

Unraveling Life Satisfaction in Türkiye: A Multifaceted Analysis of Individual and Societal Factors

Ömer Faruk Durmuş¹, Ahmet Uçar²

Abstract

This paper explores the factors that drive life satisfaction in Türkiye by examining individual, economic, and socio-political determinants through a quantitative methodology. Utilizing the data from Wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey, the study employs multivariate regression analysis to identify the key predictors of life satisfaction in Turkish society. The theoretical framework is grounded in positive psychology's "bottom-up" theory, which asserts that satisfaction across various domains contributes to overall life satisfaction. In the ultimate analysis, household income satisfaction and health status appear to be the most salient predictors influencing life satisfaction. On the other hand, variables such as religiosity, perceived democracy, political ideology, age, and education have shown a comparatively minor effect in predicting life satisfaction in Türkiye.

The study's reliance on cross-sectional data limits its capacity to establish direct causality, and using self-reported measures introduces potential biases. Additionally, the analysis has not captured the impact of post-2018 socio-economic developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have profoundly altered the landscape of subjective well-being. Despite these limitations, the research contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed picture of life satisfaction in Türkiye which has been going through socioeconomic challenges over the last two decades. The study suggests that further research could enhance the findings by using longitudinal data and incorporating additional factors to offer a more holistic and explanatory view of life satisfaction determinants in Türkiye.

Keywords: Life satisfaction, bottom-up theory, health status, household income, multivariate regression analysis

Jel Classification Codes: I31, J1, C3

¹ Graduate student, Political Science, University of Cologne, e-mail: odurmus1@smail.unikoeln.de

² Prof. Dr., Head of Dept. of Political Science and International Relations at Manisa Celal Bayar University, E-mail: ahmet.ucar@cbu.edu.tr

1. Introduction

Sometimes referred to as ‘subjective well-being’, life satisfaction, is a notion that has been occupying research in various disciplines of modern sciences such as economics, psychology, sociology, and political science. (Bjørnskov, Dreher, & Fischer, 2008). Each of these fields has been seeking explanations for the practical and methodological questions of the term based on their tenants. As a result, research on life satisfaction is characterized by two distinct approaches: one delves into micro-level factors, analyzing individual determinants that influence personal satisfaction, while the other examines macro-level factors, exploring societal determinants that impact satisfaction across different regions or states. However, the issue of causes and consequences remains the main discussion in the literature (Veenhoven, 1996).

Scholars in behavioral economics, for example, suggest that there is often a linear relationship between income and life satisfaction. By studying the concept of ‘utility’ scholars often assume that higher incomes generate higher utility and this leads to a higher level of life satisfaction (Elsas, 2021). In political science, scholars are more prone to examine the macro-micro level causes and consequences of life satisfaction by observing legal institutions, political systems, and political ideologies (Bjørnskov et al., 2008). The abundance of assumptions helps us to realize that the study of life satisfaction is a challenging task because the parameters interplay between predictors requires multilevel and multidimensional observation. Furthermore, each of the factors that might affect life satisfaction has a reciprocal influence.

Although there are various definitions of the term life satisfaction, this study relies on Veenhoven’s definition. According to him: “life satisfaction is the degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole. In other words, how much the person likes the life he/she leads” (Veenhoven, 1996).

Most of the research on life satisfaction offers one-sided explanations of the causes and consequences. Even more, apart from the cross-country studies, there are not many works on single-country review that apply an inductive approach in examining the factors with a broad perspective. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by addressing the question: What are the main determinants of life satisfaction in Türkiye? The study argues that considering the current socio-economic, political, and demographic predicaments that the country has been grappling with identifying the factors contributing to life satisfaction will provide implications to the literature of life satisfaction in developing countries.

The study involves a quantitative analysis using a multivariate regression model, conducted with common determinant parameters, based on survey data from Turkey’s sample in the 2017 World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2024). By controlling the variables namely, democracy level, religiosity, ideology, age, and education we find out that life satisfaction in Türkiye is mainly associated with health status. It is followed by the household income satisfaction. These parameters are also observed to outweigh the degree of democracy in the country, religious values, and political tendencies.

The structure of this study unfolds as follows: It begins by examining the traditional theoretical assumptions surrounding life satisfaction and establishing a theoretical framework. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the data, methods, and measures used in the analysis. Next, the descriptive statistics and key findings are presented. The discussion section then interprets these findings, addressing their implications and limitations. Finally, the conclusion highlights the broader significance of the results and their potential contributions to the literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

Life satisfaction has been a subject of discussion among scientists and philosophers for thousands of years (Kapteyn, Smith, & Van Soest, 2009). One of the well-known is the utility theory of classical economy, in which individuals aim to maximize their utility from consuming goods and services. In this view, life satisfaction is seen as a result of optimizing personal preferences and choices to maximize utility. Another important approach is the Easterlin paradox which suggests that beyond a certain point, increasing income levels do not significantly contribute to greater life satisfaction at the societal level. However, with modernization and human development, the meaning of the term has shifted, and social indicators of life satisfaction transcended the economic welfare understanding. In fact, economic assumptions have been widely criticized for explaining human behavior solely with economic interests and utility maximization. It is for this reason, we will formulate our theoretical ground on individual psychological assumption (Chomentauskas & Paulauskaitė, 2020).

There are two main theoretical assumptions on life satisfaction in positive psychology that differ in their causal explanations: the “bottom-up” and the “top-down” assumptions. The former suggests that life satisfaction is the accumulated product of various domains. On the other hand, the “top-down” model argues that one’s overall satisfaction can affect his/her satisfaction in different domains. For example, someone who is generally optimistic might feel more satisfied overall, even when things are not going perfectly (Loewe, Bagherzadeh, Araya-Castillo, Thieme, & Batista-Foguet, 2014).

According to the bottom-up theory, humans experience satisfaction in many domains of life such as social environment, health, income, and so on. In other words, people’s satisfaction with their lives in these areas combines to create our overall life satisfaction. Drawing from the ‘bottom-up’ perspective, researchers have put forth a myriad of life domain satisfactions, which are thought to be relevant to overall life satisfaction. Among the life domains that have generated more consensus are satisfaction with health, family, income, social relationships, leisure time, work, sex life, housing, safety, self-worth, and education (Loewe et al., 2014). Different cultures often weigh these life domains differently, as culture shapes individual attitudes, values, and the types of goals individuals pursue. These factors, in turn, determine the specific life domains people consider relevant and the weight they give to each domain. Therefore, studying the factors affecting life satisfaction in Türkiye is highly relevant, as the country possesses distinctive cultural features and ongoing economic and societal challenges.

3. Methodology

This study draws upon data from Wave 7 (2017-2022) of the World Values Survey (WVS), focusing specifically on the Turkish sample. The World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2017-2022), was carried out by the World Values Survey Association (Haerpfer et al., 2024). The dataset includes various variables, such as cultural values, political interest and participation, social attitudes, and perceptions on various global and societal issues. The units of observation are individuals aged 18 and older residing in each participating country. The sample was designed to be nationally representative using stratified random sampling, ensuring diverse and equitable selection through a full probability approach. Face-to-face interviews were the primary data collection method for this survey.

Countries are categorized into three groups based on their population size to determine the required sample size: 1,200 participants for the majority of countries, 1,000 for those with populations under 2 million, and larger samples for countries with higher populations. In Turkey, the survey was administered by BINOM, a data collection firm, in 2018. The target population comprised Turkish citizens aged 18 or older, residing in households. Approximately 2,000 individuals were interviewed. The sampling strategy aimed to ensure comprehensive coverage of all geographic regions and subregions of Turkey. According to the NUTS2 classification by Eurostat, Turkey is divided into 26 units, all of which were included in the sampling frame. To minimize the design effect, cities and towns were not selected as primary sampling units (PSUs) in the first stage, thus reducing clustering effects. Instead, a large number of PSUs of minimal size were used, ensuring representation across various population segments, including residents of large cities, towns, and rural areas. A total of 180 PSUs were included in the sampling frame, further enhancing the sample's representativeness.

For the analysis, we employed a multivariate regression model to assess the proposed hypotheses. The dependent variable, self-reported life satisfaction, was measured on a ten-point scale within the WVS, ranging from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). The key explanatory variable, health status, was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents very good health and 5 represents very poor health. Given data limitations, psychological and physical health were examined together under this health status parameter.

Additionally, we incorporated household income satisfaction, which was also measured on a ten-point scale, as it holds particular relevance in the extant economic literature on life satisfaction. However, since the literature predominantly focuses on individual income, we opted for “household income satisfaction” to address data limitations and concurrently capture both familial social capital and income satisfaction within a single variable. Additionally, we selected a subset of items relevant to the literature and reflective of Türkiye’s socio-economic and cultural context. Although constitutionally designated as secular, Türkiye’s populace predominantly adheres to Sunni Islam. Islamic teachings advocate gratitude for life regardless of circumstances which is considered to be effective in one’s life satisfaction. Consequently, we introduced the variable “importance of God in one’s life” to observe the correlation and linearity between religiosity and life satisfaction.

Furthermore, we assessed the extent of democracy within the country. For this, we took the question of “How democratically is the country ruled today?” which was measured on a ten-point scale from 1 to 10 (Haerpfer et al., 2024). The inclusion of the perception of democracy is highly relevant while the ruling government has been the target of critiques for the downfall of the democracy. Furthermore, we considered various socio-demographic factors such as age, political ideology, and education. In detail, we categorized age into “old” (age > 35) and “young” (age < 35) to utilize as a dummy variable to assess the relationship between aging and life satisfaction. In political science, scholars contend that an individual’s political ideology influences subjective well-being (Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012). Therefore, we examined the left-right political spectrum and focused solely on those identifying as right-wing. Recognizing education’s pivotal role, we included an education variable, specifically targeting individuals with no formal education, to investigate the correlation between being uneducated and life satisfaction (See Table 1).

To analyze the factors influencing life satisfaction, we conducted three regression models. In each model, life satisfaction was the dependent variable. Health status was the primary independent variable, with household income satisfaction and the level of democracy in the country included as control variables. Additionally, binary (dummy) variables for age, political ideology, and education were used to capture their effects on life satisfaction in Türkiye.

Model: Research Question and Hypothesis

The existing literature suggests that economic factors, health status, and extreme circumstances like war and crises significantly shape people’s life satisfaction. However, there remains ongoing debate regarding the primary determinants and their relative importance. Therefore, we aim to contribute to this discourse by posing the following question: **What factors are the key determinants of life satisfaction in Türkiye?**

Drawing from the theoretical framework presented above, which considers various determinants such as health status, income, family, age, gender, education, and religiosity holistically, the following hypothesis have proposed: **In Türkiye, life satisfaction is predominantly influenced by household income satisfaction and health status with their impact surpassing that of religious values, democratic governance, and political ideology.**

Thus, our formula is:

$$LS = \beta_0 + \beta_1 HS + \beta_2 HIS + \beta_3 RV + \beta_4 DG + \beta_5 PI + \beta_6 Age + \beta_7 Uneducated + \epsilon$$

- *LS*: Life satisfaction
- *HS*: Health status
- *HIS*: Household income satisfaction
- *RV*: Religious values
- *DG*: Democratic governance

- PI : Political ideology
- β_0 : Intercept
- $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4, \beta_5, \beta_6, \beta_7$: Coefficients for the respective variables
- ϵ : Error term

4. Empirical results

As discussed above, we first subset the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022) data by extracting the observations of Türkiye. Next, we analyzed the variables in the questionnaire that might be explanatory for the research objectives. After measuring the correlations and linearity between several variables, we agreed on our continuous dependent variable (life satisfaction) and independent variable (health status). Then, we cleaned and mutated the variables to include only valid responses of the participants. For instance, the health status was measured on a five-point scale, however, it also included values such as -1 and -2 which need to be excluded. The purpose of this was to avoid any missing or irrelevant values. Following this, we created a table for the descriptive statistics of the items that we observed (see table 1). After preparing the variables, we operated our multivariate regression analysis with three regression models.

In the first model, we observed a statistically significant negative correlation between health status and life satisfaction ($p < 0.001, r = -0.864$). The observed relationship is negative because the variable coded reverse in the data set as 1 stands for very good health and 5 is a poor health condition. Specifically, for each unit decrease in health status, life satisfaction decreases by approximately 0.864 units ($p < 0.01$). This indicates that individuals with poorer health tend to report lower levels of life satisfaction in Türkiye. However, the model accounts for approximately 11.6% of the variance in life satisfaction which is not enough to attribute solely the health factor to life satisfaction.

Expanding the analysis in Model 2 to include additional factors, we observed a statistically significant positive correlation between household income satisfaction and life satisfaction ($p < 0.01, r = 0.463$). The correlation between life satisfaction and health status has dropped to -0.545. On the other hand, Individuals who perceive their household income favorably report higher levels of life satisfaction. Additionally, both the importance of religious beliefs and the level of democracy in the country exhibit positive relationships with life satisfaction, though at a slightly lower significance level ($p < 0.05, r = 0.100$ for the importance of God; $p < 0.05, r = 0.88$ for democracy in the country). We empirically observe that the addition of new predictors improved our model's fit with 36.5% of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.365$).

In the final model, we included ideological and demographic variables such as age, political ideology, and education level as dummy variables. The age over 35 does not present statistical significance at conventional levels ($p < 0.1$). The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.131$) suggests a positive but weak association. Conversely, individuals identifying themselves as right-wing exhibit a weak positive relationship with life satisfaction $p < 0.05, R = 0.197$. On the other hand, being uneducated is associated with lower life

satisfaction levels, though not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < 0.1, r = -0.202$). In Türkiye, the constant term retains statistical significance across all models. This underscores a fundamental baseline of life satisfaction. The adjusted R-squared values (see Table 2) indicate that the included variables collectively explain a substantial portion of life satisfaction variance (36.6%). These findings highlight the intricate interplay of socio-economic, demographic, and political factors in shaping life satisfaction. Notably, the results emphasizes the predominant influence of health status and household economic satisfaction within the Turkish context.

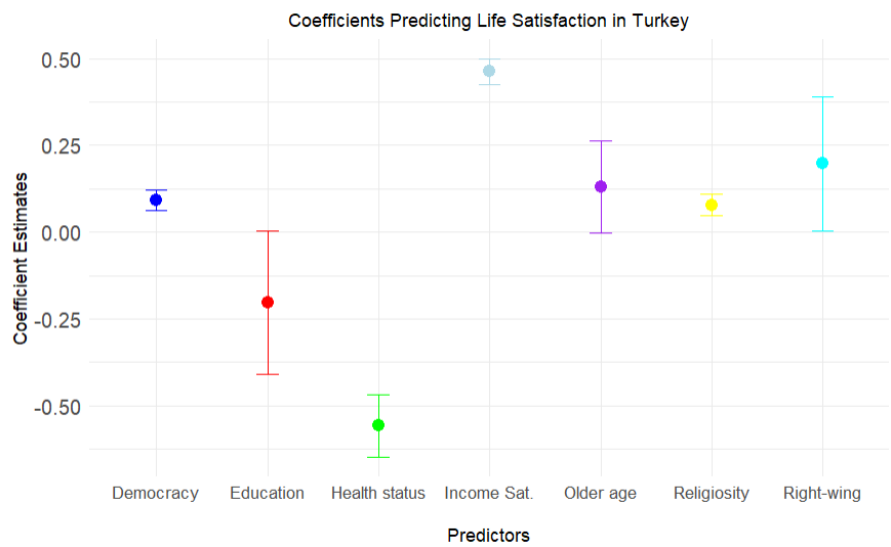
However, it should also be acknowledged that merely 36.6 percent of the variance within the sample of Türkiye can be elucidated by the utilized variables. This underscores the presence of unobserved determinants of life satisfaction, owing to data limitations and diverse factors like measurement errors. Notably, certain crucial elements, such as respondents' precise psychological states, remain unexamined due to data constraints. Additionally, significant factors like marital status, considered influential contributors to life satisfaction, were not encompassed in the analysis. In practical terms, observed variables often exhibit interdependence; for instance, one's income level can significantly impact their health status. Additionally, temporal considerations are crucial, as exemplified by the Turkish sample data collected in 2018. However, in light of the emergence of COVID-19 and its consequential challenges, encompassing health concerns and economic ramifications, a comprehensive understanding of life satisfaction dynamics necessitates the incorporation of post-pandemic realities, such as current health status and the notable surge in inflation rates evident as of 2024.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables of Interest in the TR Dataset

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Life Satisfaction	2,415	6.48	1.97	−2	10
Health Status	2,415	2.15	0.77	−2	5
Household Income Satisfaction	2,415	5.85	1.97	−2	10
Importance of God	2,415	8.07	2.32	−5	10
Democracy in the Country	2,415	6.05	2.59	−2	10
Age	2,415	38.81	12.70	−5	95
Political Ideology	2,415	5.43	3.46	−2	10
Education	2,415	2.32	1.94	−2	6

Resources: The table was generated by authors using RStudio (*R Core Team 2024, A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*, n.d.) with the dplyr, summarytools, tidyverse and stats R packages (Wickham et al., 2019)

Figure 1. Coefficients Graph



Resources: The graph was generated by authors using RStudio (*R Core Team 2024, A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*, n.d.) with the dplyr, summarytools, ggplot2, tidyverse and stats R packages (Wickham et al., 2019).

Table 2. Multivariate Regression Results

	Dependent variable:		
	Model (1)	Life Satisfaction Model (2)	Model (3)
Health status	-0.864*** (0.052)	-0.545*** (0.046)	-0.557*** (0.046)
Household Income Satisfaction		0.463*** (0.018)	0.462*** (0.018)
Religiosity		0.100*** (0.015)	0.092*** (0.016)
Democracy in the Country		0.088*** (0.015)	0.078*** (0.016)
Age(>35)			0.131* (0.067)
Right-wing			0.197** (0.098)
Uneducated			-0.202* (0.105)
Constant	8.376*** (0.118)	3.597*** (0.213)	3.673*** (0.217)
Observations	2,119	2,119	2,119
R ²	0.116	0.365	0.368
Adjusted R ²	0.115	0.364	0.366

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Resources: The table was generated by authors using RStudio (*R Core Team 2024, A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*, n.d.) with the dplyr, tidyverse, stats and stargazer R packages (Wickham et al., 2019)

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on life satisfaction, a concept intertwined with various disciplines such as economics, psychology, sociology, and political science. Through an exploration of individual and societal determinants, the study aimed to shed light on what factors drive life satisfaction in Türkiye which grappling with socio-economic challenges. The study underscores the importance of health status, with individuals reporting better health and experiencing higher levels of life satisfaction, corroborating psychological research highlighting the significance of mental and physical well-being. Furthermore, consistent with behavioral economics, we observe a significant positive correlation between household income satisfaction and life satisfaction, emphasizing the role of financial well-being in shaping individuals' overall contentment.

Beyond these individual-level factors, the study delves into societal determinants, considering the influence of religiosity and the level of democracy in the country. While both exhibit positive relationships with life satisfaction, their impact is overshadowed by health and income considerations, highlighting the primacy of basic needs in shaping well-being. The analysis also incorporates socio-demographic variables, revealing intriguing insights. While age and education level do not emerge as significant predictors, political ideology plays a noteworthy role, with individuals identifying as right-wing exhibiting higher levels of life satisfaction. This indicates a complex relationship between political beliefs and subjective well-being.

However, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts our ability to infer causality which, therefore necessitates caution in interpreting the results. The reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential biases, this necessitates further validation through longitudinal studies. Therefore, we should consider reliability doubts. There appears a several avenues for further research. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in life satisfaction over time could provide deeper insights into its dynamics, while comparative research across different cultural contexts may elucidate unique factors influencing well-being. Additionally, exploring the impact of post-pandemic realities, such as health concerns and economic instability, could enrich our understanding of life satisfaction dynamics in the Turkish context.

6. Conclusion

Conducting a comprehensive analysis of both individual and societal determinants, this study contributes to the ongoing discussions in life satisfaction. The objectives of the study offers new perspectives on what influences the life satisfaction among Turkish individuals. Findings are not only corroborate existing literature but also provide insights tailored to the specific context of Türkiye.

One key highlight of the study is the significant importance of health status, as founded a clear association between better health and higher levels of life satisfaction. This finding aligns with psychological research that underscores the crucial role of both mental and physical well-being in determining overall life satisfaction. Furthermore, in line with principles from behavioral economics, the analysis reveals a positive correlation between

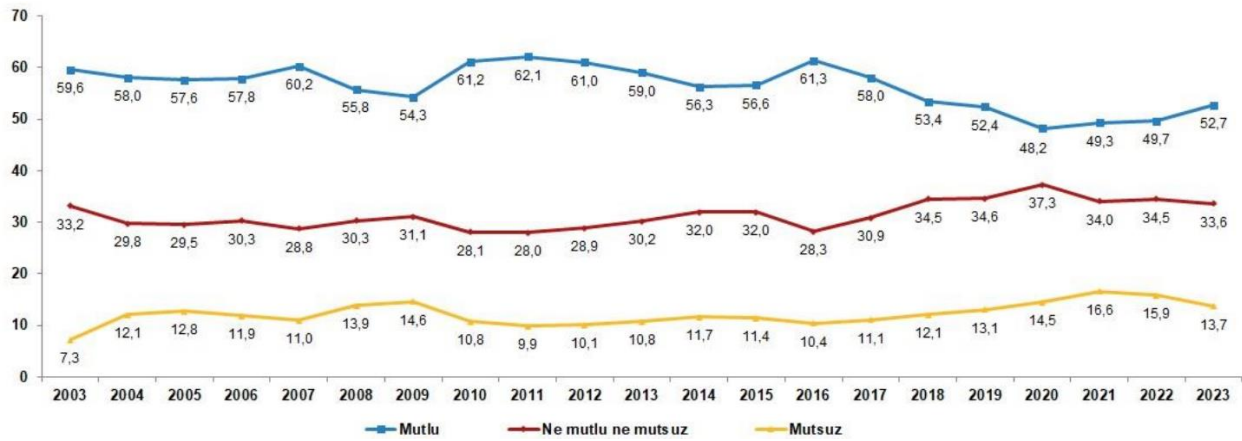
household income satisfaction and life satisfaction. This reveals the significant role of financial well-being in shaping individuals' overall sense of contentment and fulfillment.

Furthermore, the analysis explored societal factors, including religiosity and the level of democracy in Türkiye. While both correlated positively with life satisfaction, their impact was overshadowed by considerations of health and income, underscoring the importance of basic needs. Lastly, the study also reveals insights into the influence of political ideology, with right-wing individuals reporting higher life satisfaction. Consequently, relying on the bottom-up theory and the empirical findings of the analysis, this study suggests that the life satisfaction of individuals cannot be attributed to a single factor; rather, it is largely associated with the predictors of health status and household income satisfaction in the case of Türkiye.

Appendices:

Additional sources from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK)

Graph 1. Life satisfaction level by years (%)



Sources: ("Yaşam Memnuniyeti Araştırması 2023," n.d.)

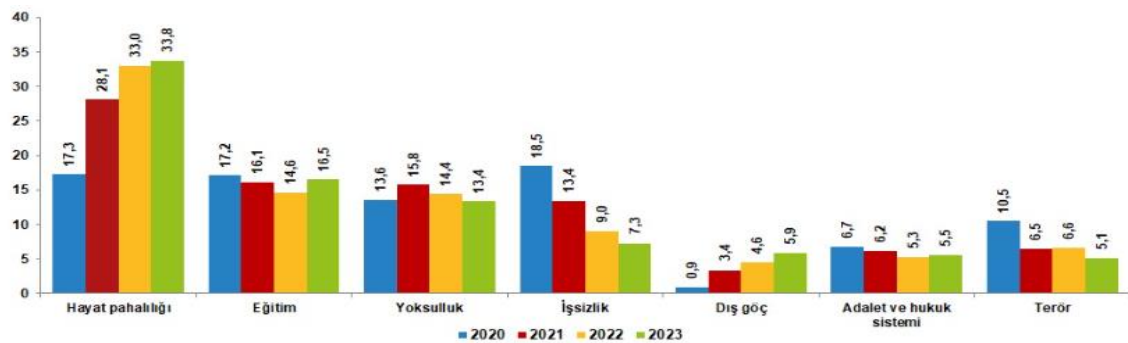
Line definitions:

Blue: Happy

Red: Neither happy nor unhappy

Yellow: Unhappy

Graph 2. The most important problem of the country (%), 2020-2023



Sources: ("Yaşam Memnuniyeti Araştırması 2023," n.d.) Problems in order:

Cost of living, education, poverty, unemployment, external migration, justice and law system, terror

References:

- Bjørnskov, C., Dreher, A., & Fischer, J. A. V. (2008). Cross-country determinants of life satisfaction: Exploring different determinants across groups in society. *Social Choice and Welfare*, 30(1), 119–173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00355-007-0225-4>
- Chomentauskas, G., & Paulauskaitė, K. (2020). Relationship between income, happiness, and life satisfaction: Evidence from Lithuania. *EWOP in Practice*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.21825/ewopinpractice.87119>
- Elsas, S. (2021). *Causality in the link between income and satisfaction: IV estimation with internal instruments* (SOEPpapers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research No. 1143). Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW). Retrieved from Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW) website: <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/243185>
- Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., ... Puranen, B. (2024). *World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2022) Cross-National Data-Set* (Version 6.0.0) [Data set]. World Values Survey Association. <https://doi.org/10.14281/18241.24>
- Kapteyn, A., Smith, J. P., & Van Soest, A. H. O. (2009). Life Satisfaction. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1508438>
- Loewe, N., Bagherzadeh, M., Araya-Castillo, L., Thieme, C., & Batista-Foguet, J. M. (2014). Life Domain Satisfaction as Predictors of Overall Life Satisfaction Among Workers: Evidence from Chile. *Social Indicators Research*, 118(1), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0408-6>
- R Core Team 2024, *A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing* [RStudio]. (n.d.). R Core Team: R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria.
- Schlenker, B. R., Chambers, J. R., & Le, B. M. (2012). Conservatives are happier than liberals, but why? Political ideology, personality, and life satisfaction. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 46(2), 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2011.12.009>
- Veenhoven, R. (1996). *The study of life-satisfaction*. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1765/16311>
- Wickham, H., Averick, M., Bryan, J., Chang, W., McGowan, L., François, R., ... Yutani, H. (2019). Welcome to the Tidyverse. *Journal of Open Source Software*, 4(43), 1686. <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01686>
- Yaşam Memnuniyeti Araştırması 2023. (n.d.). *Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (TÜİK)*. Retrieved from <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Yasam-Memnuniyeti-Arastirmasi-2023-49692>