

Under the Shadow of Civilizationist Populist Discourses: Political Debates on Refugees in Turkey

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Abstract

This article explores the extent and limits of anti-immigration discourse in recent political debates in Turkey. Anti-immigrant discourses have been at the heart of exclusionary populisms, where right-wing political actors present immigrants as economic, social and security threats. It is remarkable that this is not yet the case in Turkey, one of the world's major refugee-receiving countries. Using an original dataset, composed of party programmes, parliamentary records and public statements by presidential candidates in the last two rounds of general and presidential elections between 2014 and 2018, we argue that politicians from both incumbent and opposition parties in Turkey have used the 'refugee card' to appeal to the growing social, economic and cultural grievances of their voters but in a rather limited and divergent manner. Debates over migration have oscillated between the Western European right-wing populist perception of 'threat' and the pro-Syrian and civilizationist populism of the ruling party that relies on a transnational notion of 'ummah'.

Introduction

The rise of right-wing populism has widely been seen as a threat to diversity. Anti-immigrant discourses have been at the heart of the 'populist turn' in Europe and the US and served to enlarge the voting base of far-right political parties (Rydgren 2005; Stockeemer 2016). At the same time, empirical research reveals that support for right-wing populism has little to do with the actual volume of migration (Stockeemer 2016) and that the xenophobic language of populists is contagious (Rydgren 2005). In this regard, Hogan and Haltinner (2015) talk about a 'transnational populist playbook' that has diffused across the Western world and consistently construed immigrants within overlapping themes of economic, security and identity threats (Hogan and Haltinner 2015). In this paper, we are interested in uncovering the extent to which anti-immigration populist rhetoric is translated into non-western

contexts such as Turkey, which is hosting an unprecedented number of refugees and where the government is held by an Islamist party that (selectively) utilizes a civilizationist populist discourse at home and abroad.

Turkey is a major refugee recipient country, with over 3.5 million Syrian refugees under temporary protection as well as 300,000 refugees mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. From the first day of the Syrian crisis, in 2011, Turkey, thanks to its initial open-door policy, received Syrians fleeing civil war; these individuals are often referred to as 'guests', not 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers', even though this term has no equivalence in international law. 'Guests', as used by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is framed in reference to the notion of hospitality, justified through religious fraternity, and indicates an expectation of temporary stay (İçduygu

et al. 2017: 460). It was not until 2014 that the Turkish government introduced the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR), which provides the basis for Syrians to access education, health services and vocational training; this is considerably more than other asylum seekers in Turkey, who have neither access to protection nor such services (See Baban, Ilgan and Rygiel 2017 for a critical evaluation).

Despite the welcoming attitude of the government, the presence of Syrians is far from being truly embraced at the societal level. Recent studies show a rise in negative views toward immigration regardless of party affiliation (Erdoğan 2017; Kaya et al. 2019). Occasionally, hashtags such as #IdontwantSyriansinmycountry also become trending topics on Twitter in Turkey. One recent instance that created backlash was the aftermath of a video showing young Syrian men carrying the Free Syrian Army flag, celebrating New Year's Eve 2018 in Istanbul's Taksim Square. In this particular instance, the Ministry of the Interior was quick to respond to the outrage, giving an extensive interview on the situation of Syrians in Turkey and emphasizing the religious brotherhood between Turks and Syrians, as well as their shared Ottoman past.¹ Even though identity politics is a prevalent feature of Turkish elections, it is remarkable and equally puzzling that, unlike political campaigns in Europe or the US during the same period, the refugee question was not central to the presidential or parliamentary election campaigns from 2014 through 2018 and has been only marginally extended to party politics in general.

Following Gidron and Bonikowski's (2013: 27) call for empirically grounded analyses of populism, and incorporating a broad corpus of political texts targeting the general public into the analysis, we will unpack the puzzle of this relative absence of immigration debates in electoral

politics in Turkey, making use of an original dataset consisting of party programmes, parliamentary records and public statements by presidential candidates in the two rounds of general and presidential elections since 2014. While recent research on anti-immigration discourse in Turkey focuses on media coverage (IGAM 2019; Sunata and Yıldız 2018), fewer studies analyse statements by political actors (e.g., Ilgıt and Memişoğlu 2018, İçduygu et al. 2017). Moreover, focusing on the parliamentary debates and not only on the discourses of populist leaders or parties opens up the analysis to a diversity of views on the subject, reasoned through different ideological positions (Fletcher 2008).

The data on parliamentary records was gathered by examining specific periods around election times and two key events. The time frames are three months before the August 2014 presidential elections, June 2015 and November 2015 general elections, and June 2018 presidential and general elections. The time frames surrounding the key events are defined as 1-30 March 2016 and 1-15 July 2016, which, respectively, coincide with the signing of the Turkey-EU deal and Erdoğan's statement on granting citizenship to Syrian refugees. With the help of two research assistants, we went through the minutes of General Assembly meetings during the designated time frames and compiled all statements containing the keywords 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', 'migrant', 'temporary protection', 'Syrian' or 'Syria'. These statements were then coded based on a predefined code list, and codes were stretched or changed in a grounded fashion. Overall, we read and coded party manifestos of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), People's Democratic Party (HDP) and Good Party (İYİ Party), in addition to 408 individual statements from members of the General Assembly.²

¹ Interview with Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soyulu, 07.01.2019, *Habertürk* <https://www.haberturk.com/icisleri-bakani-suleyman-soyulu-turkiye-deki-suriyelilerin-cogu-misak-i-milli-sinirlari-icin-den-2283766#> (accessed January 7, 2019)

² Of these individual statements 194 were related to the conflict in Syria; all others regarded Syrian refugees in Turkey.

The article first provides a review of the literature, in which populist politics in Turkey is situated within two global trends: the rise of anti-immigrant populism in Western countries and Islamic populism in predominantly Muslim countries. Following Kaya et al. (2019) and, to a certain extent, Brubaker (2017), these could be conceptualized as opposite camps within the civilizationist paradigm. Against this background, the main part of the article explores the extent and limits of anti-immigration discourse in recent political debates in Turkey. Our analysis reveals that both incumbent and opposition parties in Turkey have used the ‘refugee card’ to appeal to the growing social, economic and cultural grievances of their voters, but in a rather selective and limited manner. While AKP’s civilizationist populism has grown, contrasting with the European example by rhetorically including Syrian refugees in the definition of ‘the people’, the article also points out its perils in fuelling existing discontent and societal cleavages, especially in the absence (or silencing) of rights-based discourses recognizing existing ethnic and religious diversity in Turkey. In the light of our findings, in the final section, we discuss why politicians’ use of anti-immigration discourse has so far remained limited in Turkey.

Diversity of populisms, anti-immigration rhetoric and Turkey

While there is general acceptance of the fact that populism inevitably entails a moral counter-position of ‘the people’ vs. ‘the elite’ (e.g., Mudde 2004), there is considerable disagreement about its further characterizing features and its inclusionary and exclusionary variations. One important contestation, as aptly put by Brubaker (2019), remains between nationalism and populism—at both the conceptual and empirical level—not the least due to the intertwinement and success of populist and anti-immigrant discourses empirically observed across Europe in the last decade. More importantly, however, Brubaker (2019: 13) underlines that such conceptual ambiguity is integral to and constitutive of populism since

‘populist claims-making is located at the juncture of the *politics of inequality* and the *politics of identity*, where questions about *who gets what* are constitutively intertwined with questions about *who is what*’ (emphasis original). Such exclusionary populist narratives target ‘elites’, who are perceived simultaneously as being at the top of society and as outsider to a given society. Therefore, following Brubaker (2017, 2019) and other scholars (e.g., Arditì 2007; Müller 2016), we understand populist discourses as inherently anti-pluralist and majoritarian discourses that construe diversity as a threat to social cohesion and constantly create demonized out-groups: minorities, migrants, dissidents and opposition parties and politicians (Filc 2009 cited in Yabancı 2016). Therefore, our definition aligns more with what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) identified as ‘exclusionary populism’ that is most prevalent in Europe. However, our focus is on discourses and the extent to which political parties in Turkey employ the populist card against refugees, which is regardless of whether or not the political parties themselves are characterized as populist *per se*.

The conceptual and empirical ambiguity of the term ‘populism’ has led to intense debates about the line separating populist anti-immigrant and far-right parties, which has proven hard to draw. While van Spanje (2011) demonstrates that these are not identical in Western Europe, and Stavrakakis et al. (2017: 421) describe the most-well known examples—such as the National Front in France—as nationalist and only *secondarily* as ‘populist’, others treat right-wing or radical-right populist parties as quintessentially nativist and thereby anti-immigrant and/or anti-minority (e.g., Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016; Mudde 2013). Moreover, significant diffusion effects have been noted as they borrow from each other’s master frames (Rydgren 2005). According to Hogan and Haltinner (2015), similarities in the immigration threat narratives of right-wing political parties and social movements, especially in Western democracies, indicate a shared ‘transnational populist playbook’

in which, regardless of the volume of immigration, immigrants are represented as economic and social threats, blamed as the main reason for crime, and demonized as the 'enemy Other'. For Brubaker (2017), this is a particularly Northern and Western European populist moment, distinctive in the sense that the opposition between the self and the other is defined not in narrow national but in broader civilizational terms as a liberal defence against the threat of Islam (see also Akkerman 2005; Betz and Meret 2009).

While it is important to record the rise of anti-immigration position in the West, which is very much infused with anti-Islamic discourse, studies examining various faces of populism in different parts of the world hint at deep-seated anxieties about the negative social and economic effects of globalization (see, for example, Aytac and Onis 2014; Hadiz and Chryseogelos 2017). In his comparative study of three Muslim-majority societies, namely Indonesia, Egypt and Turkey, Hadiz shows how such grievances can be rebranded under what he calls 'Islamic populism' (Hadiz 2016: 28). He demonstrates that in Muslim-majority societies, the combination of post-Cold War era social conflicts, post-9/11 context and post-Arab Spring political conflicts has led to the concept of the 'ummah' (community of believers) being increasingly defined in national terms and a substitute for the notion of 'the people' united against 'social orders that are perceived to be inherently exclusionary, unjust and therefore simultaneously immoral' (Hadiz 2016: 12). As Kaya et al. (2019) argue, this can be partly seen as the flip side of the same civilizationist populist discourse found in the West.

Over the course of its uninterrupted single-party rule since 2002, the AKP has capitalized on 'the people vs. Kemalist elite/establishment dichotomy' at home and the rising anti-Islamist civilizationist narratives abroad. While populism is not a new phenomenon in Turkish politics (see Baykan 2014 for a history of the concept), the AKP has managed to sustain a hegemonic populism by not only creatively re-producing

its character as the guardian of 'the people' but also through consecutive election wins (Çınar 2015; Dincsaahin 2012; Hadiz 2016; Yabancı 2016). Since the 2010s, when AKP's 'conquest of the state' (Somer 2017) left it with no establishment actors to blame, its populist strategy continued targeting the CHP—the main opposition party—and, increasingly, Western actors (Aytaç and Elçi 2019; Elçi 2019). Therefore, the AKP's populist discourse has decidedly moved into a civilizationist discourse that revitalizes and instrumentalizes Turkey's Ottoman heritage and takes its strength from the claim of being 'the center of the Muslim *ummah*' (Kaya et al. 2019: 6). In the face of the mass migration of majority Sunni Syrians fleeing from Assad's suppression, this civilizationist populist style has manifested itself in religious brotherhood narratives that pit Turkey's hospitality against the indifference of the West. Critiques of the AKP's open-door policy have developed as part and parcel of this hegemonic civilizationist populist style, taking different forms depending on the ideological distance between the incumbent AKP and opposition parties.

When it comes to anti-immigrant populist discourses in Turkey, our knowledge is still limited. The literature on attitudes toward migration-related issues is rather new and overwhelmingly focuses on public opinion and media representation. Erdoğan's (2017) longitudinal data on public attitudes towards Syrians shows increasing levels of 'othering' against Syrians. Even though both the media (Sunata and Yıldız 2018) and public continue to define Syrians as victims, the distance between the citizens and refugees has grown from welcoming guests towards a 'reluctant acceptance' (Erdoğan 2017). Most recent media reports emphasize an increase in the use of criminalizing language (IGAM 2019). Kaya et al. (2019) also show that even AKP voters who otherwise endorsed its revitalization of Ottoman heritage were critical of the Syrian presence out of fear of radicalization and socio-economic competition. Ilgit and Memisoglu's (2018) contribution provides a broad description of how the opposition parties in Turkey approach Syrian

refugees either as rival victim group with unfair access to public services, or a demographic threat.

Here, we examine what happens to anti-immigrant rhetoric across the political spectrum when the incumbent party itself follows a civilizationist populist style which, contrary to the European context, selectively includes refugees in its definition of 'the people' yet reproduces existing ethno-religious cleavages and shies away from any rights-based discourses. Most of the opposition parties remain incapable of challenging AKP's hegemonic populism since they are not against maintaining kinship ties with populations in the old Ottoman territories. Their critique of the AKP's badly managed open-door policy does not go beyond accusing the incumbent AKP of populist and instrumental use of Syrian refugees against the West without calculating its costs on Turkey's economy. Our analysis, therefore, reveals that the dominant rhetoric of the incumbent AKP—based on an understanding of religious nationhood and Ottoman heritage that is difficult for opposition parties to challenge—offers plausible explanations for the relatively low degree of anti-immigration discourse and its corresponding salience in electoral politics in Turkey.

Refugees as part of election campaigns: Limited to no populism

While immigration has arguably not yet been at the centre of political debates in Turkey, the arrival of over 3.5 million Syrians over a short period has prompted emerging debates on the issue. A comparison of the party manifestos that appeared prior to the 2015 parliamentary elections and 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections demonstrated increasing space dedicated to refugees/asylum seekers and exposed its heightened significance in domestic politics. However, this growth in attention does not necessarily mean that refugees are cast in a more positive light, nor that more durable measures are being proposed. Instead, compared to 2015, manifestos from across the political spectrum

in 2018—with the important exception of HDP—put much more emphasis on return to Syria as a longer-term solution.

As mentioned above, here we analyse statements of both members of the ruling AKP and opposition parties represented in the parliament. The CHP is the main opposition party, with a secular and modernist stance. The MHP is a right-wing nationalist party, with a statist and pan-Turkist approach. Although the party is not in the government, it has recently moved from opposition to a de facto alliance with the ruling party in the aftermath of the coup attempt in July 2016. The İYİ Party has been newly founded by former MHP members and takes a clear anti-government stance while maintaining the nationalist agenda. The HDP represents the Kurdish movement but also has a close alliance with smaller factions of socialist and green movements in Turkey.

As the Syrian conflict has continued and the number of arrivals has increased, we observe that the CHP strikingly changed its position of 'contemporary hospitality' (*çağdaş evsahipliği*) from the 2015 general election manifesto. The 2015 manifesto entailed several measures for improving access to education, healthcare, and housing of Syrian refugees, albeit keeping in mind an eventual return. Instead, in 2018, the CHP promised a 'voluntary, gradual and safe return process of Syrians under temporary protection'. Similarly, the İYİ Party, under the motto 'everyone is happy in his/her homeland', exclusively focused on issues of return and measures to ensure the temporariness of the refugee presence in Turkey, such as an immediate halt of protection statuses, cooperation with the Syrian state for repatriation and establishment of camps in Syria.

Moreover, in 2018, the presidential candidates of both parties addressed the return issue in their electoral campaigns. CHP candidate Muharrem İnce, in a rare televised interview, stated that if he were to be elected, he would close the door to Syrian refugees who returned to Syria for Eid: 'If you can go back for ten days, why do you come to Turkey? Is it a soup kitchen here? My citizens

are unemployed'.³ Similarly, during a rally in Mersin, İYİ Party candidate Meral Akşener proclaimed: 'Today 200,000 refugees live in Mersin. Our standard of living has declined. I promise you that we will be breaking the fast during Ramadan in 2019 in Syria'.⁴ Especially in public statements that take a more accusatory tone towards the AKP, the return of refugees—which in and of itself positions them outside 'the people'—is more clearly linked to concerns with welfare and the economy. This is very much in line with the 'transnational populist playbook' (Hogan and Haltinner 2015), according to which populist discourses construct migrants as economic threats, among others.

When it comes to the ruling AKP, it can be noted that the party devoted significantly more space to the migration theme in 2018 than in 2015.⁵ In line with the rest of its 2018 manifesto, the section on migration served the dual purpose of presenting AKP achievements, most notably the steps they have taken to improve the legal and socio-economic status of Syrians, and promises for the future. It contained a lengthy discussion about services provided to refugees, including cash transfers, without mentioning that the latter is funded by the EU or any reference to the EU-Turkey deal. While the 2018 manifesto vaguely mentioned measures for Syrians and

integration policies referred to as 'harmonization' (*uyum*) by the Turkish bureaucracy, it suggested more concrete measures for voluntary returns and deportations. It, for instance, announced the establishment of a national mechanism for voluntary return that literally translates as the 'National Voluntary Return Mechanism' (*'Milli Gönüllü Geri Dönüş Mekanizması'*), which at least discursively distinguishes it from International Organization for Migration-led 'assisted voluntary returns'. Moreover, the safe return of a considerable number of migrants currently under temporary protection at the end of their stay was presented as the fundamental aim.

The nationalist right-wing MHP, which participated in an alliance with the AKP in the June 2018 elections, had barely anything on migration in its manifesto. This was a drastic shift when compared to its 2015 manifesto, which strongly emphasized not only repatriation of asylum seekers but also offered a very criminalized image that associated migrants with societal problems such as theft, drug dealing, prostitution, etc. As a newcomer to the game, the İYİ Party was much more eager to capitalize on the societal cleavages and discontent that Turkish citizens are reportedly experiencing with the Syrian population, emphasizing the 'burden' refugees put on the Turkish economy, and promised to embrace non-arrival policies and not accept new refugees. The CHP, along with voluntary return, had an explicit focus on the integration and wellbeing of migrants, particularly on issues of exploitation and child labour. The party programme also promised to ensure transparency and accountability in the aid channelled to Syrian refugees. At the opposite end of the spectrum stands the HDP which, in both the 2015 and 2018 manifestos, consistently raised a pro-migrant voice. The HDP called for lifting the geographical limitation reservation applied to the Geneva Convention by Turkey, instituting equal citizenship, and the right to education in the mother tongue. The HDP manifesto is also the only one to point out the increasing level of hate speech and violent attacks against refugees in Turkey.

³ 'Muharrem İnce: Suriyelilere kapıyı kapatacağım' ('Muharrem İnce: I am going to close the door to Syrians'), *Haber 7*, 25.05.2018 <http://www.haber7.com/siyaset/haber/2633477-muharrem-ince-suriyelilere-kapiyi-kapatacagim> (accessed February 19, 2019).

⁴ 'Akşener, 2019'a kadar mültecileri göndereceğini söyledi' ('Akşener said she would return Syrians by 2019'). *Siyasi Haber*, 05.06.2018 <http://siyasihaber4.org/aksener-2019a-kadar-multecileri-gonderecegini-soyledi> (accessed February 19, 2019).

⁵ All party manifestos are available in Turkish.

For the AKP 2018 manifesto, see https://www.trthaber.com/pdf/Beyanname23Mays18_icSayfalar.pdf

For the MHP, see https://www.mhp.org.tr/usr_img/mhpweb/1kasimsecimleri/beyanname_1kasim2015.pdf

For the CHP, see <http://secim2018.chp.org.tr/files/CHP-SecimBildirgesi-2018-icerik.pdf>

For the İYİ Party, see https://iyiparti.org.tr/assets/pdf/secim_beyani.pdf

What is also important to note across different party manifestos is the choice of terms used in reference to the Syrian population in Turkey; this is also emblematic of the parties' definitions of 'the people'. The AKP, very much in line with its neo-Ottomanist aspirations and strategic use of Islamic populist tools, almost unequivocally used 'asylum seeker brothers' or 'Syrian brothers'. These designations clearly target domestic politics but seem to find more resonance among Syrians, who consider themselves to be culturally similar to Turkish citizens, than among Turkish citizens, who rarely consider Syrians culturally similar (Erdoğan 2017). The AKP manifesto, at times, used the alternative of 'Syrian guests', ironically more so in the section on foreign policy, which has 'refugees' in its subtitle. All other parties refrained from using the term 'refugee', instead preferring 'asylum seekers', 'Syrians under temporary protection', or 'our Syrian guests' in the case of the İYİ Party. HDP was the only party that talked about 'refugees' and openly challenged the 'guest' terminology.

AKP's hegemonic populist discourse, different from the Western-type populist discourse, does not have the effect of discrediting or criminalizing entire populations of migrants but instead selectively includes and excludes migrants based on existing societal cleavages. Despite the deliberately furthered 'guest' terminology and emphasis on return, the 2018 parliamentary elections were exceptional; a Syrian-origin Turkish businessman who entertains good relations with Saudi Arabian investors became a candidate through the AKP ranks in Bursa.⁶ The AKP choice of such a candidate is indicative of its self-assigned leadership role in the *ummah* and selective inclusion of refugees in 'the people'. Devoid of a genuine rights-based approach, humanitarianism remains dominant at the discursive level for the AKP, but this does not lend itself

to concrete measures for the integration of all newcomers. The AKP has consistently continued to employ the strategic tools of Islamic/civilizationist hegemonic populism, not only presenting the refugees as brothers (read as Sunni brothers) but also itself as a patriarchal figure and the only one capable of extending protection. The İYİ Party in 2018 and MHP in 2015, at both the party and leadership level, can be considered to have had recourse to the anti-immigrant sentiments observed in the 'transnational populist playbook', resorting to the widespread 'threat narratives' (Hogan and Halttiner 2015) found in the West, particularly that of 'economic burden'. Their definitions of 'the people' were more in national than civilizationist terms. While the CHP presidential candidate also briefly played the anti-immigrant card, both the party's manifestos and leader's statements repeatedly reflected concerns about integration, an emphasis on the possibility of voluntary return and a critique of the AKP-led civilizationist populist discourse. The only political party that maintained an inclusionary approach towards immigration in line with its pluralist understanding of 'the people' was the HDP. The plural use of 'we' in the party slogan for the June 2015 elections, 'We(s) are headed to the parliament!' ('Biz'ler meclise!'), was a clear counter-discourse to the 'us versus them' language of AKP's hegemonic populism.

Refugees in the general assembly agenda

Plurality of populist discourses

It should be noted that policies concerning refugees have been introduced by the government at the level of decrees and regulations. Therefore, in most cases, parliamentary debates do not revolve around immigration policies. Rather, general discussions on various issues on the agenda of the parliament are infused with concerns over refugees. The debates remain overwhelmingly concentrated on two key points: a) either critique or praise of AKP-led foreign policy, b) whether and how refugees would (not) be welcome depending on the politicians' take on the existing societal cleavages and kinship ties.

⁶ 'Suriyeli İş Adamı AK Parti'den Milletvekili Adayı Oldu' ('Syrian businessman is an MP candidate for AK Party'), 22.05.2018, <https://www.haberler.com/suriyeli-is-adami-ak-parti-den-milletvekili-adayi-10876208-haberi/> (accessed February 19, 2019).

This is followed by an emphasis on security and criminalization issues; there is a slight increase in emphasis on return, not only from opposition parties but also from the government. Discussions on the integration of Syrian refugees, on the other hand, are close to non-existent and did not significantly increase over time, despite empirical evidence that a considerable portion of Syrian refugees in Turkey, especially the youth, are likely to stay rather than return to Syria (Erdoğan 2017).

During parliamentary discussions, representatives of opposition parties usually depict Syrian refugees as security and social threats, a threat to public health due to the rise in certain contagious diseases, an economic burden and source of rising unemployment and, related to that, a source of crime with a high potential for committing criminal offenses. MPs from all opposition parties allude to Syrians' presence in the country as being 'out of control', 'costly', a 'demographic threat', or 'turning the country into a huge refugee camp'. 'You filled Turkey with 2.5 million Syrians; 600,000 of them live in Gaziantep. You turned upside down our country, our city, our balance, dear friends', says Akif Ekici, CHP MP from Gaziantep, a major refugee recipient city in the South-eastern part of Turkey, near the Syrian border.⁷ Even HDP MPs, particularly the ones with constituencies in the border regions, have, in time, echoed the economic and social threat arguments of other opposition parties.

Refugees are also often portrayed as a security threat and subjected to criminalizing discourses, which have taken the form of being blamed for criminal offences such as theft⁸ or drug dealing.⁹ Additionally, they are often associated with terrorist groups, mainly because the government's

open-door policy, coupled with a lack of proper registration, allowed the entry of an unidentifiable population where it is not possible to distinguish between 'real asylum seekers' and 'terrorists with blood on their hands'.¹⁰ Echoing debates on the radicalization of Muslim minority youth in Western Europe, a CHP MP from the eastern province of Tunceli raised concerns that 'Syrians have become a natural human resource within the reach of all terrorist groups in Turkey'.¹¹ Criminalizing statements that inculpate refugees for terrorist attacks have been more prevalent after triggering events in 2016, such as the Atatürk airport bombing in Istanbul and the failed bomb attack in Reyhanli, which had already been hit in May 2013 by a deadly ISIS attack. During discussions following President Erdoğan's announcement of the government's plan to grant citizenship to Syrians, a CHP MP draws attention to cases of homicide, blames *all* Syrians for several ISIS-related terrorist attacks, and reminds parliament that 'it is again those from Syria who caused the killing of our 44 citizens at Atatürk airport'.¹²

Despite such clear critiques towards the implementation of the AKP's open-door policy and its implications, members of opposition parties also commonly refer to Syrians as 'brothers' or 'fellow Muslims' and to hospitality as a quality of the Turkish nation. This rhetoric of selective humanitarianism, based on shared culture and religion, was initiated by the governing party (İçduygu et al. 2017); but the opposition has also embraced it in different ways, depending on their definitions of 'the people'. Along with religious identity, ongoing kinship ties in the region prevents people fleeing from Syria being seen as 'the ultimate other'. MHP MPs, in particular, underline

⁷ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 49, 01.03.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b04901h.htm>. All statements are translated from Turkish by the authors.

⁸ Kadir Gökmen Öğüt (CHP), TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 117, 16.07.2014. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem24/yil4/ham/b11701h.htm>

⁹ Mehmet Erdoğan (MHP), TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 50, 02.03.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b05001h.htm>

¹⁰ Hilmi Yarıyıcı (CHP), TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 111, 12.07.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b11101h.htm>

¹¹ Gürsel Erol (CHP), TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 50, 02.03.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b05001h.htm>

¹² Özkan Yalım, TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 111, 12.07.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b11101h.htm>

the organic unity between Turkmens and Turks, showing discomfort with the differential treatment received by Syrian Arabs at the border and not extended to Syrian Turkmens. For instance, MHP MP Sinan Oğan, in a heated exchange, asks provocatively: ‘Why do you close the border to Turkmens? What is their fault? Being Turkmen? If they were Arabs, you would have opened the border immediately [...] They would not be a burden; do not worry, the AKP might not take care of them, but the Turkish nation would’.¹³ Similarly, HDP MPs are concerned with the protection and rights of Syrian Kurds as part of ‘the people’, although they try to frame the issue as more multicultural, using inclusionary language. HDP MP Erol Dora, for instance, drew attention to the provision of education in the mother tongue that is provided to Sunni Arab children in camps but not to children from Kurdish, Assyrian, and Yezidi backgrounds.¹⁴

A more often employed Western-style anti-immigrant populist frame flirting with nativism is the ‘privileged’ treatment of Syrians vis-a-vis Turkish citizens. Here, critiques from opposition parties either emphasize the budget spent on the reception of Syrian refugees or the rights granted to them. They all imply that scarce resources should be devoted to the country’s ‘own citizens’ rather than spent on the refugees, as the former are also in precarious situations. CHP MP Kazım Arslan, for instance, states that the 10-billion-dollar budget spent on asylum seekers could have been invested in establishing a manufacturing site employing 5,000 people. ‘How much more are we going to spend on Syrians?’, he continues, ‘How much more money that could have been spent on factories will vanish?’¹⁵ During the intense debate on granting citizenship, oppo-

sition MPs criticized the allocation of TOKİ, Turkish government-supported housing, to Syrian refugees. While CHP MP Tur Yıldız Biçer asserts that such aid ‘hit a nerve’ with the poor and disadvantaged sections of society, MHP MP Baki Şimşek urges the government to prioritize the families and relatives of the martyrs rather than Syrians.¹⁶

Aside from such financial costs of the AKP’s open-door policy, the alleged preferential access of Syrians with Temporary Protection Status (TPS) to public services has also become a matter of contention. CHP MP Refik Eryılmaz, for instance, is very critical of the government policy allegedly providing Syrian students access to higher education with scholarships and without any prior requirements, whereas it is costly for Turkish citizens to prepare for the entrance exams. ‘Their [Syrian students’] accommodation, school fees and all costs are paid by the government. The common citizen would ask then’, he continues, ‘why do you discriminate? If young people coming from abroad are given such an opportunity, our own citizens should have it too’.¹⁷ In these latter examples, we see even more clearly the intertwinement of the politics of inequality and the politics of identity (Brubaker 2019) that lies at the very heart of the populist rhetoric. ‘The people’ are not only invoked as a nationally-bounded community but also as plebs who suffer under the unequal redistribution policies of the ruling party.

In addition to the use of populist rhetoric, opposition MPs also show a readiness to utilize plebiscitary tools such as referenda, a strategy that is by now part and parcel of the AKP’s populist reign, which dismantles horizontal checks in favour of direct communication with ‘the people’ (Aytac and Elci 2019; Castaldo 2018). CHP and MHP MPs openly call for a referendum soon after President Erdoğan unveils his plan to grant

¹³ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 128, 04.08.2014, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem24/yil4/ham/b12801h.htm>

¹⁴ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 83, 24.03.2015 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem24/yil4/ham/b11001h.htm>

¹⁵ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 55, 07.03.2016. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b05501h.htm>

¹⁶ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 111, 12.07.2016, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b11101h.htm>

¹⁷ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 80, 19.03.2015 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem24/yil5/ham/b08001h.htm>

citizenship to Syrians. After claiming that ‘Syrians are into crime, they are low-educated and the country does not need an immigrant labour force’, CHP MP Özkan Yalım proclaims: ‘Let’s ask our people and go to a referendum without any hesitation or fear so that the citizens of the Turkish Republic can choose the people to live with.’¹⁸

Limits to anti-immigrant populist discourses

As portrayed so far, unlike the AKP representation of Syrian refugees as part of the same *ummah*, opposition MPs’ critiques often reflect widely differing understandings of ‘the people’ as well as public (mis)perceptions of refugees that feed into concerns regarding public safety, security and financial costs. On the other hand, some MPs from across the political spectrum show awareness of the danger of further triggering anti-immigration sentiments among the population. Their concerns are well-founded, as the latest results of public opinion and media research cited above show the fragility of this living together arrangement. They perceive the debate over granting citizenship as potentially explosive and a source of already-reported societal clashes in different cities within Turkey. CHP MP Özgür Özel claims that emphasis on the rivalry over resources between citizens and Syrians invites hostility, ‘polarization’ and a ‘lynch culture’. While calling on everyone to be cautious about such statements, Özel also underlines that it is foremost the responsibility of the government to avoid such tensions.¹⁹ MHP MP Ruhi Ersoy stresses that, because of the way it was brought up by the president and the government, such a citizenship debate carries the risk of creating anti-Syrian attitudes among ‘the citizens who have thus far, with love and tolerance, tried to help Syrians, thinking that they will one day return to their homeland’.²⁰ Similarly, HDP MP

İdris Baluken criticizes the AKP move of making Syrians part of the existing political polarization, which could potentially increase the number of assaults. Unlike other opposition MPs, however, he references international law and states that the first move should be the granting of refugee status to prove that the government is not again instrumentalizing Syrians as they did against the EU.²¹

The opposition MPs’ critique of the government’s reception policy is overwhelmingly mixed with their discontent with AKP errors in foreign policy, especially in the early years of the Syrian conflict. Similarly, the use of Syrians as a bargaining chip against the EU is overtly criticized by opposition MPs from all parties. At the time when the EU-Turkey deal came into effect, CHP MP Faik Öztrak draws attention to the link between the deal and Turkey’s foreign policy mistakes when he says, ‘the then-prime minister said “I will conduct my prayer in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.” He could not pray in Damascus, but the yard of every mosque of Turkey’s 81 cities is full of Syrian refugees.’²² Similarly, HDP MP Garo Paylan criticizes AKP sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, an important display of its civilizationist approach, by saying ‘the government did the only thing they know [...], sending arms to only those from their own sect. But, what did we get in return? Only blood and tears, and 3 million migrants, and we used those 3 million migrants for blackmail’.²³ Several MPs from across the political spectrum discredit the deal as a ‘Faustian bargain’ (*at, koyun, Kayseri pazarlığı*)²⁴ and blame the government for acting like a ‘night watchman’ for refugees making sure they remain in Turkish territory in exchange for money. In that sense, the main critique of the opposition lies

²¹ Ibid.

²² TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 57, 09.03.2016 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b05701h.htm>

²³ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 51, 03.03.2016 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b05101h.htm>

²⁴ Literally translates as “horse, sheep, Kayseri bargain”.

¹⁸ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 111, 12.07.2016 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil1/ham/b11101h.htm>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

in foreign policy choices, and refugees are perceived mainly as the victims of external relations vis-a-vis the Syrian conflict and the West.

During the parliamentary debates on the approval of the EU-Turkey readmission deal, in order to rebut the critiques mentioned above, several AKP MPs intervene to say ‘May God keep anyone [in need of help] away from your door’ and display their understanding of the motivations of refugees by saying ‘no one would want to leave their home’.²⁵ While this pro-immigrant discourse complements the government’s open-door policy towards Syrians at the time, it is also used to avoid addressing the main critique, namely employing a selective pro-immigrant policy that is part and parcel of AKP’s civilizationist populist discourse. While the open-door policy has come to a halt, from the November 2015 election period onward, AKP MPs have repeatedly glorified the refugee policy and the hospitality of the Turkish nation, emphasizing the moral superiority of Turkey over the Western world. During the opening of the second half of the 25th legislative year in 2015, President Erdoğan underlines that ‘for the last four years, by adopting over 2 million Syrian and Iraqi brothers, Turkey has gone beyond doing her neighbourly duties and saved the honour of humanity’.²⁶ Such references to religious brotherhood and celebration of the government’s hospitality as an attribute of the Turkish nation also indicate a core component of its civilizationist populism, underscoring the contrast between the ‘generous us’ and the ‘immoral, xenophobic other’, especially with reference to Western European countries. A recent example of this is AKP MP Şahap Kavcıoğlu’s response to opposition MPs: ‘Instead of being proud of, you fling dirt at a country that earns the appreciation of the world by providing 4 million refugees with all kinds of needs, maintenance and lodging [in

Turkey], and sends the highest amount of social aid across the world’.²⁷

Despite this rhetoric of benevolence and moral superiority, debates on the current situation of Syrians in Turkey are centred on their temporariness and return options. In 2015, integration was brought up as a possible next step by a few CHP and HDP MPs; this idea has slowly faded away, ceding ground to a sound return policy that has also been gradually picked up by incumbent AKP MPs. Strikingly, the ruling AKP has centred its return discourse on the success of Turkish military operations in Syria that have allegedly created ‘safe zones’ where people may return.²⁸ AKP MP Çiğdem Karaaslan proudly announces: ‘with the Olive Branch Operation that we initiated on 20 January 2018, we cleansed Afrin of terrorists on the 103rd anniversary of the Çanakkale triumph. Our Syrian brothers who had to leave their homes and homelands have now begun to return in peace and security’.²⁹ The resolution allowing military interventions has been accepted and extended in the assembly with the support of the AKP, MHP, and CHP.³⁰ Once again, effectively blending the issue with existing societal cleavages [i.e., the long-lasting conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and nationalist pride as in the reference to the Independence War], the AKP has taken hold of the discursive upper hand with little opposition.

In other words, while opposition MPs often criticize the government’s use of the refugee card for political gain at home and abroad, the incumbent AKP rebuts any criticism through a

²⁵ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 108, 25.06.2014. <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem24/yil4/ham/b10801h.htm>

²⁶ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 1, 01.10.2015 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem25/yil2/ham/b00101h.htm>

²⁷ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 80, 03.04.2018 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil3/ham/b08001h.htm>

²⁸ “Over 300,000 Syrians returned home after Turkey’s operations, interior minister says” Daily Sabah, 10.02.2019 <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/02/18/over-300000-syrians-returned-home-after-turkeys-operations-interior-minister-says> (accessed February 19, 2019).

²⁹ TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Session 87, 18.04.2018 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanak/donem26/yil3/ham/b08701h.htm>

³⁰ Operation Euphrates Shield between 24 August 2016 and 27 March 2017, the ongoing Olive Branch Operation since January 2018.

civilizationist populist discourse that selectively extends the boundaries of 'the people'. This operates as a hegemonic populism that justifies AKP policies towards Syrians and foreign policy towards Syria through a discourse of brotherhood and references to a shared Ottoman legacy. It is a hegemonic populism maintained by claiming the moral superiority of Turkey over the West, which has long turned a blind eye to the human costs of the Syrian crisis and the pressing needs of forcibly displaced Syrians.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the debates on immigration in electoral politics in Turkey and assessed the extent to which discourses on immigration in the context of the Syrian conflict have followed a populist line, as has been the case in the Western world. Through the analysis of an original dataset of political statements between 2014 and 2018, our findings demonstrate that refugees have not been a big part of public policy and electoral debates, despite the increasing societal discontent, mediatisation, and politicization around the presence of refugees, particularly Syrians, in Turkey. The anti-immigration rhetoric of political actors only partially subscribes to the transnational populist playbook of right-wing parties in Western democracies. Refugee reception policies are often criticized by the opposition in relation to political parties' take on key foreign policy issues, namely the EU-Turkey migration diplomacy and AKP's Syria policy, within which security and criminalizing discourses are enmeshed. Opposition MPs only resorted to economic threat discourses with a nativist populist tone when Syrians were seen as rivals in competition over scarce resources. However, even for more contested issues, such as granting citizenship to Syrians, opposition MPs warned about the hostility and violence that might target refugees, and hence refrained from going too far. As we show in this paper, the key reason for the selective use of anti-immigration rhetoric is because the predominantly Sunni Muslim Syrian refugees constitute 'the ultimate

other' for neither the Turkish public nor political actors. Refugees were instead seen as victims of the conflict but mostly of the wrong policy choices of the government.

Our findings indicate that even though a populist anti-immigrant discourse could be observed in Turkey, it did not dominate the political opposition. The relative weakness of such discourse, however, did not necessarily translate into discussions on integration and social cohesion but fostered more discussions on return policies. More importantly, we detected a civilizationist populism competing with and countering the Western-style anti-immigrant discourse. The AKP MPs counter critiques of their refugee policies with populist discourse that has an Islamic tone and is premised on moral superiority vis-a-vis the anti-immigrant West. Political opposition to the ruling party's migration policies did little to challenge this moral superiority discourse; on the contrary, as many MHP and CHP MPs' statements indicate, they at times affirmed it.

With its uninterrupted single-party rule for almost 17 years now, AKP's civilizationist populism has established a hegemonic populist discourse that keeps the main opposition parties at bay and seems resilient to rights-based immigration discourse. This is a slippery slope for refugee rights, as it leaves the fate of the refugee population to the discretion of the ruling party and is highly contingent on the AKP's definition of 'the people' that, for the moment, selectively includes Syrian refugees. Yet, it has been able to define the parameters of political debates by marginalizing rights-based approaches to immigration, which have only been embraced by HDP cadres and a few CHP MPs. In this context, there is always the danger of rights violations, including of the minimum right to *non-refoulement*³¹ that Syrian refugees have been enjoying, if the

³¹ Non-refoulement is a fundamental international law principle that prohibits states from returning people seeking international protection to a country in which they would be in likely danger of facing persecution.

political cost of hosting refugees prevails in the eyes of the government.³²

Therefore, even though our findings are in line with the literature which shows that a dominant anti-immigrant discourse is independent of the actual number of migrants in a country, it also indicates that there might be other dynamics and forms of populism behind the absence of such rhetoric. Our discussion reveals that populist political discourse may even seemingly be more inclusive towards *certain* migrants depending on the definition of 'the people'. This does not mean, however, that the populism and imagery of 'the people' mobilized by the AKP is pluralist *per se*, since it builds on the existing denial of the religious and ethnic diversity of Turkey, privileging the dominant religious identity over others. Hence, the Turkish case calls for more research on political debates regarding immigration in non-Western contexts receiving a relatively high level of migrants and/or refugees and that are already highly diverse. Such an endeavour would potentially contribute to conceptualizing the diversity of populisms, particularly its exclusionary and inclusionary features, and plurality of 'the people' around the issue of immigration that builds on existing ethno-religious cleavages.

³² Recent crackdown on Syrians living in Istanbul proves the slippery ground of rights-based approaches to international protection in Turkey: On July, 22 2019, the Istanbul Governorate issued a statement and required Syrian nationals not registered in Istanbul returning to their province of registration saying that those have not been registered will be transferred to provinces determined by the Interior Ministry. The statement coupled with reports on recent detention and deportation practices of Turkey, fostered debates on the extent to which ongoing "voluntary returns to Syria" are indeed voluntary or forced. See for instance Turkey Forcibly Returning Syrians to Danger, Human Rights Watch, 26.07.2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/26/turkey-forcibly-returning-syrians-danger> (access date 01.10.2019).

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