

## SYRIAN REFUGEES AND TURKISH POLITICAL PARTIES: DOMESTIC INTERESTS VERSUS UNIVERSAL VALUES

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*Abstract:* The open-door policy of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) government during the early years of the Syrian conflict led to the inflow of more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees to the country in eight years. This great migration wave turned Turkey into the host of the biggest number of refugees in the world, surpassing the record of Pakistan. At the beginning of the migration wave, both political parties and the public had a welcoming attitude towards the migrants that had to flee from the Syrian civil war. However, in a few years, this attitude started to change rapidly and radically. This study aims to compare attitudes of the five biggest political parties represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly towards the incoming migrants: the AKP, the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* - the Republican People's Party), the MHP (*Milliyetçi Halk Partisi* - the Nationalist Action Party), the HDP (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi* - the People's Democratic Party) and the Good Party (*İyi Parti*). Why do some political parties have a pro-refugee attitude, like the JDP? How do they legitimise their policy? How did the JDP's migration policy evolve over time? Why are some of the political parties, like the İyi Party, perceiving the existence of refugees from a negative perspective? Why do they want to send refugees back? What kind of similarities and differences are there among political parties on the migration issue? Political parties' attitudes towards refugees represent their construction of self-identity and identity of others. Therefore, this study also aims to shed light on the debates of political parties on the Turkish identity as well.

*Keywords:* Turkey, Political Parties, Syria, Refugees, Migration, Critical Discourse Analysis.

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## INTRODUCTION

The territories of Anatolia have witnessed many migration waves throughout history. The breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of independent states led to the inflow and outflow of millions of people. Especially Christian minorities were migrating from the Ottoman Empire to the newly founded nation-states in the neighbouring regions, and Muslim minorities were coming to Anatolia. Migration flow continued after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923 has led to population movement of more than 1.5 million people. Both incoming and outgoing movements were experienced in the country. Hundreds of thousands of people continued to migrate to Turkey since the early 1920s as Turkish workers started moving to Western European countries to get better job opportunities from the 1960s onwards. Hence, Turkey has been both an origin country and a target country for different migration waves.

There were some important features of these migration movements: first of all, the number of incoming people was reasonable compared to Turkey's population. The biggest waves occurred in 1989 and 1991. In 1989 more than 350.000 Turks had to migrate from Bulgaria to Turkey, but half of them went back to Bulgaria after the regime change. In 1991 more than 400.000 Kurds from Northern Iraq came to Turkey to escape from the Saddam regime's aggressive policies. But, after a while, they also went back to their homeland.

This brief historical review shows that although the Republic of Turkey has witnessed several migration waves, the number of migrating people was reasonable. Turkish political life, economic structure and society could tolerate newly coming people.

However, this situation has changed with the migration of Syrians from 2011 onwards, after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. As the number of Syrian refugees has exceeded 3.6 million, Turkey has become the biggest refugee-hosting country in the world, surpassing the number of migrants in Pakistan. This has led to many challenges for Turkish politics, economics and society. At the beginning of the crisis in 2011, refugees were seen as 'guests' by many of the political actors since they were fleeing from the brutal war in Syria. However, as the number of Syrian refugees has considerably increased and the hopes for their return to the homeland decreased with time because of the continuation of the Syrian civil war, the refugee issue has become an important 'hot' topic in Turkey's political arena by different political parties.

This article aims to analyse the attitudes of Turkish political parties represented in the Turkish Parliament towards Syrian refugees via critical discourse analysis.<sup>2</sup> It will start with the theoretical framework. Then it will evaluate the approaches of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP), the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP), the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - MHP), the Good Party (İyi Party) and the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi - HDP). How do they perceive Syrian refugees? What kind of policies do they offer? Do they have consistent policies/policy proposals? Or did their approaches change over time? The article aims to contribute to the academic literature that deals with the perceptions of refugees in internal politics.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

According to the main assumptions of critical discourse analysis, discourse contributes to the construction of reality, therefore the language can be considered as more than just being a language. Discourse plays an important role, especially in the formulation of internal and external politics. When the decision-makers create discourse, they create not only their self-image but also the image of the other(s). It might also be the case that the others are marginalised through the discourse. They are being presented as the others. Sometimes these others are minorities, sometimes guest workers. In our contemporary world, these others are mostly migrants. In the construction of 'self' versus 'other', the 'self' is almost always presented as positive and the 'other' as negative.

Hence, the language contributes to the establishment of a hierarchy between elites and the others. Especially, in the construction of national identity in many countries, a superior self-image and an inferior image of others are used so that a homogeneous and consolidated internal identity can be formulated.

In recent years, critical discourse analysis is used extensively in studying national policies towards migration. The migration resulting from the Syrian

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<sup>2</sup> The study ignored small parties represented with a few MP's in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Hence, the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*), Turkish Workers' Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*), the Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*) and the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*) are not included in this article.

civil war led to securitization discourses and practices in many countries, including Turkey. When the politicians talked about migration, they also created reality. They tried to legitimise their security-overloaded discourse for the public. Migrants are presented as others for a long time (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006, pp. 5-15).

Jäger underlines the fact that there are different levels of discourse in politics, the media and academy in daily life as well as in education. Different actors can use discourse in these different sectors or arenas (2012, pp. 83-84). It is a fact that different discourse levels can affect each other. The discourse of politicians can have an impact on the media, or the languages used in media outlets can influence politics. Discourse in the media, in protest movements, in arts, social media and political life can have an interaction. Although there are different discourses at different levels, they are not independent of each other (Dijk, 2018, p. 231).

The critical discourse analysis sheds light on how the discourse of the ruling authority maintains and sometimes also intensifies the unfairness and economic inequality in society (Dijk, 1993, p. 249; Fairclough et al., 2004, p. 2; Wodak, 2013, XXXVII). In other words, this theoretical approach analyses how the rulers remain in power and how the discourse intensifies the status quo.

## TURKEY AND SYRIAN MIGRATION

The first Syrian migrants consisting of 252 people who had to flee the civil war in their homeland, entered Turkey from the Cilvegözü border gate on 29 April 2011. At that time, Turkey announced its open-door policy for the refugees. They were seen as guests who would stay in Turkey until the end of the war. The big wave of immigration to Turkey continued until 2015. Although Turkey ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, it put a geographical reserve stating that only those asylum seekers coming from Europe would be given 'refugees' status. Since Turkey has been the gateway between the East and the West and surrounded by many unstable states, it has felt the need to put a geographical reserve to prevent the huge flow of migration.

Assuming that the Syrian civil war would end in a short while and all the refugees would return to their homeland in the short-term, Turkey has given the status of temporary protection to the migrants. This status has given the migrants the right to benefit from the basic services and to stay in the camps as well as the non-refoulement. As time passed by and the Syrian

civil war continued with all its intensity and tragedy, Turkey felt the need to revise its legal system to improve the lives of refugees. In April 2013, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (*Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu*) was issued, and in October 2014 the Regulation on Temporary Protection (*Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği*) was accepted (Erdoğan, 2015, pp. 317-321; Ihlamur-Öner, 2014, p. 44). According to these legal adjustments, refugees are under temporary protection, which allows them to have some fundamental rights in the country.

The Regulation on Work Permit for Foreigners under Temporary Protection adopted on 15 January 2016 was another indication that the Turkish authorities grasped the fact that most Syrian refugees will not go back to their homeland in a short period. After recognising this fact, the Turkish government has given the refugees the right to work, subject to certain conditions. Although only about 61.000 work permits were issued between January 2016 and October 2018, at least 1 million Syrians are estimated to work illegally (Leghtas, 2019). It seems that this has been tolerated by the Turkish authorities.

However, as time went by, it was understood that most Syrians would not go back to their homeland in any foreseeable future. All the reliable opinion polls showed that Syrians did not have any intention to return as the situation in their homeland remained fragile. This has led to an increase in the reaction of the Turkish public towards Syrians. Sometimes this has led to hate speech on social media as well as some violent encounters between the Turkish people and Syrian refugees. A single incident committed by a Syrian refugee was sometimes overgeneralized and presented to the public as if most Syrians were criminals.

According to the opinion polls, the Turkish public does not have the same level of tolerance and hospitality as it was the case in the early years of migration wave. As it is the case in many of the Balkan societies, the Turkish people have been proud of their hospitality. Since Anatolia has been the centre of many migration movements throughout history, the Turkish nation has been accustomed to migrants who had to flee assimilation campaigns, wars and conflicts in the neighbouring countries and sought shelter in the country.

However, the Syrian migration movement has been different from the earlier migration waves because of several reasons. First of all, the number of refugees is significantly greater than the earlier migration waves. Second, refugees have different ethnic backgrounds and speak different languages.

Third, there is no prospect of their return. These characteristics of Syrian migration led to increasing intolerance on the part of the Turkish population.

According to a public opinion poll conducted by Kadir Has University, about 58% of people were not happy with the presence of Syrians in 2016, and the number increased to 60% in 2019. The reason for their discontent was as followed: 52% stated that they had a tendency to commit a crime, 46% claimed that they disturbed people, 43% thought that they contribute to an increase in unemployment, and 37% believe that they harm the national identity. No official statistics proves the number of crimes committed by refugees is higher than the locals, however, the perception is different (Aydin et al., 2019).

Opinion polls conducted by the prominent migration expert Prof. Murat Erdoğan also show that public perception has become more negative towards refugees over time. According to the opinion poll conducted by prof. Erdoğan in 2014, the rate of Turkish people stating that refugees have become a burden to them was 20%, and in 2017 this rate increased to 43% (Erdoğan, 2014; Erdoğan 2017).

This shift in the Turkish public opinion from hospitality to intolerance has an impact on Turkish domestic politics. Although all the political parties from the governing party to the opposition parties welcomed the incoming refugees in the early years, their attitudes have changed afterwards. This study examined pamphlets, election manifestos of the political parties as well as the discourses of party elites in order to determine their approach towards Syrian refugees and changes in their discourses.

### **THE AKP AND SYRIAN REFUGEES: A CYCLICAL DISCOURSE**

Throughout the Syrian crisis, the AKP elite did not follow a consistent foreign policy towards Syrian refugees. At the beginning phase of the conflict, refugees were welcomed as guests and brothers and sisters, however, in the following years, the AKP leaders stated that they could be sent either to European countries or back to their homeland that is conflict-ridden Syria.

When the first migrants came to Turkey from Syria, Turkey implemented an open-door policy with the belief that the Syrian regime would collapse in a short while as it had already happened in Libya and Egypt, and all the refugees would return to their home in a few months. However, the expectations were not fulfilled, and the Syrian civil war continues in its 9th year.

The AKP's legitimisation of Turkey's refugee policies has been related to its image of Turkey as a regional power and global actor. Being a central state, having a geographical and historical *sui generis* position, Turkey was presented by the AKP elite as the protector of all the oppressed Muslim people in the world.

The concept of 'responsibility' was now and then repeated in the AKP official discourse. In its pamphlet called 'AKP 2023 Political Vision' after underlining the importance of Turkey in the neighbouring regions and global system, it was stated that Syrians would not be sent back because of Turkey's 'humanitarian and moral responsibility' (2023 Siyasi Vizyon, 2020).

In addition, a discourse on civilisation was developed. Reminding of all the refugee movements dating from 1492, the Jewish exodus from Spain to the Ottoman territories till the migration waves from the neighbouring regions after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, it was stated that 'our civilisation is a civilisation of tolerance' (AK Parti İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı, 2018). This civilisationist discourse aims to convince people that migration was not new in Anatolia. Getting power from the Ottoman and Republican history, the AKP elite tried to show their policy was not something new, but just a continuation of history. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that for everybody who had fled from persecution, Turkey's geography had always been a shelter and safe roof (AK Parti İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı, 2018). Therefore, the AKP elite argued that they have just followed the footprints of the former Ottoman and Turkish elites.

It is also noteworthy that the AKP tried to address the emotions of its electorate by trying to create a fictional connection between personal emotions and state decisions. It was argued that refugees who had to flee from persecution and came to Turkey were like 'our own brothers'. Turkish President Erdoğan stated that 'Brother is brother under these difficult conditions. One has many friends during good times, but the important thing is to be a friend during bad times' (2023 Siyasi Vizyon, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Personal feelings and state interests are in fact different. In the IR literature, there are different levels of analysis: individual and state-level analyses are different from each other. However, from the very beginning of the refugee crisis, the AKP tried to appeal to the humanitarian feelings of people by ignoring the different levels of analysis. State decisions are in fact different from

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<sup>3</sup> The original quotation by the Turkish President is as follows: 'Kardeş bu zamanda kardeştir. iyi günde dost çok olur, önemli olan kötü günde dost olmaktır' (2023 Siyasi Vizyon, 2020).

individual decisions. Besides, the interests of states are different from individual interests. Therefore, state decisions cannot be justified by addressing the emotions of individuals.

An important characteristic of the AKP policy during the refugee crisis has been the imagination of new geopolitics. President Erdoğan stated that Turkey's official borders are different from the borders of the heart ('gönül sınırları'). By claiming that Turkey's borders of the heart include all the territories in which Turkey's brothers and sisters live, he tried to give a new meaning to state borders. He further claimed that those people who fled Syria and arrived in Turkey could be far away from their home and soil, but they are not far away from their homeland ('Vatan'), simply because of the fact they are in their homeland in Turkey.

This is a *new geopolitical imagination* of what a state territory consists of. This new understanding of borders of the state is closely related to the neo-Ottomanist foreign policy understanding of the AKP. Ahmet Davutoğlu, in his world-famous book entitled 'Strategic Depth', claims that Turkey has a historical and geographical depth. The combination of this historical and geographical depth creates strategic depth according to the understanding of Davutoğlu. The belief that all Muslims living in the ex-Ottoman territories are brothers and sisters, and Turkey has a special connection with them has been a component of the AKP foreign policy.

Besides these historical linkages created and recreated, the AKP has used religious ties as an instrument to justify its refugee policies, arguing that Syrian migration is similar to 'hicret' (migration) during Prophet Mohammad. Muslims in Mekka had to flee to Medina in 622 AC because of the oppressive policies of the people of Mekka. They were welcomed by the Muslims in Medina. In the history of Islam, the people in Medina were named 'ensar' (meaning those people in Medina who helped the incoming Muslim migrants), and migrants were called 'muhacir' (migrant). Turkish President has repeatedly stated that Syrian migrants should be perceived as those migrant Muslims (muhacir) in the early years of Islam fleeing oppression in Mekka, and the Turkish people should see themselves as hosts like the people in Medina welcoming migrants, in other words, ensar. Hence, not only historical but also religious elements, including the history of Islam, have been used in order to convince people to support refugees. This was also a way to convince the Turkish people to sacrifice even more for Syrian refugees (Karakaya Polat, 2018, p. 505). It is important to note that the AKP elite did not emphasize the legal right of these people to an asylum



in accordance with the 1951 Convention, but they tried to refer to historical and religious ties.

The refugee crisis has also played an important role in the AKP's construction of 'Westernism', meaning that the West, mainly Europe, was constructed as the other.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this process of presenting the West as the other already started with the Gezi Park protest movement in 2013, but it was further consolidated with the refugee flow (Demirtaş, 2018, pp. 308-323). In the official discourses of the AKP elite, Turkey was presented as a generous country having an open-door policy and providing every kind of help to those people in dire need. However, European countries were presented as those who close their borders to incoming refugees and do not provide significant assistance to those people. The otherisation of Europe was an opportunity for the AKP to show itself as the defender of the rights of refugees. It was also a way to try to escape from the increasing criticisms of Western countries with regard to the human rights problems in Turkey. Erdoğan argued that the policies of European countries towards refugees were inhuman and full of hypocrisy (AK Parti İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı, 2018). Therefore, for the AKP leading elite, the refugee crisis was an opportunity to present a positive image of Turkey as opposed to a negative image of Europe. It has been an ongoing process of self-glorification versus creating a negative image of the West since the Gezi Park Protest Movement in 2013.

In addition, the cyclical nature of the AKP discourse on migrants should be noted as well. There has been no consistent approach towards Syrian refugees. Depending on the state of affairs in domestic politics and public opinion, there were different opinions expressed by the AKP politicians. In 2018 Erdoğan stated that if it becomes necessary, Turkish citizenship could be given to Syrian refugees. Referring to the fact that many Syrian refugees work illegally, he stated that if they had citizenship, they could earn their own living without the support of the state. However, this discourse on granting citizenship was from time to time accompanied by an opposite discourse of deporting them to Europe. In recent years, the AKP politicians, especially President Erdoğan, quite often threatened Europe by opening the border gates and letting refugees go to Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of 'Westernism' can be seen as a counterpart of the notion of 'Orientalism' that was developed by Edward Said in his famous book (1979). In his book, Said analysed how the West constructed a positive image of itself as opposed to the negative image of the East.

The AKP government's threatening attitude towards Europe was realised under two conditions: first, in recent years, Turkey has carried out interventions in Syria with the aim of creating a safe zone and observation points. These military operations were criticised by European countries and the European Union. This has led to tension between Turkey and Europe. For example, such a dispute took place during the Turkish military operation called the 'Peace Spring' in 2019. This operation was criticised by European politicians. In reaction to that, Erdoğan stated that if Europe called this operation an invasion, Turkey could open the border gates and send 3.6 million people to Europe. Second, Turkey resorted to similar rhetoric when it was criticised because of human rights violations by the EU organs. For example, when the European Parliament took an advisory decision to suspend the accession negotiations with Turkey, Erdoğan stated that if they took a further step, Turkey could open the border gates.

This cyclical nature of the AKP's discourse on refugees is noteworthy. Starting with rhetoric focusing on history and religion, perceiving refugees as guests and brothers evolved over time. After a few years, the range of discourse has widened from granting citizenship to letting them to Europe. How can we explain this cyclical nature of discourse? From the perspective of critical discourse theory, it can be stated that the discourse contributed to the construction of identities. On the one hand, discourse created refugees as a group of people in dire need of the Turkish people and the AKP as the benevolent actor that does not perceive refugees as a burden, but guests and brothers. Second, there has been the identity reconstruction of Europe versus Turkey: Europe as the inhumane and hypocritical actor and Turkey as the protector of refugees.

One should also note that Turkey also encourages the voluntary return of refugees to Syria. Turkey justifies its military operations in Syria, with the aim of creating necessary conditions for the return of refugees. In its 2018 election pamphlet, the AKP stated that after the Euphrates Shield (*Fırat Kalkanı*) operation a safe area was established, and there were voluntary returns of refugees from Turkey (AK Parti, 2018).

As it has become clear that most Syrian refugees would remain in Turkey, there has been an increasing reaction of the Turkish people towards the Syrian asylum seekers. As stated before, public opinion polls refer to the increasing distance of the Turkish people towards refugees. There has been an increasing anti-refugee attitude in social media as well. This change in public opinion has repercussions on domestic politics. The AKP started to deviate from its initial discourse of guests, brothers and sisters. In recent

years, it oscillates between granting citizenship and encouraging them to leave Turkey either to return to their homeland or go to Europe.

### **OPPOSITION PARTIES AND SYRIAN REFUGEES: FROM CAUTIOUS HUMANITARIANISM TO CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

This section will try to analyse the attitudes of four major opposition parties towards refugees. The CHP, the MHP, the İyi Party and the HDP will be scrutinised as to how they approach the Syrian migrants, and whether their attitudes have changed with time or not.

First of all, it should be noted that all of these opposition parties, except the HDP, have a distant attitude towards refugees and underline their hope that Syrians would return to their homeland. However, there are differences among these opposition parties as well, which will be described below. The election manifestos and speeches of party leaders will be evaluated.

The CHP, as the main opposition party, is an important actor in domestic politics. The CHP's attitude towards refugees can be called as 'cautious humanitarianism'. The CHP's approach has four fundamental dimensions. First of all, it argues that Syrian refugees should enjoy their fundamental rights, and they should be hosted in Turkey under appropriate conditions. Second, as soon as the civil war in Syria is over, those refugees who want to return to their homeland should be given the opportunity to do so. Third, despite acknowledging the legal rights of refugees, the CHP also underlines the problems that the Turkish people encounter because of the refugee flow. Election manifestos claim that Syrians created unjust competition for the Turkish people. They also noted the financial cost of hosting the refugees. Fourth, the CHP leaders criticise the Syrian policy of the AKP, stating that the wrong foreign policy of the incumbent party has been responsible for the migration of the Syrian people. By calling it 'palace diplomacy' and 'adventurous policy', they argue that the AKP made many mistakes in its Syrian policy from the very beginning of the civil war and the AKP's wrong foreign policy resulted in the refugee crisis (AK Parti İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı, 2018).

The CHP argues that Turkey's Syrian policy needs a fundamental revision. In its election manifesto, it calls for the restoration of diplomatic relations with Syria. After the start of the Syrian civil war, the AKP broke off Turkey's official relations with the Syrian regime and started supporting some of the opposition groups, mainly the Free Syrian Army. However, this

has been a fundamental break with Turkey's traditional foreign policy that prefers to remain neutral in regional conflicts. Therefore, what the CHP has offered regarding Syria, in fact, represented a return to the traditional Turkish foreign policy whose basic pillars were laid down after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The CHP organised an international conference entitled 'International Syria Conference: Gate to Peace in Syria' on 28 September 2019. Academics, politicians, diplomats, journalists and NGO representatives from Turkey, regional and international organisations attended the conference. In the concluding declaration, it was stated that all the regional countries should concentrate on ending the war in Syria. With regard to Syrian refugees, it was stated that voluntary returns should be encouraged and for those who would continue to stay in Turkey, societal integration plans and strategies should be prepared.

In terms of critical discourse analysis, it can be stated that the CHP constructed the image of refugees as those people who need assistance as well as the ones who create unfair competition for the Turkish people. Therefore, the paradoxical perception of refugees as those people who must enjoy fundamental rights, but at the same time, who creates injustices for the Turkish people, was constructed. Therefore, the term of 'cautious humanitarianism' can be used for the CHP's approach towards Syrian migrants.

The İyi Party has a clear negative approach towards refugees. In its 2018 manifesto, it made clear that Syrian refugees should go back to their own countries. The manifesto stated that 'We will make sure that our Syrian guests would go back to their homeland. We will be fasting together as guests of our Syrian friends in Syria in Ramadan of 2019' (Birlik et al., 2018).

Similar to the CHP, the İyi Party also emphasised the importance of recognising the incumbent Syrian administration that would also contribute to the return of the refugees. It also mentioned that they supported the establishment of safe areas in Syria for the settlement of Syrian refugees.

Prof. Ümit Özdağ, an MP from the İyi Parti and former deputy head of the Party, has been quite vocal with regard to the refugee issue. He argues that Syrians should return to their country either voluntarily or involuntarily. Arguing that there has been an attempt to establish a Greater Kurdistan in the north of Syria with the help of the US, there is an attempt for 'strategic migration engineering'. He claims that Syrian migration is an imperialist trap for Turkey. After dividing Iraq and Syria into pieces, the external powers would impose the same plan on Turkey. If the refugees

remain in Turkey, they will be manipulated by the imperialist powers, and it will lead to a civil war.

In the discourse of the İyi Party officials, Syrian refugees are clearly the other of the Turkish identity. They are being portrayed as a monolithic bloc and opposite of Turkish people and unable to integrate into Turkish society.

The MHP, on the other hand, has not emphasised the refugee issue in its political rhetoric, although it is a nationalist party having a similar electorate base as the İyi Party. In its election manifestos, it has mentioned the problems that refugees create for the economic and social situation in Turkey. It also mentioned the need to take urgent measures to take them to their country. One important point about the MHP attitude was related to the Turkomans in Syria. The MHP leader Bahçeli stated his belief that Turkey should do more to help the Turkomans in that country. However, the refugee issue is not at the top of the agenda of the MHP. This is mainly because of the fact the MHP has become a *de facto* coalition partner of the AKP in recent years. The AKP and the MHP created an alliance called 'People's Alliance' (*Cumhur İttifakı*) in the process of regime change in Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential governmental system. Hence, it should be noted that not only the political stance of the party is important when it comes to its approach towards Syrian refugees, but also its position in internal politics and relationship with the AKP.

The HDP is another important opposition party representing the pro-Kurdish position. In recent years, it has also taken votes from the mainstream opposition electorate who are not satisfied with other opposition parties. The HDP is the only political party that clearly supports the lifting of the geographical reserve of Turkey on the 1951 Convention. In its election manifesto of June 2015, it states that all migrant workers should be seen as Turkey's own citizens. In the November 2015 manifesto, the HDP supported providing a decent life for all asylum seekers and refugees. All their accommodation, health, education, and working rights should be recognised. The HDP criticises the AKP's concept of 'aiding' refugees and it supports the concept of 'right'. Hence, what the Turkish state does for refugees should not be in the context of providing assistance to refugees, but in terms of their legal rights stemming from international treaties. However, the HDP approach is also related to its domestic concerns and interests. In its 2018 election manifesto, it claims for education in the mother tongue for refugee children. This can be interpreted not only as a way to help the education of these children but also to promote their own domestic concerns.

## CONCLUSION

This paper analysed policies of the main Turkish political parties towards Syrian refugees that have started migrating to Turkey in 2011 after the beginning of the Syrian civil war. How the AKP and opposition parties have perceived the refugees and what kind of policies they have proposed were analysed.

The main findings can be summarised as follows: first of all, in the case of the AKP, there has not been a consistent refugee policy. The initial 'guests', 'brothers and sisters', 'ensar-muhacir' approach that was very much loaded with historical references and religious motives evolved over time as it was understood that most of the refugees will not return to their homeland since the Syrian civil war was still going on. A cyclical discourse prevailed in the aftermath. President Erdoğan proposed to grant citizenship to refugees, however, the same Erdoğan also stated that after the Turkish military operations in Syria, refugees were expected to return. In addition, he threatened Europe by opening the border gates and letting refugees enter the EU countries. The discourse created a Turkey that provides assistance, but that does not focus on the rights of asylum seekers stemming from international treaties. This study also analysed the discourse of how Turkey presented itself as the defender of refugees but created 'Europe' as the other because of its reluctant refugee policies. Hence, the process of otherisation of Europe by the AKP, in other words, Westernism that already started with the Gezi Park protest movement in 2013, has entered a new phase with the refugee crisis.

The opposition parties, on the other hand, have formulated their refugee policies in accordance with their closeness or distance to the AKP. The CHP, as the main opposition party, has developed a policy of cautious humanitarianism by emphasising fundamental rights of refugees on the one hand but also focussing on their return to the homeland on the other hand. As different from the AKP and the CHP, the İyi Party has formulated a clear anti-refugee discourse. It was stated by the leading figures of the İyi Party that Syrians need to be sent back either voluntarily or involuntarily. The MHP, although a similar party in the ideological spectrum to the İyi Party, has not paid big attention to the issue, simply because it is a *de facto* coalition partner of the ruling party. However, it emphasised the rights of the Turkoman minority in Syria. The HDP is the only political party that underlined the legal rights of refugees stemming from international law. However, it also approached the issue from the viewpoint of their domestic concerns.

As the Syrian civil war continues, there is not any prospect of the return of Turkey's 3.6 million Syrian refugees in the short and medium-term. As the Turkish public has increasingly negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees, this issue can play a bigger role in Turkish domestic politics in the future. The transition from a country with 58.000 refugees in early 2011 to a country with 3.6 million refugees (having the world record) has not been easy for Turkey, and it will not be. During this difficult transition process, not only the Turkish identity is not being reproduced, but also refugees as the other of the Turkish people and refugees as a trump card in the negotiations with the EU are being reconstituted as well. The identity of refugees is being (re)formulated in this process. The fate of the Syrian civil war, the developments in the Turkish political context, and Turkey's relations with the EU will continue to play in this process of the difficult transition from a country created by immigrants to a country hosting a record number of refugees.

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