Ms. Itir Akdogan has been a volunteer peer trainer and volunteer editor for publications within the leading youth NGO, Youth for Habitat. This NGO is implementing since 1996 the youth branch of Local Agenda 21 Program of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Turkey. The projects that she has been involved with focused on empowering youth through ICT, with particular emphasis on women and girls. After completing her master’s degree in Brussels, Ms. Akdogan continued to work for the same NGO as the coordinator assistant for the Swiss & UNDP funded Social development of youth in southeastern Turkey. The project included offering ICT courses of different levels in partnership with international companies like Microsoft and Cisco. In addition, Ms. Akdogan has been a Turkish youth representative in the NGO section of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). She has talked in many panels, workshops, online conferences etc about the projects of her NGO. She has participated in training and advising others to initiate and participate in similar projects. After teaching at Istanbul Bilgi University for a few years, Ms. Akdogan is currently completing a PhD research project on the political impacts of ICT in local politics where she teaches courses like e-citizenship, social media, and alternative media and democracy.

Celia Romm Livermore: In your work on empowering youth political participation in Turkey, your projects emphasized women and girls. Can you explain why your NGO made this choice?

Ms. Akdogan: I’ll first start with a brief contextual introduction. The majority of the Turkish population is under 28 years old yet there is no clear youth policy. Moreover, youth, as well as other groups such as women, disabled, and minority groups, is not included in decision-
making processes. This is mainly linked to the representative democracy tradition in the country. From the mid-90s on, however, new information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as global processes such as the United Nations summits permitted Turkish civil society and activists to create and/or join global networks. This new era meant higher access to information and increased interaction between Turkish civil society and their global counterparts, letting Turkish activists learn and to be inspired by participatory democracy models. It is within this environment that the Turkish Government agreed to implement the Local Agenda 21 Program of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Several ministries have been partners of this local democracy development project together with civil society organizations that work as implementers. The leading youth NGO, Youth for Habitat, thus started to implement the youth branch of the program in 1997. Practically speaking, local youth councils have been established all around Turkey to gather both organized and non-organized youth to discuss their local problems and find solutions with local multi-stakeholder partnerships. The success of the project, also rewarded as best practice in official UN documents, has inspired Youth for Habitat to create sub-projects with several partners from different sectors and different levels of operation from local to global. As the importance of access to and skills for ICT has risen over the years, Youth for Habitat focused on ICT for youth development. Young men and young women have the same level of disadvantage in being involved in local decision-making. When it is about ICT, however, as it is the case in most of the developing world, there is a gap in favor of men. Young women and girls are more disadvantaged in this area. Especially in the eastern regions of the country, they have less access to and less skills for using ICT. This is mainly linked to the traditional division of labor and entertainment within patriarchal families of a closer society. That is why, in order to equalize the access and skills of men and women, the ICT for youth development projects emphasize women and girls with a gender balance of 50% young women and 50% young men.

Celia Romm Livermore: What kind of projects were initiated to accomplish the goal of empowering young women and girls through IT?

Ms. Akdogan: The ICT trainings embedded in ongoing projects showed the higher need for this kind of work. Thus in 2004, to parallel Turkey’s eTransformation policy, Youth for Habitat started the “The Active Participation of Youth in Turkey’s e-Transformation Process” project in partnership with Microsoft and the UNDP. This project later became an umbrella for several sub-projects with several different partners. “Empowerment of Youth in e-Transformation of Turkey” project in partnership with the State Planning Organization, UNDP, Microsoft, and Youth for Habitat trained 900 volunteer trainers in 73 cities on computer literacy, digital life, Internet security, informatics rights, web design, and software. The emphasis on women was ensured with 50% quota for young women. The success of the project raised demand from other groups, leading to the 900 volunteer trainers training more than 120,000 people, among which were decision-makers, service providers, public servants, SMEs, imams, neighborhood headmen, housewives, and children. “Technology for Women”, another project in partnership with TeknoSa, a national ICT supplier, trains at least 100 women every month in the cities. Other such projects in partnership with other civil society organizations included training women micro entrepreneurs and mothers. Women constitute 64% of the trainees of yet another online training project that reached 810,000 youth. Furthermore, nearly 2000 young people became IT specialists with the “The Youth Movement in Informatics” project’s IT Essentials and CCNA training. This project also included the establishment of the largest regional Cisco Networking Academy. This project also included the establishment of the largest regional Cisco Networking Academy. This is the academy which trained the most women Internet specialists in Eastern Europe and the Turkey region. Even though the budget of the project expired, its success was enough to convince local
authorities to fund it further. Empowering youth with ICT is not only a national issue. Mytecc, the Mediterranean Youth Technology Club, in partnership with UNICTDAR, Cisco, and Youth for Habitat gathered 50 high school students from 9 countries in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe to teach them technical English, ICT, and democracy. Youth who were trained in this project also participated online in knowledge and experiences exchange over the www.mytecc.ning.com social network, with a focus on peace and tolerance. The democracy training of this project included such subjects as gender equality and women empowerment.

Celia Rom Livermore: Can you describe some of the results from the projects? What has been accomplished and how did your projects contribute toward empowerment for women and greater democracy for youth in general?

Ms. Akdogan: As I said at the beginning, Youth for Habitat implements the youth branch of the Local Agenda 21 Program in Turkey. In this framework, local youth councils have been set up in 56 provinces and youth centers/house in 24 cities, which led together to the establishment of the Local Agenda 21 National Youth Parliament (LA-21 NYP) in 2004. The LA-21 NYP was an enormous opportunity for young people, active in local democratization, to meet their counterparts in other cities. This is especially important for large countries like Turkey with big cultural and economic divide between the regions. The LA-21 NYP’s significance is not limited to the emergence of youth interaction. LA-21 NYP provided recommendations for the amendment of the Municipality Law and organized meetings with state authorities. The goal has been to increase youth participation in decision making at the local level. The change in the Municipality Law of 8 October 2006 enabled local youth councils to have a stronger role in municipalities through city councils. Moreover, LA-21 NYP resulted in a campaign to decrease the eligibility age for deputies from 30 to 25 after organizing multiple meetings with representatives of political parties and state authorities. The campaign for changing the law relied on ICT and included many young women. It was highly supported by local governments, ministers, and the public, and for the first time in the Republic’s history, young people gained their right to represent the nation at the Turkish Great National Assembly. In a more individual level, with training, meetings, summer schools, and national coordination meetings, the projects have touched more than a million youth. These young people have met each other, started a national interaction which led to collaborations, they learnt, they got inspired, and they became active citizens. Nurten Poslu is just one of the thousands of examples. She is a young woman from Eskisehir, a city in central Turkey. She became an ICT trainer as a result of the training in one of the above projects. She then found the overall work Youth for Habitat interesting and got involved in the process. She met the LA-21 NYP and through this parliament she joined the local youth council in Eskisehir. She started to work on solving local youth urban problems. Soon after, she was elected as the president of the local youth council. She worked actively in the campaigns of the LA-21 NYP for higher representation of youth and youth e-capacity development. She benefitted from her ICT skills in all this work. She currently is an executive committee member of the LA-21 NYP and will soon start to work at the Eskisehir Municipality. I think Nurten is a very good example to showcase how ICT trainings can empower a young woman individually and also how these projects can inspire her to actively work for both local and national democratization.

Celia Rom Livermore: Have you encountered any opposition to the projects? Where did it come from? How was it overcome?

Ms. Akdogan: The strong and central government tradition in Turkey limited local democracy, local partnerships, citizen participation and demand for accountability. The above mentioned projects all challenged this situation. Therefore, especially in the beginning it was
difficult to explain the aims and the methods of the projects as well as the partners included. It did and still does require huge work to explain the need for the projects, while at the same time, make them a success. The opposition came especially from citizens for whom many of the concepts like participation, multi-stakeholder partnership, or even civil society were alien. Including as many local figures, organizations, and institutions as possible, organizing public events and talks, local media coverage, and face-to-face meetings helped to overcome the opposition. The biggest help, however, came with the success of the projects.

Celia Rom Livermore: How does the empowerment of young women and girls through ICT fit in with the general trends toward women empowerment in Turkey? How does it fit in with the development of the regions in which your projects took place and the rights of minorities in the region (Armenians, Kurds, etc.)?

Ms. Akdogan: These projects enable (women) youth to use ICT to access information and also to interact with each other. These are crucial in empowering (young) citizens. ICT also makes it possible for youth from different regions and/or time zones to communicate with each other when they cannot afford to travel. Active youth citizens can thus organize nationally, like in the national campaigns mentioned above, easily and effectively with ICT. Empowering youth in ICT thus help them to actively take part in the democratization process. The partnerships created in the projects with civil society organizations and initiatives further help young women to interact or maybe even join women movements or organizations. This is one way of connecting active women youth of democratization program with the general woman movement in Turkey. Moreover, these trainings help to overcome youth unemployment which is quite high in the country. In that sense, the projects don’t only foster local democracy but they may also help job creation in all the regions. The youth social development project in the south-eastern Turkey, for instance had youth employment creation focus for its second phase and it helped many youth either find a job or establish their own enterprise. As for the rights of minorities, hopefully the whole (local) democratization process will permit equal rights for everybody in the region and in the rest of the country.

Celia Rom Livermore: How does it fit in with the general political upheavals that Turkey is experiencing at this time, particularly in terms of the conflict between the Muslim leaning majority party and the secular leaning military?

Ms. Akdogan: All the projects strive to serve all political parties equally. This is not an easy task in a society where people are very passionate about the political party that they support. The principle, however, is still there because the projects’ leadership believes in empowering citizens and not any particular political view. In this sense, young people who benefit from the projects also learn how to tolerate people with different views, how to collaborate in a project with someone from the other camp, and how to actually co-work and co-live. I think this principle would help soften the tension between different political streams for future generations.

Celia Rom Livermore: Does your project has any direct (or indirect) implications to the relationship of Turkey with the West, including Turkey’s desire to join the EU?

Ms. Akdogan: One of the reasons that the accession to the EU process takes so long is the insufficient democracy in Turkey. This is why projects that aim to democratize the society in Turkey definitely have implications to Turkey’s relations with the EU and the West. Moreover, Youth for Habitat works as a bridge between local and global that feeds both sides. They implement the local democratization program in Turkey. They present their projects and their outcomes in global /Western/EU forums and they are active members of many global
networks and processes in the EU. They sit in steering committees of EU organizations, they contribute to official documents of UN summits and they do all this with their experience in local politics. What they learn in the global arena, they take back to local to feed the local youth movement. Moreover, they create opportunities for many youth from everywhere in Turkey to have an experience in Europe (or elsewhere) by sending them to youth meetings, summer schools, festivals, exchange programs and so on. They further receive European exchangers or interns in their office in Istanbul with opportunities to go to other cities for projects. Thus, yes all the projects I mentioned have both direct and indirect implications to the relationship of Turkey with the West.

Celia Rom Livermore: Given the questionable results of the democratization in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and the Gaza Strip, where following democracy, the country turned more extreme, are you optimistic about the impact of democracy in Turkey?

Ms. Akdogan: There certainly are circles that do not benefit from a more democratic society. I think it is normal if they react during the democratization process. The extreme reaction, however, comes when it is a top-down process like in some of the examples you listed in your question. This is why projects like the ones that I mentioned are very important because they empower citizens at the local level who would participate in democratization from the bottom-up, making sure that it does not lead to extremism. In that sense, yes I am more optimistic.

Celia Rom Livermore: What do you see as the future of projects like those that you have been involved in? What would you like to see as the next stage in promoting youth democracy, particularly among young women and girls in Turkey?

Ms. Akdogan: The most difficult part was in the beginning when we needed to explain to all the actors what it was all about. Now that both citizens and other stakeholders in the society started to learn and benefit from the projects, it will be easier to implement them. Democratization, however, is a long process. That’s why activists will patiently keep on working. The next stage should be more transparent mechanisms, both online and offline, for gender balanced youth participation in decision-making.

Celia Rom Livermore: What would you like your personal contribution to be in relation to the above?

Ms. Akdogan: I am very happy and proud to have been there in the very beginning, in the most challenging phase when we set up the bases for the rest of the process. Now I am working on synthesizing the lessons that I learnt about the political impacts of ICT in local democracy. Even though I am now based in another country (in Finland) and in another sector (academe), I am still involved with issues to do with youth empowerment with ICT and democratization as an invited speaker to international events and as an alumna of Youth for Habitat. In the future, I would like to combine activism and research in the future and this way increase my impact on youth democracy worldwide. For more information on Youth for Habitat’s work please visit their website http://www.habitaticingenclik.org.tr/en/.
Itir Akdogan is a PhD candidate and a part-time lecturer at the University of Helsinki in Finland. She is researching on the impacts of new Information and Communication Technologies on transnationalization of local politics. Her innovative online and offline courses include e-citizens in network society, social media, and alternative media and democracy. Previously, she was a local democracy activist within the youth sub-program of the Local Agenda 21 Turkey Programme. She worked both at home and in global processes. She was the youth representative from Turkey at the World Summit on Information Summit WSIS. These experiences made her an invited speaker for several international events and invited author for academic as well as opinion articles for international media coverage. She currently collaborates with her colleague for an online course to gather media scholars and activists. This is a first step she takes to further combine research and local democracy activism in the future.