

## Are Refugees an Economic Gain? Perceptions in Bolu (Turkey)

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### Abstract

Turkey has been a migrant sending country for long years. Since the end of the 1990s, it has become a country of immigration particularly for refugees from war torn countries such as Iraq and Syria. These people were resettled by the government in so called satellite cities. Bolu is one of those satellite cities that has been culturally homogeneous and economically well doing city. Differences in socio-economic situation, language, ethnicity, religion or denomination between refugees and local people caused different perceptions. The primary focus of our presentation is to discuss how local people perceive Iraqi and Syrian refugees resident in Bolu. Our main objective is in particular to answer the question of how local people perceive economic changes in the city brought by the refugees. As a conceptual framework, we use the notion of cultural exclusion and inclusion. The idea of inclusion and exclusion work via the construction of the Other. This way, we create “us” while excluding the “Other” and we design the Other while shaping us. In this respect, our discussions are based on a qualitative research. We conducted 44 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with local Turkish people living in Bolu. The snowball and convenient sampling techniques were utilized to reach the people.

**Keywords:** Refugees in Turkey, Local economy, Inclusion-Exclusion, Perception

### 1. Introduction

Located at the intersection of Africa, Asia and Europe, Turkey has always been a migration country throughout the history. It has experienced incoming migration as well as outgoing migration. However, since the end of the 1990s, it has been transformed more and more into a transit or immigration country that receives refugees from the East, Middle-East and Africa. Thousands of people who fled from war torn countries particularly in the Middle-East have been seeking asylum in Turkey’s cities. In 2016, the numbers of the refugees who entered Turkey exceeded 3 million; the majority of them from Iraq and Syria.

These people have been resettled by the government in so called ‘satellite cities’. Bolu, located in Western Marmara region, between Istanbul and Ankara, is one of the satellite cities with a relative large number on Iraqi and Syrian refugees. Differences in socio-economic situation, language, ethnicity, religion or denomination between refugees and local people cause different perceptions by the local people. It is important

to understand how these different perceptions are being experienced and what their consequences would be, in order for local people and refugees to live peacefully.

The primary focus of our paper is to discuss how local people perceive Iraqi and Syrian refugees residing in Bolu. Our main objective specifically is to answer the question of how local people perceive economic changes brought by the refugees in the city. This is insofar interesting as Bolu is one of the few Anatolian cities that has been economically well doing city.

As a conceptual framework, we use the notion of cultural exclusion and inclusion (Bauböck, 2002; Wodak, 2008). The idea of inclusion and exclusion work via the construction of the Other. This way, we create “us” while excluding the “Other” and we design the Other while shaping us.

The data for this paper was retrieved from a part of a larger research project conducted about how local people of Bolu and Iraqi/Syrian refugees perceive each other. In this respect, our discussions are based on a qualitative research. The current paper is based on 44 face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted with local Turkish people living in Bolu between the years 2014-2015.

## 2. Legal status of refugees

It is important to discuss the legal status of the Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Turkey as this determines their socio-economic position, which in turn influences the perceptions of the local people toward them. As this was discussed in a previous article (GüneyandKonak, 2016), we are going to touch only a few points. Turkey is party to the agreement of the *Geneva Convention* of 1951. However, Turkey signed the convention with a geographical limitation. That means, it accepts only those from the European Continent as refugees. People from Eastern or Southern parts of the World are exempt from the right to receive a refugee status in Turkey (see Geneva Conventions, 1951, p.1). According to the Turkish law, people from other continents are regarded as “*şartlı mülteci*” in Turkish, which means *conditional refugee* and are given a temporary residency in Turkey (ParlakandŞahin, 2015, p. 67). However, Syrian refugees have a slightly different status, which is called “temporary protection” (Çelik, 2015, pp. 68-70). As a result, the status of the refugees in Turkey differs not only according to the continent they come from but also according to their nationality and the motivation of leaving their own country. These different statuses bring different legal, social rights and responsibilities for the refugees.

Since 1994, the refugees have been placed in so called “satellite cities”, which are appointed by the Home Office and in which the refugees may reside until they are accepted and placed in a third country (KahyaandSallanGül, 2011, p. 2). Bolu is one of those satellite cities. One of the major problems that the system of satellite cities brings about is that there is no financial allocation for the refugees. This leads to various ambiguities and problems that in turn results in the ‘Othering’ of and discrimination against refugees. One of the major problems that the refugees encounter in Turkey is accessing resources such as social benefits. At the same time, this is one of the most vital issues for the refugees’ life in Turkey. The definition of the law does not have a compelling effect regarding the social benefits for the refugees. That is, Turkey does not take any responsibility regarding the issue of providing social benefits for the refugees. Therefore, the issue is left to the conscience of the local authorities. Accordingly if, when and how much a refugee receives social benefits depends on the discretion of the local administration (KahyaandSallanGül, 2011; Dalara.o., 2013).

There are no specific allowances for the refugees who were settled in satellite cities and that contribute to the perception of refugees being a social and economic a burden for the city. And this reinforces the perceived dichotomy of local citizen and refugee (Kahya and SallanGül, 2011). In the following part, we shortly discuss the concepts of exclusion and inclusion based on the constructed Other which –we think– shape the thoughts of the interviewees.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The most important point in the process of constructing the other is producing dichotomies from which meaning is created (Saussure, 1960). Thus, the dichotomies are loaded with meaning which is simple and reductionist and can therefore be not neutral. The one side of this dichotomy is always hegemonic and is in a power relation (Derrida, 1976). In this context, the local residents construct or reproduce their power by Othering the refugees. The other is at the same time important in positioning oneself and creating a meaning (Hall, 1997b). In this context, the Othering contributes to the marginalisation of the refugees and causes their positioning as subaltern (Hall, 1997a; Said, 1978). This positioning may be a temporary one yet it determines the exclusion or the inclusion of the refugees.

### 4. Methodology

This paper rests on parts of a wider research that seeks to understand how local people of Bolu and Iraqi and Syrian refugees perceive each other. In the autumn term of the academic year of 2014-2015, the BA students who were enrolled in the course “Migration Sociology”, conducted 44 face to face in-depth interviews with local people. The research population consist of people aged 18 and above living in various localities of Bolu. Since this as a qualitative research we utilised snowball and convenient sampling technics (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011, p. 107). The students conducted interviews with associates and strangers or they contacted other potential interview partners via their connections. The social networks of the students were very helpful in recruiting the interviewees. For the interviews the students used prepared structured and open ended questions as a tool for collecting data. The interviews lasted on average 25-30 minutes and were recorded in agreement with the interviewees. The transcriptions were produced by the interviewing students. These interviews constitute the base for this article.

Although this research may not be defined as a grounded theory, the concepts and practises of the grounded theory were utilised in the process of data analysis. In order to highlight the themes and the patterns, the data was analysed thematically. The themes and codes as well as the sub-codes were created according to the codes which emerged at the first place (Glesne, 2013, pp. 259-260). This way, the coordinated data was subjected to the process of description, analysis and interpretation in order to uncover the basic concepts and the relations between those concepts (Glesne, 2013, p. 288-293). In the process of analysis and interpretation, the theoretical framework which was constituted before, was scrutinized ones more. In doing this the parts which were not related to the themes and structures were removed and other related theories and theoretical approaches were included later.

## 5. Are refugees an economic gain or social nuisance?

The primary objective of our research is to examine the question of how local people perceive economic changes brought by the refugees in the city. When we analyse the responses to the questions about whether refugees changed and whether they contribute to the economy of Bolu, two tendencies were noticeable: Some interviewees saw the refugees as a ‘threat to the economy’ of Bolu. However the majority perceive them as contributing to the economy, in particular to the small businesses in Bolu.

### 5.1 They contribute to the economy

The majority of the interviewees found that the refugees contribute positively to the economy of Bolu while others think that they do not have a contribution at all, because they have the assumption that the refugees receive social benefits from the government. This is indicated in the following statements.

They do not have any contribution, they spend our money anyway. They spend the money which the state gives them (20 years, woman, student).

They can't contribute. How can they? They came here from a war, what do they have and what can you take from them? The state helps them anyway (38 years, woman, housewife).

I don't think that they contribute..they spend our money. They spent here the money that the state gives them. There is a circulation inside; I do not think that the money used here comes from outside. I think the money that comes from outside may be used for other means (37, man, worker).

As it can be seen from the statements below, the majority of the interviewees perceive that the refugees have a contribution to the economy of Bolu. The striking contradiction here is that on the one hand, the interviewees think that the refugees lead a “luxurious life” with the financial support (social benefits) that they receive from the state and the indicator for this is that the refugees are supposedly “good shoppers. On the other hand, spending money is found as advantageous for the business people of Bolu. A further contradiction in the statements is that on the one hand the refugees who escaped the war are expected to be poor so that they need the financial support of the state. On the other hand, however, it is assumed that those who came to Bolu are wealthy anyway and do not need a financial support of the state. In both cases, as a result, it was stated that the refugees were having a contribution to the economy of Bolu.

In this context, the residents of Bolu display a *utilitarian* approach. A utilitarian approach to people can be seen as representing the hierarchy between powerful and subaltern. According to this thought, the people have the right to live in a place only when they stand somebody in good stead. This approach is may be called “slaveholder mentality” in extreme cases.

They contribute; no one can say they don't. Rent, food, market shopping, cloth a.s.o. they buy many things here. And this is of course a contribution to the economy (36, man, high school graduate, self-employed).

From a materialistic viewpoint the refugees changed Bolu in a positive way, because our small business owners started to make money. They contribute to the economy by buying, meeting their needs, exchanging foreign currency, exchanging gold, a.s.o (43, man, high school graduate, small business owner).

They had a huge contribution to the business owners in Bolu. For example, when a market had usually 1000 TL earning this increased between 25 to 40 percent since the refugees came here (37, man, primary school, cook).

Of course, they contribute. I think, similar to the students at the university refugees had a serious contribution to the economy, to the business owners here in Bolu (40, man, secondary school, small business owner).

While stating about the economic change that the refugees made in Bolu, interviewees also referred to the social class of the refugees making some comments about it. The general disposition was that those refugees who came to Bolu were economically relatively well off, those economically rather disadvantaged ones remained anyway in refugee camps.

Yes, refugees changed Bolu, those who are well off, with money came here, and those who are really in need stay in the camps at the border. ...The ones in Bolu are quite happy about the life (36, woman, high school, public servant).

In addition to the quotes above, some interviewees construct a dichotomy by dividing between “us” and “them” and stating that, compared to “us”, the refugees were allegedly from the better off classes of Iraq and Syria as they dressed very well and would therefore draw interest in the market and are preferred by the business owners. In that context, the process of othering is thought along economic competition. That is, he/she is a refugee but because of the allegedly relative high economic level, he /she is treated better than a Turkish citizen. In other words, comparing themselves to the refugees, some interviewees feel relatively deprived. This is summarized by the two quotes below:

I think they contribute to the economy. I have seen it, in the market place, they are taken care of better than us by the sales people. Regarding to economic gain; they take from the state and give it back to the state by spending it. For instance, we cannot dress as good as they dress, believe me. ... Most of those who came to Bolu are the same; I think they are rich people of Syria and Iraq. The poor-fellows are all in the camps... yes because all who came here dress fancier than us, this is not possible with the 300-500 TL social benefit that they receive from the state (44, man, high school, business manager).

The small business owners of Bolu know they get cash from the refugees. And they know also that their country fellows do not have the money to spend. Thus, the business owners show more interest to the refugees (21, man, student).

This dichotomised stereotyping of refugees by some interviewees as “us” as relatively deprived and “them” as more wealthy reduces the visibility of underprivileged refugees. At the same time, many interviewees stated that they or their relatives supported disadvantaged refugees with cloth and food.

### **5.2 They are economically a threat**

Those who do not run a business or do not have any trade relationship with the refugees see the situation relatively different. What some “spending good money” consider as contributing to the economy others regard this as rather unfavourable for themselves. The spending of the refugees in order to meet their needs and the fact that they have to pay more than the residents for the same goods causes uneasiness among the residents. It is assumed that this leads to a general price increase that has a bad effect on the local residents.

Yes they changed it. Everything became more expensive, that is annoying (42, woman, primary school, business owner).

When you see the spending of them, they make a difference. I mean economically... they blow up the prices that cause a price increase... The rents went high since they came (37, man, secondary school, worker)

Yes they changed it, for example, it is said that the prices for rents are increased (38, woman, university graduate, student residence manager).

It is assumed that the refugees caused in general a price increase on consumer goods and in particular a rise in housing rents and in unemployment. Also the interviewees were concerned about that the price increase will go further in the future. These results show similarities with comparable researches in other countries (Jackson, 1993; Levine and Campbell, 1972).

In sum the local people's perception of the economic changes brought by the refugees display two tendencies: Some interviewees saw the refugees as a 'menace to the economic interests' of Bolu including very few interviewees who remarked that the refugees do not have any contribution whatsoever. Yet the majority perceive them as making a contribution in general to the economy and in particular to the small business owners of Bolu.

## 6. Conclusion

The responses of the interviewees can be categorised in two groups. The first group consists of interviewees who see the refugees as a threat to the economic well being of the people of Bolu. This view is based on the argument that the refugees would cause price increase in the city. The interesting point here is that the interviewees accuse the refugees for the allegedly price increase although the refugees may themselves be negatively affected by higher prices they have to pay. This reminds us on the "scapegoat" phenomenon that distracts from the real source of the problems. The second group consists of those who welcome the refugees as long as they spent money and therewith contribute to the good business in the city. There are only few interviewees who defend the argument that the refugees do not make any contribution at all to the economy of the city.

It also is remarkable to recognize that the business people among the interviewees are rather those who do think that the refugees contribute to the economy in general. While those in other professional categories see them rather as not making any contribution if not as a threat to their own economic wellbeing. Here again it can be said that the refugees are only accepted when they are utilised for own benefits of the residents. It can also be argued that the official political discourse about the Iraqi and Syrian refugees of being "our Muslim brothers and sisters" is rather a farce.

## 7. Recommendations

In the context of the above discussed issues, it seems to be crucial: To conduct further academic research in other cities with local people. In order to ensure the social and cultural as well as economical inclusion of the refugees it is imperative to support and innovate research about refugees' socio-cultural and economic situation and their expectations. This is also essential as it allows to utilize and develop the existing human and cultural resources provided by the refugees. Not least, it is crucial for the government to undertake administrative informational work for local people about the social and economic situation of the refugees. These all is vital in order to ensure a

peaceful living together of the local residents and refugees and to ensure to turn a so called crisis into an advantage in all means.

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