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**TURKISH MEDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE 2015  
'REFUGEE CRISIS'**

**TÜRK MEDYASININ 2015 'MÜLTECİ KRİZİNE' BAKIŞI**

**Fulya MEMİŞOĞLU\* & H. Çağlar BAŞOL\*\***

**ABSTRACT**

In 2015 the forced displacement of Syrians entered a new phase with the sharp rise in the numbers of refugees arriving at Europe's shores mainly through the Eastern Mediterranean route. Grabbing widespread media and public attention, this unprecedented refugee influx and its surrounding events are commonly dubbed as 'Europe's refugee crisis', which as some scholars highlight, is a 're-contextualised' version of already existing processes of politicisation and mediatisation of immigration. This paper intends to contribute to the debate on 'mediatisation of refugee crisis' by giving an insight on the role of Turkish media in telling its readers what to think about the 'refugee crisis' during this period of particular significance. The paper relies on a content analysis of front-page articles from three Turkish newspapers (*Birgün*, *Hürriyet* and *Yeni Akit*) between July and November 2015. By limiting our analysis to 'small data', we look closely how these newspapers on different sides of the political spectrum react to the spread of the refugee crisis to Europe and its implications on Turkey. We highlight the type of coverage

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and the definition of issues in this particular media content. Overall, we find that the highly mediated coverage of the Aylan Kurdi incident triggered a significant discursive shift as it has in other national contexts. While all the three newspapers –regardless of ideological stance– were responsive to the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe, news coverage about topics such as socio-economic vulnerabilities of refugees, issues of legal status and social integration in the domestic context was minimal within our period of analysis. We also assert that the way the three newspapers frame the ‘refugee crisis’ especially in relation to domestic or foreign politics shows significant variation. While we find that issues related to border security and border violations received the most intense coverage during the analysis period, we highlight that the coverage is embedded in a humanitarian narrative rather than a security narrative.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Europe, Refugee Crisis, Syrian Refugees, Mediatization.

## ÖZ

Suriye krizinin zorunlu göç boyutu 2015 yılında bir milyonu aşan sığınmacının başta Doğu Akdeniz rotasını kullanarak Avrupa kıyılarına ulaşması sonucunda, yeni bir sürece girmiştir. Kamuoyu ve medyanın yoğun dikkatini çeken bu göç hareketi ve ardından yaşanan olaylar sıklıkla ‘Avrupa’nın mülteci krizi’ olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Bazı akademisyenlerin ifade ettiği üzere, bu durumun medya ve siyasi söylemde ‘mülteci krizi’ olarak ifade edilmesi, göç olgusunun süregelen siyasileşme ve medyatikleşme süreçlerini değişen koşullar çerçevesinde yeniden kavramsallaştıran bir versiyonudur. Bu çalışma, Suriyeli sığınmacıların bu süreçte Türk medyası tarafından nasıl ele alındığını araştırarak ‘mülteci krizinin medyatikleşmesi’ konusundaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada yer alan ampirik bulgular siyasi yelpazede farklı duruşları temsil eden üç gazetenin (*Birgün*, *Hürriyet* ve *Yeni Akit*) Temmuz-Kasım 2015 arası dönemde yayınladığı ilk sayfa haberlerinin içerik analizine dayanmaktadır. Haberlerin içeriğinde konuların kapsamı ve nasıl tanımlandığına vurgu yapılmakta, böylece

medyanın, okurlarına ‘mülteci krizi’ hakkında ne düşünceleri gerektiğini anlatmakta oynadığı rol hakkında bir fikir vermektedir. Çalışmanın bulguları yoğun derecede ‘medyatikleşen’ Aylan Kurdi olayının diğer ülkelerde olduğu gibi Türk medyasında da önemli bir söylem kaymasını tetiklediğini göstermektedir. Her üç gazete de ideolojik duruşlarına bakılmaksızın ‘mülteci krizinin’ dış boyutta Avrupa’ya yayılmasına duyarlılık göstermiş, ancak Suriyeli sığınmacıları iç boyutta ilgilendiren sosyo-ekonomik kırılmalıklar, hukuki statü, sosyal entegrasyon gibi konulara minimal düzeyde değinmişlerdir. Buna karşılık, üç gazetenin ‘mülteci krizini’ iç veya dış politika bağlamında çerçevelemesinde önemli farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Çalışma sonuçları analiz döneminde medyada en çok sınır güvenliği ve sınır ihlalleriyle ilgili haberlerin yer aldığını göstermekle birlikte, Suriyeli sığınmacılara yönelik medya anlatılarının güvenlik çerçevesinden çok insani çerçeveye yoğunlaştığını işaret etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, Avrupa, Mülteci Krizi, Suriyeli Mülteciler, Medyatikleşme.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The ongoing civil war in Syria has forced more than 11,5 million people to flee their homes, causing the world’s largest displacement crisis (UNHCR, 2018). Although the majority of the displaced population has either sought refuge in neighbouring countries or remained within Syria, the displacement entered a new phase in 2015 with the sharp rise in the numbers of refugees arriving at Europe’s shores.<sup>2</sup> The European Union’s (EU) border agency Frontex (2016) estimates that around 885,000 migrants and refugees arrived in the EU via the East Mediterranean route in 2015, a figure 17 times higher than that recorded in 2014. Capturing widespread media and political attention globally, the refugee influx and its surrounding events are commonly referred to as ‘Europe’s refugee crisis’ (Spindler, 2015; Spijkerboer, 2016; Kryzanowski et al., 2018;

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Professor Anna Triandafyllidou and Professor Michal Krzyzanowski for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In 2015 Syrians constituted nearly one third of the total 1,2 million international protection applicants in the 28 European Union (EU) member states. In 2016 and 2017, the number of Syrian first-time asylum applicants in the EU reached half a million (Eurostat, 2018).

Triandafyllidou, 2018)<sup>3</sup>.

In 2015 the Syrian refugee situation also rose to the fore in media reports and political debates in Turkey. This was due in part to substantial rise in Turkey's Syrian refugee population and domestic circumstances, as two general elections were held that year. From 2011 to 2015, Turkey jumped from the 59th position to first place in the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) ranking of countries hosting the largest refugee populations (UNHCR, 2018). More to the point, the highly mediated spread of refugee influx into Europe via Turkey, at that time spurred further public debates. In the summer months of 2015, Izmir and other Aegean provinces faced a significant increase in the numbers of refugees living in temporary shelters, in parks and other open spaces waiting for their turn to cross to the Greek islands. Preventive measures taken by the Turkish authorities in response, combined with increased patrolling, did not curb irregular crossings. All in all, the very limited safe and legal entry options for those seeking international protection in the EU have forced thousands of people to rely on migrant smugglers to cross the Aegean Sea, a major exit point of the Eastern Mediterranean route (Zaragoza-Christiani, 2015; Karaçay, 2017).

Migration is considered to be a news story that creates a powerful impression, which nevertheless develops gradually, and its full impact can only be understood over long periods of time (Suro, 2009: 2). As Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017: 4) point out, the media's role in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 has been more critical than usual for two reasons: '(1) the scale and speed of events meant that publics and policy makers depended on mediated information to make sense of developments on the ground; (2) the lack of familiarity with the new arrivals, their histories and the reasons for their plight meant that many Europeans depended exclusively on the media to understand what was happening.'

Whereas the scale of refugee situation was already known but not widely-reported, mediatization of key events throughout 2015, the Aylan Kurdi incident in particular, made the refugee crisis real for millions of people across Europe.<sup>4</sup> On 2 September 2015, the images of Aylan Kurdi -a three-year old boy from Syria who drowned during his family's attempt to reach Greece from Turkey-

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that it is problematic to label the refugee inflows as a refugee crisis and we rather prefer to use the term 'so-called refugee crisis' (for in-depth discussions, see Lawrence, 2018; Perre et al., 2018; Krzyzanowski et al., 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018). However, to be consistent with the way events have been framed in the media context, we use 'refugee crisis' for practical purposes. We would like to thank one of our reviewers for reminding us this crucial point.

<sup>4</sup> Although later reports corrected Aylan Kurdi's name as Alan, we use the name Aylan in order to be consistent with the usage in the initial global and national media coverage. Also see, Vis and Gorinuova, 2015.

were released by the Turkish news sources, leading many international newspapers to feature the image on their front pages. Described as ‘one of the most iconic image-led news stories of our time’, a study conducted by the University of Sheffield indicates that the image has contributed to the reframing of the discussion from ‘migrants’ to ‘refugees’ in the press and social media, making the refugee crisis more visible globally (Vis and Goriunova, 2015). Based on Google data, Rogers (2015) identifies that September 2015 had the highest global search volume for the topic ‘refugees’ in Google search history. As we elaborate further in the following sections, the media coverage of the ‘refugee crisis’ has become even more crucial in understanding ‘crisis’ narratives in different national contexts.

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on ‘mediatisation of refugee crisis’ by exploring the ways in which the Syrian refugees have been discursively constructed by the Turkish print media during this period of particular significance. The paper relies on a content analysis of front-page articles from three newspapers representing left-wing (*Birgün*), mainstream (*Hürriyet*) and right-wing (*Yeni Akit*) between July and November 2015. This time frame also coincides with two national elections that further politicised the refugee issue along party politics. By limiting our analysis to ‘small data’, we look closely how these media outlets on different sides of the political spectrum in Turkey react to the spread of the refugee crisis to Europe. We investigate whether the image of Aylan Kurdi triggered a significant discursive shift in the way it has in other contexts. We aim at highlighting the type of coverage and the definition of issues in this particular media content, thus giving an insight on the role of Turkish media in telling its readers what to think about the refugee crisis. Before discussing the study findings, we explore this linkage in the conceptual background section with reference to the burgeoning literature on mediatisation. We find Esser and Strömback’s (2014) four dimensions of mediatisation of politics particularly useful as an analytical tool for understanding the influence of media in shaping and framing public perceptions/politics on immigration. For the purposes of this study, we mainly focus on the third dimension ‘media practices’, which tells us to elaborate what the media cover and how they cover it.

One key finding of our study is the media’s relative lack of interest towards the problems of Syrian refugees who are settled in Turkey. While all the three newspapers –regardless of ideological stance– were responsive to the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe, news coverage about topics such as socio-economic vulnerabilities of refugees, issues of legal status and social integration in the domestic context was minimal within our period of analysis. This is mainly in line with the findings of earlier studies (see, Suro 2009) which we review in the conceptual discussion, where sharp rises in media coverage of migration often triggered by dramatic events may condition the public and

policymakers to perceive immigration as a sudden event rather than representing the realities of migration and helping the readers to form an informed opinion. Meanwhile, we find that issues related to border security and border violations received the most intense coverage, yet the security frame is embedded in a humanitarian narrative and the coverage majorly focuses on security issues threatening refugees rather than framing refugees as a security threat. We also argue that the way each newspaper frames the ‘refugee crisis’ in relation to domestic or foreign politics shows significant variation. We attempt to demonstrate this by comparing each newspaper’s approach to the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe and its implications on Turkey.

We should also note that our intention in this article is not to establish a causal relationship between the Turkish media, public attitudes and political behaviour since this would require studying big data and analysis of a number of other factors. Through the conceptual lens of mediatisation, however, we presuppose that media coverage has a certain impact on public opinion, political decision-making and political communication (Koch-Baumgarten and Volter, 2010; Esser and Strömback, 2014). We highlight that there were important policy developments from early 2016 acknowledging Syrians’ long-term prospects in Turkey, such as facilitating Syrian refugees’ access to legal employment, inclusion into the public education system and access to citizenship. We point at increasing diplomatic engagement between Turkey and the EU to curb the irregular flow of refugees to Europe and improve the conditions of refugees in Turkey right after the critical events of 2015 took place. However, we also assert that the media framing of the refugee influx as a ‘refugee crisis’ mainly pressured governments to take immediate action to stem irregular flows rather than finding durable solutions to refugee problems, such as the option of increasing legal resettlement in Europe.

The paper is organised as follows. First, we provide background information on the significance of the time frame for understanding the dynamics of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Turkey and in Europe. In the second section, we present the mediatisation conceptual framework by reviewing the literature and highlighting the media’s growing role in shaping and framing the immigration debate especially in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’. The third section summarises the themes, categories and codes we developed to analyse the three newspaper’s public discussion of the Syrian refugee situation.<sup>5</sup> The fourth section analyses the empirical findings by discussing how Syrians are referred in the Turkish media context, the framing of refugee-related problems, and how the

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<sup>5</sup> We should note that themes, categories and codes were developed in Turkish and some of the tables in the third section were created accordingly. However, translation of terms in English appears below the table.

three newspapers approach the refugee crisis in the context of domestic and foreign politics. The final section contains some concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

## 1. BACKGROUND: SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TIME FRAME

There are over 3,5 million registered Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey (DGMM, 2018). For a considerable period of time, the Turkish government has regarded the Syrian refugee situation as temporary and provided extensive humanitarian assistance to the displaced Syrians (Memişoğlu, 2018). Following the declaration of open-border policy as early as April 2011, the initial response centred around accommodating Syrians in temporary accommodation centres managed and financed by the Turkish government (World Bank, 2015).

As Turkey retains a geographical limitation to its ratification of the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Syrians did not receive an official refugee status in Turkey. Instead, they were granted temporary protection, a group-based protection scheme in times of mass influxes of displaced persons, in line with the EU's 2001 Directive on Temporary Protection (EU Council Directive 2001/55/EC). This meant protection against forced returns and assistance for all Syrians, Palestinians from Syria and stateless people from Syria. The country's first comprehensive immigration law - Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) was adopted in April 2013, providing a legal basis for temporary protection but requiring an additional regulation to be issued by the Council of Ministers specifying its scope and content. In October 2014, the Regulation on Temporary Protection came into effect, strengthening the legal framework for Syrians' access to social services, including education and medical care, financial assistance, interpretation services and access to the labour market.<sup>6</sup>

As the crisis turned into a protracted refugee situation with increased refugee arrivals, the Syrians started settling more into urban areas. Currently less than 6 per cent of all Syrian refugees live in camps (DGMM, 2018). The consistent growth of the urban refugee population posed further pressures on public services, causing housing shortages, increase in rents, unregistered employment and competition in the labour market (International Crisis Group, 2014). The economic and social vulnerability of urban Syrian refugees has been subject to numerous reports since the intensification of the refugee flow into Turkey (Kirişçi, 2014; İçduygu 2015; Şenyücel and Orhan, 2015). Considering that working-age Syrian refugees constitute the largest age group followed by

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<sup>6</sup> This regulation is based on Article 91 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No.6458)



school-age children as the second largest group,<sup>7</sup> access to employment and access to education have become the two most pressing issues for refugees.

Against this background, the Turkish government gradually moved away from emergency responses and started formulating mid-to long-term strategies targeting the needs of self-settled refugees in urban areas (World Bank, 2015). Policy measures facilitating access to public education system, the introduction of work permits in January 2016 and other institutional adjustments enabled to develop a more coordinated integration policy for the management of the protracted refugee situation (Şimşek and Çorabatır, 2016; Yavçan, 2018). The government's rhetoric became more assuring over time, in terms of considering long term prospects of refugees in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> Opening pathway to citizenship has also been on the national agenda following President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's public announcement in July 2016 of plans to grant citizenship to Syrians. By January 2019, around 76,400 Syrians have been granted citizenship (T24, 07 January 2019). As will be discussed below, one other factor in the shift to more long-term approaches was the growing EU engagement with Turkey on the refugee crisis, which included EU's commitment to provide €6 billion financial aid in supporting Syrian refugees in Turkey (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

Prior to such policy developments from 2016 onwards, uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding Syrians in Turkey were particularly intensified in the second half of 2015. As Turkey experienced two national elections during this period, the Syrian refugee situation became a highly politicised topic on the domestic agenda (İlgi and Memişoğlu, 2017; Devlet-Karapınar, 2018). The campaign period for the June 7 elections, in particular, demonstrated that refugees became a political instrument for opposition parties to criticise the incumbent government's domestic and foreign policies (for in-depth discussions, see Dyke and Blaser, 2015; Oruç, 2015; İlgi and Memişoğlu, 2017). Enforcing return of the refugees to Syria was a recurring theme, for instance, especially in the main opposition party CHP discourse, usually suggested in such a way as to be for the benefit of the refugees themselves, which nevertheless received criticism from rights-based groups (TRT News, 09 May 2015).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For up-to-date national migration statistics, see, Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM)'s website, available at: [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/migration-statistics\\_915\\_1024](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/migration-statistics_915_1024).

<sup>8</sup> To give an example, in April 2016, the Former Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek stated: 'First we need to acknowledge that (Syrian) refugees are not here temporarily. We have to be aware of this... In my opinion, we should give them access to education, a good vocational training, and treat them with respect. Perhaps in the short term, they may be a burden, but we should not see it that way. At the same time, we should consider them as entities with a positive value in the long run' (T24 News, 15 April 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Although prominent figures from the ruling party AKP also employ the return rhetoric from time to time, their remarks emphasized return as conditional upon the restoration of peace in

Against this background, AKP's loss of parliamentary majority following the June 7 elections and the failed coalition attempts nurtured Syrian refugees' perceptions of lack of a certainty regarding their future prospects in Turkey (Daily Sabah, 10 June 2015). In August 2015, the former Minister of Labour and Security Faruk Çelik announced that there were no plans to grant work permits under a general program for refugees even though this was already foreseen in the Regulation on Temporary Protection (Reuters, 7 August 2015). Such mixed messages from the authorities, combined with limited access to legal employment and education could be considered among major push factors making European countries a better alternative. Yet, it is equally important to bear in mind other factors not involving Turkey directly, such as intensification of the conflict in Syria and the increasingly restrictive admission policies of EU countries and other major host countries in the region. These 'cornered and concentrated migrants and refugees in Turkey' (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015: 18).<sup>10</sup>

As the refugee influx became the focus of media and political agendas, Turkey's critical role in the management of the refugee influx from that time onwards has become an utmost concern for the EU member-states, leading to a growing diplomatic engagement with the Turkish government. In November 2015 the EU and Turkish officials started working on a joint action plan to cope with the pressures of the mass displacement. The EU's expectation from Turkey has been clear: stemming the irregular flow of migrants and refugees into Europe. And for Turkey to do this, the Union has agreed to financially assist Turkey in providing improved living conditions for Syrian refugees (ECHO, 2016). The provisional deal reached at the EU-Turkey summit was finalised on 18 March 2016 (also known as the EU-Turkey Statement), setting out a complex framework to end irregular migration flows to Europe via Turkey and start resettling Syrian refugees directly from Turkey to Europe.<sup>11</sup> Under the 'EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey', the EU agreed to fund humanitarian and

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Syria (see, Haberler, 18 October 2013). CHP's rhetoric, maintained in more recent electoral campaigns of June 2018, on the other hand, implies that return could be coerced if the party comes to power (see, Oruç, 2015). To illustrate, in April 2015 CHP's leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu stated: 'we are going to send our Syrian brothers back. Excuse us. Every person is happy in their homelands where they were born, happy in their own countries' (Milliyet, 22 May 2015).

<sup>10</sup> According to the Turkish authorities, there has also been a sharp increase in the numbers of Syrians arriving to Turkey from Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan during the summer months of 2015. Turkey adopted other measures to curb irregular flows, including introduction of visa requirements for Syrians arriving to Turkey by air or sea from third countries (Hürriyet Daily News, 18 December 2015).

<sup>11</sup> '(1) All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey; (2) For every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be returned the EU' return all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek islands with the costs covered by the EU; to resettle for every Syrian readmitted by Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian from Turkey to the EU Member States, within the framework of existing commitments' (ECHO, 2016).

development projects between 2016 and 2018 to support Syrian refugees' access to food, shelter, education and healthcare in Turkey (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 2018). While the EU-Turkey statement has been criticised on various grounds, including for being 'too pragmatic, unethical, and overly strategic' (Kale, 2018: 73), its implementation from March 2016 reduced irregular crossings and migrant deaths in the Aegean. The number of people arriving in Greece via Turkey dropped 97 per cent (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Meanwhile, the deal had a limited effect in opening more legal pathways in Europe for asylum seekers. As of August 2018, around 15,000 Syrian refugees from Turkey were resettled in the scope of EU-Turkey Statement, which is less than 0,4 per cent of Turkey's total Syrian refugee population (DGMM, 2018).

The EU-Turkey Statement can also be viewed as part of the Union's strategy of externalising refugee management in light of persistent shortcomings of its own Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (Alfred and Howden, 2018; Niemann and Zaun, 2018). Although growing migration flows across the Mediterranean have been forecasted by migration experts for a long time, the European governments were ill-prepared to deal with the political and humanitarian implications of increased migration (Gattinara, 2017: 319). Rather than putting into practice a fair asylum distribution mechanism, the immediate responses were restricting the activities of migrant smugglers to prevent Mediterranean crossings and strengthening EU internal and external borders to prevent migrants and refugees reaching Northern and Eastern Europe (Berry et al., 2015:3-4). Meanwhile, security-focused responses drew widespread criticism for undermining the humanitarian challenges faced by migrants and refugees (Berry et al., 2015). The intense mediatisation of certain tragic events, such as the death of nearly 1200 people due to sinking of five boats in the Mediterranean in April 2015 and the Aylan Kurdi incident in September 2015, spurred public debates, increasing pressure on governments and the EU institutions to act and come up with solutions (Bozdağ and Smets, 2017: 4047; Niemann and Zaun, 2018: 4).

The figure of Aylan Kurdi, in particular, became a symbol of 'innocence and injustice', mobilising an international public reaction against the casualties brought by the Syria war and the ineffective European response to this humanitarian crisis (Fernando and Giardano, 2016). The emergence of Twitter hashtag #RefugeesWelcome, for instance, not only remained as a 'new form of digital citizen participation' (Barisione et al., 2017), but also turned into a social movement bringing together individuals and as well as humanitarian, faith-based and rights-based organisations to support refugees in different countries. Political responses, on the other hand, remained fragmented. Although some governments, notably the German government initially opted for open-border policy for refugees, some other European countries like Hungary took further

measures to seal their borders from mid-2015 (Niemann and Zaun, 2018:4). In September 2015 the EU introduced a ‘temporary emergency relocation scheme’ in an attempt to strengthen responsibility sharing mechanisms for refugees, facing fierce opposition from several Eastern European member states. The lack of political commitment for the creation of unified strategy among member states, as the EU Commission pointed out, led to only 937 asylum applications to be relocated from Greece and Italy by March 2016 despite the agreed decision of 160,000 reallocations (EU Commission, 2016). In 2016, the EU’s border agency Frontex had a budget increase of 75 per cent, which according to Richards (2018), together with some EU member states’ reintroduction of border controls within Schengen zone, indicated that the migration inflows were identified as a ‘security threat’, increasing the ‘negative stereotyping of refugees as a threat to European society’.

Such dynamics overall sparked a political crisis within the EU, threatening the core human rights values of the European integration project (Gattinara, 2017; Niemann and Zaun, 2018). As a matter of fact, scholars widely criticise the use of labels ‘refugee crisis’ or ‘migrant crisis’ for misrepresenting the situation, and instead describe the EU’s response to the refugee influx as ‘crisis of solidarity’, ‘crisis of protection (Perre et al., 2018), and ‘crisis of the CEAS’ (Niemann and Zaun, 2018). Some others assert that the description of recent refugee influx in political and media discourse as ‘refugee crisis’ is ideologically charged, which has purposefully developed to legitimise the ‘urgency’ of the situation and the necessity to take ‘special measures’ (Kryzanowski et al., 2018:3). The term is claimed to be a ‘recontextualised’ version of the earlier negative descriptions of large-scale developments related to immigration and asylum, highlighting the ‘pre-existing processes of simultaneous politicisation and mediatisation of immigration’ (Kryzanowski et al., 2018:3).

## 2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The media is long considered to be a powerful tool for delivering and interpreting information especially concerning topics that people do not have direct access (Iyengar, 1991; Machill et al., 2006; Strömback, 2011; Corbu et al., 2017). With its growing importance in public and policy debates, immigration is one of those topics that has firmly entered the media agenda, which lead many people to develop a ‘media-based impression of immigration and immigrants’ (Van Klingeren et al., 2015) rather than the realities of immigration. While the media’s role in shaping public opinion is not straightforward (Shannan et al., 2008; Lawlor and Tolley, 2017), numerous studies have shown its substantial agenda-setting role by capturing public attention on particular issues through repeated coverage, front page news, large headlines, and so on (Mccombs, 2004; David and Kamau, 2016). Accordingly, agenda-setting has been one of the

central concepts addressing the media's impact on public opinion and political behaviour (Van Aelst, et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2016). Another key concept is mediatisation, which has taken the analysis of media-politics nexus a step further. As a broader research strand, mediatisation offers an explanatory framework for understanding the media's growing influence beyond just the formation of public opinion, but in all aspects of politics and social life.

To briefly contextualise, the media has been undergoing a rapid transformation in parallel to the developments of the 1990s, particularly globalisation and digitalisation (Hepp et al., 2018). These dynamics have increased media's relevance for a wide range of human activities and social relations, making numerous areas of life more and more 'mediatised' especially in the last decade (Krotz, 2017; Hepp and Hasebrink, 2018). Some scholars describe mediatisation also as a 'meta-process' equal to other transformative social changes such as globalisation (Krotz, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013). While there is no precise definition due to the multidisciplinary study of the concept (Strömback and Esser, 2014), the common assumption is that mediatisation refers to a 'long-term process of increasing media importance' with direct and indirect influence in different spheres in society (Hjarvard, 2013).

Scholars also highlight that it is no longer suitable to identify a specific media means or content as the 'driving force' of mediatisation, mainly because today's old and new media channels have become increasingly interconnected due to their digitalisation and the advancement of internet (Krotz, 2017:105). The Aylan Kurdi incident illustrates the interlinked nature of new and old media channels: it was initially a Turkish news agency that reported the story together with 50 images, which later reached 20 million people across the world through Twitter. An empirical study analysing responses from Turkish and Belgian Twitter users to the incident shows that the majority of tweets contained a link to news websites, or other social media platforms (Bozdağ and Smets, 2017: 4056). Accordingly, while new types of media change communication environment in a fundamental way, old types of media, such as print newspaper coverage, continue to have a substantial impact that goes far beyond its readers through its agenda-setting role for both broadcast news agendas and social media (Rey Mazon, 2013; Krotz, 2017).

In explaining the politics-media relationship, the mediatisation theory is claimed to have the potential to integrate different theoretical strands within one framework, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the role of media in the 'transformation of established democracies' (Esser and Strömback, 2014: 6). De Vreese (2014: 137), for instance, specifically focuses on the linkage between mediatisation and framing, showing how traditional media effects such as framing is a key indicator of mediatisation. Lilleker (2006) also points at media's

central role in shaping and framing the processes and discourse of political communication and society, paving the way for mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Schulz 2004). In other words, politics become highly dependent on media, and political practices are transformed into a process of 'mediated attention-seeking rather than of political representation and policy making' (Krzyzanowski et al., 2018: 6).

Esser and Strömback (2014: 6-7) identify the following four distinctive, yet related dimensions of mediatisation of politics, which help to develop a conceptual framework for empirical studies. The first dimension refers to the degree to which the media constitutes the most important source of information about politics and society. The second dimension focuses on media's autonomy from other political and social institutions. The third dimension refers to the extent to which media content and coverage of politics is guided by media logic or political logic. This dimension is mainly concerned with what the media cover and how they cover it. The fourth dimension refers to the political practices, and asks whether political institutions, organisations and actors are guided by media logic or political logic.

The third dimension on media practices has been investigated by a wide range of scholars in understanding the influence of media in shaping and framing public perceptions/politics on immigration. Examining the case of United States (US) from 1980s to mid-2000s, Suro (2009)'s work, for instance, depicts the news coverage of immigration as 'highly episodic' often emphasising themes of illegality, crisis, controversy, and government failure. Such sharp rises (often triggered by dramatic events) and falls in media coverage of immigration, condition the public and policymakers to perceive immigration as a sudden event, combined with a tone of crisis. And through this type of coverage, the news media is claimed to misrepresent the realities of immigration in the US and instead contribute to the 'polarisation and distrust that surrounds the immigration issue' (Suro, 2009: 3). Some other scholars highlight the role of media in explaining anti-immigrant attitudes (Esser and Brosius, 1996). Boomgarden and Vliengenthart (2009), for instance, found that the frequency and tone of media coverage affected anti-immigration attitudes in Germany.

The third dimension of mediatisation of politics also helps to contextualise the media coverage of the 'refugee crisis' and its effects on the 'crisis' narratives in different national contexts. First, it is argued that labelling the refugee influx of 2015 as a crisis both in media and political discourse has added extra weight to the issue, pressuring governments to take immediate action or reminding the public what was supposed to be done in recent months and years (Perre et al., 2018; Krzyzanowski, et al, 2018). As immediate political responses to the highly mediatised Aylan Kurdi incident, for instance, the German Chancellor Angela

Merkel decided not to close the border with Austria, signalling that Germany remained open for refugees (Spiegel, 24 August 2016). The former British Prime Minister David Cameron announced to the House of Commons that the United Kingdom (UK) would 'live up to its moral responsibility' towards people forced from their homes by taking 20,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years (The Guardian, 7 September 2015). And several months later, as discussed in the previous section, Turkey and the EU have begun to implement a multifaceted agreement designed to curb the irregular flow of Syrians to Europe and improve the conditions of refugees in Turkey. Yet, these initiatives did not really open the gateway for dealing with realities of immigration and finding durable solutions, such as increasing legal resettlement options for refugees in Europe.

The literature also extensively addresses the common media frames used for portrayal of refugees and immigrants (Bozdağ and Smets, 2017: 4050), which as mentioned earlier, is considered a key indicator of mediatisation. One common frame is the danger/securitisation/control framework, depicting refugees as security threats and calling for security-oriented policies. Another common framing is the economy/social costs framework, focusing on both economic costs and benefits refugees generate. The other two categories are the culture/integration framework and the humanitarian framework, which both intend to create more empathy with the situation of refugees. The most typically used representations of Syrian refugees within these frames, according to Bozdağ and Smets (2017: 4049), are of threat, burden and victimhood. Nevertheless, it is also evident that news frames are not fixed and can react to shifts in the social and political context (Lawlor, 2015; Wallace, 2017; Berry et al., 2015). Wallace (2017: 208), for instance, demonstrates that the framing of the Syrian refugee crisis in Canadian print media shifts from conflict-dominated representations to more humanizing portrayal of refugees following the release of Aylan Kurdi's photo in September 2015.

Media's adaptability to shifts in political and public debates is also apparent in the European context. The European media is claimed to have a long-standing role in nurturing the growing public resentment towards asylum and immigration across EU countries through its framing of migrants and refugees as a 'problem' rather than 'benefit to host societies' (Berry et al, 2005: 5). Georgiou and Zaborowski's study covering eight European countries shows that media narratives significantly changed in the two-months period before and after the Aylan Kurdi incident, in which 'descriptions of measures to help refugees significantly dominated over measures to protect the country' (2017: 8). Their findings also address that the 'sympathetic and empathetic' media response to the events of summer and autumn of 2015 has been short-lived. And it was gradually replaced by 'suspicion, and in some cases, hostility towards refugees and migrants' especially after the November 2015 Paris attacks

(Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017: 3). Cross-country studies also expose major differences in the ways the refugees were portrayed during the ‘refugee crisis’ (Berry et al. 2015; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). According to Georgio and Zaborowski (2017: 12), whereas the refugees were particularly ‘nameless’ and ‘voiceless’ in the Hungarian press during 2015, the Greek newspapers have given more ‘voice’ to refugees compared to the European average, which could be explained in relation unfamiliarity vs. long-standing familiarity with refugee issues in the domestic context.

The representation/framing of Syrian refugees is also the most commonly analysed topic among scholars focusing on the Turkish media context. An earlier study finds that the 2014 coverage of five Turkish dailies with the highest circulation rates portray Syrian refugees either as ‘poor people in need of help’ or ‘threats for social security’ (Pandır et al., 2015). According to the authors, this dilemma is a reproduction of the stereotypical representation of asylum seekers in international studies, which either adopts a humanitarian framework or a security framework. Focusing on the representation of refugees in social media, Bozdağ and Smets (2017: 4062) find that the most dominant portrayal of Syrian refugees among Twitter users from Turkey and Belgium were of victimhood, while representation of refugees as ‘active agents’ or as an ‘opportunity’ were also common among tweets from politicians and NGOs. Exploring media representations in relation to domestic politics, Erdoğan (2014) argues that the pro-government newspapers in Turkey tend to portray Syrian refugees in humanitarian lines, whereas anti-government newspapers use frames that emphasise themes of burden and threat. Elaborating further on differences in framing, Yücel and Doğankaya (2017: 5) suggest that both the conservative/right-wing centre/left-wing newspapers tend to adopt pro-refugee representations, but the latter is more concerned with presenting this from a human rights perspective. Overall, it is emphasised that Turkish media’s coverage is mostly positive or neutral in comparison to more negative framings prevalent in Europe (Pandır et al., 2015; Yavçan et al., 2017; Yücel and Doğankaya, 2017). Some other earlier findings from the European and Turkish media contexts will be elaborated later in comparison to our empirical findings.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In our attempt to elaborate how the refugee crisis is framed in the Turkish media from different ideological perspectives, the paper provides an analysis of the front-page news of three newspapers, *Birgün* (left-wing), *Hürriyet* (mainstream and central) and *Yeni Akit* (right-wing) for the period between July and November 2015. Aside from representing left-central-right political spectrum, these newspapers were selected also for practical research purposes as each has an easily accessible online front-page archive. There are several reasons why our



analysis focuses only on front page news. First, front page is considered to be the most important page of a newspaper and the stories are more likely to be selected for front page if they constitute a part of an ongoing story (Reisner, 1992). Second, we support the idea that analysis of front pages provides a straightforward way to assess and visualise news attention to specific stories over time, across or between newspapers (Rey Mazon, 2013).

Apart from its significance in the domestic context outlined above, this period was chosen to investigate whether and how the attitudes of the newspapers have changed after the increase in crossings via the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece, with particular emphasis on the tragic incident of Aylan Kurdi. Accordingly, the analysis traces the two-month period before and after the incident with the intention of understanding how much emphasis each newspaper has put on this critical turning point of the refugee crisis. The total number of the news analysed is 66 with the following distribution: *Hürriyet* (33), *Birgün* (30) and *Yeni Akit* (10). The following themes and codes were developed in order to analyse how the media frame public discussion of the Syrian refugees (see also, Appendix 1). The coding procedure has been completed through NVivo 11 Pro for Windows. Descriptive analysis of the news includes the total number of the themes, categories, codes and as well as the cluster analysis to look at the relations between them. Naturally any item or source could be coded under more than one theme, category or code, so the total number of any coding may not match the total number of the sample. First, the data demonstrates how the Syrian refugees are defined in the news and as to whether different terms overlap or are used interchangeably or any of the newspaper under analysis prefers to use a specific type of description. Within the definition theme, the following pre-defined codes were used: migrant, illegal migrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, Syrian/Syrian citizen(s). Second, the sample is categorised according to its domestic and international focus in order to distinguish between news material that solely focus on the refugee issue within a domestic context without touching upon international aspects and news that primarily look at the international context. The third theme of analysis is the subject of the news to grasp what topics are being covered as front-page news, what are various story elements, and as to whether the definition of Syrian refugees changes depending on the topic.

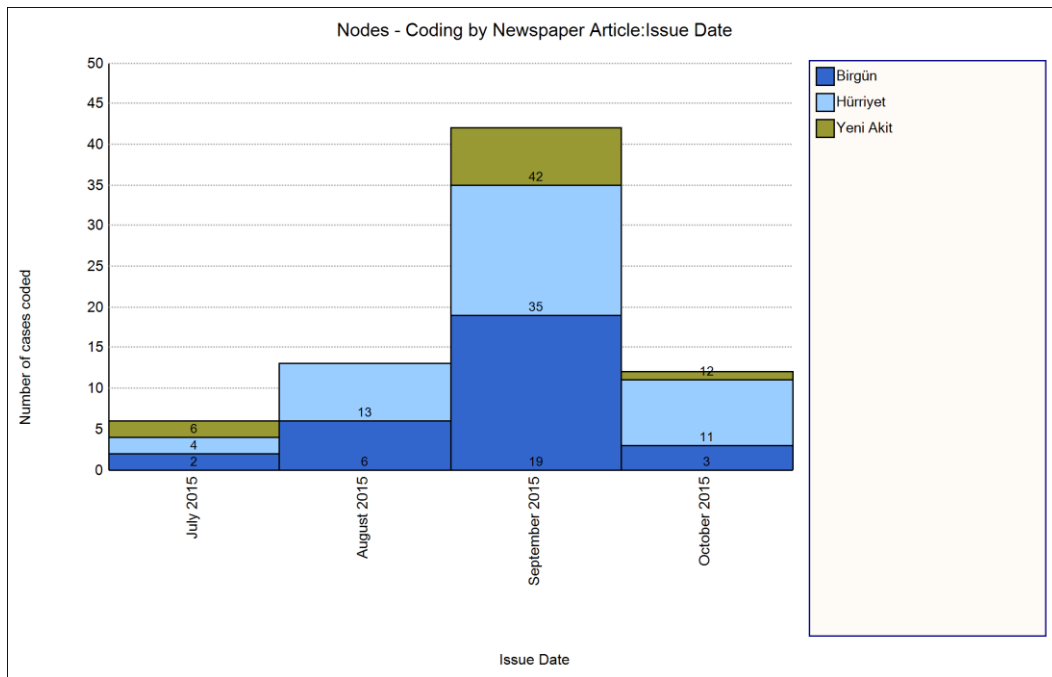
Within the subject theme, the following categories were identified: (1) agenda-setting, in which a particular topic becomes high on the agenda leading to subsequent widespread coverage; (2) the newspaper coverage of refugee issues bring tabloid material to the fore rather than directly focusing on the refugees; (3) refugee problems that are directly related to access to food and housing, working conditions, educational issues, security, legal status, health, violation of rights and mistreatment of refugees; (4) border security and border violations with pre-

defined codes, including migrant smuggling, exit from or transit movement via Turkey, and entry into Turkey; (5) political discussions of the refugee crisis differentiating between domestic politics and external politics.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In July 2015, the total number of front-page news covering the refugee crisis was limited to six with an equal distribution of two articles per newspaper. In August, there was already an increasing coverage in *Hürriyet* and *Birgün* (13 in total), while *Yeni Akit* had no front-page news. Experiencing a peak in September, the total number of news reached 42, with a visible increase in each newspaper: 19 (*Birgün*), 16 (*Hürriyet*) and 7 (*Yeni Akit*) (See, Figure 1). The release and circulation of the photographs of Kurdi in early September appears to be a major explanatory factor for this increase. In October, the total number went down to 12, where *Hürriyet* tops the list with 8 front-page articles. As Figure 2 illustrates further, *Hürriyet* holds the largest share with 33 headline news during the four months period, meanwhile *Birgün* immediately follows after with 30 news and *Yeni Akit* comes last with a total number of 10 front page news.

**Figure.1: Distribution of Newspaper Articles per Month**



<sup>12</sup> By tabloid material, we refer to elements of tabloid journalism that aim to catch readers' attention through coverage on readers' idols, such as celebrities, sports heroes and so forth (for an in-depth discussion of tabloid journalism see, Brichta, 2010). In our analysis, we came across a few articles (mainly by *Hürriyet*) where refugee issues were covered with reference to stories involving celebrities. As an example, *Hürriyet* had a front-page news about Shakira's concert where she dedicated a song to Aylan Kurdi and his brother (24 September 2015).

**Figure.2: Distribution of Articles per Newspaper**

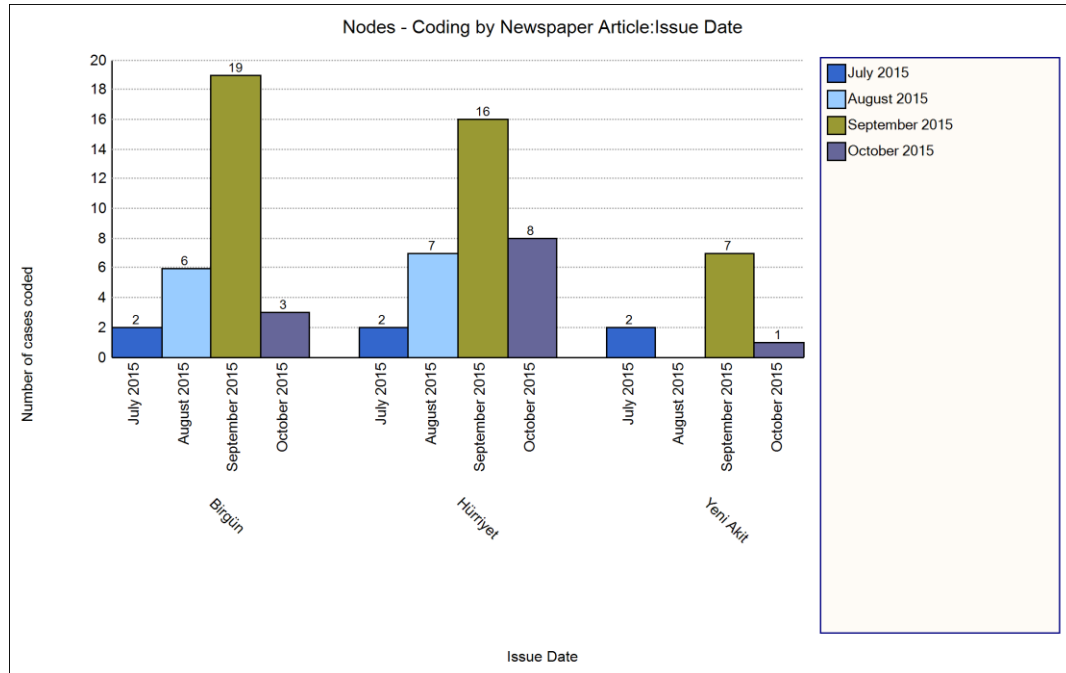
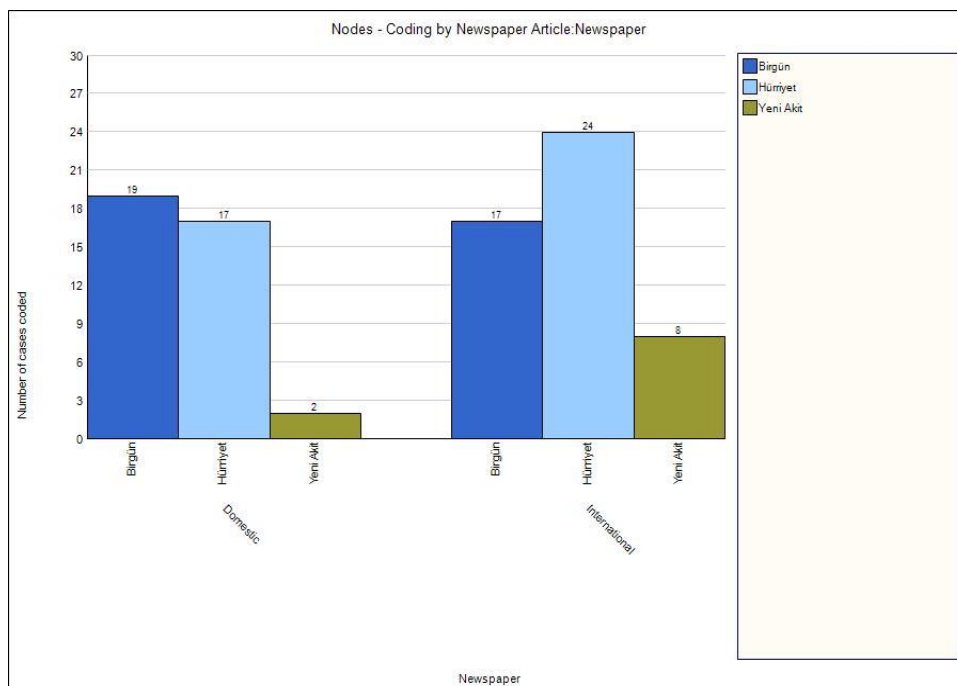
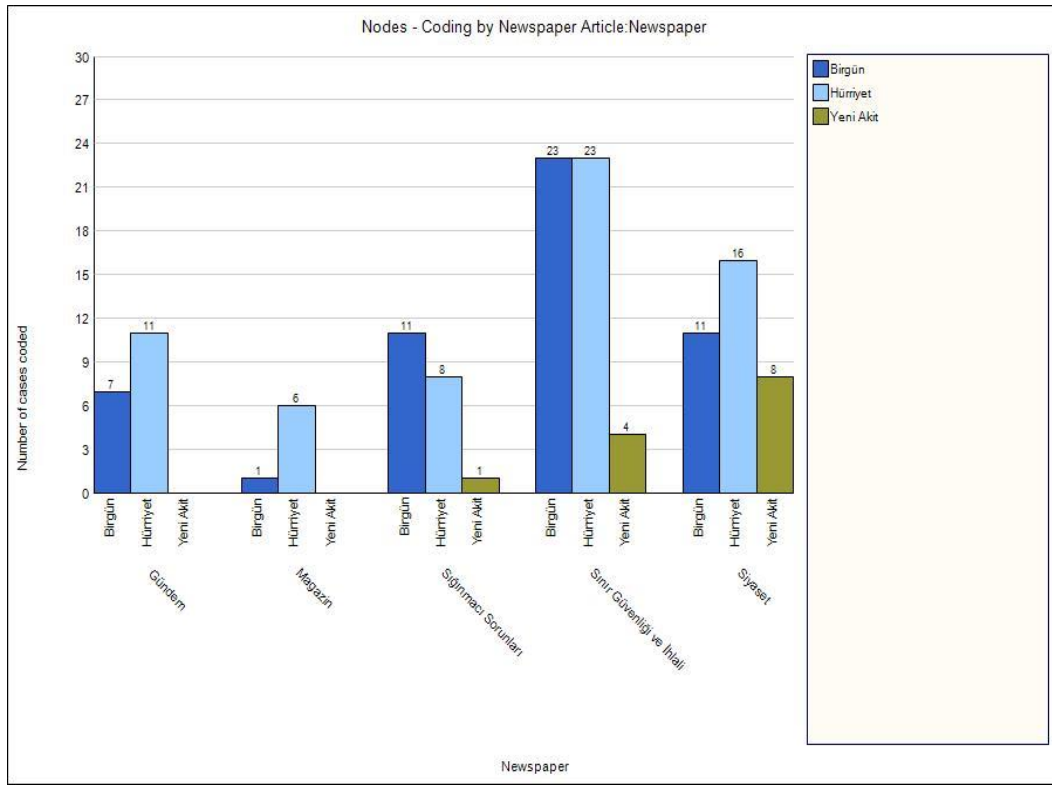


Figure 3 shows that 38 front-page articles is solely focused on domestic context with no coverage of the international aspect of the refugee crisis, while 48 front-page articles touch upon both domestic and international issues. And finally Figure 4 indicates the distribution of news according to categories: border security and violations (50), politics (35), refugee problems (20), agenda (18), and tabloid (7).

**Figure.3: Focus of News (Domestic vs. International)**



**Figure.4: Distribution of News by Subject**

Categories: Agenda [**Gündem**], Tabloid [**Magazin**], Refugee problems [**Sığınmacı sorunları**], Border security and violations [**Sınır güvenliği ve ihlali**], Politics [**Siyaset**]

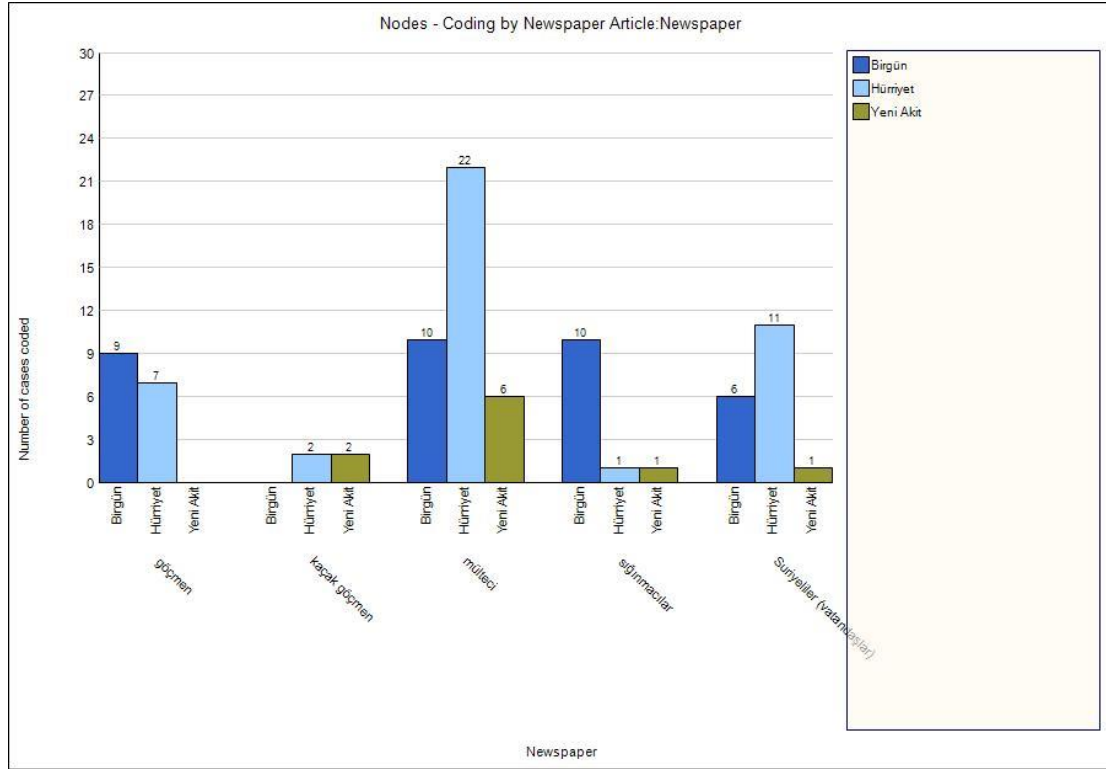
### How Syrians Are Referred to in the Turkish Media Context?

Regarding how Syrians are referred to in the Turkish media context, the most common term used by the three newspapers appears to be ‘refugees’ (38), followed by ‘Syrians/Syrian citizens’ (18), ‘migrants’ (16), ‘asylum-seekers’ (12), and lastly ‘illegal migrants’ (4) (see, Figure 5).<sup>13</sup> Even though Syrians in Turkey do not have an official refugee status, as discussed earlier, there has been a considerable increase in the usage of both ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum-seekers’ especially in September (see, Figure 6). A similar trend is also evident in the European media context, in which existing data shows that the global repercussions of the image of Aylan Kurdi, in particular, has changed the language used on media, with more uses of the term ‘refugee’ than ‘migrant’ during the same month (Vis and Goriunova, 2015: 5). Some other scholars suggest a direct link between the use of labels in the media and the domestic political debate, pointing at overwhelming usage of ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum-seekers’ in the German and Swedish press, which also happens to be the two EU member-states that have agreed to take the largest proportion of refugees in the

<sup>13</sup> The analysis did not include ‘guests’ as it only appeared once in one of the front-page news of *Birgün* (3 July 2015).

EU in 2015 (Berry et al., 2015: 5). In contrast, it is noted that the Italian and UK press opted for ‘migrant’, and the Spanish press preferred the term ‘immigrant’ (Berry et al., 2015: 5).

**Figure.5: Distribution of Definitions per Newspaper**



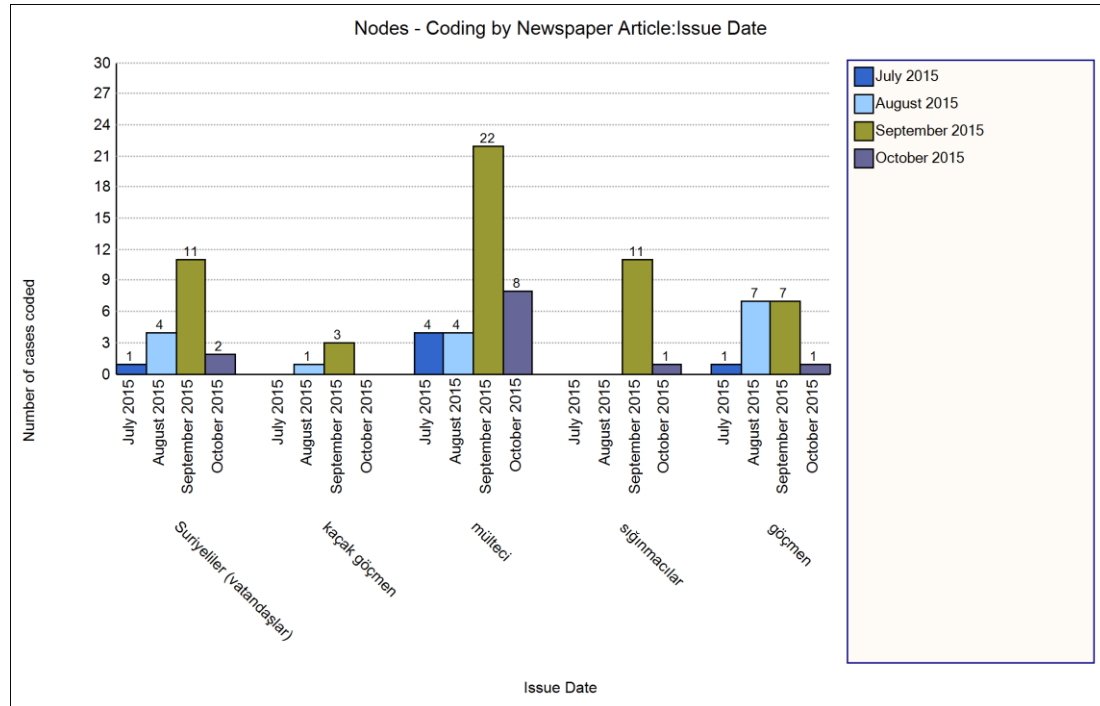
Codes: Migrant [**göçmen**], Illegal migrant [**kaçak göçmen**], refugee [**mülteci**], asylum-seekers [**sığınmacılar**], Syrian/ Syrian citizens [**Suriyeli/Suriyeli vatandaşlar**]

Meanwhile, our analysis shows that the Turkish newspapers use the terms ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘Syrians/ Syrian citizens’ interchangeably especially in the domestic context. Only *Birgün* has a more consistent use of ‘asylum-seekers’ and ‘refugees’ when referring to Syrians regardless of the circumstances. While *Birgün* does not employ the term ‘illegal migrants’ at all, both *Hürriyet* and *Yeni Akit* have two articles each where Syrians are described as ‘illegal migrants’. All the four articles using the term ‘illegal migrants’ cover issues related to the theme border security and border violations, mainly referring to Syrians or other nationals leaving Turkey irregularly. In *Hürriyet*, the term ‘illegal migrant’ is also used interchangeably with ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ within the same coverage as follows: ‘An old fishing boat carrying refugees sank near the Farmakonisi Island... Among the illegal migrants 34 people were dead, including 4 babies and 11 children’ (*Hürriyet*, 14 September 2015).

This finding is largely in line with an earlier study analysing Syrians’ representation in five Turkish dailies from March 2011 to May 2015 (Efe, 2015:

63), which suggests that media's interchangeable usage of these terms blurs further Syrians' legal status in Turkey especially in the eyes of the public. As indicated in other studies (Memişoğlu 2018), the lack of general public awareness about refugee legal framework and temporary protection is among factors triggering perceived ambiguity over the legal status of Syrian refugees, which in turn make it difficult for refugees to comprehend the scope of their actual rights and obligations, especially for those benefiting from temporary protection. Considering the media's impact on public opinion, it could be suggested that Turkish media outlets could play a more informative role in this particular aspect.

**Figure.6: Distribution of Definitions per Month**



Codes: Migrant [**göçmen**], Illegal migrant [**kaçak göçmen**], refugee [**mülteci**], asylum-seekers [**sığınmacılar**], Syrian/ Syrian citizens [**Suriyeli/Suriyeli vatandaşlar**]

### Framing News as Agenda Items

Although each newspaper has published broadly on irregular border crossings to Europe (*see below*, 4.4. Border security and border violations), the Aylan Kurdi incident in particular has become an agenda item in all the three newspapers in September, covered widely throughout the month matching different themes. The incident was the death of 12 Syrian refugees on 2 September 2015, who were drowned while trying to cross to the Greek island Kos from the Turkish coastal town Bodrum. The Turkish Doğan News Agency (DHA), owned by the same media group as *Hürriyet*, was the first to report the

story together with 50 images from the incident, which also featured the dead body of a three-year-old Syrian refugee boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on the shore. As Vis and Goriunova (2015: 5) note, the images of Aylan Kurdi caught global attention in a matter of 12 hours reaching 20 million people across the world through 30,000 tweets. The image has also made the front page in numerous European newspapers - regardless of their conservative or liberal stance - with the following headlines: 'Somebody's child' (*The Independent*, UK), 'Unbearable' (*Daily Mirror*, UK), 'A picture to bring the world to silence' (*La Repubblica*, Italy), 'An image that shakes the awareness of Europe' (*El Pais*, Spain) (Berry et al., 2015: 5). In framing of the incident, some newspapers, such as the UK daily *The Independent*, took it a step further and launched a campaign calling its readers to urge the UK government 'to take its share of refugees' (*The Independent*, 3 September 2015). The newspaper's online petition #RefugeesWelcome received over 400,000 signatures in four days, which was followed by the UK government's announcement to take 20,000 refugees (*The Independent*, 25 May 2016).

In the Turkish media context, *Hürriyet* initially published the story and the pixelated images of Aylan Kurdi on September 2. But following its global and national public impact, the photograph appeared on the newspaper's first page the next day with a statement explaining the editorial decision to publish the image as 'a duty of journalists to draw attention to the refugee tragedy that the world is turning a blind eye on' (*Hürriyet*, 3 September 2015). In the next three days to follow, front-page news covered various aspects in relation to the incident. At first, the newspaper put emphasis on the immediate normalisation of life with images featuring children playing on the same beach the day after the incident, elaborated with quotes from local residents: 'since two months, no law enforcement unit managed to prevent these crossings. Those who got on the boats knew they would die. As you see, life went back to normal here, people are swimming' (*Hürriyet*, 4 September 2015).

Statements from the photographer of the image 'I took the picture of a silent scream', and narratives by Aylan Kurdi's father, who survived but lost his wife and two children during the incident, are also extensively covered with the headline 'my children slipped through my hands' (*Hürriyet*, 4 September 2015). From 5 September, coverage mostly focuses on the incident's impact on Europe, highlighting that it caused Germany and Austria to accept thousands of refugees. The newspaper published the images of Austrian and Danish police officers helping the refugee children: 'Aylan opened the gateway' and inserted quotes from European politicians, including Angela Merkel 'Aylan saddened me greatly', and Francois Hollande 'These images woken up Europe' (6 September 2015; 12 September 2015). There is also coverage of tabloid material in relation

to the incident, including statements from celebrities like the UN Goodwill Ambassador Shakira (Hürriyet, 24 September 2015), which are not covered in the front-pages of the other two newspapers.

While *Birgün* and *Yeni Akit* also had front-page news the day after the incident covering the story of the Kurdi family ‘Will anyone stop this drama?’ (Birgün, 3 September 2015), ‘Here is the most painful scene’ (Yeni Akit, 3 September 2015), the images they published are pixelated and much smaller than *Hürriyet*. In the following days, *Birgün* and *Yeni Akit* develop their storylines in sharp contrast to each other. *Birgün*’s framing of the incident entails a criticism directed towards the Turkish government, emphasising its role in the outbreak of the Syrian refugee crisis and that the conditions of refugees in Turkey should be improved (Birgün, 6 September 2015). *Yeni Akit*, on the other hand, frames the incident as a direct outcome of ‘the policies of global powers towards the Middle East that washed the bodies of Syrian refugee children ashore’ (Yeni Akit, 5 September 2015). The newspaper also highlights the government’s efforts in supporting the refugees mostly at its own expense without receiving any significant financial contribution from the international community (Yeni Akit, 5 September 2015). In another front-page news, *Yeni Akit* represents the incident as a validation of Turkey’s foreign policy while blaming the ‘Western governments and the United States’ for ignoring the atrocities caused by the Assad regime over the years. More specifically, it claims that both the Aylan Kurdi incident and the refugee influx to Europe have proved Turkey right on its insistence for the creation of a safe zone, leaving the Western governments and the United States with no other choice (Yeni Akit, 6 September 2015).

A more blatant comparison of Turkey and the Western governments in *Yeni Akit* appears with the headline ‘Here is Europe’s humanitarianism’ a month after the Aylan Kurdi incident (Yeni Akit, 16 October 2015). The newspaper covers the story of a refugee child, whose body was found at the Greek shores similar to Aylan. Publishing the images from both incidents, the newspaper draws attention to the ‘father-like kindness’ of the Turkish coastguard quoting his statement: ‘For us, the priority is saving human lives. More importantly than my professional duties, I am a father first. The moment I saw Aylan, I put myself in his dad’s shoes. This was an inexplicable tragic feeling’. Highlighting the humanitarian aspects of Turkey’s rescue operations, the coverage also includes statements from another law enforcement official, who asserts:

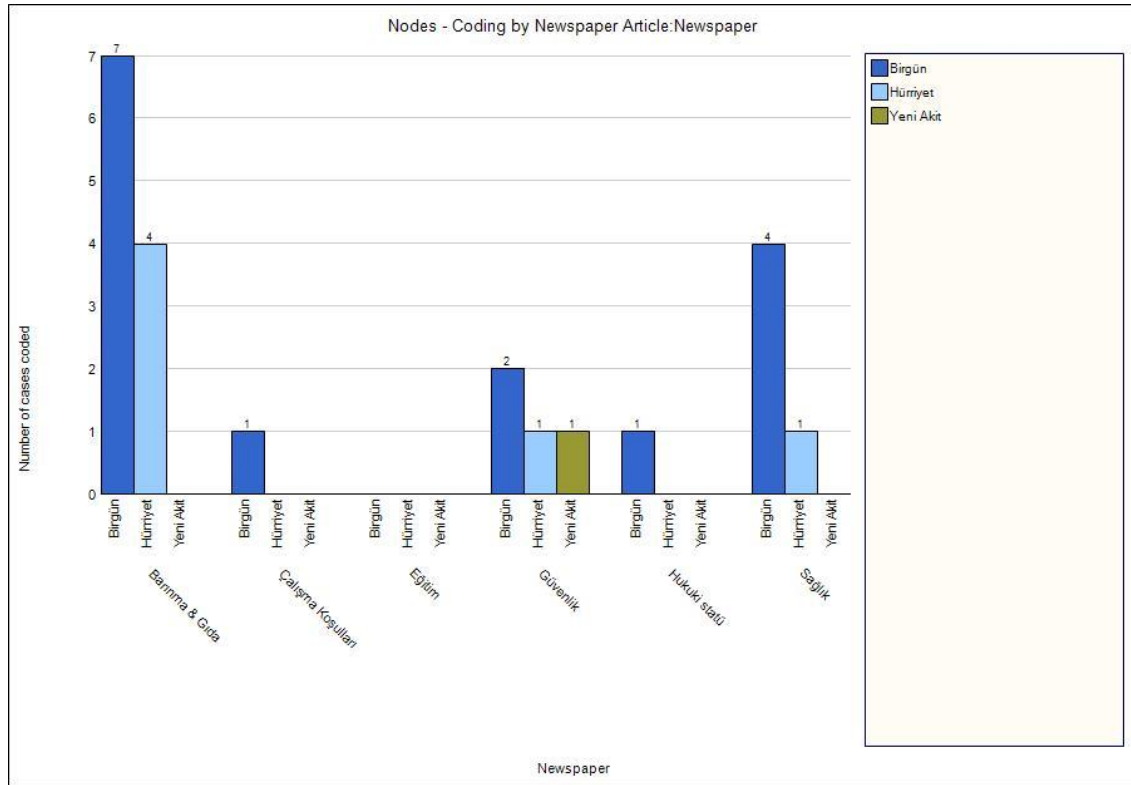
‘Through our operations, we are protecting the European countries from mass refugee influxes. In response, the European countries are only taking measures concerning themselves, they are neglecting the problems encountered in source and transit countries, they are indifferent to our efforts in coping with these problems’ (Yeni Akit, 16 October 2015).



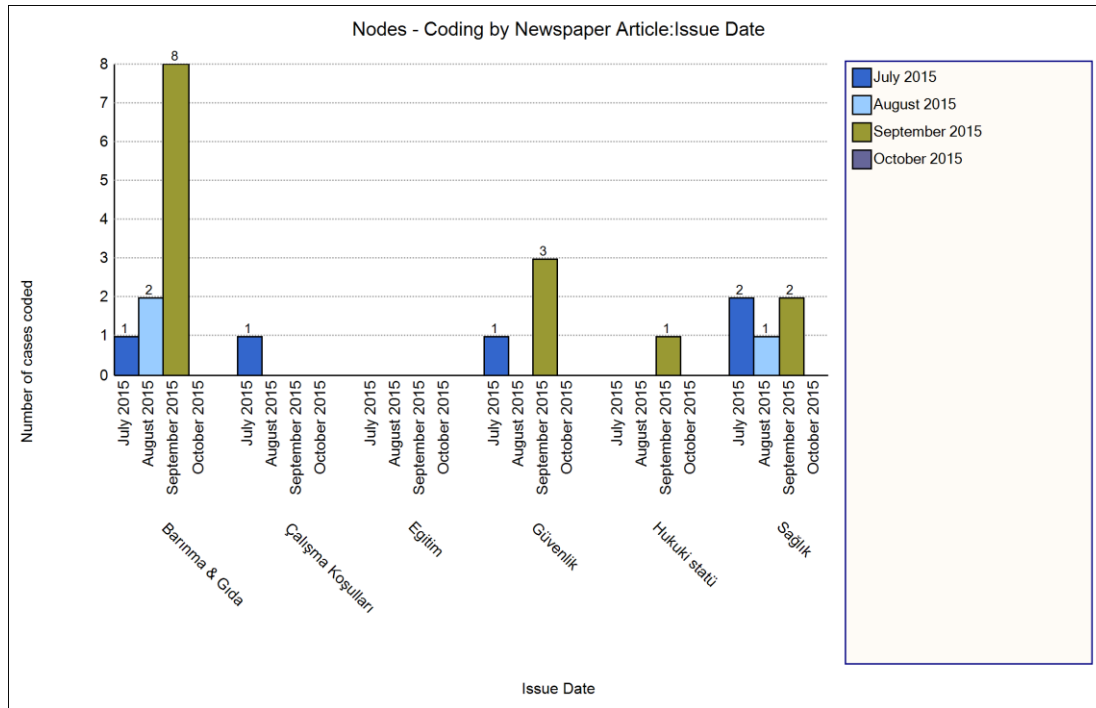
## Framing of the Refugee Problems

Around one third of front-page news is directly featuring the refugee problems theme. And *Birgün* is well ahead of the other two newspapers with a share of 15 out of 22 total front-page articles, indicating its emphasis on framing the refugee crisis through the lens of refugees. While *Hürriyet* draws attention to refugee problems in six front-page articles, *Yeni Akit* only has one article under this category during the timeframe under analysis. The distribution of news along the categories is as follows: shelter and food (11), health (5), security issues (4), legal status (1) and working conditions (1) (see Figures 7 and 8).

**Figure.7: Distribution of Refugee Problems per Newspaper**



Categories: Shelter and food [**Barınma ve gıda**], Working conditions [**Çalışma koşulları**], Education [**Eğitim**], Security [**Güvenlik**], Legal status [**Hukuki statü**], Health [**Sağlık**]

**Figure.8: Distribution of Refugee Problems per Month**

Categories: Shelter and food [**Barınma ve gıda**], Working conditions [**Çalışma koşulları**], Education [**Eğitim**], Security [**Güvenlik**], Legal status [**Hukuki statü**], Health [**Sağlık**]

There is an increasing coverage of refugee problems by *Hürriyet* and *Birgün* particularly in September, especially focusing on refugees' access to shelter and food. However, the way *Hürriyet* and *Birgün* frame the refugee problems are significantly different than each other. *Hürriyet* only focuses on the categories in relation to Syrians in transit, covering mainly the problems of those waiting for their turn to reach from Turkey to Europe via irregular routes, which is repeatedly described as "journey of hope" (*Hürriyet*, 9 August; 29 August; 16 September 2015). In other words, *Hürriyet* represents the movement of refugees towards Europe as an externalised problem, putting more emphasis on European governments' lack of responsibility in managing the crisis especially after the Aylan Kurdi incident. While the refugees' vulnerability is frequently associated with restrictive legal entry routes to European countries, *Hürriyet*'s front-page articles within the analysis period does not touch upon refugee problems in the domestic context that could be the likely causes pushing them to embark on dangerous journeys. This framing is illustrated with descriptions of refugees as 'desperate', 'hungry', 'exhausted', 'thirsty' on their way to Europe.

At the same time, *Hürriyet* depicts Europe as the one and only destination of refugees, supported by quotes from refugees 'Our destination is Holland, wish us good luck', 'I started walking to Edirne because I do not want my baby to

drown in the sea' (Hurriyet, 9 August 2015) without addressing whether their decision to leave for Europe is by choice or shaped by their circumstances in Turkey.

Meanwhile, immediately following Aylan Kurdi incident on September 3, *Birgün* elaborates on the vulnerable situation of Syrian refugees and other migrant groups living in Turkey, including those coming from Africa, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Birgün, 4 September 2015; 5 September 2015; 7 September 2015). The poor living conditions of refugees, including their access to basic services, are frequently addressed in light of newspaper's criticism over the Turkish government in managing the refugee crisis. In an article published in September, the newspaper sheds light onto the difficult living conditions of a Syrian refugee family with five children living in Izmir, where the mother is the sole breadwinner of the household working 12 hours per day and making 250TL (around US \$88 based on equivalent currency in 2015) per month. The article puts emphasis on lack of means to leave for Europe quoting the woman 'If we had money, we would also go to Europe'. The poor living conditions of Syrian refugees is addressed in relation to poverty, labour exploitation, and gender-based violence (Birgün, 7 September 2015).

Concerning legal status, only *Birgün* has one article linking the lack of refugee status in Turkey as a likely cause of Syrian refugees' decision to move to Europe. Through an interview with an academic specialised on the topic, the newspaper highlights that the Syrians under temporary protection cannot be granted refugee status unless Turkey lifts the geographical limitation to the UN Convention. The content of the article also reveals *Birgün's* stance on elaborating the necessity to openly discuss integration problems of refugees and as well as the dynamics of their acceptance by the host community (Birgün, 23 September 2015). There are no front-page articles highlighting education issues of Syrian refugees during the period although it coincides with the start of the new academic year.

### **Emphasis on Border Security and Border Violations**

As addressed in the literature, framing of immigration in relation to security and terrorism in different national contexts is a dominant theme in print and television news (Wallace, 2018: 210). In line with this, analysis of our sample indicates that issues related to border security and border violations received the most intense media coverage from July to November 2015, with a significant rise in September. However, we also find that the security frame entails humanitarian aspects in the Turkish context and the coverage mainly focuses on security threats faced by refugees rather than framing refugees as a security threat. As shown in Figure 9, there are 33 front-page articles tackling

migrant smuggling and 33 news related to exit from and transit via Turkey, while entry into Turkey is the least covered topic with 6 news. In all the three newspapers, reporting on border security issues mainly focus on irregular crossings via Turkey, with repeated coverage of refugee deaths and casualties due to capsized boats in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea.

*Hürriyet* and *Birgün* also put emphasis on the dependency of refugees on migrant smugglers, giving place to refugees' personal stories highlighting their vulnerability in their attempt to reach Europe (Birgün, 5 August 2015). In fact, this type of coverage, giving voice to refugees, is already recurring before the Aylan Kurdi incident. *Hürriyet* covers the situation of Syrians waiting at the Basmane district of İzmir for their turn to be smuggled into Greece. With the headline 'Getting ready to escape', the newspaper quotes a refugee from Syria:

'If you pay US \$300 in Syria, your passport is ready. I attempted to reach Greece twice before, but the Greek coastguards sent me back to Turkey. If we don't leave Turkey in a month, this time Turkey will send us back to Syria, which means we will be back in the hands of the Syrian army. This is why we are not scared of the dangerous sea journey, we are willing to take this risk' (*Hürriyet*, 2 August 2015).

Describing migrant smugglers as 'hope traffickers/traders', *Hürriyet* also covers the situation in the Greek islands, stressing that the crossing between Turkey and Greece is only a small segment of their journey towards Europe.

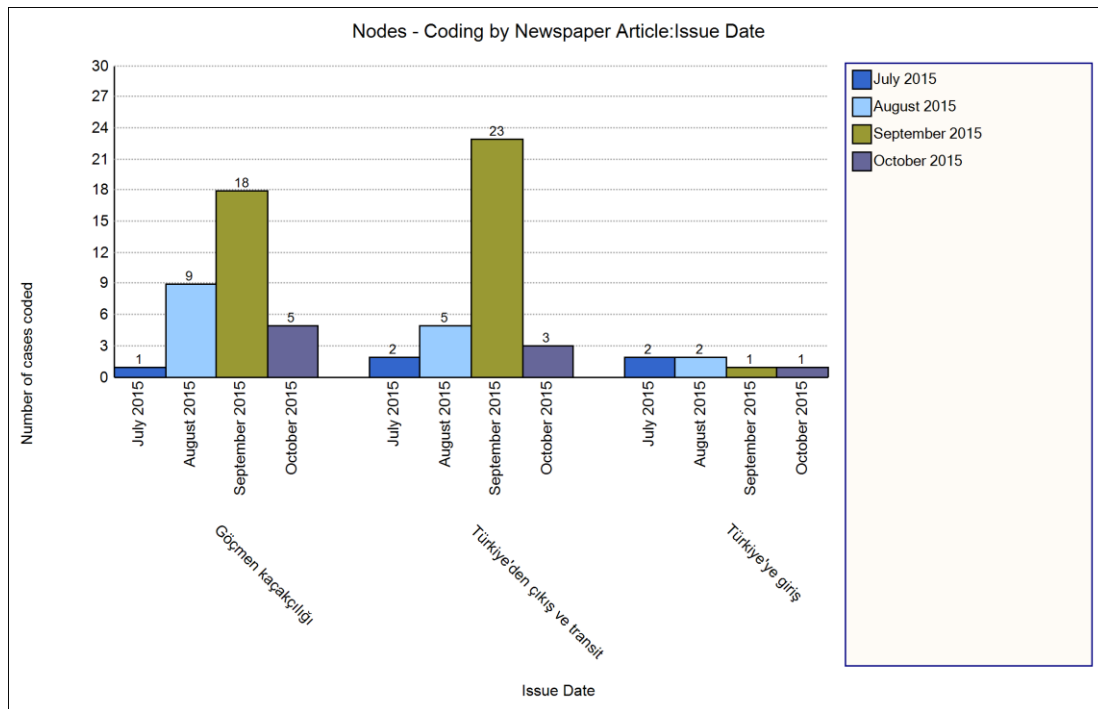
'Each day, around 300 refugees cross Lesvos from Ayvalık. Yet, their desperate situation does not end once they arrive to the island. Hope traders leave those who escaped war into secluded parts of the island, forcing them to walk for kilometres under difficult conditions until they reach the registration offices in the centre' (*Hürriyet*, 19 July 2015).

Publishing the images of a boat leaving Turkish shores with 50 refugees in the middle of the night, the reporting quotes the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras 'Europe has to help urgently', and points at the efforts of both Turkey and Greece while describing the rest of European governments as 'indifferent' to the refugee crisis (*Hürriyet*, 8 August 2015). There is also negative coverage concerning Greece focusing on incidents where the Turkish coast guards have reportedly saved the lives of refugees when the Greek coast guards intended to sink their boats with the headline 'The moment humanity dies' (*Hürriyet*, 14 August 2015).

While *Yeni Akit*'s coverage of the situation at Turkey's western borders is much narrower than *Hürriyet* and *Birgün*, the newspaper shifts the attention to the border security issues between Turkey and Syria. Concerning exit from Turkey, only *Yeni Akit* addresses the situation at Turkey's southeast border,

asserting in a front-page article that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) prevents Syrian refugees' voluntary return to Syria due to their 'intentions of changing Syria's demography in advantage of Kurds' (Yeni Akit, 9 July 2015). The only occurrence of Syrian refugees as a 'security threat' within our sample appears in *Yeni Akit*, where the newspaper highlights the connections between terrorist organisations PKK and PYD, asserting that both use Syrian refugees to smuggle weapons from Syria to Turkey (Yeni Akit, 26 July 2015).

**Figure 9. Border Security and Border Violations**



Codes: Migrant smuggling [**Göçmen kaçakçılığı**], Exit from and transit via Turkey [**Türkiye'den çıkış ve transit**], Entry into Turkey [**Türkiye'ye giriş**]

### Refugee Crisis in Domestic Politics vs. Foreign Politics

In comparison to the other two newspapers, *Hürriyet*'s coverage of the refugee crisis is extensively focused on foreign politics and policies especially in September and October. In other words, *Hürriyet* puts forward a more responsive approach to the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe and its implications on Turkey. A coverage of the European dimension appears in early September with the headline 'The Border of Shame' draws attention to the growing tension between the EU member-states quoting the French Foreign Minister: 'We do not even treat animals this way' expressing his reaction against Hungary's placement of wire fences at its borders (*Hürriyet*, 1 September 2015). Similar to emphasis on 'collective solutions' narrative in newspapers of continental Europe (Berry et al., 2015), *Hürriyet*'s coverage highlights that the crisis should be solved

collectively at the EU level. While doing this, the newspaper is also telling its readers that Turkey is an indispensable partner of the EU for coping with the pressures of the refugee crisis.

Especially during October, *Hürriyet* emphasises the growing diplomatic exchanges between the EU leaders and Turkish counterparts. The main content of the news consists of statements from politicians both from the government and the main opposition party. An extensive coverage appears during President Erdoğan's visit to Brussels in October, highlighting the growing importance of Turkey in the management of the European refugee crisis and its linkage with Turkey's quest for EU membership. Quoting Erdoğan: 'The (refugee) situation is no longer sustainable. Europe should not forget that Turkey is hosting Syrians on behalf of the international community...Our main foreign policy objective is to join the EU. Help us share the burden, support the safe zone plan in Syria, accelerate the visa liberalization process and opening of new accession chapters' (*Hürriyet*, 6 October 2015).

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Turkey in October is also widely covered in *Hürriyet* and as well as in *Yeni Akit*, while *Birgün* has no front-page coverage on this visit. With the headline 'A sensitive message to Merkel: Turkey cannot be a concentration camp', *Hürriyet* reports former PM Davutoğlu's statement: 'There is no such proposal as 1 billion, 3 billion Euros on the table. We told that we would not accept this. We would not accept the approach "we gave this and Turkey is now satisfied. Refugees now should stay in Turkey" ... I also told Merkel. No one should expect Turkey to become a country full of refugees like a concentration camp. But illegal migration has to become more controlled and regularised. In order to solve the refugee problem, the Readmission Agreement has to be implemented' (*Hürriyet*, 20 October 2016). *Yeni Akit* focuses on Merkel with the headline 'Merkel passed the ball again' claiming that the German Chancellor was inconsistent in her statements and did not put a clear stance on how to tackle the refugee situation (*Yeni Akit*, 19 October 2016). As a matter of fact, *Yeni Akit*'s framing of refugee crisis in relation to foreign politics is coherent with the newspaper's coverage of the Aylan Kurdi incident, reflecting its critical stance against the policies and politics of 'Western governments'. The newspaper's main criticisms centre around the unwillingness of 'Western states' to share responsibility with Turkey and the lack of humanitarianism in their approach in comparison to Turkey's generous stance. Meanwhile *Birgün*'s coverage does not particularly focus on the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe through the framework of foreign politics, and the newspaper does not pay in-depth attention to the repercussions of Europe's refugee debate on Turkey. To put differently, *Birgün* frames the refugee crisis

through the lens of domestic issues and it is presented as an integral part of the newspaper's coherent critique of domestic politics and policies.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a widely used conceptual tool, mediatisation helps to explore the relevance and influence of media in various spheres of social life. With specific reference to migration-related issues, an extensive literature shows that media contents have the power to stir public discussions about refugees and migrants. In this article, we intended to contribute to the debate on 'mediatisation of refugee crisis' by discussing the ways in which the Syrian refugees have been discursively constructed in three Turkish newspapers during the peak of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Using Esser and Strömback's (2014) dimensions of mediatisation as an analytical departure point, we mainly focused on the 'media practices' dimension, which tells us to explore what the media cover and how they cover it.

Our findings initially demonstrate a sharp increase in the total number of front-page news on the 'refugee crisis' and an increasing usage of the term 'refugees' in September 2015. This suggests that regardless of their ideological stances, *Hürriyet*, *Yeni Akit* and *Birgün*, were all responsive to the Aylan Kurdi incident and the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe. Our findings also indicate that 'refugee' was the most frequently used term when referring to Syrian refugees although Syrians are not granted official refugee status in Turkey. While the usage of 'refugee' appears to be more consistent in *Birgün*, both *Hürriyet* and *Yeni Akit* use the term interchangeably with other terms, including 'illegal migrant'. Drawing from existing studies and considering the media's impact on public opinion, we argue that interchangeable use of these terms could trigger perceived ambiguity over the legal status of refugees and migrants. Through accurate and consistent terminology, on the other hand, media outlets could play a more informative role in this particular aspect.

One key finding of our study is the media's relative lack of interest towards the problems of Syrian refugees who are settled in Turkey. Refugees' access to education, for instance, has not been covered by any of the newspapers analysed during the given period which coincides with the start of the academic year. Although *Hürriyet* reported extensively on access to food and shelter, its coverage is only limited to Syrians in transit without touching upon social issues concerning refugees and migrants living in Turkey. Only after the tragic incident of Aylan Kurdi, *Birgün* puts some emphasis on socio-economic vulnerabilities of refugees, issues of legal status and social integration in the domestic context. Meanwhile, issues related to border security and border violations received the most intense media coverage with a significant rise in September 2015.

Nevertheless, the security frame is embedded in a humanitarian narrative and the coverage majorly focuses on security issues threatening refugees rather than framing refugees as a security threat. *Hürriyet* and *Birgün*, in particular, put emphasis on the human face of the ‘refugee crisis’ through coverage of personal stories of refugees, often highlighting their vulnerability and difficult circumstances on their way to Europe. As we have addressed in the conceptual framework, these findings are indeed consistent with findings of earlier studies that suggest sharp rises in media coverage of migration often triggered by dramatic events may condition the public and policymakers to perceive immigration as a sudden event rather than representing the realities of migration. This brings us to the conclusion that within our timeframe of analysis media outlets were more concerned with crisis narratives rather than helping readers to form an informed opinion.

Furthermore, framing of the refugee crisis in relation to domestic or foreign politics showed significant variation between the three newspapers. The mainstream newspaper *Hürriyet* focuses on the spread of the refugee crisis into Europe especially after the Aylan Kurdi incident, underlining Turkey’s transit position and the country’s growing importance for the EU in the management of refugee influx. In other words, *Hürriyet* frames the refugee crisis as an externalised problem without extensively assessing the refugee situation in the domestic context. The newspaper’s primary focus on refugees in the context of foreign politics also hints at growing diplomatic exchanges between Turkish and EU political actors, giving voice to policy-makers and highlighting Turkey’s strategic role in solving the ‘refugee crisis’ with Europe. *Yeni Akit* also portrays the refugee crisis mainly as an external problem without any in-depth discussion of the refugee situation in Turkey. Different than *Hürriyet*’s coverage, however, the newspaper coherently puts a critical stance against the ‘Western governments’, including their politics in the Middle East, their reluctance to share responsibility with Turkey, and the lack of humanitarianism in their refugee policies. In sharp contrast, *Birgün* predominantly frames the refugee crisis as an internal issue, presenting it as an integral part of the newspaper’s consistent critique of domestic politics and policies. We conclude by suggesting that our small-data analysis could be used comparatively with other time periods in order to have a more comprehensive understanding on the mediatization of refugee issues in the Turkish media context.



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## Appendix 1. Themes, categories, and codes of content analysis

Theme	Categories	Code	Description
Definition		Migrant ( <i>göçmen</i> )	Also plural version of each definition code
		Illegal migrant ( <i>kaçak göçmen</i> )	
		Refugee ( <i>mültecî</i> )	
		Asylum-seeker ( <i>sığınmacı</i> )	
		Syrian/Syrian citizen ( <i>Suriyeli/Suriyeli vatandaşı</i> )	
Focus		Domestic	News solely focusing on domestic context, no coverage of international aspects
		International	News also focusing on international aspects
Subject	<b>Agenda</b>		
		Agenda ( <i>gündem</i> )	Public discussion of the issue becomes an agenda item, followed by widespread coverage
	<b>Tabloid</b>		
		Tabloid ( <i>magazin</i> )	Coverage of refugee-related news putting tabloid material to the fore
	<b>Refugee problems</b>		
		Access to housing and food ( <i>barınma ve gıda</i> )	Syrian refugees' access to shelter and food in Turkey, including Syrians in transit
		Working conditions ( <i>çalışma koşulları</i> )	Working conditions of Syrian refugees in Turkey
		Education ( <i>eğitim</i> )	Syrian refugees' access to education in Turkey
		Security ( <i>güvenlik</i> )	Security and safety of Syrian refugees
		Legal status ( <i>hukuki statü</i> )	Legal status of Syrian refugees in Turkey, including Syrians in transit
		Health ( <i>sağlık</i> )	Syrian refugees' access to medical care in Turkey
		Violation of rights and mistreatment of refugees	Syrian refugees' mistreatment by authorities and law enforcement units, displacement and restrictions on mobility and other violation of rights
	<b>Border security and border violations</b>		
		Migrant smuggling ( <i>göçmen kaçakçılığı</i> )	Coverage of news that focus on irregular movement of Syrian refugees in relation to migrant smuggling
		Exit from or transit via Turkey ( <i>Türkiye'den çıkış ve transit</i> )	Exit from or transit via Turkey
		Entry into Turkey ( <i>Türkiye'ye giriş</i> )	Entry into Turkey via irregular means
	<b>Politics</b>		
		Domestic politics ( <i>iç siyaset</i> )	Topics that focus on Syrian refugees in relation to domestic politics and policies
		External politics ( <i>dış siyaset</i> )	Topics that focus on Syrian refugees in relation to foreign politics and policies