

26 May 2025

Where Borders Blur:

LIVES IN MOTION AT
EMNİYET BUS TERMINAL



The Emniyet Bus Terminal in Fatih, for nearly twenty years, is not just a transportation hub—it's a vibrant node where Istanbul's networks of migration, trade, and movement come alive.

Known for its frequent visits by foreigners and various forms of trade, particularly suitcase trade, this commercially dynamic neighborhood serves as a hub for the redistribution of numerous goods, as well as a major flow of travelers, merchants, and tourists.

More than just a transport hub...

Emniyet Bus Terminal, is a place where global and local migration, trade and social interactions intersect. Given its central role in Istanbul's migration system, this bus station is one of the most suitable locations to observe the city's multi-layered socio-spatial structure at a micro scale.

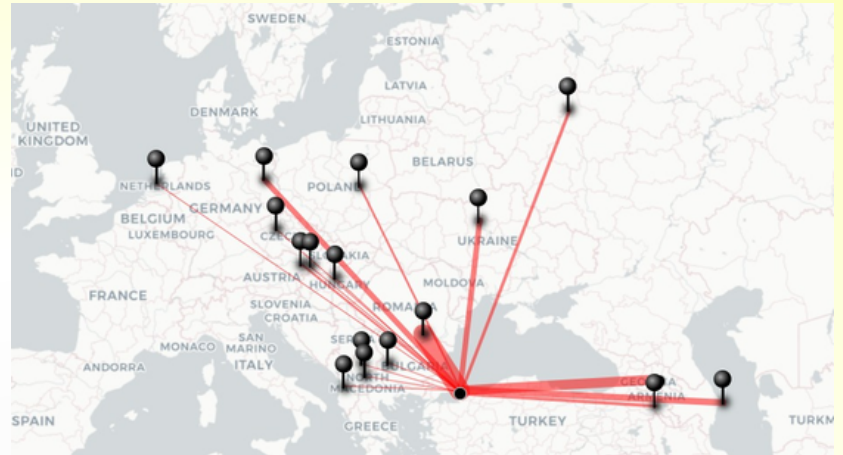
It is noteworthy that the people working in the bus terminal are mostly people who came to Istanbul from eastern Turkey during the eighties and nineties, and that the terminal's location is home to remarkable number of people from outside Turkey.

It would be misleading to see Emniyet Bus Terminal as only a transportation hub. It is a spatial and social focal point where people, goods, information and identities pass through, come together and are exchanged, where multilayered actors come together, keeping the pulse of Istanbul's migration geography. Here, tourists, migrants, traders, waiting, passing and staying are intertwined. Thousands of stories pass through this terminal every day, some of them returning, others heading towards uncertainty.

Spaces like the Emniyet Bus Terminal should be considered not only as physical transit points but also as intermediate zones where identities, purposes and statuses can transform.

Migration, Trade and Mobility

Dozens of buses depart for 17 different countries every day at Emniyet Bus Terminal. Among these countries, Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Ukraine stand out.



The passengers are mostly small-scale merchants engaged in suitcase trade and individuals visiting their families.

The Economic Web Near the Bus Station

The bus station is a dynamic economic center that interacts with its surroundings. The Kumkapı and Laleli neighborhoods in particular are concentrated in sectors such as textiles, cosmetics and accessories, due to the shuttle trade.

These micro-economies are shaped not only by trade, but also by the co-existence of migrant workers, middlemen and locals. In order to communicate with foreigners who come from abroad for the suitcase trade, local shopkeepers often employ people from the same countries as their clients.

Negotiating the City: Moving or Staying

In recent years, the Istanbul Municipality has been seeking to move the Emniyet Bus Terminal out of the city. There are not only logistical, but also symbolic and social reasons behind this decision.

For the municipality, the terminal may be an “area that needs to be cleaned up”, evoking disorder and informality, but for traders and local artisans in particular, it is a vital economic artery. Local actors are strongly opposed to IBB's plan to relocate the Emniyet Bus Terminal to Alibeyköy and are continuing the negotiations and legal process.

Tourist or Migrant? The Fluidity of Status

Nowadays, words like migrant, tourist, refugee appear frequently in our lives. In legal documents or statistics, these definitions are strictly demarcated. However, when we look at real life, the situation on the ground is not so clear.

The people we encounter in everyday life, especially in big cities like Istanbul, do not fit neatly into these categories. This is because the flow of real life often pushes the boundaries of official categories, sometimes even blurring them completely.



Take a short stroll through places like Istanbul's Emniyet Bus Terminal and you will see people with very different stories. Some of these travelers are here for a few days, perhaps to trade, and then plan to return home. Others, especially from Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, come here on tourist visas to visit their relatives.

But a person who comes here can assume several different roles at the same time.

For example, they may engage in short-term trade, or they may decide not to return to their country for political, economic or family reasons. These transitions are not only geographical, but also legal, identity and economic. Therefore, in Istanbul, the status of migrant or tourist is fluid and open to constant change rather than fixed.

In short,

Emniyet Bus Terminal shows us that migration is not just a simple relocation, but a multi-layered process in which complex identities and economic activities are intertwined. In cities such as Istanbul, this uncertainty has become a part of life.

This blog entry was written based on field research conducted by students from Galatasaray University and Université Paris-I-Panthéon-Sorbonne at the Emniyet bus terminal in Kumkapı. The pictures used in this blog entry are those we took ourselves in the field, and the information obtained is based on in-depth interviews and discussions with local actors.

I would like to thank my friends: Coline Renard, Valentine Marraud and Jeanne Domin who were with me in the field.

In addition, the following article has also been helpful in the blog entry: Mustafa Aslan et Jean-François Pérouse, « Istanbul : le comptoir, le hub, le sas et l'impasse », *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* [En ligne], vol. 19 - n°3 | 2003, mis en ligne le 09 juin 2006, consulté le 15 avril 2022.

Aykut Nehir:

Aykut Nehir studies sociology at Galatasaray University and is particularly interested in urban space and migration.

miGoSur

Jean Monnet Chair of Migration Governance for Sustainability and Resilience