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The Unwelcome 'Guests': How Political Discourse Regarding Syrian Refugees Shifted in Turkey

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The Unwelcome ‘Guests’: How Political Discourse Regarding Syrian Refugees Shifted in Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Harbouring almost 4 million Syrian refugees, Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the world. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Turkish state has run an ‘open-door’ policy, insofar that Syrian refugees were welcomed as ‘guests’ by the political elite as well as by the wider public. An open-door policy that was a result of various factors, with one of these factors being the expectation that the war in Syria wouldn’t last all too long and that Syrian civilians would return soon enough. But the still ongoing civil war in neighbouring Syria and the transition to Europe for Syrian refugees blocked with the EU-Turkey deal, the Turkish case has more and more developed into a protracted refugee situation.

While following an ‘open-door’ policy at the beginning of the refugee crisis and calling Syrian refugees ‘guests’, the public and political attitude has seen a dramatic shift towards Syrian refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Icduygu & Simsek, 2016). Referring to Syrian refugees as ‘guests’ is now in stark contrast with rising xenophobia amongst Turkish citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2022), with 93% of the population wanting Syrians to leave the country as soon as possible (Aksoy arastirma merkezi, 2021). Insofar that the Turkish president Erdogan announced in May 2022 that he intends to resettle one million refugees in northern Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This shift results in several questions. How and why did this shift occur? How did the political reaction go from welcoming to wanting to resettle one million refugees? And more specifically the question that this thesis tries to answer is;

how did political discourse regarding Syrian refugees shift in Turkey?

Before delving into the shift in political discourse towards Syrian refugees in Turkey, it is good to know what makes the Turkish case different from other (protracted) refugee situations. While Turkey is one of the original signatories of the 1951 Geneva Convention, it is also one of a handful of countries that maintain a ‘geographical limitation’ on it (Abdelaaty, 2019; Aydemir, 2022; Baban et al., 2017; Ekmekci, 2016; Icduygu & Simsek, 2016; Koca, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017). The result of this limitation is that non-Europeans aren’t recognized for refugee status, and that only European nationals are able to attain it. The main consequence of this limitation is that the Turkish state can refer to refugees with various terms - such as ‘guests’ - which leaves them outside the normal operation of the law. It thus enables the Turkish

state to discriminate amongst groups, treating refugee groups that fit within government narratives, better, and neglecting others without any consequences. Being referred to as ‘guests’, ‘friends’, or ‘victims’, has left Syrian refugees in Turkey in a limbo as neither ‘real’ refugee or guest.

Even though literature on how governments and politicians deal with refugees is vast, the cases and countries looked at are mostly those where there is a legal definition and obligations on refugees based on international law (Chebel d’Appollonia, 2017; Gattinara & Morales, 2017; Kirkwood, 2017; Vollmer, 2011). That’s why the more ‘logical’ approach when looking at the Turkish case is to analyse recent Turkish law or policy changes to understand how and why the Turkish state deals with Syrian refugees as it does. But Turkish policy regarding Syrian refugees is based on the earlier given ‘guest’ label, and the use of this label cannot be fully explained by looking at Turkey’s international legal obligations or by looking at recent legal developments (Abdelaaty, 2019). Therefore, analysing the Turkish legal framework regarding Syrian refugees will not show any significant results when trying to determine political reaction.

To highlight how the political discourse has shifted, and thus how the *narrative* has changed, one has to analyse the said narrative used by the political elite regarding Syrian refugees. Using party group speeches held by the leading government party of the current Turkish president Erdogan and the main opposition party, this thesis tries to clarify how the political discourse, and thus the narrative, regarding Syrian refugees has shifted through a discourse analysis. This analysis confirms the expectation, that follows existing literature, that the leading government party moves from a more ‘open’ stance regarding Syrian refugees towards a more restrictive stance, and that the restrictive stance by the main opposition party continuous throughout the years by instrumentalizing Syrian refugees to criticize government policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Labelling refugees

Within the scope of this thesis, it is relevant to briefly conceptualize the definitions for terms (or labels) such as ‘migrants’, ‘forced migrants’, and ‘refugees’, as the definition for these labels varies within literature. Even though being a refugee is a widely recognised universal condition, it is still difficult to agree on an acceptable definition (Zetter, 1991). Insofar that in the past twenty years the label ‘refugee’ has become ever more blurred, due to increasingly complex social transformations. Because of this vagueness and complexity, literature has more and more preferred the use of ‘forced migrants’ as it captures the complexity of contemporary root causes better than when using the label ‘refugee’ (Zetter, 2007). What is also important to note is that national governments are more dominant in giving meaning to the label ‘refugee’, compared to NGOs and humanitarian agencies.

Still, for the scope of this thesis, when referring to Syrian refugees or similar groups of forced migrants, the definition for refugees as described in the 1951 Geneva Convention will be used. The Convention defines a refugee as “someone who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Ekmekci, 2016, p. 1434). The reason for this is that ‘refugees’ as a term is already ‘fully labelled’ in people’s minds (Zetter, 1991), as well as the relevance of the various possible definitions for the label ‘refugee’ isn’t relevant to answer the research question. The definition as stated in the Geneva Convention for that reason suffices. Labels such as ‘migrants’, ‘forced migrants’, or ‘refugees’ regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey therefore can and will be used throughout this thesis, but will thus all refer to the same group.

2.2. The political dimension of migration

How and to what extent immigration affects (democratic) policies is influenced by the attitude of the native-born majority towards immigration (Chebel d’Appollonia, 2017). This means that, if a native-born majority has a more negative stance towards migrants and refugees, political elites will be more inclined to push more restrictive agendas, and vice versa. What is also relevant is how far immigration has already been politicized in national political arenas

(Gattinara & Morales, 2017). By creating the image and idea that immigration and ethno-religious diversity poses a threat to domestic security, political elites are able to securitize immigration (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017).

Whether or not actors will refer to immigration as e.g., a security threat depends on several factors. If for example migrants are openly associated with criminality, the need for securitization becomes increasingly stronger (Vollmer, 2011). There are two main dimensions in the securitization of migration that will be discussed further. These are: migrants as a threat to public and national security, and migrants as a cultural threat to the 'indigenous' culture (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017; Vollmer, 2011).

The perception of migrants as a security threat isn't something new. Even before 9/11 and other (more recent) terrorist attacks in Europe, immigration has been framed as a threat to security (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017). This is done by linking migrants to criminal activities or by labelling them as potential terrorists. Political elites that favour restrictive policies regarding migration will then push a more negative and criminal image of migrants to support their policies. Even though scholarly consensus on this matter is clear, that structural disadvantages contribute to violence for all ethnic groups (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017), criminalizing and pushing restrictive policies persists instead of tackling the structural disadvantages that are the root cause of potential public or national threats.

Migrants are also potentially perceived as a cultural threat to the 'indigenous' culture. The notion that migrants are unwilling to assimilate, and are actively threatening societal cohesion by preferring to form ethno-religious enclaves, increased the perception of migrants as a cultural threat (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017). Concerns on identity and religious differences create a perception of cultural competition (Gattinara & Morales, 2017), as if migrants' goal is to 'take over' the 'indigenous' culture. Differences due to culture or religion are thus seen as a more symbolic threat to the social fabric of the host community (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2017).

Another important factor in how governments deal with immigration is public perception. One way in which governments do this, as argued by Vollmer, is through 'number games' (2011). As mentioned earlier, the perception of threat by the public plays an important role in how governments deal and the political elite react to migration. This is also seen in the number games, where 'numbers' refers to the number of migrants in a country. Discourse that refers to migrants as a foreign infiltration or massive waves of people is then combined with

the number of migrants that enter a country. The bigger the number, the more a country is 'overwhelmed' and threatened by infiltrators that threaten national homogeneity, the more justification for control and enforcement policies (Vollmer, 2011).

What is also interesting to note is that there is the interplay between number games and threat perceptions, which results in something Vollmer calls 'the demonstration of efficient governance' (2011). The result of this interplay is that the level of political trust correlates with how well governments perform in keeping 'others' out, or are able to integrate 'the outsiders' into the 'native society'. Something radical right parties could capitalize on, as originally mainstream (political) actors and governments 'shied away' from immigration (Gattinara & Morales, 2017). Radical right parties often blame minorities in general, and immigrants in particular, for the social and economic problems in a country (Meuleman et al., 2019), and thus optimally position themselves towards such a discourse. But because of the correlation between political trust and efficient governance, mainstream parties have progressively changed their strategy by also taking a side in the migration debate, politicizing the issue even further.

Lastly, the 'othering' of migrants by the political elite also shows the relevance of public perception in political discourse. By othering migrants and portraying them as undeserving of support, political elites can reduce the scope for empathy towards migrants (Kirkwood, 2017). This again delegitimizes support for migrants, and pushes further a more restrictive migration policy. It is also possible for political actors to do the exact opposite, and to choose to humanize migrants. This way, actors can portray themselves as being moral and having humanitarian concerns by presenting migrants explicitly as human beings and implying that they deserve to be treated in the same way one would treat their own kin (Kirkwood, 2017). Though, the humanisation of migrants by governments doesn't necessarily mean a government supports or will support said group of migrants.

2.3. Existing literature on the Turkish case

Until the 1950s, Turkey didn't have a specific policy on refugees or a strategy on the social inclusion of migrants (Ekmekci, 2016). This changed by signing and ratifying the 1951 Geneva Convention, albeit maintaining a 'geographical limitation' whereby non-Europeans aren't recognized as refugees (Abdelaaty, 2019; Aydemir, 2022; Baban et al., 2017; Ekmekci, 2016; Icduygu & Simsek, 2016; Koca, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017). Policies on migration were not properly developed until the last two decades. Real development started mostly as part of

Turkey's process of trying to join the European Union. As part of the Accession for Partnership Document for Turkey, the country agreed to adopt several policies on migration, mainly to prevent illegal immigration (Ekmekci, 2016). The most recent development in this perspective was the establishment of a new Asylum and Migration Unit to prepare a draft law on asylum that started in November 2008 (Abdelaaty, 2019; Baban et al., 2017; Koca, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017), although state capacity was still very limited.

The consequence of having barely any legal rights to rely on, caused by the geographical limitation, is that Syrian refugees are left in a (bureaucratic) limbo (Baban et al., 2017; Koca, 2016). The geographical limitation enables the Turkish state to discriminate amongst groups, treating refugee groups that fit within government narratives more favourably, and neglecting others without much consequence. It is why the Turkish state consistently referred to Syrian refugees at the beginning of the conflict as 'guests', as this 'guesthood' derives from the geographical limitation and helps the government from opting in or out of what might otherwise seem to be generally applicable national-level policies (Abdelaaty, 2019).

This doesn't change the fact that this wasn't the first time the Turkish state was dealing with forced migrants and referred to them as 'guests' or used other similar labels. In the past a similar 'guest' label was used towards non-Kurdish Syrians, Iraqi Turkmen, Bosnians and Kosovars, while other groups such as Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds and Chechens were singled out for poor treatment (Abdelaaty, 2019). A result of the Turkish response to foreign-policy considerations as well as domestic identity politics. More specifically, the Turkish state treated refugees from rival countries generously, while having a more negative stance on refugees from allied countries (Abdelaaty, 2019; Aydemir, 2022).

It is important to note the difference in political spectrum and ideological cleavages between that of Turkey and other Western examples. In the West, ideological and party cleavages are established along the traditional progressive/conservative or left/right lines. This in contrast with Turkish ideological cleavages that follows ethnic, religious or sectarian lines in its divided societal structure (Aydemir, 2022). It is also important to underline the role of the historical cleavage in Turkey between conservatives and secularists since the late 18th century.

This difference in cleavage is also seen in the stance of Turkish political parties regarding (policies on) Syrian refugees. The leading Justice and Development Party (AKP) has advanced the Sunni-Muslim identity as its central component of their conception of nation and

nationalism (Abdelaaty, 2019). The narrative Erdogan and the AKP used regarding Syrian refugees such as *muhacir*¹ or as their ‘brothers/sisters in religion’ (Koca, 2016) fit very well within this orientation. The main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), follows an ideology on (Kemalist) secular lines (Aydemir, 2022). Yet, anti-Syrian perspectives don’t follow these ideological lines and go beyond reactions to an ‘outsider community’, but mainly underline a party’s position towards the AKP.

The initial ‘open’ stance by the government was in the assumption that the war in Syria wouldn’t last long and that refugees would return to Syria once the war ended (Baban et al., 2017). The idea was also that, following Assad’s quick fall, Turkey could play an important role in the country’s reconstruction. This way the Turkish government could ensure a Sunni-dominated Syria that would align itself with Erdogan’s neo-Ottomanist orientation (Abdelaaty, 2019). But when it became clear that Syrian refugees would be staying for longer than anticipated, the Turkish government introduced measures to provide Syrian refugees with some form of legal status. The main agency that was responsible for the coordination of refugee management was the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), that followed on the 2014 Regulation on Temporary Protection for Syrian Refugees (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017). Public acknowledgement that Syrians might stay in Turkey for longer than anticipated followed a year later in 2015, peaking in July 2016 with the announcement by Erdogan that Syrians could be granted Turkish citizenship (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016).

Criticism by the opposition was formed within a societal security frame (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017). Syrians would pose a demographic threat in the sense that they would secure the AKP a majority in return for government help, and that they were having ‘unfair’ access to public services. Syrian refugees were instrumentalized to express criticism towards the governing AKP. The CHP blames AKP for deepening the Syrian crisis, leading to a mass influx of refugees at the expense of Turkish citizens (Aydemir, 2022). This criticism was overshadowed by the continued use of religious and cultural references when addressing the refugee crisis, representing Syrian refugees as victims of the Assad regime (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017).

¹ referring to the Muslims who sought refuge in Medina due to the religious persecution they suffered in Mecca.

2.4. Positioning this thesis

Given the earlier theoretical framework, it is important to position this thesis and its relevance compared to earlier works. As mentioned earlier, labelling Syrian refugees as ‘guests’ enabled Turkish authorities to ‘de-legalize’ their claims to protection and assistance. The use of the guest label also meant that it was more relevant to analyse the narrative used by the political elite regarding Syrian refugees. Yet, this thesis isn’t the first of its kind on the Turkish case. Earlier literature has touched upon this case from various perspectives, but mainly the works by Abdelaaty and Aydemir have specifically studied the political discourse used by the Turkish government and opposition parties. This thesis builds upon their works and expands on what is still missing.

Although Abdelaaty has already touched upon the use of the guest label, he hasn’t conducted a discourse analysis to highlight the shift in government or opposition narrative. The same goes for Aydemir that also has specifically looked at party speeches in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, but hasn’t done a discourse analysis on the narrative but conducted a content analysis of party group speeches from March 2011 to December 2019. This thesis will build upon both works firstly by adding to the literature on the use of the ‘guesthood’ or similar labels, but also using the content analysis to formulate a hypothesis.

There are two hypotheses that follow based on the existing literature to the question how political discourse regarding Syrian refugees has shifted in Turkey. The first hypothesis is that:

H1: the narrative of the ruling government party AKP regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey will shift from a more open stance towards a more restrictive stance

This hypothesis follows as the government narrative on Syrian refugees at the start of the conflict was more ‘open’ and Syrian refugees were referred to as ‘guests’. This gradually shifted towards a more restrictive stance where Syrian refugees were increasingly referred to as ‘illegal migrants’ and the use of words such as ‘prevention’ and ‘control’ increased (Aydemir, 2022).

The second hypothesis is that:

H2: the narrative of the main opposition party CHP regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey continuously follows a restrictive stance, but not along ideological lines but instrumentalized as criticism

This hypothesis also follows existing literature. The CHP instrumentalized Syrian refugees to express criticism towards the governing AKP. As criticism towards the government continued, so did criticism on its migration policy. Syrian refugees were framed as a societal threat, where Syrian refugees were used by Erdogan to increase his electoral support, and that they were having unfair access to public services. The anti-Syrian perspective of the CHP additionally didn't follow ideological lines, and thus the expectation is that there won't be a secular narrative based on ideological lines.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To test the hypotheses given in the previous chapter and to answer the main question of this thesis, a discourse analysis will be conducted using party group speeches held in the Turkish parliament in a timeframe around four important events regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey between March 2011 and October 2022. The reason to choose for these meetings is due to the significant importance of them. Party group speeches are a popular political activity, and an important moment for party leaders to share their perspective on events and issues of the previous week (Aydemir, 2022). Speeches given by party leaders are relevant as party leaders have almost unlimited say over their groups. For this reason, it is not useful to look at individual parliamentary activities of parliament members.

What makes this data also very useful is the fact that they are delivered every week in similar formats and consecutive slots, which makes it very suitable to conduct a systematic analysis across time as well as of different party leaders (Aydemir, 2022). For the purpose of this thesis, the group party speeches of two political parties will be analysed; the leading government party of Erdogan, the AKP, that follows a populist-conservative ideology, and the leading opposition party CHP that represents the secular segments of Turkish society (Aydemir, 2022). All speeches are in Turkish and translated by me to English for this thesis. All translation errors are therefore mine.

The four important events that will be used are moments in time with a significant change in policy or narrative regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey, supported by earlier literature. These moments are the:

- establishment of a new Asylum and Migration Unit in April 2013 (Abdelaaty, 2019; Baban et al., 2017; Koca, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017);
- forming of the Joint Action Plan (better known as the EU-Turkey deal) on November 29th 2015 (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016);
- announcement by Erdogan that Syrians will be granted Turkish citizenship on July 2nd 2016 (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016);
- announcement by Erdogan that he intends to resettle one million refugees in northern Syria early May 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

As it is not possible to pinpoint a specific week around all these events that can be selected to analyse group party speeches, and not all speeches can be found online, speeches within a certain time frame around those events will be selected to overcome this problem. The time frame used is three weeks prior to, and three weeks after an event (and thus a total of six weeks), or speeches given at dates closest to an event if speeches aren't consistently available. For events with a more specific date the time frame around those dates will be used to analyse group party speeches. For events with a less specific date all speeches in the four weeks of that month will be analysed, and the speeches one week prior and one week after that month. E.g., for the first event with the establishment of the Asylum and Migration Unit all four weeks of April 2013 are selected, plus the last week of March 2013 and the first week of May 2013. This results in a total of 48 speeches analysed in all time frames. Of those 48 speeches, 19 were relevant for the purpose of this thesis, of which 10 speeches by the AKP and 9 speeches by the CHP.

Important to note is also the changes in party leadership. During the timeframe this thesis analyses, the CHP continuously had Kemal Kilicdaroglu as its party leader, and thus were all group speeches given by him. For the AKP this changed several times, with Erdogan being party leader until 2014, Ahmet Davutoglu between 2014 and 2016, Binali Yildirim between 2016 and 2017, and again Erdogan since 2017. The party group speeches analysed for the first and last key event are thus held by Erdogan, for the second event held by Davutoglu, and those of 2016 partly by Yildirim.

An issue with acquiring party group speeches is that it was not possible to find party group speeches for the AKP after 2017, potentially because the speech held by Erdogan after cabinet meetings has replaced the group party speeches. For this reason, for the fourth key event, instead of group party speeches, the speeches held after cabinet meetings by Erdogan is used for the analysis. In the sense of structure or narrative there is no significant change between the group party speeches held by Erdogan earlier, and the speeches after the cabinet meetings, thus these speeches suffice for this thesis. Another issue is that it was not possible to find the group party speech held by Kilicdaroglu on 15-05-2013, but a large part of the transcript could be found on another website and was therefore used.

Relevant paragraphs regarding Syrian refugees within speeches were found by using certain keywords that could be used as mentioned in existing literature. Keywords that were used were 'Syrian(s)', 'refugee', 'brothers/sisters (in religion)', 'guest', '*muhacir*', '*ensar*', 'illegal migrant(s)', '(southern) border', 'compatriot', 'migrant(s)', 'immigration', 'asylum'

and 'integration'. Data is analysed and shifts are highlighted by the change of narrative regarding Syrian refugees. E.g., a shift from a more open stance towards a more negative stance would therefore mean that one would start with referring to Syrian refugees as guests, but would later on use other securitizing labels such as 'national/social security' more frequently.

Reference to the original text for the speeches can be found in appendix A, and the Turkish translation of the words used for the analysis in appendix B.

ANALYSIS

The data analyzed for this study shows a clear match between existing literature and the hypotheses that followed. While maintaining the ‘guest’ label and narrative from the start of the influx of Syrian refugees until this year, the AKP has started to more explicitly mention the return and resettlement of Syrian refugees. Same holds for the CHP that has continuously used Syrian refugees as an instrument to criticize the Turkish government, and Erdogan specifically. Interesting to note is that, even though the CHP indeed didn’t follow ideological lines in their criticism, its (Kemalist) secular stance did resurface in some cases, as will be seen below.

4.1. A new Asylum and Migration unit

Since the start of the conflict in Syria, and the influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey, the AKP followed an ‘open’ stance towards Syrian refugees. Insofar that Erdogan criticized those who questioned this open stance.

I would like to address those who say ‘Why should we care about Syria’, those who say ‘What business do we have with Syria’, and those who say ‘Why do we embrace refugees, why do we take foreigners into our lands’. [...] we believe that peace, tranquility and stability in the region are very, very closely related to Turkey. We want peace in the region for our own peace, internal unity, and security. (AKP 14.05.2013)

Here, Erdogan shows that the main reason for their migrant policy is the stability of the region, but also to prevent internal struggles. He further underlines this by saying that accepting refugees into Turkey is an inescapable fact.

In this difficult geography, closing doors, building walls, being indifferent to problems is never a solution. (AKP 14.05.2013)

But, even though the AKP uses security labels, such as ‘peace’, ‘stability’, and ‘internal unity’, to justify their policy, their main narrative of accepting Syrian refugees, not as ‘refugees’, but as their ‘brothers’ or ‘guests’, still dominates their group speeches.

They are our brothers, they brought a different liveliness and mobility here, they are our guests. [...] How can those who say ‘Syrian refugees should leave’ look at their

neighbors? How can those who say 'Turkey should not be interested in Syria' explain this to their conscience? We are not a racist nation, we are not a selfish nation. What makes us a great nation is that we stand by the oppressed in difficult times. (AKP 14.05.2013)

Not only are Syrian refugees referred to as ‘brothers’ and ‘guests’, Erdogan also adds their positive effect on the country by bringing ‘liveliness and mobility.’ The question how someone who wants Syrian refugees to leave can look at their own neighbors is also in parallel with Syria and Syrian being a neighbor of the Turkish republic. Good neighborhood refers to the AKP’s Sunni-Muslim stance, where good neighborhood is seen as a Muslim virtue and moral obligation (Abdelaaty, 2019; Aydemir, 2022).

The CHP had a critical stance towards the influx of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the conflict. As stated earlier in the theoretical framework, this was not due to ‘othering’ Syrian refugees, but to criticize (the foreign policy of) the AKP, and specifically Erdogan himself.

One of those responsible for what Syria is experiencing today is Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (CHP 07.05.2013)

The influx of Syrian refugees is being closely linked to Erdogan’s foreign policy, as (shared) responsibility for the conflict is put on Erdogan’s shoulders. This is something that is continuously seen throughout all the speeches that are analyzed, showing how the CHP instrumentalized Syrian refugees to criticize Erdogan.

We do not have a problem with Syrians who are staying in our tents and to whom we provide food. Turkey is a great state, necessary action must be taken.

But outside the refugee camp, outside the tent, it is unacceptable for us that strangers are able to come to cities this easily, that they can rent a house, can make bombs, and then go out again (without any issue).

Look, it's not just us that have refugees. They are also in Jordan. Is there a fight (in Jordan)? Is there a bomb? Where can you find this, you can find this in Turkey. Anyone with a gun has come (to our country) without any issue. (CHP 14.05.2013)

Securitization here happens by referring to potential ‘strangers’ with ‘bombs’ or ‘guns’ that can uncontrollably be brought into the country. Immigration is framed as a security threat by linking migrants to criminal activities, or by labeling them as potential terrorists (Chebel d’Appollonia, 2017). Syrian refugees, or rather ‘strangers’ that can potentially accompany Syrian refugees, are framed as potential terrorists with bombs and guns. Kilicdaroglu also mentioned Jordan as an example, to again show how government policy is to be blamed, as problems supposedly only occur in Turkey and not in other nations. In another speech he further underlines this.

I warned (Erdogan) many times about Syria, I warned many times, I said that you are following the wrong policy. [...] I said that since 1071² we have turned our direction to the West, to civilization. We said don't go into the swamp of the Middle East, you can't get out if you enter, you will turn it into a bloodbath, you will discredit Turkey. (CHP 28.05.2013)

Here again government policy is blamed for the cause of the problems in Syria and its consequences for Turkey. Not only has Erdogan’s foreign policy internal consequences, but will also ‘discredit’ Turkey.

What is even more interesting here is that a statement in Kilicdaroglu’s speech goes against expectation and partly disconfirms the second hypothesis (H2). H2 stated that the restrictive stance of the CHP wouldn’t follow along ideological lines. This is indeed confirmed by all other speeches analyzed in this thesis, except for this specific part where Kilicdaroglu mentions that Turkey had ‘turned their direction to the West’ since 1071, and more specifically towards ‘civilization’. Referring to the West as civilization, and the Middle East as swamp follows ideological anti-Arab lines and Kemalist isolationism from the Middle East (Aydemir, 2022).

4.2. The Joint Action Plan

One aspect of the policy on Syrian refugees in Turkey is that narrative was generally linked to Turkey’s foreign policy. As seen in the analysis in 4.1. the CHP instrumentalized Syrian refugees to criticize government policy, and specifically Erdogan’s Syria policy, even when party leadership changed in the AKP. Following the Joint Action Plan at the European Summit

² Here, 1071 refers to the date of Turkish victory in Anatolia against the Byzantine Empire during the battle of Manzikert, which led to the Turkification of the region.

in 2015, this was even more prevalent in the speeches of both parties. During one of the group party speeches Davutoglu mentioned their success during this Summit.

We also achieved significant gains for our Syrian brothers and sisters at the European Union Summit. [...] and the Republic of Turkey, which has carried all this burden alone so far in the case of Syria, will act together with other countries on burden sharing. (AKP 08.12.2015)

Important to note here is also the continued labeling of Syrian refugees as ‘Syrian brothers and sisters’. But the burden of Syrian refugees in Turkey on the Turkish state is also stated more explicitly by mentioning how Turkey is carrying ‘this burden’ alone.

Another expectation as mentioned in the theoretical framework is also fulfilled with Davutoglu stating the positive consequences of harboring Syrian refugees in the country.

All these difficult days will pass, but I am sure that our Syrian brothers and sisters, whom we are close with and shared our table, will pass on this epic to future generations for decades and centuries. (AKP 08.12.2015)

As stated by Abdelaaty, the idea here was that a quick fall of Assad would mean an important role for Turkey in the country’s reconstruction (2019). This way the Turkish government could ensure a Sunni-dominated Syria that would align itself with AKP’s neo-Ottomanist orientation, as ‘Syrian brothers and sisters’ will pass this epic on ‘to future generations for decades and centuries’. In a later speech Davutoglu also opened the doors towards a return of Syrian refugees.

The suffering of the Syrian people must come to an end, the ground for a real peace must be prepared in Syria. (AKP 22.12.2015)

Mentioning that ‘real peace must be prepared in Syria’ foreshadows Erdogan’s future statement to resettle one million refugees in northern Syria. Davutoglu also refers to Syrian refugees here as ‘the Syrian people’, in contrast with continuously referring to Syrian refugees as ‘Syrian brothers/sisters’ or ‘guests’ in previous speeches.

The CHP on the other hand continued its criticism.

From the very beginning, we said that the Syria policy was wrong [...] But today, be sure, even those in power have come to the point where they admit their own mistakes, and a wrong Syria policy has made them pay the bills with 2 million Syrian refugees, over 2 million Syrian refugees. (CHP 30.06.2015)

Here again, the CHP consistently referred to Syrians as refugees, and instrumentalized them to criticize government policy. Kilicdaroglu also notes that the government also saw ‘their own mistakes’ and confirms the slow shift in government narrative. A mistake that is being ‘paid’ in the form of a bill of 2 million Syrian refugees. But the number games continuous.

No one knows the whereabouts of over 2 million Syrians. Actually, we say over 2 million, but maybe 3 million, maybe 5 million, no one knows the number. [...] if peace does not come to the Middle East, their (the more than 2 million Syrians’) burden on Turkey will be very heavy economically, politically and socially. (CHP 30.06.2015)

This statement is again confirming the hypothesis. Criticism by the opposition was formed within a societal security frame (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017), as Kilicdaroglu does by stating that the ‘burden on Turkey will be very heavy economically, politically and socially’. Additionally, Kilicdaroglu is using numbers to frame the potential threat as bigger than it really is, not per se to justify more control and enforcement policies, but to prove poor effective governance by the Turkish government.

4.3. Turkish citizenship for Syrians

The announcement of plans to naturalize Syrian refugees and enable Turkish citizenship led to much criticism by the opposition.

Look at this governance. Is this possible? 3 million Syrians arrived. Before we knew it, suddenly an explanation, what is it? ‘We will naturalize Syrians’. Why are you doing that? On what grounds do you give them citizenship? There are 6 million unemployed, 6 million. (CHP 12.07.2016)

Again, Syrian refugees are instrumentalized to criticize effective governance. In the same speech the CHP also again used the societal security frame.

If we agree with this (situation we are currently in), Turkey's social fabric will be destroyed, my friends. Turkey's genes are clearly being played with. There is a security risk. No one knows who is a terrorist or who is innocent. [...] you (Erdogan) forget all this, you say, "I am giving citizenship to Syrians". Ghettos will form in big cities and this will lead to conflicts and tensions, my friends. (CHP 12.07.2016)

By stating that 'Turkey's social fabric will be destroyed', the CHP again framed Syrian refugees as a potential threat to social security. This is also done by implying that naturalization would lead to ghettos, and that it will 'lead to conflicts and tensions'. Kilicdaroglu also added to the criticism on effective governance by stating that 'no one knows' if a migrant in the country is a terrorist or innocent. Still, Kilicdaroglu also responds to increasing xenophobia amongst the Turkish public.

Citizens are angry with Syrians... This is wrong, friends. Why are you angry with the Syrian? This is the man who fled the war. You will be angry with the government that has haunted you with Syrians, my brother! (CHP 12.07.2016)

The CHP here again instrumentalized the Syrian refugees to steer the public's criticism towards the government. In turn, the AKP increasingly shifted its narrative regarding Syrian refugees and migration.

Turkey has the power and might to stop a new wave of mass refugees, ethnic engineering on its border, and elements that threaten its national security, by reacting when necessary. (AKP 16.02.2016)

Davutoglu explicitly used labels here such as 'a new wave of mass refugees' and 'national security', shifting away in only referring to the Syrian conflict in 'humanitarian' terms and labels, but securitizing the issue further. Nevertheless, the AKP continued its narrative regarding Syrian refugees as their 'brothers/sisters'.

Throughout the history of Turkey, our country has always been on the side of the oppressed, here we embraced 3 million Syrian brothers/sisters ... (AKP 18.10.2016)

The neo-Ottomanist hospitality can also be seen here with the AKP referring to the idea that Turks were always 'on the side of the oppressed', referring to earlier Ottoman hegemony in the region, and the supposed peace and stability it brought.

4.4. Resettling one million refugees

The announcement that Erdogan is planning on resettling one million refugees in northern Syria is the biggest turning point in the government narrative regarding Syrian refugees. Even though Erdogan continued a similar narrative, the search for a ‘solution’ became even more apparent.

But with these (Syrian) brothers of ours, we will continue our way in the culture of the ensar (the first Muslims in Medina who harbored Muslims who fled Mecca) and the culture of muhacir, and we will never make any concessions. [...] It is our humanitarian, conscientious and historical duty. Thankfully, having fulfilled this moral duty duly, we stand before the world with peace of mind. (AKP 09.05.2022)

Erdogan still refers to Syrian refugees here as ‘brothers’, and further implies the religious kinship and moral obligation by referring to the *ensar* and *muhacir* cultures. Showing little change in narrative regarding Syrian refugees. Still, the narrative regarding *how* to deal with Syrian refugees has. First, Erdogan states that the ‘humanitarian, conscientious and historical duty’ has been ‘fulfilled’. This in contrast with an earlier speech where this ‘duty’ was a duty he would continuously fulfill. Second, this ‘fulfillment’ also took a more concrete form in the same speech.

For example, when the Gulf War started, almost all of the 1 million people who came to our country from Iraq returned to their homes after the war. [...] We are making every effort to stabilize Syria... (AKP 09.05.2022)

Erdogan makes the ‘safe’ return of Syrian refugees here more explicit. By referring to earlier refugees that ‘almost all’ of them have ‘returned to their homes’, the expectation that almost all Syrian refugees will return is also implied. Not just implied, but later also explicitly stated.

No one should have any doubt that the number of Syrians in our country will decrease to reasonable levels as long as we provide the necessary opportunities for voluntary returns. (AKP 09.05.2022)

The main opposition party CHP also confirms this shift.

Yes, he (Erdogan) has seen the polls now, he's seen the reaction from below; "We will do our best for the return of our Syrian brothers," he says. What kind of spinelessness is this, how can you turn like this? (CHP 19.04.2022)

Kilicdaroglu states here that the government narrative has seen a major shift, and builds further on earlier criticism.

There is no policy regarding refugees, there is no such policy. See, is there any lack of control? Yes there is. Those who want can easily cross the border. 100 thousand was a red line, what 100 thousand? It became 3 million 600 thousand. [...] Everyone is looking at the palace (the residence of Erdogan). Because no one has the authority. There is only one official, and that is that person in the palace. (CHP 10.05.2022)

The criticism is again referring to ineffective governance by the AKP, and that there is no policy regarding Syrian refugees. According to the CHP, the only authority in managing Syrian refugees in Turkey is Erdogan.

4.5. Results and further discussion

There were two hypotheses that followed based on the theoretical framework to answer the main question on the shift in political discourse regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey. The first hypothesis (H1) was that the narrative of the ruling government party AKP has shifted from a more open stance towards a more restrictive stance throughout the years. The second hypothesis (H2) was that the narrative of the main opposition party CHP would follow a restrictive stance throughout the years, but that restrictive discourse would not follow ideological lines and that Syrian refugees are instrumentalized by the CHP to criticize government policy. Open stance was defined by the use of labels such as 'our Syrian brothers/sisters', 'guests', or other inclusionary labels. A more restrictive stance was defined as the increased use of labels that are linked to restrictive migration policies, such as 'national security' or 'border security'.

The analysis of the speeches confirms both hypotheses. Although the AKP continuously referred to Syrian refugees with inclusionary terms, or referred to (Islamic) moral obligations, the increased use of restrictive narrative could also be seen. By explicitly using labels such as 'a new wave of mass refugees', 'national security' and 'border security', the AKP shifted away from only referring to the Syrian conflict in 'humanitarian' terms and labels, but also added to

the securitization of the issue. Insofar that Erdogan voiced the expectation that Syrian refugees would eventually leave the country and ‘return to their homes’.

Same goes for the CHP, which continuously linked Syrian refugees with the government's migration policy as well as its foreign policy. The CHP referred to Syrian refugees as a potential societal security threat with narratives such as ‘Turkey’s social fabric will be destroyed’, and that supposedly ghettos would form in major cities and would result in conflicts and tensions. The CHP also securitized the influx of Syrian refugees by framing migrants as a security threat by linking them to criminal activities and labeling them as potential terrorists. Nevertheless, the overlapping narrative regarding Syrian refugees was continuously used to instrumentalize Syrian refugees to criticize the Turkish government, and specifically Erdogan.

Although H2 is mainly confirmed by the analysis, there was one instance where H2 was disconfirmed. One of the expectations was that the restrictive narrative by the CHP wouldn’t follow (secular) ideological lines, but one of the earlier speeches disconfirms this. Kilicdaroglu mentions in one instance that Turkey ‘had turned their direction to the West’ in the past, and more towards ‘civilization’. He adds to that by referring to the Middle East as a swamp, a narrative that follows ideological anti-Arab lines and Kemalist isolationism from the Middle East.

Even though the analysis confirms both hypotheses to some extent, the speeches of just one opposition party was analyzed. Narrative regarding Syrian refugees and criticism on migration policy by the opposition varies insofar that, although the CHP didn’t mainly follow ideological lines in its narrative, other parties such as the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) or the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) would do so (Aydemir, 2022). This means that the analysis isn’t generalizable to the rest of the Turkish opposition and further research that also analyzes the narrative of other opposition parties would therefore be more complete. Still, with the MHP supporting the governing AKP since 2015, and the HDP’s co-chairs imprisoned after the 2016 Turkish coup attempt, the CHP was the most viable party to select for analysis for this case.

The implication of the result of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it shows the importance of more research on migration policy in non-Western countries and/or illiberal democracies, as most of the literature on migration policy and political discourse focuses on Western (liberal) democracies. On the other hand, non-Western countries and/or illiberal

democracies are countries that are in more vulnerable parts of the world that can be affected by climate change. The Syrian conflict, and the displacement caused by it, can be ascribed to climate change to some level (Abel et al., 2018). Especially slow-onset climate changes such as droughts can make regions inhabitable, which will likely increase migration and refugee influxes (Kaczan & Orgill-Meyer, 2019). With non-Western countries and its neighbors more vulnerable to climate change means an increased potential of mass refugee influxes such as with the Turkish case. Researching what kind of narrative or policy countries that will have to deal with more migrants in the near future already have on migration, may provide useful insights for (international) refugee organizations.

CONCLUSION

Since the start of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, neighboring countries in the region have been affected by the mass influx of refugees, because of this conflict. Now harboring almost 4 million Syrian refugees, Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the world. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Turkish state has run an ‘open-door’ policy, insofar that Syrian refugees were welcomed as ‘guests’ and ‘brothers/sisters’ by the political elite as well as by the wider public. Yet, referring to Syrian refugees as ‘guests’ is now in stark contrast with rising xenophobia amongst Turkish citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2022), with 93% of the population wanting Syrians to leave the country as soon as possible (Aksoy arastirma merkezi, 2021). Insofar that the Turkish president Erdogan announced in May 2022 that he intends to resettle one million refugees in northern Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

To know and see how the political discourse has shifted from ‘our Syrian guests’ to ‘we will resettle one million Syrians in northern Syria’, and thus why the *narrative* has changed, this thesis analyzed the said narrative used by the political elite regarding Syrian refugees. For that purpose, party group speeches of the leading government party AKP and the main opposition party CHP were analyzed through a discourse analysis to see whether and how the discourse has shifted. The data analyzed for this study shows a clear match between existing literature and the hypotheses that followed, and thereby answering the research question. While maintaining the ‘guests’ and ‘our brothers/sisters’ label and narrative from the start of the influx of Syrian refugees until this year, the AKP has started to more explicitly mention the return and resettlement of Syrian refugees. Same holds for the CHP that has continuously used Syrian refugees as an instrument to criticize the Turkish government, and mainly the Turkish president Erdogan. One exception partly disconfirming this thesis was that, even though the CHP indeed didn’t follow ideological lines in their criticism, its (Kemalist) secular stance did resurface in some cases.

This thesis adds on to the vast literature on migration policy and political discourse. It specifically is an addition to literature on migration policy and political discourse in non-Western countries. By researching how the interplay with narrative is formed in a country where refugees cannot rely on international laws and rights due to the geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention, this thesis gives more insight on political discourse in a case where policy, and thus refugees trapped in such countries, heavily relies on it. Researching what kind of

narrative or policy countries that will have to deal with more migrants in the near future already have on migration, may provide insights for (international) refugee organizations, so people who have been barred from their homes can be better supported if they fall in a bureaucratic limbo.

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APPENDIX A. SPEECH REFERENCES

The following references are used for the party leader speeches that are used for the analysis:

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APPENDIX B. LIST OF SEARCH WORDS

List of search words in English

- Syria
- Syrian(s)
- Refugee
- Brother(s)/sister(s) (in religion)
- Guest
- *Muhacir*
- *Ensar*
- Illegal migrant(s)
- (southern) border
- Compatriot
- Migrant(s)
- Migration
- Asylum(seeker)
- Integration

List of search words in Turkish

- Suriye
- Suriyeli(ler)
- Mülteci
- (Din) kardeş(ler)
- Misafir
- Muhacir
- Ensar
- Kaçak göçmen(ler)
- (güney) sınır
- Hemşehri
- Göçmen(ler)
- Göç
- İltica(cı)
- Entegrasyon