

**T.C.**  
**ANTALYA BILIM UNIVERSITY**  
**INSTITUTE OF POST GRADUATE EDUCATION**  
**GLOBAL POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**  
**THESIS MASTER'S PROGRAM**

**THE ROLE OF ERASMUS MOBILITY IN THE EUROPEAN  
UNION'S SOFT POWER: THE CASES OF AKDENIZ UNIVERSITY  
AND ANTALYA BILIM UNIVERSITY**

**DISSERTATION**

**PREPARED BY**  
**NATALI UYAR**

**ANTALYA – 2022**

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**ANTALYA – 2022**

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## **PREFACE**

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my dissertation advisor Asst. Prof. Dicle KORKMAZ, who has always encouraged and supported me during my thesis writing process. With heartfelt praise, I acknowledge her efforts to guide me and thank her sincerely. I would like to thank my husband and mother for believing in me and my children for the motivation to improve myself and be an example for them.

Natali UYAR

Signature

## ÖZET

Araştırma, Joseph Nye'in yumuşak güç kavramını kullanarak, Erasmus hareketlilik programının Avrupa Birliği'nin yumuşak gücüne ne derece katkı sağladığını Akdeniz Üniversitesi ve Antalya Bilim Üniversitesi örneklerinde incelemektedir. Araştırma, Erasmus hareketliliğinin katılımcıların Avrupa Birliği'ne ilişkin algılarını olumlu yönde etkilediği sonucuna varmıştır. Katılımcıların yaklaşık %95'i Erasmus programını başkalarına tavsiye etmiştir. Yaklaşık %80'i tekrar Avrupa'ya gitmek istemektedir. Katılımcıların %50'den fazlası Avrupa'da yaşamayı veya çalışmayı planlamaktadır. Katılımcıların %95'i Avrupa kültürüne ilgi duymaktadır. Çoğu Erasmus katılımcısı, Avrupa'nın ortak değerlerini taahhüt etmektedir. Erasmus sonrası kendini uluslararası veya küresel vatandaş olarak tanımlayan öğrencilerin oranın %50'ye yükseldiği tespit edilmiştir. Bu araştırma özgürlük, hukukunun üstünlüğü ve refahın öne çıkan değerler olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Erasmus yararlanıcıları, Batı Avrupa'da demokrasi ve özgürlükler seviyesinin, eğitim kalitesinin ve teknolojik gelişmelerin daha iyi olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Görüşmeciler tarafından Avrupa gelenekleri kapsamında öne çıkarılan saygı ve açıklık, siyasi liberalizmin ve demokratik değerlerin kültürde yerleşik olduğunu göstermektedir. Türk öğrencilerin Avrupa kültürü hakkında daha kuvvetli izlenimleri olduğu ve kültürel farklılıklar konusundaki farkındalıklarının yabancı katılımcılara göre daha fazla arttığı tespit edilmiştir. Erasmus programı yumuşak gücün siyasi değerler ve kültürel bileşenleri değerlendirildiğinde etkilidir. Dış politika bileşeninin değerlendirilmesi için veri yetersizdir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrupa Birliği, Yumuşak Güç, Erasmus, Akdeniz Üniversitesi, Antalya Bilim Üniversitesi

## ABSTRACT

Utilizing Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the research examines the extent to which Erasmus mobility program contributes to the European Union's soft power in the cases of Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University. The research finds that Erasmus mobility positively affected the perceptions of the participants about the European Union. Approximately 95% of the respondents recommended the Erasmus program. About 80% of the participants wish to go to Europe again. More than 50% of respondents plan to live or work in Europe. 95% of respondents are attracted by European culture. Most Erasmus participants are committed to European shared values. After Erasmus, the rate of students who define themselves as international or global citizens increased to 50%. This research finds that freedom, rule of law and prosperity are the prominent values. Erasmus beneficiaries emphasize that the level of democracy and freedoms, quality of education and technological developments are better in Western Europe. Respect and openness highlighted by respondents within the scope of European traditions show that political liberalism and democratic values are embedded in the culture. Turkish students had more vivid impressions of European culture, and their awareness of cultural differences increased more than foreign participants. Erasmus program is effective when political values and cultural components of soft power are evaluated. Data was insufficient to make an assessment on the foreign policy component.

**Keywords:** European Union, Soft Power, Erasmus, Akdeniz University, Antalya Bilim University

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>ÖZET .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1 From Liberal Theory to Liberal Institutionalism and Soft Power .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.2 Normative Power and Civilian Power of the EU .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2. ERASMUS PROGRAMME.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1 Bologna Process.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2 Erasmus and Erasmus+ Program .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.3 Turkey and Erasmus Program .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.1 Theoretical Framework on International Education Programs .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.2 Exchange Programs .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3.2.1 Benefits of Erasmus Program.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3.2.2 Negative Experiences .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>3.3 Contribution to the Literature.....</b>	<b>33</b>

<b>CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4.1 Research Purpose, Design and Sampling .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4.2 Type of Analysis .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.3 Limitations of the Research, Validity and Reliability .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>5.1 Culture .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>5.1.1 Religion .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>5.1.2 History.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5.1.3 Education and Language.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.1.4 Traditions and Characteristics of the Society .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>5.1.5 Technology and Scientific Advances .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5.1.6 Arts.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>5.1.7 Cultural and Social Identity.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>5.2 Political Values .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5.2.1 Freedoms.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>5.2.2 Democracy .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>5.2.3 Respect for Human Rights .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>5.2.4 The Rule of Law and Justice.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>5.2.5 Equality between Women and Men .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>5.2.6 Tolerance .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>5.2.7 Non-discrimination .....</b>	<b>66</b>

5.3 Foreign Policy.....	67
5.4 Assessment of the Erasmus Programme.....	70
5.4.1 Economy.....	70
5.4.2 Recommendation.....	73
5.4.3 Going to Europe Again.....	73
<b>CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>75</b>
6.1 Culture .....	75
6.2 Political Values.....	82
6.3 Foreign Policy.....	87
6.4 Assessment of Erasmus Programme .....	88
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>94</b>
Books.....	94
Articles .....	97
Reports or Books by an Institution or Company.....	104
Dissertations .....	106
Interviews .....	107
Web pages.....	109
<b>ANNEXES .....</b>	<b>112</b>
Mülakat Soruları.....	112
Interview Questions .....	114

<b>A Letter to Erasmus Programme Coordination Offices .....</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>Consent Form.....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Codebook.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae.....</b>	<b>123</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1.</b> Erasmus+ Statistics of Turkey (2016-2020) .....	199
<b>Table 2.</b> Erasmus+ Higher Education Statistics of Turkey (2016-2020).....	199
<b>Table 3.</b> Top Sending Institutions and Receiving Countries.....	20

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>COVID-19:</b>	Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>EHEA:</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>ENQA:</b>	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>EQAR:</b>	The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
<b>ERA:</b>	European Research Area
<b>EU:</b>	European Union
<b>IIE:</b>	The Institute of International Education
<b>LGBT:</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
<b>LLP:</b>	Lifelong Learning Program
<b>METU:</b>	Middle East Technical University
<b>NAFSA:</b>	Association of International Educators
<b>NATO:</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
<b>OECD:</b>	The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>PODEM:</b>	Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies
<b>QF-EHEA:</b>	The European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework
<b>TEU:</b>	The Treaty on European Union
<b>UACES:</b>	University Association for Contemporary European Studies
<b>UDHR:</b>	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>UN:</b>	United Nations
<b>US:</b>	United States
<b>USA:</b>	United States of America

## INTRODUCTION

International relations are mainly carried out through diplomacy if some exceptions are not considered. States use dialogue, negotiation, and other peaceful ways to affect the behaviour and choices of foreign countries and people. Contemporary diplomatic relations are rooted in the post-Renaissance European state structure. Diplomacy is described as the management of bilateral official relations between sovereign governments. Nowadays, diplomatic methods pioneered in Europe have spread over the globe. Meetings, international conferences, international operations of supranational and subnational institutions, and informal non-governmental informal diplomacy have all been used in various ways (Encyclopedia Britannica, Freeman, 2020).

The concept of power is one of the most significant aspects of international relations. Nye (1990: 14) defined power as an actor's ability to influence or modify the behaviour of another actor through economic and military means. States will need to use deception (carrot) or threats (stick) to accomplish this (Nye, 2005a:14). The concept of diplomacy and the many powers of governments are inextricably linked. According to Aron (2003: 24), diplomacy is the ability to convince without resorting to force and the strategy of defeat with a limited budget. The goal of actors wielding power is to acquire what they want, and in some situations, they can do so without resorting to threats or lies. Joseph Nye (1990: 20) represented the concept of soft power in his book "Bound To Lead" in 1990, which discussed the claim that America is in decline. Nye (1990: 20) defines soft power as an actor's capacity to get what he wants without employing carrots or sticks by cooperating or exploiting attraction factors. Soft power is derived from culture, history, values, internal and foreign policies pursued by states, institutions, economic development, and advances in science, art, and literature (Kalathil, 2011).

Although soft power is a relatively new concept, its application dates back almost as far as international relations. One of the most famous examples in modern history is the emergence of Europe. With the geographical discoveries of the 16th century, Europe began to rise in the world, making advances in science and civilisation with the Reformation and Renaissance, breaking economic barriers with the Industrial Revolution, establishing a strong position in international relations with the French Revolution, and eventually becoming one of the most powerful in the world between 1850 and 1950. The

goal of ending war and maintaining permanent peace on the continent has lifted Europe to a position of soft power that can be emulated in the post-1951 period.

Education has emerged as an essential component of soft power in recent years. Because one of the aspects that contribute to a country's soft power in international relations is its educational quality. The importance of education in a country's worldwide standing and prestige has grown even more as the global economy and values have changed. Education has become even more vital as the world has moved toward a knowledge economy, and it has become a requirement for governments. Because people with a good education are regarded as one of the essential components in boosting economic growth and competitiveness. Education is also crucial in promoting principles such as equality of opportunity and the empowerment of underprivileged groups and individuals. Such educational benefits to countries and communities can enlarge its attractiveness to other countries, increasing its soft power.

The United States and the European Union are famous for the international education opportunities. Europe has the world's oldest and most prestigious universities. The European Union has aimed to increase the quality of education and thus prepare for development more systematically. Many training programs have been implemented in this direction for 35 years. Comett, Socrates I-II, Lifelong Learning Program, and Erasmus Plus (+) Program are the leading educational programs implemented. It is essential to examine education systems and policies, transfer of knowledge, and activities disseminating innovations and good practices. The Erasmus Plus (+) Program, the current umbrella application started in 2014, does not exist only in 27 Union member countries, but also non-EU Program Countries (United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Macedonia, and Turkey) and Partner Countries. Partner countries include four regions neighbouring the EU (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership countries, Southern Mediterranean, and Russian Federation) and ten other regions (including Central and East Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Gulf, and the Pacific). Program Countries can participate in all Erasmus+ actions, while Partner Countries take part in some activities according to specific conditions. EU educational programmes aim to deepen transnational cooperation with partner countries, support the internationalisation and modernisation of educational institutions outside of Europe, stimulate European interest in higher education, and enhance European higher education institutions' competitiveness in the global higher

education market (European Commission, 2014).

Nowadays, universities are seen as valuable tools for understanding political influence, values and culture. Universities are naturally equipped for this purpose since they allow people to learn about a country, religion, language, political principles or culture through synthesis. Countries and organisations will most certainly continue to collaborate, but they will also utilise higher education to compete with perceived competitors. One of the essential examples in practice is undoubtedly the Erasmus+ program, implemented by the EU and the surrounding countries. The impact and results of the Erasmus+ program in terms of the soft power of the EU need to be researched and revealed. The background problem that led to the writing of this research is the extent to which the EU education programs, and the Erasmus program, in particular, are successful.

This study focuses on the following research question: To what extent does the Erasmus mobility in higher education program contribute to the European Union's soft power in the cases of Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University? This thesis examines the students' perceptions of the Erasmus program and the European Union based on semi-structured interviews.

The study's significance lies in understanding how the Erasmus program influences participants' perceptions of the EU by examining its political and cultural results within the scope of the soft power concept. In this way, comprehending how education works as a soft power element and how it can cause changes in the participants will help understand the Erasmus program's results. The cases of Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University are important as Turkey is a non-EU country participating in the Erasmus program. Turkish culture, historical routes, government system, and geographical location differ from most participating countries. The perceptions of Turkish students about EU soft power and the Erasmus impact are significant to be investigated.

The first chapter explains the theoretical framework of this study. The theoretical background of the thesis is primarily based on liberal theory, followed by liberal institutionalism, soft power and its components. The chapter introduces the concepts of normative, civilian and soft power and explains the difference between them. The second chapter describes the chronological information about the Bologna process, past and

present of the Erasmus program and explains the membership of Turkey in the program. The chapter presents statistical data on mobility for the last few years with tables. The third chapter reviews the literature on the subject. The chapter evaluates the scholarly works about the soft power of education, exchange programs and the Erasmus program, in particular, the impact of exchange programs, including benefits and negative effects, and determines the place of this research in the existing literature.

The methodology chapter presents the research aims, design, sample group and sampling type. It explains how the theoretical concept is operationalised, how the interview questions are created, how codes are created and content analysis utilised. Finally, the chapter elaborates on the limitations, validity, and reliability of the research. The fifth chapter analyses the interviews with programme participants according to the codebook, which was constructed during the evaluation of interview transcripts.

The last chapter of this research evaluates the results obtained in the study and discusses the findings acquired in the analysis part in the light of the studies in the literature and the theoretical framework. The chapter interprets and contrasts data and links it back to the research objectives. In the end, there are recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As the Erasmus program is an outcome of inter-institutional relations in which EU members and partner countries are included and a tool for the EU's normative and soft power, the theoretical background of the study relies on liberal theory, followed by liberal institutionalism and soft power. The Chapter first introduces the liberal theory and then discusses different dimensions of EU actorness like soft, civilian, and normative power. In the course of the subject, the necessary concepts are also defined when necessary.

### **1.1 From Liberal Theory to Liberal Institutionalism and Soft Power**

Liberalism is one of the important theories of international relations. This theory has deep scientific and philosophical roots. Liberalism, one of the two most important products of the European Enlightenment period, seriously affected modern industrialised societies and shaped these societies. Its basic principles are international cooperation and peace. Since the 17th and 18th centuries, political liberalism has begun to eliminate the understanding of the nobility and ensure equality (Shirayev and Zubok, 2014: 80). Liberal values began to be developed by philosophers such as Locke, Voltaire, Smith, and Kant in the Enlightenment period. The Thirty Years' War and the Enlightenment were the most influential on liberal scholars. In his book "Two Treatises of Government", published in 1689, Locke discussed many ideas that we can attribute to liberalism. He pointed out that people have natural rights and the law. He argued that people are born as a blank slate (tabula rasa), not preordained or born sinful, and are equal to other people (Lazar: 2013: 43). It was called the Natural State. Locke argued that people were at first a blank slate, and over time, they shaped themselves with their own experiences and lives. He was one of the first to state that anarchy could best be reduced through civilian government. He claimed that when there was a government, people acted more rationally and obeyed the law. According to Locke, thanks to the civil government, citizens could obtain basic rights such as health, property, and freedoms (Lazar, 2013: 43-46).

The ideas of Locke seriously influenced the pioneers of the American and French Revolutions (Mingst et al., 2018: 81). Kant, another significant liberal pioneer, developed the principles of the peace program for the practice of nations in "Perpetual Peace". This program demands that states act jointly to ensure cooperation, security, peace, and equal gain. He also stated that democratic states would not fight each other because war is not

popular, it brings many costs and other burdens, and those who run the state will not resort to war because of the fear of not being able to win in the next election (Kant, 1983: 113). Libertarians believe that once states become economically interdependent, war can be avoided in the international relations system (Shirayev and Zubok, 2014: 80). Liberalism includes limited role of government, scientific rationalism and individual freedom from the state's arbitrary use of force, oppression, and superstitions. It is also in favour of protection of political freedom, democracy, rights protected by law, equality of all before the law, and freedom of individuals. According to liberalism, individual competition in society and the efficient use of resources limited by market capitalism increase the welfare of society. After the spread of democracy in both hemispheres and the increase of globalisation after the Cold War, liberal ideas have grown increasingly and have become one of the most powerful and influential doctrines today (Burchill et al., 2013: 69).

In international politics, the growth of institutionalism within liberalism reveals itself in understanding the problem of war. Liberalism offers three options for dealing with the problem of war. The first is democracy, which is one of the most closely associated concepts with liberalism. Liberals assert that democratic governments are less violent in their interactions with other countries and never wage war with other democracies. This is primarily because, democratic structure, liberal values and institutions puts an obstacle for leader. Furthermore, governments are accountable to electorate, the evaluation of costs and risks makes conflicts less possible (Doyle, 1986:151). Second, economic interconnectedness will reduce the likelihood of war. Liberals believe that international trade bonds states together since one state's interests become the interests of others. As a result, states find conflict prohibitively expensive and think it preferable to collaborate. International institutions are the third option. Liberal institutionalism claims that institutions improve inter-state collaboration, reducing the likelihood of war (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 83).

Keohane and Nye (1998) sought to put these developments in world politics after the 1970s into a theoretical framework with the term "complex interdependence". Complex interdependence is an idealised point in world politics where multiple channels of social communication exist, there is no order of importance between economic or security issues, and military power is becoming less important, which is desirable and positions itself differently from realism (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 92). There are two

points that Keohane and Nye (1998: 97) especially emphasise in a complex interdependence. First of all, although complex interdependence is not a concept that describes the type of relationship the whole world is in, it is possible to use it to describe relations between developed countries. Secondly, Keohane and Nye (1998: 112) stated that they did not reject the realist theory. But they aimed to fill the gap caused by the over-reliance on realistic theory in American foreign policy. They synthesise liberalism and realism, based on the system level of the alternative theoretical framework they put forward and did not forget that domestic policy is also important. The trend that emerged after the discussion of dependency and cooperation in the global arena and that united regimes and organisations was called liberal institutionalism. Because dependency, which Keohane and Nye also explored in *Power and Interdependence* and which has been subsequently highlighted several times (and as classical liberals claim), does not always result in collaboration. Cooperation, on the contrary, is the reconciliation of previously discordant behaviours of various persons or groups (Keohane and Nye, 2015: 82).

International institutions encourage peaceful relations while promoting cooperation through common rules and norms. As specified by Nye (2011: 11), power would be twofold in a world where security and power are less significant due to the complicated concept of interdependence and countries are interconnected by many social and political interactions. The capacity to move others in ways that go against their initial preferences and tactics is known as hard power. On the other hand, Nye (2004a: 5) defines soft power as the ability to persuade others to want what you want, and to attain goals through attraction rather than compulsion. Furthermore, Nye (2004a: 5) contends that in international politics, soft power is just as significant as hard power, if not more. Nye (2011: 90) argues that soft power can be used in a positive-sum interaction because soft power does not have to be a zero-sum game where one state benefits at the expense of another.

As specified by Nye (1990: 154), soft power is derived from the country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. For these entities to function, as Nye describes, they must create an attraction and help a particular state achieve its foreign policy objectives. There are a few methods to use these resources in foreign policy to implement a soft power strategy. Taking ownership of and propagating values that can be international or regional norms, delivering messages through well-known people, and creating appealing

national or global discourses are just a few of them (Lee, 2009: 210). Every country has some soft power resources, which are used to construct soft power strategies appropriate for that country. The major purpose is to influence the receiving country, so conveying constructive messages to the other party is essential (Kroenig et al., 2010: 427).

Nye (2004: 6) argues that the capacity to form preferences is linked to intangible, non-monetary assets like an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions. Culture is one of the essential aspects of soft power. Since the more a country's culture is attractive to others, the greater its influence. When popular cultural figures' branding is examined from this perspective, their effects can be seen in various parts of the globe. Lifestyle, history, traditions, educational activities, festivals, holidays, cuisine, gastronomy, music, entertainment, painting, sculpture, architectural structures, television shows, sports, literature, fashion, and clothing are all part of the broader phenomenon known as culture and are marketed as soft power values of countries.

In some sources, soft power activities carried out in the field of culture are referred to as public cultural diplomacy. Cultural public diplomacy can be defined as an effort by an actor to make cultural flow abroad practical or to manage the international environment through cultural achievements and cultural resources (Cull, 2008: 39). Cultural public diplomacy is essential to create a positive image in all diplomatic relations and for that country to achieve its foreign policy goals. Cultural public diplomacy supports relations with cultural content such as language, science, art, literature, music, radio programs, TV, and movies. The main purpose of public cultural diplomacy is to make a country known internationally for its national language. Cultural public diplomacy, one of the best ways to change prejudices and wrong ideas about a country, is a striking and effective method frequently used in public diplomacy practises (Szondi, 2008: 312).

Education is the most important source and tool of soft power in international relations (Wojciuk et al., 2015: 3). Education is significant in global economic competition and plays an important role in ensuring equality of opportunity, development, and personal and social development of individuals and societies. The concept of soft power has been used a lot lately, and it is evident that its popularity has increased. In a globalised world, superpower status is more about winning other people's hearts and minds than acquiring resources or winning wars. In other words, the superpower position

is primarily based on soft power (Özdemir, 2008: 56).

It is hard to distinguish appeal from other conceivable mechanisms when evaluating institutions of the higher education system as a source of soft power under the subject of culture. The urge to study overseas may have fewer connections with a country's culture in the wider definition and more with the educational institutions' brand image and resources. There are considerable incentives to attend a university known for cutting-edge research or a great reputation for job advancement. Moreover, a university's location can significantly correlate with its ability to access resources through links with local trade and science sectors (Hall, 2010: 199).

Culture is a set of ideals and traditions that generate meaning for a society (Nye, 2004a: 23). There is a strong connection between culture and identity. Cultural identities are fundamental in a person's self-perception, and they transform within a social environment over time (Lustig, 2013: 72). Cultural identities occur as a result of belonging to a group or culture and are constructed by location, gender, lifestyle, race, history, nationality, language, values and norms, religious beliefs, ethnicity, cultural, thinking and behavioural patterns (Boski et al., 2004: 5). In countries like the U.S., Canada and the EU, where the population has different ethnical roots, social cohesion is centred on shared values and beliefs. Furthermore, cultural identity may be shaped by the community network of people who try to emulate and pursue social norms. (Boski et al., 2004: 5).

Same as cultural identity, social identity is a component of self-concept derived from group membership and social environment (Brewer, 1991: 476; Hornsey, 2008: 207). Social identification means adopting group features to which the person classifies himself as belonging. The harmony or resemblance between a person's attitudes and values and the other group mates fosters affiliation (Cragun and Cragun, 2010: 69). For example, when the culture, social context and norms become a part of a person, a student in the Erasmus program may assimilate, feel himself belonging to European culture or international environment.

Another element of soft power, mentioned by Nye, is a country's political values, which it displays in domestic and foreign policy. The easier access of people to information and the increase in their demands for all kinds of freedoms at the global level

increases the attraction power of countries that put forward and implement peace, human rights, and cooperation as political values. Nye (2004: 68) defines political values as intangible assets, ideology, national interests, a composite of many different ideas and attitudes, promoted inside and outside the country that have important political effect. In his book “Soft Power. The means to success in World Politics”, Nye refers to political values like democracy and human rights, individualism, liberties, rule of law, openness and tolerance. As stated by Nye (2004: 55) it is not enough to proclaim political values. Political values can be a powerful source of attraction when a country upholds them at home and abroad, when they are shared and successfully implemented. One state administration can sway people by providing a positive example by defending the free press and the right to protest inside the country, for instance; and in international organizations by consulting others and fostering multilateralism. Nye (2004: 7) states:

Soft power uses a different type of currency (not force, not money) to engender cooperation-an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values. Our decisions in the marketplace for ideas are often shaped by soft power – an intangible attraction that persuades us to go along with others’ purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place (Nye, 2004: 7).

In any form of government different ideals are favoured as national values, which are extremely political and constantly changing. For example, human rights, dignity, and collectivist notions of security can change rapidly after a terrorist attack. So which principles are focused on, which are trivialised, what type of explanation is suggested, and where deviations are acceptable could be extremely political and dependent on context (Hall, 2010: 200).

For a nation it is possible to achieve the results it desires in international politics without the use of force, when other states admire its ideals and beliefs, emulate its behaviour, and aim to reach its level of prosperity and openness (Nye, 2004: 5). By establishing a framework of international laws and organizations that are consistent with liberal and democratic norms, institutions can strengthen a nation's soft power by promoting its values. Countries with dominant cultures and ideologies that are more in line with current global norms, which focus on liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy, and whose credibility is strengthened by their domestic and international values and policies

more possibly gain soft power (Nye, 2004: 32).

The ultimate generator of soft power, as specified by Nye (1990: 154), is a country's foreign policy. Governments can impact international politics as long as their activities are viewed as "legitimate and moral" (Nye, 2005a: 76). Today, it is difficult for states to retain policies that international and regional organisations do not support. Taking action despite the international community's reaction may result in various political and economic sanctions. As a result, governments that promote political values, that others admire, and implement a foreign policy, that reflects these values, will strengthen their prestige in the international community while also allowing other countries to emulate them with their respected foreign policies.

Different actors will back an attractive foreign policy, which is determined by how many other actors support it. Certain foreign policies may get support from other countries without using force or rewards by focusing on similar values. States may obtain legitimacy and benefit from the attraction mechanism or the growth of a shared normative order. A larger appeal to common values can assist a state in attaining its objectives.

## **1.2 Normative Power and Civilian Power of the EU**

It is significant to situate this study within the broad theoretical framework and debate related to EU actorness, which refers to civilian, soft and normative power of European Union as an international actor in global arena. Sjöstedt (1977) defined EU actorness as "the capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" (p.18).

Francois Duchene (1972) described the European Union's distinctive role in the world as "civilian power", underlining its civilian, non-military forms of influence on other actors, including trade, economic interdependence and diplomacy. He argued that due to the inability to develop a full-fledged army and common administration, the EU's internal and external relations are based on peace and cooperation, thus acting as a stabiliser in global affairs (Duchene, 1972: 19). EU civilian objectives reflect in its integration process, neighbouring policies, trade agreements with third parties, developmental aid and peacekeeping missions.

The liberal/idealist framework of civilian power with a neutral or absent military force was extensively criticised by realists. Bull (1982: 163) argued that the economic power of the EU is undeniable, but its civilian way of relations relies on the military protection of the US, therefore, it can not be a mature international actor or superpower.

With the end of the Cold War, the emphasis on rationalistic theories changed to the growing importance of ideas and values in foreign policies. Utilising civilian, non-military means of communication is only one aspect of the EU's civilian power, while another is its civilising effects on the environment beyond and inside its borders by seeking the distribution of specific norms. The significance of normative goals in being a civilian power led to the emergence of a new EU identity concept. Ian Manners (2002), a supporter of social constructivism theory, determined the EU actorness as Normative Power Europe, which is focused on the EU's dissemination of universal norms and standards as a way of defining "normal" in international relations. Manners emphasises the "intellectual nature" of EU power, which can be evaluated as supporting the assumptions of the constructivist approach of "the ideas that determine the meaning of material power" (Dimitrova et al., 2016: 9). This unique EU identity attracted the attention of the scientific world and contributed to the studies of how the Union defines its actions in the international arena. According to Manners (2002: 242-243), the difference between the EU as a normative power and other powers with norm-spreading characteristics lies in the establishment of the EU. The combination of the historical context in which the EU emerged, its hybrid structure, unique from other pre-existing political forms and legal character confirms that it places universal principles and democratic values such as human rights, solidarity, equality and the rule of law at the centre of its relations with its member states and third countries and shapes the international environment (Manners, 2002: 240). In addition, Manners (2002: 240) states that the norms promoted and disseminated by the EU already exist at the base of the union with its different policies, declarations, and actions since the World War II, and that the normative basis of the Union is peace, cooperation, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The EU, as an "ideational" actor, aims to develop strategies such as foreign policy, enlargement policy, and relations with neighbouring countries in line with these values (Ataç, 2012: 3). Therefore, the values adopted by the EU are in a central position both in its own institutional and political structure and in its relations with third countries, within the framework of the understanding of Europeanness, which is defined

as “normative”. Manners (2008: 46) argues that in EU relations with third parties, it will be able to ensure the sustainability of its normative power to the extent that other countries perceive it as normative.

The soft political instruments, based on attractiveness and persuasion, that the EU utilizes in the international sphere to promote its standards and democratic values link normative power with soft power (Hill, 1990: 42). A civilian power executes peaceful non-military tools, employs compelling methods of power, is able to use the power of attraction (soft power), and, most significantly, prioritises normative objectives (Özer, 2012: 85).

This study’s theoretical framework is based on liberal theory and Nye’s definition of soft power. The evaluation of the European Union’s attractiveness via the Erasmus program will answer the research question. Nye’s conceptualisation is used as it more appropriately reflects the research topic and provides the criteria, which are the components of soft power concept, culture, political values and foreign policy, to measure the soft power impact on Erasmus beneficiaries. As it will be elaborated in the methodology chapter, the codebook is prepared in line with the Nye’s components of soft power. This research investigates the contribution of the Erasmus programme to the European Union’s soft power as one of the role concepts of the EU and part of its actorness in international relations and thus participates in wider theoretical debates over the sui generis identity of the EU, obtaining a particular kind of power in the global arena.

## **CHAPTER 2. ERASMUS PROGRAMME**

Cultural and educational exchange programs, which are among the activities carried out by countries to transfer their cultures, languages, and values, are important for countries. It produces soft power by using education exchange programs to improve mutual understanding between nations, people, and states from all over the world (Maluki and Waithaka, 2016: 5). The Fulbright and Erasmus+ exchange programs are the most well-known and widely applied in the world. First, this chapter provides information about the Bologna process. Then it introduces the Erasmus program. Finally, the chapter evaluates Turkey's place in this program and its development over the years in the light of statistical information.

There are several policies that the European Union has been following in the field of education to achieve certain goals. These policies are carried out in conjunction with various programs, which are conducted by the European Commission. The programs aim to develop relations between the participating countries in the fields of education and youth. Although the beginning of these programs and policies dates back to the 1970s, sufficient progress could not be made in the implementation phase in these years. However, since the late 1980s, the scope and diversity of the programs have begun to increase (Jones, 2010: 43).

### **2.1 Bologna Process**

A historical review of European education programs in higher education can be found in the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum. This document, drafted in Barcelona in 1988 and signed to celebrate the 900th Anniversary of the Alma Mater, illustrates a common European understanding of the need for an integrated model for the higher education system. The document also acknowledges the priority of universities as tools for cultural competency and increases competitiveness as a driver for transformation by replying to the requirements of a global economy (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1991). The Sorbonne Declaration, which was the precursor of the Bologna Process in 1998 and was published almost 10 years later, set a clearer framework (Jones, 2010: 44). On June 19, 1999, the education ministers of 29 European countries signed the Declaration on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in Bologna, Italy. The approach behind the declaration is expressed as follows:

A Europe of knowledge is now widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new Millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space. The importance of education and educational cooperation in the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies is universally acknowledged as paramount, the more so in view of the situation in South East Europe (De Wit, 2000: 8).

These are some of the objectives that the ministers outline in the declaration: adoption of degrees and “Diploma supplement”, development of undergraduate and graduate cycles, the establishment of the European Credit Transfer System for encouraging student exchange, promotion of European cooperation in higher education (De Wit, 2000: 8).

EU countries have become more interested in investing in universities and knowledge with the Bologna Process. In the Bologna Declaration, EU countries decided to allocate 3% of their countries’ gross national product to research and development until 2010 (Nerad, 2010: 14). In 2001, two years after the Bologna Declaration was published, the ministers responsible for higher education from 32 countries met in Prague to monitor the Bologna process and set incentives for the coming years. The Bologna Process has adopted three more goals: providing active participation of students and educational institutions, making the EHEA attractive, and promoting lifelong learning (Eurydice, 2012: 11).

In addition, the Ministers of Higher Education from 33 European countries, convened in Berlin in 2003, included another target to the Bologna Process. That is establishing a connection between the European Research Area (ERA) and EHEA, as well as doctorate studies (Eurydice, 2012: 11). At the fourth European Education Ministers Conference held in Bergen, Norway, in 2005, it was decided to prepare an evaluation report (Stocktaking Report) in order to determine the practices in the member countries on the four main issues expected to be realised by 2007. The first of these four issues is the implementation of the “Quality Assurance Standards and Implementation Principles” for higher education institutions in the EHEA member countries, developed

by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Others are in the fields of implementing national qualification frameworks, joint higher education programs, and establishing adaptable learning paths in higher education (Eurydice, 2012: 12).

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine joined the Bologna Process in May 2005, bringing the total number of signatory states to 45. Ministers in charge of higher education gathered in Bergen to discuss the Bologna Process' medium-term achievements and to establish the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework (QF-EHEA).

The London Ministerial Meeting, held on May 17 and 18, 2007 marked a turning point in the formation of the Bologna Process' first official body, the European Register of Quality Assurance (EQAR). Ministers decided to build national strategies and action plans in the social dimension and agreed on a strategy to develop a global dimension of Higher Education in London. (Eurydice, 2012: 13).

In the Leuven Declaration, published in 2009, the priorities of European higher education until 2020 were determined. Equal access to higher education from various European countries, lifelong learning, employment prospects, student-centred learning, research and innovation in education, international transparency, and exchange programs for all three degrees (bachelor, master, doctorate) were the priorities determined. The decision to establish the EHEA, which was accepted in the 1999 Bologna Declaration, was also the main subject of the Budapest and Vienna meetings held on 11–12 March 2010 (Eurydice, 2012: 13).

## **2.2 Erasmus and Erasmus+ Program**

The Erasmus program, described under this subheading, is a tool to reach the objectives determined during the Bologna Process. The Erasmus program is an EU program encouraging higher education institutions to cooperate. Desiderius Erasmus, who gave the program its name, was a Dutch philosopher who lived between 1466 – 1536 years. Erasmus, one of the most important figures in the Renaissance's humanism movement, was chosen as the program's name because of his contributions to the unification of Europe under a single art and science umbrella, as well as his effect on the

educational philosophy of the time. In addition, the name ERASMUS is also an abbreviation for the official name of the program, which means the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Maiworm, 2001: 468).

The Erasmus program aims to improve the quality of higher education in Europe and deepen its European component, encourage international cooperation between universities, and facilitate students' and academicians' mobility in Europe. Its goal is to aid in the academic recognition of studies and degrees earned in the program's participating countries and to develop transparency. As the final goal of the program, the universities that offer high-quality higher education services in Europe aim to train individuals who are well-equipped and more responsive to the expectations of the business world (National Agency, 2005).

Before the program was started under the name of Erasmus, a 6-year pilot program was carried out by the European Commission between 1981 and 1986. The program was implemented with the participation of 3244 students from 11 countries in the first year, 1987. After the Maastricht Treaty, two framework programs were combined and developed to provide better coordination and efficiency. These were the Socrates (Erasmus and Lingua) and Leonardo da Vinci (Comett, Force, Petra, Eurotecnet, partially Lingua) programs. The Commission decided to continue the Erasmus activities under the umbrella of Socrates I between 1995 and 1999, and the activities between 2000 and 2006 under the umbrella of Socrates II action plans. In 1997, besides the students, the lecturers teaching at higher education institutions were also allowed to participate in the program (Demirer, 2015: 86). Since 1987, when the program started to be implemented, more than 10 million people have participated in Erasmus+ and its predecessors (European Comisison, 2018).

Since 2014 the educational programs are named as Erasmus+, which aim to gain new competences, improve personal development and enlarge job opportunities irrespective of age, status, gender and academic qualifications. The main reason the program is named Erasmus+ is the awareness of the Erasmus program, which was implemented in previous years, recognised and adopted by society in education abroad. The Erasmus+ Program is the name given to the umbrella program that unites several programs under its name. As in the programs implemented in previous years, Erasmus+

provides support for higher education, vocational education, adult education, and youth at school, as well as supporting projects in the field of sports.

The fields supported by the Erasmus+ program are grouped under four different headings: three Key Actions and Jean Monnet Actions. Key Action 1 supports the mobility of individuals, including those abroad. This Key Action is designed for students, teachers, invited experts and vocational education trainers. Key Action 2 encourages the formation of global networks of organisations to foster collaborative, innovative partnerships. Policy reform at the institutional level is supported by Key Action 3. Jean Monnet Actions foster European Union research and innovative educational approaches. (Europass Teacher Academy, 2021).

Under the Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals, the Erasmus program offers the following opportunities to individuals within or outside the borders of the European Union: studying, training, work placement, career development, unofficial learning-based youth events, and volunteer work. Program participants have a chance to study and teach at universities in Europe or various parts of the world. Thus, in addition to increasing interest in higher education in Europe, a more favourable environment is created for the development of higher education in countries outside of Europe. The individual's learning activity provides support to a wide audience. This thesis examines the impact of the students mobility in higher education which is a part of Erasmus+ Program Key Action 1.

### **2.3 Turkey and Erasmus Program**

Turkey has been a participant in European educational programs since 2004. An integrated collection of initiatives aims to foster cooperation between EU member states and candidate countries in several areas relevant to EU policies. Turkey took part in the Erasmus Programme as a part of the Lifelong Learning programme during 2004 – 2013. Since 2014 year Turkey has been participating to Erasmus+ (EU Delegation to Turkey, n.d.). A National Agency was established in Turkey to benefit from the EU education programs as a candidate country.

Between 2014 and 2020, the amount of the Turkish grant in Erasmus+ reached €740 million. More than 36,500 Turkish organisations took part in the program, and

315,000 students, trainees, staff, and teachers travelled abroad as part of the Erasmus program (European Commission, 2021 b).

The statistical data for 2016–2020 years regarding Turkey’s place in the Erasmus+ program is presented in the table below.

**Table 1.** Erasmus+ Statistics of Turkey (2016-2020)

	EU Budget	Erasmus+	Turkey’s total grants	Participants	Projects
2016	€2.2 billion		€75.75 million	41.275	991
2017	€2.6 billion		€76.73 million	43.097	1.304
2018	€2.8 billion		€83.96 million	44.930	1.417
2019	€3.4 billion		€83.00 million	44.953	1.333
2020	€3.4 billion		€83.59 million	43.114	1.224

**Source:** European Commission 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 a.

**Table 2.** Erasmus+ Higher Education Statistics of Turkey (2016-2020)

	Outgoing Students Trainees	and	Incoming Students Trainees	and	Outgoing Staff	Incoming Staff
2016	16.193		7.469		2.779	1.521
2017	17.008		3.563		3.334	1.199
2018	17.957		3.521		3.244	1.958
2019	17.461		4.579		3.104	2.288
2020	15.664		4.619		1.194	1.106

**Source:** European Commission 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 a.

**Table 3.** Top Sending Institutions and Receiving Countries

	Top 3 Sending Institutions			Top 3 Receiving Countries		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
2016	Ankara University	Marmara University	Anadolu University	Poland	Germany	Italy
2017	Anadolu University	Ankara University	Hacettepe University	Poland	Germany	Italy
2018	Ankara University	Anadolu University	Hacettepe University	Poland	Germany	Italy
2019	Marmara University	Anadolu University	Yildiz Technical University	Poland	Germany	Spain
2020	Marmara University	Ankara University	Hacettepe University	Poland	Germany	Italy

**Source:** European Commission 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 a.

The tables indicate that, if 2020 is excluded from the evaluation due to the pandemic, the number of incoming and outgoing participants of the Erasmus+ program in Turkey has been increasing every year. When the universities that send the highest number of students are evaluated, it is seen that they are mostly the same universities. Ankara University and Anadolu University stand out as the universities with the highest numbers on the list. Assessing the countries with the highest number of students from Turkey, it is seen that the ranking has not changed much. Poland comes first as the country that hosts the highest number of students every year, while Germany comes second. Italy comes in third place. But Spain, on the other hand, climbed to third place only once in 2019.

This research investigates the Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University cases of participation in the Erasmus+ Programme. According to the statistical information provided by the Erasmus Coordination Office of Antalya Bilim University, since the establishment of the University in 2010 until 2022 year, 204 students benefited from Erasmus learning and internship mobility and went to one of the European countries. Unfortunately the statistical information from Akdeniz University has not been received.

## CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the existing literature about the theoretical framework on international education and exchange programs, elaborates on the studies on the impact of educational exchange programs, including Erasmus mobility, and determines the present research place in the literature and its contribution to academia.

### 3.1 Theoretical Framework on International Education Programs

In the relevant literature about education different theoretical frameworks are used, these are liberalism (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019; Gautam et al., 2021), neoliberalism (Gyamera and Burke, 2018; Bamberger et al., 2019) and neoimperialism (Chankseliani, 2021; Yao, 2021).

When the literature on international education programs are examined, it is seen that it is mostly associated with liberal theory. The number of studies about the use of education as a soft power tool has been increasing. Studies of different countries have diversified considerably in recent years. Scholars examine the soft power and educational policies of the USA (Foo, 2021), the EU (Ferreira-Pereira and Mourato Pinto, 2021; Kasatkin and Ivkina, 2018), OECD (Sjøberg, 2020), United Kingdom (Codó and McDaid, 2019; Ploner and Nada, 2020), China (Gill and Huang, 2006; Wu, 2019; Wen and Hu, 2018; Gauttam et al., 2021), Russia (Halidov, 2014; Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019) and other countries like Turkey (Çavuş, 2012; Karagül, 2013; Aras and Mohammed, 2019). With established international institutions and student mobility programs, the use of education as a diplomacy tool has become widespread.

The rating, research output, faculty quality, degree of internationalisation, appeal to foreign students and scholars, and collaboration with famous foreign universities all contribute to a higher education institution's soft power. Peterson (2014: 2) considers higher education to be a soft power tool in terms of creating a positive reputation and attractiveness among international students. Wojciuk, Michalek, and Stormowska (2015: 2) presented an educational soft power model consisting of three components: values, resources, and tools. As a result, soft power is reinforced through higher education by expressing the host country's values to international students, offering quality education to international students, and emphasising the importance of higher education in attaining

a country's policy objectives.

Valiulis (2013: 206) comes to the following conclusions in his research on the requirements of higher education institutions in Europe to expand their prospects for international activity: particular attention should be paid to the clear positioning of a country and identifying its advantages. He states that a country's image, education system, living conditions, and immigration policies should be heavily stressed to capture the attention of both foreign partners and potential international students. Policies for the internationalisation of higher education should be set at the national level.

On the other hand, when examining the history of soft power and higher education, Wojciuk (2018: 352) claims that soft power is highly context-dependent. Soft power manifests itself when institutional and cultural organisational patterns generate recognition, admiration, and—possibly but not necessarily—a desire to imitate them or to be part of a particular system. The sources of soft power do not exist independently of social reality. This perspective is also in line with Nye's claim that context is the key to understanding soft power. Wojciuk's work also examines, in part, the experiences of students participating in international student mobility programs. Students' experiences span a wide spectrum. The main ones are the gentle acculturation of the Western academic system through identity concerns, cultural shock, and rejection of the foreign model (Wojciuk, 2018: 349).

Trilokekar (2021) investigates how governments use international higher education programs as a soft power foreign policy tool. Using historical analysis in her research Trilokekar (2021: 37) reveals that the development of a country's soft power takes generations. It has grounded the prediction that China's soft power will surpass the USA's after a certain period. However, Trilokekar also explains that this change may still be happening, especially when US policies towards international students counter its stated soft power goals of fostering international change through education programs. The Trump administration has reported that this trend is also evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and at a time when there are divergent efforts to offer educational opportunities to students abroad who are physically inactive due to the impact of the pandemic and restricted visas.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the concepts used to define the policies to be

implemented in the context of soft power. Ivey and Cleggett (2008: 5) state that the establishment, growth, and preservation of connections with foreign states through culture, art, and education is referred to as cultural diplomacy. It is an external projection that takes into account the relationships and evolution of institutions, political ideologies, and state culture.

The theoretical framework of public and educational diplomacy is utilised widely in the literature. Priotsi (2015: 9) defines educational diplomacy as the use of all forms of academic practice, formal or widespread, that serve the goals of a larger foreign policy agenda. Education in international relations has been seen as an element of soft power. Rasmussen (2009: 9) states that mobility actions such as Erasmus are deeply focused on two elements, education and language, especially those of the European Union and states willing to interact with long-term relations. Universities are significant partners in achieving the European Union's economic development and welfare plan. Leonard (2002: 18-20), who also highlights educational programs in the light of public diplomacy, considers exchange programs to be one of the most effective tools for building stable relationships.

As an example of public diplomacy Bint Abbas (2015) applies Pakistan to analyse the role of international mobility. Using qualitative analysis in her research, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants of the Fulbright Foreign Student Program. The research results show that Fulbright scholarships partially successfully achieve their judicial aim among Pakistani recipients. Because of their Fulbright experiences, the majority of participants said they gained a better knowledge and tolerance of the American people and society. On the other hand, their views on US foreign policy and the nature of the Pakistan-US relationship stay sceptical. (Bint Abbas, 2015: 74).

Globalisation, student exchange programs, and demographic shifts have changed the landscape of higher education in Europe and around the world. Erasmus exchange programs for students and staff have also led to this shift and are considered a means of achieving European higher education's internationalisation. At the same time, they provide European residents with the skills they need to improve their employability and, as a result, contribute to the economic development of Europe. Scott-Smith (2008:

45), who discusses exchange programs in terms of public diplomacy, says that exchange programs ensure the establishment of long-term lasting relationships through interpersonal communication and the sustainability of new collaborations through these relationships.

As it is mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, there are authors who use other theories besides liberalism in their research. Using the example of Cuba, China and Israel, Bamberger et al. (2019) investigate the role of neoliberalism in depictions of internationalisation in higher education and create a link between the knowledge economy and neoliberal transformations in higher education. The scholars reveal how the countries' initiatives to internationalization of higher education are influenced by diverse ideologies, local histories, and conflicts rather than a progressive neoliberal approach.

The study of Gyamera and Burke (2018) evaluates the influence of neoliberal agendas on the curriculum in African higher education through a postcolonial and decolonising perspective. The researchers conduct 48 semi-structured interviews and documentary analyses across three higher education institutions in Ghana. The research examines how authoritarian attitudes affiliated with neoliberal ideologies change priorities of Western-focused perspectives, beliefs and principles and impact universities.

Some studies have examined the use of international student mobility as a state-approved form of neo-imperialism to increase or maintain the influence of countries globally. Chankseliani's (2021) study explored Russian external policy in the former Soviet bloc and argued that the export of Russian higher education is an attempt to maintain and enhance political power and influence in Russia. Chankseliani also argues that international student mobility programs originating from the Global North, such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Australia are mainly motivated to generate income for campuses in their home countries, while Russia intends to strengthen its political influence (Chankseliani, 2021:27).

Likewise, Yao (2021) argues that international student mobility is a part of US academic imperialism around the world rather than a more neutral exchange of information and people. Yao (2021), who does not do traditional empirical research, reviews policy briefs from the IIE, NAFSA and OECD. He defines academic imperialism as the privilege and dominance of knowledge in higher education (Yao, 2021: 155). In

her previous study of Chinese international students in the US, Yao (2015) explores how the power imbalance between sending and receiving countries for both people and programs is a form of academic dependency. She points out that the United States education system is “the best in the world” and underlines the academic dependence on the USA, even from China (Yao, 2015: 159).

## **3.2 Exchange Programs**

### **3.2.1 Benefits of Erasmus Program**

The European Union is about bringing people together. With 27 member countries and a population of 445 million, it is a large structure, consisting of various languages, religions, and races. It builds on the success of the Erasmus Programme, which has attracted more than 10 million participants in nearly three decades thanks to inter-institutional collaborations (European Commission, 2014, 2019). The Erasmus program has evolved into an EU flagship initiative and a concrete emblem of the EU’s vision for the country since its inception in 1987. Several studies, including the Erasmus Impact Studies of 2014 and 2019, have shown that Erasmus students are very supportive of the mobility, are more favourable about the possibility of living in another EU country, and have more friendships or romantic ties with them (European Commission, 2014, 2019). This is an example of European diversity and the opportunities that the EU offers to the European people (Ferreira-Pereira and Mourato, 2021:74). Examining European education programs, the European Commission (1998: 24) reveals that the most important contributions of the programs are that they promote transnational and intercultural cooperation and exchange. These findings were later supported by Osler and Starkey (1999), and Grainger (2003).

There are many scholarly works highlighting the benefits of Erasmus program. The first essential component of the Erasmus exchange program is a student grant, which distinguishes it from other international student mobility programs. According to a study of Erasmus students, the socioeconomic levels of those participating in the program are not high (METU, 2013: 3). As a result, the Erasmus program provides this option to students who otherwise would not be able to afford to study abroad due to financial constraints. The second notable element of the Erasmus student exchange program is that it aims to increase young people’s knowledge of European issues and their understanding

of EU citizenship (Toprakçı, 2004: 89). Wilson (2011: 1134) compares two groups of Erasmus students and non-Erasmus students and concludes that Erasmus students are more pro-European. He finds that Erasmus students who learned about diverse cultures and lost their prejudices developed European consciousness. Young people developed worldwide solidarity as a result of this process. Sigalas (2010:1353) claims that Erasmus students acquire good attitudes about the EU while also delivering several personal benefits, and they are more effective in promoting awareness about EU membership. The Erasmus program's third distinguishing trait is that it provides students with opportunities for personal growth as well as academic performance. According to Arslan (2013:16-17), Erasmus students obtain significant personal benefits, such as better understanding themselves, learning about various cultures, and enhancing their tolerance. Furthermore, the Erasmus program is seen as a beneficial step in developing foreign languages and creating future work chances.

The academic and professional experience perceived during the program contributes to the long-term development of partner countries' higher education systems, which is one of the program's overall goals. Ünal (2011) states that mobility programs offer participants social, cultural, individual and professional contributions. Yağcı et al. (2007) also examine the satisfaction status of students in the country where they went under the Erasmus Program and express that students are generally satisfied with the services offered.

Students believe that the Erasmus program offers opportunities to realise themselves and their dreams, which affects the reasons for participation. According to Feven and Krzaklewska (2013: 9), time spent abroad not only improves the student's academic and professional skills, but also enhances their language learning skills, intercultural communication competencies, self-confidence and cultural sensitivity. These experiences enable students to better understand their European citizenship. In addition, this process positively affects students' employment opportunities and their perspective on the profession (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013: 10). Their research observed that while staying abroad with Erasmus, adaptation to new situations, open-mindedness, understanding the value of different cultures, learning, independent planning and collaboration, analytical thinking and problem-solving skills are developed.

Similarly, to previously mentioned studies, works of other researchers indicate that international mobility has many benefits, such as improving the knowledge of foreign languages (Kinging, 2011), the ability to think critically (Nguyen, 2012), the ability to build a constructive dialogue with people of different nationalities (Williams, 2005), and personal development (Dwyer, 2004).

The Erasmus program impact study (European Commission, 2014) emphasises that Erasmus students are better placed than other students to find a first job and develop their careers, have more employability abilities to work abroad, and the program has positive effects on participants. That research concludes that Erasmus mobility provides many contributions to students. The students claimed that living in another nation on their own had enhanced their self-confidence. Mobility experience also supported their ability to be entrepreneurial and extroverted. Students who studied abroad acquired new friends, went on historical and tourist trips, and got the chance to learn about diverse cultures. Erasmus experience caused significant changes in their life.

Similarly, Lesjak et al. (2015: 851) claim that living with foreign people expands students' horizons of individual differences. In light of the exchange program's academic contributions to students, it has become easier for students studying a new foreign language or improving their knowledge of a foreign language to reach international sources. Furthermore, according to their findings, students in a different educational system and atmosphere boosted their academic awareness and began to view their future and profession in a new light. With the experience of living abroad, a sense of curiosity, the desire to develop oneself in size, learn a new foreign language or make new friendships, learn about other cultures, and make historical and tourist trips come to the fore.

The basis of differences between cultures is not only the geography of a country, but also closely related to the perception, attitudes and behaviour of people who grew up in one country and adopted its culture. For this reason, invisible boundaries are formed between people. The globalisation process has important consequences in various fields especially economic, political, cultural and ideological. One of these results is the internationalisation process in rapidly increasing education. As Özdem (2013: 62) notes, concepts such as the exchange of cultural, personal and social experiences have been

applied in the educational policies implemented in recent years. Therefore, the Erasmus program implemented by the EU can also be considered one of these application areas.

Ritzen and Marconi (2011: 89) argue that the Erasmus program is very successful EU project encouraging students to study abroad. Corresponding to Özdem's research, Ritzen and Marconi evaluate mobility to ensure the internationalisation of European higher education, along with providing European individuals with the competencies required to improve their employability and boost the economy of Europe. Although there are some negative points of view to the Erasmus program, which will be elaborated on in the next subheading, it is an important exchange program that contributes to the development of students' perspectives and the international cooperation of universities.

In his study, Demir (2009: 95) highlights that the European Union educational programs support the creation and development of decency, tolerance and understanding awareness by ensuring that young people from different cultures are brought together through dialogue. Training given within the framework of respect for human rights undoubtedly gives individuals a culture. It has a positive effect on the perception of the EU.

Mutlu (2011: 86) finds out that European consciousness is formed in Erasmus students who recognise different cultures and get rid of their prejudices, and young people also build international solidarity in the process. According to Sigalas (2010: 1353), Erasmus students gain many personal advantages during mobility and develop positive feelings towards the EU.

The study carried out by PODEM (2020) reveals that the perception formed in almost all of the participants of Erasmus is that they will prefer to live in Europe if they get the opportunity. It turned out to be a positive image of Europe. It is worth noting that three concepts are widely expressed in the perception of Europe: freedom, prosperity and order. The research concludes that the student community within the European Union supports the EU and approaches it positively. Erasmus experience increases pro-EU sentiment, cross-border interactions and student exchange mobility. One of the objectives of the Erasmus exchange program is to promote a sense of European identity among the participants. PODEM's research assesses the positive and negative opinions of students who travel abroad as part of the Erasmus mobility, and confirms the fact that it has a

positive effect on students.

Research on the perceptions of students participating in the Erasmus program in general noticed positive effects. Sigalas (2010) investigates the role of the Erasmus program in the construction of European identity using an experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group. According to the findings of the study, Erasmus experience facilitated students adjusting to another European country and culture.

Ribeiro (2014) carries out a qualitative study with Erasmus students in Braga and Prague. After mobility, students find it difficult to leave the hosting country, and many students return to these cities later in their lives to renew their memories. Isler (2014) assesses the Erasmus Program's outcomes in terms of European identity. According to the findings of the study, there is a strong correlation between participating in the Erasmus Program and feeling more European.

Kasalak (2013) investigates the perspectives of Akdeniz University professors who participated in the Erasmus staff teaching mobility program. The participants responded that they engaged in the program to gain international experience and develop joint projects, and that they expected to strengthen relationships with the university they visited. According to the participants, the program's benefits include learning and improving foreign languages, getting to know a different nation, institution, and culture, and meeting with teaching staff, students, and the education system in another country.

In his study, Şahin (2013) evaluates the views of Turkish students participating in the Erasmus program and attempts to assess whether the attitudes and views of the Turkish students who participated in the Erasmus program have altered as a result of their European experiences. According to the findings of the study, all of the participants expressed satisfaction with their lives in the hosting countries. The Erasmus program is regarded as a significant opportunity in terms of the international atmosphere and scholarship chances it gives. The research underlines the benefits of the program, such as improving confidence, obtaining an intercultural viewpoint, and expanding horizons. The students indicated that their previous opinions on Europe had become stronger as a result of the program.

Kalyacı (2011) conducts a study on Erasmus students at Selçuk University to

reveal the program's benefits to students and the education system, as well as to determine the program's adequacy and prevalence. According to the findings of the study, the Erasmus program contributes to the emergence of new ideas in universities in their home countries as a result of the experience gained in a different educational system in a foreign country. Furthermore, except for a few examples, it is often carried out in the form of experiencing and learning about new cultures, as well as intercultural dialogue.

Çelik (2018) studies Aksaray University as an example of the socio-cultural consequences of the Erasmus Program on university students participating in learning mobility. According to the study's findings, students' self-esteem rose, and they gained confidence. Students got rid of unfavourable stereotypes about people from other nations, and their viewpoints shifted. They began to see life with more optimism, and meeting individuals from the countries they visited added to their cultural diversity. Students' foreign language skills and communication abilities improved, and their awareness of the European Union and European countries increased significantly due to the Erasmus program.

In his study on Turkish Erasmus students, Kağnıcı (2016) examines the influence of EU mobility exchange programs on the formation of European identity. While many of the interviewed 66 Turkish students stated that they did not feel close to any identity type such as "national" or "European" before the mobility period, the research reveals that the sense of belonging and identity became stronger after the mobility period. For example, the number of participants who feel closer to the "National first, then European identity", "Equally national and European identity" increased and "None of them" decreased (Kağnıcı, 2016: 58).

The research of Şahin (2007), which aims to understand the perceptions of Turkish exchange students of the Erasmus Program via qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews and content analysis, is very close to this thesis subject. As the research is in the field of educational sciences, the focus is different. At the end of the research it was found out that the students' perceptions of Europe became stronger.

According to Wilson (2011), the Erasmus mobility contrasts with other exchange programmes regarding its political purpose, which is to generate support for an institution outside of the process rather than strengthen in-group and out-group ties. The European

Commission does not provide funding for French youngsters to study in the United Kingdom to optimise their perceptions of the country, but it does provide funds to improve their attitudes towards Europe. But this does not mean that Erasmus aims to generate loyalty so intense that, according to Galtung (1994: 83), it is called “European ultranationalism” (Galtung, 1994: 83). But that it aims to generate support for a political entity that, along with many others, includes the existing national government.

In the European context, the lack of public support for the EU has been the subject of much debate in the literature (Arts and Halman, 2006). The literature is divided on how long supranational authorities can expect to obtain public support. Deutch et al. (2001) argue that supranational integration is possible and that the international mobility of students, to be specific, is a significant main cause. When established political modules joined to form various groups in the past, the procedure included mobility population. Connor (1972) is more sceptical that exchange programs seriously influence integration. Within the framework of European integration, Cederman (2001) agrees that political values can be changed, for example, through mass education, but questions Europe’s possibility of obtaining them.

### **3.2.2 Negative Experiences**

Soft power tools, such as student exchange programs, do not always produce the desired results. There is evidence that gaining the appreciation of arriving students is difficult, particularly if their relationship with the host society is sour (Lambert and Bressler, 1954: 72). A senior member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was an exchange student at Colorado State University, and instead of returning home with a favourable impression of the United States, he came home with negative views, describing American society and social structure as immoral, selfish, and consumerist (Cull, 2008: 42).

Personal traits of exchange participants are another occurrence that attracts attention to the impact of exchange programs. Their educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds can influence how they perceive things (De Wit, 2001: 80). The concept that exchange students serve as a link between the host country and the home country has also been criticised. For example, if the exchange student rejects his native culture and becomes overly “Europeanized” or “Westernized”, his credibility in the eyes

of the home society may be harmed (Snow, 2008: 198). The home society cannot relate to them in such instances, which are also known as captive mind syndrome. When exchange students are regarded to be too defensive of their host nation or too critical of their own culture when they return, their ability to influence their relatives' opinions diminishes (Bint Abbas, 2015: 38).

Writing about the Erasmus effect, Zichner and Saran (2016: 183), who examine the EU's foreign education policy and the opinions of the participants with qualitative research, instead of analysing how successful the EU is in following this public diplomacy strategy, examine it as a migration problem in terms of its results. They obtained data through interviews with practitioners responsible for coordinating Erasmus Mundus in Moldovan universities. The research problems are to what extent an initiative like Erasmus Mundus facilitates the migration of the highly trained individuals and to the issue of brain drain.

Li and Kaye (1998: 43) argue, that English language proficiency appears to be an important factor affecting many facets of the study abroad experience. The main challenges are caused by the weakness in English proficiency, which leads to more acculturation stress. The difficulties experienced by students going abroad are discussed in social, academic, and housing dimensions. One of these challenges is culture shock, which is distinguished by emotions of worry, melancholy, and homesickness that occur throughout the period of adjusting to life in a new country (Oberg, 1960). This is because "deep culture" characteristics are difficult to see. They are linked to the culture's deep-rooted views, values, and customs.

The participants in Ersoy's (2013) study on the Erasmus exchange program experience of Turkish teacher candidates reports challenges with intercultural experiences such as cultural disparities, inability to communicate effectively in English, and cultural prejudices. They found solutions such as overcoming cultural stereotypes, promoting their own culture, and recognising other cultures. The participants increased sensitivity by expanding their intercultural awareness and reducing their preconceptions, according to the analysis of the collected data.

In addition to the problem of weakness in English as a spoken language and intercultural communication issues, Erasmus program participants report other negative

experiences in the studies of Şahin (2013). They cited the lack of grants, the lack of information seminars, the inability to adapt to the climate and the difference in social structure as other problems. In Kasalak's research (2013) participants reported encountering various issues, including program length, transportation, foreign language, nourishment, bureaucratic issues, weather conditions, and knowledge exchange. In studies conducted by Özdem (2013) and Sancak (2009), students also noted an inadequacy, stating that they were not properly informed about the program. Bilici (2016) and Yücelin-Taş (2013) stated that the students who went abroad with the program had difficulties in housing, among other services. Yağcı et al. (2007) stated that the participating students did not find health services sufficient. They note that the lack of equivalence of courses leaves students in a difficult situation and leads to an extension of the semester. The study of Ritzen and Marconi (2011) stated that Erasmus project could have been a better articulated international program. Recommendations included to account the higher living costs for international students, when designing grant schemes; ensure English is the primary language of administration and student services in universities and attract more students.

### **3.3 Contribution to the Literature**

Most of the research in the literature on exchange programs utilises the qualitative method. It is seen that the theoretical framework used in the research is not always mentioned in the literature, especially in studies on Turkish students' experiences in Erasmus mobility. Some of the studies by Turkish researchers took the concept of soft power under the title of public diplomacy (Akgün et al.,2020). The liberal theory that Nye used while constructing the concept of soft power constitutes the theoretical basis of this research. This is the first contribution. The research aims not only to understand public perceptions towards the EU, which is widely covered in the literature. The most important difference and advantage of this study are that the concept of Soft Power is operationalised. The students were asked questions about their Erasmus experience following Nye's components of Soft Power Theory.

The second contribution of this research is empirical. The case studies of the research are Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University. As the literature review reveals, this is the first research about the Erasmus program for Antalya Bilim University.

There is a study of Akdeniz University professors who participated in the Erasmus staff teaching mobility program, but the target group is different from this research. This research will contribute to academia with theoretical and empirical knowledge and fill the gap in the literature.

## CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the information about the methodology of the research. It starts with the research purpose and design, sample group, then it explains how the interview questions were formulated. Afterwards it elaborates on the type of analysis. Finally, the chapter assesses the limitations, validity, and reliability of the research.

### 4.1 Research Purpose, Design and Sampling

This study investigates the role of Erasmus mobility in the EU's soft power, the cases of Antalya Bilim University and Akdeniz University. The main research question of this thesis is: To what extent does the Erasmus program contribute to the European Union's soft power? This qualitative study aims to reveal the EU perceptions of Turkish and foreign students participating in Erasmus mobility from Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University. Students' perceptions of the Erasmus program and the European Union are examined in terms of soft power.

This study is based on qualitative research methods and techniques. In social sciences qualitative research emphasises the descriptive data collection technique in natural environments and the perspectives of research subjects (Bogdan and Biklen, 1997: 5). Qualitative research utilizes qualitative techniques for gathering information such as observation, surveys, records and data collection; and the stories, understandings and activities are revealed realistically and holistically in the natural environment (Ekiz, 2009: 32). The most basic feature of qualitative research is to analyse the researched events, facts, norms, and values from the perspective of the researched people (Ekiz, 2009: 32). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990: 44), qualitative research is one of the mechanisms of building knowledge to comprehend people's attitudes, narratives, behaviours, organisational structures, and collective transformation. Unlike quantitative research, which analyses data with statistical information, qualitative research aims to solve the question of what sorts of meanings people assign to experiences, or how they narrate events (Dey, 1993: 61). Therefore, qualitative research provides the opportunity to examine people's perceptions of life in more depth by allowing them to define phenomena with their view of life.

In qualitative studies, the aim is not to reach generalisable results through numbers

but to present an in-depth understanding of the researched subject. It is important to present the data as detailed and directly as possible in terms of the validity and reliability of the research results. Studying cases will form the basis for further research (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005: 32).

This qualitative research applies a case study approach. A case study presents a comprehension, a deep understanding of an individual or group case and its analysis, the description and analysis of the issue and events, and therefore a narrative of the investigative process of these features (Mesec, 1998: 45). According to Mesec (1998: 383) a case study has two purposes. The first one is theoretical, which is to identify features of the situation, frameworks, forms, and orders of interaction between the participants and environment. The second purpose is practical, which is to evaluate work efficiency or the latest developments (Mesec, 1998: 383). A case study is a detailed investigation of the complexity and distinctiveness of a certain program, policy, institution, program, or system in actual life from different angles (Simons, 2009: 21). Case studies concentrate on the context, which is the environment. George and Bennett (2005: 26-29) emphasise the benefits of case studies, such as their ability to accomplish high conceptual validity, explore causal mechanisms and assess complex causal relations.

The cases of Antalya Bilim University and Akdeniz University were selected for this research. This is a collective type of case study, where a group of individuals or an entire community of people such as Erasmus students is involved in studying in a certain environment. The study was carried out in a retrospective time dimension. It entails gathering information on a past occurrence, with the researcher reflecting on a circumstance, event and target group of people.

The order of the questions during the interviews is found to be important. The interview questions were structured in this way: first before the Erasmus mobility experience, then during and after the trip.

All the questions were open-ended and neutral, aimed to avoid giving guidance to the interviewees. First, a broad question was asked to hear the story of the participant. And then, a specific question was asked to learn the interviewees' opinions or experiences in a certain area (culture and political values). The methodology of probing and prompting questions is applied in the interviews. In qualitative interviews, prompting questions

provide the interviewee with a device to reflect and start debating on a set of themes, and when the researched question is not covered within the course of the narrative and story told, the interviewer investigates where appropriate and requests for more elaboration. The probing technique is applied where it is necessary to ask for more explanations and detailed descriptions of the experience, which ensures that the information will be useful in data interpretation and assessment (DeMarrais and Lapan, 2004: 63-65).

This thesis aims to understand the chosen research topic from the perspective of the local population of interest. The reason for choosing students from universities in Turkey as the focus of the research is that the researcher lives in Turkey, can speak the local language, and communicate comfortably with the institutions, associations, and participants that implement the program. The example of Turkey is important as it is a non-EU country benefiting from the Erasmus program. Turkey's culture, historical background, government system, and geographical location differ from most participating countries. The perceptions of Turkish students about EU soft power and the Erasmus impact are significant to be investigated.

The research is focused on undergraduate and graduate students. It was aimed to reach the participants according to the pre-selected criteria related to the research question. The criteria were to be participated in Erasmus+ studying or work placement mobility in the last 10 years, to be an undergraduate, graduate student or alumnus in Turkish universities, and to have experience in the Erasmus+ program between 3 months and 1 year. However, due to time constraints, the number of universities was limited to only two universities in Antalya. At the time of the study AKEV University had no Charter. The choice of one public university – Akdeniz University – and one private university – Antalya Bilim University – is supposed to be a good combination for the research. The study sample consists of foreign and Turkish students who went abroad via the Erasmus+ program from Akdeniz University or Antalya Bilim University. Academicians who went abroad via Erasmus were not included. The foreign students who came to Turkish universities via Erasmus, that is incoming Erasmus students, were excluded as well. AKEV University, Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University and Alanya HEP University are not included to this research. The selected criteria allowed focusing on people with the necessary experience and insight into the research topic.

The snowball sampling technique was applied in this study. The snowball sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, is used to determine the participants. In snowball sampling, the researcher aims to access the most informative candidates to start interviews (Flick, 2018: 15). Then the researcher tries to reach the other participants from the people he interviewed, starting with the first participant. In this way, a researcher aims to increase the number of samples. This process of asking and reaching new connections continues throughout the process until the researcher reaches the sample size targeted. For this reason, in this study Patton's (2014: 23) "Who knows more about this subject?" and "Whom should I interview?" questions are applied in search of interviewees. The study group was formed by the participants directing the researcher to each other. Although the Erasmus offices were contacted on this issue, the list of Erasmus students was not shared due to concerns about privacy and confidentiality. Then, students from the immediate environment with Erasmus mobility experience were interviewed. Afterwards, it was attempted to reach the participants from Erasmus groups on social media. The number of samples was increased by reaching students with the help of their Erasmus friends.

The distinguishing feature of qualitative research is obtaining in-depth information from a small number of units. The findings obtained in qualitative research are quite detailed in contrast with quantitative studies, where the numbers are more important. In this research it was aimed to reach a sample group of 30 people, reflecting the characteristics of participants from different countries or cultural backgrounds, participating in mobility in different countries. A total of 32 students, 19 from Akdeniz University and 13 from Antalya Bilim University, were interviewed. During the last interviews, the participants started to repeat what was previously said by other interviewees, and it became obvious that they did not bring new data anymore. The maturity of the interviews was reached. In qualitative interviews the size of the sample is found according to saturation point, so it was decided to stop collecting data at this number of interviewees.

Questions in the interview are based on the components of soft power discussed in the theoretical chapter. In order to operationalise the concept of soft power, an abstract concept is transformed into concrete with interview questions.

The whole list of interview questions is attached in the annexes. The following questions of the interview were asked to understand the cultural component of the soft power concept:

- 1) To what extent experiencing the European culture was a reason for you to participate in Erasmus?
- 2) If you think of yourself before going abroad via Erasmus, what was your main perception about Europe? In terms of culture.
- 3) How would you consider your cultural or social identity before going on the Erasmus trip?
- 4) How has the perception of Europe changed during your trip? In terms of culture.
- 5) Would you like to share any experience that attracted you positively? In terms of culture.
- 6) Would you like to share any experience that surprised you or caused conflicting feelings? In terms of culture.
- 7) To what extent do you feel more aware of cultural similarities and differences when comparing with your home country?
- 8) What aspects of the European way of life or traditions would you like to install in your home country?
- 9) Are there any cultural things that you would not want to see in your home country?
- 10) How would you define your cultural or social identity after your return? What impact did Erasmus mobility have on this issue?

One of the topics in the meeting was about political values. Even in any form of government, different principles are promoted as highly politicised and ever-changing national values. Erasmus+ mobility is likely to affect students' political values. In this section, the following questions were formulated and asked in different orders according

to the course of the interview:

- 1) To which degree Europe's political values were a reason for you to join the Erasmus program?
- 2) If you think of yourself before you went abroad via Erasmus, what was your main perception of European political values?
- 3) How has the perception of Europe changed during your trip? In terms of political values.
- 4) Would you like to share any experience that attracted you positively? In terms of political values.
- 5) Would you like to share any experience that surprised you or caused conflicting feelings? In terms of political values.
- 6) To what degree does your home country have political values similar to European?
- 7) Which political values would you like to import to your home country?
- 8) Would there be any political values that you would not be willing to adopt for your home country?

There were also measurement tools in the questions:

- 1) Have you been following more news about human rights?
- 2) Do you watch more stuff on youtube or TV about it?

The aim of these questions under the category of political values was to understand if there was a change in the students' self-consciousness.

Nye also focused on the foreign policy of a country on matters related to soft power. As a result, one of the topics in the meeting was foreign policy. States can gain legitimacy with soft power and benefit from the attraction mechanism. A greater appeal to shared values can help a state achieve its goals. In this respect, the opinions of the

students participating in the Erasmus+ mobility were also consulted. For this reason, the following questions were asked:

- 1) To what extent does the EU influence non-EU countries via the Erasmus program, in your mind?
- 2) To what extent Erasmus is efficient in EU foreign policy?

At the end of the interview, two questions were asked to assess the Erasmus program's reputation and attraction and analyse the ripple effect of the mobility program. With the help of these questions, it is analysed if the soft power works and the attractiveness of Europe is comprehended. These questions were:

- 1) Would you recommend the Erasmus program to others? Why?
- 2) Would you like to be in Europe again? What will be the main reason for you to go there?

## **4.2 Type of Analysis**

The content analysis was used to understand the extent to which the EU's soft power via Erasmus mobility functions in the undergraduate and graduate students of Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University. One of the most important approaches in social science research is content analysis, which is used to examine a big number of documents. It is utilised to locate and analyse essential portions of the material, such as themes, patterns, and frequently used terms. Content analysis can be done by hand or with multiple computer software. This study is done manually by the researcher. The individual level of analysis was used in the study. The contents of the interviews of thirty-two participants were first transcribed to the Microsoft Word program. A pre-prepared codebook was developed and improved in the process of rereading and finding pattern in the transcripts of interviews. The codebook, which consists of 21 codes, is attached to the annexes. As it was mentioned in the previous sub-heading, the codes and categories are prepared utilising Nye's concept of Soft power.

## **4.3 Limitations of the Research, Validity and Reliability**

Like any study, this research has some limitations. Firstly, the statistical

information for the last years about the outgoing Erasmus students from Akdeniz University was not received from the Erasmus coordination office.

Secondly, the target group of the study does not allow to investigate the EU foreign policy as a component of soft power. To be able to analyse foreign policy component of soft power, an elite interviews have to be organised with the representatives of governmental institutions. Elite interview are conducted in qualitative policy research in a politicised domain. However, as mentioned before the target group of this study includes students and alumni of Erasmus mobility program from two universities in Antalya. Nonetheless, additional questions about foreign policy allow the researcher to understand students interest and perception of the EU foreign policy.

Interviews were conducted in the English language. The third limitation of the research is that both the interviewer and interviewee spoke a foreign language during the conversation, which could challenge the participants' self-expression.

Validity is defined as one of the important aspects of qualitative research. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009: 34) defined validity as the consistency in all aspects of research and the application of analytical processes. In qualitative research, validity is related to the compatibility of the tool used for the research. Complete collection of research data is a validity criterion in qualitative research (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018: 23). In the qualitative phase of this research, the following validation processes were applied to ensure originality and credibility. The theoretical concept of soft power and its components was used to understand the contribution of Erasmus mobility to the students' perceptions of the EU. Based on Nye's concept, soft power components, the developed codes and themes were selected following the research design and scanning the literature related to the research. While creating the qualitative study group, attention was paid to the saturation point. In the study, due care was taken to collect valid data and ensure that the consistency in the analysis phase or the research design was appropriate. In-depth information was gathered by interviewing individuals in a way that best reflects the research.

Qualitative studies have a risk of researcher's bias. As human nature is subjective, maintaining objectivity is crucial. The triangulation method helps to avoid personal bias considering that they are part of the evaluated environment. In qualitative research,

triangulation means using various techniques or data sets to to gain a thorough knowledge of occurrences (Patton, 1999: 58). Triangulation also helps to check validity by merging information from different places. Webb et al. (1966) were among the first to use the term “triangulation” to describe a method of study in the social sciences. Methodological or instrument bias, dataset bias, and researcher bias are only a few examples of possible biases. Data bias occurs when the sample group has unusual traits that are not representative of society. To prevent this, it was tried to reach participants from different faculties. In addition, interviews were held not only with Turkish students but also with foreign students. This way, the perspectives of the participants with different backgrounds were also reached. Due to the pandemic, interviews were held online. This method allows relistening the records, transcribing them word by word, and avoiding generalisation of interviewees’ answers over time. It is thought that researcher bias was kept to a minimum as the researcher was not in the same official environment.

Reliability is related to the reproducibility of research results. In order to ensure the reliability of the research in the interview technique, it was confirmed that the two documents coded by the experts could achieve similar results. The codebook was discussed with the supervisor to check the consistency and a coding consensus was reached. This consensus is formed by revealing the units with matching explanations (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007: 15). The study also evaluated reliability through code overlaps in sections. Definitions of codes and categories are presented in the codebook. A separate file was created for each code to check for code conflicts in sections. In this study, it was decided that the codes in the sections overlapped sufficiently. Data collection was carried out online in the zoom application. The records of online meetings can be listened to again. The contents of the interviews were transcribed to reflect all the details, and the codebook was constructed. When another researcher can repeat the analysis, this provides the reliability of the research.

## CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS

This chapter analyses the semi-structured interviews with the students who participated in the Erasmus+ mobility program in the last 10 years. In total 32 students, who studied at Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University and took part in the Erasmus+ mobility program for 3 months to 1 year, participated in the interviews. 19 participants are from Akdeniz University, and 13 are from Antalya Bilim University. About half of the participants are Turkish citizens, and the other half are foreign nationals living or studying in Turkey. A wide variety of participants was reached. For example, participants from Ghana, Colombia, the USA, Russia, Indonesia, Syria, and Ukraine participated in the study. This research evaluates the opinions and experiences of the participants within the scope of Soft Power, as stated in the methodology chapter above.

After the fieldwork of the study was completed, the interviews were transcribed in the computer environment. The interview contents prepared in Microsoft Word were evaluated by comparing them. A codebook was prepared before the fieldwork and then improved and developed during the process of transcripts evaluation. Nye's Soft Power approach is applied in the codebook, which is a roadmap for analysis.

The interviews are analysed under the main categories, which are culture, political values, foreign policy and assessment of the Erasmus program. Culture is discussed first. The participants' thoughts and experiences regarding the culture are examined within this context. Under the category of Culture, the following codes are allocated according to the participants' construction of culture: religion, history, education and language, traditions and characteristics of society, technology and science advances, arts, cultural and social identity. Secondly, the category of political values is evaluated. The political perspectives of the participants before and after the mobility are examined under different codes: freedoms, democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law and justice, equality between women and men, tolerance and non-discrimination. Thirdly, the foreign policy category is assessed. The participants' perspectives on Europe's external policy are analysed under this title. Finally, the assessment of the Erasmus programme is used as additional category in the analysis for a broader examination of the Erasmus program impact and contribution to students' perceptions of the European Union. The assessment of Erasmus program category consists of three codes: economy, recommendation and going to

Europe again. The detailed codebook with the definitions of codes and categories is presented in the annexes.

## **5.1 Culture**

One of the most important components of soft power is culture. “Culture is the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society” (Nye, 2004a: 23) and comes in many forms. A popular culture concentrates on mass entertainment, while elite or high culture refers to literature, art, and education. On the other hand, European culture is more important in this respect. As Nye (2004a: 28) specified, EU culture attracts the whole world like a global magnet. European art, literature, music, design, fashion and food are the main points of interest. Taken separately, many European countries are culturally attractive. Europe is home to half of the world’s top ten most spoken languages. Because of its culture’s attraction and mission relationships, when one state’s culture incorporates universal principles, and its policies support the principles and interests shared by others, it enhances the likelihood of accomplishing desired goals.

90% of the participants in this research declared the main reason for the travel was the opportunity to see and experience European culture up close. With this aspect, it is understood that the cultural soft power of Europe is an attractive force for students. Some participants had an interest in their professional field. For example, for an engineering student, experiencing European technology up close was an essential motivation, and for an architectural student the reason for the Erasmus trip was the opportunity to get acquainted with famous architectural monuments and styles. The ability to travel to other places and see diverse cultures was a major draw for some participants.

95% of the participants in this study expressed positive feelings regarding European culture. However, at this point, there is a difference between foreign participants and Turkish participants. Foreign participants’ expectations of European culture are often favourable and confirmed. However, approximately half of the Turkish respondents had reservations about their expectations. Six Erasmus participants believed they would have an unfavourable attitude toward immigrants and foreigners. They are, however, more receptive to different opinions and ideas, according to them. Only one person, Participant 24 (27.02.2022) indicated that before leaving, he had an extremely negative attitude regarding Europe. He further stated that after the mobility, he believed

he was correct on this subject. These issues are discussed in more detail under the next sub-headings.

It was observed that Erasmus participants refer to different components of culture. They debated about religious distinctions, historical roots that affect the current situations in society, education in European countries and their home countries, foreign languages, ways of life in Europe, customs and what Europeans are like, technological advances, the ways of cultural expression like sculptures and paintings and the questions of identity and citizenship. The analysis in this category and the codes are assigned based on the participants' construction of the concept of culture.

### **5.1.1 Religion**

Religion and culture are inextricably linked. Many aspects of culture are recognised to have their origins in religion. Only seven of the individuals spoke about their religious beliefs. Four of them are citizens of Turkey. They remarked that living in the country they visit is not focused on religion. However, the majority of the participants made very few mentions of religion. The religious sensitivities of the participants may be one of the causes of this.

Participant 9 (18.02.2022) mentioned religion while comparing the country he visited with his home country in terms of culture. The main difference between the two countries is that in the EU, where he experienced Erasmus, religion is not perceived within the scope of culture. That is why people are more open-minded, he said. Participant 9 (18.02.2022) said that they respect other nations and that it is a part of their culture. Participant 22 (26.02.2022) said she expected to see many devout Catholic people. During her Erasmus mobility, she realised that such things are more about individual preferences. On the contrary, answering the question about European culture, Participant 19 (24.02.2022) replied:

My perception of culture in Europe changed depending on the places I visited. I saw that people are more religious than I thought of them before. Participant 19 (24.02.2022).

According to Participant 11 (19.02.2022), who went for the Erasmus mobility programme to Germany, politics and religion are intertwined in Turkey. He made a

comparison by arguing that they are distinct from one another in Germany. As a result, some participants reported that they felt more European. Participant 11 (19.02.2022) said he felt like he belonged to Turkey in Atatürk's time, but now he feels more European. People from many countries and beliefs live in harmony, according to Participant 17 (23.02.2022), who was in the Netherlands during the mobility. Three participants said that religion did not have much effect on young people.

Participant 2 (14.02.2022) drew attention to the relationship between religion and identity. Like nationality, religion is also a part of identity. She said she was afraid to say certain things about her religion in Europe. However, she said that she developed a more cosmopolitan perspective after Erasmus:

When I say I am a Turk, I perceive that they understand me as a Muslim. For foreigners it is equal. Turk means Muslim. I was quite adapted to say it. I used to explain that yes, I am Muslim, but I like people, and I was afraid to speak about my religion. Before the trip I emphasised my Turkish side, I had never been to Europe, and I felt ties with Turkish society. But then I met with different people, different kinds of society, and I was introduced to different values. Again I have my Turkish identity more deeply tied, but now my experience there made me think and have a more international perspective as well. I gained a more cosmopolitan look there due to my Erasmus trip. Participant 2 (14.02.2022).

Only one individual gave this issue significant thought. Participant 24 (27.02.2022), who sees himself as a sincere believer in Islam, states that European culture is merely a "bubble". It appears open and inviting on the surface, yet it constantly places roadblocks in your way if you want to go there. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the way he was treated. As a result, Participant 24 (27.02.2022) noted he was friends with the religious minority that was close to him. These people, he claimed, were more helpful than the natives.

Participant 24 (27.02.2022) connected religion with culture. He used the terms "Christianity" and "European culture" interchangeably. As a result, when asked about his culture, he felt compelled to say that he was a Muslim. He has described himself as having "a sleazy and hostile" attitude toward European culture before and after Erasmus experience. The following are some of his notable statements on the subject:

I am a Muslim person. I am a true believer, that is why the Western religion was not my reason to experience the European culture. Even though I respect Christianity, I do not support it. Europe had dark ages. Meanwhile, the Middle East Islamic world had a scientific world. The history of Europe and its beliefs in terms of religion is not primary for me. My reason for participation was to see the propaganda with my own eyes, and I do not believe the European culture is something superior. Participant 24 (27.02.2022).

And he continued:

My idea was certain. Europe is not as it is shown. It is a fake balloon. They just give you propaganda. They try to convince you that they are better than you, they are superior, they have better technology, better human rights, more justice, men and women are equal, and they show it in a way in the world that other countries such as Turkey, other the Middle East and Asian countries are lesser, inferior to Europe. My main perception was like Europe is something fake, false. In terms of culture, they say they welcome people, but I was not welcomed when I went there, mostly because of my country of origin and religion. Participant 24 (27.02.2022).

This research shows that most of the Erasmus participants in the study are not interested in religion. Those seven students who debated religion connected it with culture and identity. They expressed their positive and negative perceptions regarding religion in their countries of origin and EU countries. It is seen that most of the participants find European countries secular. According to respondents, religious beliefs are everyone's private matter in Europe, while in Turkey religion refers more to public and political affairs. After staying in a country with another dominant religion, half of the participants who commented about religion define themselves as more open-minded and international.

### **5.1.2 History**

History is a notion that is intimately tied to culture. The participants, on the other hand, largely avoided discussing the subject. Only five Erasmus students said they were interested in European history. As a result, they reported that they went to museums throughout their mobility. Participant 5 (15.02.2022) noted that while any issue can be discussed in Europe, it appears that discussing Adolf Hitler is prohibited. According to Participant 28 (28.02.2022), she was astounded by historical knowledge of Europeans.

She claimed that in her home country people study world history, but Europeans were unaware of other countries' history.

The thing that shocked me. [In my country] We are raised like we have to know a bit about everything: history not only local [my country] but World history (of course it is biased but still), arts, musicians etc. to be able to support the conversation all the time. In Europe, it is not like that. A lot of people have no idea about Russia, Asia, US. Many people even do not have an idea about neighbouring countries. They are young, but also close-minded. Participant 28 (28.02.2022).

Participant 26 (27.02.2022) said that the history of a country also affects the culture. According to this participant:

A different history of countries puts an emphasis on countries' culture. Hungary still has the aftermath of the post-Soviet political influence on modern life. Turkey nowadays tends to turn into a more religious country than a secular, democratic one. Participant 26 (27.02.2022).

Participant 24 (27.02.2022) with a negative attitude about Europe concentrated on Europe's Dark Ages. He claimed that the "Muslim Middle East" was scientifically more sophisticated than Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

Limited number of interviewees' reference to history within the framework of culture indicates that participants' interest in history is low. Only five Erasmus beneficiaries casually mentioned history in their discussions of culture. Three participants appealed to the national history of certain states, other two referred to European history.

### **5.1.3 Education and Language**

Education has evolved into one of the most powerful soft power tools available. One of the main tendencies of the 21st century is a contest between various national and socio-economic development values and paradigms. Without encouraging personal development, which is fundamental for building a new knowledge-based economy, such leadership is currently unachievable. According to Cowan and Arsenault (2008: 13), just a sophisticated education system that serves the needs of an innovative high-tech economy, while also being joined with international fields of education and science, can be one of the advanced state's most important advantages in the international competition

for minds. One of the state's most important soft power instruments is providing educational opportunities to international students. Aside from learning the language, successful international students will progressively learn about the host country's scientific and cultural accomplishments. After studying overseas, these students can obtain substantial social capital. Consequently, they are expected to be people who can effectively communicate the language and culture of the country they study in, once they return home with their newfound knowledge and personal connections (Nye, 2005).

In this research, the participants' perspectives alter depending on which countries they visit for mobility. Those who travelled to developing nations such as Hungary and Romania said the education there was lower quality than in Turkey. Those who travelled to more industrialised countries praised the educational system and its high quality. Some expressed their amazement with considerably more forceful expressions. The training in these countries was more participatory, according to the participants. They recommended that students attend additional classes and put what they learned into practice immediately. Participants who travelled to developing Eastern European countries had a variety of experiences. Participant 1 (14.02.2022) compared students' attitudes in Turkish universities and the country of his Erasmus experience. He stated that professors in EU universities treat Erasmus students differently and do not put too much pressure on them. Participant 19 (24.02.2022) stated, that students in European universities studied for examinations in the last week, much like they do in Turkey. In terms of administration, Participant 8 (17.02.2022) claimed that the hosting university in Europe was inferior than Turkish ones. He used the student affairs office as an example of his negative experiences in this area. As a result, views on education differ greatly from country to country.

Participant 16 (23.02.2022) made the following comparison with Turkey:

Their education [in a hosting university in Europe] impressed me. For sure, they treated us differently because we were Erasmus students. They were more easygoing with us. Teaching in EU countries is based more on experience. We learned more theoretically at our university in Turkey, and lecturers expected us to gain experience during our internships. Doing something practical is a plus, but if not, you can pass the kind of attitude in a Turkish university. But in Europe in classes, they just give information and immediately in the same week or month expect you to show a project or assignment. They make you produce something. Participant

16 (23.02.2022).

Participant 22 (26.02.2022) pointed out that the perspective in education also affects language education:

Our education systems are different. We started to learn English when I was in 4th class.

In Europe , they communicate a lot at their schools, they have speaking clubs, etc.

We just learn grammar and reading. We start as beginners every time. We do not learn anything. They do not follow the program much in Europe but practice a lot.

It is not only about English. Participant 22 (26.02.2022).

Participant 32 (14.03.2022) drew attention to the differences in the approaches of professors at the university:

Education there was good. Professors from different countries, not only Germans [are also good]. We were talking in the class, not only studying. They gave us a chance to explain our ideas during the class. Sometimes, when I tried to talk at our university in Turkey, my English was not good enough, professors were not motivating me, and they were not willing to listen. That is why I wanted to go abroad to improve my language skills. Maybe because we were Erasmus students [and] professors pushed us to speak more, [because/even if] our pronunciation was different. Participant 32 (14.03.2022).

Participant 27 (28.02.2022) compared Turkey and European countries in terms of education quality and said there was little difference. But she emphasised that the approach to education is very different. Because of this difference, she determined that the results after the training were very different:

Before I came here, I thought that Germany had a really good education system, and they do. I came to one of the best universities in Europe, but there is not much difference from my Turkish university. Theoretically, we both learn many things, but in practice, we do not have the same coverage in Turkey. In Germany, we are always interactive. We have to always accomplish something when we learn in class. They just want to solve something. Germans are like this, they find a problem and have to solve it. And that is the way learning works. They are the best university in Munich, and I guess in the top 50 in the world. Practising is the formula of learning here. I can say that the education system is far better here in Germany. Participant

27 (28.02.2022).

This research indicates that Erasmus beneficiaries see education as an important element of culture. Many participants expressed their idea about education and language in the hosting universities. They find education in Europe more based on practice, assignments and learning by doing approach.

In terms of language, participants' ideas differ depending on their country of visit. For example, Participant 21 (25.02.2022) stated that everyone in the country speaks more than one language, while Participant 24 (27.02.2022) stated that no one in France speaks English.

Erasmus beneficiaries compared the quality of education in Western and Eastern European countries and their countries of origin. It is noticed that participants mostly use the words “education in Europe”, “European universities” and quality of education in Europe when making comparisons. It can be concluded, that participants generalise the level of education in EU countries most of the time. However when it comes to negative examples of Eastern European countries, the participants refer to national universities, make clarifications, and name the countries, illustrating that these are exceptional cases and do not refer to all European universities.

#### **5.1.4 Traditions and Characteristics of the Society**

Customs and traditions in society are among the most prominent aspects of culture. The research shows that customs, traditions and characteristics of the society vary depending on the country and the city. There might be a lot of differences even within the same city. All participants willingly expressed their opinion about the European way of life, customs and personal features of the local population. Turkish participants, in particular, called attention to these distinctions. They remarked that Turkish people are really helpful to tourists. However, they claimed that Europeans are not always willing to assist outsiders.

The participants agreed that Europeans are more open-minded and less conservative than Turkish people. Even Participant 24 (27.02.2022), who had negative feelings toward Europe, reported that he could readily explain his beliefs and that his self-confidence had grown. Under the category of political values, this topic will be examined

in greater depth.

Erasmus participants drew parallels between Turkey and the European Union. The example of Participant 15 (22.02.2022) is very striking:

It is very different from Turkish traditions, culture, norms and values. A lot of Turkish immigrants live in Europe. The Turkish community, we come from, is a conservative, traditional society. But Europe is less conservative. They are more open-minded, more international, their society is more liberal. This difference can be noticed in every field of life. A girl in Turkey cannot live in one house with her boyfriend. It is the opposite in Europe and very normal. Participant 15 (22.02.2022).

Foreign participants found less cultural differences between European countries they visited and their countries of origin. For example, Participant 17 (23.02.2022) said that his home country was not culturally different because it had previously been a Dutch colony.

The approaches of the participants to the concept of culture and their definitions vary considerably. According to five participants, culture is about the way of life and thinking. In this respect, it has been stated that Europeans are more comfortable. According to Participant 13 (20.02.2022):

Europeans are more relaxed. They do not have many thoughts about their survival in life. They are more into educating themselves, using the sources and being more productive. They have more fun as they have fewer problems. Participant 13 (20.02.2022).

The “open-minded” definition of European people was frequently used in the interviews. According to Participant 30 (03.03.2022):

Europe is less conservative than my society, more open, you can talk about everything, and it is pretty much natural. I was not shocked by the culture. The thing that impressed me is the open-mindedness of people; not every person, of course, the young generation is very open, always ready to do new things or go somewhere. It felt freer spiritually, with no limitations. Even though there were some financial issues, we would always figure out how to go somewhere. It was much easier to

communicate and understand. Participant 30 (03.03.2022).

Similarly, Participant 10 (18.02.2022) from a more conservative society, stated that Europeans are more relaxed and free.

The earlier impressions of Participant 5 (15.02.2022) about Europeans' way of life were that they were always drinking and throwing parties. This, he maintained, was not the case. He stated the following about it:

It is weird, but before I went there [to EU country], I thought people there were partying and drinking alcohol very often. My grandparents always said that when I grew up here [in Turkey]. But when I went there [to EU country], I realised that things were not like that. Participant 5 (15.02.2022).

Some participants associated culture with some individual and social characteristics. Participant 6 (16.02.2022) expressed her bias that Germans are extremely cold. However, she stated that her thoughts about them drastically changed after the mobility. Similarly Participant 9 (18.02.2022) said he always thought of Europeans as cold people. He thought Europeans had nationalist views and did not like foreigners. But since Erasmus, these thoughts have completely changed. He defined Europeans as "friendly, good people; they help a lot; they like foreigners". The definition of Participant 25 (27.02.2022) is as follows: "people in Europe are welcoming, they are kind, they like to meet other people, open to communication" Participant 25 (27.02.2022). Participant 27 (28.02.2022) linked Europeans' multiculturalism and openness to other people with the opportunity to travel freely and get to know other cultures. Discussing the personal characteristics of people in Europe, 14 participants stated that local people in the places of their studies have a strong work ethic and are dedicated to work. 7 participants claim that people in the countries they visit are more laid-back than people in their home country. Participants have a clear opinion that Europeans are more individualistic and have fewer family ties.

Six participants stated that they were suspicious due to discriminatory thoughts on culture and fascist movements in Europe. Participants had different experiences in this regard. Approximately 75% of the participants said they had not encountered such things. Some participants have the opposite experience. The subject will be discussed in more

detail under “political values”. Only the views of Participant 16 (23.02.2022) will be included here:

Despite all the positive things we read about Europe in books about their values and how lovely Europeans are, if you focus on a country or society level, they have such social problems. Participant 16 (23.02.2022).

Participant 9 (18.02.2022) drew attention to gastronomy and food culture in terms of culture. The participant found Europe insufficient in diversity compared to his home country.

### **5.1.5 Technology and Scientific Advances**

Five interviewees associated the subject of culture with technology. Erasmus students stated that Europe is very advanced in terms of technology. However, Erasmus beneficiaries who mention technology, make a differentiation between Western and Eastern European countries. According to respondents, Eastern European countries are less developed and advanced in terms of technology.

Two participants associated technology with education. Participant 3 (15.02.2022) said that the European university has the latest technology. Computers and projectors are in very good condition. He gave an example that there are still 80s technologies in his country of origin:

In Russian universities, it is awful. I have friends studying at Moscow State University.

They are equipped in the 80s and still stay the same. That is a big difference. In the EU, universities and institutions stay updated, and are provided with the best equipment. Also it is because of the economy, that they can do it. Participant 3 (15.02.2022).

Two participants associated technology with bureaucracy. They said that the state should facilitate the lives of citizens with technology. Both participants made comparisons with Turkey. Participant 16 (23.02.2022) said that the country he visits with the Erasmus program is very technologically advanced:

I thought about Europe as a more advanced continent in terms of technology. This technology makes the way of living very easy for citizens. When you look at the bureaucracy, for instance, most things are made online, through advanced

technologies. When you look at the transport, recreational system, and how people have fun, it is something you want to have in your life. That was the best place I have seen in my life. Participant 16 (23.02.2022).

Participants, who experienced Erasmus mobility in Eastern European country, state that technologies and scientific advances there are not as developed as in other European countries. In this respect, Participant 4 (15.02.2022) compared it with Turkey. He said that Turkey's technological infrastructure is much better than in Romania. Similarly, Participant 26 (27.02.2022) said that the Eastern European country where he is located is technologically behind Turkey and Western European countries. He said that Turkey is more developed in bureaucracy and technology than the EU country, where he experiences Erasmus mobility.

According to Participant 1 (14.02.2022), there is no difference between Turkey and Europe. He even claimed that Turkey is superior to the EU Member States in some areas. Participant 1 (14.02.2022) states:

Maybe 20 years ago our country was terrible, we did not have proper technological goods, like fridges, or cars. But now Turkey is almost equal to the USA or European countries, in some aspects we are even better. Participant 1 (14.02.2022).

Thus, discussing the topic of technology, the students compared the level of technological development of the Western and Eastern European countries, and their countries of origin and Europe in general.

### **5.1.6 Arts**

Art is an important form of cultural expression. Sculptures, museums, and buildings are examples of notable works of art. Six people shared their thoughts on European art. Three participants considered architectural aspects to be works of art. Four participants also identified museums, paintings, and sculptures in Europe as cultural artefacts. Two participants claimed that while individuals in Europe engage in a wide range of art-related activities, this is not the case in their nation.

Three participants associated culture with historical and architectural structures. They said that very important works should be seen in Europe on this subject. It has been pointed out that the architectural works are very well preserved, and Europeans have very

different perspectives in this respect. Arts is found to be an important component of European culture by 20% of the participants. In their discussions of this question Erasmus students mostly referred to European arts as a part of cultural heritage, not differentiating to national authors or works.

### **5.1.7 Cultural and Social Identity**

About 50% of the participants come from quite different cultures and backgrounds. Approximately 50% of Turkish students confirmed they have strong connections with Turkish culture. Participants with two or more citizenships, in particular, stated that they did not feel like they truly belonged to a country. About 20% of the participants said they saw themselves as global citizens before Erasmus or felt they belonged to Western culture. The rate of students who define themselves as international after Erasmus has increased to 50%. This is what Participant 16 (23.02.2022) says about her Erasmus experience in terms of cultural identity:

My international identity even strengthened there during my Erasmus mobility. Erasmus is extremely international. We do not meet so many foreigners in our usual life. When you stay in another country, in a multinational environment, mentally, you adapt. The circumstances boost you up, and your identity becomes close to theirs. Participant 16 (23.02.2022).

As discussed under the title of religion, some Erasmus program participants define cultural or social identity as belonging to the religion of their country of origin. Participant 4 (15.02.2022) links the changes in his feeling of belonging to the European community with Erasmus and religion-oriented politics in Turkey:

I can say my European identity has strengthened during Erasmus. It is influenced by my experience of living in Europe as well as Turkish politics. Last 20 years, AKP has used religious orientation in governing Turkey. I am not a big fan of the ruler of Turkey. Because of it, I feel more European. Participant 4 (15.02.2022).

About 40% of Turkish students changed their cultural identity definitions after Erasmus. Seven participants, who previously defined themselves as nationalists, started to define themselves as cosmopolitans, international, world citizens, or belonging to the Western culture. This research shows that foreign participants or students with two or more citizenships did not have a major shift in their cultural or social identity, but some

mentioned strengthening their feeling of being international.

To summarise the findings of the research under the heading of culture, it is concluded that cultural experiences are significant to most participants. 95% of people had good experiences. The number of people who had negative experiences is relatively modest. Only one person expresses a negative viewpoint by equating his unfavourable experiences with the entire continent of Europe. However, Participant 24 (27.02.2022) mentioned that he was able to explain his beliefs. Two individuals had unfavourable experiences, although the number of people who thought these occurrences were widespread was relatively tiny. They are frequently viewed as exceptions.

## **5.2 Political Values**

According to Nye (1990: 154), political values are reflected in a government's broad domestic and foreign policies. These include the principles that a government espouses domestically and internationally and its general foreign policy objectives. The political values that a government promotes in its domestic behaviour (for example, exercising democracy), international organisations (cooperating with others), and external policy (supporting peace and human rights) have a significant impact on other people's decisions. Under the influence of their example, governments can either attract or repel others. Political values are an important component of soft power in this regard.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of political values in their lives. For example, freedom, democracy, gender equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights and dignity, pluralism, non-discrimination, and justice are all mentioned. Political principles were cited by over 80% of the participants as a significant factor. Some interviewees claimed that they did not have any political values in mind when they went to Europe, but during the Erasmus experience, they learned and became aware of some political values. About 70% of interviewees stated that Erasmus experience impacted them positively. Their awareness increased, and they became more committed to European shared values. Four participants classified themselves as apolitical, claiming they were unconcerned about these problems. Turkey is democratic on par with Europe, according to only one participant. Participant 24 (27.02.2022) said that Europe is not superior to Turkey, and he sought to prove this with several examples.

Our political values [in Turkey] are true and more stable. We have a patriotic feature. In Europe, they do not have patriotism. In France, their patriotism level goes beyond racism. We do not have that resistant feeling in Turkey. But when you go there, if you do not speak their language, they just ignore you; you become the other for them. In Turkey, when we have tourists here, we try to speak their language, help with gestures, and body language. Participant 24 (27.02.2022).

Then he adds:

I remember the Syrian refugee crisis; it was a crisis just because of Europe. Turkey welcomed millions of refugees. When our capacity was almost full, Europe had to step in and take some refugees. Do you remember Greece? It is a part of Europe. When refugees wanted to go to Greece, they did not accept them; they sent them back from the border gate. While refugees were trying to go by boat in the sea, they made them swim back to Turkey; it is totally out of human rights; it is not even humane. When refugees want to ask a shelter in Europe, they accept just doctors, engineers, lawyers, and somebody of high status. They do not accept the common people. Where is the human rights protection here? In Turkey, we accept everyone; we give them equal rights and opportunities for education and health care. In Europe, they ignore human rights. Participant 24 (27.02.2022).

After the mobility, six participants reported that their ideas had not changed. Apart from the individual who had initially expressed unfavourable sentiments, three others said their perceptions had shifted negatively. Two of these individuals stated that the political principles in Europe were not what they imagined because of the discrimination and racism they had experienced. Participant 19 (24.02.2022) expressed his dissatisfaction that political values exist only on paper. Political ideals are deemed valid as a component of soft power when viewed in general.

### **5.2.1 Freedoms**

The most prominent theme among the participants is freedom. Many individuals were drawn to an environment where people could freely express their ideas. The most commonly articulated freedom is freedom of expression. In this way, there was no distinction between foreign and Turkish participation. Participant 5 (15.02.2022) expresses his vision of this value in Europe:

Before going to Europe I wanted to experience and know how they practice the freedom of speech. This type of value is sensitive to talk in Turkey. Some people say be careful about what you want to express because even the wall can hear you. I was lucky to have a chance to experience these values in Europe in comparison with Turkey and Indonesia. The idea of freedom attracted me a lot in Europe. Participant 5 (15.02.2022).

It was particularly underlined that in EU countries, citizens are free to discuss the country or the administration. Some attendees stated that these topics could not be discussed openly in Turkey. They compared Turkey to a few Eastern European countries. In other words, Turkey and Eastern European countries do not completely execute the liberties mentioned earlier. This research shows a division in the level of practising freedoms in Western and Eastern European countries.

Participant 30 (03.03.2022) stated that he had experienced all different types of freedom in Europe:

I used to travel around Europe before the Erasmus trip. I do love the freedom here. Not only freedom of speech or these highly developed habits like freedom of choice etc. I like freedom in every single aspect of life in Europe. I can drive without documents up to Spain, crossing around 7 countries' borders, and nobody will stop me. Freedom of movement is the greatest thing. Participant 30 (03.03.2022).

Participant 9 (18.02.2022) gives an example of the political value of freedom in an EU country:

I am so amazed that freedom of speech is the most important thing here in Germany. In Germany especially and generally in Europe, people care about the freedom of people's privacy. They do not even have the full google map here, the photo of real streets and houses in most of the places in Germany. They have a law about it, I think, they decided not to have these full maps. They give a lot of value to privacy. It seems to me very nice. Participant 9 (18.02.2022).

Some participants drew attention to the freedoms and rights of minorities and different groups in Europe. 20% of the participants stated that groups such as LGBT are respected in Europe. They said that groups such as LGBT people and minorities are protected against discrimination. In this respect, they compared Turkey and determined a

big difference between them. The comparison made by Participant 17 (23.02.2022) is as follows:

The LGBT people, in terms of how they dress, do make-up, and go to the office with hats, this type of freedom exists in the Netherlands. They support it heavily. I cannot imagine this level of freedom actually could happen in my country or Turkey. The democratic values and self-determination are different in these countries. This is the difference when we speak about freedom of speech and freedom of expressing our self-identity. Participant 17 (23.02.2022).

Even Participant 24 (27.02.2022), who had a negative opinion of Europe before and after the mobility, remarked that he felt more comfortable expressing himself and enhanced his self-confidence. Three participants stated that they would not be able to adjust to freedoms and other new political values immediately upon arrival in Europe. Turkish participants, in particular, claimed that they are frequently reminded of the need to remain silent on some political matters in Turkey. In Europe, though, Participant 32 (14.03.2022) maintained that he continued to do so unknowingly.

100% of the participants expressed their opinion about freedoms in European Union. This is the political value that participants enjoy the most in Europe and are very committed to. However, interviewees who experienced Erasmus in Eastern European countries mentioned that they had not expected to see the difference between Western and Eastern European countries. According to respondents, before going to Europe they were unaware of these differences.

### **5.2.2 Democracy**

Four people made some remarks about democracy. Five Erasmus participants used Europe's liberal framework as an example. They also stated that attending political meetings was simple. Erasmus experience was different regarding youngsters' political participation. Participant 8 (17.02.2022) expressed astonishment that, in comparison to Turkey, young people participate more in political activities. Participant 31 (08.03.2022) states that young people are apolitical and uninterested in politics. Some participants claimed that the democratic system in the country they visited was similar to that in Turkey. For example, Participant 27 (28.02.2022) stated that people in Italy were critical

about the level of democracy in Italy. He cited: “In Turkey, people choose their president; in Italy, we do not; therefore we are not democratic” Participant 27 (28.02.2022).

Participant 4 (15.02.2022) divided Europe into two in terms of democracy and evaluated it differently:

I do not want to put all the countries in the same basket, but I was thinking about democratic values. I was confident to observe the Western part being more focused on democratic values, practising them more than the Eastern side. To be honest, I still do not know a lot about the EU itself. Of course, I know basic things about the EU and NATO by studying political science, which is relevant in the current situation between Ukraine and Russia. When we speak about Eastern Europe, historically speaking, in this regard, we also need to talk about Russian Empire. It is close to Russia, and some of the countries in Eastern Europe back then had a heavy influence from the former USSR. When it comes to former USSR republics and democratic studies, measuring the level of democracy is important. I would say I am more confident about democratic values in Western Europe. That was one reason I applied for Erasmus in the Western side of Europe, like Germany or the Netherlands. Participant 4 (15.02.2022).

This research indicates that there is a difference in the level of democracy between Eastern and Western European countries. According to experiences of Erasmus students, Eastern European countries are less democratic than Western European countries due to historical background. Because of this difference Participant 4 (15.02.2022) preferred to have Erasmus experience in a more democratic Western part of Europe.

### **5.2.3 Respect for Human Rights**

One of the political values that most participants care about is respect for human rights. Participants emphasised the importance of people’s rights and their protection. They frequently made comparisons with Turkey or their home countries when discussing this topic. They stated that these rights are eroding and dwindling in Turkey. Participants from other nations agreed that Europe is doing well regarding human rights. There was no difference, according to four individuals. These people’s viewpoints, on the other hand, are significantly dissimilar. For example, Participant 6 (16.02.2022) asserted that all rights are available in Turkey as well. Participant 22 (26.02.2022) stated that the

human rights situation in the country she visited (an Eastern European country) did not meet her expectations in Europe. While these rights were recognised in law and on paper, it was pointed out that they were not implemented in practice. As a result, she stated that she did not feel safe regarding her rights. So regarding political values, the students make comparisons and differentiations between Eastern and Western Europe.

Participant 16 (23.02.2022) noted respect for human freedoms in Europe as a result of the value placed on humanity:

You can notice that the value given to human rights is high. How they defend themselves in any case where they feel there is an injustice, something unfair is significant. They are not scared to go to court. In my country, if there is something unfair, you would first think that applying to court will not help. I do not think it will be justice here [in the country of origin], if I do not pay. But in European countries, it is prioritised, the well-being of a human first. Even when people are in a relationship, they do not totally connect their lives. Participant 16 (23.02.2022).

Participants find that human rights are an important political value in European countries. They believe it is natural and easy to speak about and protect it in Europe.

#### **5.2.4 The Rule of Law and Justice**

The approach to the rules is one of the topics that the participants brought up. 80% of the interviewees claimed that European people are quite prescriptive, disciplined and always follow the rules. They said that everyone follows the regulation, particularly in traffic. Complying with the rules in traffic has multi-layered meanings. The fact that people obey the rules shows that they act in accordance with the law. It is therefore surprising and awe-inspiring for the participants to see people obeying the rules in Europe. Interviewees made comparisons with Turkey. In 95% of these comparisons, a good example was always Europe. Here is what Participant 15 (22.02.2022) said about it:

Traffic rules impressed me. Crossing the street at a red traffic light is not a problem in Turkey. It was strange for me when people were waiting at a red light when no cars were passing. They obey rules. Participant 15 (22.02.2022).

Seven more Erasmus participants said that there are rules in their own country but

no one follows them. Traffic rules actually represent the legal system of the country. Participant 4 (15.02.2022) expressed the same idea:

They follow the rules. Sometimes they follow too much, it even gets annoying. Traffic rules as well, comparing to traffic in Turkey. They always stop when you step onto the road, in Turkey you have to wait until all the cars pass. In the stores they are more respectful in lines. They don't try to be sneaky. Participant 4 (15.02.2022).

Participant 23 (26.02.2022) gave another example of following the rules in everyday life:

They have rules and prescriptions for everything. For instance, in the dormitory and public places, there is no sound after 10 pm or 11 pm. The city was very quiet. It was surprising for me. In Turkey it is crowded until night, sound and traffic horns everywhere, cafeterias, music, people are going out, talking loud, nobody cares. There in the dorm's kitchen we were cooking late for up to 10 people. Security called a policeman and told us we must follow the rules and be quiet. But I adapt to everything and respect it. People start their day early there. Participant 23 (26.02.2022).

Participant 6 (16.02.2022) is concerned about the implementation of the rule of law in her country of origin, when comparing it to Europe, which confirms its high significance for Erasmus students.

All the people in Germany have a lot of respect for rules, they obey rules at all times. You can even see it on their public transport system. You may hear a stereotype about Germans that they are always on time. And this is correct. This means they care about the rules. In Europe they are more strict about laws. There is not much difference between Turkey and Germany in that sense, laws are similar. But in Turkey some rules are just on paper, the culture of implementing those rules in life is lower. In Germany they do not have much tolerance for rules. In Turkey we are more tolerant of rules. Sometimes I watch news that women are killed in Turkey, that is very sad. I do not know why they are not got punished for that. In Germany if such a thing happens it will be the huge news number one in every source of information. In Turkey it became a normality. Participant 6 (16.02.2022).

While the majority of the Erasmus students who discussed the rule of law in EU countries, expressed positive attitudes towards it, Participant 31 (08.03.2022) had a

negative experience:

When you enter the bus [in an EU country], you need to buy a ticket before that. Before the process, planning things and rules are everywhere. In Turkey for example in the public transport you can upgrade your card or ask somebody and solve your problem, inside the bus you can handle all the issues connected with it. In Europe I could not buy a ticket in advance and thought to take it from the machine inside, but I could not. Then I paid the penalty at ticket control. In our country if somebody comes from abroad without knowing how things work here, people are tolerant, and will not make you pay the triple price for not buying a ticket in advance. Too much rules and restrictions in Europe make me sick of it. Maybe it is not right, because rules make discipline and create a well-organised society. Participant 31 (08.03.2022)

When comparing their own country, two participants used justice as an example. Participant 23 (26.02.2022), a foreign national, indicated that corruption is widespread in her country and that getting justice is tough, but it is easier in Europe. Participant 7 (16.02.2022) expressed her confidence in walking along the street. She explained this by saying: “If something happens to me, I am confident that the individual who did this will be held accountable” Participant 7 (16.02.2022). This shows their belief in justice in European countries. The analysis of the interviews in part about the rule of law and justice reveals that the participants give importance to these political values in their comments on Europe and highly evaluate their meaning for a society.

### **5.2.5 Equality between Women and Men**

Regarding gender equality, the participants are not entirely in agreement. They made general comparisons between Europe and Turkey. Three interviewees stated that men and women are treated equally in Turkey and Europe. Four attendees stated that equality only exists on paper in Turkey. While women in Turkey still struggle for some rights, this is the norm in Europe, according to Participant 2 (14.02.2022). Female participants, in particular, were more concerned about this issue. They remarked that they feel freer in Europe since there is no prejudice. As an example, Participant 12 (20.02.2022) mentioned clothing and alcohol. When she returned to the country, she felt like an alien. “I felt like I was in prison in my own country” Participant 12 (20.02.2022), she said. Participant 25 (27.02.2022) brought out the disparities between European

countries. She stated, for example, that women in Poland are prohibited from having abortions. This research shows that the political value of gender equality is an attractive soft power component of Europe in terms of female participants.

### **5.2.6 Tolerance**

Before embarking on the journey, the participants said that one of the things they most wanted to experience in Europe was tolerance for differences. Seven participants said they had gone through something similar. Participant 4 (15.02.2022) describes Europeans as “open, kind, liberal, accepting, respectful to differences, tolerant to other cultures, characters and points of view” Participant 4 (15.02.2022). Participant 9 (18.02.2022) gave the example of Amsterdam, and emphasised pluralism the most. He claimed that in Amsterdam, people have a high level of respect for one another’s differences and live in peace. On the contrary, Participant 31 (08.03.2022), giving an example of her ticket in the bus, claimed that Europeans are less tolerant of foreigners than people in Turkey. This research reveals that living and studying in an international environment, and being among people devoted to European values, increased Erasmus students’ tolerance. This political value is attractive for Erasmus beneficiaries.

### **5.2.7 Non-discrimination**

Before their mobility, six Turkish participants were afraid of xenophobia in Europe and believed there was discrimination toward immigrants and foreigners in EU countries because of religion, appearance, different views and other reasons. However, only two of thirty two participants had a negative experience of racism or discrimination. As a result, Participant 30 (03.03.2022), who had previously held negative views on Europe, reported that his views had changed as a result of the mobility. Two people had unpleasant experiences in this regard. Participant 26 (27.02.2022) claimed to have been subjected to racism by an academic counsellor. Participant 3 (15.02.2022) stated that he was discriminated against due to his beard and Middle Eastern appearance.

Discussing the non-discrimination political value, Participant 19 (24.02.2022) argued that work chances for a foreigner are lower than for locals with the same competencies, and employers discriminate strangers by paying higher salaries to European citizens. However, Participant 19 (24.02.2022) did not mention that he was personally discriminated against by the employer.

Four Erasmus beneficiaries expressed their opposite opinion regarding non-discrimination political value, they consider there is no distinction between foreigners and Europeans, Muslims and Christians, black or white in Europe. Participant 32 (14.03.2022) described his case:

Yesterday we went to a dorm in Munich. It is for Christians, but they accepted us, even though we are Muslims. Here religion does not have that much impact and importance. They always respect people. I saw other Muslims staying in this dorm. The manager said there is no religious discrimination here. We were in the church once as an Erasmus group, listening to a church choir, we were mixed Christians and Muslims, and we were not discriminated. In Turkey when someone sees a Christian they say they are a Devil, a bad person, only because he does not believe in Allah. Participant 32 (14.03.2022).

Erasmus beneficiaries had some prejudice about attitude to outlanders in Europe, and some of them were confirmed, even though not many participants experienced heavy cases of racism. Non-discrimination is a political value that damages the image of a right and fair Europe. Therefore it can be concluded that the political value of non-discrimination is not a strong part of the EU's soft power.

### **5.3 Foreign Policy**

Soft power cannot exist without legitimacy and trustworthiness (Oğuzlu, 2007: 86). According to the literature, there are three major sources of legitimacy (Nye, 2004b: 259). First, legitimacy may be derived from the power holder's values. Second, a country's political, social, economic, and cultural institutions can provide legitimacy. People in other countries will regard a country's foreign policy as legitimate if they perceive its institutions as contributing to and striving for social and economic welfare (Nye, 2004b: 260). And third, for soft power to exist, other actors must follow the soft power actor's leadership with the belief that such a course of action will suit their identities and serve their interests.

Foreign policy is one of the components of Nye's soft power strategy. None of the participants, except Political Science and International Relations students, were interested in foreign policy. 80% of Erasmus beneficiaries had difficulties answering the questions about the foreign policy of the EU. Participant 19 (24.02.2022) stated that the Erasmus

programme is about individual experiences. He believes it will have little impact on the government. According to Participant 24 (27.02.2022), European propaganda delivered through media outlets is more successful. He claims that young people regard Erasmus as a way to get into Europe, which is detrimental to other countries.

The participants agreed that Erasmus had a beneficial impact on individuals in general, rather than a governmental impact. Erasmus students said that their self-consciousness about political values increased and they felt more aware of cultural similarities and differences compared with their home countries. Besides that Erasmus participants gained personal benefits like improved knowledge of foreign languages, increased self-confidence, intercultural communication skills, enhanced tolerance, employability, open-mindedness and problem-solving skills.

Participant 28 (28.02.2022) explained how Erasmus could be effective as follows:

For sure, Erasmus is a very efficient tool to influence people. They teach people European culture. If they try to teach 50-60 years old people, they will not change their minds, or opinions. Doing these programs for young people and giving them a chance to observe the way of life in different countries, to compare with your own country, make you realise how people can live, feel the difference. One of the reasons for most of the young generation to do Erasmus is that they want to have international friends, so that they can share experiences when they visit that country, they know somebody from there. But when you come back you realise that it is even more than that, it can make your mind. The new generation is more flexible and open to changes. Participant 28 (28.02.2022).

Four participants were sceptical of Erasmus long-term impact. According to Participant 8 (17.02.2022), Erasmus attracts young individuals, who are unconcerned with the country's difficulties. He claimed that they only went to Erasmus to have a good time. However, he suggested that if adults participate, they may return and transform their country's political structure. Participant 8 (17.02.2022) also remarked that young people are unconcerned with European values and prefer to enjoy their freedom. He proposed that Europe should welcome students from more countries in order to be more effective in foreign affairs. Participant 8 (17.02.2022) wondered, for example, what impact it would have on Africa if Erasmus admitted African students. He also stated that outgoing

students only discuss the European Union or the European system in their friends' environments. However, he did say that students who had participated in Erasmus had little impact on Turkish politics.

Political Science and International Relations students provided more thorough responses on this topic. They stated that it is a foreign policy weapon known as soft power, even though it was not asked as a question. Students in the Erasmus programme stated that they would use the concepts they learned and their experiences in Europe back home. As a result, society would be able to gradually progress to a higher level. It was also mentioned that these pupils would opt to move to Europe. They claimed that the Z generation, in particular, did not want to stay in Turkey because of its economic position and government policies. Participant 14 (21.02.2022) claimed that young people try to relocate to the EU or the United States because they believe they will fit in better there than in Turkey, despite the challenges. Three Erasmus students supposed that Erasmus experience might lead to a migration of students and a brain drain problem for the sending countries. This is not the topic of this research, but a desire to migrate shows that students are attracted by Europe, and confirms its soft power impact.

According to Participant 6 (16.02.2022), the Erasmus program impacts people's thoughts. She claimed that the EU was actually saying "we are all free and welcome" Participant 6 (16.02.2022) through Erasmus:

It demonstrates its political clout in non-EU nations in this way. Erasmus, for example, sends a message to Turkish individuals that Europe wishes to see them as neighbours and collaborators. To put it another way, if we still have access to the Erasmus programme, it means Europe still wants us to address some of our difficulties before joining the EU. Participant 6 (16.02.2022).

Participant 31 (08.03.2022) explained the soft power effect of Erasmus as follows:

Soft power is not only about public diplomacy, created through participation in exchange programs. A lot of countries do the same things under different names. The best example of what soft power impact can be, is pop-culture. If you observed South Korea one decade ago, people had no interest in South Korea, but nowadays, young people are willing even to come to South Korea, to work or marry. This is a success of public diplomacy of their government. Soft power is an effective tool of

influence. For example, the identities of the hosting countries in the EU delivering what they want to say, delivering their messages to the rest of the World through their culture is also about soft power. Indirectly speaking about how the students' behaviour change after experiencing living in Europe, they can try to adopt the lifestyles of visited countries in their origin countries. Participant 31 (08.03.2022).

Six participants, who are interested and aware of global and European affairs, consider the Erasmus program a significant foreign policy tool.

During the analysis, it is important to take into account the fact that foreign policy as Nye's component of soft power refers to giving legitimacy to the foreign policy and following the leadership of the soft power. When Nye's concept of soft power is taken as a basis, it is more accurate to measure the foreign policy component via elite interviews with governmental representatives. As it is discussed in methodology chapter, inability to analyse the foreign policy component with the selected target group is the limitation of this study. Questions about foreign policy allowed to reveal the Erasmus students' lack of interest and knowledge in the foreign policy of the European Union, except for Political Science and International Relations students.

## **5.4 Assessment of the Erasmus Programme**

This additional category in the analysis examines a broader understanding of the Erasmus programme impact and its contribution to students' perceptions of the EU.

### **5.4.1 Economy**

One frequently cited cause for Erasmus mobility is increasing participants' work chances.

Nye (2004a: 67) cites military and economic powers as sources of hard power, economic interdependence between states, and economic sanctions to threaten countries and force them to change their positions. He also argues that national interests can include attractive reasons such as economic aid or peace-making, that economic power is reflected in international aid capability, and these values create soft power (2004a: 87). Soft power can be created by hard power sources, according to Commuri (2012: 49). In practice, it is understood that the concrete elements of hard power and the ethereal features of soft power sometimes go hand in hand (Kurlantzick, 2007: 72). Nye also

mentions that economic assets can also construct soft as well as hard power. They can be utilised for appealing and enforcing (Nye, 2011: 85).

Participants generally expressed their opinions in the field of economics in questions about political values. It is understood that they think of the interaction between economy and politics. About 60% of the participants evaluated the economy. Eleven participants pointed out that Europe is more economically balanced. Participant 1 (14.02.2022), who went to a more economically developed country, stated that he had difficulties in economic terms from time to time due to the exchange rate difference. On the other hand, six participants drew attention to the difference in economic development. The thoughts of Participant 12 (20.02.2022) are as follows:

I think Europeans are luckier than us. Economy and education are so important to me. It is strange in Turkey, we study all our life and then cannot find a job, always some crises, young people going abroad because of it. We work in Turkey for very low salaries. I am also thinking of moving abroad for my education and working possibilities. Participant 12 (20.02.2022)

Erasmus program participants generally made comparisons with their own countries. The thoughts of Participant 18 (23.02.2022), who drew attention to the difference between European countries and Turkey, are as follows:

They [Europeans] are already in good condition. They have quite a good life. Stable money flows make people's life easier politically and economically. In Turkey, life is a kind of struggle, all the time facing hard things, scarifying one of your goals etc. In the EU, they are born in a good environment, and with these good conditions, they can be productive, and have chances to do many things. We have our goals and expectations in Turkey and maybe Middle Eastern countries, but we can do it if the conditions are right. Participant 18 (23.02.2022)

Participant 11 (19.02.2022) drew attention to the reflection of economic circumstances on daily life. What he says about it is quite remarkable:

People driving luxury cars made me upset. In Turkey, it is a luxury to drive BMW or Mercedes. Here, it is a need. They are so used to it that even students have a car, which is a dream for me. These economic differences irritate me. Participant 11 (19.02.2022).

Similarly, Participant 14 (21.02.2022) stated that she plans to stay in Europe for economic reasons. Those who plan or want to return to Europe to have more job opportunities and a more liveable income constitute 50% of the participants. Participant 21 (25.02.2022), who has just completed his master's education, said he is actively looking for a job in Europe. He said that if she could not find a job, she would search for PhD opportunities in Europe. Participant 23 (26.02.2022) received a job offer during Erasmus. She stated that she felt lucky to receive such a job offer. She added that she would start working after Erasmus. Three Erasmus students discussed the migration and brain drain problem, which, in their opinion, is associated with a more attractive economic situation in the EU countries compared to participants' countries of origin.

If the country of residence is not very developed economically, it is more difficult to find a job. According to Participant 29 (01.03.2022), who experienced Erasmus in an Eastern European country, finding a job as a foreigner is very difficult. But he also drew attention to his positive contributions:

It is hard to live as a foreigner, when you cannot get a job easily or have communication struggles, but I am not afraid. It gives you some power to think that you can do great things. The immigration process is not easy. You are losing your identity at some point, but you are getting the better one, the double one. If you can immigrate and assimilate into a foreign country, you can do anything in the world. Participant 29 (01.03.2022).

Only one participant thinks quite differently. While explaining why he would not go to Europe again, Participant 24 (27.02.2022) drew attention to education and job opportunities in Turkey. He stated that there is no need to go to Europe for the economy and jobs. Here is what he said about it:

I would not want to go to Europe again, because I do not need to travel abroad, in our country we have all the ancient cities of ancient times, the modern buildings, modern structures. We have jobs in almost all the sectors. Any person can go to university, graduate in 4 years and start his dream job. The service of Turkey is huge. Anyone can settle down in any city, study the field he likes and have a dream job. In every city, we have 2-3-4-5 universities. Studying is not an obstacle. We have every opportunity for our young generation. They do not need to go to Europe, and me neither. Participant 24 (27.02.2022).

The research shows that participating in the Erasmus programme reinforced the students' knowledge of Europe. Thirteen participants agreed that Erasmus experience would help to obtain better jobs. Respondents think that Europe is at a better level economically. About 50% dream of finding a job and living in Europe. It is seen that the economic aspect of Europe's soft power is very effective. Taking part in Erasmus increases the tendency to work and live in Europe. It is seen that Europe's soft power is very strong in terms of the economy.

#### **5.4.2 Recommendation**

The participants were asked a series of questions to see whether their involvement in the Erasmus programme had any impact, and whether the EU soft power works. Participant 7 (16.02.2022) was not certain whether or not he would recommend Erasmus to others. Except for one, all participants said they would enthusiastically recommend it. The common thread running across the responses to the question of why they recommend it, is that it contributes positively. Some attendees emphasised the opportunity to learn about various cultures. They said that they would be able to truly understand the world. It was also mentioned that it helps people enhance their academic performance. Even if students had a terrible Erasmus experience, it was stated that they would get the ability to travel and live in Europe on their own. Some of the participants mentioned the idea of learning many languages. According to several participants, it would help them break out of their comfort zones and boost their chances of success in life. Only one participant indicated it was not something he would suggest. Participant 24 (27.02.2022) thought incoming students could learn nothing from Europe. As a result, the answers to this question suggest that Erasmus has a soft power success rate of roughly 95%. Three participants compared the Erasmus programme to other countries' practices. They claim that China has similar programmes and awards scholarships, but they are not as effective as Erasmus. They indicated that Erasmus is one of the most effective education programmes.

#### **5.4.3 Going to Europe Again**

The second question, asked of the participants to see if their participation in the Erasmus programme was effective in terms of soft power, was whether they wanted to return to Europe. This question was answered "yes" by almost 95% of the participants.

About 25% of these people want to go for tourist reasons, while the other 25% want to go for educational reasons. About half of the people desire to work and live in Europe. Soft power appears to be particularly effective in this regard. A sizable portion of the participants would rather live in the EU than in their home nation. Approximately 50% of individuals prefer to migrate to Europe. Even though it may bring undesirable consequences for the home countries of program participants, their desire to migrate to European countries indicates that Europe attracts Erasmus students, and its soft power influence is high.

## CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

This chapter evaluates the findings obtained in the analysis part and discusses them in the light of the studies in the literature. Although there are many conceptual common points in the literature studies, what is understood by soft power is quite different. As stated earlier, in its simplest form, Nye's definition of soft power is "to make others want what we want" (Nye, 1990: 124). However, the concept of soft power has been handled so widely in the literature that almost every international activity of a country has been accepted within the scope of soft power. This chapter discusses the finding of the research, compares and contrasts them with the literature in the field.

When the results obtained in the analysis are summarised, the thoughts and attitudes of the students participating in the Erasmus programme towards the EU at the end of the mobility are approximately 95% positive. 80% of the participants want to go to Europe again. About 50% want to work or live in Europe (more developed countries). It is concluded that soft power of culture and political values works successfully. People's attitudes towards the EU have strengthened in most of the examples. The study of Şahin (2007), which is very close to this thesis, likewise reveals that the Erasmus program participants' perceptions of Europe became stronger. This research confirms the findings of the Erasmus Impact Study conducted by the European Commission in 2014 and 2019, which shows that Erasmus beneficiaries are very supportive of the mobility.

### 6.1 Culture

As elaborated in the theoretical chapter, Nye defines culture, which is the first source of soft power resources, as "the sum of values and practices that have meaning for a society" (Nye, 2004a: 23). Culture has many levels and is a form of social behaviour in which knowledge and values are spread by groups (Nye, 2011: 43 ). The continuation of this divides the culture into two within itself. According to Nye (2004: 49), one side of the culture consists of high culture that appeals to the elite, such as literature, art, and education, while the other side consists of popular culture based on entertainment in general. The research participants focused on the following topics: religion, history, education, language, societal traditions and characteristics, technology and scientific advances, arts, and cultural identity. It is evident that the participants mostly refer to the upper/high culture.

This research indicates that the cultural attractiveness of Europe is very high. 95% of the participants are attracted by European culture in its different dimensions. One of the reasons nearly 90% of the students participate in Erasmus is the opportunity to see and experience European culture up close. It is seen that Europe creates an attractive power for the neighbouring countries. Some participants wanted to see a more advanced country and culture related to their field. In this way, they wanted to broaden their horizons. Furthermore, they stated that Erasmus experience would help them find a better job. European culture means a higher level of well-being for the participants. A higher level of welfare contributes to the development of different branches of art. The branches of art that the participants want to see are as follows: architectural works, sculptures, paintings, etc.

It has been revealed that Erasmus students are satisfied with the cultural dimension of the program. A similar result is seen in the studies on Turkey of Şahin (2001), Özdem (2013), and Erişti (2014). In addition to being aware of different cultures in the intercultural environment, students also had the opportunity to look at their own culture from another perspective, to compare it. They got to know their cultures more closely and gained intercultural awareness during this process. These achievements have also developed the student's critical perspective on cultural issues. Similarly, Özdem (2013) revealed in his study that students' world perspectives have changed and their interest in different cultures has increased; Erişti (2014) emphasised that they have gained awareness about their own culture; and Ersoy (2013) highlighted that encountering different cultures enables participants to look critically at their cultural characteristics. Çakı (2011), on the other hand, in his research on the students participating in the European Voluntary Service, concluded that the intercultural interaction environment enabled students to think more about their own identity and culture and develop awareness, apart from better defining themselves.

However what the respondents refer to within the scope of culture is different. This research concludes that in 50% of cases, respondents refer to European culture, for example when they discuss arts, societal characteristics and religion. In 20% of answers to the questions about culture, Erasmus beneficiaries make a distinction between Eastern and Western European countries, for example discussing technology and education. In 30% of cases, they refer to the national cultures of hosting countries, for example, when

debating the impact of history, traditions and languages. It is worth mentioning that questions were asked about the culture of Europe, not about the culture of a hosting country. It is concluded that Erasmus participants do not always make a differentiation between national and EU culture. They attribute some of the components of culture to European culture as a whole and some the to national culture of a visited country.

Regarding culture, participants drew attention most to being respectful and open to differences within the framework of customs and traditions. This was the only topic that all the interviewees participated in. It is probably the image of Europe that looks most beautiful to people. This image may be the feature that distinguishes Europe from other countries practising soft power. Even one participant with a negative view of Europe reported that he could express his beliefs easily, and his self-confidence increased at the end of Erasmus. 80% of respondents also described Europeans as friendly, nice, helpful, and fond of foreigners. Furthermore, 50% of participants described them as hospitable, polite, enjoying meeting new people, and open to communication. When respondents described the respectfulness and openness of Europeans, they did not differentiate between East and West Europe. Respect and openness as characteristics of European people are connected with the political value of freedom of expression and tolerance. These democratic values are embedded in the society and make Europe attractive for outsiders. This topic will be discussed under the sub-heading of political values. This study, like Demir's (2009), finds that Erasmus mobility facilitates the formation and growth of decency, tolerance, and understanding awareness by introducing young people from different cultures through dialogue.

Undertaking the task of arranging the elements of culture based on statistics in order of their level of attractiveness, the Europeans' personal traits and traditions (with regard to the way of life in EU countries, individualistic type of society) will come first. The second element of culture producing the most strong soft power effect is education. In the third place respondents are most attracted by technological developments in Europe.

Since the Erasmus programme is an education program, the most important part of mobility is education. In terms of soft power, students who participate in mobility are expected to be people who can effectively convey the language and culture of the country

they study in, when they return home with their newly acquired knowledge and personal connections (Nye, 2005b: 12). The opinions of the participants about the quality of education are directly related to the country they visited during their Erasmus mobility. For those participants who studied in Western European countries, Erasmus has been very beneficial in terms of education. These participants said that they received a higher quality education. About 50% of the respondents in these countries said they are considering going for the master's education again. The quality of education, the image of EU universities, opportunities for international students, societal integration within institutions create a powerful impact and positively influence Erasmus beneficiaries' attitudes towards the EU. The finding of this thesis concerning the quality of European education and its attractiveness is in line with the results of PODEM (2020) study.

This research finds a significant difference in students' perceptions of education in Eastern and Western European countries. Before the trip respondents had a good perception of education in EU. However, the positive thoughts about the education in the European Union of those who went to Eastern European countries are changing. Their expectations about the quality of education were not confirmed. Students who went to Eastern European countries were not satisfied with the education and stated that the university they studied in Turkey was of much higher quality. Because of this difference, the attractiveness of the European Union in education is damaged. Students are not very aware of the differences of educational quality within European Union countries until they go for the exchange. When describing high quality education, participants usually refer to European universities and European education in general. When they had a negative experience or unfulfilled expectations about the quality of education in Eastern European countries, they specify the country and university, attribute these issues not to Europe but to the national education of the hosting country. After mobility, the positive image of Western European countries is getting stronger. The Erasmus students' perceptions of European languages depends on a visited country. In some European countries people are nationalistic and speak only local language. In other countries local people can speak and willing to use several foreign languages.

There is a difference in students' perceptions regarding technological advances in Western and Eastern European countries. Erasmus beneficiaries find Western European countries more modernised, technologically developed, universities better equipped, and

services in the cities more computerised.

It has been observed that there is a cultural difference between foreign and Turkish participants. Foreign participants and participants from Turkey who had previously been to Europe were more familiar with the cultural characteristics of European countries. Due to the differences in the dominant religion in Turkey and the conservative nature of society, Turkish students had more vivid impressions of European culture, and their awareness of cultural differences raised more than foreign participants' awareness. It is not possible to make a comparison between the Erasmus participants from Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University because of differences in the target group. There are more foreign students from Antalya Bilim University and more Turkish participants from Akdeniz University. Therefore, this study evaluates similarities or dissimilarities between foreign and Turkish students.

In terms of religion, this research finds that European countries are secular. Religion, politics and culture are not intertwined. Religious beliefs are everyone's private matter. This study revealed the Erasmus participants' lack of interest in history. However, they mention that history of states and world history leave an imprint on their culture and modern life. In their study Akgün et al. (2020) determine that attractiveness and historical elements have a positive effect on the citizens of the country they live in. This study shows that some Erasmus students visited museums and art exhibitions. Art is found to be an important component of European culture by 20% of the participants.

Many studies in the reviewed literature investigated the questions of the Erasmus impact on the construction of European identity, cultural identity and citizenship. As specified by Bauman (2000: 146), the first step to self-establishment is to realise that the identity is not given to the individual ready-made, and that individuals must construct this identity themselves and take responsibility for it. In other words, individuals are faced with a long and laborious, never-ending identification task. Today, in social sciences, a common conclusion has been reached on the idea that identity is a cultural, historical and social construction (Bilgin, 2007: 23). For this reason, this research aims to understand how identity is developed in the cultural sphere.

The number of individuals who have the opportunity to go abroad through exchange programmes is increasing day by day. This research shows that, due to Erasmus

mobility, internationalisation and acculturation increase. Participants experience interaction with different cultures in a different country while dealing with the difficulties posed by the new environment. The situation of being educated in a different language in a new educational environment and, in addition, the adaptation process with the students from different countries in that educational environment provided both individual and social development in the students participating in the mobility. This research finds that the national or local identities of the participants acquired an international dimension due to the mobility experience. Individuals have gained the ability to interpret events differently by stepping out of their socio-cultural environment, and have learned to look at events in their own countries from a different perspective. Resnick (2005) summarised this situation as follows: “Sometimes, when you are thousands of kilometres away from your home, you start to look at the events happening around you with a different perspective” (p. 7). In addition, half of the participants declared that after the Erasmus experience they define themselves as international, cosmopolitan or global citizens. The development of a global/international identity of the students as a result of the study was not found in the reviewed literature, however there are many studies highlighting the influence of Erasmus mobility on the construction of European identity.

The study indicates that Erasmus participants define cultural or social identity as a group membership in their nation, culture, or religion. This research finds that Erasmus program participants develop an attachment to a hosting European country or Europe in general and the environment where they live, and some develop a more determined view that European integration improves their lives. Erasmus beneficiaries find themselves in a situation where the EU’s presence allows them to participate in the exchange program in another Member State much more easily than they could in other ways, and the European Commission provides a grant.

Similarly to the studies about Erasmus program impact on EU countries and on Turkey, this research finds that the Erasmus program strengthens the participants’ ties with the Western culture. The findings obtained in this respect are compatible with the literature. According to Wilson (2011), Erasmus experience increases pro-European sentiment by introducing students to the advantages of integration. PODEM (2020), Ribeiro (2014), Sigalas (2010) and Isler (2014) stated in their studies that Erasmus mobility beneficiaries developed a positive feeling towards the EU. The study of Şahin

(2007), the closest to this research topic, comes to the same conclusion as this thesis. That is, Erasmus students' mobility experience significantly altered their comprehension and perception of the host country, to the point where they cultivated a sense of attachment and belonging to the EU country.

The finding of this research has similarities with the study of Kağnıcı (2016). According to Kağnıcı (2016) study, Erasmus students' sense of belonging and identity (national and European) became stronger after their mobility experience. About 60% of respondents in this study spoke more confidently about their cultural identity after the mobility. Before the Erasmus experience students had no questions about identity in their minds, but studying abroad and living in an international environment made them think about where they belong to. In addition to strengthening students' cultural / social identity (national, European, global) after mobility, this research revealed that Turkish students tend to change their identity (to European or international / cosmopolitan) more often than foreign students.

Several participants mentioned that they had some prejudices against Europe. They expected Europeans to be cold, unfriendly and leading an inappropriate lifestyle. Some participants believed they would have an unfavourable attitude toward foreigners or Muslims. In the intercultural interaction environment, prejudices have been replaced by empathy, open-mindedness and tolerance over time. Similar results have emerged in the studies on Turkey by Önder and Balcı (2010) and Elmalı (2013). In line with Mutlu (2011) and Çelik (2018) this study finds that Erasmus students develop European consciousness and build international solidarity by recognising different cultures and overcoming stereotypes. According to Eğinli (2007), it is more important that a person develops sensitivity to the culture, has tolerance and acquires communication skills through intercultural diversity.

This research has similar findings with the reviewed literature on negative experiences during Erasmus mobility. In his study Ersoy (2013) reports challenges with cultural disparities similarly like the respondents of this research described their expectations and prejudice before the Erasmus trip. Correspondingly, the participants from Turkey in research of the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies report populism and xenophobia as the most important problems in Europe (PODEM, 2020).

This research confirms the result of the scholarly works about studying abroad by Lambert and Bressler (1954) and Cull (2008), who state that it is hard to get the appreciation of incoming students, especially if their perception of the host country's culture is stained before the trip. It is also in line with De Wit (2001), who writes about education in USA and EU and claims that participants' personal features may influence the effect of the exchange program.

The results of this study are consistent with the literature that uses cultural and educational diplomacy as a theoretical framework. Similarly to the research of Peterson (2014), this study finds higher education and Erasmus mobility to be effective tools in terms of creating a positive reputation and attractiveness among international students. Higher education reinforces soft power by expressing the host country's culture and values and offering quality education to international students. According to Ivey and Cleggett (2008), cultural diplomacy is the establishment, growth, and maintenance of relationships with other countries through culture, art, and education. This study confirms the finding of Ivey and Cleggett (2008) that it reflects the interaction and evolution of institutions, political values, and the country's culture. Similarly to Rasmussen (2009) and Leonard (2002) this research finds that the strong part of the EU's educational diplomacy with long-term effect lies in exchange programs and mobility actions such as Erasmus. Universities are significant partners in achieving the European Union's economic development and welfare plan. This study agrees with Leonard (2002), who also highlights educational programs in the light of public diplomacy, and considers exchange programs to be one of the most effective tools for building stable relationships. Akgün et al. (2020), who takes the concept of soft power under the title of public diplomacy, in their study conduct in-depth interviews with students who went to Hungary and Italy with the Erasmus+ Volunteering Program. They state that outgoing Erasmus students act as cultural ambassadors, they reflect the values, history, culture and policies of the country and try to create a good international image and perception. When the strategies aimed at improving the image of the country aimed with the exchange programs are implemented correctly, they will serve public diplomacy and foreign policy better.

## **6.2 Political Values**

According to Nye (2005a: 75), the fact that a state has political values and that its

regulations serve the values and priorities of others boosts the likelihood of success. Therefore, government policies are a potential source of soft power both domestically and overseas. The values that a government defends through its behaviour in domestic organisations, international bodies, and international policy heavily influence the choices and priorities of other states. Governments' actions can either inspire or distance people. (Nye, 2005a: 76). It is a great source of attraction for a country to internalise the values of human rights and democracy at home, act together with other actors rather than act on its own in international politics, and strive for the development of international peace. Charm, willingness to work hard for reforms, goodwill, and dependability are critical components of European Union cooperation and integration (Volten, 2016: 93). Formal and informal policy coordination enables EU governments to work together to influence the outside world.

The tradition of working in coordination among EU countries and shared common values causes the Union to be a coalition of volunteers. Because the EU's culture holds universal values and its policies serve the values and interests of others, it is more possible to produce the desired outcomes due to the relationships and attraction it creates. As an actor that has developed peace and stability across a continent, the European Union holds a distinctive position in regional integration. Different enlargement rounds demonstrate that many countries around the world want to emulate the EU's experience.

This research reveals that all participants drew attention to at least one of the concepts of freedom, democracy, gender equality, the rule of law, respect for human rights and human dignity, pluralism, non-discrimination, solidarity and justice. This study finds that the most attractive political value, stressed by the participants is freedom in all its manifestations. For some participants, this makes them want to live in Europe. The most exemplary issue is that people can express their opinions freely. Participants highlighted the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement the most. Participants declared that these values are widespread and supported in Western Europe. As it was discussed in the sub-heading about culture, participants are attracted by respect and openness of European culture, which is related to political values. Even Participant 24 (27.02.2022) with negative attitudes to Europe before and after the Erasmus trip mentioned this. Agreement on freedom and cultural traditions (openness and respect) demonstrate the importance of hierarchy among political values. This research

finds the interconnectedness between cultural traditions and political values in European Union and embeddedness of political liberalism to the culture. There are similarities in the study of PODEM (2020) on Erasmus student from Turkey with the finding of this thesis. In its research “Social openness”, “Society without borders”, “Democracy ” (e.g. freedom of expression, openness, rule of law) were cited as the reasons for the extremely positive feedback (PODEM, 2020).

Determining a hierarchy of political values for Erasmus students based on statistical calculations, this study reveals that the second most effective principle is the rule of law and justice in Europe. Their attractiveness is very high. During the interview about 70% of the participants mentioned the rule of law, justice or public order as a distinctive feature of European countries, a positive experience or values that participants would like to adopt in their home countries. The most frequently described example was traffic rules. Traffic rules represent the legal system of the country. Seeing everyone follow the rules and those, who do not follow the rules, are punished gives people a sense of trust and safety. This outcome is the same as Şahin’s study (2007), which states that the mobility experience in an EU country made Erasmus participants believe that Europe has a regulatory system and order in all aspects of society.

This research shows that based in statistics respect for human rights is the third in the rating of most effective soft power element within political values. Erasmus students give importance to and highly evaluate human rights protection in EU countries. It was observed that the sensitivity of the students participating in the research to human rights increased. This finding is the same as the result of Demir’s study (2009), which concluded that training provided within the context of human rights respect positively affected the students’ perception of the EU.

The analysis of the obtained data detected that the level of political values differs in Western and Eastern European countries. According to participants, shared European values are manifested on paper and not always practised in Eastern European countries. Allegiance to European political values in the Western part of Europe makes it more attractive for Erasmus participants. Most of the scholarly work about Erasmus in the literature analyses the cultural component. For this reason it is not possible to compare every finding of this research with the literature. This research uses Nye’s concept of soft

power to evaluate the role of Erasmus program. Apart from cultural component this study evaluates the attractiveness of political values and foreign policy. Hence some findings of this study especially about political values are unique.

The fourth and fifth place in the list of values, that to the same extent attracted Erasmus students in Europe and they would like to implement in their country, is gender equality and tolerance. The study finds a division in the perception of the political value of gender equality between men and women. Female participants are more concerned about this topic. Young women from conservative countries declare that in European countries, women are more free than in their countries of origin. They pointed out that women can dress however they want. They stated that there is social pressure on women in Turkey, but they feel free and safe in Europe. Concerning pluralism in Europe, for some respondents that was a reason to participate in Erasmus mobility. Approximately 20% of students wanted and did experience it in Europe. It was observed, that participants became more respectful and tolerant of the diversity of opinions, cultures, religions, beliefs, appearances, backgrounds, lifestyles etc.

This research shows a difference in the perception of European political values before the Erasmus trip between foreign and Turkish participants. Before the mobility, some Turkish participants stated that they were sceptical about whether people in Europe were respectful and tolerant of differences. However, these ideas have changed since mobility. It is seen that the image of Europe, especially in Turkey, arouses suspicion in people. According to the participants, before the mobility, they thought there were many anti-immigrant movements, insults and discrimination against foreigners in Europe. After the mobility, 95% of those participants, having doubts, stated that these were exceptional cases. The studies on Erasmus students from Turkey by Önder and Balcı (2010) and Elmalı (2013) obtain the same findings about prejudices and fears of Turkish students and their dispelling in the process of mobility. Foreign participants in this study did not mention about stereotypes or preconceptions they had about Europe.

Some participants witnessed or even suffered from such negative experiences of discrimination and racism during their Erasmus mobility because of their appearance, religion or spoken language. Even though these are rare cases, in this sense, the reputation of a right and just Europe is harmed. This research concludes that non-discrimination is

the weakest European value based on reports of interviewees about their negative experiences. The negative experience of discrimination differs from the other negative experiences mentioned in the reviewed literature. On the contrary to the relevant literature of foreign and Turkish researchers, who discuss negative experiences of Erasmus students like administrative (Ritzen and Marconi, 2011; Kasalak, 2013; Özdem, 2013; Sancak, 2009), budget problems (Şahin, 2013; ), acclimatization (Şahin, 2013; Kasalak, 2013), health, housing and transportation services (Yağcı et al. 2007; Bilici, 2006; Yücelsin-Taş, 2013; Kasalak, 2013), this study investigates negative experiences concerning the topic of soft power and finds out that some participants even not the majority experienced issues related to tolerance of local people and discrimination. In this regard the finding of this thesis are comparable with PODEM (2020) study, which participants informed that they were exposed to discrimination and nationalist approaches and stated that the feeling of “being the other” weakened their positive feelings about Europe.

A remarkable result of the research is that universal values promoted by Europe give an important soft power effect. People are willing to follow European shared values. Erasmus students said they would be more respectful towards other points of view and perspectives. They stated they would be more conscious of human rights, equality, and the rule of law. They would learn global values by living them, and bring them back to their own countries. Some interviewees stated that beneficial developments are possible in their countries of origin, as they desire similar rights and a justice system in their own countries. However, about half of the participants consider their own country unlikely to stick to democratic values in the nearest future.

Comparing the findings of this study regarding the spread of political values by the Erasmus program, they are in line with Wilson’s research (2011). The universal values promoted by the European Union via Erasmus mobility foster loyalty, and commitment and improve students’ perceptions of Europe. Despite the doubtful views expressed in the studies of Connor (1972) that exchange programs are able to seriously influence integration and Cederman (2001) that European high education is able to transform political values, the results obtained from this research show that the belief in European political values has increased during Erasmus mobility.

### 6.3 Foreign Policy

It is discussed in the theoretical framework of this study that, according to Nye (2005a: 76), one of the most important contributions of soft power is to provide legitimacy to foreign policy. People in other countries will see a country's foreign policy as legitimate if they perceive its institutions as contributing to and striving for social and economic well-being (Nye 2005a: 76). Nye developed the concept of soft power against the claims that US power was weakening and argued that, contrary to popular belief, US power is not composed of military and economic power (hard power), but its main power is soft power that reflects "universal" values, culture, lifestyle, position, and image in international systems and institutions (Layne, 2010; 52). When a country's culture and principles are appealing, other states will definitely go along with it. Although some researchers argue that its decentralised structure prevents it from becoming a global actor, the multi-actor institutional structure of the European Union plays a very important role in integration. The EU's performance appear credible and trustworthy for other states because it can present its goals and priorities as universal values.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, Nye (2005a) addresses foreign policy legitimacy and moral authority that drives a country's soft power influence, referring to governmental and non-governmental political, social, economic and cultural institutions. As far as the Erasmus program is an individual program, the target group of this research does not allow to measure EU foreign policy trustworthiness, as Nye mentions it. The interviews were conducted with the university students and alumni, not elite interviews with the government. This is the limitation of this research.

This research reveals that the professional field of education can impact students' perceptions of the EU, as it seen seen in the case of Political Science students. Except for Political Science and International Relations students, none of the participants were interested in foreign policy. About 20% of the interviewees were able to debate the topic of foreign policy and all of them consider the Erasmus program a powerful soft power tool. Approximately 60% of Erasmus beneficiaries, together with students who are aware of global affairs, agreed that Erasmus has a beneficial effect on individuals rather than states. Interviewees consider the Erasmus program causing a significant brain drain from sending countries as a result of EU educational policies. Although it can be a negative

consequence for the sending countries, this is evidence of the European Union's attractiveness and soft power impact. This finding is similar to the result of the study of Zichner and Saran (2016: 183), who investigate the Erasmus effect and migration problem in terms of its results, and report about Erasmus Mundus contribution to the migration of the highly skilled people.

#### **6.4 Assessment of Erasmus Programme**

This study finds that freedom under political values and cultural traditions of society (respect and openness) under the cultural component are very strong determinants of European Union's soft power. This research comes to the conclusion that Erasmus beneficiaries highly assess freedoms, the rule of law and justice, and the level of economic development of Western European countries. These findings are similar to the results of PODEM (2020) study, which states that Erasmus students have a positive image of the EU and three ideas dominate people's perceptions of Europe, these are freedom, prosperity and order.

This research reveals that Erasmus students are committed to universal values, promoted by European Union. Before the mobility students were familiar with European shared values and after mobility they became even more conscious. Respondents evaluated and gave the most importance to freedoms and the rule of law in Europe. Since non-discrimination is mentioned as negative experience of Erasmus mobility by participants, soft power component of political values is not determined as a strongest part of EU. Along with political values, European culture attractiveness is ranked high by the Erasmus students. After characteristics of European society respondents highlight the attractiveness of education and technologies / innovations. Respondents speak differently about culture, but everybody is attracted by culture from different angles. Even those participants who were discriminated, could find something positive to say about European culture.

This research reveals that for Erasmus program participants, the level of economic development of European countries is a very attractive factor after European shared values and European culture. Liberal market values in Europe are ranked high by the Erasmus participants. Nye (2011: 85) states that economic resources can be utilised to build soft and hard power, to appeal and enforce. Even though the attractiveness of a

country's economic model is not a component of Nye's soft power concept, the research results display its significance. The economic factor ranks first among the reasons participants mention their motivation for migration to Europe. A performance reading of the EU and its political values reveals that the European Union, which promises a better quality of life to people than other geographies of the world, has emerged as a global centre of attraction.

Discussing the hierarchy of Nye soft power concept components, foreign policy is the weakest one. About 80% of respondents have a vague idea about European Union's external strategies, policy objectives and international relations, which was expected due to the limitation of research.

Assessing the Erasmus program, this research finds that mobility programs offer social, cultural, individual and professional contributions to participants. Erasmus students obtain personal benefits, such as increasing intercultural communication skills, self-confidence, cultural sensitivity, enhancing tolerance, employability, improving the knowledge of foreign languages, open-mindedness and problem-solving skills. Kasalak (2013), Çelik (2018) and Kalyacı (2011) come to the similar results in their studies on Turkey and Kinginger (2011), Nguyen (2012) and Williams (2005) make the same conclusions in their research about Erasmus students in EU. Similarly, Akgün et al. (2020) states that educational programs like Erasmus have a great importance in terms of both the promotion of the country and the development of the participating individuals.

## CONCLUSION

When the states do not have sufficient power, they can not be in a governing position in the international system. It is also very difficult to measure the power of states. In this respect, Nye linked power to attraction. It cannot be expressed in numbers, but can be understood in mutual behaviour in relationships. The stronger side is in a better position to change and resist change. In other words, the stronger party is the one who does not have to adopt the perspectives of others (Nye, 2011: 124). It can also be seen in the examples in history that soft power applications have more successful and permanent results in the long run. Changing perspectives and determining preferences tend to depend mostly on intangible factors such as attractiveness, commitment to moral values, and multiculturalism. According to Nye, using soft power depends on the ability to persuade others to do what you want them to do on their own accord (Nye, 2011: 98).

The EU relies on the development and foreign aid as the effective tools of its soft power and the main pillar of its influence in the international arena. European cultural richness and diversity are inextricably linked to its growing global influence. The EU is a revolutionary and extremely popular cultural and social project, as well as an economic union and a great power (Kavaliūnaitė, 2011: 239). According to Manners (2010: 242), the European Union does not have enough hard power to impose norms on unwilling actors. In other words, the EU is actually weak in terms of hard power. For this reason, the EU attaches more significance to soft power than hard power and gives more importance to realising its policies in this field. The EU maintains its relations with the rest of the world on peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, equality, and social solidarity. The soft political tools, based on attractiveness and persuasion and employing compelling methods of power that the EU employs in the international field to promote its standards and democratic values, prioritising normative objectives link normative power with soft power.

This study examines the role of Erasmus mobility in higher education programme in the EU's soft power. The cases of Akdeniz University and Antalya Bilim University are investigated. The qualitative study with semi-structured interviews aims to analyse the Turkish and foreign students' perceptions of the Erasmus program and the European Union in terms of soft power. The theoretical framework of the research is based on

liberal theory, followed by liberal institutionalism and soft power. The interview questions are formulated based on soft power components, that Nye introduced in 2004 in his book “Soft Power: The means to Success in World Politics”. The codebook’s categories repeat soft power components, which are culture, political values, foreign policy. Additionally assessment of Erasmus program code is used in the codebook. The content analysis is applied to the transcripts of interviews, conducted in February – March 2022.

When the soft power of the European Union regarding culture and political values is evaluated, it is concluded that the Erasmus programme is very effective. Erasmus mobility positively affected the perceptions of the participants about the European Union. It increased the interest and awareness of the participants in areas such as human rights and freedoms. 95% of the participants recommend the Erasmus programme to others. More than 50% of respondents plan to live or work in Europe. Except for one interviewee, the other 95% of respondents are attracted by the European culture though in different aspects. Most Erasmus participants are committed or wish to follow European shared values. After Erasmus, the rate of students who define themselves as international or global citizens increased to 50%. About 40% of Turkish students changed their social identity definitions after Erasmus to cosmopolitan / international or belonging to the Western culture. Answering the research question of the thesis, the results obtained within the analysis of Antalya Bilim University and Akdeniz University cases indicates that the Erasmus program is crucial to the European Union’s soft power and has a considerable impact on beneficiaries. This research shows that the European Union’s power of attraction, derived from European shared values and European culture, plays a great role in its capability to persuade the preferences of others. Furthermore this research finds that the Erasmus program supports EU actorness.

Analysing the differences in the soft power of Western and Eastern European countries, it is concluded that Eastern Europe is less attractive for Erasmus students. When the respondents compared elements of culture such as education, technology, the trails of history but also political values, they often give a positive example of Western Europe. In addition there are differences in the level of practicing political values in Western and Eastern Europe. Eastern European countries are less democratic, less

developed technologically and education there does not always live up to expectations of the Erasmus students.

There is a cultural difference between foreign and Turkish Erasmus participants. Turkish students had more vivid impressions of European culture due to distinctions in the dominant religion in Turkey and the conservative nature of society, and their awareness of cultural differences increased more compared to foreign participants. Besides that, some Turkish respondents had a suspicious attitude towards xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments of Europeans.

What the respondents refer to within the scope of culture is different. In 50% of cases, respondents refer to European culture, for example when they discuss arts, societal characteristics and religion. In 20% of answers to the questions about culture, Erasmus beneficiaries make a distinction between Eastern and Western European countries, for example discussing technology and education. In 30% of cases, they refer to the national cultures of hosting countries, for example, when debating the impact of history, traditions and languages. Regarding culture, participants drew attention most to being respectful and open to differences within the framework of customs and traditions. These characteristics of Europeans are connected with the political values of freedom of expression and tolerance. This shows that political liberalism and democratic values are embedded in the society.

When the hierarchy of soft power components is analysed, European shared values particularly in the West and European culture are considered to be strong determinants of Europeanness. Erasmus beneficiaries stressed freedoms, welfare, the rule of law and justice in Europe the most. The other attractive universal values highlighted by respondents are respect for human rights, gender equality and tolerance. Non-discrimination is the weakest political value in Europe. Analysing the hierarchy within elements of culture producing the most strong soft power effect, after societal characteristics and traditions respondents are most attracted by education and technological developments in Europe. The sample group of this research does not allow to evaluate the soft power effect of EU's foreign policy, but this study reveals the lack of interest to the questions of EU's foreign policy among Erasmus students and alumni.

It is concluded that Erasmus mobility in higher education plays a significant role in European Union's soft power. Appearing as a soft power acknowledges the EU's actorness in the global arena. An intense interest of Erasmus beneficiaries in European shared values indicates Europe's strong capacity as a normative power, which aims to spread universal values and norms. As a unique actor in the global arena European Union maintains its impact via European institutions. Erasmus program is a tool to increase European Union's soft power, which effectiveness and capability to produce desired outcomes is testified in this thesis. Steps in the European integration process, ability to alter others' preferences and gently direct, coherence towards shared values, ability to set priorities and norms, availability of political soft power tools like the Erasmus program and capacity to use it effectively confirm the EU's distinctive international role and global actorness. In this thesis the soft power of the EU is analysed within the framework of the Erasmus program and an empirical contribution is made to the existing literature from the field of international relations.

Future studies can examine the long-term effects of the Erasmus program. Those who participated in the Erasmus programme 10 or 20 years ago can be contacted, and their position in society and the state should be examined. In this way, the influence of the people participating in the Erasmus programme on the participating countries can be measured. In addition, such comparative studies can be conducted among students at the same university. Comparative studies on students participating and non-participating in the Erasmus programme will help to understand the individual effects of the program. Another idea for future research is to study migration to Europe as a consequence of Erasmus mobility. As seen in the present research, many participants are influenced by the EU's soft power and are willing to move to the EU. For future studies the SoftPower30 project definition and its components may be used as a broader concept. Furthermore, the contribution of the Erasmus program to the Europeanisation process and investigation of the mobility from the perspective of the European normative power concept are recommended for examination.

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## ANNEXES

### Mülakat Soruları

#### Erasmus programı ile AB ne ölçüde yumuşak güce sahiptir?

Kendinizi tanıtır mısınız?

1. Erasmus Öncesi : Kültür, siyasi değerler ve kimlik açısından sebep ve algı
  - 1.1 Erasmus programına katılmanızın temel nedeni neydi, motivasyonunuz neydi?
    - a. Avrupa kültürünü ne ölçüde deneyimlemek sizin için bir nedendi?
    - b. Avrupa'nın siyasi değerleri sizin için ne derece gerekçe oldu? (Siyasi değerler derken özgürlük, demokrasi, kadın erkek eşitliği, hukukun üstünlüğü, insan haklarına ve insan onuruna saygı, hoşgörü, çoğulculuk, ayrımcılık yapmama, adaletten bahsediyorum.)
  - 1.2 Erasmus ile yurt dışına çıkmadan önce Avrupa ile ilgili temel algınız neydi?
    - a. Kültür açısından
    - b. Siyasi değerler açısından
    - c. Sosyal ve kültürel kimlik açısından: Erasmus'a gitmeden önce kimliğinizi (belirli bir sosyal gruba yada kültüre ait olma hissi) nasıl değerlendirirsiniz?
2. Erasmus Sonrası : Kültür ve siyasi değerler açısından algı
  - 2.1 Seyahatiniz sırasında Avrupa algısı nasıl değişti?
    - a. Kültür ve kültürel kimlik açısından
    - b. Siyasi değerler açısından
    - c. Erasmus hareketliliğinin bu konuda nasıl bir etkisi oldu?
  - 2.2 Sizi olumlu yönde etkileyen herhangi bir deneyimi paylaşmak ister misiniz?
    - a. Kültür açısından
    - b. Siyasi değerler açısından
  - 2.3 Sizi şaşırtan, sevmediğiniz veya çelişkili duygulara neden olan herhangi bir deneyiminizi paylaşmak ister misiniz?
    - a. Kültür açısından
    - b. Siyasi değerler açısından

2.4 Kendi ülkenizle karşılaştırdığınızda kültürel benzerlikler ve farklılıklar konusunda ne ölçüde daha bilinçli hissediyorsunuz?

- a. Avrupa yaşam tarzının veya geleneklerinin hangi yönlerini kendi ülkenize taşımak istersiniz?
- b. Kendi ülkenizde görmek istemeyeceğiniz kültürel şeyler var mı?

2.5 Siyasi değerler konusundaki benlik bilincinizdeki değişimi lütfen detaylandırın.

- a. İnsan haklarıyla ilgili daha fazla haber mi takip ediyorsunuz? Bununla ilgili Youtube veya TV'de daha fazla şey izliyor musunuz?

2.6 Kendi ülkeniz ne ölçüde Avrupa siyasi değerlerine benzer siyasi değerlere sahip?

- a. Kendi ülkeniz için hangi siyasi değerleri ithal etmek istersiniz?
- b. Kendi ülkeniz için benimsemek istemeyeceğiniz siyasi değerler var mı?

### 3. AB Dış Politikası

3.1 Sizce AB, Erasmus programı aracılığıyla AB üyesi olmayan ülkeleri nasıl etkileyebilir? Erasmus, AB dış politikasında ne ölçüde etkindir?

### 4. Erasmus programının değerlendirilmesi

4.1 Erasmus programını başkalarına tavsiye eder misiniz? Neden?

4.2 Tekrar Avrupa'da olmak ister misiniz? Oraya gitmenizin asıl sebebi ne olabilir?

Başka eklemek istediğiniz bir şey var mı?

## Interview Questions

### **To which extent does the EU has a soft power via the Erasmus programme?**

Can you introduce yourself?

1. Before Erasmus: Reason and perception in terms of culture, political values and identity
  - 1.1 What was the main reason for you to participate in the Erasmus program? What was your motivation?
    - a. To what extent experiencing the European culture was a reason for you?
    - b. To which degree Europe's political values were a reason for you? (When I say political values I am referring to freedom, democracy, equality between men and women, the rule of law, respect for human rights and human dignity, tolerance, pluralism, non-discrimination, and justice.)
  - 1.2 If you think of yourself before you went abroad via Erasmus, what was your main perception about Europe?
    - a. In terms of culture
    - b. In terms of political values
    - c. In terms of social and cultural identity: Before going on the Erasmus trip how would you consider your identity (the feeling of belonging to a specific social group or culture)?
2. After Erasmus: Perception in terms of culture and political values
  - 2.1 How has the perception of Europe changed during your trip?
    - a. In terms of culture and cultural identity
    - b. In terms of political values
    - c. What impact did Erasmus mobility have on this issue?
  - 2.2 Would you like to share any experience that attracted you positively?
    - a. In terms of culture
    - b. In terms of political values
  - 2.3 Would you like to share any experience that surprised you, you did not like or caused conflicting feelings?
    - a. In terms of culture
    - b. In terms of political values

- 2.4 To what extent do you feel more aware of cultural similarities and differences when you compare with your home country?
- a. What aspects of the European way of life or traditions would you like to install in your home country?
  - b. Are there any cultural things that you wouldn't want to see in your home country?
- 2.5 Please elaborate on the the change in terms of your self-consciousness about political values, if there is.
- a. Have you been following more news about human rights? Do you watch more stuff on youtube or TV about it?
- 2.6 In what degree does your home country have political values similar to European?
- a. Which political values would you like to import to your home country?
  - b. Would there be any political values that you wouldn't be willing to adopt for your home country?
3. EU foreign policies
- 3.1 In your mind how can the EU influence non-EU countries via the Erasmus program? To what extent Erasmus is efficient in EU foreign policy?
4. Assessment of the Erasmus programme
- 4.1 Would you recommend the Erasmus program to others? Why?
- 4.2 Would you like to be in Europe again? What will be the main reason for you to go there?

Is there something else you would like to add?

## **A Letter to Erasmus Programme Coordination Offices**

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am a Master's student in the Global Politics and International Relations programme at Antalya Bilim University. Right now I am writing my thesis about the European Union's use of soft power in its relations with other countries and the role of the Erasmus program in the perception of the EU. This study is not grant funded and not sponsored.

To meet the research objective it is planned to conduct approximately 30 interviews with Turkish and foreign students from the universities of Antalya, who have completed 3 months to 1 year of Erasmus exchange experience abroad within the last 10 years. The one-on-one interviews will be held online between 20.01.2022-01.03.2022 and will take approximately 1 hour. The discussions will be recorded and transcribed in order to capture participants' insights and conduct a qualitative analysis. The records will not be shared and will only be used for the purpose of the study. Though direct quotes of interviewees may be used in the dissertation, the identifying information will be kept anonymous.

Thereby I am writing to you with a request to assist in the development of the research in the search for program participants. It would be very helpful if you could send me a list of outgoing Erasmus students with their contact details. This information will be used solely for research purposes and will not be shared with third parties.

Looking forward to receiving your favourable response.

Sincerely yours,

Natali Uyar

## **Consent Form**

Hello dear student,

I am a Master's student in the Global Politics and International Relations programme at Antalya Bilim University. Right now I am writing my thesis about the European Union's use of soft power in its relations with other countries and the role of the Erasmus program in the perception of the EU. I aim to learn the perspectives of Turkish university students who participated in the Erasmus program on the EU culture, education, political values, people, etc.; to hear their narratives about exchange experiences and changes in their visions. I am investigating the contribution of the Erasmus program to the ability of the EU to shape the preferences of others through attractiveness. My research is carried out under the consultancy of Asst. Prof. Dicle Korkmaz. This study is not grant funded and not sponsored.

Within the study, I am conducting one-on-one interviews with Turkish and foreign students from the universities of Antalya, who have completed 3 months to 1 year of Erasmus exchange experience abroad within the last 10 years. The interviews are held online and take approximately 1 hour. The discussions are recorded and transcribed in order to capture the participants insights and carry out a qualitative analysis. The records will not be shared and will only be used for the purpose of the study. Though direct quotes of interviewees may be used in the dissertation, the identifying information will be kept anonymous.

Thereby I am writing to you with a request to assist in the development of my research and take part in my interview. It would be very helpful if you could set aside some time and tell me your story. Participation in this research is completely voluntary. This information will be used solely for scientific purposes and will not be shared with third parties. If you would like to receive the research results, I will be happy to provide an electronic copy of the final dissertation upon completion.

Please write to me on this mail [natali.uyar@gmail.com](mailto:natali.uyar@gmail.com), and we will make an appointment. I would also appreciate much if you could share this offer with your outgoing Erasmus friends. Thanks in advance for your participation and contribution to the study. Friendly yours, Natali Uyar.

## Codebook

Category	Code	Definition
Culture		This is the set of ideals and customs that generate meaning for a society (Nye, 2004a: 23). This study investigates the perceptions of students that Nye attributes to the elements of high culture.
	Religion	This is a commitment to faith, a personal set of spiritual attitudes, beliefs and practices (Encyclopedia Britannica, Augustyn, 2022).
	History	This is a serie of past events of a certain county, place, or organisation (The Britannica Dictionary, 2022b).
	Education and Language	This research assesses students' perceptions of studying in higher education institutions and learning foreign languages in European countries. One of the state's most important soft power tools is the provision of educational opportunities for foreign students, which contributes to their obtaining significant social capital and effective communication in the language and culture of the country of study (Nye, 2005: 43).
	Traditions and Characteristics of Society	Under this code the perceptions of students on a particular country's customs, practices, societal features, lifestyle, socially accepted way of behaviour and national characteristics of the population are investigated (Cambridge dictionary, n.d. c).
	Technology and science advances	This code refers to technological infrastructure, technological goods, equipment, modern facilities,

		computerisation and online services, a country's level of technological development, and how the scientific knowledge is applied for practical purposes of the population in the country (Cambridge dictionary, n.d. b).
	Arts	This code is developed to report the interviewees' understanding of such forms of cultural expression as sculptures, museums, architecture and paintings (Cambridge dictionary, n.d. a).
	Cultural and Social Identity	Cultural identities occur as a result of belonging to a group or culture and are constructed by location, gender, lifestyle, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, values and norms, religious beliefs, ethnicity; cultural, thinking and behavioural patterns (Boski et al., 2004: 5). Social identity is a feeling of belonging to a certain social group, following common attitudes to outsiders, adoption group features together with psychological and sociological aspects of group behaviour (Tajfel and Turner, 1979: 34). This study examines how living in a European country and multicultural environments impacts the students' identities.
Political Values		These principles and ideals exist in any form of government and are promoted as national values (Hall, 2010: 193). Nye (1990: 154) considers that political values create a soft power effect when they are attractive in a home country and abroad. This study refers

		to European values. The Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union states that the EU is “founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” (European Union, TEU, 1992). These are democratic values at their core.
	Freedoms	This code applies to liberties like freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of thought, freedom of religion etc., mentioned in The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Court of Human Rights, 1950).
	Democracy	Democracy is a form of government ruled by people with a system of free elections (Encyclopedia Britannica, Dahl, n.d.). The interviewees’ discussions of Europe’s liberal framework and democratic values are collected under this code.
	Respect for Human Rights	This means an admission that all people are “entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in UDHR without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or another status” (UN, n.d). UDHR declares that all people are “born free and equal in dignity and rights, everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person, everybody is equal before the law” etc. (UN, n.d).

	The Rule of Law and Justice	The rule of law means that “all public powers always act within the constraints set out by law, in accordance with the values of democracy and fundamental rights, and under the control of independent and impartial courts” (European Union, Glossary of Summaries, n.d. b). This code refers to the value of rightfulness, lawfulness and equity.
	Equality between Women and Men	The EU Glossary defines it as a principle of having equal rights regardless of gender “to cover working conditions, social security, access to goods and services, work-life balance, maternity protection, parental leave and equal treatment in work in a self-employed capacity” (European Union, Glossary of Summaries, n.d. a).
	Tolerance	This is a capacity and desire to accept different opinions, beliefs, visions etc. (The Britannica Dictionary, 2022c).
	Non-discrimination	It is a principle of equal rights regardless of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, property or birth” (UN, n.d.).
Foreign Policy		These are political processes within national borders regarding the international environment; government external strategies, and actions aimed at achieving policy objectives (Hocking, 1993: 1). Nye (1991: 89) argues that foreign policies become a source of soft power when others countries assess them as legal and ethical.
Assessment		This is an additional category in the analysis

of Erasmus programme		for a broader examination of the Erasmus programme impact and contribution to students' perceptions of the European Union.
	Economy	The economy is the condition of a country concerning the production and consumption of products, facilities, services, supply and demand balance and proper regulation of existing resources (The Britannica Dictionary, 2022a). In this study the definition of the economy refers to the state's welfare and the standard of living of the population. Nye (2005: 43) states that depending on a county's principles, economic might can be a source of soft power and represent an "international assistance capability" of a state. Economic aid and peace-making are examples of attractive national policies.
	Recommendation	Under this code the Erasmus program participants' willingness to advise the program to other students is evaluated in order to verify whether the EU soft power works.
	Going to Europe again	This code is created to gather the data about interviewees' desire to return to Europe in order to assess the Erasmus program effectiveness in terms of soft power.

