



## Humanity on Hold: Transformation of Migration Governance in Türkiye and Russia



Ata Taha KUVELOĞLU<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article examines the intertwining of migration with identity formation and state power policies in Türkiye and Russia. These two similar political structures have historically mobilized narratives of belonging and exclusion to demarcate their national imaginaries. Drawing on constructivist and post-structuralist theoretical frameworks, this study conceptualizes migration discourse as a constitutive field through which political elites continually articulate the boundaries of national membership and hierarchies of otherness. In Türkiye, migrants are situated within the discursive frameworks of "religious solidarity" and "hospitality," while in Russia, especially Central Asian migrants are simultaneously represented as indispensable economic actors and culturally alien subjects. These strategies demonstrate how each state manages identity through a complex interplay of inclusivity and otherness. Using a comparative discourse analysis of political discourse, media representations, and legal instruments, the study argues that migration governance in both contexts operates as a discursive arena in which issues of sovereignty, legitimacy, and nationhood are constantly negotiated, beyond their demographic and economic dimensions. Ultimately, the article concludes that migration narratives function as state legitimization mechanisms, reproduce exclusionary national myths, and that contemporary states redesign concepts of belonging and identity within the global circulation of people and meaning. Although there are many other parameters in the realpolitik of both countries regarding migration and its consequences, this study has been prepared within the confines of the theoretical framework. The main question of this study explores the ways in which Türkiye and Russia employ migration narratives in order to reinforce national identity, justify state authority and define the boundaries of belonging through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

**Keywords:** Migration, Türkiye, Russia, Discourse, Transformation

### Beklemede Olan İnsanlık: Türkiye ve Rusya'da Göç Yönetiminin Dönüşümü

#### Özet

Bu makale, Türkiye ve Rusya'da göçün kimlik oluşumu ve devlet politikalarıyla iç içe geçmesini incelemektedir. Bu iki benzer siyasi yapı, tarihsel olarak aidiyet ve dışlanma anlatılarını harekete geçirerek ulusal imgelemlerini sınırlandırmıştır. Konstrüktivist ve post-yapısalcı teorik çerçevelerden yararlanarak, bu çalışma göç söylemini, siyasi elitlerin ulusal üyelik sınırlarını ve ötekilik hiyerarşilerini sürekli olarak ifade ettikleri bir alan olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Türkiye'de göçmenler "dini dayanışma" ve "misafirperverlik" söylemleri içinde konumlandırılırken, Rusya'da özellikle Orta Asya'dan gelen göçmenler hem vazgeçilmez ekonomik aktörler hem de kültürel olarak yabancı özneler olarak temsil edilmektedir. Bu stratejiler, her devletin kapsayıcılık ve ötekilik arasındaki karmaşık etkileşim yoluyla kimliği nasıl yönettiğini göstermektedir. Siyasi söylem, medya temsilleri ve

<sup>1</sup> Research Assistant, Aydın Adnan Menderes University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of International Relations, Aydın, Türkiye, [ata.kuveloglu@adu.edu.tr](mailto:ata.kuveloglu@adu.edu.tr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1999-9366>.

yasal araçların karşılaştırmalı söylem analizini kullanan çalışma, her iki bağlamda da göç yönetiminin, demografik ve ekonomik boyutlarının ötesinde, egemenlik, meşruiyet ve ulus olma konularının sürekli olarak müzakere edildiği bir söylem alanı olarak işlediğini savunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, göç anlatılarının devletlerin meşruiyetini güçlendiren araçlar haline geldiğini, ulusal kimliği dışlayıcı biçimde yeniden ürettiğini ve modern devletlerin küresel ölçekte aidiyet ile kimliği yeniden tanımladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Her ne kadar her iki ülkenin reelpolitğinde göç ve sonuçlarına dair birçok başka parametre olsa da bu çalışma teorik çerçeve paralelinde sınırlanarak hazırlanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın temel sorusu, Türkiye ile Rusya'nın göç söylemlerini ulusal kimliği pekiştirmek, devlet otoritesini meşrulaştırmak ve aidiyet sınırlarını içerme ile dışlama dinamikleri üzerinden tanımlamak amacıyla nasıl kullandığını incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, Türkiye, Rusya, Söylem, Dönüşüm

## 1. Introduction

Migration has been a fundamental phenomenon throughout history of the humanity. From ancient times to the present, political, economic, social, and environmental factors have consistently triggered migratory movements. These waves of migration have produced both advantages and disadvantages for the socio-economic structures of host states, contributing to development in some areas while creating certain challenges in others. Migration has evolved from an issue concerning one or a few countries into a complex phenomenon that affects nearly all nations across the world in varying ways. In recent years, Türkiye has been particularly impacted by these developments. While the country was historically characterized as a source of emigration, over time it has transformed into both a transit and destination country. Today, Türkiye stands among the states facing significant challenges related to migration (Çağlar, 2018).

The early twenty-first century has witnessed major population movements that have tested state narratives and national identities in both Türkiye and Russia. Türkiye became the one of the world's largest refugee-hosting country after the 2011 Syrian civil war and subsequent Arab Spring uprisings. Russia, historically both a migrant-receiving and sending state, has grappled with labor migration from Central Asia while also experiencing a significant outflow of Russians after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Migration discourses in both countries are strongly influenced by domestic politics and are disseminated through state-controlled media. Understanding how these narratives construct "belonging" requires theoretical tools from constructivism and post-structuralism. Constructivism emphasizes that international relations and security are socially constructed through discourse and "speech acts," meaning that labeling an issue as a threat can transform it from a normal issue into a security crisis. Post-structuralism adds that knowledge and power are entwined; media narratives help produce identities and define who belongs within the nation (Heusala et al., 2024).

The past fifteen years have been marked by unprecedented levels of forced migration. Civil war in Syria and the war in Ukraine have reshaped debates in Türkiye and Russia. Constructivist and post-structuralist approaches highlight that states use discursive practices; not simply material factors but also to define the "self" and "other" and legitimize policy. Turkish and Russian governments have constructed deserving and threatening categories of migrants, drawing on national identity narratives, civilizational frames and populist rhetoric. Discourse analysis therefore provides insights into how migration becomes securitized, how belonging is constructed and how power relations shape policy (İçduygu & Keyman, 2000).

Political actors may manipulate migration narratives to garner public support, negotiate with other stakeholders, and legitimize state interventions. In this regard, examining how migration produces comparable outcomes under similar conditions across different geographical contexts renders this study particularly significant.

This study traces the historical trajectories of migration discourses in Türkiye and Russia, focusing on turning points after the Arab Spring and the 2022 Ukraine war. For Türkiye, the period between 2011, when the Arab Spring triggered the Syrian civil war, and 2017 will be examined as a phase during which migration movements reached dramatic proportions. For Russia, the analysis will focus on the period from the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022 to the present day, addressing migration dynamics and the policies pursued within this context. In this respect, this study situates itself within the broader scholarly debates on migration, national identity, and state power. While a significant portion of the literature emphasizes migration primarily as a security or economic concern, recent constructivist and post-structuralist approaches underscore the role of discourse in shaping social and political realities. By engaging with works on securitization, identity politics, and migration governance, this research critically examines how Türkiye and Russia not only manage population movements but also employ migration narratives to legitimize state authority and delineate belonging. In doing so, it addresses gaps in the literature where comparative analyses of these two contexts remain limited, particularly in linking policy frameworks to discursive constructions of national identity.

Drawing on constructivist and post-structuralist approaches, this research conceptualizes migration discourse as a constitutive field through which national identity, state authority, and social hierarchies are continuously negotiated. Constructivist perspectives highlight that notions of belonging, citizenship, and social order are not pre-given but socially constructed through political practices, interactions, and normative frameworks. Post-structuralist perspectives further emphasize the centrality of language and discourse in producing power relations, enabling a critical examination of how inclusion and exclusion are articulated and maintained.

Situating the analysis within these frameworks allows the study to engage with literature on securitization, identity politics, and migration governance. While previous research has often treated migration as primarily a legal or policy issue, integrating constructivist and post-structuralist lenses provides a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between ideational and institutional dimensions. This approach elucidates how Türkiye and Russia employ migration narratives not only to manage populations but also to legitimize state authority, define the boundaries of national membership, and produce hierarchies of belonging. With this theoretical foundation, the historical analysis that follows can more effectively trace the evolution and strategic use of migration discourses in both states.

Finally, this study also contributes to ongoing discussions on the interplay between inclusion and exclusion in migration policy. While prior studies have often focused on either legal frameworks or social integration outcomes, this research integrates both dimensions to illustrate how migration governance operates as a multidimensional instrument of political power. By examining historical patterns, contemporary regulations, and elite discourses, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how migration becomes a mechanism for both reinforcing national cohesion and marking the boundaries of otherness.

## **2. Historical Path of Migration Discourses in Türkiye and Russia**

Shacknove (1985) links the notion of a refugee to the inability of the home state to meet an individual's basic needs, emphasizing compulsion as the core element of displacement. After establishing the conceptual basis, the legal dimension must be clarified. International law

protects this status through the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, which set the criteria for identifying and safeguarding individuals who fall under this category. Within this legal framework, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) specifies that a person is considered a refugee when they are compelled to leave their country because of persecution, armed conflict or widespread violence. Beyond laying out who qualifies as a refugee, the legal framework also sets forth the responsibilities of states toward individuals granted this status. Such protection includes the prohibition of refoulement, the provision of fundamental rights and the assurance of a legal position that maintains an individual's safety and dignity in the host country. Within this structure, the Geneva Convention and its Protocol articulate the baseline obligations required of states, while the UNHCR serves as the central international body tasked with monitoring and supporting the enforcement of these protective standards. Such an individual has a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and is therefore unable or unwilling to return (Loescher et al., 2008).

In addition to the 1994 refugee regulations, Türkiye's migration policies were significantly influenced by earlier regional crises, particularly the migration movements in the Balkans in 1989 and the post-Gulf crisis influx in 1991. The Balkan migrations, triggered by the disintegration of socialist states and ensuing ethnic conflicts, brought a substantial number of individuals seeking temporary and permanent refuge, challenging existing administrative capacities (Turgüler, 2025). Similarly, the Gulf crisis led to the arrival of people fleeing conflict in the Middle East, further testing Türkiye's ability to manage sudden population movements (Human Rights Watch, 1991). These events contributed to the securitization of refugee policies, reinforcing a perception of migrants primarily as potential threats to national stability, and set a precedent for subsequent regulatory measures that combined humanitarian obligations with security-oriented considerations.

Beneficiaries of this category of rights are not required to have entered the host state through lawful means or to possess valid travel documentation, nor is their legal presence within the territory a prerequisite for entitlement to such rights (Hathaway, 2005). As previously noted, since migration encompasses a wide range of parameters, the scope of comparison in this study will be confined to the refugee dimension, focusing on the transformation of migration governance within this conceptual framework. On the other hand, the notion of a refugee is dynamic, continuously shaped by shifting political and social circumstances, and should therefore be interpreted in relation to evolving contexts and prevailing societal values (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2021).

Besides, in the context of globalization, nation-state policies aimed at managing complex migration flows have increasingly shown limitations, particularly when migrants are perceived primarily as threats to national security. In response to a sudden and large-scale influx of people, primarily from the Middle East, Türkiye implemented the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" framework in November 1994, which established procedures for the registration and identification of refugees, temporary residence permits, and the provision of basic social services such as healthcare and education. The regulations also delineated the legal status of asylum seekers, although they did not automatically confer long-term residency or full labor market access, reflecting a security-driven approach. Consequently, these measures framed refugees primarily within a securitized lens, prioritizing border management, internal security, and state control over comprehensive social integration or long-term protection (İçduygu & Keyman, 2000).

The protest movements that emerged across the Arab world in the early 2010's, many of which culminated in the overthrow of governments, spread to Syria where they encountered strong state resistance, ultimately setting off a process that escalated into a civil war. As a consequence of this conflict, Türkiye was confronted with large-scale migration flows, which in turn produced several profound and transformative outcomes within the country (Saylan & Aknur, 2023). Türkiye's economic expansion has transformed the country into a significant destination and safe haven for both migrants and refugees. In response to these developments, a new migration and asylum law was enacted in April 2013, followed by the implementation of the EU-Türkiye visa liberalization process and readmission agreements. Consequently, Türkiye has shifted from its former status as a major country of emigration to an increasingly prominent country of immigration (Duvell, 2014).

Discourse and practice based approaches have become central analytical perspectives in the study of migration and border management, emphasizing that security is produced not only through speech and discourse but also through the everyday and material practices that sustain it. When the Syrian conflict broke out, Türkiye implemented an open-door policy and initially referred to Syrians as *misafir* (guests) and *kardeşler* (brothers). The early narrative was framed around humanitarian responsibility and a sense of civilizational duty. President Erdoğan often portrayed Türkiye as a guardian of the oppressed, asserting that assisting refugees was a moral and civilizational imperative. During this period, the government consciously refrained from drawing ethnic or religious distinctions, emphasizing instead that Türkiye provided protection to all individuals seeking refuge without discrimination. President Erdoğan depicts migration as a "burden" consistent with Türkiye's broader framing of Syrian refugees, advocating the notion of "shared responsibility" within the international community, while at the same time emphasizing Türkiye's humanitarian orientation. In terms of both discourse and practice, Türkiye's stance on migration and the Syrian refugee question has not always aligned with the contextual dynamics shaping arrangements such as the agreements concluded with the European Union (Lüleci-Sula & Sula, 2021: 2-7). The shaping of Türkiye's position on this issue has also been influenced by its security perception and the perceived lack of expected support from European counterparts. As emphasized by Feller et al. (2003), refugee protection cannot be effectively addressed in isolation; rather, it requires all relevant actors including states and civil society to clearly define their roles in order to ensure an equitable distribution of protection responsibilities. This perspective aligns with Türkiye's long-standing expectations from Europe regarding a fair and shared approach to the management of refugee burdens.

On the other hand, in Russia, although the constraints inherent in state capitalism created certain difficulties for integration into the free market economy, post-Soviet Russia experienced a significant economic boom and became an attractive destination for workers from Central Asia, leading to a considerable influx of labor migration. By the time of the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections, migration had emerged as a central theme in political discourse, and the notion of migration rapidly became politicized, increasingly dominating media narratives (Heusala et al., 2024).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia experienced extensive demographic restructuring. Early migration policy was largely determined by migrants' origins, allowing citizens from former Soviet republics to freely relocate within the newly independent states. This approach reflected Moscow's intention to preserve both demographic continuity and symbolic influence across the post-Soviet region. Between 1989 and 2002, approximately five million individuals moved to Russia, with ethnic Russians constituting

about two-thirds of this total. Such migration was interpreted not merely as a demographic remedy for population decline but also as a geopolitical mechanism aimed at reinforcing the narrative of a unified Russian world (Mihaylov,2017).

Although large-scale East-West population movements did not occur, the post-Soviet space witnessed significant internal migration driven by ethno-political conflicts, economic turbulence, competition for scarce resources, and the resurgence of nationalism in the newly independent states. After 1991, millions of former Soviet citizens migrated both within and between the fifteen successor states. During the Soviet era, many had already been forcibly relocated, and the establishment of post-communist governments now threatened the citizenship rights of numerous residents particularly the 25 million ethnic Russians living outside Russia. Between 1992 and 1996, roughly three million refugees and displaced persons, mostly ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, fled to Russia. Legislation adopted in June 1992 granted them residence, employment, and access to basic services, yet this influx strained the state, which was already struggling to reintegrate demobilized soldiers from Eastern Europe. Major migration waves occurred in Central Asia and the South Caucasus in the early 1990s and later in the North Caucasus toward the decade's end (Loescher, 2001).

The migration challenges faced by contemporary Russia are deeply rooted in the Soviet Union's migration policies and the subsequent partial dismantling of those frameworks. Between 1995 and 2005, the country experienced a significant influx of migrants, largely shaped by the socio-political transformations initiated during the Perestroika era under the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which spanned from the mid-1980s until the USSR's dissolution in 1991. As a result, Russia emerged as a major destination for migrants, predominantly from former Soviet republics with the migrant, share of its total population maintaining an average level of approximately 8 percent between 1990 and 2015 (Bodrunova et al., 2017).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, migration flows across the region expanded markedly, resulting in a chaotic and painful dispersal of populations. Although Russia hosts a comparatively smaller number of legally recognized migrants than Türkiye does in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, refugees often move through the same routes, networks, and channels as irregular migrants, making it difficult to distinguish between the two groups. This overlap renders the management of migration in the Russian context increasingly complex (Nicholson & Twomey, 1999).

The Russian government undertook extensive legal and administrative initiatives, supported by significant resource allocation, to formalize the status of refugees arriving from Ukraine and to ensure their effective social and institutional integration (UNHCR, 2018). On the other hand, The Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which enables Member States to provide protection swiftly, was implemented for the first time in 2022 to address the mass influx of refugees fleeing Ukraine following Russia's invasion. This directive has demonstrated its effectiveness as a valuable mechanism for responding to sudden large-scale displacement situations (Zimmermann et al., 2024).

### **3. Constructing Belonging Through Discourse**

Hasenclever et al. (1997) argue that knowledge-based regime theories concentrate on the origins of states' perceived interests, emphasizing the influence of both causal and normative

ideas in shaping them. They suggest that, in many instances, states are better conceptualized as role-players rather than mere utility maximizers. Within this framework, migration policies can be understood as products not solely of rational cost-benefit calculations but also of normative identity constructions and discursive positioning. In this regard, the “role-playing state” perspective occupies a central place in interpreting the migration discourses of Türkiye and Russia.

Forced migration constitutes a central dimension of global politics, as refugee movements are inherently political phenomena that embody the tension between the rights and interests of citizens and non-citizens, while also remaining intrinsically international through their cross-border nature. The drivers of displacement are deeply intertwined with broader dynamics of the international system, geopolitics, and the global political economy. Within this context, positivist perspectives conceptualize state identities and preferences as socially constructed through ideas and knowledge (Betts, 2009). Betts’s analysis of forced migration within political, identity-based, and political-economic frameworks provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Türkiye’s discourse of “religious solidarity” and “hospitality” as well as Russia’s narratives centered on “security” and “labor necessity.” On the other hand, by the late 2010s, the prevailing migration situation in Türkiye had increasingly come to be described as a “crisis” by migration experts, non-governmental organizations, and various state institutions (Sevinin & Awad, 2024).

Constructivist analyses demonstrate that Turkish political elites employed Islamic and Ottoman imagery to conceptualize Syrian refugees as *muhacirler* (emigrants) and Turkish citizens as *ensar* (helpers), invoking both the Prophet Muhammad’s migration and the Ottoman imperial legacy (Çoban, 2024: 5–6). This discourse of religious solidarity served to legitimize the open-door policy and to encourage societal acceptance of refugees. President Erdoğan frequently framed this approach as part of a broader civilizational and humanitarian responsibility. Over time, however, nationalist and conservative narratives gained prominence in political rhetoric and media representations, portraying refugees as potential threats to national identity and social cohesion. Critics of the government contended that refugees were instrumentalized as leverage in negotiations with the European Union and as justification for cross-border military actions (Sağlık, 2025).

Türkiye has become a major transit country for population movements and, in addition, serves as a destination for individuals arriving particularly from Eastern European states, as well as for people of Turkic origin. Within the framework of principles such as maintaining an open-border policy, adhering to the prohibition of refoulement, allowing indefinite stays, and ensuring humanitarian assistance in camps, a temporary protection regime has been established for Syrians seeking international protection. However, the inability to secure Türkiye’s eastern land borders, persistent security concerns in border regions, the high number of asylum seekers, and the fragmented nature of refugee law across different legal provisions have together created significant challenges (Ergüven & Özturanlı, 2013). Also, Türkiye’s migration policy has increasingly been shaped by an emphasis on social conservatism and religion, diverging from its traditional Western-oriented outlook and giving rise to what can be described as a “religion-infused migration state.” This orientation was evident, for instance, in the government’s open-door policy toward Syrian refugees, justified through notions of Islamic solidarity. Nevertheless, this approach did not prevent the growth of public discontent toward Syrians, whose presence began to be questioned on economic, national, and cultural grounds (Kirişçi & Yıldız, 2023).

The Russian state and media on the other hand, construct the notion of belonging by drawing a distinction between culturally proximate “refugee compatriots” and foreign labor migrants. Refugees from the Donbas region have been depicted as victims of Ukrainian aggression and as symbols of Russian moral virtue (Moen-Larsen, 2019). These representations are embedded within the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) narrative, which implies a shared civilizational unity. In contrast, migrants from Central Asia are frequently depersonalized and criminalized; media coverage often highlights their ethnic origins while portraying them as passive, unskilled, and uncivilized individuals. During the pandemic, media narratives framed migrants as “objects of care,” emphasizing the benevolence of the state while simultaneously denying their agency and autonomy (Bodrunova & Smoliarova, 2022).

In Russia, migration has become increasingly embedded within the language of national security. Policy reforms have been justified primarily as efforts to maintain domestic order and stability, rather than as responses to humanitarian or economic needs. The introduction of annual labor quotas in 2007 and the subsequent replacement of work permits with a patent system in 2015 illustrate the growing bureaucratic control over mobility. Within this securitized framework, migrants particularly those from Central Asia were simultaneously portrayed as essential to the economy yet culturally distinct and peripheral. Their limited proficiency in Russian and the absence of integration mechanisms further entrenched their marginalization as societal “outsiders” (Mihaylov, 2017).

Although the Russian government adopted policies to stimulate immigration in response to its dependence on low-cost labor, the resurgence of anti-migrant sentiment beginning in 2017 once again rendered migration a deadlock for the country. This trend became even more critical as the number of registered migrants nearly halved between 2020 and 2021, while the proportion of Central Asian labor migrants rose to 75 percent, illustrating the deepening structural reliance on migrant labor despite declining inflows (Bodrunova & Smoliarova, 2022, pp. 289–290). In 2018, Russia hosted the largest concentration of Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR, 2018). Following the Donbas crisis, the number of refugees, which had been approximately 3,000 in 2012, surged to over 200,000 after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (UNHCR, 2014). This dramatic increase generated significant challenges in local integration and propelled migration to the forefront of Russia’s domestic agenda.

#### **4. Comparative Analysis**

The early 1990s witnessed significant migration movements across Eastern Europe, triggered by the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with Germany emerging as a primary destination for incoming populations. These migratory flows prompted states and policy-makers to frame migration not merely as a demographic or economic challenge but as a potential threat to national security, public order, and social cohesion, thereby initiating processes of securitization. Securitization, in the sense defined by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), involves the framing of an issue as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary political measures beyond normal policy procedures. In this context, national governments, international organizations, and media actors constructed narratives portraying migrants as sources of social instability or cultural disruption, while political institutions implemented restrictive measures to regulate entry and residence.

The proliferation of migration research centers and policy institutes during this period reflects not only growing scholarly interest but also the institutionalization of security-focused

approaches to migration. By situating migration within a security discourse, states effectively legitimized exceptional practices such as stricter border controls, accelerated asylum procedures, and selective integration policies, illustrating how securitization shapes both public perception and governance frameworks. Germany was among the countries most affected by the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The early 1990s triggered major migration movements across Eastern Europe, as flows from east to west and south to north rapidly became central to Europe's political agenda. Efforts to curb irregular migration soon gained prominence, leading to a remarkable increase in the number of research centers and policy institutions devoted to migration studies (Martin, 1994). These developments, along with similar dynamics, have contributed to the securitization of migration.

Both Türkiye and Russia have securitized migration, albeit through distinct mechanisms. In Türkiye, the framing of migration as a security issue emerged primarily within the context of populist electoral politics and relations with the European Union. While refugees were initially welcomed through discourses of religious solidarity, they were later portrayed as threats and employed as instruments of political bargaining (Hazer & Uyar, 2022). In Russia, by contrast, securitization centered less on refugees and more on labor migrants within a broader geopolitical context. Anti-immigrant rhetoric reached its peak during the 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign, when candidates pledged to "cleanse" the city of migrants (Heusala et al., 2024). After 2014, public and political attention shifted toward refugees arriving from Ukraine, yet labor migrants continued to be depicted through persistent stereotypes as criminal or unskilled individuals (Bodrunova & Smoliarova, 2022).

Despite Türkiye's substantial role in reducing irregular migration and providing shelter for millions of refugees, President Erdoğan accused the European Union of not fulfilling its obligations (Euronews, 2019). This episode marked a pivotal shift in Türkiye's migration narrative, reflecting a growing sense of disillusionment and recalibration in its discourse on migration governance. Until 2016, Türkiye's migration policy was primarily shaped by humanitarian and religious considerations. However, the acceleration of cross-border military operations and the implementation of the EU-Türkiye Agreement introduced new parameters into the policy framework. Although migration remained largely exempt from formal securitization, the absence of comprehensive legal provisions regarding non-European migrants and the persistent challenges in the practical realization of migrant rights continued to generate social tensions (Lüleci-Sula & Sula, 2021: 13-14).

Türkiye's refugee policies have been significantly shaped by its European Union membership perspective and the accompanying harmonization process, fostering a framework grounded in human rights and international refugee law. The enactment of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2013 established a comprehensive national legal framework, replacing the earlier, fragmented regulations of the 1934 Settlement Law and the 1994 Asylum Regulation. This law provided structured mechanisms for refugee status determination, temporary protection, residence permits, and the application of related rights, enhancing alignment with international norms. Nevertheless, the persistence of the geographical limitation, the reliance on temporary protection measures, and limited opportunities for local integration for Syrian refugees highlight the tension between security-driven priorities and compliance with global refugee standards in Türkiye (Kirişçi & Yıldız, 2023).

Building on the examination of the Turkish and Libyan agreements, it is important to acknowledge that the European Union acts as a key driver in the securitization of migration,

influencing not only its own policy framework but also shaping Türkiye's migration discourse. The EU's security-centered approach, focused on border management, enforcement measures, and collaboration with third countries, has played a significant role in structuring Türkiye's strategies and narratives on irregular migration. This external influence has reinforced the adoption of security-focused rhetoric within Turkish policymaking, shaping the articulation of national identity, state authority, and social cohesion vis-à-vis migrants. As a result, Türkiye's migration discourse must be analyzed in the context of this interaction between domestic policy priorities and the EU's securitization and externalization efforts, which collectively frame migrants as potential threats while legitimizing both restrictive policies and cooperative arrangements (Mengüaslan & Arman, 2022).

Divergences with the European Union and the failure to meet Türkiye's expectations in practice revealed a shift toward alternative policy proposals, such as the establishment of a safe zone for refugees (BBC News Türkçe, 2019). Between 2016 and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Türkiye's discourse increasingly emphasized that the responsibility for hosting Syrian refugees should not rest solely on its shoulders but should be shared more equitably among international actors. The enduring weakness of the international refugee regime stems from the gap between rhetorical commitments to collective action and the reality of implementation, as states continue to place domestic political and strategic priorities above transnational responsibilities. Türkiye and Libya agreements during the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that, as instruments of the EU's irregular migration policy, they were insufficient in ensuring humanitarian sustainability and resilience. The agreements prioritized the prevention of irregular migration over effective protection, limiting access to rights for refugees and migrants in both countries, while failing to significantly reduce migration toward Europe. Furthermore, they did not address structural challenges in migration management or strengthen social cohesion, highlighting critical gaps in EU cooperation and humanitarian obligations during the pandemic (Mengüaslan & Fidan, 2022).

Both states employ civilizational frameworks to delineate in-groups and out-groups. Türkiye draws upon its Ottoman and Islamic heritage to project an image of humanitarian leadership, whereas Russia relies on the "Russian World" narrative and anti-Western discourses to define its moral and geopolitical identity. Russian media have drawn parallels between Syrian refugees in Europe and Central Asian migrants in Russia, suggesting that Europe's mishandling of the refugee crisis validates Russia's own approach while simultaneously reinforcing xenophobic sentiments (Gabdulhakov, 2016). In both settings, media representations function as instruments of domestic political strategy: pro-government outlets emphasize the state's benevolence and moral authority, whereas opposition media focus on local grievances or direct criticism toward external actors (Bodrunova & Smoliarova, 2022).

From both constructivist and post-structuralist perspectives, identities and threats are understood as being socially constructed through language and political practices. In Türkiye, identity is negotiated between the notions of a multiethnic, Islamic civilizational mission and the secular, nationalist conception of the nation-state. Migration discourses reveal the tension between narratives of hospitality and fears of cultural dilution. Russia's discourse, by contrast, reflects an illiberal political framework in which migration functions as a form of political capital; although the tone of discourse shifts according to political circumstances, it consistently reinforces an ethnic hierarchy (Moen-Larsen, 2019). Both states instrumentalize migration as a tool of foreign policy: Türkiye employs refugee narratives as leverage in negotiations with the European Union, while Russia uses migration-related discourse to justify

its intervention in Ukraine and to criticize Europe's perceived "double standards" (Bodrunova & Smoliarova, 2022).

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Türkiye and Russia approach migration not solely as an issue of security or administrative management but also as a discursive sphere through which national identity is continually reconstructed. The ways in which both states articulate migration narratives lie at the core of political practices that define where the boundaries of belonging are drawn. For this reason the main question of the study goes beyond the substantive content of migration policies and seeks to uncover the discursive structures that underpin them, the identity frameworks they legitimize and the social groups they exclude. By examining how state authority instrumentalizes migration and how this instrumentalization shapes national identity formation the research offers an integrated perspective that brings administrative and ideological dimensions into a single analytical frame.

The events that occurred in both Türkiye and Russia, as mentioned in the earlier sections of this article, triggered securitization discourses in both countries. In Türkiye, the public gradually adopted an anti-immigration discourse in response to the perceived negative consequences of migration, while developments at both the national and international levels radically reshaped the political agenda. Similarly, in Russia, the annexation of Crimea, the Covid-19 pandemic, and ultimately the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 rendered the migration issue increasingly ambiguous.

The coup attempt of 15 July 2016 exerted such dominance over the national agenda and media that the question of Syrian refugees was effectively marginalized within public and political discussions. Similarly, following the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussions surrounding migration and Syrian refugees rapidly lost prominence in Türkiye's media and public discourse, and in the aftermath of the pandemic, the issue appeared to have become normalized and largely internalized within the societal context.

Comparative analysis indicates that between 2011 and 2025, migration discourses in Türkiye and Russia underwent a transformation from narratives of humanitarian hospitality to those characterized by securitization and politicization. Constructivist perspectives demonstrate that both states construct notions of belonging through civilizational references, kinship-based metaphors, and moral missions, while simultaneously adjusting their approaches to migration in accordance with evolving domestic priorities and foreign policy agendas. Eventually, in both contexts, the perspectives of migrants are largely silenced, with expressions of empathy and humanitarian discourse being notably diminished, particularly in times of crisis such as the pandemic.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that Türkiye and Russia frame migration through lenses shaped by their historical trajectories, security perceptions and identity driven political agendas. Migration discourse emerges as a strategic tool through which political elites consolidate state power while promoting an image of unity and homogeneity within society. Therefore, the study argues that migration governance cannot be separated from identity politics and emphasizes that discursive strategies serve not only to position migrants but also to redraw the symbolic boundaries of national membership. Through this approach the article

aims to contribute to a broader literature that treats migration as a multilayered social and political phenomenon.

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