

POLICY MEMO

Exclusion through Public Discourse: Media representations of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Executive Summary

Turkey currently hosts over 3,8 million displaced Syrians, while acting as a gatekeeper and a regulator of mass migration to European countries. The vast majority of the Syrians are not officially recognized as refugees but have a “temporary protection status”, which gives them certain rights with regard to access to education, healthcare and work. Beside the policy initiatives put in place by the AKP-led government to manage the refugees’ access to services, the European Union supports the refugees and host communities with funds envisaged by the EU-Turkey Statement. Many experts concur that the majority of Syrians are likely to stay permanently in Turkey, thus the importance and the necessity of their integration into the host society.

Yet, the refugees still face serious problems of social and economic instability. In the areas where the refugee population is high, the capacity of service providers is stretched and there is social tension. The tension between host society and refugees is confirmed by recent episodes of racist attacks and surveys on public perception of Syrian refugees. In this respect, media representations and the policy makers’ public discourses on the refugees appear to be crucial, as they directly influence public perception. Indeed, Turkish media continues to alternatively or jointly frame Syrians as “needy people”, “a threat” or “a burden”, often reproducing the exclusionary discourses of policy makers from different political visions, who tend to instrumentalise the refugees for domestic and international political purposes.

In light of these considerations this policy memo puts forward the following recommendations: First, the social and economic integration of the refugees should be supported by an inclusive and pluralist narrative. While inducing political representatives

to adopt a different narrative could be difficult, media editors and journalists could be trained to provide a more balanced reporting based on fact-checking. Second, the EU should consider engaging in a structural and long-term financial and technical support for a better inclusion of refugees in the host society. This support should also be directed to NGOs attempting to create an alternative narrative on refugees. Third, local media should be incentivized to give a more thorough account of the life conditions and status of Syrian population, while addressing the concerns of both refugees and host communities.

Background and Research Question

Turkey hosts the world’s highest number of displaced Syrians since 2014. As of June 2020, more than 3,88 million Syrian people, almost half of whom are children, were “registered under temporary protection” in the country¹. This trend started in 2011, when the government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) decided to adopt an “open door policy” toward Syrian civilians fleeing from the conflict in the neighbouring country. The government initially assumed that the conflict would end soon, expecting to receive just a few thousands of refugees and that those arriving would quickly return home. However, as the numbers increased, the Turkish government had to make changes in laws and legislation, as well as institutional adjustments to handle the registration and access to services of the incomers. Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention with a geographical restriction that limits the refugee status to only Europeans (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). Therefore, the majority of

¹ Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, (2020). <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27> (accessed 2020, June 20).

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the Syrians in Turkey are not recognized as refugees but were granted “temporary protection status” (TPS)². The TPS gives Syrians access to health facilities, education and work permit in the province of registration, but provides no timeframe for the duration of temporary protection, putting those subject to it in an uncertain situation (Çorabatır, 2016). Moreover, the majority of the Syrian population in Turkey experience limited access to proper accommodations and jobs and face problems of social and economic instability (Koser Akcapar & Şimşek, 2018). Indeed, as of March 2019, only 31,185 Syrians were granted a work permit, while a vast majority of refugees informally participate in the labour market with salaries remaining under the minimum wage³. On top of this, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has left thousands of refugees unemployed, putting them again in an extremely needy situation⁴.

The EU-Turkey Refugee Statement⁵ (March 2016) represented an important policy development within this picture. As the EU policymakers decided to externalize migration management, Ankara took on a key role, both as a gatekeeper to Europe from the perspective of Syrian refugees, and as a regulator of mass migration to European countries, from the European perspective (Bilge, 2019). The Statement intended to end the flow of asylum seekers from Turkey to the EU and has been successful in reducing migration to Greece over the sea, but has also been widely criticised both on legal and humanitarian grounds (Adalı & Türkyılmaz, 2020). The Statement also comprised a total of €6 billion funding (The “EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey” - FRIT) “to support refugees and host communities in Turkey” for projects, which run until mid-2025 latest⁶ and are mostly managed by international NGOs and UN Agencies, in collaboration with local institutions and NGOs⁷.

The policy measures adopted by the AKP in recent years have been considered a sign that the Turkish authorities had accepted the likelihood of a long-term settlement of Syrians (İçduygu & Nimer, 2020). The issue is also addressed in the Turkish presidency’s development plan for 2019–2023⁸, which stresses the necessity to develop efficient policies for the economic and social integration of refugees. Nevertheless, the public discourses of the AKP are still centered on an eventual return of the refugees. Moreover, reports in July 2019 of some refugees being forcibly deported from Istanbul have raised concerns about any large-scale forced returns⁹.

If the majority of Syrians are to stay in Turkey their integration into the host society becomes even more important and challenging. As almost all of the Syrian population lives outside of refugee camps, the capacity of service providers in areas with a high refugee population density - such as Istanbul, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa - continues to be stretched which, at times, leads to social tension. What is clear is that exclusionary and mixed messages on refugees given by policymakers to the public can only worsen tensions. This policy memo aims to inquire into the refugees’ social integration in Turkey posing the following questions: How are Syrian refugees represented in Turkish media? What is the role of political parties in this respect? How does the Turkish population perceive the refugees?

Methodology / Data

This policy memo is based on a critical review of recent studies tackling the representation of the Syrian refugees in the Turkish media (secondary analysis); news stories; commentaries and speeches of politicians on the refugee issue as they appeared on the media in Turkey. It is also based on the outcomes of recent research and surveys inquiring into the perception of the Syrians among the Turkish population.

2 The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (N. 6458), which is the law defining the current legal status of all foreigners in Turkey was approved in 2013. The law included a section on temporary protection. The TPS acquired a clearer frame with the Regulation on Temporary Protection (Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği, 2014), which included details on access to education, health services and working permits for Syrians under temporary protection.

3 Hamsici, M. (2019, August 20). Türkiye’de kaç Suriyeli var, en çok Suriyeli nüfusu hangi şehirde yaşıyor? BBC Türkçe. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-49150143>.

4 Kürçü, E. (2020, April 30) 1 Million Refugee Workers Laid-off Amidst COVID-19 Crisis, Bianet. <http://bianet.org/english/minorities/223646-1-million-refugee-workers-laid-off-amidst-covid-19-crisis>

5 EU-Turkey Statement (2016, March 18). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>, (accessed 2020, June 21th).

6 The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/frit_factsheet.pdf (retrieved 2020, June 21).

7 EU Facility Projects <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/eu-facility-projects-6993> (accessed 2020, June 28).

8 On birinci kalkınma planı. <http://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/OnbirinciKalkinmaPlani.pdf>, (retrieved 2020, June 21).

9 Evans, D. (2019, October 9). Turkey’s plan to settle refugees in northeast Syria alarms allies. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-refugees-graphic-idUSKBN1WN28J>.



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Key findings

Media discourses clearly have an influence on the Turkish society's perception of Syrian refugees and thus on their social acceptance. In Turkey's context the presence of Syrian refugees is entangled with the prevalent identity debates and conflicts in domestic politics (Polat, 2018). Accordingly, media discourses reflect the political stance of the news outlet, with respect to how the outlet in question is in favour or critical of the government (Efe, 2019; Karakuş, & Göktuna Yaylacı, 2015). However, it should be added that in recent years the space for critical media coverage has been considerably reduced due to the authoritarian tendencies of the Turkish government.

Against this backdrop, there are two main types of discourses alternatively or jointly used to frame Syrian refugees in the Turkish media. The first type is a "humanitarian" discourse which focuses on displacement challenges, features the refugees as "needy people" and often identifies them with a passive and collectivized entity that is instrumental to place Turkish actors in a good light (Efe, 2019; Özdora Akşak, 2019). Some of these narratives directly express the AKP policymakers' humanitarian discourses based on religious solidarity. Thus, in media discourse we find the frequent use of the terms "brothers/sisters" used by AKP actors which, in turn, is criticised by opposition newspapers (Efe, 2018). While both pro-government and opposition papers almost never specify the legal status of the Syrians (TPS), the term "guest" is often used by government representatives to refer to Syrian refugees. The term indicates a temporary situation, but it also implies that Turkey's acceptance of fellow Muslim Syrians is a moral obligation - thus justifying their presence to the party's constituency. In addition, the humanitarian discourse on the refugees is also deployed by the AKP to claim moral superiority vis-à-vis Europe and the EU, which is accused of being irresponsible and inhuman in this regard (Polat, 2018).

The second type of discourse presents Syrian refugees as a "threat", offering discriminatory and alienating statements, coupled with particular political and social issues (Efe, 2018; Bilge, 2019). The trend is more visible in opposition media, which incorporates security and threat discourses in criticisms of the government's Syria and refugee policies. The image thereby constructed presents Syrian refugees as a "burden" for the country's economy, as well as a group of people that is alien to the country's socio-cultural identity (Onay-Coker, 2019). Analyses carried out on the issue show that the association of refugees with crime, socio-economic problems and "cultural deprivation" have increased after 2015-2016 and that such discursive practices as developed in parallel with episodes of racist and violent attacks against Syrians (Toğral Koca, 2016). This changing trend is also

confirmed by some surveys. Konda's 2016 Perception on Syrian Asylum-Seekers' survey shows that, four years ago, 72% of the interviewees were willing to live with the Syrian population in the same city. The same survey repeated in 2019 shows that the percentage dropped to 40%.

Social media and platforms represent another venue where public opinion on Syrian refugees is shaped. Bozdağ (2019) notes that while social media contributes to disseminate discourses of "othering", thus normalizing discrimination, it also enables the circulation of false/unverified information to "rationalize" discrimination and nationalistic statements. "Syrians are getting a salary from the government"; "Free public housing for the Syrians" and "Syrians will be able to vote in the upcoming elections" are among the most common "fake news" that concern them¹⁰. This type of narrative is frequently reproduced in the speeches and social media comments of the major opposition party's (CHP - People's Republican Party) representatives¹¹, as well as in those of the Turkish nationalist parties (namely MHP - National movement party, ally of the AKP, and İYİ Parti). Similar comments are echoed in the public perception of Syrian refugees, as exemplified by a 2019 research conducted in Istanbul by Istanbul Political Research Institute. According to this study, 78% of the interviewees thinks that the government treats Syrians better than Turkish citizens¹². Another 78% does not have any contact with Syrian refugees despite seeing them every day in the street they live (52%), in the workplace (44%) or in groceries and shops (% 69). For 49% of the respondents, Syrians are "a less talented race", while 36% think that "they are not victims of war". Finally, 33% of the respondents feel "intense rage" towards the Syrians, while 47% of the participants affirm to experience "an intense sense of uneasiness" with regard to the refugees¹³.

10 The spread of misinformation on Syrian refugees has led some NGOs working with refugees and debunking platforms to launch counter-information campaigns. One recent example is Suriyelilerle İlgili Doğru Bilinen Yanlışlar (2020) [False Claims considered True about the Syrians] a booklet by the Mülteciler Association that lists 16 of such claims. Similar false informations are also constantly debunked by the fact-checking site Teyit.org.

11 See for example: Diken. (2017, September 19). Kılıçdaroğlu'nun tespiti: Suriyeliler birinci, Karadenizli üretici ikinci sınıf vatandaş oldu. <http://www.diken.com.tr/kilicdaroglu-nun-tespiti-suriyeliler-birinci-karadenizli-uretileri-ikinci-sinif-vatandas-oldu/> and <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/sinan-ogandan-soke-eden-sozler-40383629>.

12 It is worth noting that rumors about Syrians receiving a salary from the government is related to the fact that media often avoid specifying that Syrians in need receive a monthly payment through the ESSN card funded by the EU Facility for Refugees.

13 Şar, E. & Kuru, N.O. (2019). İstanbul'da Suriyeli Sığınmacılara Yönelik Tutumlar [Attitudes towards Syrian Refugees in Istanbul]. [Report] https://d4b693e1-c592-4336-bc6a-36c134d6fb5e.filesusr.com/ugd/c80586_2ae245f059244f1fba7fd785e4caa447.pdf.

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Recommendations

Considering that Turkey is likely to continue to host millions of refugees in the foreseeable future, this policy memo puts forward the following three recommendations: First: Policymakers need to stop instrumentalise Syrian refugees for domestic and international political purposes. This type of attitude negatively influences the perception of the refugees among local communities and stands as an impediment to their integration. Policies that would increase their social and economic integration should be supported by an inclusive and pluralist narrative. This effort should come from both government and opposition representatives, as their discourses clearly influence the way in which media reports on refugees. While inducing government and opposition leaders to change their discourses might not be an easy task, journalists and editors could be trained on how to report their declarations in a more balanced way, to engage in fact-checking and in an inclusionary narrative. Second: As the EU made the highly controversial decision of externalizing the management of migration, its contribution to the improvement of life conditions of Syrian refugees and local communities in Turkey should not be limited to the scope and time limit of the EU Facility. The EU's contribution needs to be formulated as a structural and long-term financial and technical support to be carried out in collaboration with local institutions and NGOs. This could also entail supporting the latter organizations' attempts to create an alternative narrative on Syrian refugees and venues of socialization between Syrian and Turkish people. In this respect, transparency of fund management would also need to be more easily accessible by the general public. Third: Local media should be incentivized to give a more thorough account of the life conditions and status of Syrian population. It would also be beneficial to carry out information campaigns that would address the concerns of refugees as well as local communities, considering that the recent developments in the political and economic situation of the country has substantially hardened the life conditions of the latter community as well.

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