The Right of Vote to Syrian Migrants:
The Rise and Fragmentation of Anti-Migrant Sentiments in Turkey

Seval Yurtcicek Ozaydin, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Japan

Abstract

Hosting more than 3 million Syrian migrants, Turkey has a serious migrant issue with an increasing level of anti-migrant sentiments. In migrant hosting countries, the anti-migrant sentiments are mostly associated with unemployment, social and cultural issues, etc. However, Turkish people face an additional migrant issue, which is unique to Turkey: According to officials, more than 30.000 Syrian migrants (who are already Turkish Citizens) are going to vote in the general elections in June 2018. However, spreading especially on social media, there are news and rumors that Turkish Government accepts a huge number of Syrian migrants to Turkish Citizenship with the right of voting in the elections, in order to vote for Erdogan. In this work, we ask whether the spreading news have a contribution to the anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey and study the fragmentation of anti-migrant sentiments. We retrieved random 25 thousand tweets before the elections and 38 thousand tweets after the election, containing the word "Syrian" (in Turkish). Classifying the retrieved tweets into three categories, i.e. Crime, Economic, and Voting, we found that not only before, but also after the elections, the voting issue is the major reason of anti-Syrian sentiments among Turkish people. We also studied the fragmentation of the reasons of anti-migrant sentiments and found that the highest level of fragmentation is between the Crime class and the other two classes.

Keywords: Anti-migrant sentiments, Syrian refugees, fragmentation, social media

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Introduction

Syria has been in a complicated civil war since 2011. On the one side, there is Syrian Government and on the other side, there are terrorist groups such as Free Syrian Army, ISIS (Islamic State), Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and so on. Several countries are also involved in the war in this or that way such as USA, Israel, Iran, Russia and Turkey. As a natural consequence of the war, Syrian people have been leaving their homes and migrating to other countries, some to have better life conditions and some just to save their lives. According to UN Refugee Agency (2018a; 2018b), due to the so-called Arab Spring and the war in Syria, 1.5 million refugees arrived in Europe since 2014. In 2018, this number is over 70 thousand, of which 10% is Syrians. The total number of Syrian refugees around the globe is 5.6 million and more than 3.5 million of them are in Turkey. On the contrary to most of the other European countries, in Turkey only 8% of Syrians are living in refugee camps, and others are living in the city centers as immigrants (Erdogan, et al., 2017). As the perspective of the present work covers both, here we will call all of them as "migrants".

Previous works in this field show that anti-migrant sentiments around the world are usually associated with reasons such as economic, criminal, diseases, environmental, resource scarcity, cultural, and so on (Citrin, 1997; Rustenbach, 2010). However, there is another potential reason which is unique to Turkey. That is, just before the general elections in June 2018, the government started to give citizenship and therefore the right of vote to Syrian immigrants. What is more, although the official number of Syrians being accepted to citizenship was declared to be relatively low, on mass media and especially on social media, there has been spreading news that the undeclared number is actually much higher, and the number is going to increase considerably. Therefore, it is natural to ask at what level this issue contributes to the anti-migrant sentiments among Turkish people.

In this work, focusing on the Syrian migrants, the reasons of anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey on social media are studied, categorizing into three classes: crime, economic and voting. It is found that both before and after the general elections, the voting issue is a major reason of anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey. Also, the fragmentation of the reasons is studied and it is found that crime class has a higher level of fragmentation than the other two classes.

Anti-Migrant Sentiments in Turkey

Anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey regarding Syrians are usually associated with violence and crime on mass media. A random pick about Syrian immigrants will most probably bring news about knife fights or stabbings in any city. For example in Gaziantep, there was a knife-fight between Syrians (Celik, 2018); in Elazig, there was violence between Syrians and locals (Bay, 2018); and in Antalya, there was a knife-fight between Syrians and locals (Durmaz, 2018). However, following the increasing news about the so-called "Syrian violence", the Turkish Ministry of Interior held a press briefing and declared on June 2017 that the annual crime rate of Syrians is only 1.3% of all Turkey. Since the ratio of Syrian population (~3.5 million) to the total population of Turkey (~80 million) is around ~4.5%, the crime rate of Syrians can be regarded as even much lower than the average. Hence, it can be inferred from the

media that *when locals fight this is no news but when a Syrian fights, that is news!* Nevertheless, as the perception of people depends on the spreading news and rumors especially on social media more than the official statistics, the crime issue obviously constitutes one of the major reasons of anti-migrant sentiments.

Media is focusing also on the economic issues about Syrians, especially on their cheap labor. As they work for very low salaries with no insurances, employers tend to hire them instead of Turkish citizens, which increase the unemployment among the latter. Taking into account the financial crisis in Turkey, unemployment and economical issues also contribute to anti-migrant sentiments. However on the contrary, some media such as Aydinlik newspaper is attracting attention on the human dimension of the migrants, their poor health and living conditions (Bilici & Eroglu, 2018).

Besides these two reasons of anti-migrant sentiments which are common to any other country (Cherri, 2016; Meier, 2014; El-Khatip & Lenner, 2015), a specific case for Turkey is that government has started to give citizenship to Syrian immigrants. The official number of Syrians who have received Turkish citizenship is announced to be 55.583, and as the citizens over 18 years old can vote in Turkey, 30 thousand Turkish citizen Syrians already voted the last general election (Hurriyet, 2018). Actually, this number is practically insignificant when compared to 60 million voters among the country. However, two common concerns of a majority of people are that, Syrians voters will vote for Erdogan, and therefore Erdogan is planning to give citizenship to all the Syrians in Turkey to take their votes.

A recent article from The Times entitled *"Erdogan gave 30.000 Syrians citizenship – now it's payback time at Turkey elections"* has presented the opinions of some Syrians voters (Smith, 2018), claiming that most, if not all Turkish citizen Syrian immigrants will vote for Erdogan.

AGE	MAN	WOMAN	TOTAL
TOTAL	1.927.877	1.627.587	3.555.464
0-4	280.856	262.213	543.069
5-9	246.423	231.262	477.685
10-14	191.280	175.633	366.913
15-18	159.127	127.196	286.323
19-24	312.944	222.724	535.668
25-29	196.021	141.057	337.078
30-34	162.222	120.750	282.972
35-39	113.264	89.498	202.762
40-44	76.192	69.200	145.392
45-49	57.592	54.018	111.610
50-54	46.624	44.700	91.324
55-59	31.160	31.292	62.452
60-64	22.402	23.094	45.496
65-69	14.534	14.629	29.163
70-74	8.078	8.911	16.989
75-79	4.566	5.510	10.076
80-84	2.567	3.317	5.884
85-89	1.328	1.678	3.006
90+	697	905	1.602

1.674 K (spanning ages 0-4 to 15-18)

1.881 K (spanning ages 19-24 to 90+)

Figure 1: Age distribution of Syrian immigrants in Turkeyshows that almost half is below 18 years old. Data is from Directorate General of Migration Management (2018).

In Figure 1 which shows the age distribution of Syrian immigrants in Turkey, we see that almost half is below 18 years old, who will therefore gradually turn 18. If all the Syrian immigrants receive citizenship, there will be 1.8 million voters, and as youngsters turn 18, this number is expected to exceed 3.6 million voters making 3% and 6% of all the voters in the country, respectively. In order to see how much contribution does this amount of vote make to the overall results, let us look at the results of the June 2018 Elections in Figure 2.

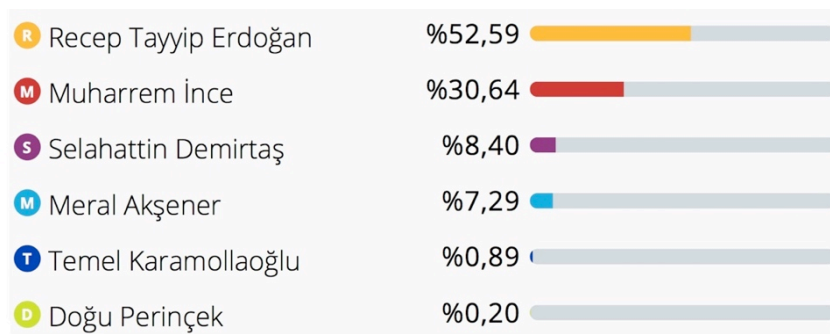|		
R Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	%52,59	
M Muharrem İnce	%30,64	
S Selahattin Demirtaş	%8,40	
M Meral Akşener	%7,29	
T Temel Karamollaoğlu	%0,89	
D Doğu Perinçek	%0,20	

Figure 2: Results of general elections on June 24, 2018.
Erdogan took 52.5% of votes, while opponents took 47.5%.

It was a two-round elections and only a few percent of votes could lead to the second round in which only two candidates could race, making all the opposition unite for a single candidate against Erdogan. A few percent of votes could then change the winner. A more serious point is that in this elections, Erdogan's party AKP collaborated with nationalist party MHP, agreeing on a single candidate: Erdogan. That is, in the future elections where there may be no such a collaboration, the 3% or 6% of extra votes from Syrians would be a critical factor to determine the winner. In this picture, expecting almost all the Syrian immigrants to vote for himself, Erdogan would like to accept them to citizenship to guarantee his victory. On the other hand, it is natural for the opponents to be highly against it. Therefore, one can expect from a Turkish citizen who do not vote for Erdogan, and in the same time who has actually no anti-migrant sentiments for Syrians due to criminal or economical reasons, can raise anti-migrant sentiments due to this voting issue. Although anti-Syrian sentiments have been studied from various perspectives (Girgin & Cebeci, 2017; Yazici, 2016; Ozdemir & Oner-Ozkan, 2016; Unal, 2014), no study regarding the voting issue has been done to the best of our knowledge.

In this work, the reasons leading to anti-migrant sentiments in Turkey on social media was studied, focusing on Twitter. Retrieving the tweets with word "Suriyeli" meaning "Syrian", the anti-migrant sentiments were categorized into three classes: Crime, economic, and voting. In order to classify each tweet, three sets of keywords for each of these classes were created according to our observation on Twitter, as shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5, respectively. For retrieving and analyzing the tweets, Tweepy library (Tweepy, 2018) for Python programming language was used. Each retrieved tweet was checked if contains any keywords from each class. If it does for a class, the counter for that class was incremented. Eventually, the number of tweets falling into each of the three class were determined.

Table 1: Set of keywords for the Crime Class

suç (crime)	tecavüz (rape)
kavga (fight)	saldırgan (attacker)
yaralama (hurt/injure)	çete (gang)
namus (honor/pudicity)	mafya (mafia)
bıçak (knife/stabbing)	fuhuş (prostitution)
Irz (purity/chastity)	fahişe (prostitude)
mahalle (neighborhood)	gasp (seizure)
taciz (harassment)	haraç (tribute)

Table 2: Set of keywords for the Economy Class

işsiz (unemployed)	enflasyon (inflation)
açlık (hunger)	sigorta (insurance)
ekonomik kriz (economic crisis)	borç (debt)
yoksul (poor)	zam (price rise)
sıkıntı (financial difficulty)	faiz (interest)
vergi (tax)	esnaf (artisan)
kira (rent)	maddi destek (financial support)
maaş (salary)	pahalı (expensive)

Table 3: Set of keywords for the Economy Class

oy (vote)
seç (election)
vatandaş (citizen)
vekil (deputy)
cumhurbaşkanı (president)
aday (candidate)

The first step of the study was realized before the elections between May 1 and May 4 by retrieving around 25 thousand tweets including the word "Suriyeli". According to the classification scheme presented in Tables through 1 to 3, 4885 tweets were determined to mention anti-Syrian sentiments in these classes. As shown in Figure 3, out of 4885 tweets, 501fall into Crime class, 595 fall into Economic class, and 3789 fall into Voting class, which makes 77.6% of all.
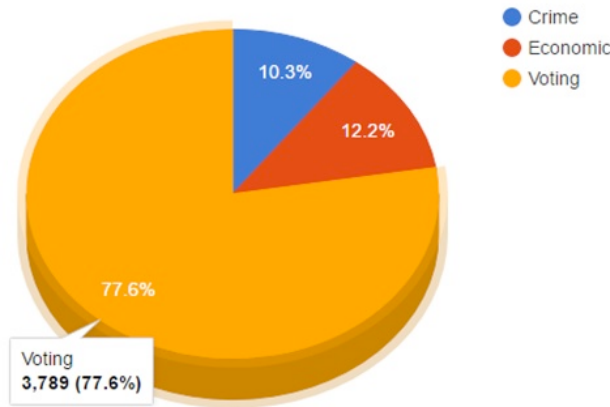
Figure 3: 4885 tweets out of ~25.000 retrieved before June 2018 elections were found to have anti-Syrian sentiments with the given percentages in each class.

The second step of the work was realized after the elections, between September 28 and October 6, 2018, to understand the dynamics of the reasons of anti-migrant sentiments. This time, a total number of over 38 thousand tweets were retrieved and analyzed, and using the same classification method, 5682 of them were found to have anti-migrant sentiments with the numbers 1709, 1907 and 2066 tweets in Crime, Economy and Voting class, respectively, as shown in Figure 4.
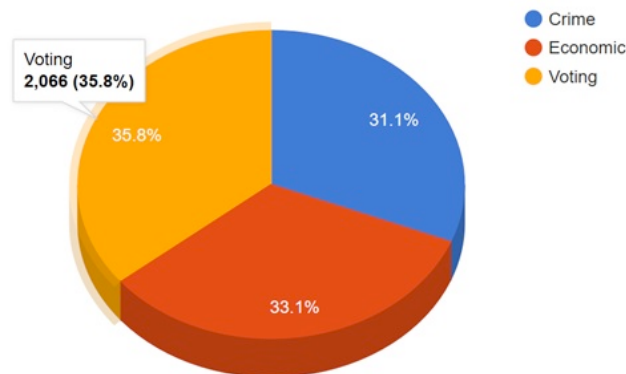

Figure 4: 5682 tweets out of ~38.000 retrieved after June 2018 elections were found to have anti-Syrian sentiments with the given percentages in each class.

The dynamics of anti-migrant sentiments before and after the elections clearly shows that voting is the most important issue in raising anti-migrant sentiments. Although it has a higher percentage before the elections and dropped after the elections, it stayed the biggest reason of anti-Syrian sentiments in Turkey, on Twitter. A critical point to recall here is that, right after the general elections, Turkey started to experience a serious economic crisis, which makes it natural for the anti-migrant sentiments due to economic reasons to increase. Therefore, it can be concluded that the decrease in the Voting class led to increase in the two other classes. Nevertheless, Voting class is still the largest and Economic class is still the second largest.

Fragmentation of the Reasons of Anti-Migrant Sentiments on Social Media

Fragmentation on social media has been studied usually for the opposite ideas. For example, Yardi and Boyd studied the fragmentation between two opposite ideas on abortion (Yardi & Boyd, 2010); Colleoni et al. studied to predict political orientation

and homophily between Republican and Democrats in the US (Colleoni et al., 2014); and Quattrociocchi et al. studied the fragmentation between conspiracy theory pages and scientific information pages on Facebook (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016).

However in this work, we approach the fragmentation from a novel perspective. That is, we study the fragmentation of the reasons leading to the same idea. In particular, we study the level of fragmentation of the reasons due to crime, economic and voting issues in raising the anti-Syrian sentiments in Turkey on Twitter.

In order to reveal the fragmentation of each class, this time the focus was on the Twitter users in the post-election term. For each tweet in each of the three classes, the user of the tweet was considered and it was checked whether that user tweeted in the two other classes as well. As one user could tweet more than one in one class, the distinct user in each class were determined in the first place. It was found that, there were 1709 tweets by 1638 users in Crime class; 1907 tweets by 1702 users in Economic class; and 2066 tweets by 1741 users in the Voting class. That is, 5682 tweets in the three classes belong to 5082 distinct users.

As shown in Figure 5, it was found that 105 users tweeted in all these three classes. However, while the intersection of Crime and Economic classes is 106 and the intersection of Crime and Voting classes is 148; the intersection of Economic and Voting classes turn out to be 598. This shows that, the number of same people having concerns about economic and voting issues is much higher than the other two cases. That is, among three reasons of anti-migrant sentiments studied in this work, crime issue has the highest level of fragmentation than economic and voting issues. Because, people who are against Erdogan usually complain about the economic crisis, while Erdogan's supporters do not –otherwise they would arguably not vote for him. That is, there is a large gap between the perspectives of opponents and supporters of Erdogan on economy. Such a gap also exists for the voting issue. However, when it comes to criminal problems raised by immigrants, one can argue that no such gap is expected between opponents and supporters. Therefore, the distinct feature of crime issue is revealed in the fragmentation.
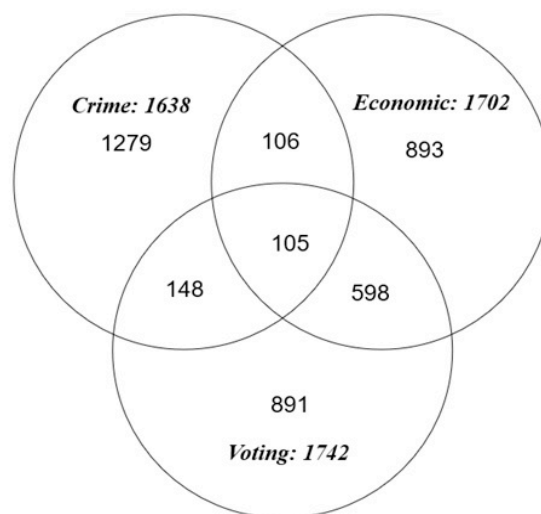

Figure 5: Fragmentation between the reasons raising the anti-Syrian sentiments in Turkey on Twitter. Numbers represent distinct Twitter users tweeting in each class. The highest level of fragmentation is found in the Crime class with respect to the other two classes.

Conclusion

The dynamics of the reasons of anti-migrant sentiments regarding Syrians in Turkey on social media is studied. In particular, around 65 thousand tweets with the word "Suriyeli" ("Syrian" in Turkish) before and after the general elections in June 2018 were retrieved and categorized into three classes: Crime, Economic and Voting. It was found that, not only before but also after the elections, the major reason of anti-Syrian sentiments among Turkish people is citizenship and therefore right of vote given to Syrian immigrants by President Erdogan. Fragmentation of the reasons of anti-migrant sentiments is also studied and it was found that the highest level of fragmentation is between the Crime class and the other two classes.

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Contact email: yurtcicek.s.aa@m.titech.ac.jp