

An analysis of anti-Syrian's signature campaign in Türkiye: The cases from *Change.org*

Türkiye'de Suriyeli karşıtı imza kampanyasının analizi: Change.org örneği

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the individual actions taken against Syrian immigrant through online signature campaigns launched on the *Change.org* website and their role in inciting hate speech and related crimes in Türkiye. These campaigns represent one of the largest anti-immigrant petitions globally. To collect the data, a basic search was conducted on the *Change.org* website using the keyword 'Syrian(s),' which yielded 154 signature campaigns. Campaign texts were analyzed thematically through the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The main themes identified were the stigmatization of Syrian identity in virtual spaces, the reproduction of stereotypes within migrants, guest discourse, and cultural racism. The findings indicate that the campaigns frequently employ discriminatory stereotypical categories, portraying Syrians as an economic burden, potential/imaginary enemies, not willing to integrate, betrayers of their homeland, fleers from the war, and even terrorists. The expression of Syrian(s) is framed as a stigmatized and ethnicized group identity rather than a social identification, mainly reflecting on Syrian men as being immoral and fleeing from war. The results also show that this identity is equipped with a hegemonic masculinity construct over a gendered perception.

Keywords: Syrian identity, stigmatization, stereotypes, cultural racism, *Change.org*

Öz

Bu çalışma, *Change.org* internet sitesi üzerinden başlatılan çevrimiçi imza kampanyaları aracılığıyla Suriyeli göçmenlere yönelik bireysel eylemleri ve bunların Türkiye'de nefret söylemini ve buna bağlı nefreti teşvik etmekteki rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu imza metinleri dünya çapındaki en büyük göçmen karşıtı sanal imza kampanyalarını temsil ediyor. Çalışmada verileri toplamak için *Change.org* web sitesinde Suriyeli(ler) anahtar kelimesi kullanılarak basit bir web araması yapıldı. Bunun sonucunda 154 imza kampanyasına ulaşıldı. Kampanya metinleri, Eleştirel Söylem Analizinin Söylem Tarihsel Yaklaşımı kullanılarak tematik olarak analiz edildi. Belirlenen ana temalar, Suriyeli kimliğinin sanal

ortamda damgalanması, göçmenler arasında stereotiplerin yeniden üretilmesi, misafir söylemi ve kültürel ırkçılık olarak saptandı. Bulgular, kampanyalarda Suriyelilerin ekonomik bir yük, potansiyel/hayali düşmanlar, entegre olmaya istekli olmayanlar, vatanlarına ihanet edenler, savaştan kaçanlar ve hatta teröristler olarak tasvir edildiği ayrımcı basmakalıp kategorilerin sıklıkla kullanıldığını göstermektedir. Suriyeli(ler) ifadesi, sosyal bir kimlikten ziyade damgalanmış ve etnikleştirilmiş bir grup kimliği olarak çerçeveleniyor ve

esas olarak Suriyeli erkeklerin ahlaksız ve savaştan kaçan kişiler olduğu yansıtıyor. Etnik kategorizasyon sonucu Suriyeliler damgalanmış bir kimlik algısına tabi tutuluyor. Sonuçlar aynı zamanda bu kimliğin toplumsal cinsiyet algısı üzerinde hegemonik erkeklik kurgusuyla donatıldığını da göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Suriyeli kimliği, damgalama, stereotipler, kültürel ırkçılık, *Change.org*

Introduction

Türkiye's efforts to host a large group of refugees were widely praised as the country's open-door policy was seen as a humane and compassionate response. The government's open-door policy was legally deficient rather than lacking in humanitarian considerations (Bozdağ, 2019; Koca, 2016). This preference, one that solely encompasses emotional and national boundaries, stands in contrast to the definition style commonly employed by global organizations such as the United Nations and international legal norms. This form of relationship, which is based on emotional ties rather than legal, is gradually weakening. However, on the emotional basis of this relationship style, acting with the moral superiority motive against the West has a great contribution (Polat, 2018). The purpose of using the Islamic discourse is to gain superiority over the anti-immigrant attitude and moral stance of the West through the emphasis on Islamic brotherhood and to adsorb all social oppositions.

Nevertheless, the guest discourse found social acceptance and overshadowed most failures. However, as time passed, it became clear that the concept of the guest was no longer adequate, and a new approach was needed. Studies, such as Saraçoğlu and Belangar's (2019) research based on field findings in Izmir, have shown that economic, urban, and social cohesion problems have led to an increase in hostility towards Syrians and the emergence of Syrian xenophobia with anti-Syrian sentiment. Erdoğan (2020) has also noted the creation of exclusion mechanisms for Syrians, leading to a weakening of the guest perspective and decreased cultural closeness.

The fact that the increasing opposition towards Syrians takes place in daily racist practices shows that the discontent is becoming more and more effective (Deniz et al., 2016; Erdoğan, 2020). It is also seen that these anti-immigrant reactions, which are

becoming more and more massive, especially on the internet, have begun to organize and increase their dosage. It is an important indicator that anti-Syrian sentiment is increasingly gaining ground on *Twitter* (now *X*), as well as other social media platforms and media tools (Bozdağ, 2019; Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021; Karlıdağ & Bulut, 2020; Onay-Coker, D., 2019; Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018; Özdüzen et al., 2020). Dal and Tokdemir (2021) conducted a study that found that the national media's coverage of Syrians in Türkiye contributes to an increased perception of threat among citizens towards Syrians.

This study adopts a distinctive approach by directing its attention to the most prominent anti-immigrant petition campaigns in Türkiye, which surfaced as a response to the call for tangible measures addressing immigration-related concerns. It aims to reveal the dynamics of consciousness and anti-immigrant grouping that creates an imaginary community around the Turkish national identity, which the study assumes to constitute Signature Texts (ST). Social identity theory is used as the theoretical starting point to understand how opposing groups are formed, from creating STs to supporting them and making them public through campaigns. It is also important to understand the dynamics of anti-immigrant sentiment and the dimensions of grouping. The study delineates a distinction within the domain of comprehensive conceptualizations of social groups, specifically focusing on categories such as citizenship and immigration.

To understand how arguments against Syrians have evolved into racist practices, the study employs Goffman's (1963) stigma theory. This theory helps to identify how stereotypes and disinformative information towards immigrants become practical attitudes and shape public action. By analyzing the context in which Syrians are handled in STs and revealing the discourse strategies as a product of created power relations, the study aims to provide insight into how anti-immigrant sentiments are perpetuated in Turkish society.

The study has adopted the DHA of CDA to comprehend how the arguments against Syrians have evolved toward racist practices, and how these perspectives are turned into actions. This approach facilitates the analysis of the social circumstances that construct anti-immigrant discourse by delving into the historical context with thorough actions (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009).

This observation signifies a theoretical framework known as cultural racism theory, as elucidated by Balibar (1991). This theory is discernible within anti-immigrant texts

that disseminate an environment characterized by fear and apprehension within an imaginary national community. Remarkably, this hypothetical community is predominantly structured around cultural rather than traditional racial exclusionary mechanisms. The pervasiveness of these texts not only mirrors the onset of a fresh wave of nationalism, as noted by Billig (1995) but also contributes to the inception of a unique strain of racism deeply embedded within a cultural identity. This novel manifestation of racism seeks to uphold the envisioned uniformity of the national community, from Anderson's perspective (1991), by fostering cultural harmony and solidarity.

Social identity and Syrians

While society determines how people are categorized, individuals play a complementary role by conforming to these categories, making them seem ordinary and natural (Goffman, 1963). Immigrants are expected to conform to the social representations created by the host society. Social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and representations (Moscovici, 1988) that are distinct in society become the criteria that determine whether an immigrant will be viewed as an "invader" or "honest" (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). Although social representations are ultimately based on a socio-cognitive approach that compares groups and cultures, they also reveal that collective memory is activated and becomes an attitude toward individuals (Moscovici, 1988). This attitude aims to transform the foreign into something familiar.

Stigma and Syrians

Goffman's (1963, p. 2) theory of stigma distinguishes between "virtual social identities" and "actual social identities," with virtual identities being ascribed to potential meanings that may not necessarily reflect reality. Stigmatization arises when there is an inconsistency between these virtual and actual identities, which leads to the formation of stereotypes that can be negative or positive. However, stigmatization is primarily directed towards discrediting an individual or group and is sustained by the inconsistency between their fundamental qualities and stereotypes. Goffman (1963) explains that stigmatization arises from social differences, and symbols and metaphors are used as tools to create stigmas. Stigmatizing immigrant groups by using "tribal stigma" based on their in-group characteristics is an attempt by the host group to impose the average and standard in a hegemonic way (Tsuda, 1988; Valenta, 2009).

According to Deniz et al. (2016), the perception of Syrians in Türkiye has shifted from an “ethnic and culturally based discourse” to one that entirely excludes Syrian identity. Syrians are stigmatized as an indolent nation, traitor, and invader, and their men as immoral. These stigmas have become a part of Syrians’ daily lives, and they often point to weakened masculinity after forced migration. For instance, Syrian men in Egypt target those who migrated to Europe to cope with the stigma of being a refugee, and men who cannot hold on to jobs in the Dutch labor market face similar challenges (Huizinga & Hoven, 2020; Suerbaum, 2018). The connection between masculinity and military practice is also evident in Türkiye, where leaving the homeland without a fight is seen as a loss of masculinity from a hegemonic perspective (Sancar, 2016).

Syrians and new media

While social networks are considered a new public sphere (Castells, 2015), the discourse on migration is primarily produced by ordinary people, leading to a populist discourse (Datts, 2020). However, this new field is an unstable, platformed field that is heterogeneous, as expressed by De Blasio et al. (2020). Talking about a globally homogeneous new public sphere concerning immigration is challenging (Schlesinger 2020), and it remains unclear how the concept of publicness can promote equal and peer-to-peer communicative action within the context of a nation-state understanding (Habermas, 1991).

According to Papacharissi (2004), the Internet has enlarged the public sphere, but the lack of face-to-face communication in virtual environments has led to an increase in political discussions that are more contentious and unfettered. Furthermore, social networks cluster the anti-immigration and exclusionary power of increasing populist discourse heterogeneously (Datts, 2020; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Kreis, 2017) leading to a pathological side of an imaginary community that finds an area of flow in any form through the “roots of fear and hatred of the other” (Anderson 1991, p. 141).

The difference between the government’s guest discourse and open-door approach towards Syrians and its perspective in the civilian field (Deniz et al., 2016; Erdoğan, 2020) can be understood through the dynamics of informal nationalism (Eriksen, 2010). Eriksen differentiates between the dynamics of formal and informal nationalism, dealing with the nationalism spreading from the grassroots, through the conceptualization of informal nationalism.

The discriminatory and exclusionary discourse (Bozdağ, 2019; Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018) towards Syrians in new media environments can be seen as a voice rising from the bottom in the context of informal nationalism. Bozdağ (2019) noted that hate speech, especially in social media, has sparked a broad discussion on citizenship, exemplifying the ethnocentric perception of the citizenship institution towards Syrians. Similarly, Güney (2022) emphasizes that the people of Bolu are distant regarding citizenship. On the other hand, emphasizing “us” in the discourse toward Syrians to reinforce national identity shows the hegemonic and daily positioning of informal nationalism (Billig 1995; Özkırımlı 2015).

This study holds significance in its contribution to elucidating the pervasive nature of unofficial nationalism and anti-Syrian sentiment within the virtual realm. Particularly noteworthy is its revelation that hostility can proliferate across various virtual environments, extending beyond conventional social platforms. The study underscores the hierarchical targeting of hate towards Syrians, employed within an exclusionary framework. Consequently, discussions within the public domain concerning immigrants gain a broader and more intensified perspective. Furthermore, the study reinforces the notion that anti-immigrant sentiment disrupts the conception of a homogeneous public sphere.

Aim and methodology

Change.org is an online platform that enables the creation of recognizable online petitions, which allows for the interaction of real people and transparency through the identification of individuals who created and participated in STs (Change.org 2020; Halpin et al. 2018). *Change.org* aims to transform ordinary individuals into important figures through public participation and its ‘civil participation cycle.’ By doing so, it aims to press campaign launchers and signatories to respond to social demands on political decision-makers (Change.org, 2020 p. 7).

Halpin et al. (2018; p. 5) assert that online signature campaigns lead individuals to engage in a unique act of creation by emphasizing the act of creating in a specific format, termed “creation petition”. The principal idea for conducting the study via *Change.org* is to observe the evolution of anti-immigrant sentiment within the virtual sphere, concomitant with the aspiration for the texts posted on the platform to catalyze a public consensus. This phenomenon encompasses a form of collective demand wherein there is a discernible

inclination for the transformation of anti-immigrant sentiment into widespread tangible animosity. Qualitative methodology has been adopted, allowing this demand to be observed in a methodological, in-depth, and contextual manner.

The study assumes that signature campaigns created for Syrians on online platforms, in Türkiye, extensively deal with Syrians in a discriminatory and stigmatizing context, fueled by hatred (Bozdağ, 2019; Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021; Karlıdağ & Bulut, 2020). Additionally, STs are believed to be created with the instinct of being members of an imaginary national community (Anderson 1991) rather than individual acts, leading to the production of common and similar arguments and discursive strategies. The investigation also pertains to the inquiry of whether discernible anti-immigrant sentiment can be identified within the seminal texts when viewed from a macroscopic standpoint.

The research endeavors to address the following inquiries: Firstly, the contextual framing of discussions about Syrians within these petitions. Secondly, it aims to unveil the discourse patterns crafted for Syrians, including an examination of the ideological, social, and cultural underpinnings that inform these texts. Lastly, the study endeavors to elucidate the arguments that are employed in this discourse.

A qualitative approach was used to investigate this, and the keyword Syrian(s) was searched for on the site on December 20, 2021. The keyword was chosen due to its use in field studies on Syrians (Deniz et al., 2016; Erdoğan, 2020; Saraçoğlu & Belangar, 2019; Güney, 2022) to describe this immigrant group of locals/citizens. The search resulted in 154 signature campaign texts. Focusing on texts created by individuals rather than a one-dimensional representation made it an interactive field study.

The signature campaigns were saved in a Word file according to the search results due to the online environment and hypertextuality (Çomu & Halaiqa, 2014). During the registration process, the STs, creators, addressees, titles, date of creation, and the number of supporters were recorded and converted from metadata to data in the form of C(campaign)-1, C-2, C-3...C-154. After eliminating 20 petition texts due to problems unrelated to the topic, the data was divided into main and sub-categories through a specific segmentation process, and trial coding was created. The main categories consist of macro themes that contain the ideological, cultural, and social driving force that creates the texts.

Campaigns addressing anti-immigrant sentiment through similar themes are divided into certain main categories. The categories were hierarchically created, with main categories emphasizing the associative aspect of the texts, and sub-categories established to allow for a consistent, mutual, and original relationship between each other by enabling the approach of the data from the micro-domain within a specific context. The process of categorizing the STs and gathering them around certain main themes was carried out by two different experts through a blind process to reach a consensus on the categories. The discrepant texts were opened to discussion and reinterpreted. Thus, the main themes on which a clear consensus was reached were formed.

Discourse-historical approach

The critique presented in this study is derived from the social context in which critical theory is rooted (Reisigl & Wodak, 2008). The text suggests that a deep DHA is required to comprehensively analyze and understand the complex phenomenon of anti-immigrant discourse. This approach should prioritize the examination of the historical and social power relations that shape such discourse, rather than solely relying on semiotic and linguistic analysis (Leeuwen, 2008). By doing so, a more nuanced and critical understanding of the factors that contribute to the production and reproduction of anti-immigrant discourse can be obtained (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009).

Additionally, the role of language in focusing on hegemonic relations and how ideology positions and reproduces itself led to Critical Discourse of Analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk; 2018; Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2017). Understanding the themes, actors, arguments, linguistic strategies, social positions, and sources of legitimacy used in the discourse, and how power tries to justify, normalize, and use innocent ways by positioning itself is crucial (Van Dijk, 1987).

The concept of criticality is important in terms of taking a position and determining the positions of the agents of discourse (Hart, 2015). It is also important to reveal the manipulative side of the discourse. Criticism does not mean taking an idle position but acting based on social theory. To comprehend the underlying social conditions that give rise to anti-immigrant discourse and the structures that uphold and generate this opposition, it is essential to adopt a critical stance and an approach that justifies that stance. DHA benefits greatly from the insights of critical theory, which enables a deep exploration of the historical structures that underlie discourse.

Reisigl & Wodak (2008) define ideology in the context of DHA as a shared set of attitudes and patterns of meaning among members of a specific social group, typically taking the form of a biased and one-sided worldview. Discourse plays a central role in enacting this process, as it helps to expose power relations and make sense of transformations. The main goal of DHA is to uncover the hegemony of particular discourses by revealing the ideologies that support or challenge relations of domination. DHA posits that language is not a self-contained entity but rather a structure that is shaped by the power relations in which it is situated (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009; Reisigl and Wodak, 2008; Rheindorf & Wodak, 2017).

Representative textual samples were methodically integrated beneath each thematic heading. These samples were subject to systematic interpretation within the framework of the DHA to CDA. For instance, the findings section comprises an exposition of the discursive strategies, conceptual constructs, binary oppositions, and argumentative elements employed, accompanied by elucidations that elucidate the overarching discourse landscape. Furthermore, the study drew upon references from social theory and pertinent literature, as they contributed significantly to the systematic comprehension and explication of the findings. Consequently, as the discursive elements evolved into empirical findings, these findings were imbued with substantive significance and made amenable to extensive deliberation and analysis.

Findings

Categories were primarily structured by recurring themes commonly found in STs. The overarching theme of each text determined its placement within a specific categorical topic. Subcategories were established by analyzing the finer details of the discourses, strategies, and arguments employed, followed by their subdivision into subheadings within the primary categories. STs typically portray Syrians in a negative light, with content organized around four primary problems. These include STs on the axis of political problems (n=99), STs on the axis of urban-daily life problems (n=24), STs on the axis of economic problems (n=27), and STs on the axis of right-seeking, in which Syrians are the subject (n=4) or object (n= 9).

Syrians are frequently represented in texts on political and urban issues as fertile, 'breeding' (n=3), 'stinky,' 'scum' (n=4), 'seeking shelter' (n=2), 'creatures' (n=1), 'asylum seekers' (n=3), 'viruses' (n=2), 'refugees' (n=28), 'our siblings' (n=5), 'oppressed' (n=3), or

'simply Syrian' (n=13). In representations of Syrian men, sub-categories often include 'lazy nation' (n=2), 'treasonous,' 'escaped from war' (n=16), 'immoral' (n=10), 'terrorist' (n=3), 'living in pleasure,' 'comfortable' (n=3), and 'stray,' 'idle' (n=1). Texts on the axis of economic problems tend to depict Syrians as 'people who receive money from the state' (n=3), 'beggars' (n=6), 'work illegally' (n=7), or 'having better conditions than Turks' (n=2).

Moreover, those who create these texts often position themselves by emphasizing we-I versus them. In the texts, it is common to find references to "our country" (=31), "our soldiers" (n=13), "our state" (n=3), "our hero Mehmetçik! (s)" (n=3), "our house" (n=4), "our people" (n=1), "our children" (n=3), "our neighborhood" (n=1), "our youth" (n=2), "our future generations" (n=1), "our country Türkiye" (n=2), "our glorious Turkish army" (n=2), "our nation" (n=6), "our homeland" (n=5), "our lands" (n=1), "our martyr" (n=4), "we" (n=8), "we are Turkish" (n=6), "Turkish Nation" (n=5), "Turkish youth" (n=4), "my country" (n=13), "my people" (n=2), "a son of the country" (n=4), or "a citizen of Türkiye" (n=2). Overall, the texts establish a dichotomy between us and them, a classic anti-immigrant trope (Van Dijk, 2018).

STs on the axis of economic problems: "The government gives money"

The government's use of economic aid to Syrians has been widely discussed as a reflection of populist-hegemonic rhetoric, often aimed at countering the West (Polat, 2018). While this aid has been cited as a key argument by the government, it has also been used to fuel negative attitudes towards Syrians through stereotyping (STs). "They get money from the government, and the government helps them. Our tax contributions are allocated toward their funding. They sell illegal cigarettes; they are begging and make their children begging too" (C-27, 2019).

In these STs, Syrians are portrayed as receiving aid through illegal means such as the sale of cigarettes or by begging at traffic lights, while the Turkish people are depicted as being neglected by their state. Such comparisons reinforce the 'us vs them' dichotomy and emphasize the Syrian's outsidership through intergroup antagonism. The STs also make use of emotional appeals to national belonging, which reflect the dynamics of formal and informal nationalism (Eriksen, 2010).

Many STs employ manipulative and generalizing arguments, which aim to fill in the gaps of incomplete information and reinforce the idea that 'we' are worse off than

‘them.’ Begging is often presented as a central argument to stigmatize the Syrian group identity, as it is seen as an immoral behavior by the host society. Such arguments are used to refute the discourse of the Syrian group as guests, oppressed, and victims. Society generally accepts the government’s victim and guest discourses towards Syrians, but there are breaks due to the distance from certain national consciousness and narratives that an imaginary epistemic community presupposes (begging, harassing women, living in pleasure, etc.) (C-8, 2018).

The STs also create a hegemonic context by emphasizing the Andersonian concept of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991), which highlights the differences between Syrians and Turks. The STs claim that the Syrians are an economic problem and consume limited national resources (Burns & Gimpel, 2000). This economic representation and stereotype are expanded towards a racist discourse through campaigns that argue that Syrians are a burden on the Turkish economy.

STs on the axis of urban- daily life problems

The discourse in STs about the Syrian group is often generalized to group identity based on daily life and social events. However, the presentation of these discourses in a racist context frequently employs metaphors that strip Syrians of their humanitarian characteristics, seeking rationality for divisive purposes and general exclusion. For instance, the use of metaphors in STs is a distinguishing feature, as seen in this excerpt (C-18, 2017): “How many of our youth have been slaughtered by these creatures, but our media has only broadcast the boy a food company threw water in his face.”

The word ‘creature’ and ‘murdered’ are dehumanizing and portray Syrians in an inhuman, brutal light. Criticisms of the media suggest that this perspective is rooted in informal and everyday nationalist practices (Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995).

Moreover, STs often criticize the government and media over Syrians. There is a discourse that suggests that hosting is fulfilled, but the Syrian group is problematic, implying that while the host is doing their best, Syrians are not willing to be worthy of it. This inference is used to deconstruct the emphasis on hospitality, which is often reproachfully voiced, as evident in this example (C-124, 2016):

As citizens of the Republic of Türkiye, we are extremely hospitable. We welcome anyone who comes to our house. We are always with the oppressed. It is the sincere sincerity of the people of Türkiye to welcome everyone in our beautiful mosaic country. In these difficult times, while we are in unity and solidarity, it is observed that self-conscious Syrians are walking around with iPhones in their hands, rioting in the streets, and having fun while looking into the eyes of our citizens, causing uneasiness and distress in many parts of the country.

There are reactions when Syrians cannot meet the expectations of the hospitality codes created by the host society. This reaction is also fed by the government's guest and victim rhetoric (İnal & Nohl, 2018). Syrians are not seen as entitled subjects but as objects suitable for Turkish society's victimization and guest codes. The notion that a Syrian can become self-sufficient with an expensive phone in hand or that a war victim can have fun deconstructs stereotypes and turns Syrians' support in the social arena into exclusion in the opposite way. Furthermore, STs employ these arguments as a strategy of exclusion with racist reflexes.

Although the examples given are seen as individual references and experiences from daily life, they are generalized to a certain group and lead to the exclusion of that group. In all examples, the negative experience of a person who is believed to be a Syrian can be turned into a useful argument to denigrate Syrians. All examples are based on sensations or personal experiences. Naturally, these experiences lead to increased distance and hatred towards Syrians.

The contextual view of racism: "They should be prevented from giving birth"

In the STs, demands are made in a racist context towards Syrians, attempting to rationalize their problems by suggesting that they are morally, culturally, and ethnically inferior and incompatible. The Turkish identity is portrayed as dominant, and the Syrians are viewed as objects to be corrected by purifying them of their humanitarian characteristics, which plays a significant role in designing the social space (C-55, 2018). Racist context can often find a place in the daily life. It is common to see the level of hatred deepened and fear intensified with references from daily life. For example (C-23, 2019; C-67, 2018, C-89, 2019), analogies such as "Syrians swimming in the sea," "Syrians wandering around idle," "Syrians living for free," "idle Syrians smoking hookah" are presented with references from daily life.

One example of this is the belief that people of Syrian origin who came to Türkiye as refugees should be prevented from living under refugee conditions and giving birth under Turkish conditions to avoid putting strain on both the country and their families' conditions and budgets. This is accompanied by a call for sanctions on those who give birth, and a campaign has been started to prevent them from giving birth until their conditions are suitable for return.

Most STs transform individual performance into a public demand through the rights arising from a particular national membership. Expressions such as "our country" result in "I started" while fulfilling a duty required of national belonging. The fundamental paradox is that all interventions and plans against the Syrians are justified through the sense of duty arising from this national belonging.

Dehumanization or moral-cultural discrediting of the group is also a basic strategy (Hagendoom, 2010) used to rationalize reluctance and incompatibility. This represents one of the measures taken to create distance and establish boundaries between groups. The strategy involves dehumanizing the opposing group or presenting exclusionary forms of new types of racism as strategic moves (Balibar, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 2001).

In these STs, the idea that Syrians are incompatible without exception is presented, and they are portrayed as morally, culturally, and ethnically inferior to Turks with a nationalist reflex. The idea that decisions must be made on behalf of Syrians seems quite human. These rational thoughts legitimize all negativities by associating them with group identity. The presentation of a racist approach as a pragmatic demand is strategic rather than coincidental. The justification for speaking on behalf of the other is the principle of utility. These demands are also dialogic, preserving the homogeneity of the fictitious national community to avoid potential danger.

STs on the axis of political issues

According to some individuals, granting citizenship to three million Syrians at once would mean the occupation of Türkiye by this ethnic group, and it would transform Türkiye into an Arab country. This ethnocentric perspective seeks to marginalize Syrians, who are seen as imaginary others of Turkish national identity. While this approach reveals the ethnic emphasis in the dynamics of Turkish national identity, it also ensures that Syrians are perceived as a homogeneous ethnic group, who are part of the war.

The fear that the homogeneous identity imaginary, which is based on the potential danger to the future, will be disrupted is a heterophobic approach (racism) according to Balibar (1991). This approach rationalizes reluctance to discredit the other. In some instances, individuals argue that Syrians are potential betrayers and pose a danger to Turkish identity. This argument is based on historical narratives and the rhetoric of 'the homeland is going away.' The emphasis on nationalism and the fear of the Turkish identity being dissolved within Muslim Arabs is a legacy of Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals. Arabs and Turks cannot be friends, they have always stabbed us in the back and betrayed us (C-11, 2017; C-72, 2016)

The strategy of certainty and credibility in these discussions is built on historical narratives that position the Syrian identity at the point that is just the opposite of the warrior and holy Turkish identity. Therefore, the Syrian identity is often perceived as a potential danger/hostile social identity based on certain stereotypes and representations and marginalized over historical references. This approach is ironic, given that it only considers the Syrian identity of those who immigrated to Türkiye after 2011, which is an inductive, ethnicized, virtual social identity feature based on certain stereotypes and representations.

The ideal immigrant as an argument: "People of our blood"

The ethnocentric perspective is most prominently reflected in STs through the use of kinship to describe the distance towards refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. To deepen the differentiation between Syrian and Turkish identity, examples of kinship are often used to illustrate the ideal immigration model:

In 1989, when our compatriots from Bulgaria fled persecution and came to their homeland, they kissed the land, worked tirelessly for this country, and did not engage in extortion, rape, or begging. They did not seek refuge from the cruel Bulgarian President during Eid because they were Turkish (C-70, 2017).

The emphasis on kinship is used to present the ideal migrant prototype as a justification for the reluctance toward Syrians. Although Turkishness is positively emphasized in STs, cognates and other Turkish communities such as Ahıska Turks are not recognized as refugees or immigrants. Therefore, being a migrant or a refugee is viewed as a subcategory of citizenship. It is essential to note that Turkishness is portrayed through an emotional

bond with the homeland. The rhetoric of kinship over other immigrant groups implies that Syrians are culturally incompatible. Consequently, homogeneity can only exist through emphasizing citizenship based on ethnic Turkish identity.

Being a refugee as an informal concept of hegemonic status: Syrian(s), refugees

The emphasis on refugees created in the STs regarding Syrians is perceived in a lower hegemonic relationship than the legal, moral, and cultural dynamics on which citizenship is defined.

I am treated like a refugee in my own country. It is to employ Syrians simply by saying that they work for cheap, to establish an order of exploitation, and to condemn the youth of this country to hunger, poverty, and illegality! (C-98, 2019).

In a way, Syrians are seen as having refugee status, which is seen in a lower category than citizenship and built with stereotypes (cheap working, poor, illegally working, non-Turkish, etc.). While the concept of refugee is employed in the context of the specified STs (C-1-9-12-14-18-24-28-33-37-41-50-55-70-98-113-126-149) for the designation of a specific group, certain other STs (C-70-74-128-129) opt to underscore the affiliation of Turkish groups by utilizing the concept of “kinship” instead of “refugee.”

The term refugee is perceived more as a lifestyle descriptor rather than strictly adhering to its legal definition, as indicated by reference (C-140, 2016). The practical application of this perspective is evident in phrases such as “granting citizenship to Syrian refugees in our country.” This conveys that the term extends beyond a mere legal categorization. Such utilization is not confined solely to Syrians, as emphasized in reference (C-113, 2016), where a distinct status understanding is articulated: “We do not want Iraqi refugees in our country.”

As it can be understood from the expression “Iraqis have no respect for the Turkish flag or Turkish citizens (...)”, for groups that are not members of the imaginary community, being a refugee is seen as a beneficial secondary status (C-113, 2016). The status of refugees is important in terms of having an understanding fed by informal nationalism dynamics. In a sort of classification, Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans were pushed into an undesirable position as refugees. A ground for implicit exclusion is created with a holistic perspective by positioning it under this status.

Moreover, the perception of 'refugee' extends to a hierarchical category under citizenship, one that lacks a well-defined citizenship status and is associated with individuals demonstrating a sense of well-being:

As we see refugees in our country who are in a better situation than us, the question of whether we are refugees or are they refugees comes to our minds, as if their comfortable living is not enough, they also disturb us. (C-18, 2017).

From a refugee point of view, it also includes the bad economic conditions and victimization codes. The economic indicators in the refugee emphasis are also compatible with the victim and needy codes of the Syrians. However, refugees also have a representation of Syrians with the stereotypes it contains. Its relation to reality shows a fictional virtual identity (Goffman, 1963). While the uneasiness arises from the fact that the Syrians have the wealthy people they have, the discourse is developed over the dual dialogic context between citizens and refugees in STs.

Hegemonic masculinity: "Our great Turkish soldier versus Syrian men who fleeing from the war"

Hegemonic masculinity is a useful concept for analyzing the construction of different masculinities and the power relations between them (Nagel, 2015). The representation of Syrians often reinforces masculine stereotypes, leading to stigma. For instance, terms like "traitor" (C-1-14-65-76), "it-broken" (C-41), and "fleeing from the war" (C-10-21-33-54-84) perpetuate a gendered discourse. The depiction of an indolent nation characterizes men as weak and powerless, reinforcing their inferior position within a hegemonic framework:

Homeland means honor. Let the Syrian men go and claim their honor. For this reason, we want the Syrian citizens spread across Türkiye to gather, the women and children to stay in the camps, and the deportation of the men to protect their honor (C-115, 2016)

This representation of masculinity is linked to national identity and is a result of the sexist structure of the historical dynamics that shape national consciousness (Nagel 2015; Sancar 2016). The demand to ban women from giving birth (C-55, 2016) is an example of reducing women to iconic roles that give birth to the nation's masculine

figures. The instinct to protect the homeland reinforces the importance of the warrior male figure, and masculinity becomes a key feature of Turkish national identity (Sancar, 2016). The comparison of masculinities becomes a strategic reference source in the texts, establishing a hegemonic relationship: "Friends since our Mehmetçiks were fighting shoulder to shoulder on the mountain and the slope since the Syrian men came to our country in pursuit of women, let them join the war with our Mehmetçiks" (C-52, 2018).

Military service is the most critical indicator of completing masculinity and transforming into a strong man figure in terms of national dynamics, leading to stigma against Syrian men (C-110, 2018). Masculinity is a social construct built on certain stereotypes, and the glorification of masculinities through comparison is a key element of national consciousness.

The metaphor of "Mehmetçik," often used in these texts, emphasizes the emotional and robust side of the 'us' of the Turkish soldier, positioning representations of Syrian men as morally, culturally, and ideologically inferior to Turkish men. This creates a stigmatizing ground. The age range of 18-45 emphasizes the importance of military service and reveals the distance of masculinity from biological discourse. The binary opposition discourse of our soldiers and Syrians fleeing war, which makes it so easy to stigmatize masculinity, is one of the ways that stigmatization turns into public hatred.

Discussion and conclusion

In the texts, the social positioning of 'we' and 'them' has been discussed about the Syrian identity and its relationship with the Turkish national identity, which has been hegemonically emphasized in an exclusionary and stigmatization manner. This stems from the perception of citizenship on an ethnic basis (Yeğen, 2004). Akçam (2008) argues that the historical construction of ethnicity in Türkiye is an integral part of the mechanisms that shape national identity and ideology, which in turn determine citizenship. Consequently, while immigrant identity is often relegated to a secondary status, Turkishness, which is defined on an ethnic basis, is deemed a prerequisite for citizenship. As such, the idealization of immigration is often framed in terms of kinship.

The recurrent deployment of distinctions between 'us' and 'them' within the texts underscores the prominence of a uniform perception of identity, with a conspicuous emphasis on portraying Syrians as the 'other'. Van Dijk (2018) already mentions the

intense use of us and them distinction in discourses towards immigrants. As noted by Güney (2022), in citizenship debates regarding Syrians, local populations have constructed a border based on ethnic perceptions of Turkishness.

The recurrent argumentative utilization of the concepts of “people of our blood” and “Turkishness” substantiates this assertion. Hence, a more precise interpretation of the texts, a focal point of this study, entails considering them as outcomes of collective endeavors imbued with the impetus to belong to an imagined nationalist community, rather than as manifestations of individual performance or agency.

The texts examined in this study reveal a pattern of demands that reflect group dynamics shaped within the context of Turkish supra-identity, which is constructed on an ethnic basis with citizenship as its reference point. An opposition to perceived threats to the homogeneity of this identity characterizes the majority of these demands. The perceived threat to the imagined homogeneity of a given community may prompt individuals to present irrational arguments in defense of anti-immigration positions. This fear contributes to the normalization of anti-Syrian sentiment within every day-nationalist attitudes. Such ordinary nationalist attitudes may persist until demands for the removal of immigrants from everyday life are made.

The STs rely on strategies such as ethnicization, criminalization, exaggeration, generalization, and stereotyping to construct the Syrian virtual social identity and perpetuate the stigma of Syrian identity. These strategies are not individual acts but rather reflexes of the (imaginary) national consciousness and are constructed as a public discourse. Or, they may have been directed towards stimulating a public demand.

The concept of Syrians is a practical example of an exclusionary style of discourse, referring to power relations based on an intrusive form of ethnic categorization towards a particular group. The power to use the concept of ‘Syrians’ as a distinct label for immigrants exemplifies the exclusionary nature of social power dynamics against immigrants. This is further supported by the way group belonging is constructed around national identity in the texts, which portrays immigrants as a perceived threat to the national group.

However, the representations of Syrian men as immoral, war-fleeing, treasonous, and terrorist in the STs contribute to stereotypes and lead to the holistic stigmatization of Syrian identity. These representations are often encoded as the opposite of the

representations of Turkish men who are depicted as hardworking, patriotic, and protectors of the homeland from a national perspective. Such hegemonic masculinity of Syrian men perpetuates the negative stereotypes against them.

For instance, the fact that only Syrian men are considered immigrants and are expected to take part in the war is an example of a militaristic and male-centric perspective. The term Mehmetçik serves to rationalize social boundaries by invoking a militaristic perspective that embraces the concepts of homeland and border, rather than just serving as a military label. This perspective justifies excluding those who are fleeing the war and reinforces power dynamics between other immigrant men and Turkish men.

The discourses in the STs are influenced by informal nationalist dynamics, different from the state's perspective. This can be seen in the state's rhetoric of Syrians as guests, victims, and oppressed, which contradicts the STs' portrayal of Syrians as a party to the war. The Syrians are also stigmatized as being culturally, morally, and economically inferior to Turkish citizens, as evidenced by the emphasis on their poverty status and their dependence on state aid. This stereotype extends to other non-Turkish refugee communities who are not seen as refugees, even though they share the same kinship as Turkish citizens.

While the STs mostly refer to kinship Iraqi, Afghan, or Syrians are excluded based on Arab identity. Moreover, the Arab identity is portrayed as stigmatized within an ethnicized context that is hostile towards Turkish national identity, using historical references and imagination.

The claim that Arabs betrayed Turks during times of war often cited in prominent texts, is presented as a historical reference. To address this issue, the DHA was employed to deconstruct the arguments that were deemed suitable for the stigmatizing discourse style, by removing them from their historical context. The STs also demonstrate a heterophobic approach, which posits that Syrians are culturally, ethnically, and morally incompatible with the Turkish national community. This approach is based on myths, disinformation, nationalist historical arguments, and stereotypes, rather than a rational basis.

Economic arguments are constructed based on myths, exaggerated references, disinformation, and stereotypes, which perpetuate a racist context and double standards.

In conclusion, the STs perpetuate negative stereotypes against Syrians through various strategies and approaches, which are influenced by informal nationalist dynamics and myths, rather than a rational basis.

According to Daniş and Parla (2009), immigration holds hierarchical meanings in Türkiye that differ based on geography and Turkish identity. They further argue that the state reflects this hierarchy of acceptance in its policy-making practices. The predominant emotion evident in prospective scenarios for immigrants is fear, alongside the cultivation of a tumultuous atmosphere.

It is evident from this that the government's emphasis on fostering social acceptance toward immigrants has been significantly undermined. This fear serves to facilitate the normalization of anti-Syrian sentiment within the realm of commonplace nationalist attitudes, as delineated by Billig (1995). Furthermore, the sense of belonging to a nationalist community, by Anderson's framework (1991), augments the rationale behind anti-immigrant arguments. In essence, concerning immigrants, we are confronted with a construct of truths shaped by the prevailing majority.

Balibar (1991) accentuates the disparities in immigration experiences by elucidating distinctions between the Portuguese and Arab communities in France. A concept of an idealized immigration model is likewise observable in the Turkish context, with a notable differentiation between individuals of Arab heritage and those of Turkish lineage (Akçam, 2008; Akçura, 2015).

Regarding prospects, it is evident that the rising prevalence of anti-immigrant practices in Türkiye will progressively foster an atmosphere of animosity that will manifest prominently within the public domain. The divergence in approaches to immigration policy among various forms of nationalism is becoming more pronounced and distinct, as reflected in the evolving discourse styles.

It is emphasized that the anti-immigrant discourse in Austria (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2017; Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009) as well as Sweden (Krzyzanowski, 2018) and Poland (Krzyzanowski, 2017; Krzyzanowski & Ledin, 2017) are on the rise in the dominant political discourse in the public sphere (Masalha & Baş, 2023). Similarly, this study has tried to draw attention to how the anti-immigrant populist discourse, which is rising in the virtual environment in Türkiye, is increasingly organized. Similar to other countries,

Türkiye has experienced a wave of populist and informal nationalist sentiment in the context of labor (Yılmaz, et al., 2023). This nationalist reflex has led to a growing opposition towards immigrants.

In conclusion, the STs perpetuate negative stereotypes against Syrians through various strategies and approaches, which are influenced by informal nationalist dynamics and myths, rather than a rational basis. It is emphasized that the anti-immigrant discourse in Austria (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2017; Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009), as well as Sweden's anti-immigrant discourse (Krzyzanowski, 2018), are on the rise in the dominant political discourse in the public sphere. Similarly, in Türkiye, it is possible to talk about an anti-immigrant sentiment that is getting stronger and rising in the public sphere. The public power this will create may gradually strengthen the desire for the arguments requested in the texts to turn into political debates.

The study reveals that irrespective of the nationalist perspective, all forms of discourse contribute to the reinforcement of anti-immigrant sentiment. Texts predominantly characterized by anti-Syrian sentiment emerge as the primary drivers of hate speech, delineating citizenship boundaries with an emphatic *us*, while subjecting the Syrian group to exclusionary discourse through ethnic categorization with a contrasting emphasis on them as devoid of positive attributes. The research exposes the principal discourse strategies and arguments underpinning this hatred within the examined texts.

It is noteworthy that counter-discourse often portrays itself as the truth when addressing matters related to Syrians. However, the study contends that anti-Syrian hate speech, camouflaged as an absolute truth, should not be permitted to dominate public spaces, particularly in virtual environments. To address this, a legal and rights-oriented definition should supersede discourse boundaries like 'guest' or 'brother.' For instance, numerous texts depict Syrians as a potential threat. The ambiguity stemming from these unclear definitions facilitates the propagation of fear and animosity towards foreigners as the primary rationale for hatred.

To counteract this trend towards stigmatization, emphasis should be placed on promoting tolerance and understanding. Unofficial anti-immigrant nationalism's dynamics must be scrutinized more closely, and ambiguous forms of definition, enabling its ascendancy in public discourse, should be discarded. Instead of perpetuating cultural

distance, efforts should be directed towards generating more pluralistic political and discursive approaches.

Endnotes

- 1 This unofficial designation is conferred upon Turkish soldier by the Turkish population, and it serves as a symbol of their courage, resilience, and protective attributes.

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