

Perceptions on Syrian Refugees in Turkey¹

*Short analysis of a survey identifying differences and similarities between two groups of Turkish voters**

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Makale Bilgisi/Article Info:

Geliş/Received: 29.04.2020 Düzeltme/Revised: 18.05.2020 Kabul/Accepted: 27.05.2020

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Atıf / Cite as: Bandur, P. (2020). Perceptions on Syrian Refugees in Turkey, Short analysis of a survey identifying differences and similarities between two groups of Turkish voters. Antakiyat, 3 (1), 67-91

Öz:

Halen sürmekte olan Suriye çatışması, en az 5,5 milyon Suriyeli mültecinin yerlerinden edilmiş ve ülkeleri dışında yaşamak zorunda kalmış olması nedeniyle 21. yüzyılın en kötü insani felaketlerinden biridir. Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komisyonu'na göre mülteci dalgasının vurduğu en kötü ülke, şu anda geçici korumaya sahip 3,5 milyondan fazla mülteciye ev sahipliği yapan Türkiye'dir. Türkiye başlangıçta Açık Kapı Politikasını uygulamış ve mültecileri misafir olarak karşılamıştır. Ancak Ankara'yı baskı altına alan ve karşılama tutumlarından daha hoş olmayan tutumlara geçişin kanıtları artmaktadır. Bu makale, Türk halkının Türkiye'de ikamet eden Suriyeli mültecilere yönelik algısını, hükümet yanlısı veya muhalefetten 161 katılımcıdan oluşan bir anket üzerinden tespit etmektedir. Anket iki bölümden oluşmaktadır. Birinci bölüm toplam katılımcı sayısını içerirken, ikinci bölüm katılımcıları iki seçmen grubuna (her gruptan 52 katılımcı) ayırmaktadır. Analizin sonucu, hükümet ittifakı seçmenleri (Cumhur İttifakı) ile muhalefet ittifakı seçmenleri (Millet İttifakı) arasında önemli farklılıklar gözlemlenmiştir. Muhalefet ittifakının seçmenleri, muhafazakâr hükümet ittifakının seçmenlerinden daha olumsuz tutumlara, önyargılara ve ayrımcı görüşlere yönelmiştir. Hükümet ittifakı seçmenleri, mültecilerin varlığı ya da kabulü konusunda çok daha yardımsever bir tavır sergilerken, çok az bir kesimi Türkiye'nin varlığı ve güvenlik durumu konusunda kaygı duydular. Muhalefet ittifakı seçmenleri de Türkiye'nin laik bir karakterine olası muhafazakâr bir tehdit olarak Suriyeli mültecilerin varlığı konusunda daha güçlü güvenlik endişeleri dile getirdiler. Suriye'nin Halep ve İdlib illerindeki endişe verici durum nedeniyle kapalı sınırlarla birlikte bu olumsuz tutumlar, şu anda İdlib'de hapsedilmiş yüzbinlerce mültecinin Türkiye'ye girişinin reddedilmesi olası bir insani felaketin uyarı işareti olabilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Türkiye, Suriyeli Mülteciler, Göç, Türkiye'nin Göçmen Algısı, Sığınmacılar

¹ (I confirm TR Dizin 2020 ethical rules). Bu araştırma sürecinde TR Dizin 2020 kuralları kapsamında "Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesinde" yer alan tüm kurallara uyulmuş ve yönergenin ikinci bölümünde yer alan "Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiğine Aykırı Eylemlerden" hiçbiri gerçekleştirilmemiştir. Ayrıca bu araştırma Yüksek Lisans Tezinden türetildiği için "Etik Kurul İzni" gerektirmeyen bir çalışmadır.

* This survey is a slightly edited part of my MA thesis "Social and security impact of the Syrian conflict on Turkey", Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of Political Science. The thesis had a qualitative-exploratory character with additional quantitative method of a survey, which is published in this article.

Abstract:

The ongoing Syrian conflict is one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century with at least 5,5 million refugees displaced outside of Syria. According to UNHCR, the worst country hit by the refugee wave is Turkey, currently hosting more than 3,5 million refugees with temporary protection. Turkey initially applied Open Door Policy and welcomed refugees as guests, however, evidences of the shift from welcoming attitudes towards more unwelcoming attitudes are increasing, placing Ankara under a pressure. This article is identifying Turkish people's perceptions on Syrian refugees residing in Turkey on a survey conducted on a sample of 161 respondents either pro-government or pro-opposition, the survey consists of two parts, the first one is including the total number of participants while the second part is dividing participants into two groups of voters (52 participants per one group). The outcome of the analysis is that significant differences can be observed between the voters of government alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) and voters of opposition alliance (Millet İttifakı). Voters of opposition alliance tended much more to negative attitudes, prejudices and discriminative opinions than voters of conservative government alliance. Government alliance voters turned out to be much more benevolent to the presence of refugees or their accepting and significantly less concerned about the security situation or character of Turkey, while opposition alliance voters expressed stronger security concerns over the presence of Syrian refugees and they refer to them as a possible conservative threat to a secular character of Turkey. Negative attitudes together with closed borders during the alarming situation in Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Idlib might be a warning sign of a possible humanitarian catastrophe when hundreds of thousands of refugees currently trapped in Idlib will be denied from entering Turkey.

Key Words: Turkey, Syrian Refugees, Migration, Turkish Perception on Immigrant, Asylum Seekers

1. INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring as a wave of uprising throughout the region of Middle East and North Africa region caused serious disruptions in the whole region. In Syria, the origins of the uprising are dated back to the beginning of 2011. While in January 2011 Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in an interview for The Wall Street Journal stressed his optimism about the stability of Syria without any chance for events like in Egypt², few weeks later first peaceful manifestations started in Damascus, then in Dara'a. As the anger over the arrest of young students from Dara'a was growing, the Syrian regime started to use brutal force via its Shabiha militias and the consolidation of opposition started under the bloc of Syrian National Coalition.³ And according to Nergis Canefe, the uprising in Syria quickly transformed into a brutal civil war with systematic violations of human rights, regular use of chemical weapons against civilians, mass killings, tortures and forced displacement of large groups of population. The crimes committed by the Syrian regime during the conflict follow long decades of state-sponsored violence and oppression in Syria.⁴

² WSJ: *Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad*. The Wall Street Journal. 31.1. 2011

³ Pillon, M. *The Syrian Conflict. Conflict Analysis of a Multi-Layered Civil War*. Sabanci University. 2014

⁴ Canefe, N. *The Syrian Exodus in Context*. Istanbul Bilgi University Press. 2018 p.6-7

The Syrian conflict has led to a mass displacement of Syrian civilians not just internally, but also to abroad to neighbor countries. Turkey sharing 911 kilometers long border with Syria has been confronted with the arrival of refugees since April 2011. The groups of refugees have been growing as the conflict in Syria was escalating. Both the government of Turkey and also the Turkish society in the beginning of the uprising expected that the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey is only temporary and they will return to their home country within few months. Turks accepted Syrians as guests running from the brutalities of the conflict who they considered to have ethical duty to take care and accept them. Meanwhile there was an existing expectation that the so-called Open-Door Policy for Syrian refugees will bring long-term political benefits and opportunities for Turkey.⁵

The ongoing presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the raging war in Syria disproved these expectations. Under the pressure of these factors, Turkey was visibly impacted socially, politically, economically, psychologically and by security concerns. It is known sociologically that since migration is not a simple physical or geographical location change but also a social mobility that brings with it a social and cultural change, there may be some cultural tensions, debates and even conflicts between the immigrant population and the locals.⁶ As Canefe states on the topic of Syrian exodus, integration and reintegration: *“Acceptance in a new society as refugees, migrants, and guest workers, or a return to home and to post-conflict situations, each scenario involves both specific physical challenges and difficult encounters with broader political communities.”*⁷ The evidences of the shift in welcoming attitudes towards more unwelcoming attitudes in Turkey are increasing. The shift in perceptions is not just visible on social media, but also in the rhetoric of some politicians and occasionally even in daily life. Many cases were reported from different parts of Turkey when rumours circulating on social media and daily communication grew into vandalism, violent gatherings or even clashes. Back in 2014, a rumour claiming that Syrians poisoned the drinking water in Gaziantep led to vandalism of Syrian properties and angry protests with anti-Syrian slogans. The rising anti-Syrian or anti-refugee perceptions were according to Al-Monitor described by some local residents as a *“ticking bomb”*.⁸ Another two very similar cases were reported from Istanbul’s western suburb Küçükçekmece⁹ in July 2019 or, for

⁵ Kirişçi, K. *Syrian refugees and Turkey’s challenges: Going beyond hospitality*. The Brookings Institution. 2014

⁶ Kirman, M. A. *Sosyal Bir Olgu Olarak Göç, İslam Coğrafyasında Terör, Göç ve Mültecilik*. Ankara: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Üniversitesi Yay. 2017, p.117

⁷ Canefe, N. *The Syrian Exodus in Context*. Istanbul Bilgi University Press. p.8

⁸ Tremblay, P. *Anti-Arab sentiment on rise in Turkey*. Al-Monitor. 21.8.2014

⁹ Dadouch, S. *They want to kill you’: Anger at Syrians erupts in Istanbul*. Reuters. 9.7.2019

instance, in Adana¹⁰ in September 2019. Both cases in Adana and Istanbul were based on same false claims circulating on social media accounts blaming Syrian refugees of abuse and rape of Turkish children. These claims were never proved true, however, a small group of men mobilised by false Twitter statements managed to destroy dozens of Syrian shops and their properties before the intervention of police.

A more dangerous dimension of the anti-Syrian attitudes is when these sentiments get legitimisation through the rhetoric of politicians. While the Turkish president R.T. Erdoğan especially in the past repeatedly referred to Syrian refugees as “*brothers and sisters*”, many opposition politicians chose different rhetoric and often used harsh statements legitimising the already negative attitudes in society. For instance, Meral Akşener, the leader of an opposition İyi Parti and its presidential candidate in 2018 elections promised to send back refugees to a war-torn Syria within a year if she is elected.¹¹ Her party’s mayoral candidate for Istanbul in 2019’s local elections İlay Aksoy also promised in a same way¹² and actively used anti-refugee slogans during her campaign.¹³

Besides İyi Parti we can also find negative rhetoric among the politicians of the oldest and strongest opposition party CHP. Despite of the CHP’s surprisingly positive initial stance to provide help to refugees, a shift can be noticed in these rhetoric since 2016. CHP in recent years became the main Turkish political force pushing the harsh anti-refugee rhetoric.¹⁴ Some local CHP mayors tried to stop financial aid to refugees¹⁵, others tried to ban refugees from entrance to public beaches.¹⁶ The rhetoric got even more aggressive after Ekrem İmamoğlu was elected as a new mayor of Istanbul in June 2019. He said that Istanbul should stay Turkish, complaining about the high number of refugees and signs in Arabic on local shops in Istanbul.¹⁷ Just after winning the elections, CHP supporters intensively started to tweet a call “*Suriyeliler defoluyor!*” to expel Syrians from Istanbul.¹⁸ The already cold perceptions and attitudes towards refugees got approved by some politicians and

¹⁰ Ragip, S. *Angry crowds attack Syrian business in Turkey over sexual abuse allegation*. Middle East Eye. 20.9.2019

¹¹ Middle East Monitor, *Turkey’s presidential candidate vows to repatriate Syrian refugees if elected*. 7.5.2018

¹² Daily Sabah, *Far-right IP’s anti-refugee election banner draws criticism*. 18.3.2019

¹³ Videos in politicians claim that cities are getting under the influence of foreigners (refugees, migrants) is phenomena that is common in Europe as well, especially among some politicians with racist attitudes.

¹⁴ Atlas, M. I. *Syrian refugees and the CHP’s culture of hate*. SETA Foundation. 23.2.2019

¹⁵ Daily Sabah, *Newly elected CHP mayor cuts aid to Syrian refugees*. 10.4.2019

¹⁶ Bilir, I. *Banned from the beach: Excluding Syrian from public spaces*. Inside Turkey. 19.7.2019

¹⁷ Reeves, M. *Reading the Signs in Istanbul*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. 15.1.2020

¹⁸ Adigüzel, Y. *Suriyeliler gitsin’ demek çözüm mü?* Star Newspaper. 7.7.2019

this kind of legitimisation of discriminative or in some cases even racist narrative is a very dangerous political tool which is typical mainly among some politicians across EU.

The entering hypothesis of the research is that the Syrian conflict caused a shift in the attitude of Turkish society. Furthermore, on the topic of presence of Syrian refugees as a spillover effect of Syrian conflict on Turkey, these attitudes among voters differ according to political alliance they associate with.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is a part of MA thesis *“Social and security impact of the Syrian conflict on Turkey,”* Comenius University in Bratislava. The thesis was based a qualitative-exploratory research with a combination of both qualitative (field observation) and quantitative methods (survey). The theoretical background of thesis is based on previous studies and books, reports from international and Turkish media, think-tanks or statistics of UNHCR. According to Babbie, exploratory research is one of the three most common forms of research in social sciences and one of its main purpose is to *“satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for better understanding.”*¹⁹ As the topic of my thesis is quite dynamic, it needed a combination of methods which allow wider data collection. For this purpose, field observation was conducted in Istanbul, Kilis and Gaziantep including the border crossing of Öncüpınar in July 2019. According to Blackstone, *“field research is a qualitative method of data collection aimed at understanding, observing, and interacting with people in their natural settings.”*²⁰ However, for the purpose of this article, I will focus only on the survey part and its results and not the field research.

The survey was conducted by using a Google survey form on a sample of 161 Turkish respondents from specific regions such as Istanbul, Ankara or border regions with Syria. Data collecting was going on between 18.12.2019 and 8.1.2020 online and limited data were obtained personally. After collecting the data, I analysed the answers in two different parts. In the first part I evaluated the total results of the survey, while in the second part I divided the answers into two groups based on the political affiliation of the respondents (*Cumhur İttifakı* and *Millet İttifakı*). *The main aim of this research is to find out the general approval and agreement with the negative attitudes and to identify differences and similarities between government and opposition supporters according to which party they vote in last parliamentary elections.* The entering hypothesis of the research is that the Syrian conflict caused a shift in the attitude of Turkish society. Furthermore, on the topic of presence of

¹⁹ Babbie, E. *The Practice of Social Research*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning 2010. p.92

²⁰ Blackstone, A. *Principles of Sociological Inquiry: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*. Flatworld 2012. p.122-4

Syrian refugees as a spillover effect of Syrian conflict on Turkey, these attitudes among voters differ according to political alliance they associate with. The first part of the survey suggests the general opinions of the total number of respondents in relation to Syrian refugees in Turkey, the second part identifies the possible differences and similarities between the voters of the two mentioned groups.

The survey consisted of two introduction questions and 13 other topic related questions. The questions were asked in Turkish language as negatively formulated sentences based on common prejudices and misperceptions in Turkey. Likert Scale was used for evaluation of the answers. This scale was first developed by Rensis Likert in 1932 and since then this method became popular in social sciences for measuring attitudes and levels of agreement on various scales such as 1-5 or 1-7.²¹ All the respondents were asked to give answers on these questions/sentences related on their agreement on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means *absolute disagreement* and 5 means *absolute agreement*. By this survey I tried to research the attitudes and agreements with these negatively formulated sentences about Syrian refugees. In the second part of the survey I randomly chose 52 respondents from both of the political groups in Turkey and the sum of points based on disagreement/agreement scale identifies voters from which political bloc have higher inclination towards negative attitudes on Syrian refugees. Answers were expressed numerically (quantitatively), but they reflect qualitative agreement/disagreement with the offered statements. I therefore evaluated the obtained qualitative data by a quantitative method.

Some limits occurred during the evaluation process. The most important limit is that the survey is not deep and I didn't divide the respondents according to their age, sex, education or job so the exact characteristics of those who answered the survey are not clear. Another, but a slightly smaller limit was some critical voice from respondents that the survey questions had strong political character what might had led to a refusal of filling the survey. Some respondents complained that the sentences in survey were too critical, however, for the character of my survey it was necessary to divide respondents according their political affiliation and all the negative sentences just reflect the most common prejudices which are being circulated about Syrian refugees in Turkey. It is important to conduct further research on the topic with more specific questions to get even more relevant data.

Similar, but more exact and detailed research was already conducted by Murat Erdoğan in his research *Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration Research*, the results of his research are also a source of motivation to conduct my survey. For instance, according to Erdoğan, the ongoing conflict might transform the

²¹ Rod, A. Likertovo škálování. *Electronic Journal for Philosophy*. 2012

generally tolerant and open attitude into a discrimination or in some cases even violent acts with racial background. As he also states, the shift towards negative attitudes might be observed in opinions blaming the refugees of increase in criminality, despite of very low criminal records of Syrians in Turkey. According to the results of his survey, the general belief of cultural differences between both groups (Syrians and Turks) is also present in Turkey and besides of that, half of the participants in his survey would not like to have Syrians as their neighbors.²²

3.1. FINDING AND RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

3.1. First part

First part of the result analysis consists of the answers of all 161 respondents who took part in this survey. In the first question, each participant was asked which party he vote for in the last General elections in 2018. There were three choices to answer – Republican alliance (*Cumhur Ittifakı: AKP, MHP*); National alliance (*Millet Ittifakı: CHP, İYİ, SP, DP*) and Others. In the second question the respondent had to answer which region he or she resides. 85 out of 161 participants were from Istanbul, 25 from Ankara and the rest mainly from Adana, Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis. Limited number of participants were from cities of Izmir, Denizli, Bursa, Burdur or Antalya. The introduction questions were followed by 13 topic related questions and the evaluation of answers were conducted by Likert Scale.

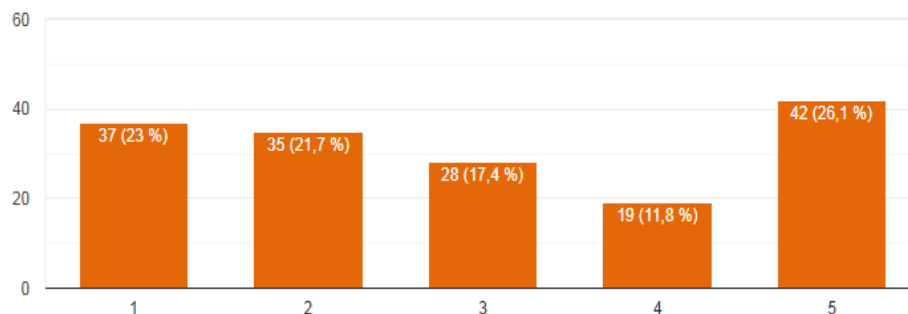
1. I experienced a negative situation in daily life with Syrian refugees

This statement reflects a common perception about Syrians who cause discomfort of the local people by various means (sexual harassment, misunderstandings, thefts etc.) Totally 61 participants (37,9%) expressed agreement with this sentence – 42 of them agreed absolutely and 19 of them agreed marking the choice 4. However, 72 participants (%44,7) didn't agree with the sentence and so they didn't experience any negative situation in daily life with Syrian refugees. 28 participants (17,4%) chose number 3, which on our scale 1-5 means the neutral middle. When the proportion of indecisive people is distributed to others 55% disagree and agree 45% agree.

²² Erdogan, M. *Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration Research*. Ankara: HUGO Hacettepe University, 2015.

1. I experienced a negative situation in daily life with Syrian refugees.

161 odpovedí

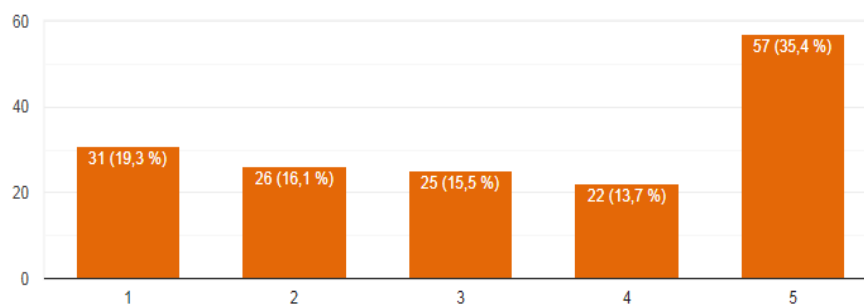


2. I refuse to accept new refugees from Syria, regardless of possible political persecution and other dangers in their country.

This sentence is relevant in the context of current humanitarian situation in northern Syrian provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, which were since the beginning of 2020 under heavy bombardment of Russian and Syrian warplanes, killing hundreds and displacing hundreds of thousands civilians towards Turkey. 79 participants (49,1%) don't want to accept new refugees from Syria, from which 57 (35,4%) absolutely reject the idea of accepting any new refugees. 57 participants (35,4%) didn't agree with this sentence and 25 chose number 3. It's a clear signal that despite of the humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib more refugees in Turkey are not welcomed.

2. I refuse to accept new refugees from Syria, regardless of possible political persecution and other dangers in their country.

161 odpovedí



3. I agree with returning back to Syria those refugees, who are in Turkey without legal documents

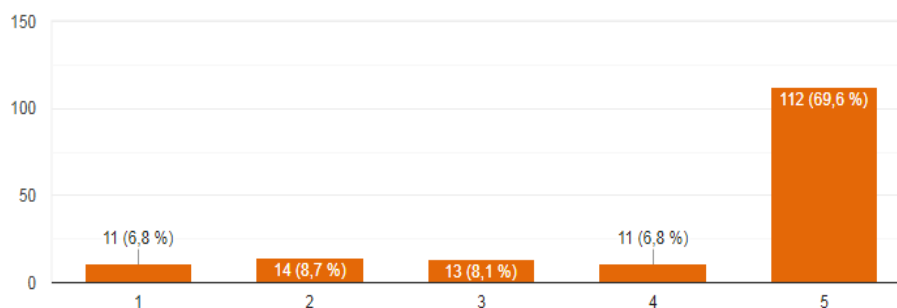
Alleged deportations of Syrian refugees without legal documents to reside in Istanbul got medialised July 2019, when authorities began to return them to their first point of entrance in Turkey (border provinces) or in some cases²³ reportedly

²³ HRW: Turkey: Syrians Being Deported to Danger. HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. 24.10. 2019

even to Idlib. The government decided for this step under the pressure after the victory of Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul. In this question a rare match can be observed. 123 participants (76,4%) agree with this statement, while most of them agree absolutely (69,6%). Only 11 participants absolutely don't agree with the returning of refugees. These data tell us that the government was pushed to this step under a growing pressure from society and it is possible that this trend will further continue.

3. I agree with returning back to Syria those refugees, who are in Turkey without legal documents.

161 odpovedí

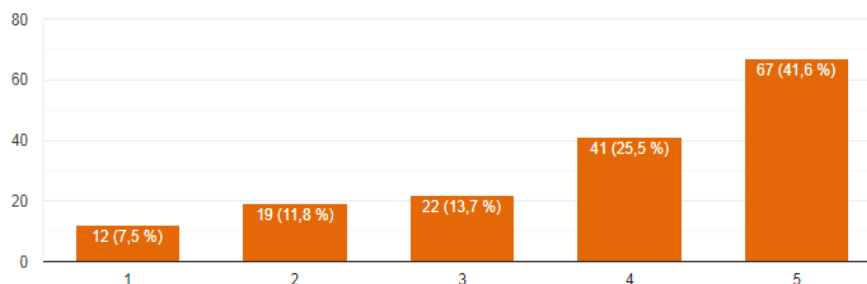


4. There are huge cultural differences between Turks and Syrians

Turkish president R.T. Erdoğan few years ago repeatedly referred to Syrian refugees as “*brothers and sisters*” who share similar values with Turks and that Turks have moral duty to help those in need. However, generally the opinions might differ and many people might think the opposite. 67,1% (108 participants) believe that between Turks and Syrian there are huge cultural differences. Only 12 participants absolutely disagree and another 12 disagree by choosing number 4. 22 more people chose the neutral answer. Data show that despite of the same religious background (Sunni Islam), significant part of the society might think that Turks and Syrians strongly differ.

4. There are huge cultural differences between Turks and Syrians.

161 odpovedí

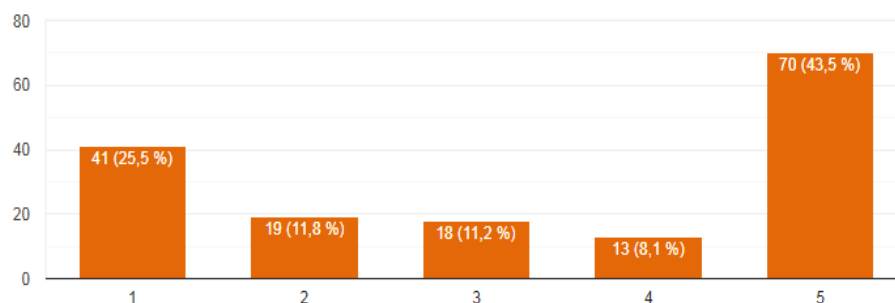


5. The presence of conservative refugees is a threat for secular character of Turkey

Since establishing the Republic of Turkey, Turkish society has a modern and secular conception of religion. The offered opinion is common among voters and supporters of some opposition parties. Generally, the society of Syria is more traditional or conservative than the Turkish. Many prejudices are shared on social media, where people blame that refugees might turn Turkey into a more conservative and religious country. 70 participants (43,5%) absolutely agree with this statement, another 13 (8,1%) agree by number 4. It means the majority. 60 participants don't agree – 41 (25,5%) of them absolutely. Large part of the respondents is concerned about changes in Turkey due to the presence of conservative refugees. I suggest that these concerns might strengthen parties promoting strong secular character of Turkey.

5. The presence of conservative refugees is a threat for secular character of Turkey .

161 odpovedí

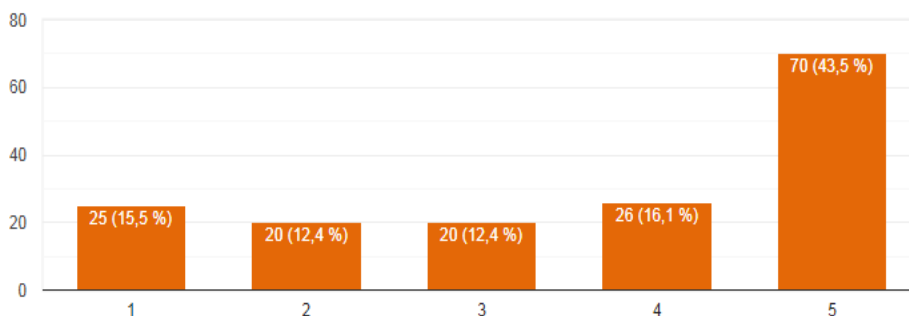


6. In streets with higher refugee concentration I feel uncomfortable or unsafe

In some Turkish cities, especially in Istanbul, some parts of the city have quite high concentration of Syrian refugees. In these districts there are, for instance, many shops with signs written in Arabic and Arabic is widely spoken in streets. As data show, part of the respondents feels uncomfortable in these streets. 70 participants (43,5%) absolutely agree and 26 agree. 45 participants (27,9%) disagreed with this statement. Even if 20 participants chose the neutral answer, the majority (59,6%) doesn't feel safe in streets with high number of Syrian refugees. That number is interesting because the crime rate of Syrians in Turkey is annually very low, as it was repeatedly mentioned by the minister of interior Süleyman Soylu.

6. In streets with higher refugee concentration I feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

161 odpovedí

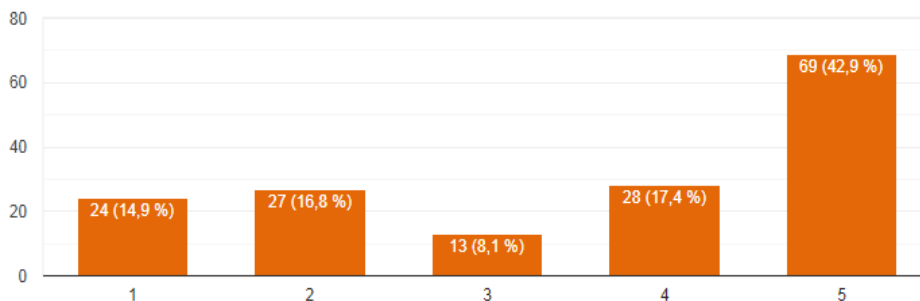


7. Security in my city got worse due to the presence of Syrian refugees

This statement follows the previous one and it is a part of many prejudices about refugees as criminals who are responsible for the worse security situation in Turkey. Previous studies in this field show that these prejudices got more common after bomb attacks (Reyhanlı, Gaziantep, Istanbul) and violent events related to circulating hoaxes a disinformation on social media (Adana, Istanbul). 69 participants (42,9%) absolutely agreed, another 28 (17,4%) agreed and at all 51 participants (31,7%) didn't agree that security in cities got worse due to the presence of refugees.

7. Security in my city got worse due to the presence of Syrian refugees.

161 odpovedí

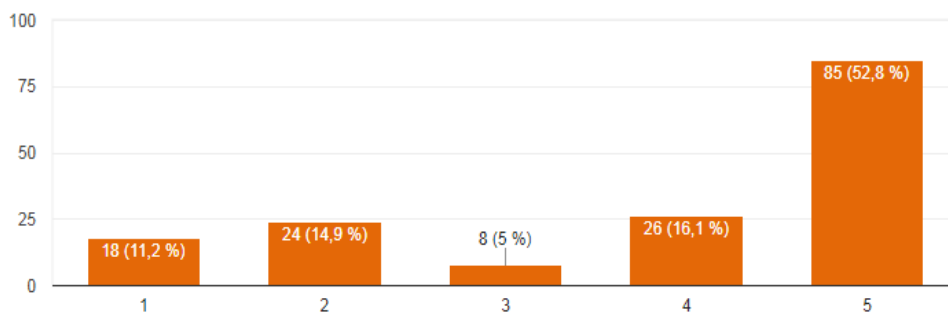


8. Turkish government favors Syrian refugees while the life in Turkey is getting more difficult

The decision of Ankara to grant temporary protection to refugees guarantees many rights in social area, including free education and healthcare. During the years, some prejudices occurred claiming that refugees “parasite” on the Turkish social system. Many of these prejudices are based on a feeling that the government helps Syrians more than Turks. This kind of prejudice is very common in Europe in the context of Roma people, especially in Central Europe (Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary). 111 participants (68,9%) agree with this statement – 85 (52,8%) agree absolutely. Only 26,1% of respondents disagreed.

8. Turkish government favors Syrian refugees while the life in Turkey is getting more difficult.

161 odpovedí

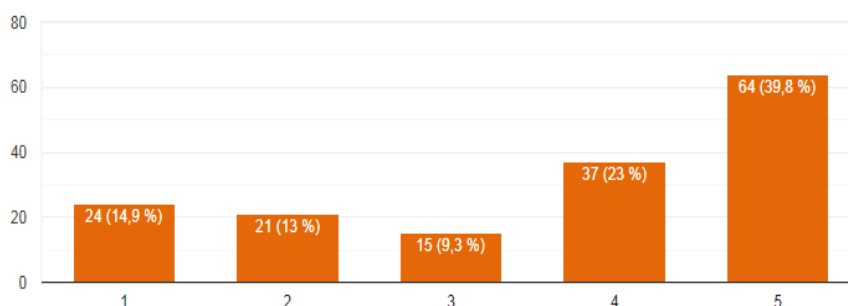


9. The presence of refugees is one of the reasons of high unemployment

This sentence follows the previous one and reflects the dissatisfaction of population with high (14%) unemployment in Turkey. Syrians are considered to be a cheap labour and they are often blamed to “steal jobs”. Just as at previous question, here we can also observe high agreement of the majority. 101 participants (62,8%) agree with this statement of which 64 (39,8%) agree absolutely. 24 (14,9%) absolutely disagreed and another 21 participants disagreed.

9. The presence of refugees is one of the reasons of high unemployment.

161 odpovedí

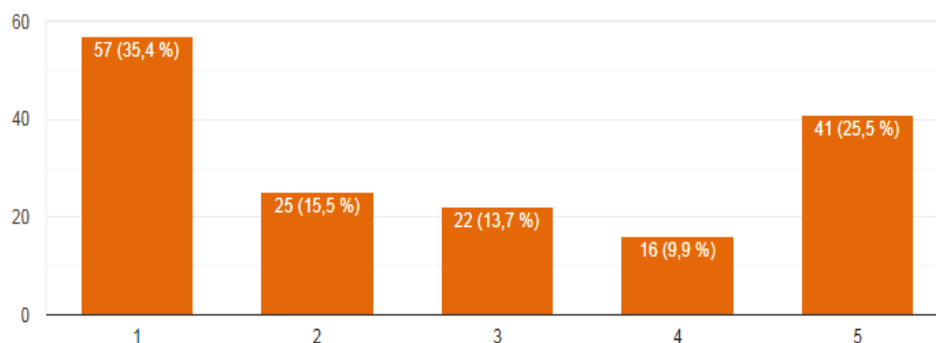


10. Groups of Syrian men and strictly dressed Syrian women irritate me

Some reports conducted in Turkish cities say that Turkish women complain about the high number of young Syrians walking through streets in groups. Conservatively dressed Syrian women, often wearing full-body veil (often visible in Kilis) might be negatively perceived especially by secular oriented Turks who, for instance, in the past negatively perceived even the wearing of hijab. Data show that 82 participants (50,9%) disagree with this sentence of which 57 absolutely disagree. 41 (25,5%) absolutely agree that strictly dressed Syrian women irritate them and another 16 agree by number 4.

10. Groups of Syrian men and strictly dressed Syrian women irritate me.

161 odpovedí

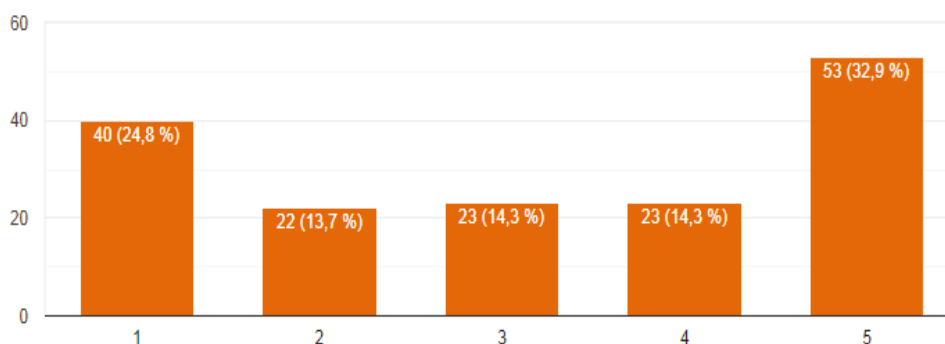


11. I avoid restaurants and shops owned by Syrian refugees

In the context of negative perceptions against refugees it might be interesting to look if Turks are avoiding shops or restaurants owned by Syrians. Many Syrians after some legal changes allowing them to work started to invest and open their own business, offer their products or services, often for lower prices compared to Turkish sellers. The data show that 73 participants (47,9%) are avoiding places owned by Syrians from which 53 participants (32,9%) absolutely agree with avoiding them. 23 participants (14,3%) chose the neutral answer and 62 participants (38,5%) do not avoid places owned by Syrians. There is a slight polarization to be observed, although it is questionable if avoiding Syrian restaurants and shops is due to their negative attitudes towards them or simply just preferring to support local Turkish enterprises. This topic needs further research.

11. I avoid restaurants and shops owned by Syrian refugees.

161 odpovedí



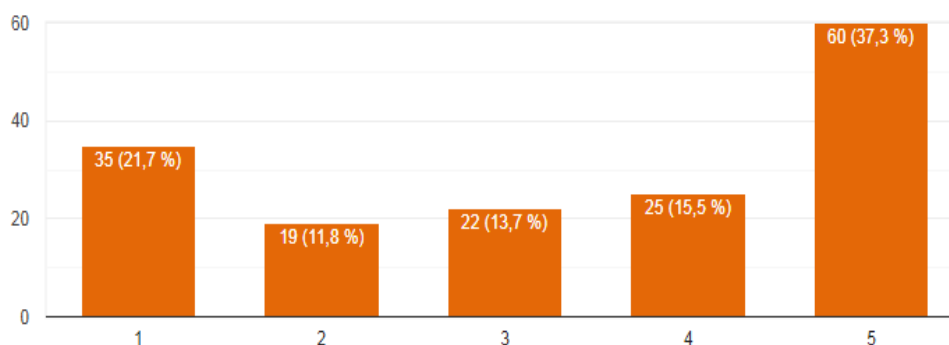
12. My opinions about Syrian refugees changed

As it was mentioned, refugees in Turkey were initially considered as temporary guests and Turks were meant to have a moral duty to accept and help those in need. During the escalation of the conflict in Syria, growing number of arriving refugees

and wave of terrorist attacks the perceptions started to change. 60 participants (37,3%) expressed their absolute agreement with this sentence and another 25 (15,5%) also agreed, it means more than a half of participants. 22 participants (13,7%) chose neutral answer and the rest 33,5% expressed their disagreement.

12. My opinions about Syrian refugees changed.

161 odpovedí

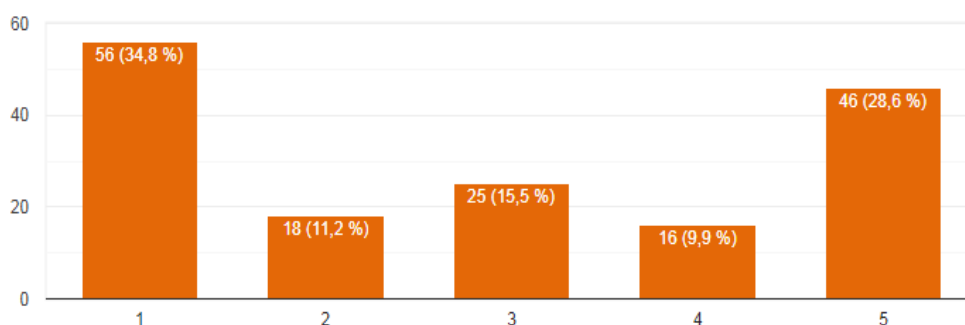


13. My vote in 31.3. 2019 local elections was influenced by my disagreement of the ongoing presence of Syrian refugees

Pre-election campaign in 2019 was specific for its aggressive rhetoric and using Syrian refugees as a tool to gain votes of angry voters, as mentioned in the introduction. A candidate of CHP and later the new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu stressed that refugees should be replaced from cities into refugee camps, reeducated. He even pointed at refugees as the biggest problem of Istanbul. Even if the anti-refugee statements were part of his successful campaign, it would be too naive to think that it was the only source of his victory. And as data show, it is not easy to conclude that dissatisfaction explicitly influenced determined the voting behavior. Only 38,5% of the participants agreed with this statement, 28,6% of them absolutely while 46% didn't agree with it, 34,8% absolutely disagreed. It means that only 62 respondent's voting behavior was influenced by disagreement of the presence of Syrian refugees, thus the majority didn't vote according to their opinion on refugees.

13. My vote in 31.3. 2019 local elections was influenced by my disagreement of the ongoing presence of Syrian refugees.

161 odpovedí



3.2. Second Part

Second part of the result analysis consists of comparing the answers of 52 respondents as voters from each alliance. As before, respondents had 13 topic related questions and a point scale from 1 (absolute disagreement) up to 5 (absolute agreement). After answering all the questions, each participant's vote brought the sum of points to the chart, maximum 65 points per 1 participant (13 questions X 5 points) or maximum 260 points per 1 question after the sum of all respondents (52 respondents X 5 points). Totally each alliance could gain maximum 3380 points (52 respondents per alliance X 65 points) and minimum 676 points (52 respondents X 13 points). After dividing voters into two political alliances and analysing the answers I can conclude the similarities and differences between the two groups.

1. I experienced a negative situation in daily life with Syrian refugees

52 participants among the voters of government alliance collected on this question in total 122 points and 9 participants expressed absolute agreement. The same number of participants among the voters of opposition alliance collected 186 points and 22 participants expressed absolute agreement. Data show that voters of opposition alliance claim to experience negative situation with Syrian refugees much more than voters of government alliance.

POINTS ²⁴	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Cumhur İttifakı (Ci)	20	13	9	1	9	122
Millet İttifakı (Mi)	8	8	4	10	22	186

2. I refuse to accept new refugees from Syria, regardless of possible political persecution and other dangers in their country

Voters of government alliance collected on this question in total 138 points and 10 participants expressed absolute agreement to refuse new refugees from Syria. The sum of points was higher among opposition voters – 213 points, 31 absolute agreements and only 5 absolute disagreements. A visible difference can be observed in the attitude of accepting new refugees from Syria regardless of the humanitarian and political situation over there. According to data, voters of the opposition have more negative attitude for accepting new refugees from Syria.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	14	15	8	5	10	138
Mi	5	3	6	7	31	213

3. I agree with returning back to Syria those refugees, who are in Turkey without legal documents

Quite similar answers might be identified on this question between the both group of participants. Voters of government alliance collected on this question in total 209 points which is their highest score of all 13 questions. It means that the voters of government alliance expressed their strongest agreement with this sentence. 31 of them absolutely agreed. Opposition voters collected even more points, 246. 45 of them absolutely agreed and only one disagreed. This topic with small differences connects voters from both groups, which is a rare situation in polarised Turkey.

²⁴ Numbers from 1 to 5 refer to the options where: 1 – absolute disagreement; 2 – disagreement; 3 – neutral; 4 – agreement; 5 – absolute agreement. Under the numbers there is the number of respondents who answered accordingly. The sum refers to the total collected points per one group in one question. The points rise per more negative attitude.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	5	6	3	7	31	209
Mi	0	1	5	1	45	246

4. There are huge cultural differences between Turks and Syrians

The question about cultural differences brought 158 points for the “government” group together with 10 absolute agreements. The difference between the answers was bigger than before – opposition voters collected 224 points together with 32 absolute agreements. It shows that voters of opposition parties in Turkey consider to differ from Syrians more than voters of government alliance.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	9	13	7	13	10	158
Mi	2	3	5	10	32	224

5. The presence of conservative refugees is a threat for secular character of Turkey

The biggest difference between both groups can be identified right here. Voters of more conservative government alliance collected only 103 points, the less of all 13 questions. Only 6 participants absolutely agreed and the most of participants (28) absolutely disagreed. Voters of ideologically different opposition alliance collected 230 points and 39 of them consider the presence of refugees as an absolute threat for secular character of Turkey. I assume that this significant difference is an evidence of strong political polarisation in Turkey. It is estimated that secular voters are more concerned about the future of Turkey’s character while more conservative voters do not believe that Syrian refugees can anyhow endanger it.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	28	11	5	2	6	103
Mi	2	3	5	3	39	230

6. In streets with higher refugee concentration I feel uncomfortable or unsafe

Government alliance voters collected 128 points and only 8 of them absolutely agreed. Opposition alliance voters collected in total 227 points with 34 absolute agreements. It is interesting that those participants who considered conservative refugees to be threat for secular character of Turkey answered this question almost the same. From this I suppose that voters who are concerned about the character of Turkey highly tend to feel unsafe or uncomfortable in the streets with high refugee concentration.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	19	12	7	6	8	128
Mi	2	2	5	9	34	227

7. Security in my city got worse due to the presence of Syrian refugees

There are no big differences compared to the previous question. Government alliance voters collected 127 points and they answered almost identically as in previous question. Opposition alliance voters collected 222 points and 33 of them absolutely agree about the worse security situation. It means that opinions about the worse security situation are related with unsafe and uncomfortable feelings when being in streets with higher concentration of refugees.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	15	19	4	8	6	127
Mi	4	3	4	8	33	222

8. Turkish government favors Syrian refugees while the life in Turkey is getting more difficult

As the sentence tells itself there is a logical expectation that opposition voters might agree with it more than voters of government alliance. However, it is interesting that even among the voters of government alliance some agreement might be identified. Government alliance collected 153 points and 12 of them absolutely agree that government spends too much money on refugees. Among opposition voters the numbers are even higher – 239 points and 43 absolute agreements, only 5 participants disagreed. The surprising result is not the high point of opposition voters but the fact that even among government alliance voters some

agreement might be observed. I assume that this dissatisfaction of government voters might be (with some uncertainty) reflected in the outcome of next general elections in Turkey. However, it is unclear whether the critical government voters were the same critical during the time of last general elections in 2018 or the shift occurred later. In case of the first option it is possible that the loyalty of those voters will remain.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	11	15	4	10	12	153
Mi	2	3	0	4	43	239

9. The presence of refugees is one of the reasons of high unemployment

Answers of participants and also the collected points almost copy the result of previous question. 9 government alliance voters absolutely agreed with this sentence and 23 of them do not think that refugees anyhow influenced the unemployment rate in Turkey. Opposition voters were more critical, collected 222 points with 35 absolute agreements.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	13	10	4	16	9	154
Mi	4	3	3	7	35	222

10. Groups of Syrian men and strictly dressed Syrian women irritate me

Sentence pointing on groups of Syrians and strictly dressed Syrian women collected small amount of points in both groups, although still showing a sign of polarisation between both groups. Government voters collected only 104 points and most of them (38) disagreed with the sentence and only 5 absolutely agreed. Opposition group collected in total 186 points and 22 absolute agreements. I assume that that groups of Syrian men and strictly dressed Syrian women irritate more the secular voters. However, it is also true that much more opposition voters are more concerned about the future of Turkey’s character than the way how Syrians dress or socialise in streets.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	28	10	5	4	5	104
Mi	7	6	11	6	22	186

11. I avoid restaurants and shops owned by Syrian refugees

It is interesting that even in the question of avoiding Syrian restaurants or shops are some differences. Data surprisingly show that visiting these kind of places might be influenced by political opinions of the participants. Government alliance voters collected 123 points and only 6 of them absolutely agreed while 31 have no problem to visit places owned by Syrians. Opposition alliance collected in total 198 points, 27 participants absolutely agreed and another 5 agreed by choosing number 4. Many opposition voters who oppose the presence of refugees, who are concerned about Turkey's character also avoid places owned by Syrians. Government alliance voters are much more benevolent and just as they do not consider conservative refugees to be a threat for Turkey, they also don't avoid visiting Syrians restaurants or shops.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	22	9	7	8	6	123
Mi	7	3	10	5	27	198

12. My opinions about Syrian refugees changed

This is the second most polarising sentence in the survey. Government alliance voters collected 124 points and only 8 participants absolutely agreed while 31 participants don't think their opinions about Syrians changed during the years. Numbers among opposition voters are much different with 217 collected points and 30 absolute agreements.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	21	10	9	4	8	124
Mi	3	3	6	10	30	217

13. My vote in 31.3. 2019 local elections was influenced by my disagreement of the ongoing presence of Syrian refugees

The last survey question had relatively low points for both groups – 116 points for government alliance and 181 points for opposition alliance, the less of all questions. Only 8 voters of government alliance absolutely agreed and 34 disagreed. Among opposition voters 24 absolutely agreed and 12 absolutely disagreed that their voting behavior in last local elections would be influenced by any disagreement about the presence of refugees, even if some politicians were using anti-refugee statements as a political tool in their rhetoric.

POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	SUM
Ci	24	10	8	2	8	116
Mi	12	5	5	6	24	181

CONCLUSION

By conducting this research connected to my thesis and analysing the answers I conclude to findings, based on which I can evaluate some general opinions of the society and also identify which group of voters tend to a more negative attitude in perceptions on Syrian refugees in Turkey. Based on the evaluation of the results in first part of the research I conclude, that about half of the participants (49,1%) is against accepting new refugees from Syria and a large part (76,4%) supports the idea of repatriation or deportation of those Syrian refugees who are in Turkey without any legal documents allowing them to reside in Turkey. These negative attitudes together with the closed borders and ended Open Door Policy during the alarming situation in Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Idlib might be a warning sign of a possible humanitarian catastrophe when hundreds of thousands of refugees currently trapped in Idlib will be forced to stay there regardless of the dangers they might face. The majority of the respondents (67,1%) also believes that the Syrians do not share cultural similarities with Turks despite of the fact that both countries have majority of Sunni Muslim population. 51,6% also believes that the presence of conservative refugees means a serious threat to long built secular character of Turkey despite of the fact that Syrians have no political rights in Turkey, thus without any legal tool to change the policy making in Turkey. Negatively perceived is also the security situation in districts and suburbs with refugee concentration. 59,6% of participants doesn't feel safe in those districts which have high concentration of Syrian refugees. A warning signal to the current government of Turkey might be also the fact that 68,9% of all participants agrees with a stance that Ankara applied too

many benefits for refugees at the expense of Turks, while 62,8% of participants consider the refugees as reason for current unemployment rates in Turkey. Regarding the first part of the survey I conclude that Ankara is facing a growing pressure from the society which is pushing the authorities to resolute steps such as closing the borders to avoid a new influx of refugees, deportation of refugees from Istanbul without residency approvals²⁵ or even cross-border anti-terrorist operations against terrorist groups of YPG/PKK and Daesh to secure the area for safe repatriation of millions of refugees.

The main value of this research is that it identifies interesting differences between the two political blocs of government and opposition. These differences between the voters of AKP/MHP alliance and CHP/İYİ/SP/DS alliance appear to be significant. As the sum of results show, I conclude that the voters of secular opposition alliance (2793 points) tend much more to negative attitudes, prejudices and discriminative opinions than the voters of conservative government alliance (1760 points). In all of the survey questions the opposition voters used the answer of absolute agreement more often than the voters of government alliance and that is the main reason of huge difference in the sum of points. Unfriendly attitudes and anti-refugee rhetoric of some opposition politicians (such as Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu the head of Millet İttifakı, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Meral Akşener and others) are translated into the society and they reflect some very common opinions of their voters. The voters of secular opposition, among other things, are much more bothered by full-body veiled Syrian women and they are much more concerned that the presence of conservative refugees will be a serious threat to long built secular character of Turkey. However, among the voters of conservative government alliance these concerns are only minor or minimal (6 voters of AKP against 39 voters of opposition from total of 52 participants). The same participants in the survey expressed higher security concerns in the streets, while the majority of government alliance voters doesn't think that security in the streets of Turkish cities got worse due to the presence of refugees. Dissatisfaction with high expenditures on refugee care is obviously also higher among opposition voters. But it is important to mention that even among the voters of government alliance there are number of participants who think that the government of Turkey should have spent the money on helping Turks instead of Syrians.

Part of the society with this strong negative inclination, especially the opposition voters relating to secularism, presents a potential danger due to its tendency to normalize intolerant discriminative discourse and prejudices against Syrian refugees who are the most vulnerable group of population in Turkey. Some

²⁵ As documented by non-governmental organizations Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

guilt might be blamed on those politicians, who repeatedly refer on refugees in a negative way legitimising the incorrect misperceptions about refugees as a burden for Turkey from economic, cultural and ethical aspects. As the research showed, political parties using strong anti-refugee rhetoric (especially CHP and İYİ) have much more critical and dissatisfied voters than conservative AKP and MHP. The voters of AKP, which was promoting the Open Door Policy for years are much more open and benevolent to the presence of Syrians and they are much less concerned about the security or character of Turkey. However, the fact that even among AKP voters there are voters who are dissatisfied with high expenditures on refugee care might be a warning signal for the government to take necessary steps to avoid loss of votes in upcoming elections of any kind. The recent military activities in northern Syria (*Operation Peace Spring* in Oct. 2019, *Operation Spring Shield* in Feb. 2020) prove that Turkey is taking the challenge of growing anti-refugee pressure very seriously, determined to repatriate large numbers of refugees instead of accepting new ones.

Finally, despite of the rising pressure from the society, Turkey's role in handling the presence of Syrian refugees is a unique example and a successful story. As from a European perspective, my field observations for purposes of the thesis proved that a multicultural society is achievable under strong government support and social acceptance or tolerance. Visited Turkish cities are example of a possible coexistence, despite of cultural or language differences or even growing attitudes of pressure. Turkey with a long emigration and immigration history will, in my opinion, still remain as country with unique hospitable culture open for those who need help and instead of constant strict criticism from EU institutions or states on the domestic or often misunderstood foreign policy of Turkey, much stronger acknowledgement of Turkey's huge effort on Syrian refugees well-being should be stressed. Accepting millions of refugees fleeing a brutal conflict and a regime cracking down on its own citizens is not an easy task, yet Turkey found a way to deal with this burden. However, to continue this successful mission is possible only with responsible political steps and rhetoric, which should absolutely avoid harsh statements and anti-refugee sentiments, and with an international solution to the ongoing crisis in northern Syria.

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