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# Syrian Refugees between Turkish Nationalism and Citizenship

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores local people's attitudes toward the naturalization of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Based upon fieldwork data, I explored the way the people of Bolu construct Syrian refugees as the "Other" on the grounds of citizenship and the way these narratives reproduce a nationalistic discourse in Turkey. The results indicated that the people reject granting citizenship for ideological reasons and on the grounds of a subjective nationalistic understanding of nation-state membership. Simultaneously, extending such citizenship rights as state welfare (healthcare and education) was seen as a social right or courtesy toward their Muslim neighbors.

## KEYWORDS

Syrian refugees; nationalism; Muslim; Other; Turkish citizenship; naturalization; social rights; ethnic; nation-state

As of June 2020, there were 3.9 million registered refugees<sup>1</sup> in Turkey (European Commission (EC), 2018). Of these, Syrians constitute the largest group, followed by Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and Somalis. Approximately one hundred thousand of them live in camps (6-10 percent) (Baban et al., 2017a; Icduygu & Nimmer, 2020). However, most have settled in various cities on the South-eastern border, including Kilis, Urfa, Antep, and Mardin, while many have chosen to live in Western cities such as Istanbul or Bursa (Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü (GIGM), 2016). A relatively small number of refugees have settled in Bolu, where the field research in this study was conducted.

This article examines the way the local people in Bolu construct refugees as the national and ethnic "Other" on the grounds of citizenship debates and the way these representations reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic nationalistic and chauvinistic discourse in Turkey. As in many other countries, the exclusion and discrimination of the refugees in Turkey are based upon multifaceted social and political processes and require a close look at the specific legal arrangements. However, because of the limitations of space, I will give only a brief account of the Syrian refugees' legal status in Turkey.

Turkish law grants refugee status only to those who come from the European continent under certain conditions (see UNHCR, 1951, p.1). Individuals who are fleeing from other countries are allowed to remain in Turkey with a *conditional refugee* status until they are settled in a third country (Parlak & Şahin, 2015). However, Syrians followed a different legal path. With reference to their common religion, the Turkish Government welcomed the Syrian "Muslim Brothers" as "guests," a status that implied a short-term stay and left the Syrians in limbo. As it became clear that they would remain in Turkey longer than anticipated, the Turkish Government introduced legislation in 2014 intended to provide the Syrian refugees with a quasi-legal status to meet some of their immediate needs. This law changed their legal status from short-term *guests* to *temporary protection* (Baban et al., 2017b; Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). Temporary protection is provided to "foreigners, ... who have ... crossed in masses the borders of Turkey to seek immediate and temporary protection..." (Çelik, 2015, pp. 68-70). However, with temporary

protection status, Syrians have only limited options to settle in a safe third country<sup>2</sup> (Baban et al., 2017b; Ineli-Ciger, 2015).

Nonetheless, the “temporary protection” improved their access to certain social rights and benefits, such as healthcare, education, and access to work permits (Icduygu & Nimmer, 2020; Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). Yet, free access to these benefits is conditional upon registration in their city of residence, and registration is an obstacle for many, as it limits their ability to move to another city with more employment opportunities (Togral Koca, 2016). A further significant change in the Syrian refugees’ legal status was the amendment to the citizenship law in 2016 (Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). The rationale for this change was to offer citizenship status to skilled refugees with economic and cultural capital (Bozdag, 2020; Icduygu & Nimmer, 2020). As of 2019, more than 117 thousand Syrians obtained Turkish citizenship (Erdogan, 2020). Although this is a small number (3.3%), it caused a heated public debate. According to Bozdag’s (2020) study, the vast majority of the population opposes granting citizenship to Syrians unequivocally (c.f., Icduygu & Nimmer, 2020 and Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). The measures and attempts to achieve better integration, free access to social rights, the policy implementations with respect to work permits, and the amendment of the Turkish Citizenship law in favor of certain Syrian refugees have improved the status of some significantly. However, they have not brought about a noticeable change for the majority, and they still lack a status that would ensure long-term residency and unconditional citizenship regardless of their economic or cultural capital.

Accordingly, although the data for this article were collected before the implementation of the changes with respect to work permits and citizenship, the results presented here remain relevant, as the perceptions and attitudes of the majority population in Turkey regarding naturalization of the Syrians have not changed (Baban et al., 2017b; Bozdag, 2020; Icduygu & Nimmer, 2020; Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018; Simsek, 2018). Moreover, given the increase in media reports of racism and discrimination against, and physical attacks of Syrians, the situation has even worsened (Bozdag, 2020).

There is a considerable body of literature on the local people’s perceptions of refugees in Turkey (e.g., see Nielsen, 2016; Erdogan, 2014; Özcürümez & Mete, 2020 ). Most of the literature on these local-level refugee dynamics in Turkey has focused either on large cities with large numbers of refugees, such as Istanbul and Ankara, and/or border cities with a considerably large number of Syrian refugees, such as Antep, Urfa (Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018; Simsek, 2018, 2021), Kilis (Harunogullari & Akcadag Celik, 2019), or Mersin (Mete, 2018), while the local peoples’ perceptions in cities with comparably few refugees remains understudied.

In that context, as one of the relatively prosperous cities with a growing economy based upon services (tourism) and agriculture, Bolu constitutes an appropriate site for an analysis of nationalism and citizenship regarding refugees. Bolu is known as one of the most conservative/nationalist cities in Turkey, as seen in the elections and voter alignments. This was also confirmed recently by the city’s mayor’s anti-refugee attitude, as he instructed administrations to halt aid to refugees. A further important feature of Bolu is its relatively homogeneous population with respect to the religious and ethnic constellation. Compared to the neighboring cities of Kocaeli and Düzce, which have, among others, some Kurdish and/or Alevi populations via in-migration, the majority of Bolu’s local population is comprised of Sunni, ethnic Turks. Accordingly, the people of Bolu experienced the Other through the settlement of refugees for the first time. Thus, contrary to most of the literature that has focused on regions with large numbers of refugees, Bolu, with its relatively small proportion of refugees (1.2% of 311 thousand)<sup>3</sup> constitutes an interesting case with which to study the interplay between political and local public debates on refugees and citizenship.

Within this frame, this study’s primary purpose was to investigate the local people’s attitudes toward the naturalization of the Syrians in an ethnically homogenous, nationalist/conservative city with a small number of refugees. The goal was to analyze the way the refugees are represented as the national and ethnic “Other” by employing the concept of “the Other.” In doing so, the study revealed the way these narratives reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic nationalistic and chauvinistic public discourse.

The analysis of the fieldwork data obtained from individual in-depth interviews showed primarily three threads through which the refugees are represented as the Other: Nationalism/patriotism; ethnic identity, and resource allocation. These categories were created from the themes articulated in the narratives, such as fatherland, state, patriotism, war, loyalty, Turkishness, and social benefits. These leitmotifs are not separate from each other, but are somewhat entangled instead. In this respect, this article consists of three main sections: The contextual background and current literature in the Introduction are followed by the first section in which the theory is framed, and the concepts of citizenship and the related process of othering are discussed briefly. The second section presents the research's methodological approach and the fieldwork details. In light of the discussion above, the fourth section offers an in-depth examination of the way refugees' "otherisation" based upon nationalism/chauvinism and resource distribution is constructed. In doing so, respondents' attitudes toward citizenship and social rights were the primary questions of interest. Finally, the findings are discussed.

### **Citizenship: Closure or crossing?**

With the increase in global human migration, the question about the inclusion/exclusion of migrants in the host society has become one of the principal concerns in recent years, and the subject of nation-state citizenship has moved more toward the center of academic debates.

Some authors have stated that citizenship is related closely to the identity question. According to De la Paz (2012), citizenship is an identity as much as a legal status. Therefore, citizenship has both objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension includes certain rights and duties that the state assigns to its members. Thus, citizenship represents the relationship between the individual and the state, while the subjective dimension expresses a sense of loyalty and belonging. However, the point that needs to be emphasized here is that objective citizenship does not guarantee subjective citizenship in itself. Stated differently, a citizen's rights and duties cannot and do not guarantee the sense of belonging or loyalty to the country in which s/he is a citizen (De la Paz, 2012). Nevertheless, a sense of belonging and loyalty to a country is related to the way the state and its citizens perceive immigrants and the way they construct the meaning of citizenship (Bauböck, 2002). The author employed the notion of "transnational citizenship" "...not only to refer to the actions and social networks of migrants but also to describe their lives or identities within the broader political communities and the changes in political institutions" (p. 7). In a post-Marshallian light, Brubaker (1992) and Joppke (1999) indicated that the nation-state defines citizenship as a way to exclude immigrants. Brubaker (1992) stated:

Citizenship is not only an instrument of closure, a prerequisite for the enjoyment of certain rights or participation in certain types of interaction. It is also an object of closure, a status to which access is restricted. (p. 31)

Another concept that has been discussed widely is Soysal's (1994, 2011) notion of "postnational citizenship." "Postnational citizenship confers upon every person the right and duty of participation in the authority structures and public life of a polity, regardless of their historical or cultural ties to that community" (Soysal, 1994, p. 3). The author stated further that two incongruent elements of modern citizenship in the postwar era, identity and rights, were separated. While rights became legally universal and defined uniformly at the global level, in contrast, identities maintained their particularity, as they are still perceived to be bounded territorially. Hence, providing non-nation-state members with citizenship rights does not inevitably require their incorporation into the national collectivity. Instead, the social rights granted to national citizens, as defined legally by the nation-state, have been extended to include those who are not nation-state citizens, but live permanently in that nation-state. However, the nation-state remains the central structure in organizing the membership, particularly the material realization of individual rights and privileges, as well as regulating the access to social resources. This reflects the duality between the postwar global system's two principles: National sovereignty and universal human rights (Soysal, 1994).

Many authors have expanded the discussion by redefining individual rights as human rights and focusing on the concept of transnational membership (Jacobson, 1997; Sassen, 2003). For example, according to Sassen (2003), the global city has been reshaped as a part of a de-nationalized space that allows a partial conception of citizenship to be reinvented. Bosniak (2006) and Sassen (2003) emphasized that the nation-state and national citizenship remain significant. However, they pointed out that other forms of identity, rights, and citizenship practices were added. Thus, the practice, experience, and institutionalization of nation-state citizenship have begun to show developments that are regional or subnational (Manatschal et al., 2020), transnational, non-national, postnational (Brubaker, 1992; Soysal, 1994, 2011), or articulated with respect to the nation-state (Bosniak, 2006; Joppke, 1999).

In Turkey, on the other hand, the republican model of citizenship has become dominant over time. This citizenship model emphasizes *duties and obligations* rather than social rights, as seen in the liberal individualist approach (Üstel, 2004). Üstel stated in her outstanding work, in which she examined the historical textbooks on citizenship used in secondary schools' curriculum, that the young Republic of Turkey's establishment advanced the republican model of citizenship vigorously. In this, Turkish citizenship was framed so that it imposed duties to civilization and patriotism vehemently. This model of citizenship constructed a typology of an ideal or "praised citizen." A praised citizen was portrayed as someone who carries out his/her duties and obligations in the best way possible and demonstrates civility (urbanity/modernity) and patriotism. An ideal citizen also carries out his/her responsibilities toward the family, society, and the state by paying taxes, upholding the public order, and (men) engaging in military service above all. Thus, the republican project of citizenship is based upon the logic of state preeminence and national loyalty (Üstel, 2004; c.f., Kardam & Cengiz, 2011; Atasoy, 2011). However, in recent years, particularly during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) period, the concept of "civilized citizens" has been eroded to create a hegemony of *religious Sunni* citizens (Üstel, 2004). It can even be said that in recent years, a praised citizen is not only a religious Sunni Muslim, but also a nationalistic or even chauvinistic one. In that context, Üstel (2004) stated:

The essential characteristic of the citizen's profile is that it is not a civilian but a militant one, and it has three main components: patriotism, rights and tasks systematic, and threat/danger perception. Firstly, the objective is to shape patriotism based on territorial and cultural/ethnic sensitivity and kinship feelings. Secondly, according to the rights and duties system, a praised citizen is a citizen *owing duties*<sup>4</sup>. In other words, rights exist for the fulfillment of duties. Finally, the function of the perception of threat/danger is to make 'the state of mental mobilization, hegemonic in the society', created by pointing to the 'Other'. (Transposed by Taşkın, 2014, p. 365)

The construction of the Other is essential to position oneself and create meaning (Hall, 1997b). The process of othering involves generating relative meaning by creating dichotomies or binary oppositions (Saussure, 1960). However, binary oppositions that are fraught with meaning are reductive and straightforward; they are not neutral, but contain a power relationship because one side of the duo is always dominant (Derrida, 1976). Hence, the construction of refugees as the Other contributes to not only their marginalization, but also positions them as the subaltern (Hall, 1997a; Said, 1978). Consequently, citizenship is one of the principal ways to define the Other. Citizenship as an institution separates individuals into *we* and *them*, and combined with nationalism, becomes a means of exclusion. In that context, it can be said that the local people of Bolu establish or reproduce their power through othering. Hence, the current prevailing understanding of citizenship in Turkey is associated closely with the nation-state that constructs simplistic citizen/non-citizen binaries (Baban et al., 2017a).

## Methods

This article is part of a broader research project conducted in Bolu in the autumn of 2015. The study investigated the mutual perceptions of refugees<sup>5</sup> and the local people. This article covers

only one part of the project overall: The way local people represent refugees as the Other via national and ethnic discourses about naturalization.

Overall, fifty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with the local (native) people of Bolu. Because of space limitations and the need to use only the most expressive quotes, the data from only the forty-four of the interviews are considered in this article. The interviewees were selected randomly, and to ensure diversity in the sampling, all possible occupations, levels of education, ages above 18, and the gender balance were considered. Ethnicity and class variables were not considered because, as mentioned earlier, the city's population is relatively ethnically homogeneous. Class differences are not pronounced, but the respondents' occupations and/or educational level may reflect their economic status in part. The interviews were conducted in either the interviewees' home or workplace and in a small number of cases, in public spaces.

Among the forms of purposive sampling, convenience and snowball sampling were employed. The interviewers interviewed people they knew or did not know and reached other participants through their acquaintances or neighbors. Thus, the interviewers benefited from each other's social networks and guided each other. The questions focused on local people's thoughts and opinions about granting citizenship to Syrian refugees, their permanent settlement, and access to such social services as healthcare, education, and welfare benefits.

The most effective data collection technique to answer this research's central question is the in-depth face-to-face interview. An interview's purpose is to understand people's perspectives by entering into their inner world and understanding first hand unobserved phenomena such as attitudes, thoughts, interpretations, mental perceptions, reactions, and so forth (Glesne, 2013). As the purpose was to identify the similarities and differences between the narratives on various topics through comparisons, a "structured interview" composed of prepared, standardized, open-ended questions posed in the same style and order, was used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and lasted approximately 25–40 min. The interviewers who conducted the interviews transcribed them.

Although this is not a grounded theory study, the concepts and applications of such research were considered in the data analysis. The data were subjected to thematic analysis to reveal themes and patterns. First, the transcribed interviews were coded through detailed readings by the author, and themes or categories and subcategories were created. A continuous case comparison was carried out to identify the patterns in the emerging themes or categories and determine whether there were pattern variations in each theme (Glesne, 2013). The data were organized and then subjected to the processes of description, analysis, and interpretation (Geertz, 1973) to identify the key concepts and relations among them (Glesne, 2013).

## **Attitudes of the local population (results)**

### ***Nationalism/chauvinism versus refugees' naturalization***

As mentioned earlier, according to Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), 2021 vast majority (98 percent) of the refugees live in urban and semi-urban areas. Local people in Bolu encounter Arab-speaking refugees in few public places, where they are visible as groups, and few works with them or have them as neighbors. Thus, although most have no direct contact with them, there is growing resentment, exclusion, and racism (Koser Akcapar & Simsek, 2018). When asked what they think about granting Turkish citizenship status to the Syrian refugees who reside in Turkey, most of the respondents expressed adverse reactions, except for a small number who had no significant objections. It was noticeable that the narratives that rejected naturalization referred to four primary reasons. The first and most important reason was the supposed disloyalty attributed to the refugees. The second was associated with the construction of an ethnic nationalism according to which Turkish citizenship is reserved only for ethnic Turks. The third reason was related to the perception that refugees are invaders. Finally, the fourth reason was concerned with resource allocation, in which such resources as



jobs and financial aid were presumed to be available only for Turkish nationals. Except for healthcare and education, the refugees are seen as unjust potential recipients of scarce resources.

### ***Syrians are disloyal and do not deserve Turkish citizenship***

Some respondents claimed that Turkish citizenship should be granted only under the condition of an unquestionable patriotic commitment.

*I do not want them to become Turkish citizens. They ran away. They would be of no use to Turkey. If there were a war here, they would run away again (Man, 44, manager) <sup>6</sup>.*

*These are traitors from birth. They did not defend the Ottomans; instead, by joining the traitor England, they stabbed us in our back in Yemen and Tripoli.<sup>7</sup> Look, he is still a traitor to his home country, and he dares to come here (Man, 42, café owner).*

Syrian refugees are seen as the descendants of those responsible for the end of the glorified Ottoman era (Finkel, 2007). The Syrians were not only “traitors to the Ottomans” but also to their nation. As the progenies of such “treacherous ancestors,” they would be disloyal to Turkey as well. Thus, on the grounds of their alleged traitorousness, Syrian refugees constitute the opposite of a praised citizen, who is obliged to show his loyalty as a citizen of the respective state. The narrative also re-constructed an essentialistic view of the nationality of a fixed and constant being by pointing to historical accounts.

Interestingly, loyalty, which is linked to a territorially defined nationalism, usually expected from its own nationals, appeared to be extended to other nationals. As Leoussi (2001) stated, territorial nationalists tend to idealize citizenship and demand absolute loyalty. The rhetoric that Syrian refugees are traitors is a widespread argument in the othering process that is put forward by the local people against their naturalization. In that respect, it represents a classical model of citizenship that was embedded in territorialized notions of patriotism and cultural belonging and fixed in historical constructions (Üstel, 2004).

### ***No Turkish citizenship to those who are not Turks***

The second reason for opposing naturalization is the perception that citizenship is an integral part of ethnicity that one can acquire only through birth. In this view, one’s own ethnic group and country are perceived as unique and superior. The downward comparison of other ethnic groups and countries is combined with a blind, uncritical attachment to one’s own group and country (Staub, 1997, cited in Raijman et al., 2008). These narratives reproduce ethnic nationalism by othering the refugees.

*No Turkish citizenship to those who are not Turks! I do not want anything like that. Then, they should take away my Turkish citizenship status (Man, 42, café owner).*

Although Turkish citizens are composites of different ethnic (Turks, Kurds, Roma, etc.), religious (Muslim, Christian, Orthodox, etc.), and denominational (Alevites, Sunnis, etc.) groups, this is not acknowledged formally in all its facets; hence, the participants’ opinions reflect the hegemonic discourse of citizenship, and display an essentialist approach that associates citizenship with “race.” According to the “Turkish Citizenship Law” adopted in 2009, Turkish citizenship can be acquired by descent, by birth, as well as after birth (Official Gazette, 2009). Recent changes in the citizenship law under the AKP government even imply a turn toward de-ethnization (although in favor of class) decoupled from the constraints of the previous citizenship regime (Serdar, 2021). However, the ethnicized understanding of citizenship from the 1982 Constitution states that “Everybody who is bound to the Turkish state by citizenship is considered Turk” (Kaboğlu, 2014, p. 322) appears to be more prevalent. Although the state is the central structure in organizing the membership, as Soysal (1994) stated, without public participation in decision-making, such as the changes in citizenship, the local people do not recognize the reforms, as indicated in the narratives.

Consequently, because kinship or ethnicity constitutes the hegemonic discourse of individual-state relations in Turkey, the old view appears to demarcate Turkish citizenship as a privileged status and indicates that only ethnic Turks can attain it. As Bauböck (2002) stated, some evaluate citizenship from a voluntarist perspective, but they still approve of an old doctrine of eternal loyalty. On the other hand, others regard citizenship as a status passed from one generation to another or as a racial symbol of ethnic origin and thus, as immutable. Regardless of the social rights-based inclusion, the result is that refugees are denied incorporation into the national collectivity (Soysal, 1994).

### ***They should be aware that they are guests***

The third reason the respondents reject Turkish citizenship for refugees was the perception that they are an alien nation of invaders, an inevitable disaster, and an insoluble situation.

*Now we are not pro-war people. Of course, they came here to escape the war ... However, if they had been limited in numbers and to specific places ... they would not have been spread all over, would not be in our lives... (Woman, 39, pharmacist).*

*The state could have collected them in a place. When they came to Bolu, the municipality could have built a small city or prefabricated houses... not in the city center, but a camp outside. Okay, they have the needs, they should be met, the food will be given, then the health services will be given (Woman, 34, civil servant).*

*It makes more sense if the state would have collected them around a village ... It is better to give them some land to cultivate to prevent discrimination from being supported for their independent living (Man, 48, business owner).*

*They should know that they are guests. Let us do our duty as a host country as much as we can...But if they have to stay, they should stay in camps in the South East... I mean, they should have their own world (Tradesman, 50).*

*It [citizenship] should not be granted; everyone should go to his/her own country and live there (Woman, 34, civil servant).*

According to these interviewees, refugees' permanent residency in the country must be controlled. They should return or be segregated spatially, preferably in geographically remote camps on the South-eastern borders, an area in Turkey that is populated predominantly by Kurds and/or Arabs. Hence, they should be separated from the local citizens of Bolu. In short, they should be prevented from mingling with the (ethnic) Turkish population. Although several interviewees with good intentions proposed spatial segregation to "prevent discrimination," the majority exhibited somewhat territorial nationalism, if not chauvinism, in which the nationals must defend a demarcated territory of a state (Brubaker, 1992; Üstel, 2004). These views resemble discourses of "invading refugees" in Europe (e.g., *Flüchtlingsströme*) and the state's policy of refugee settlement in remote camps. Bauböck (2002) referred to such a narrative of the danger of *Überfremdung* (foreign infiltration) as racist rhetoric. Contrary to the notion of postnational citizenship, these narratives reflect the classical citizenship model that is nation-state bounded (Joppke, 1999), and entails a territorial relationship between the individual and the state from which refugees are excluded.

### ***Yes, but conditional citizenship***

Although not opposed fundamentally, some interviewees endorsed granting citizenship to refugees only under certain conditions. Others were concerned that refugees may become "...a threat to the unity of the nation"—rhetoric used often for the ongoing Kurdish question in Turkey.

*Granting Turkish citizenship is a matter of choice. If they [refugees] want to be Turkish citizens, it does not bother me...Yet, I am a nationalist man, if they would become a threat to the unity of our nation and people, in the future, then it will be a problem, of course (Man, 22, waiter).*



This narrative reveals implicitly the expectation that the refugees, when naturalized, must assimilate at the least, but must not demand rights based upon their cultural differences, as “the unity of the nation” requires a homogeneous cultural structure (Anderson, 1983). Thus, one who is defined as culturally Other is not supposed to act as such, but is expected instead to conform to the “national culture” Once more, the concepts of nation and nationality determine the perception of membership in the nation-state. It is also striking that proclaiming one’s own nationalism as a matter of course has become commonplace in discourses related to refugees, citizenship, and the nation in Turkey.

In certain circumstances, refugees can and may influence politics in the host country. As Bauböck (2002) indicated, states take precautions not only against decreasing population, but also use refugees for their own interests. Public discussion of the Syrian refugees’ naturalization has focused often on whether the governing party (AKP) obtains a political gain from refugees or how far the Syrian (Muslim) refugees constitute potential voters for the AKP. This issue came up in some interviews:

*[Citizenship] can be granted as long as it is not used for political advantage because they also can provide a specific contribution to Turkey. After all, there is a common culture; we have been living together with them... They can be Turkish citizens. However, if it is done to obtain a political gain, I am against it (Man, 22, student).*

Again, other narratives reflected the duties and obligations approach to citizenship.

*If they want, citizenship can be granted... if it is granted, then they need to work like ordinary citizens. They should not display themselves as different from the Turkish people. If native workers are working with the minimum wage, they should be paid the minimum wage (Man, 37, worker).*

This quote illustrates very well the current state-citizen relation that is determined by the citizens’ duties. Turkish citizenship does not confer more rights than duties, such as the duty to work for the minimum wage. This view rests upon the general assumption that the refugees are prioritized to receive benefits without working.<sup>8</sup>

Some interviewees considered citizenship attainable; moreover, they made suggestions regarding the potential forms of membership, under the condition to keep the numbers limited.

*Citizenship has different dimensions ... For example, dual citizenship practice can be applied (Man, 36, self-employed).*

*Double citizenship can be a possibility ... I do not want it to be granted to many people, though (Woman, 39, pharmacist).*

Dual citizenship, practiced frequently in states with a multi-culturalist policy (e.g., Great Britain), interrupts the presumed analogy between membership and territory and makes the boundaries of membership fluid; this fluidity, in turn, becomes formalized insofar that dual citizenship conforms to the postnational model that Soysal (1994) suggested. However, the complexities of dual citizenship for refugees from war-torn countries need to be considered, but are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Concluding this section, it can be said that the majority of the respondents are opposed to refugees’ naturalization, and justified their attitude from a nationalistic, chauvinistic, and essentialist ethnic perspective on citizenship. On the other hand, several respondents appeared to have a positive, albeit conditional approach to naturalization. Despite the changes in the citizenship law in favor of the refugees, the local people appear not to be ready to include the refugees in the national collective, which is not necessarily a prerequisite for granting the social rights-based citizenship that Soysal (1994) suggested.

### **Citizenship and resource distribution**

As stated above, the prevailing negative stance toward the Syrian refugees’ naturalization could be clustered into four categories: The first three were nationalism expressed via notions of loyalty,

ethnicity, and legal status. The last point related to citizenship attainment was resource distribution, such as income support, health services, and education. While the former three categories refer to subjective elements of identity and belonging, this section discusses the objective dimensions or social rights of citizenship (De la Paz, 2012; Soysal, 1994).

Resource distribution is frequently one of the most critical indicators of inequality and, therefore, of discrimination. Citizenship is expected to assure equal access to resources, at least ideally. Sharing resources with refugees is one of the main concerns that the interviewees articulated. While most opposed citizenship based upon the rhetoric of resource insufficiency, many expressed the idea that Turkish citizens deserve priority.

### **Social aid: the state must give priority to its citizens**

Except for very few, respondents generally did not have sufficient information about refugees' social rights or the benefits that they may obtain. At the time of the fieldwork, social aid distribution to refugees was somewhat irregular and informal, if at all, depending upon the municipality's (Bolu's) conduct. However, many assumed that the refugees were provided with all benefits, ranging from financial aid and food to clothing, housing, and so on. On the basis of this misinformation, most interviewees responded to whether the state should provide financial aid to the refugees with irritability and resentment.

*I think the state's citizens should come first ... The official hunger threshold fell; this must be considered at first, the people of other countries can be helped later ... for the state, the own citizens must have priority (Man, 36, self-employed).*

*We have so many hungry; we have too many poor and too many homeless, some die outside, we see on the news ... I feel very sorry for them personally. If the aid given to them [refugees] were given to our nation [people], there would be no problem left in our country. Constantly spending money on them... I have friends abroad ...: there is no aid for Turkish people; they help their own people. They discriminate against us. Not only the Turks, but they also discriminate against those from other countries. Why don't we do the same? Why don't we defend our folks?... They [refugees] take advantage, all are free of charge, as far as I know, medicines as well, and they receive state aid, from the municipality, charcoal, charitable aid, food aid, they get psychological support, counseling services, what can I say the state provides these not even to our people (Man, 43, merchant).*

*... I think it is wrong. Why? Once I saw: The man [refugee] was entering the market. He can quickly fill two trolleys. What he bought I cannot buy in one year; I do not have the means. In Turkey, there are so many who work on the minimum wage limit. When there are so many poor people, providing such luxurious life to them [refugees] makes me angry (Man, 44, manager).*

The prevailing perception is that the government prioritizes refugees and that economically disadvantaged Turkish citizens are being treated unjustly. This anger with, and latent criticism of, the government rests upon the perception that refugees constitute an economic threat against already disadvantaged Turkish citizens. Considering the ethnicity-bound-perception of citizenship discussed above, the question that can be raised here is whether this attitude would change if non-ethnic Turkish refugees became Turkish citizens.

Interestingly, however, with respect to certain other social rights, such as access to public services, the provision of free healthcare and education, most of the respondents had no objections.

### **Healthcare is a fundamental right**

When asked whether refugees should receive free health services, the majority of the respondents indicated that they should. This is quite different from the predominantly negative attitude to the former issue of providing financial aid.

*I do not see a problem with their use of health services. They may also be severe patients so that the state may be caring for them (Man, 36, self-employed).*

*If they are here, they have to take advantage of health; they will be sick, so we do not have the right to say that they should not get sick (man, 30, merchant).*

*Health is not a joke. No, everyone should receive health service at any place and any hospital (Woman, 39, pharmacist).*

*There is no problem. They are humans too. They are entitled to sickness or recovery (Man, 41, business administrator).*

*Absolutely ... The right to health and access to healthcare should be one of the most basic freedoms of the human, in any case, they should benefit from free access to health services (Man, 21, student).*

As the excerpts above reflect, most interviewees stated explicitly that healthcare is a fundamental right and that the state should provide this right regardless of individuals' legal status. In this case, the respondents did not bind social rights to citizenship, the national collective, as Soysal (1994) proposed for postnational citizenship, but to the value of human dignity. However, some respondents justified refugees' access to health services as a nationalistic-religious grandeur. Employing religious-nationalist rhetoric, they referred to healthcare services for refugees as a courtesy of the "Turkish people" or "the Turkish state" to their Muslim neighbors. They considered sharing social resources as a religious duty, a charity rather than a human rights issue. In a religiously motivated charity, the beneficiary determines under what conditions and to whom the aid will be delivered and expects gratitude from the recipient. However, this "benevolence" has a limit, and the assistance should not be binding under all conditions.

*Of course, we serve people in need in our country; these are our neighbors, religious brethren, people with whom we share cultural values. And it is pretty standard for them to benefit from health institutions. Because we have a promise to the world, we have said, "we are not going to let anyone suffer", our neighbors around us. Do you see the slightest help from European countries? No. That is enough to figure out how great our country is and how much it values human life (Man, 33, merchant).*

Despite differing motivations, the attitude toward refugees' access to health services was positive overall. Moreover, some respondents considered health services a fundamental right, while a smaller group perceived it as a humanitarian task to be fulfilled for their religious brothers. Unlike the financial aid issue discussed above, the respondents did not display an attitude toward prioritizing Turkish citizens. In this context, there is neither a dichotomy nor a hierarchy between a citizen and a non-citizen. Consequently, with respect to access to health services, far from othering, the refugees are considered in an inclusive manner regardless of formal citizenship status. As Soysal (1994) stated:

The factors that determine non-citizens' access to social rights such government programs as education in public schools, health benefits, and welfare and social insurance schemes (...) the foreigners' legal status and physical presence are the most important factors whereas formal citizenship is the least. (p. 123)

Nevertheless, although these rights are an integral part of the international human rights in the law on refugees, local people consider it within the frame of national grandeur and religious mission.

### **Right to education**

When the interviewees were asked what they thought about their children being educated with refugee children, most favored a joint education. Similar to the attitudes about healthcare provision, access to education was seen as a universal human rights issue.

*The children of the people who have come here have the right to knowledge and education. If they are guests in our country, they should also benefit from these rights. For example, there are many students at the university in Bolu; Black, Mongolian, Baltic Republics. Do you have any problems? You do not. Then, I do not think they will be a problem here either (Man, 42, engineer).*

*No, no, everyone has a right to study, so this can be a refugee or not, everyone has the right to education on equal terms, but as far as I know, they want an Arabic speaking teacher, they want a private school, this is not necessary (Tradesman, 43).*

In addition to the respondents who were not opposed to children's mixed education, a significant number of interviewees considered it positive and even desirable. They stated that it would be beneficial for their children to attend school with refugee children. The children would learn different languages, and the multicultural environment would affect their development positively.

*I welcome it. They want education as well ... It is nice to have a mixed education. At least they learn a language (Woman, 38, housewife).*

*If I had a child (...) it would not be a problem being at the same school, in the same class as refugees. On the contrary, the multicultural environment will contribute more to its successful development (Man, 33, merchant).*

*The education sector is in trouble when it creates uniform training. Education should be done with scientific, spiritual knowledge learned from many different sources. In that sense, education should be given to all regardless of whether it is Arab, White, or Black. It's not crucial with whom he/she gets an education (Woman, 34, dorm manager).*

As a result, most interviewees displayed positive responses about refugee and Turkish children's mixed schooling. In this context, it appears that the othering process does not operate at the expense of children and their education. In this case, the marginalizing discourse toward the refugees does not include children, particularly with respect to their education. This decoupling of access to education as a human rights issue from nation-state citizenship can be seen as a point that we may call the beginning of a rather different and timely approach to, perhaps, a de-nationalized concept of citizenship that makes nation-state membership redundant.

## Conclusion

The results of this study can be summarized with two main points. First, Bolu locals' narratives implied that the othering process in refugees' citizenship attainment is based upon subjective, rather than objective, dimensions (De la Paz, 2012). This indicates that the ideological dimensions of citizenship understood as national loyalty, belonging, and patriotism are critical factors for the local people. The ideological arena is the sphere in which they declare the refugees as the undesired Other together with nationalist discourses such as loyalty, duty, belonging, etc.

These narratives are associated closely with the classical hegemonic view of citizenship in Turkey that emphasizes the duties and obligations approach. They are also linked to the relationship between the individual and the state that is constructed not only through the sense of loyalty, but also the assumption of a sense of belonging to an essential kinship and ethnicity.

The second point is related to social welfare, in which the respondents showed a tendency to accept refugees' access to social rights in the absence of citizenship. However, most of them opposed a particular form of benefit for refugees: Financial aid. This result may rest upon the fact that the local people view themselves to be in an economically disadvantageous position. Nonetheless, the respondents' relatively accommodating attitudes toward the provision of elementary welfare benefits, such as healthcare and education, imply that they do not associate social rights necessarily with political or ideological dimensions of nation-state citizenship. These results support Soysal's (1994) notion of postnational citizenship. However, for many local people, refugees' access to social rights is seen within the scope of national nobility as Turks and/or religious mission toward "Muslim brothers" rather than as a human rights question. The rationale of religiously motivated welfare aid is left to people's conscience and cannot be claimed within the human rights frame. Thus, to this end, these research results seem not to support—at least

not completely—the de-nationalized or postnational concept of citizenship that Soysal (1994) proposed.

Further, the division of citizenship as a national collectivity and social rights-based membership that Soysal (1994) suggested may create a “two-class system of citizenship” in the long term. As has been seen recently in several European countries (e.g., Germany), the exclusion from the national collective leads to wide-ranging anti-immigrant/refugee discourses in public and bolsters radical right-wing groups.

The dynamics of the current global migration flows and disruptions of national implicitness in identity and belonging require differential, cross-cut membership concepts in the context of the particular formal, cultural, and geographical constellations. Future studies in other contexts should address this problem and possibilities for preventing nationalist and chauvinistic discourse on citizenship while keeping the multiple nature of belongingness.

## Notes

1. The notion of refugee or asylum seeker does not have a corresponding legal base in Turkey, and the status of people from different countries may differ. However, the local population commonly defines all people who seek refuge in Turkey, regardless of their legal status, as refugees. Therefore, in this article, I will follow the local people and use the notion of refugees.
2. According to DGMM, only 16,700 Syrian refugees were resettled in a third country between the years 2014 to 2020. <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>
3. Göc İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, January 20, 2021, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>. According to the city’s governorship, there were only 459 registered Syrian refugees at the time of the fieldwork (2015).
4. Emphasis in original.
5. At the time of the fieldwork, Iraqis and Syrians constituted the majority among the refugees in Bolu. Bolunsesi, 1 October 2015.
6. For ethical reasons, the names of the respondents are not displayed.
7. The respondent here was referring to the uprising of the Arabs against the rule of the Ottomans during WWI. Britain supported the Arab nationalist ideology, motivated primarily as a weapon to use against the Ottoman Empire’s power. In 1918, the Arab Revolt occupied Damascus accompanied by British troops, and ended 400 years of Ottoman rule (Finkel, 2007). *Osman’s Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire*. Basic Books).
8. It is important to note that many Syrian Refugees do work under perilous conditions for a wage that is far less than the legal minimum wage.

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