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Refugee policy narratives of political parties in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the diverging narratives of the governing and opposition parties in Turkey about Syrian refugee policies between 2011 and 2023. We use a mixed method combining process tracing and quantitative exploratory text analysis of 1,001 parliamentary group speeches by four political parties. Our analysis reveals six main narratives about Syrian refugees: temporariness, fraternity, civilizationist humanitarianism, rights-based humanitarianism, burden, and repatriation. The ruling party, AKP, embraced the pro-refugee policies by mixing the first three narratives until 2017, after which the repatriation narrative gained significance. The CHP, the main opposition party, codified a burden narrative, which problematised Syrians as a threat to border security, national economic resources, and social cohesion. Similarly, the Turkish nationalist MHP adopted the burden narrative until its alliance with the government. After the 2019 local election, all three parties' narratives slightly converged around the repatriation narrative. One exception to narrative convergence(s) among parties is the pro-Kurdish party HDP, which consistently emphasises rights-based humanitarianism. Our findings provide insights about how political parties develop, contest, revise, and converge their narratives about refugees over time. This contributes to the de-centering on political narratives and migration governance by bringing in a non-Western perspective.

Introduction

Political parties play a crucial role in shaping attitudes, setting political agendas, and directing national narratives. It is inevitable that the parties diverge in their opinions on immigration policies and express this divergence through their discourses disseminated by politicians' speeches, party manifestos, slogans, and other means. These political narratives aim to shape public attitudes, policies and governance about migration. As mentioned in the introduction of this Special Issue, migration is an inherently political process characterised by power relations, and there is no single

'national interest' regarding migration. Instead, there are competing visions and interests proposed by different actors, such as state institutions, civil society, and migrants (Triandafyllidou 2025).

Despite the plethora of studies addressing centre-right, populist, and (far)right parties' immigration politics in Europe and how the so-called 'refugee crisis' affected their policy positions (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2022; Hutter and Kriesi 2022), less is known about the role of ruling and opposition parties in the construction of policy narratives about refugees and how these narratives are related to each other, and whether they change over time in the non-Western context. As noted in the introduction of this SI (Triandafyllidou 2025), increased focus is needed on migration governance narratives arising from regions like West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Research that highlights various actors – including sending states, cities, and migrants – facilitates de-centring by unpacking the interplays of power and the circulation of narratives (see Ho 2025; Molho 2025; Olakpe 2025). Additionally, it would be beneficial to view political narratives in non-Western contexts not as a unified official narrative but as a dynamic and contested discourses. Accordingly, it is possible to de-centre prevailing political narratives within a single country by focusing on the roles of interrelated actors such as media (see Lam, Fong, and Wang 2025), government and political parties, as intended in this article.

Emphasising parties' migration narratives and policy positions in different political regimes is essential because an overwhelming majority of the refugee population lives these contexts in protracted situations, and party dynamics exhibit some similarities, such as the prevalence of populism, while peculiarities, such as conventional left-right dimensions and power sharing among parties, might be more nuanced (Aydogan and Slapin 2015; Fakhoury 2021). Moreover, although some regimes may be classified as electoral democracies, ruling parties often maintain prolonged control as sole power holders, thereby exerting hegemonic influence over narrative construction. Nevertheless, opposition parties may make slight impacts on the political narratives.

Turkey, hosting the largest number of refugees since 2014 and characterised by a multiparty system with regular elections alongside autocratic practices often classified as a democratic or constitutional autocracy, is an intriguing case to explore as a comprehensive case study for de-centering migration governance by incorporating non-Western examples. Twelve years of migration management with a single-party government but with vocal opposition parties offer a promising period for tracing potential relational and temporal aspects in parties' policy narratives, which are a key component of political and governance narratives. By adopting the working definition presented by Triandafyllidou (2025), we approach migration governance as a comprehensive landscape involving a fuller set of actors, institutions, policies, and the relationships among them. The government parties in Turkey and state institutions are at the centre of migration governance who develop the dominant narrative; however, parties also exert some influence over this narrative and contest it. Policy narratives refer to discourses 'setting out beliefs about policy problems and appropriate interventions' (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011, 1). Policies related to admission, protection, and integration represent a specific aspect of governance in which actors propose competing discourses as seen in border control or repatriation policy areas. Here, politics refers to the discourses of those involved in policy and governance, with

particular emphasis on state actors (Triandafyllidou 2025). We include political parties as political actors that impact governance and policies about migration, therefore aim to better understand political narratives.

We identify the features – mobilised references and values – of political narratives concerning Syrian refugees, which is a main policy and governance issue in Turkey since 2011. We examine narratives adopted by the ruling party and opposition parties and how these narratives evolved over time. We use a mixed-methods approach combining process tracing of party discourses and the government's main policy framework with quantitative text analysis of party leaders' group meeting speeches (n = 1,001) from 2011 to 2023.

Drawing from quantitative and qualitative analysis of data, we argue that the government party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet and Kalkınma Partisi, AKP*), initially produced a pro-refugee narrative based on the temporality of Syrian displacement and mobilised supportive frames on guesthood and hospitality referring the cultural-historical and religious references. The AKP's dominant political framing was based on labelling Syrians as brothers/sisters/guests rather than identifying them as either asylum seekers and refugees or burdens and security threats. The AKP used references to the present time by highlighting the temporality of Syrians' stay and the past by glorifying history as an ideational driver of accommodation and solidarity provided to Syrian refugees. The AKP's narrative became hegemonic, bolstered by media control and voter support because the party was in power since 2002 and won the majority of seats in the 2015, 2018, and 2023 parliamentary elections, the 2015 presidential and 2014 local elections. The Turkish media and political debate were primarily aligned with the geopolitical interests of AKP in the Syrian war, maintained also given the country's limited media/political freedom. The general hegemonic power of AKP strongly influenced the consolidation of the narrative. However, as the Syrian presence became protracted and the AKP encountered political junctures and disruptions due to hyperinflation, the emergence of multiple crises, border security issues, losses in the Syrian war, and local elections, the competing narratives offered by opposition parties gained some popularity. The Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP*) and Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP*) had produced contending narratives by emphasising the economic, social and security-related potential drawbacks of admitting Syrian refugees with an emphasis on the present and future time risks. While CHP and MHP narratives showed strong anti-immigrant references, the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HDP*) embraced a more pro-refugee, human rights-centric approach. MHP stopped contesting AKP's narrative after forming an election alliance in 2018. Over time, the populist narratives of the opposition parties, approaching refugees as a burden, started to more diffuse in political debates. The AKP politicians had to recalibrate their pro-refugee narratives because they were wary of losing the support of the party constituency, given rising negative public attitudes. AKP slightly revised its hegemonic narrative, adding the repatriation policy narrative, mainly by referring to the future as a 'reasonable' solution that fuels its narratives in the hybrid frame.

This paper is structured to provide insights contextualising and supporting these arguments. The first section presents a literature review on migration policy and governance narratives and the role of political parties, specifically focusing on the temporal lenses

and relationality in narratives. The following section lays out the key features of refugee governance in Turkey. Then, we detail our data collection and methodological approach. The analysis begins by illustrating how frequently Syria and refugees are discussed in party group speeches. After this overview, we identify references and values that are mobilised in party narratives and quantify their variations over time and across parties. We then address AKP's narratives as hegemonic followed by the discussion of competing political narratives used by opposition parties. Our main findings and ideas for future research are reiterated in the conclusion.

Conceptual approaches: temporal lenses to parties' policy narratives

Political debates about migration revolve around different but often competing claims, values, and interests. These divergences are reflected in discourses about the type, volume, causes, effects, and consequences of immigration. Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten (2011) note that 'such claims are best conceptualised as 'policy narratives,' setting out beliefs about policy problems and appropriate interventions.' (1). So far, the complex relationship between narratives in the media, political debate, and policy-making are addressed (Boswell and Smellie 2023), but less emphasis is put on the relationality and temporal approaches in the party's migration narratives created in non-Western contexts hosting large refugee populations. To do that, we engage with the entanglement of three theoretical discussions: migration policy narratives, political parties, and time dimension/temporality in migration governance.

Regarding the migration policy and governance narratives, our focus is on the different sets of actors behind them. Narratives are produced by multiple actors, such as media, politicians, migrants, technocrats, civil society, and scholars, and are governed by their diverging discursive styles, distinct logics and interests (Boswell and Smellie 2023). In a non-Western context, narratives at the regional level emphasise governance aspects, using various starting points, as demonstrated by Bisong (2025) and Adugna (2025) regarding West Africa and East Africa respectively. Even within a region, competing and counter-narratives become further nuanced when elements such as gender are emphasised (Setrana 2025).

At the national levels, the narratives are often socio-historically grounded and institutionally tied to power, shaping particular views and attitudes. Politicians are usually eager to adopt simple, accessible, and emotive narratives because such narratives have a better chance of being picked up in the media and resonating with the public, as they are thought plausible and morally compelling (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas 2024). It is observed that on many occasions, media and political debate are already aligned mainly in their goals, and these are, in turn, broadly consistent with government policy (Smellie and Boswell 2024). As demonstrated by Lam, Fong, and Wang (2025), a dynamic interaction exists among government actors, the media, and civil society. While power dynamics, such as being the government party, may strongly influence narrative production, political junctures also play a role in determining dominant stories. A crisis, like a dramatic episode during refugee arrivals or a terror attack, could potentially lead to new and transformative narratives challenging the usual approach to immigration and asylum (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas 2024, 13).

The second theoretical discussion we rely on is the political parties, but we focus on the migration narratives of parties in non-European contexts. Although political regime types do not inherently dictate immigration policy outputs (Natter 2023) or discourses, expanding our understanding of party narratives across the political regime spectrum will contribute to more inclusive theorising about migration and politics. The recently growing literature on immigration politics in the Global South is thought-provoking for exploring diverse party narratives (Arcarazo and Freier 2015; Brumat and Geddes 2023). For example, Brumat and Geddes (2023) showed a 'counter-intuitive outcome of a far-right anti-migrant/refugee government in Brazil extending protection to displaced people' by highlighting the impact of domestic and international factors on state capacity (2023, 478). Machinya underlined that anti-immigrant populist discourse was mainstreamed in South Africa as a 'sensible and justifiable' narrative with the participation of political leaders from across the political spectrum (2022, p.59). Narrative shifts, tensions, and policy competition at the intraparty level are not rare in such Global South contexts (Fakhoury 2021). However, the research emphasis is still on the government parties in these countries and treating narratives as static frames, which does not necessarily explain possible competing narratives, relationalities, and potential shifts over time.

Our third theoretical angle is debates on time dimension and a range of temporal matters because they implicitly arise about the policy and party narratives and help us examine shifts in narratives over time. We mainly draw from the theoretical lenses of Triandafyllidou (2022), who proposes temporariness as a migration policy category, and Griffiths (2024) and Dennison (2021), who scrutinise temporal themes in migration governance. Triandafyllidou (2022), distinguishing forced temporariness as a policy category imposed on refugees and asylum seekers, highlights that temporariness reflects the temporary protection regime, not the asylum-seekers intention. Treating temporariness as a policy category also aligns with the arguments that explain the features of refugee governance in many non-European contexts where temporality is adopted as a governance strategy that is intentionally produced to control and manage refugee situations through institutional, legislative, and discursive components (Şahin-Mencutek et al. 2023; Stel 2021). In a further discussion on how a temporal lens is adopted in the examination of the politics of European asylum and reception systems, Griffiths identifies three temporal themes: '(1) the tempos; (2) synchronicity; and (3) the tenses' (2024, 1231). We found the third theme of Griffiths (2024), 'the tenses,' highly relevant for party narratives. The tenses refer to themes from thwarted and inaccessible individual futures to political representations of the collective past and future and the enduring reverberations of past events. These imaginations about the collective past and future lead to a 'dichotomy of worthiness and belonging, resulting in criminalisation, legalisation, and temporal insecurity for some, and warmth, speedy rights-giving and inclusivity for others.' (Griffiths 2024, 1239). Similarly, Dennison (2021) pointed out that the core feature of narratives is selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time among past, present, and future. These shape several features of the policy. For example, 'temporal architectures' are codified into legal frameworks, instrumentally employed to delay and accelerate, to produce uncertain or unreachable futures, and to construct border-crossers as temporary and asynchronous' (Griffiths 2024, 1245).

The analytical lens of time and temporariness has been increasingly consulted to investigate the multiple facets of international migration (Sanò, Storato, and Puppa 2024; Triandafyllidou 2022). However, it has still been less explored by focusing on political party narratives about refugee migration in non-European contexts, with some exceptional case studies from Latin America (Arcarazo and Freier 2015; Brumat and Geddes 2023). The reception of protracted refugee situations can be insightful in understanding how temporal themes arise in migration narratives of different political parties, to what extent they are relational, or whether they remain static or have changed over the years. While addressing the conceptual relationship between time and migration is beyond the scope of this article, we may partially contribute to this line of research by bringing in the political parties' usage of temporal aspects in their narratives.

The case study on Turkey is promising to address these questions. We argue that forced temporariness, in a way Triandafyllidou (2022) proposed, has been used as a policy category in the initial and protracted stages of the Turkish government's response to the Syrian refugee movement. Temporal architectures emerged as the main governance mode. However, there is limited empirical evidence on what values and references to past, present and future, as questioned by Griffiths (2024), are utilised in policy narratives shaping these responses and whether narratives of government and opposition parties diffuse, change, or converge over time. Setting the context in Turkey and referring to existing studies is worthwhile before moving to analysis.

Strategic temporality as the migration policy category in Turkey's response to Syrian refugee movement

Turkey has become the leading destination for forcibly displaced Syrians since 2011, hosting 3,092,536 under temporary protection status Syrians as of September 2024 (Gocgov 2024). The numbers were as high as 3.7 million in 2021(Gocgov 2024). Given the intensity of developments, tempos, critical junctures, and geopolitical entanglements in the Syrian war as one of the intervening regional actors, summarising all events here is impossible. Hence, a timeline is provided in the Online Appendix in Table A1.

Turkish state adopted strategic temporality as a policy category when encountering massive Syrian refugee migration (Anonymous 2). This policy echoes what Triandafyllidou (2022) labelled forced temporariness as a policy category imposed on refugees and asylum seekers. In the Turkish context, temporality emerged as a governance strategy intentionally produced to control and manage mass refugee flow. The initial reception stage was managed by ad hoc practices and discourses rooted in culture and religion (Kaya 2017; Kayaoglu 2023). The temporality of protection is explicit in policy, reflected through the adoption of the Temporary Protection Regulation (2014) as new legislation and co-constitutive practices causing legal precarity and stratification. Temporary legislation and policies, excessive discretionary power, and bypassing institutional accountability measures are different forms of temporal governance. Integration policies also show strategic temporality in uncertainty and fluctuation in integration-(dis)integration/exclusion spectrum over time (Sahin-Mencütek 2020). Until recently, there has been no publicly announced national integration policy, leaving refugees in limbo regarding access to the labour market, education, housing, and long-term residence.

Most work informally and experience economic precarity (Kayaoglu 2020). The policies aimed to return refugees to their country or move them elsewhere, such as Europe, as early as possible. However, over time, it became clear that most Syrians would stay in Turkey, with a return contingent on many challenging conditions (Kayaoglu, Şahin-Mencütek, and Erdoğan 2022).

Turkish government policies have a compelling discursive dimension. The portrayal of Syrian refugees by various political parties in Turkey has been examined in the growing literature (Apaydın and Müftüler-Baç 2022; Aydemir 2023; Sert and Danış 2021; Irgil and Norman 2024; Yanasmayan, Üstübici, and Kasli 2019). Sert and Danış (2021) found that Turkish political institutions and actors frame migration differently from hegemonic European discourses, deliberately avoiding the word 'crisis' to manage public reactions to the mass arrival of refugees. By qualitatively analysing party programs, parliamentary records, and public statements from 2014 to 2018, Yanasmayan, Üstübici, and Kasli (2019) argue that politicians from both incumbent and opposition parties in Turkey use the 'refugee card' to appeal to voters' grievances, oscillating between Western European right-wing populist perceptions of 'threat' and the pro-Syrian populism of the ruling party. Aydemir (2023), who conducted a qualitative content analysis of group speeches from other main political parties between 2011 and 2019, discovered that political identities, more than policy options, shape refugee governance, categorising groups as Islamic Neo-Ottomans, secular modernisers, Turkish nationalists and Kurdish nationalists. Similarly, Apaydın and Müftüler-Baç (2022) analysed parliamentary discussions from 2015 to 2019, highlighting a split among the four main political parties. In their qualitative study, Irgil and Norman (2024) found that CHP adopts a critical stance on the presence of Syrians, emphasising economic impacts and alleged crime, significantly influencing voter perceptions and priorities as the prominent dissenting voice. However, these studies have not necessarily focused on the temporal lenses and possible changes over time. Building on these studies, our research expands the time span of analysis from 2019 to 2023 for four main parties in Turkish politics to capture the usage of tenses as well as temporal continuity and disjuncture in party narratives.

Methodology and descriptive overview of metadata

We gathered party group speeches from February 2011 to January 2024 to analyse the narratives of the four political parties (AKP, CHP, MHP, and HDP) and examine their values and references to the past, present, and future.

We chose party group speeches instead of party manifestos or other communication tools for four main reasons. First, party leaders in Turkey wield significant authority over party groups in the parliament, making these meetings crucial for discussing key political events, shaping policy discourse and consolidating the party position. Second, since 2002, the government's dominant position in parliament and in the media has marginalised individual parliamentary activities, while party group speeches remained one vital channel to disseminate party narratives (Aydemir 2023). Third, these speeches occur weekly in a consistent format and duration, allowing for the analysis of narrative evolution over time, which is more informative than party manifestos, electoral speeches, press releases or other sporadic addresses by party leaders. Finally, party group speeches,

open to the public and party supporters, have the potential to be picked up in the media and resonate with the constituency. Hence the media and political debate can be aligned (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas 2024; Smellie and Boswell 2024).

To create a metadata set, some weekly party group speeches from 2011 to 2019 were generously obtained from migration scholar Nermin Aydemir[1], while we collected the missing speeches in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017 from websites and the parties' official YouTube channels. We added new speech texts for CHP before 2014 and HDP before 2016. We also extended the data of party group speeches after 2019 from political parties' websites and the Presidency's official website. Considering the rise of anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey post-2019, this extension provides a nuanced understanding of changes in party narratives over time. All these substantially increased the size of the metadata set, compared to Aydemir 2023.

We gathered 1,001 party group speeches, with the AKP delivering 213, the CHP 299, the MHP 273, and the HDP 216. The data excludes items that are not available online. That's why, in contrast to Aydemir (2023) and Morgül (2023), we also emphasise the proportion of relevant speeches out of the total number of speeches in a year rather than just the count of those mentioning Syria or Syrians. To ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of our analysis, we carefully coded each speech to create metadata with relevant keywords for every narrative category. This approach facilitated a thorough understanding of the context whenever references to refugees or Syria were made. This method also bolstered the validity of our findings and provided a robust foundation for our research outcomes.

We employed dictionary-based coding on 1,001 texts to calculate the frequency and examined each text to ensure relevant contexts. We checked how often Syrian refugees or related terms were mentioned in group speeches using the key terms Suriye* (Syria*), göç* (migra*), sığın* (tak*/took refuge*), and mülteci (refugee*).[2] Instead of excluding speeches without any mention of Syria or Syrians, we computed two metrics: (1) the proportion of speeches containing these keywords out of the total speeches in a year, and (2) the average frequency of our keywords per relevant speech per year for each political party. The former measure indicates the prominence of this issue in speeches within a given year, while the latter provides insight into the intensity and significance of these issues annually. We found that 451 (45.05%) of 1,001 party group speeches are relevant speeches. Figure 1 presents how the share of relevant speeches has evolved over time.

Figure 1 illustrates five descriptive characteristics of the speeches over the years, providing initial insights into relationality and temporal aspects. First, political parties' emphasis on the Syria and refugee issue seems to be relational, particularly after 2017, with the highly correlated changes in the shares of relevant speeches. In order to support this observation, we have included additional quantitative results in Figure A12 in the Online Appendix.[3] In Figure A12, we display the percentage distribution of a relationality index that we created for using the keyword 'Syria*' in our corpus data. If the relationality index is equal to 4, it implies that all four parties had a relevant speech in a given quarter, as in our case. The figure presents the percentage distribution of each relationality index value. We find that in around 50% of the quarterly speech data, all parties mentioned the Syria* keyword. Only in around 8% of speeches in a quarter, the Syria* is used by only one party. The second descriptive
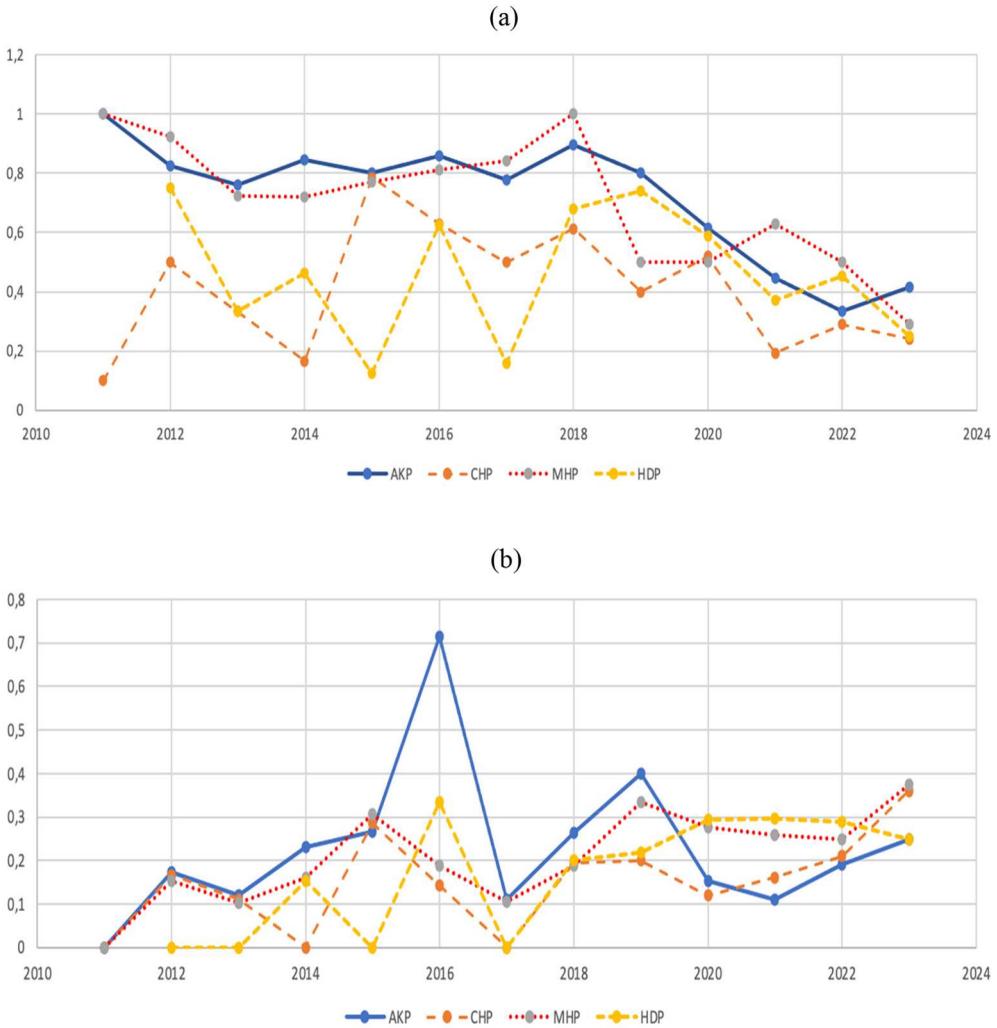
(a)

(b)

Figure 1. Share of Relevant party speeches over years across different political parties. (a) Share of speeches using keywords 'göç*/sığın*/mülteci*'. (b) Share of speeches using the keyword 'Suriye*'.

finding from Figure 1 is that AKP and MHP, on average, focused more on Syria-related issues than CHP and HDP before the 2019 local elections, after which the issue's prominence decreased and converged to CHP and HDP levels. Third, the correlation of saliency was substantial between the AKP and nationalist MHP even before their alliance in 2018. Fourth, party leaders mainly discussed the Syrian war and its impacts on Turkey, with comparatively less on refugees, particularly in the earlier years of refugee flows. Lastly, there has been an increasing trend in migration-related keyword usage for all political parties since 2017.[4] After analysing the frequency of the keywords 'Syria' and 'refugee/migration,' we conduct a more in-depth examination of the variations in party narratives by creating narrative categories as discussed below.

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Categorising party narratives: variations in mobilised values and references to tenses

The categories used in this research are both theory and data-driven. The existing scholarship in migration politics (Aydemir 2023; Morgül 2023), our previous research on refugee governance in Turkey and an overview of corpus data for frequency analysis has already led to the detection of the broader categorisation of narratives. Then, once we started coding our corpus data, we specified values and references by linking with the exact keywords to be categorised in each narrative category. Then, we quantitatively coded each party group speech using six main narrative categories: (1) temporariness, (2) fraternity, (3) civilizationist humanitarianism, (4) rights-based humanitarianism, (5) burden and (6) repatriation. Relevant keywords were employed to understand the frequency of these narratives in each speech corpus, providing insight into their usage over time and across different political parties. Table 1 below presents the keywords used to measure the frequencies of each narrative in our text corpora.

In our pursuit of understanding temporal dynamics, we paid attention to the extent to which these narratives embed particular tenses such as past, present, and future (Griffiths 2024) and the points in time (Dennison 2021). Our first narrative category, 'temporariness', refers to the terminology around guesthood using repeating terms like hosting, host, and guest. These terms depict Syrians' stay as a temporal occurrence in the present time. Figure A6 in the Online Appendix shows persistent and dominant usage of this narrative by AKP, with a sharp increase post-2019 local elections. MHP also increased its usage after the 2019 local elections. The second narrative category is 'fraternity,' which utilises religious terminology and refers to neo-Ottomanism, in addition to referring to terms like 'innocent'. Hence, the primary reference of this narrative is to the

Table 1. Narrative categories, mobilised values and mobilised references.

Narratives	Mobilised values	Mobilised references
Temporariness	Guesthood	guest*, host*, to host* (misafir*, ev sahibi*, ağırlama*)
Fraternity	neo-Ottomanism	ansar*, muhajir*, coreligionist*, Syrian brothers/sisters, Ottoman*, ancest*, wretched*, innocent* (ensar*, muhacir*, dindaş, Suriyeli kardeş, Osmanlı, ecdad*, garib*, masum*)
Civilizationist humanitarianism	Protecting the oppressed	oppressed, victim, humanity, bloodshed/war/barbarity/oppression (mazlum*, mağdur*, insanlık*, Suriye* katliam/savaş/vahşet/zulüm)
Rights-based humanitarianism	Refugee rights, human rights	human rights, refugee rights, universal, children rights, labour rights, equality, human dignity, (fights against) racism*, ((fights against)) discriminat*, humanitarian aid (mülteci hak*, insani yardım*, insan hak*, insani, insan onuru, ayrımcı* mücadele, insanlık suç, mülteci* ayrım*, ırkçı saldırı)
Burden (on economy, public resources and security)	prioritising citizens' interests; protecting the land, border and people	cost of refugee hosting, spending, burden, unfair competition, tax, threat, public security, uncertainty, social fabric (maliyet, harcama, külfet, haksız rekabet, vergi, tehdit, bilinmezlik, sosyal doku)
Repatriation	Timing and volume of (safe) return	safe return*, return to Syria/their homes/safe zones, return, repatriate, voluntary return (güvenli dön*, Suriye* dön*, güvenli bölge*, geri gönder*, geri dön*, ev* dön*, gönüllü dön*)

collective past and belonging to the Ottoman geography, and it connects this past with the present situation by expecting that the public should show the same fraternity toward current innocent Syrians. Figure A7 in the Appendix illustrates that the AKP predominantly employs the fraternity narrative. Additionally, the HDP utilised this narrative to a limited extent before 2017, similar to other opposition parties, but notably ceased its usage thereafter, unlike them. The third narrative category, 'civilizationist humanitarianism,' prioritises protecting the oppressed without explicitly addressing their rights and dignity throughout migration. This discourse portrays refugees as victims and appeals to people's humanitarian values by connecting current events with the negative images and experiences from the global past and demands their support by emphasising the responsibility of the public to protect and host the oppressed without giving a reference to the Ottoman lineage. This distinct character separates it from the narrative of fraternity. While used by all parties at times, it did not become dominant, as shown in Figure A8 in the Online Appendix. This narrative appears as a mix of references to the past, particularly in a negative way, by drawing parallels with barbarity in global history and the treatment of refugees now. Hence, it tries to make a morally compelling narrative without referencing the Turkish common past and religion. The fourth category, 'rights-based humanitarianism,' mobilises human rights principles, particularly focusing on the rights of refugees irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or political beliefs. It differs from the previous one because the present is the main point of time in this narrative, and the suggested policy direction is to embrace universal rights regardless of the imagined collective past. HDP has predominantly used this narrative since 2012, as shown in Figure A9 in the Online Appendix.

In addition to positive narratives, negative ones, such as the 'burden' narrative, address the economic costs and security implications of the governing party's migration policy on the public. In this narrative, the commonly referred tense is present time, hence contesting the wide usage of past references in the fraternity and civilisations narratives by the AKP government. This narrative also extensively references the future, referring to predictions about refugees' demographic, economic or cultural impacts, growing risks of social breakdown, and public security. The burden narrative is predominantly utilised by opposition parties at varying levels throughout the years. Figure A10 in the Online Appendix reveals an anticipated trend: while the AKP consistently refrains from employing such narratives, the CHP notably leans towards their utilisation. Another noteworthy observation is the shift in narrative strategy by the MHP: before its 2018 alliance, it actively employed burden narratives yet subsequently altered its stance. Lastly, the 'repatriation' narrative focuses on the timing and the scale of Syrians' return, occasionally underscored by considerations of refugees' safety and dignity. It appears as the causal claim following the burden narrative because of alarming forecasts about the future leading policy solutions on repatriation in the present time. As shown in Figure A11 in the Online Appendix, AKP started incorporating the repatriation narrative following the commencement of military operations in Syria, with its usage steadily rising in the lead-up to the 2019 local elections due to the electoral risk in the present and future.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of our dataset regarding the mobilised narratives for each political party over 13 years, highlighting the dominating narrative for each.[5] Fraternity emerges as the most frequently used narrative in AKP's speeches. In contrast, for CHP and MHP, the burden narrative is predominant, with its salience particularly

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Table 2. Mobilised narratives in political party group speeches.

	AKP		CHP		MHP		HDP	
	# of times	share of relevant speeches	# of times	# of relevant speeches	# of times	# of relevant speeches	# of times	# of relevant speeches
Temporariness	33	14.19%	6	3.23%	22	6.89%	1	0.98%
Fraternity	144	30.40%	15	8.87%	14	4.76%	4	3.92%
Civilisationist Humanitarianism	89	16.89%	35	15.32%	37	8.47%	28	16.67%
Rights-based Humanitarianism	38	14.86%	10	6.45%	11	3.70%	92	25.49%
Burden	0	0	72	48.39%	39	13.76%	4	2.94%
Repatriation	47	14.19%	61	19.94%	24	5.29%	11	6.86%

Note. The share of relevant speeches is calculated by the ratio of party group speeches using a narrative divided by the total number of party group speeches multiplied by 100. '# of times' columns provide the frequency of the keywords used in the relevant speeches in each narrative category.

notable in CHP, where almost 49% of relevant speeches mention it. For HDP, the dominant narrative is 'rights-based humanitarianism,' accounting for approximately 25.49% of all party speeches in our dataset. Comparing narrative prominence across parties reveals temporariness as highly utilised in AKP speeches but mentioned only once (0.98%) in HDP's speeches, mainly to criticise AKP's temporariness narrative. Notably, rights-based humanitarianism is predominantly used by HDP. Finally, repatriation is mostly used by CHP, followed by AKP. While these overall usage patterns allow for party narrative comparisons, they do not provide insights into changes in the use of these narratives over time, which we will explore next.

The AKP as the constructer of the initial hegemonic narrative and moderate shifts over time

In addition to the descriptive quantitative findings presented above, the in-depth analysis of party narratives necessitates some evidence from our metadata corpus to be able to show the embeddedness of temporal lenses. As the AKP has been the consistent ruling party from 2011 to 2023, the period which we are analysing, it set the hegemonic narrative and the direction of migration policy based on temporality. AKP's group speeches reveal that the party narratives revolved around two interlinked values: (1) guesthood tradition and (2) Muslim fraternity. These mainly refer to the imagined collective past to resonate with the Turkish public and encourage them to welcome Syrians and show less resentment in the present time. As early as 2012-2013, Erdogan's speeches demonstrate a blend of these references:

> The Syrian nation is our brothers and sisters. We cannot turn our back on them. (Erdoğan, 7 February 2012)

> Even if they are not Muslims from Syria, if someone asks for our support and seeks asylum on our doors, we should open our doors; this is our humanitarian approach, and this derives from our faith. We both open our doors to provide food and shelter. This is due to our faith. (Erdoğan, 9 October 2012)

> This nation [referring Turks] is hospitable; this nation always supports oppressed people and victims. This nation is always on the side of justice. Hence, we would be hospitable, stand next to the oppressed and defend their rights. (Erdoğan, 14 May 2013)

Related to the fraternity value, a wide range of religious-cultural and historical frames were taken as reference points, drawing upon shared history between Turkey and Syria during the centuries of Ottoman rule, holding common culture and religious references derived from Islamic terminology, reminding the neo-Ottomanist characterisation (Aydemir 2023). Turkish government leaders consistently linked Turkey's assistance to Syrian refugees to the historical role of the *Ansar*, who aided Muslim immigrants, *Muhajirun*, fleeing persecution in 622, as exemplified in statements like, 'Our nation embraces being Ansar; these characteristics are our inevitable part' (Erdoğan, 15 July 2014). Framing Syrian refugees within these Islamist and neo-Ottomanist discourses not only elevated public and private efforts to accommodate them from a humanitarian responsibility to a religious and charity-based duty but also mediated culturally-historically grounded negative attitudes towards Arabs among the public. For instance, during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims engage in increased charity, Erdoğan urged, 'In particular, I ask you and our nation to remember our guests, brothers who came from Syria', to direct aid to Syrian refugees (Erdogan 24 June 2014).

The same approach persisted until 2018, with Erdoğan stating, 'In the last seven years, we opened our arms to 4.5 million asylum seekers coming from Syria and Iraq; we opened our doors and provided complete care of them' (Erdoğan, 16 January 2018). However, all of these cultural and religious terminologies inherently built on the idea of the temporality of refugees because 'guesthood' directly implied 'temporariness', and labelling them as 'Muhajirun' also indicated a non-permanent hosting situation, in addition to the 'religious brotherhood/sisterhood' and 'humanitarian' connotations, as those Muslim immigrants had stayed temporarily in the city of asylum and later returned to their origin region.

Despite AKP's moral or religious narrative on hosting Syrians, public attitudes and narratives of opposition parties shifted towards a growing emphasis on a return discourse and open hostility towards Syrians, aiming to deter new arrivals. Our qualitative research highlighted that these narratives gradually undermined the AKP's hegemonic discourses. The AKP gradually adopted a utilitarian language with a discourse of national economic interests after the EU-Turkey deal in 2016 (Mccarthy 2021) and increasingly emphasised the repatriation of Syrians (Aydemir 2023; Yanasmayan, Üstübici, and Kasli 2019; Sahin-Mencütek et al. 2023). Nevertheless, as noted by Morgül (2023), although Erdoğan increased his statements on the return of Syrians after 2018, he continued to employ discourses of fraternity and protecting the oppressed throughout his term. This can also be confirmed by our analyses of AKP group party speeches presented in Figure 2.

For the domestic audience, the government party began making more references to returns by using the present and future tenses, providing returnee numbers in their group speeches and assuring the Turkish public that millions would soon return. In one of his speeches, Erdoğan made promises regarding the mass repatriation of refugees in the future, linking it with military operations carried out by the Turkish army in Northern Syria. He said:

> In order to enable the returns of Syrians, we try to expand 'safe zones' as much as possible. So far, 330,000 Syrians returned. I believe that when we solve the problems on the east of Euphrates and Münbiç, these numbers will increase to millions. (Erdoğan, 25 June 2019)
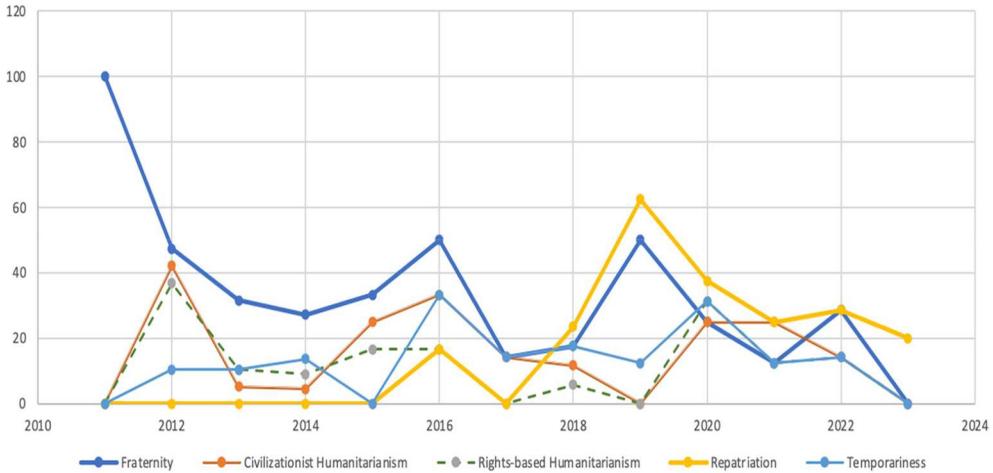
Figure 2. Dynamic evolution of narratives employed by AKP.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, a moderate discourse on return with a voluntariness empha-sis continued, as traced in speeches such as 'We will speed up voluntary returns of migrants' and 'We will encourage the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrian brothers to their homeland' (Erdoğan, 26 December 2022; 6 June 2023).

Our analysis of quantitative data on AKP also confirms a shift in narrative usage over time, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 illustrates that the fraternity narrative remains dominant for the AKP, but shows some fluctuations in post-2017. This trend may be attributed to AKP leaders' efforts to mitigate rising levels of societal discontent and grievances, reminding the public and AKP supporters of shared ethnoreligious ties with Syrian refugees and their moral and ancestral responsibilities towards them. Moreover, as Figures A6 and A7 in the Online Appendix show, the use of temporariness and fraternity narratives were dom-inantly used by AKP compared to the other three political parties between 2011-2013. Notably, a subsequent phase is marked by increased utilisation of both repatriation and fraternity narratives simultaneously from 2017 until the 2019 local elections. Lastly, we observe a complementary relationship between the repatriation and tempor-ariness narratives post-2019 local elections. Despite the dominant nature of the AKP's narrative over the past decade, opposition parties have developed competing narratives, with some fluctuations over time, as detailed in the following section.

The analysis of opposition parties' contesting narratives and convergences

The previous studies suggest that CHP constantly criticised AKP's refugee policies, accusing President Erdogan and the ruling party of exacerbating the Syrian crisis and burdening the nation's (secular) citizens (Kaya 2017). Our analysis of party speeches aligns with this observation.

Unlike AKP, CHP avoids references to religious values; however, party leaders occasionally use the term 'our Syrian brothers' to emphasise a shared culture, history,

and kinship (Kılıçdaroğlu, 19 April 2022). Nevertheless, these instances do not constitute the fraternity narrative. Earlier discourse of CHP about Syrians was not welcoming, unlike AKP's, but can be categorised as a 'civilizationist humanitarian' narrative. Here is an example from 2014 speech:

> We know the quagmire in Syria. We are aware that no one leaves his country without a reason. No one flees to another country if they do not experience hunger and life threat. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 15 July 2014)

Parallel to that, CHP raised concerns about how the reception of refugees threatens border and national security by referring to the present time. In its June 2015 election manifesto, CHP identified the 'refugee problem' as a threat to citizen safety and a factor hindering foreign trade and investment.

Over time, the 'burden' narrative became central to the CHP. Figure A10 in the Online Appendix clearly shows that the use of burden narrative is dominant for CHP and after the post-2018 alliance of MHP with the governing party, it is almost the only constant user of the burden narrative among four political parties. In its 2018 election manifesto, the CHP described the Syrian 'asylum crisis' as not only a humanitarian issue but also 'a serious problem' due to its 'economic costs' on Turkey. The CHP's narratives highlight ongoing competition for jobs, increasing pressure over public services, and issues about social fabric due to the AKP's policies, which are argued to have disadvantaged citizens not only in the present tense but also in the future. Some speeches from the CHP in 2015 and 2016 exemplify this stance:

> Syrians tell an employee, 'Why do you pay 60 TL to the local; we could do the same work in 20 TL? CHP would send one million seven hundred twenty Syrians back to their country, Syria. CHP would give jobs to our citizens. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 17 February 2015)

> Our citizens in Kilis [a border province] are not able to visit hospitals; the hospitals serve Syrians. There is no doubt that Syrians should have been given services, but our citizens in Kilis cannot afford this. Moreover, polygamy rates and domestic violence increased, and the family institutions were shattered … 'Our locals, 20–25 percent of them, had to leave their city Kilis because Syrians settled there; our people became miserable; why? (Kılıçdaroğlu, 26 Nisan 2016; 10 May 2016)

After 2017, CHP also linked the economic burden discourse with other types of costs, such as sending Turkish soldiers to cross-border operations. CHP leaders raise the provocative questions of 'Why did young Turkish soldiers die (became martyrs) for Syria, while Syrian youth live in Turkiye work here?' (Kılıçdaroğlu, 28 February 2017). In 2018 and 2019, the tone of CHP's critical discourse targeting the AKP's cross-border operations and economic burden narrative was sharpened. The CHP leader stated,

> Our soldiers became martyrs in Afrin, El-Bab [cities in Syria], while 3.5 million Syrians live here in Turkiye. Why don't they go to fight for their own country? 'my main responsibility is to protect our citizens, our business owners, I have to prioritize the interest of our citizens, not Syrians' (Kılıçdaroğlu, 6 February 2018; 18 June 2019; 13 November 2018).

Unlike AKP, the CHP did not make any references to the common past in interpreting the developments and Turkey's intervention in Syria.

Besides the liberal refugee policies of AKP, its migration management incorporating external actors, such as the EU, became the point of discursive contestation among the

parties. After the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, the CHP strongly criticised the European countries for not sharing responsibility and the AKP for accepting the deal:

> Whenever you push refugees for onward migration, Europe will push them back. Under these conditions, why did you sign this agreement at a time when 2.5 million refugees are present in Turkiye? … This agreement, the promise of paying to Turkiye, makes our country a concentration camp. (Kılıçdaroğlu 16 February 2016).

Aligned with these narratives, the CHP's policy solutions include the immediate repatriation of Syrians and 'taking measures to prevent unfair competition conditions', as mentioned in CHP's 2018 election manifesto. There are almost no traces of the rights-based narrative in the CHP, as illustrated in Figure A9 in the Online Appendix. Unsurprisingly, CHP criticised any efforts to integrate Syrians or grant them citizenship. Despite its anti-Syrian stance, the CHP, which mainly aims to criticise the government party policies, seems sensitive about not inciting racism and exploitation in the labor market. During the 2021 local incidences where some Syrians were lynched by their neighbours, the CHP publicly condemned the incident and underlined that 'Syrians work to meet their livelihoods. This has to be respected and our critics of the AKP's Syria politics should not be interpreted as legitimising racism targeting Syrians' (Kılıçdaroğlu, 30 March 2021).

From 2018 to 2021, CHP's most prominent narrative and policy proposal has been about the repatriation of Syrians after the consistent use of burden narrative. The repatriation narrative was voiced intensively during the 2023 election campaigns as well. In fact, the CHP party leadership started to voice demands for Syrians' repatriation earlier than any other party, particularly in the present time. Figure A11 in the Online Appendix illustrates the variations in this narrative. Its robust return discourse emphasises negotiation with the Syrian regime about the return of many refugees in a short time. However, CHP leaders provide very detailed, unrealistic, and populist plans for repatriation. Moreover, CHP's focus on repatriation does not reference the international legal framework. It is consistently proposed as a solution to all problems encountered by Syrians, as exemplified in the speech, 'we are aware that Syrians are paid half of the minimum wage, they are exploited, mistreated. What we said, we will repatriate them back to Syria with their own will' (22 March 2022). Similar to the AKP, the CHP also promised to create conditions within Syria for repatriation by using the present and future tense. The quotations from Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches below exemplify this usage:

> We will recover Syria, reconstruct its schools, houses, hospitals, and roads, and Syrians will return to their homes (Kılıçdaroğlu, 30 January 2018).

> We will send our Syrian brothers back by providing safety for them and their properties, we will make peace with the Syrian regime. We will open their bridges, roads, schools, kindergartens, factories. They will work there. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 19 April 2022)

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of CHP's relevant group speeches across narrative categories. As previously discussed, the burden narrative is the predominant discourse employed by CHP, followed by the repatriation narrative. Conversely, temporariness and rights-based humanitarianism narratives are utilised less frequently.

From a relational perspective, CHP's emphasis on repatriation appears to influence other parties' narratives (Irgil and Norman 2024). Figure A11 in the Online Appendix compares the use of the repatriation narrative across political parties between 2011
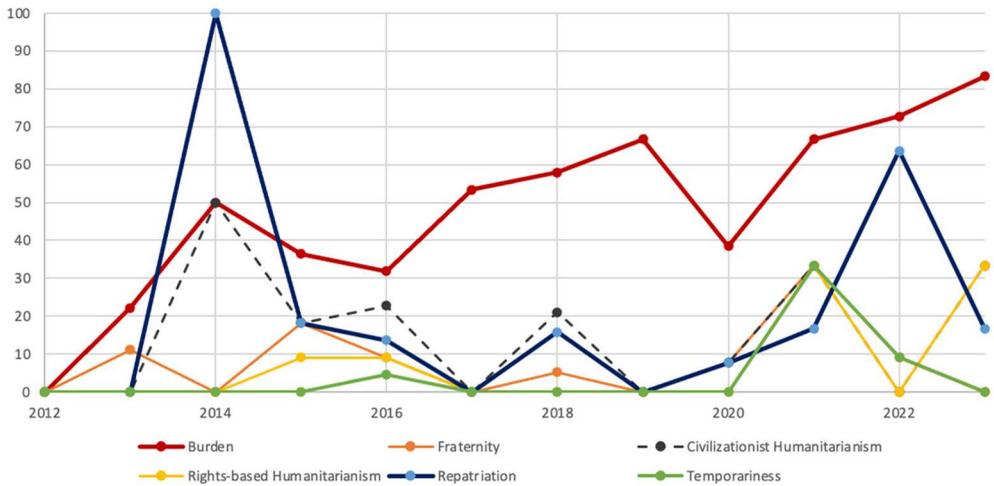
Figure 3. Dynamic evolution of narratives employed by CHP.

Note: Starting period in this figure is 2012 because we there was only 1 speech in 2011 that was mentioning Syria or any narratives.

and 2023, which clearly shows that the repatriation narrative was first used by CHP before 2015 and continued to be used afterwards by all political parties to different extents. Notably, the use of the repatriation narrative in AKP discourse and President Erdogan's speeches following the 2018 elections has sharply increased. AKP's repatriation rhetoric differs from CHP's, indicating the diffusion and convergence of narratives on repatriation. Nevertheless, there are also conjectural factors and voting concerns urging the AKP to embrace this narrative (Anonymous reference 2022). Since mid-2018, most Turkish citizens have no longer embraced such AKP's religiopolitical discourse. Growing domestic societal and political tensions have strengthened popular discontent against Syrians, reviving xenophobic and even Arabophobic sentiments expressed by mainstream political parties, especially during electoral cycles. The AKP's liberal policies towards Syrian settlement were seen as one of the reasons for the party's loss in municipal elections vis-à-vis CHP candidates in March 2019 in two metropolitan provinces, namely Ankara and Istanbul. Not only the electoral concerns but also the protraction of the Syrian war, relevant geopolitical anxieties and external security risks stemming from the changes in the power holders on the border to Syria were challenging the temporariness narratives and urged the AKP government to reconsider its policies (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2023).

Alongside the CHP, the Turkish nationalist MHP also criticised AKP's immigration policies until their 2018 alliance. Tracing party group speeches reveals that MHP initially employed a humanitarian civilizationist narrative. As illustrated in Figure 4, MHP's narratives evolved over time.

In speeches from 2012 and 2013, there are references to humanitarian civilizationist, such the following statement: 'Our innocent Syrian brothers who died because of fighting between Asad regime and opposition forces, Syrian innocent civilians who paid the real price of war, who had to leave their homes' (Bahçeli, 29 February 2023; 5 March 2023).
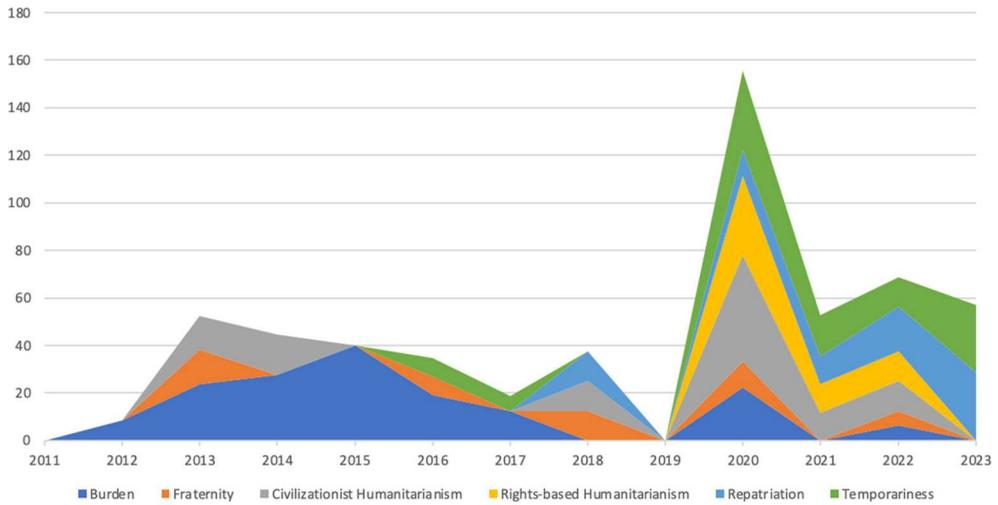
Figure 4. Dynamic evolution of narratives employed by MHP.

Meanwhile, the MHP was also profoundly concerned about the increasing number of asylum seekers, the lack of hosting capacity, and potential risks to border security and internal stability in the present time. In this regard, it criticised the government's welcoming approach:

> The number of Syrians arriving reached beyond Turkey's capacity. This is an alarming situation at our borders and must be prevented. For border security, the government should act and meet its promises. (Bahçeli, 1 November 2012)

The intensity of government criticisms, threats, and burden narratives are evident in the MHP leader's 2013 and 2014 speeches:

> State authority in our borders has entirely disappeared. As asylum seekers get involved in incidences because of having a wide range of opportunities, social tension rises. Our small business owners are miserable; our streets are not safe. … Those crossing our borders are not asylum seekers; they are not migrants. (Bahçeli, 1, 14 May 2013).

Due to being ideologically grounded in Turkish nationalism, the MHP questioned 'why the government did not welcome Cyprus Turks, Turcomans from Iraq and Syria, and Uyghur Turks instead of Syrians' (Bahçeli, 15 April 2014). The burden narrative was also used to accuse the government of not spending the budget to enhance the living conditions of Turkish farmers, teachers, or state employees (Bahçeli, 13 May 2014). In this line, the scapegoating of Syrians 'for feeding social and economic instability, including unemployment' was traceable in MHP's speeches (Bahçeli, 17 February 2015).

Similar to the CHP, the MHP also criticised the government for signing the EU-Turkey deal, accusing it of accepting the EU's 'secret' plans to 'turn Turkey into an asylum seeker warehouse' in 'exchange for bribes.' The MHP also condemned EU countries for not accepting Syrians, calling the deaths in the Aegen Sea during crossings

a 'humanitarian tragedy' (Bahçeli, 22 December 2015). As shown in Figure 4 above, the MHP used a rights-based humanitarianism narrative more frequently in 2014 and 2015.

After forming an alliance with the AKP in 2018, the MHP's burden and threat narrative gradually shifted towards fraternity and temporariness, referencing values such as hospitality, guests, and brotherhood by mobilising references about past and present. This shift is exemplified in MHP party leader Bahçeli's speech below:

> Our beloved nation opened its arms and heart with a spirit of hospitality to all brothers who seek refuge in Anatolia. Our people believed those coming were from us; our nation shared its bread and fate with those people. (Bahçeli 25 May 2021)

Nevertheless, MHP's repatriation calls, aligned with the guesthood values used by AKP, emphasise 'safe, voluntary, and dignified returns' since 2021(Bahçeli, 5 October 2021; 3 October 2023). Despite not being rights-based, MHP's 2022–2023 speeches warned against lynching or hate crimes targeting refugees, describing such incidences as provocations and stressing that Syrians, as 'innocent people who sought asylum,' should not be scapegoated (Bahçeli, 4 January 2022).

Similar to other studies, our findings confirm the inconsistent narratives of MHP (Kurtoglu and Durmuslar 2023). It appears that the MHP has prioritised ideological infiltration over garnering votes, resulting in a gap between its supporters' opinions and its stance on Syrian refugees and AKP policies. However, anti-refugee opinions of nationalist supporters led to the emergence of a extreme far-right party, the Zafer Partisi (*Victory Party*), in 2021. It secured 2.5 percent of votes in the 2023 general elections by mobilising a sole anti-migrant and pro-deportation rhetoric.

On the other hand, the pro-Kurdish HDP's stance on Syria and refugee issues is quite nuanced. Kurdish politicians contest the notion of Sunni Islam-based Turkish nationhood, seeing it as a strategic ideological framework for Kurdish assimilation facilitated by the AKP's discourse of fraternity in welcoming and hosting millions of Syrian refugees (Aydemir 2023). Belanger and Saracoglu (2019) argued that the HDP's opposition might intensify with the Kurdish national movement's ongoing political power. However, Yanasmayan, Üstübici, and Kasli (2019) demonstrate in their
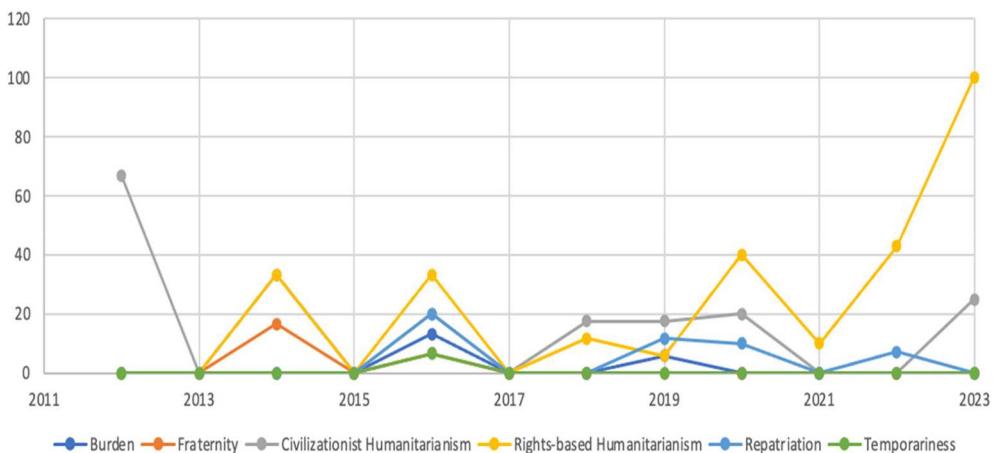

Figure 5. Dynamic evolution of narratives employed by HDP.

analysis of party manifestos that the HDP is the only political party maintaining a pro-refugee discourse emphasising human rights. Our analysis of HDP party group speeches reaffirms both the seemingly conflicting findings of Yanasmayan, Üstübici, and Kasli (2019) and Belanger and Saracoglu (2019), providing evidence that the duration of the analysis is pivotal in identifying the frequently used narratives.

As depicted in Figure 5 below, right based narrative consistently emerges as the predominant one for the HDP over the years.

Unlike CHP, HDP consistently accuses the AKP government of prolonging the war, being expansionist, and aiming to alter the demographic composition of Northern Syria to weaken the Kurds' position (Baydemir, 18 July 2017). There are frequent criticisms of the AKP's support for military fractions purportedly fighting against the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, allegedly facilitated by logistical support from the AKP government. This critique emerged prominently in HDP's party group speeches, particularly during and after the siege of the Syrian town of Kobane in mid-September 2014. Crucially, the rights-based narrative is utilised even during the Kobane siege and its aftermath.

Over the years, HDP's interpretation of the Syrian refugee issue and its criticism of policies have remained consistent, but this criticism is not necessarily based on the burden narrative as illustrated in Figure A10 in Online Appendix. The party presented different arguments by referring to the present and the future. The party continued to claim that AKP's policies aimed

> to depopulate certain regions of Syria'; 'to intervene in Syria's design of its future' via Syrian immigrants, 'used these people as a means to blackmail Europe', 'to use Syrians to change the demographic structure', 'to benefit from the refugees as cheap labor, as informal labor. (Demirtaş, 21 June 2016)

When juxtaposed with the usage of civilizationist humanitarianism narrative, it becomes evident that the discourse of humanitarianism is the primary narrative of HDP, and it is notably more prevalent and pervasive than in other political parties. Even in 2016, when the rights-based humanitarianism narrative was either unused or minimally utilised by other parties, HDP's co-chair Demirtaş stated that:

> these people, who are already victims of war and have been forced to leave their homeland like us, are valuable individuals. They are dignified and honourable, and we cannot view them as enemies who have come to steal our bread or our country from us … they should be treated as equal brothers every day, every hour. (Demirtaş, 15 Mart 2016)

Unlike other parties, the HDP directly and consistently uses the term 'refugees,' referring to all refugees rather than singling out Syrians. It frequently expresses its concerns about the limited access of Syrians to fundamental rights and services in the present time, citing issues such as 'high rates of school drop-outs among Syrian children', 'lack of qualified education standards provided to Syrian children', and 'disappeared children' (Temelli, 24 April 2018). The HDP also underlines the poor working conditions of Syrians in the seasonal agricultural work and 'work accidents costing the lives of dozens of refugees' (Temelli 11 June 2019).

Over time, consistent with the right-based narrative, the HDP proposed creating a solidarity and advocacy movement with refugees (Sancar, 3 March 2020). HDP leaders called for 'creating humanitarian living conditions for all refugees by avoiding discrimination based on unsafe statuses such as migrant, asylum seeker or guests' (Buldan 27

April 2021) as well as 'fighting against all types of discrimination, including those target- ing refugees' (Akın, 4 July 2023). While the HDP, like other parties, criticises the AKP for blackmailing Europe by threatening to push for onward migration, it also accuses Europe of making refugees 'the instrument of bargaining' (Sancar, 3 March 2020).

Unlike other parties, HDP does not emphasise temporal governance and repatriation. It even criticises the government's discourse that legitimises cross-border operations by preparing conditions in Northern Syria for repatriation. The HDP notes, 'To garner pol- itical and social support, the government now disseminates the propaganda of repatriat- ing refugees after military operations. Military techniques can never solve such massive migration issues. Rather, such military operations might create larger refugee move- ments. Potential fighting in Syria will lead to further displacements' (Buldan, 31 May 2022). HDP also criticises the government's and other opposition parties' inconsistent narratives about repatriation, interpreting these as signs of instrumentalizing the refugee issue while underestimating its 'humanitarian, societal and political dimensions' and warning that 'such repatriation-focused narrative will feed hostility, discrimination, and hate targeting refugees' (Sancar, 10 May 2022). Overall, rights-based humanitarian- ism dominates HDP's narrative.

Conclusion

This study offers a longitudinal and inter-party comparative analysis of political narra- tives employed by governing and opposition parties in the context of policies targeting Syrians in Turkey. As a single case study, generalising findings about political, policy and governance narratives is challenging. Nevertheless, it provides some insights into the politics and governance of migration literature and research on party narratives within non-Western contexts, thereby contributing to the de-centering efforts. While our findings largely align with recent scholarship on the topic, our methodology enables identifying longer-term trends, shifts and ruptures of competing narratives used by both the governing and opposition political parties.

The study offers that a critical and comparative analysis of political migration narra- tives of the governing and opposition parties may contribute to a better understanding of the plurality of narratives. Our findings provide a basis for further exploration of how parties play a crucial role in the codification of narratives by selectively mobilising ideo- logically, historically, and culturally grounded values and references. This research also helps unpack how narratives are relational, showing that they are created through com- municative interaction among parties. These interactions provide specific interpretations of perceived reality and selected time references such as present, past and future. The nar- ratives also differ in terms of the depiction of tenses, claims about what is beneficial for the national interests, and suggestions for policy choices and direction for migration governance.

To comprehensively understand the interaction between migration politics and nar- ratives in the non-Western context, additional comparative and longitudinal research is needed to explore the variations, interactions, and contestations of parties' migration policy narratives within specific contexts. Given the highly relational nature of party dis- courses, such contestation(s) may result in the diffusion, revision, and convergence of party narratives. We show that factors such as traditional ideological leanings and

perceived interests in domestic and international politics can influence the direction of these narratives. Therefore, the analytical framework proposed in this special issue, which 'embraces various actors that may promote, engage, shape, contest or negotiate migration narratives, the communicative sphere within which these circulate, and the ways in which they connect with the master narratives' (Triandafyllidou 2025, 7) is promising for enhancing the understanding of narratives' role in migration politics and governance. Future research can focus on systematically analysing power dynamics and relational aspects embedded in competing narratives as well as investigating how and when they resonate with the public or are contested at the societal level. Hence, as it is noted in the introduction of this special issue, de-centering will contribute to a better understanding of transfers and contestations among various types of actors engaged in migration governance, whether central or more peripheral in their role, such as parties.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Dr. Aydemir for sharing the dataset with us.
2. Party group speeches are conducted in Turkish, and our dictionary-based coding utilizes the Turkish keywords, with English translations provided in parentheses to aid international readers.
3. Due to the word count limitation, we present many figures and tables in Online Appendix by indicating them in the text.
4. Additionally, Table A1 in the Online Appendix provides details on the total number of speeches and the total number of those addressing Syria or refugee issues ('relevant speeches').
5. Number of relevant speeches for each political party for all narrative categories are provided in the Table A2 in the Online Appendix.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

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