



Book Review - Kitap İncelemesi

 Sinem Arslan
Boğaziçi University



**PRECARIOUS HOPE: MIGRATION
AND THE LIMITS OF BELONGING IN
TURKEY**

**AUTHOR
AYŞE PARLA**

**STANFORD, CA: STANFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019, 256 PAGES
ISBN: 9781503608108**

Received/Geliş Tarihi

16 December 2024

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi

26 December 2024

Publication/Yayın Tarihi

31 December 2024

**Corresponding
Author/Sorumlu Yazar**

Sinem Arslan

PhD Candidate at Boğaziçi
University

sinem.arslan9604@gmail.com

Cite this article

Arslan, S. (2019). [Review of the book Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey, by A. Parla]. Journal of International Relations and Political Science Studies, 12(1), 25–30. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



Content of this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License.

Migration stories are grounded in two fundamental emotions: hope and fear. While hope threads through these narratives as a shared theme, its expression and experience differ widely among migrants. In *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*, Ayşe Parla reframes hope not as an individual sentiment but as a collective condition shaped by economic and legal structures. This approach provides a nuanced lens for understanding the emotional and structural complexities of migration. Parla illustrates these dynamics through the case of Bulgaristan migrants[1], a group perceived as relatively privileged in Turkey due to their ethnic ties. She highlights how migrants from various ethnic and religious backgrounds who come to Turkey encounter starkly different capacities for hope under its migration and citizenship regimes. Her focus lies on post-1990 Bulgarian migrants who, driven by economic concerns, often worked in informal sectors and—unlike earlier waves of migrants—were denied automatic citizenship. Through this lens, Parla examines the “precarity” of hope that emerges from Turkey’s ethnic-based migration and citizenship policies, especially during the prolonged citizenship application processes. As she notes: “This book thus invites the reader to rethink the limits of belonging in contemporary Turkey from the perspective of those to whom legal and cultural privilege is intimated, promised, and occasionally delivered.” (p. 21).

Now available in Turkish as *Kırılğan Umut: Türkiye’de Göç ve Aidiyetin Sınırları* (2023)[2], translated by Yunus Çetin and published by İletişim Yayınları, Ayşe Parla’s book represents a remarkable scholarly contribution to migration studies. By seamlessly merging philosophical debates on hope with anthropological methodologies, Parla offers both a historical critique of Turkey’s migration and citizenship regimes and an intimate, ethnographic exploration of the lived experiences of Bulgarian migrants. This interdisciplinary approach provides a fresh and critical perspective on migration studies, challenging the discipline’s traditional focus on nationalism while opening new avenues for examining the intricate interplay of policy, identity, and emotion. The book is thoughtfully structured, featuring an introduction, four richly detailed chapters, and a conclusion, each of which weaves theoretical discussions with empirical data to analyze various dimensions of hope among Bulgaristanlı migrants.

[1] As Ayşe Parla states in the introduction of the book, due to the violent assimilation policies the Turkish minority in Bulgaria endured between 1984 and 1989, Bulgarian Turks avoid ethnic identification by using the term “Bulgaristanlı” (from Bulgaria), which emphasizes geographic origin rather than ethnicity. Therefore, she uses the term “Bulgaristanlı” throughout the book. For instance: Bulgaristanlı (of/from Bulgaria), Bulgaristan göçmeni (migrant of/ from Bulgaria), and Bulgaristan Türkü (Turkish from/in Bulgaria) (p, 10).

[2] Ayşe Parla, *Kırılğan Umut Türkiye’de Göç ve Aidiyetin Sınırları* (Çev.Y.Çetin) İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2023, s 312., ISBN: 978-975-05-3520-8

Parla's meticulous attention to detail shines through in the epilogue, which provides an insightful reflection on her methodology, further enriching the book's academic depth.

Following the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1990, an ensuing economic crisis catalyzed a new wave of migration to Turkey. In contrast to earlier migratory movements—those triggered by the violent dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent social engineering processes of emerging nation-states—the motivations behind these more recent migrations were predominantly economic. This shift in migratory patterns engendered a hierarchy of acceptance, even among migrants hailing from the same region. In the introductory chapter, “Shielding Hope”, Parla delineates the overarching framework of the book, illustrating the limitations of Turkey's migration and citizenship regime, which initially embraced Bulgaristanlı migrants through the rhetoric of kinship but began encountering its structural boundaries by 1990. She explicitly outlines her aim to critically examine the nation-state-driven migration and citizenship policies of Turkey, positioning her work in dialogue with the existing academic discourse on the subject.

“The Historical Production of Hope”, opens with a detailed examination of the transformation of Turkey's migration and citizenship regime, which, for much of the 20th century, favored individuals of “Turkic origin” and readily granted citizenship to groups with cultural affinities to Turkish heritage. However, this preferential treatment culminated in a significant shift with the enactment of the Citizenship Law in 2009. Parla uses this historical juncture to establish a nuanced framework for understanding the relative privileges embedded within Turkey's migration policies, particularly as they pertain to the post-1990 influx of Bulgaristanlı migrants. Drawing on both historical and legal perspectives, she identifies the “hope” that emerged from the relative privilege these migrants experienced in comparison to previous waves. This hope, Parla argues, was grounded in the historical continuity of Turkey's ethnic-based policies, which, although modified by the changing political landscape, continued to offer favorable treatment to those of Turkish descent. Through vivid personal narratives of Gülbiye and Elmas, Parla underscores how regime violence and economic deprivation intertwined to fuel migration from Bulgaria. Moreover, she traces the establishment of migrant associations by earlier Bulgarian migrants, emphasizing their critical role in facilitating the citizenship struggles of their more recent counterparts. In doing so, Parla highlights the complex dynamics of migration as both a legal and social process, shaped by both state policies and the lived experiences of individuals navigating these shifting terrains.

The second chapter, titled *Entitled Hope*, explores the sense of entitlement among Bulgaristanlı migrants, exemplified by Nebaniye, who believes that, unlike migrants from regions such as Georgia, Uzbekistan, or Africa, her ethnic connection to Turkey as “kin” guarantees her inherent right to citizenship (p. 69). Despite the legal challenges they face, Bulgaristanlı migrants continue to perceive themselves as more privileged due to their ethnic ties to Turkey, even though they share the same legal status as other migrant groups in the post-1990 period. By examining the transformation of Turkey’s migration and citizenship regime, Parla underscores how the historical legacy of kinship-based privilege shapes the self-perception of these migrants, despite the evolving legal landscape. This sense of privilege stands in stark contrast to the precarious experiences of other migrant groups, such as Festus Okey, a Nigerian footballer whose tragic and mysterious death in police custody highlights the stark disparity in treatment compared to the relatively favorable reception extended to Bulgaristanlı like Nurcan and Hoşgül.

The third chapter, titled *Precarious Hope*, presents a detailed analysis of the precariousness inherent in the experiences of Bulgaristanlı migrants, with a particular focus on gender and generational hierarchies of vulnerability. Through Ayşe Parla’s extensive fieldwork, the chapter examines how the intersection of gender and ethnicity shapes the experiences of Bulgaristanlı migrant women, who, despite their relative privilege due to their ethnic kinship, are nonetheless subjected to gendered violence and marginalization. The chapter also explores the vulnerabilities faced by children, who, like women, occupy the lower rungs of the hierarchy of precariousness within migration. Parla reveals how, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Bulgaristanlı children were smuggled across borders by “channelers” and faced uncertain access to education in Turkey. This chapter underscores how state and associative mechanisms interact with migrants’ citizenship struggles and how these migrants’ lives are framed within both gendered and ethnically inflected discourses.

The fourth chapter, titled *Nostalgia as Hope*, critically examines the rhetoric framing migration from communist Balkan countries, particularly Bulgaria, as an escape by *soydaş*[3] from communist persecution between 1950 and 1989. With the fall of communist regimes, this justification for migration lost its relevance in Turkey. Parla explores how the shift in migration and citizenship policies, along with the transition to a free-market economy, has reshaped migrants’ memories of communism.

[3] The rhetoric of *soydaş* is a discourse used by Turkey during the Cold War to legitimize the migration of Turkish and Muslim minorities from communist Balkan countries by emphasizing their shared ethnic and cultural ties.

She interrogates this rhetoric while also delving into the persistent nostalgia for *komunizma* (p.138) which continues to shape the memories of migrants despite the violence they have experienced. The recollections of Bulgaria's communist past are multifaceted, especially regarding women's participation in the labor market. While some view this involvement as an attempt to erase Turkish and Muslim identities and impose a double burden, others interpret it as a step toward women's emancipation (p.143-150). Through the personal stories of migrant women, Parla demonstrates how these individuals reconstruct their memories of communism considering their current migration experiences. This chapter, therefore, reveals the complex intersection of historical memory, gender, and migration within shifting political landscapes.

In the conclusion, titled *Troubling Hope*, Parla begins with a dialogue about hope between Gülcan, who has lived undocumented for three years, and her sister Nefiye, who still holds a valid residence permit, as they wait in line at the Foreigners' Department. Gülcan, with little chance of benefiting from the 2011 amnesty, says to her sister, who has no chance at all: "But don't say things like that again to make my hope empty." (p. 164) After this poignant moment of unfulfilled hope, Parla shifts the focus from *Bulgaristanlı* migrants to a broader intellectual discussion of hope. In the epilogue, *A Note on Method, or Hopeful Waiting in Lines*, reflects on the methodological choices that shaped the field research for this book. This research is a successful example of the anthropology of waiting, exploring how the experience of waiting becomes a space of anticipation, powerlessness, and, often, prolonged uncertainty for migrants. Waiting is an integral part of the migrant experience, deeply shaping their narratives of hope, frustration, and survival. Through the lens of waiting, Parla examines the socio-political and emotional dimensions that define the precarious lives of migrants, emphasizing how waiting is not simply a passive moment, but a significant site where identities, power dynamics, and aspirations are continuously negotiated.

Parla's study is based on a well-structured three-phase ethnographic research. The first phase is her doctoral research, conducted between 2002 and 2003, which explores how Bulgarian Turks, expelled from Bulgaria in 1989 and migrated to Turkey, were both embraced as "ethnic kin" and marginalized as "Bulgarian migrants." The second, and most significant, phase of the fieldwork spans 48 months from 2008 to 2013. The third and final phase consists of an additional 12-month fieldwork conducted in 2013 (p. ix-xii).

During her ethnographic research, she also visited Bulgaria with her interlocutors. Her observations of everyday life in Bulgaria during these visits helped her better understand why these migrants continue to nourish hopes of obtaining Turkish citizenship. However, Parla does not fully address the northern-southern divide among Bulgaristanlı Turks, even though she mentions it in the methodology section. Most of her interviewees are from the northern region, which means their experiences are shaped by greater influences from communism and Bulgarian culture. This distinction is not consistently reflected in her analysis, as all the women whose stories are presented in the chapters are from the northern region.