

*İnceleme Makalesi*

## Thinking Migration and Nationhood in the Realm of Sports: Migrant Track and Field Athletes in Turkey During the 2016 Event Cycle<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article aims to discuss the link between sports and migration in the context of how migrant athletes are perceived in terms of bringing about a reimagining of ethnicity and nationhood. Sporting migration is increasingly discussed within the framework of the debates concerning the economic premises of the understanding of post-Cold War migration and human mobilities in general. These include both the discussions revolving around the so-called “pull factors” of migration and the deriving of gains obtained through sporting success. In this article, the author aims to contribute to the opening of a discussion on the economic, as well as political and cultural consequences of sporting migration. In order to do that, a focus on the public debates, particularly in the related media output, revolving around the migrant athletes who competed for Turkey at the track and field events of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio and the 2016 European Athletics Championships. Through this, the author also discusses how the nationhood in Turkey is brought into question within the context of migrant athletes competing and obtaining honours for Turkey.

**Keywords:** Sports Migration, National Identity, Citizenship, Turkey.

<sup>1</sup> Makale Geliş Tarihi: 28.03.2023 Makale Kabul Tarihi: 15.04.2023

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*Review Article*

## **Spor Dünyasında Göç ve Ulusal Kimliği Düşünmek: 2016 Spor Takviminde Türkiye'deki Göçmen Atletler**

### **Öz**

Bu makale, spor ve göç arasındaki bağlantıyı, göçmen sporcuların etnisite ve ulusal kimliğin yeniden tahayyülünü getirme açısından nasıl algılandığı bağlamında tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Spor göçü, Soğuk Savaş sonrası göç ve daha genel anlamda insan hareketliliğine ilişkin anlayışın ekonomik sebeplerine ilişkin tartışmalar çerçevesinde giderek daha fazla konuşulmaktadır. Bunlar, hem göçün “çekici faktörleri” etrafında dönen tartışmaları hem de sportif başarıdan elde edilen kazanımlara ilişkin tartışmaları içerir. Bu yazıda, sportif göçün ekonomik olduğu kadar siyasi ve kültürel sonuçları üzerine bir tartışmanın açılmasına katkıda bulunmayı hedeflenmektedir. Bunu yapmak için, 2016 Rio Yaz Olimpiyatları ve 2016 Avrupa Atletizm Şampiyonası atletizm yarışmalarında Türkiye için yarışan göçmen atletler etrafında, özellikle medyada dönen kamuoyu tartışmalarına odaklanmaktadır. Bu vesileyle, Türkiye için yarışan ve dereceye giren göçmen sporcular bağlamında Türkiye’de ulusal kimliğin nasıl sorgulandığını da tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Spor Göçü, Ulusal Kimlik, Vatandaşlık, Türkiye.

## Introduction

At least at the discursive level, the public debate around migration always came to have a very intrinsic relation with the question of ethnicity. This attracted scholarly attention as well, leading to different views and perspectives on understanding the role of ethnic identities in the study of migration. A number of dimensions are at play in these discussions including economic and cultural ones while the former often surface with expressions of a perceived threat to the employment of the native workers, the latter goes beyond to bear overtones of eroding social cohesion and mounting an inside threat towards the nation itself (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 79). While studying this phenomenon, it is of crucial importance to hold in mind the areas where these aspects converge and influence one another.

The public debate on migration often trickles down to other areas where a variety of aspects are brought up, discussed, and criticized with reference to the ethnic identity of the migrant groups and host communities. Particularly at a time when the political discourse is heavily influenced and shaped by right-wing parties whose agenda dominantly revolve around the issue of migration, the influence of the issue can be seen in multiple areas. While it also coincides with one of the biggest (involuntary) human movements in post-Second World War history with the refugee flight from the Syrian Civil War and the conflicts in regions like Central Africa and Southern Asia, the using of this event as a way of signaling threat to nations and nation-states is a common characteristic. Immigration and the introduction of novel identities at a larger scale, in that sense, are used by different political movements to stoke assertions of national identity and exclusionary aspirations towards the migrants (Hage, 1998).

In order to put the recent tide of this trend under focus, it would be important to take fields where nationhood is produced and reproduced into account and discuss how these fields are affected by these discourses. One important impact of the instigators of these debates is that they influence the general discourse effectively and push nearly every actor to produce attitudes towards it. Therefore, the general debate and produced discourses on the matter, as well as how they should be analysed stands as an essential question before migration studies.

Sports is one of the areas where the issue of migration -among many other issues- becomes crystallized before public eyes and attract widespread attention. Over the course of years, refugee and migrant athletes who took citizenship of other countries have come to be a matter of discussion revolving around questions of identity and ethnicity. Turkey has also become a hot bed of these debates which turned paramount after 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio and the European Athletics Championships the same year (Reiche & Tinaz, 2018). Furthermore, this also coincided with the increased media attention turned towards the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers,

both internationally and domestically. Main reason behind this, is the rising number of refugee deaths in 2015 and the ensuing readmission deal between the European Union and Turkey in 2016 (Lehner, 2019). In that sense, at a time when there was intensified public debate around the issue of migration, sports also had its fair share of it under the heading of transfer athletes.

This paper aims to open a discussion on how to think about migrant athletes and the political implications of their naturalization within the context of the debates surrounding migration and ethnicity. While the issue has generally been discussed in cultural terms, it has underlying economic bases as well, as the results in international competitions and the successes obtained by migrant athletes in Turkey are often translated into financial gains. Moreover, these results bring forth a questioning of the national identity itself, which make them a relevant subject matter to discuss the debates of ethnic identity and migration. As Kellas (1991, p. 21) argues, the support lent to national teams and athletes represents the most common form of outward nationalist expressions and the problematization of the identity of the athletes based on their tie to the imagined national group merits a discussion on its place in the conception of migration.

As mentioned earlier, this article mainly aims to open a discussion rather than drawing conclusive remarks on the matter. This is a multi-dimensional issue that can be examined from a variety of angles ranging from gender to economics and to identity. This article, in this sense, solely scratches the surface by introducing the issue around one of these topics, that is the contesting of national identity through the integration of migrant athletes into the sporting outfits of the host countries. Without doubt, this is only one of the many fields where the issue of migration can be discussed in terms of the ways in which they impact imagining and reimagining nationhood and ethnicity. The reason I chose sports is that it provides a clear manifestation of how ethnicity and nationhood is produced and reproduced due to its competitive nature and the national representations intrinsic to it. Furthermore, the case of Turkey, which I discuss in this paper, demonstrates how forced migration movements that come to the fore of the agenda trickle down to influence other issues. An important caveat here is that this paper neither holds the claim to be conclusive nor comprehensive.

In this regard, the first section consists of a sketch of the theoretical outlook of the migration theories regarding the question of ethnicity, as well as a brief discussion on how they are handled in the case of Turkey. The second section tackles the issue of migrant athletes and how their naturalization for representing other countries is discussed in the literature. From here, the discussion links to the case of Turkey, with reference to the looming debates on the migrant athletes, national identity and the developments on the issue of migration at the time. Sports play a crucial role in shaping and influencing the public debate on migration as it makes the phenomenon

more visible and the competitive element and measurability intrinsic to it provides concrete evidence for politicians to draw statements in favour of their views on the topic. My main focus will be on the case of migrant track and field athletes transferred to compete for Turkey and the public debate revolving around their results in the Olympic Games and European Athletics Championships in 2016. While doing so, I make use of the related content appeared in conventional and digital media in order to obtain a general overview on how the debate was portrayed and how these athletes were represented in the public discourse. The data collected for this paper includes newspapers and news websites that provide a variety of perspectives from which the questioning of ethnicity and national identity within the framework of migrant athletes can be traced. In order to draw representative and concise remarks I refrained from including popular opinions dispersed and shared through online platforms. However, further research including these narratives on the topic would be of great contribution to the relevant literature. All in all, I aim to contribute to the emerging scholarly discussion that may result in the expansion of the literature to different aspects of the topic of sports and migration, such as ethnicity.

### **Ethnicity in Migration Studies**

Migration movements have lasting effects on the countries of origin, countries of destination and third countries all at the same time. One of these effects is conceptualized as chain migration, with initial migratory mobilities creating larger arrivals of family, peers and others (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 29). These dynamics of migratory movements produce similar results in both voluntary and involuntary instances, as people tend to relocate to where they believe offer better conditions. This is one of the important reasons why migration clusters form and produce political, economic and cultural consequences. Furthermore, the contemporary migratory movements are defined by the globalization of the neoliberal capitalist market and the forms of inequalities and exploitation shaped under these circumstances produce and reproduce the exploitative ties between the former colonizer and colonized countries. As de Haas and co-authors (2020, p. 50) underline:

migration and immigration regimes depriving migrant workers of rights and protection can be seen as reinforcing the effects of hegemony and control of world trade and investment in keeping the 'Third World' dependent on the 'First'.

While the consequences differ drastically in nature and reflect the characteristics of the different cases that they are part of, some commonalities can be traced as well. One of them is the imagining and reimagining ethnic and/or national identities by the migrant groups and the host groups alike. For instance, Ahmed (2000, p. 93) talks about ways in which communities in a contested manner with the relationship with the host communities as well as through the sense of estrangement are formed.

In this instance, it can be argued that alterity plays a significant role in this dialectical formation of ethnic identities. Here, alterity refers to the definition of the self, vis-à-vis a perceived Other. The role of the Other in the formation of the self, has come to be discussed with regards to a variety of issues in social sciences, including but not limited to Bakhtin's (1984, p. xxx) views on self-appraisal through the gaze of others. Under these premises, it can be argued that the formation of a group identity involves defining who the members of the group are as much as defining who they are not. Therefore, the construction of national identity almost always is a process of setting lines of demarcation which includes the imagined members of the group as much as it entails leaving those who are not members outside. One of the most important instigators of this process are the encounters with different groups. These encounters produce interactions that help the group define itself in the terms mentioned above as well as get defined by the other group. The formation of ethnic identities can be defined in these terms as well and the migration process entails a significant portion of this dialectical construction. As migration processes serve as perfect incubators of these encounters, the interactions between host communities and the migrant groups advance the imagining and reimagining of concepts of nationhood and ethnicity.

Different views on the formation of ethnic identity emerged overtime among scholars, such as Clifford Geertz (1973), who argued that ethnicity is a primordial attachment, surrounding the member of the ethnic community almost from the moment they are born and sustaining itself through ties of blood, kinship, language and custom. Alongside the views on primordial ethnicity, there are those stressing the situational character of ethnic identity. According to these, the ethnic identity is 'invoked' as a way of identifying the self by a group. This invocation occurs through a variety of markers such as history, language and religion, and at the same time, the boundaries of the group based on this identification vary as well, based on the circumstances (Wallman, 1986, p. 229). Lastly, there are those who argue for an instrumental definition of ethnicity. The proponents of this view contend that ethnicity and ethnic identity are brought up in order to strengthen group identity or to obtain advantageous positions in different circumstances such as in the face of the allocation resources by a state (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 77).

The main debate surrounding national identity and nationhood, on the other hand, revolves around the temporality of nations, in terms of whether nations preceded modernity or are product of it. Alongside primordialists such as Geertz, ethnosymbolists also contend that nations preceded modernity and they were sustained through myths and symbols transferred from generation to generation (Smith, 1991, pp. 19–20). Contrary to that, those who argue that nations and nationalism are outcomes of transformations brought by modernity -like urbanization, industrialization, secularization etc.- emphasize the importance of certain products of modernity that established group cohesion and common identity among the members of the imagined nation. In this vein,

Gellner (1983) argues for the significance of common education, Anderson (1983) underlines the standardization of the vernacular through print press and Hobsbawm (1983) traces the role of ‘invented traditions’ in constructing the national identity.

To link these discussions to the issue of migration, it can be said that the cultural aspects that sustain ethnic identity play a critical role for the migrant communities to counter exclusion and discrimination. However, in doing so, the conflicting identities reciprocally influence and alter one another, which demonstrate that these cultures are far from being static in nature, and they change through external interactions (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 81). While this is closely related with the socio-economic and cultural integration, there are external, as well as local, forces like globalization and immigration at play in the aforementioned changes, culture becomes increasingly the subject of political debates. Here, it is crucial to take a look into different aspects that prove a determinant role in the contemporary migratory movements. In what is called “a global race for talent” countries impose preferential entry rules for migrants and refugees granting stay for varying durations and based on often precarious contracts (Shachar, 2011). For Europe, it could be seen that the formation of the Schengen zone, eased travel for its members, while resulted in harder border controls and stricter visa rules for those outside of the zone. In the meantime, the increasing labour demand contributed to the rise in irregular migratory movements, bringing the integration processes under spotlight (de Haas et al., 2020, pp. 135–136).

The legal framework with which modern nation-states are defined, in most instances, presupposes that the power to rule is derived from the people. In the nation-states, the people generally refer to the nation, therefore it is important to define who belongs to the nation. Furthermore, the legal link between the nation and state is, to a large extent, established by citizenship (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 85). In that sense, those who fall within and out of this framework bring about the reimagining of nationhood. Migrant groups are directly involved in this subject matter as their arrival and possible naturalization, as well as the barriers before their naturalization strike questions on the matter of citizenship and inclusion.

Turkey has witnessed such questionings over the past decade intensely, particularly due to the arrival of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. The movement of the Syrian refugees, as well as the recent increase in the refugee outflow from Afghanistan have raised debate even more in Turkey. This has attracted scholarly attention as well, with the intensified public debate around nationhood in Turkey. This bore intense references to the changing nature of the conception of Turkish national identity, both in political and economic terms (Kaftan, 2022; Şimşek, 2021). These scholarly debates extend to the question of citizenship as well, with Güney (2022) discussing the public perceptions towards Syrian refugees acquiring citizenship in Turkey by focusing on the conception

of nation-state and the ties to it, as well as extending of rights to perceived Others. There are also studies that take on a multidimensional approach in analysing the sense of nationhood such as the one conducted by Saraçoğlu and Bélanger (2019), in the Turkish city of Izmir and trace the xenophobia that the refugees face to the sentiments of losses of economic gains, urban space and national cohesion, and analyse these with reference to past migratory movements experienced in the city.

The questioning of nationhood with reference to migration can be seen in a number of areas, extending through politics, economics and culture, and often times, crosscutting them. In that sense, nationalism studies need to look into different aspects of migration where the imagining and reimagining of national identity get crystallised. In the case of this paper, the focus is on sports.

### **Sports, Globalisation, and National Identity**

Sports have always been a significant area of contention that transcended beyond the competition on the pitch, and extended to other areas like ideologies, identities, social struggles, and more. With regards to the studies of national identity, the coinciding of the emergence of modern sports with the rise of nation-states in Europe led sports and nationalist politics to reciprocally shape one another. Without doubt sports, due to their competitive nature, have always come to provide lieu for the surfacing of disputes in a supposedly non-violent fashion. This made nationalist politics attribute symbolic meanings to sports events, making them a form of imagining or affirming nationhood. As Bairner (2001, p. xi) suggests,

“Sport is frequently a vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment to the extent that politicians are all too willing to harness it for such disparate, even antithetical, purposes as nation building, promoting the nation-state, or giving cultural power to separatist movements.”

This definition entails both the state-centric purposes of national identity building and the promotion of a common identity for nationless states as well. In that sense, sports is a relevant subject matter for the studies of national identity.

Nation-states have used sports as a way of constructing national identity since the conception of the idea of a modern nation as well as the codification of leisure activities as modern sports. While the understanding of nationhood has been intrinsically related to strength, this has widely been understood on par with physical strength and health which shaped the sports and physical education policies of nationalist politics.<sup>3</sup> Also, the

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<sup>3</sup> For the case of Turkey, see (Akin, 2004)

rise of international sports organisations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries helped carry the pursuits for national identity construction to the international arena, as well as allowing room for mutual interactions among the representatives and agents of different national and ethnic groups.

Allison and Monnigton (2002) contend that there are two ways of extracting national prestige from sports. One is taking part in mega sports events and international competitions for obtaining successful results and demonstrating superiority while inflicting pride to the imagined national group, or participating for the sole purpose of marking the presence of the national group in the international scene. The other is hosting these events, in order to demonstrate grandeur and a national capability to undertake such mega projects, through the advantage of hosting numerous other countries and their representatives. Therefore, there are a variety of dimensions through which national identity gets into relation with sports as nationalist politics. It as a way to shape perceptions both externally, that is vis-à-vis others with whom the national identity is constructed in a reciprocal manner; and internally, referring to the consolidation of the imagined national group domestically and establishing a bond around common identity among the members of the group who lack everyday direct contact.

As nationalism is much about determining who are not members of the national group as it is about determining who are, sports can be spaces of inclusion as much as they provide premises for exclusion, too. Therefore, the identities represented by teams and athletes can be arenas of contention both internally and externally. The problematization of national identity in this vein is particularly present in the everyday discourse through media outputs and political discourses produced with regards to representation in the international sphere. This, extends into the scholarly literature on this issue as well, and migration holds an important place in this vein.

The freer mobility of athletes particularly after the 1990s should be examined under the free movement of labour and the increasingly complex matrix of financial transactions that bound up people's lives on a wider array of levels. The globalization process that had a variety of political and economic implications through connecting the world with a wide set of communication tools that allow capital as well as labour to more freely move across borders has also diversified human mobilities and migration flows. This is often brought up with economic references as it has economic bases at its root, with the financial crisis of 1973 being used as a pretext for increased deregulation propped up by right-wing conservative policies. Furthermore, the rise of globalization was also countered by anti-globalization movements that oppose various aspects of the phenomenon such as migration (Maguire & Falcous, 2010, p. 5).

The relationship between sports and migration is also influenced heavily by the power relations dominant in the globalization process that characterize the exploitation of labour in the contemporary era. As teams, for instance, have increasingly turned into transnational corporations, their interests have also turned into international labour market which led to an increase in the athletes' international movement (Maguire & Falcous, 2010, p. 6). One of the most important legal implications of this turn in Europe came with the 1995 ruling of the European Court of Justice in a lawsuit filed by Belgian football player Jean-Marc Bosman, famously known as the Bosman rule. This ruling removed barriers on players' transfers to other teams within the European Union (EU), while at the same time, the ruling rendered restrictions on the number of foreign players in football teams in the EU unlawful (Binder & Findlay, 2012). It is no wonder that the ruling came at a time when the barriers on the movement of labour and capital are rapidly being removed, which had also political implications.

The characterization of this form of migration as 'good' or 'bad' is very much related to the success when it comes to sports, due to the fields extremely competitive nature. As Maguire and Falcous (2010, p. 6) contend:

What counts as good or bad depends on who decides and by what criteria – whoever defines what counts as 'success' succeeds in the contested process of player migration. This conflict has involved struggles between those promoting the commercial success of the clubs or the prestige associated with the national team; between entrepreneurs striving for short-term viability or officials concerned with long-term development; and between those who market the creation of a spectacle that can be sold to the media and those who advocate local identity and player development.

This produces consequences on the matter of imagining nationhood through sports as well. While successful results with the (in)direct contribution of migrant athletes often produce a more favourable discourse on the intersection of migration and sports, while on the other hand unsuccessful results may be met with racist and discriminatory attacks towards the athletes and migrants in general. However, this is not always the case. One of the most striking examples of the interplay between public view and political discourse with regards to migration through sporting results is France's 1998 victory at the FIFA Men's World Cup. The country's first such win at the tournament they hosted produced a variety of political discourses regarding the identity of the footballers, most of whom carrying a background from Africa or overseas territories that France still rules ever since the colonial period. As early as 1996, when the team, comprised of a talented generation of migrant footballers first took international stage at the European Championship, Jean-Marie Le Pen of far right National Front (Front National) party declared the team 'artificial' and complained that they did not sing *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, deliberately or due to 'visibly not knowing the words' (Marks, 1999, p. 50). While

the remarks were contested by the mainstream media, the issue of migration was brought up by the magazine, France Football, where Jean-Marie Lanoe argued that the national football team being diverse was nothing new, but it only reflected a different era of immigration (Marks, 1999, pp. 50–51). According to this, while the French team was composed of immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from war-torn European countries such as Poland and Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War during the 1950s, whereas in the last decade of the 20th century immigrants from African countries and overseas territories and departments became the faces of the national team (Marks, 1999, p. 52).

Mainstream media's favourable look upon the question of immigration, particularly related to an international success is directly related with the perception of this as a confirmation of the Republican citizenship model of France. In fact, deriving from Bromberger, Marks (1999, p. 53) contends that the liberal democratic view sees football as an affirmation of the promise of meritocratic success combined with collective endeavour: "In particular, football offers a way of understanding and negotiating the sometimes contradictory demands of individual achievement and collective effort which underpin contemporary liberal democracies."

However, the erosion of the liberal democratic view from mainstream politics through the dominance of far-right views led to the lifting of the curtain that shielded the mechanisms of exploitation and inequalities behind the promises of meritocracy and collectivity that surrounded the political discourse on migration. The debate around France's national team was at a time when the liberal ideology seemed triumphant after the disintegration of the socialist states. While there were relatively less visible challenges to the political and economic dominance of the capitalist bloc, the views on the team's success as an affirmation of this triumph reflected this spirit of the time. Therefore, looking into the contemporary understanding of sports and migration at a time when the issue of migration heavily dominates politics in a way that is dominantly driven by far-right politics is relevant to understand the reflections of the changing political landscape around migration and its impact on culture. The case of migrant athletes in Turkey can set an example to observe this trend.

### **The Case of Migrant Athletes in Turkey and National Identity**

Turkey's history of transferring migrant athletes and naturalizing them to compete for Turkey as a policy is as long as the history of neoliberalism in Turkey. While the first traces of increasing privatization and opening up to the international market economy dates to early 1980 with a series of decisions taken by governmental decree, the coup d'état<sup>4</sup> later that year paced the transformation into neoliberal economic policies backed up by a conservative set of policies in many aspects of politics and culture. What the immediate aftermath of the

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<sup>4</sup> The coup d'état on 12 September 1980.

coup d'état also witnessed internationally was while the economy was preparing to open up, politically the ongoing human rights violations led to an isolation of Turkey. Therefore, the military junta as well as the civilian government that took over shortly after, sought international recognition and legitimacy through sports (Irak, 2020, p. 174). The transfer of Bulgarian-Turkish athlete Naim Süleymanoğlu was one of the first examples of this efforts.

The transfer of migrant athletes has continued as a tradition but intensified after the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, when Turkey's Olympic campaign was marred by doping cases. While a number of athletes from Turkey's delegation were banned for certain periods of time from competing internationally, Turkey turned to transfer athletes, particularly from African countries, who were naturalized to represent Turkey. For the purpose of the discussion of this paper, I focus on the media frenzy over the track and field athletes who competed in the Olympics and the European Championships in the summer of 2016 and how their campaign was perceived in the public discourse.<sup>5</sup> While doing so, I particularly focus on the athletes who took part in track and field events as it holds a particular place in the case of migrant athletes in Turkey. According to Reiche and Tınaz (2018), 25 foreign-born athletes who participated in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio among the Turkish delegation took part in athletics. Most of these athletes are transferred from African countries like Kenya and Ethiopia based on their athletics training, and none of them were refugees. There are also those from Caribbean countries like Jamaica, as well as those from neighbouring countries to Turkey like Azerbaijan, also transferred on sporting bases. Moreover, Turkey won a record of 12 medals, four of which were gold, at the 2016 European Athletics Championships and nine of these medals were obtained by migrant athletes. This first came to the fore of public attention with an article published in the Daily Telegraph.<sup>6</sup> While the article called Turkey's policy as a 'farce' the snarky comments about the lack of experience on Turkishness on the part of migrant athletes sparked a debate in Turkey.

Before beginning an analysis of this very debate, it should be noted that the widespread naming for these athletes is *devşirme*, which refers to an Ottoman practice of taking a child from non-Muslim families in order to convert and train them for military service. Therefore, the widespread term for the policy implies a tie to the nation that is different from citizenship. The term was widely used during the public debates revolving around the issue. Furthermore, these successful results and the ensuing publicity that the sports gained led to increased reactions from nationalists in Turkey. For instance, in an article published in the newspaper *Yeniçağ*,<sup>7</sup> which was

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<sup>5</sup> It should also be noted here that Rio 2016 was an event around which the topic migration and refugees had been widely discussed, as it also witnessed the formation of a team comprised of refugee athletes (see Turcott & Ariyo, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> Seven Kenyans, two Jamaicans and a Cuban competing for Turkey - this is a disgraceful farce, 07 July 2016, Daily Telegraph, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/athletics/2016/07/07/seven-kenyans-two-jamaicans-and-a-cuban-competing-for-turkey---t/>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Devşirme sporcularımız dünyada alay konusu oldu!, 11 July 2016, *Yeniçağ*, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/-141595h.htm>, accessed on

close to the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) at the time, it was argued that the migrant athletes made Turkey a ‘laughing stock’. Furthermore, the same article expressed a concern for the erosion of Turkish values: “The love of going through African countries and making them wear the star-crescent jersey is the end of Turkish athletics. Because we do not care about our own values.” This also carried nativist tendencies as well, basing the opposition to the policy on the argument that those who were born in Turkey had more rights. For instance, in the Yeniçağ article, it was argued that if the same interest that was allocated to migrant athletes were given to Turkish-born athletes, they would not fall into the trap of doping. In another article which was published again in a nationalist paper, *Aydınlık*, with more secular and authoritarian tendencies, linked the issue with the arrival of Syrian refugees, evoking the question of granting refugees citizenship.<sup>8</sup> The article also brings up a common theme that revolves around the issue in many other places of the world and questions whether these athletes would sing the Turkish national anthem.

There were also praises for the policy and arguments for this laying a basis for the naturalization of ‘qualified’ immigrants, particularly when it came to refugees.<sup>9</sup> Some journalists even called out the way this policy was opposed as ‘fascism’ and ‘racism’.<sup>10</sup> However, even those who had a more favourable view on the migrant athletes mentioned the lack of cultural bonds of ethnic ties bringing a disconnection to the link of citizenship. A journalist talking to a centre-left online media platform, *Medyascope*, argued that these athletes “lacked the citizenship bond with the country they are citizens of”.<sup>11</sup> In that sense, it can be seen that a lot of performative and symbolic meaning is attributed to citizenship in these debates.

### Ersatz Conclusion

The discussion under question in this paper merits an ersatz conclusion, as it is far from drawing conclusive remarks and leaves a wide area open for further inquiry. The case discussed here is a mere depiction of the ways through which social transformations can be initiated through further research focusing on a wide array of related cases from a variety of theoretical approaches. As the debate under focus in this paper is highly related to the question of migration, it was inevitably tied with the wider migration policies at the time which was mostly dominated by the refugees and asylum seekers fleeing from the civil war in Syria. Although refugee athletes

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17 January 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Kim bunlar?, 13 July 2016, *Aydınlık*, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/koseyazisi/kim-bunlar-8842>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Göğsümüzü kabartan ‘devşirme’ sporcular, 10 July 2016, *Milliyet*, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/cadde/ali-eyuboglu/gogsumuzu-kabartan-devsirime-sporcular-2275734>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Çare devşirme sporcular mı?, 13 July 2016, *Al Jazeera Turk*, <https://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/care-devsirime-sporcular-mi>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>11</sup> “Devşirme atletler” tartışması büyüyor, 12 July 2016, *Medyascope*, <https://medyascope.tv/2016/07/12/devsirime-atletler-tartismasi-buyuyor/>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

from the Syrian conflict is not a substantial phenomenon in Turkey, the policies regarding them triggered a widespread debate around the issue of migration as a whole, which trickled down to transfer athletes. In that sense, the issue was handled with regard to the media outlets' views on the government's migration policies. While the anti-migrant views began to hold increasingly more ground around the time this debate was raging, it largely influenced the views on migrant athletes and their presence was questioned.

The main arguments against the policies on migrant athletes were based on the issue of opportunities provided to them, contending that they were being allocated to the detriment of Turkish-born athletes, which is a reflection of the nativist views on migration. These views are also present regarding the presence of Syrian refugees, therefore, it can be argued that they trickled down to other areas and shaped a general opinion on the question of migration. Other arguments put forward requirements for the acquisition of Turkish citizenship, drawing boundaries of nationhood and putting those who were to enter within to the test. As can be observed in the case of migrant athletes competing in the 2016 European Athletics Championships, obtaining success for Turkey was not enough. This demonstrates the changing nature of nationhood in the face of alterity.

Turkey is one of the most prominent migration countries and the political discourses and debates produced around the issue continue to spread to a variety of areas regarding politics, economics, and culture. Therefore, studying these areas carry utmost prominence. Sports, due to its popularity and competitive nature is one of the most important spaces where these debates crystallize, therefore further research is required in the field to demonstrate how nationhood is contested and reimagined within this recent moment of migratory movements. While this paper only demonstrates a way in which the issue can be discussed, a deeper inquiry into the topic may undertake a longitudinal analysis to periodize how the issue of migrant athletes led to the imagining and reimagining of nationhood throughout history in Turkey. Further research may also focus on the negotiation of identities on the part of migrant athletes as well. Moreover, while virtually invisible in the 2016 debates under focus in this paper, the gender aspect is also a crucial area to be studied since nationhood is often constructed through hegemonical relationships regarding gender as well. In that sense, this field deserves further scholarly attention.

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