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Overcoming Prejudices and Stigmatisation towards Refugees: A Novel Approach Through Deliberative Citizen Dialogues in Turkey

Abstract

Can changing how refugees and asylum seekers are narrated in public debates help citizens reassess their prejudices? Which narratives would garner support from ordinary citizens and promise to generate an attitude shift? While hate speech and far-right narratives targeting forcibly displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers are reported extensively, little is known about how citizens would respond to alternative narratives that portray them as rights-bearing agents. This study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings migration scholarship in dialogue with cognitive fields and social psychology and offers a novel participatory approach to generate data. In eight cities across Turkey, citizens were invited to deliberate three sets of 'de-stigmatising narratives' based on 1) social solidarity, 2) collective memory of welcoming and settling refugees in the past, and 3) the injustices of exploitation that refugees encounter while earning a living. Participants were steered to discuss each narrative through a) progressive framing (fairness, egalitarianism, social cohesion) and b) conservative-nationalist framing (maintenance of law, order, and identity). The findings reveal that engaging with de-stigmatising narratives evokes affective empathy, leading to moderate, refugee-supportive attitudes among participants even in a context where anti-refugee attitudes have escalated to communal attacks targeting refugees. However, positive attitudes toward refugees display a local turn, varying by city and often after progressive frames are supported by conservative-nationalist ones. The study highlights the importance of participatory community mobilisation and sub-national/local approaches to shift, counter, or replace prevailing narratives to help reduce misinformation and prejudices about refugees.

Keywords: refugees, forced displacement, social boundaries, cognition, stigmatisation, deliberative citizen dialogues.

Introduction

Far-right narratives targeting refugees, forcibly displaced people and asylum seekers (from now on, refugees) are on the rise in numerous countries. Fear-instigating narratives, once considered fringe political discourse but now increasingly mainstreamed by the media and political actors, attribute criminal activities to people who cross borders without authorisation as well as to activists who offer humanitarian responses to forced migration (Held and Patana 2023; WPR 2023). From the daily news to politicians' statements and YouTube comment sections, ordinary citizens are overexposed to narratives about refugees that are deeply stigmatising. As these narratives become pervasive, racial and ethnic prejudices and threat perceptions are intensified. This spiral of stigmatisation deepens the securitisation of migration and leads to undemocratic and illegal practices, such as pushbacks, externalisation of border controls, surveillance, maltreatment, and detention and deportation to risky countries

(Sherman-Stokes 2024; Vrăbiescu 2022; Koca 2016; Cusumano 2019; Moreno-Lax 2018; Molnar 2024).

Much of the research on the far-right's influence on this topic treats public opinion as a static condition to explain or measure. Bonikowski (2017, 192) highlights “the resonance between available [far-right] political frames and corresponding public attitudes” as one of the main reasons for the 'success' of the far-right. Similarly, Gemignani and Hernandez-Albujar (2015, 2754) argue that narratives of hate groups “mirror dominant political discourses that are internal to a nation.” This approach inherently assumes that prejudices exist independently and the far-right just needs to tap them to activate these pre-existing attitudes. This study argues that extreme biases and stigmatisation towards refugees are political constructs and cannot be considered independent of structural and discursive power dynamics. It explores discursive conditions under which these reactionary attitudes can change, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines migration studies with studies on cognition, sociology of boundary (un)making, psychology and deliberative theory.

Turning the gaze to ordinary citizens who feel anxious, polarised, or confused about the question of refugees, the study asks the following questions: Can citizens be incentivised to engage with normative positions presented through alternative, or as dubbed in this study, *de-stigmatising narratives*? Under what conditions do citizens endorse such narratives and acknowledge refugees as individuals with inherent rights deserving of dignity and the potential to enrich society? How do citizens renegotiate, adapt, affirm or reject such narratives? To answer these questions, a participatory method of data generation was utilised: Deliberative Citizen Dialogues (DCD). Citizens rarely get a chance to hear narratives depicting refugees as equal and rights-bearing humans. They are less likely to take an active part in a balanced debate to consider and evaluate de-stigmatising narratives. DCDs foster informed debates by structuring the deliberation among ordinary citizens around de-stigmatising narratives about refugees. This field-intensive approach offers in-depth insights into how and why citizens display extreme anxiety and biases, hence, stigmatise refugees in specific ways. It also helps create and test compelling public narratives that can challenge far-right dominance in this area.

The study formulates rights-based narratives and examines how ordinary citizens engage with them. Data was collected at the subnational level across eight cities in Turkey. Participants were presented with three sets of narratives focused on 1) the fundamental human rights of refugees and social solidarity towards them, 2) collective memory of the acceptance and integration of refugees in the past, and 3) the injustices of exploitation that refugees encounter in earning a living. Participants were invited to discuss each de-stigmatising narrative in light of a progressive framing and a conservative-nationalist framing.

As Dennison argues (2021), the potential effects of alternative narratives on ordinary citizens have been suggested, but empirical research is missing on the issue (also see Boswell et al. 2021; Banulescu-Bogdan 2022). Existing research on narratives tends to document either personal narratives by migrants/refugees themselves or the securitising and stigmatising institutional, policy or media narratives about migration (El-

Bialy and Mulay 2020; Fina and Tseng 2017; Cederberg 2017; van Houte et al. 2021; D'Amato and Lucarelli 2019; Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; for a review of this literature: Mencutek-Sahin 2020; Boswell et al. 2021). Despite the expanding literature on Turkey's refugees in the last decade, research focused on narratives has been limited at best. Focus groups have been used to understand how migrants talk about their own experiences of discrimination and violence in Turkey (Bivand et al. 2023). In a recent study, Ozcurumez and Mete (2021) reported how non-working women reproduce narratives to scapegoat refugees within their social networks based on participant observation. Multiple studies examined (social) media narratives about refugees (Sunata and Yildiz 2018; Ozerim and Tolay 2020; Narli, Ozascilar, and Zeynep 2019; Bilge 2019; Bozdağ 2020). However, these studies focus on reporting extant stigmatising narratives driven by prejudices and racialising views. Alternatively, this study explores whether a normative shift in citizens' engagement with the issue of refugees can be incentivised when they reflect on strategically selected de-stigmatising narratives as alternatives to widely circulating stigmatising ones.

The first section introduces the interdisciplinary theoretical framework that lays out core concepts and assumptions regarding the role of de-stigmatising narratives. It outlines how and why narratives may trigger empathy and solidarity and de-stigmatise refugees through the inner workings of cognitive schemata, thus helping people reconsider their misperceptions and prejudices. The second section details the methodology, research design, data collection and analysis. The third section reports findings, focusing on five major themes. The fourth section discusses cross-cutting contextual dynamics and demographical factors such as age, gender, and class that intermediated participants' responses during DCDs.

Although the study cannot offer 'a recipe' for shifting dominant narratives about refugees, the results reveal that even citizens who consider themselves anti-refugee might be encouraged to develop affective responses like empathy and solidarity with refugees through in-depth engagement with the issue from various angles. Deliberations around de-stigmatising narratives can encourage citizens to realise their misinformation and extreme biases. Citizens who feel anxious and threatened by the presence of refugees can converge towards consensus around a middle ground, attaining positive attitudes towards refugees through a local lens and, in most cases, after the nationalist framing was introduced to support the progressive one. The results suggest that far-right dominance in producing public narratives about migration can be challenged if the media, policy-makers, and civil society systematically produce and deploy de-stigmatising narratives. The findings call for large-scale, systematic research and policy interventions concerning refugees and other stigmatised groups.

Theoretical Framework: (De-)Stigmatisation and Narratives

Scholars of cultural sociology agree that discrimination and exclusion of refugees (and other minoritised and racialised groups) start at the level of narratives (Gemignani and Hernandez-Albujar 2015; Lamont 2023). Narratives erect social boundaries based on citizenship, nationhood, blood ties, and perceived loyalty (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). When narratives continuously produce a reified image of 'the threatening other' in contrast to the identity of 'us,' norm perceptions —i.e., perceptions about what is

accepted as the social norm or tolerated by society— change accordingly (Tankard and Paluck 2016). Thus, many citizens 'learn' to concur with vilification, dehumanisation, segregation, indiscriminate deportation, and maltreatment of refugees. However, social stigmatisation is neither preordained nor irreversible. Since attitude-shaping stigmatising narratives are constructed, they can be deconstructed and undone. According to Michele Lamont,

Cultural repertoires directly impact boundaries, as they contain narratives about the relative worth and positioning of various groups. They can weaken or strengthen mutuality and solidarity towards low-income populations, LGBTQ individuals, or ethno-racial or religious minorities. Thus, mobilising institutions and cultural repertoires in crafting messages about worth can affect recognition gaps and extend cultural membership to the largest number (Lamont 2018, 427).

What Lamont refers to as “crafting messages” concerns the production and systematic deployment of what is called here de-stigmatising narratives that can counter and replace stigmatising narratives that currently dominate the public's norm perceptions regarding refugees. Narratives are complex cognitive-linguistic stories about socio-politically complex issues (Dennison 2021). Different from the technical and bare nature of 'factual' information, narratives, “even when they do seem to describe states of affairs simply, are also vehicles of implicit normative presuppositions” (Sconfienza 2017, 22). They can provoke people to interpret a social issue in different ways and motivate them to revise their convictions (Gamson 1992; 2007; Friedenwald-Fishman, Kirkpatrick, and Campisteguy 2019). This is why narratives are central to shaping attitudes and convincing people to engage with an issue from a new normative angle.

Human cognition plays a central role in making narratives crucial structures shaping attitudes. Cognition works through schemata, i.e., abstract knowledge structures in the human mind acting as intermediaries between “stimuli received by the sense organs and behavioural responses” (Casson 1983, 430). Schemata can be likened to a network of nodes in our minds. Nodes represent objects, memories, events, sequences, and actions we previously experienced. Schemata work like mental algorithms. They unconsciously intermediate “the comprehension process by providing a [pre-set] system of expectations and an infrastructure for making inferences” for individuals (Rice 1980, 155). Researchers argue that schemata are most responsive to narratives (Bruner 1991). Narratives act as stimuli and activate different parts of schemata each time we need to process information, form or change attitudes (solidarity, empathy, prejudices, etc.), and respond by taking action (behaviours). They are central to human attitudes and behaviour to the extent that some scholars coined the term 'homo narrans' (Fisher 1984) to refer to the narrative mode of human communication and thinking.

Put differently, narratives not only “represent the world” but also “constitute the world” (Vigliano Relva and Jung 2021, 3). From a psycholinguistic perspective, narratives' evaluation and resonance depend on the extent to which hearers can relate them to their own experiences (Woodly 2015), thus perceiving them as plausible and realistic (Bruner 1991). Recipients are mentally drawn into the world of the narrator. This immersive experience simulates the described situation as the recipients' cognitive schemata perceive the narrative as a real-life experience. Thus, the narrative affects the perceptions, emotions and actions of the recipient (Allan 2019). Therefore, narratives

are essential public communication tools for politicians, activists, and other public actors (Boswell et al. 2021; Dennison 2024). They help public actors justify a particular position, offer solutions to pressing problems, and motivate citizens for or against a policy. Therefore, they can encourage imagining and constructing “alternative worlds” through narratives (Bruner 1991). And, building alternative worlds is “an essential feature of the human capacity to transform our own selves as well as our social contexts” (Monteagudo 2011, 298).

Based on these premises, one can postulate that when narratives are strategically and situationally deployed, they can tap into hearers' schemata to motivate them to reinterpret refugees against routine understandings, i.e., set boundaries and stigmas. In Bruner's (1990, 49–50) words, strategic deployment of narratives can “mitigate or at least make comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern.” Studies show that narratives make complex issues meaningful, relevant, and accessible to the public and small twists in narratives about highly controversial issues can alter opinions, attitudes, and behaviour (Dahlstrom 2014; Avraamidou and Osborne 2009). Regarding migration, Bello (2022, 1465) argues that while narratives about migrants can still be “openly rejected by some, they do not need to be accepted by all the others to exercise their effects. They convince of their intrinsic truth all those interlocutors who do not share an alternative version of the story, a counternarrative which needs to be immediately and openly proposed.” Therefore, de-stigmatising narratives about refugees can potentially generate a normative leap in the way ordinary citizens engage with the question of refugees.

Such a normative leap would be detected in citizens' questioning and moderating their vilifying, marginalising, and stigmatising prejudices concerning refugees and self-correcting their misperceptions after hearing and debating about alternative narratives. It would also manifest in empathy for refugees, a display of understanding of other persons' situation through affiliative verbal cues and response cries, such as “‘I feel the same way’, ‘I'd do the same thing’, ‘I'm with you’” (Kupetz 2014, 7) or an acknowledgement “which suggest[s] that if the recipient were to experience the things described, they would feel the same way” (Heritage 2011, 169).

Research Design

Turkey was chosen as the case study due to its global prevalence as a refugee-hosting country, as well as the recent formation of anti-refugee sentiments. According to the UNHCR (2024), Turkey currently hosts about 3.6 million Syrians and approximately 370,000 refugees under international protection, mainly from Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These figures establish Turkey as the country with the highest number of refugees in the world¹. Most of these refugees arrived within a short period between 2011 and 2018. The legal and logistical preparation for settling and integrating refugees was unsystematic and failed to facilitate social integration, leading to a rapid rise in segregation and fatigue among citizens after initial generosity.

Additionally, there has been an ongoing economic crisis and rising inflation (>75%) in recent years that make refugees an easy target for scapegoating, such as stealing jobs, putting upward pressure on real estate prices due to increased demand, and taking

advantage of social provisions. Inter-communal tensions and attacks against refugees and their properties have already occurred in several cities (e.g. BBC 2021; Hubbard and Timur 2024). Furthermore, the Arab community that constitutes the majority of refugees is historically stigmatised in Turkey as 'traitors'. The nationalist revolts in the Middle East during WWI against the Ottoman Empire served as a basis for racial prejudices toward Arabs as 'an untrusted community' and hence not deserving sympathy. In recent years, opposition parties increasingly have stoked growing anti-refugee sentiments among voters with the hope of gaining electoral advances against the government that initially welcomed Syrians.

These complex contextual factors make Turkey an ideal case for subjecting the hypothesis that alternative narratives can modify widely-held prejudices to a strenuous test. To expose ordinary citizens to these narratives, deliberative citizen dialogues (DCD) were utilised as a bottom-up and participatory approach to in-depth knowledge generation. There are several advantages of DCDs. First, it is a tested approach in other topics and contexts. Researchers previously employed DCDs across various research areas to discover how people's ideas shift "after they have engaged deeply with multiple, alternative perspectives" (Dawson and Mages 2016). They are the most suitable way for deploying narratives, thick story-like propositions with normative argumentation. DCDs provide people with "the opportunity to develop and express their views, learn from the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach a judgment about matters of public concern" (Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004, 319).

Second, the promise of DCDs lies in their ability to "foster an egalitarian, reciprocal, reasonable, and open-minded exchange" (Mendelberg 2002). Due to its participatory and egalitarian setting between citizens, interactive and participatory encounters not only shape public opinion on a salient issue by informing citizens who are not yet committed to a specific policy outcome or opinion. They also alter misinformation and biases through peer-to-peer learning (Hamlett and Cobb 2006a).

Third, deliberation does not seek to generate consensus on complex issues but aims to broaden perspectives to initiate empathy with 'the other' in place of threat perceptions and hostility. When diverse perspectives were presented and discussed in deliberative settings, researchers showed that polarisation cascades, a situation where people holding minority opinions on one topic feel obliged to adopt the majority opinion, were prevented (Sunstein 2003; Fishkin et al. 2021; Hamlett and Cobb 2006b). Finally, researchers also reported that deliberation can generate attitudinal and behavioural change (Smets and Isernia 2014) because it triggers a "cognitive process in which individuals form, alter, or reinforce their opinions as they weigh evidence and arguments from various points of view" (Lindeman 2002, 199).

DCDs were conducted in eight cities across Turkey, selected for their varying degrees of socioeconomic development, urbanisation, and their distinct refugee populations in terms of profiles, numbers, and living conditions (see Table 1). (Supplementary Material additionally details the selection criteria of cities, the recruitment of participants and the execution steps on the ground.) The author moderated DCDs in person in each city.

Data collection took place in October-November 2023 and was carried out in public places such as community centres and offices of civil society organisations. Each session lasted between 2-3 hours. In total, 35 women, 33 men, and one person who did not want to disclose their gender participated (8-9 people per city) (see Table 2). Participants originated from diverse backgrounds regarding educational attainment, income levels, and jobs. Although university students were over-represented in some cities, like Adana, overall participants included non-working women, retired persons, ex-prison convicts, (upper-)middle class, and working-class people. Many participants acknowledged having relations and daily encounters with refugees as neighbours, colleagues, teachers, employees, and landlords.

Table 1: Number and Ratio of Refugees in Cities

Cities where deliberative dialogues were conducted	Number of registered refugees under temporary protection (unique to Syrians) according to the official statistics	The ratio of refugees to resident citizens
Istanbul	528,225	3.26 %
Gaziantep	429,318	16.55%
Adana	216,819	8.72%
Bursa	170,414	5.03%
Konya	121,577	4.98%
Izmir	119,578	2.6%
Ankara	87,771	1.49%
Diyarbakir	21,927	1.19%

Table 2: Profile of Participants (based on participants' own declarations)

Age	Level of Education	Ethnic identification	Do you have refugees as your neighbours in your district?	Do you have a family member who lives abroad as a migrant?	Did your grandparents or great-grandparents migrate to Turkey from abroad (i.e. outside Turkey's current borders)?
18-29: 56.5% 30-49: 24.6% 50+: 18.8%	Primary school or below 7.2% Secondary school 13.5 % High school 26% University 23% Master's degree or above 2.8% Prefer not to disclose 27.5%	Turkish: 62.3% Kurdish: 23.2% Arab: 4.3% Other: 10.2% (Circassian, Laz, Zaza, etc.)	No: 62.7 Yes: 42.3	Yes: 46.4% No: 53.6%	No: 79.7% Yes: 20.3%

For a systematic and structured study, the author introduced three narratives to participants in the same order in each city (see Table 3). These narratives were based on a preliminary study of a systematic review of literature, public opinion surveys about refugees in Turkey and 12 in-depth interviews with civic organisations, lawyers and activists working on refugee rights and integration, as well as community help and charity groups organised by Syrian refugees in Turkey. This preparatory phase helped the author to identify narratives that stand the best chance of garnering widespread engagement from citizens.

The first narrative focuses on the argument that all human beings have fundamental rights and dignity. The second narrative taps into the participants' collective memory of refugee inflow to Turkey and their formative life experiences as descendants or friends of these refugees. The last narrative highlights the unfairness of exploitation refugees encounter when they seek to earn a living for basic needs. Since there is more than one way of presenting the same narrative, i.e. the framing effect in social sciences (Druckman 2004), participants were offered different 'packagings' of each narrative. Framing underscores the significance of wording, context and justificatory perspective in shaping how individuals respond to presented narratives. The author presented each narrative twice for participants to discuss, first through 'the progressive frame' emphasising fairness, egalitarianism, and social cohesion, and then through 'the conservative-nationalist frame' emphasising loyalty and love for the country and maintenance of law, order, authority, and identity. The aim was to resonate with a broader audience from different sides of the political spectrum.

Recordings were transcribed, translated, and analysed through Atlas.ti software. Following an open coding procedure, iterative analysis established patterns concerning how different sociodemographic, ideological, age, and gender categories reflect and engage with the debate. The rich data also helped to identify five themes about how people negotiated, interpreted, bent or engaged with the alternative narratives. These themes sometimes cut across the narratives presented for discussion. The following section reports these findings.

Table 3: Summary of Narratives and Corresponding Framings

NARRATIVES	PROGRESSIVE FRAMING	CONSERVATIVE-NATIONALIST FRAMING
<p>1- Social Solidarity, fundamental rights and dignity</p> <p>People have different living conditions, identities, and views. These differences sometimes generate disadvantages for specific groups of people who speak certain languages, follow certain religious traditions, and belong to certain ethnicities. Some of these disadvantages arise depending on whether one is born in this country or not.</p> <p>However, recognition, empathy, and social acceptance are forms of social solidarity that every individual needs, despite all the differences I have mentioned. Stigmatising and humiliating behaviour or targeting people will lead to shunning and exclusion from social life and participation in the workforce. For instance, when refugees are denied dignity, their situation leads to social and spatial marginalisation and translates into poverty.</p> <p>Everyone needs recognition, empathy, and social acceptance regardless of citizenship or migration status.</p>	<p>By acknowledging the fundamental rights of refugee groups and extending social solidarity, our shared spaces like cities, neighbourhoods, parks, and workplaces can be accessible to everyone. This is essential for a more egalitarian and harmonious society.</p>	<p>By acknowledging the fundamental rights of refugee groups and extending social solidarity, refugees can be encouraged to learn and adapt to the Turkish language, traditions, and culture. This is essential to foster refugees' allegiance to our country and national identity.</p>
<p>2- Collective memory and formative life experiences</p> <p>Migration is engrained in the history of modern Turkey. Almost everyone living in these lands has an immigration story that goes back one or more generations. Thousands of Jews were expelled from Spain in the 1500s and took refuge in these lands. During the last two centuries of the Ottoman Empire, wars, conflicts, and nationalist movements forced Balkan Muslims, Crimean Tatars, and Circassians to seek refuge within the borders of contemporary Turkey. During the Ottoman Empire, a special refugee law was enacted in 1857, and one of the first national commissions working with refugees in the world, the Muhajirin Commission, was established. In this way, millions of refugees settled in different cities in Anatolia, and they were given 17 hectares of</p>	<p>Today, refugees who arrive under challenging conditions should be provided with opportunities in line with same humanitarian approach so that they can establish themselves in this country, as in the past. A similar integration of refugees can enrich our culture and promote pluralism further.</p>	<p>Turkey's humanitarian history of welcoming refugees provides a successful role model today. This historical legacy creates a current responsibility to uphold. Turkey should continue to assist those in need as a moral duty.</p>

<p>agricultural land, animals, and seeds, facilitating for them settling in the country permanently.</p> <p>Later, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1924 resulted in a population exchange between Greece and Turkey; half a million refugees from Greece arrived as forcibly displaced people; and they were provided land and homes.</p> <p>During the 20th century, migratory flows continued from abroad, such as Turkish people forcefully displaced from Bulgaria during the 1980s. Refugees fleeing from Bulgaria were offered facilitated asylum and citizenship after they fled to Turkey due to the regime's policy of forced assimilation. Several of us also have close family members who emigrated to Europe, the USA, and other parts of the world from the 1960s onwards.</p> <p>We are all the children, grandchildren, family members, and friends of migrants and refugees.</p>		
<p>3- Injustices and Unfair Treatment</p> <p>Refugees face injustices and exploitation in their daily lives. Their current predicament is not of their choosing. Many find themselves trapped in informal work arrangements, which makes them vulnerable to exploitative conditions, such as unfair or even no payments, no job security, and no protection against deadly job incidents. The fact that they cannot make a living hinders other dimensions of their lives, such as children's education and access to language training.</p>	<p>Eliminating injustices and unfair treatment can allow individuals to realise their talents and capabilities. Empowering refugees to earn their lives and thrive enriches our society as a whole.</p>	<p>Eliminating injustices and unfair treatment will prevent conflicts (between citizens and refugees and among refugees) and crimes, and help preserve and enforce law and order.</p>

Findings

Naming 'Villains' and Redirecting Grievances to Public Authorities

Nazan, a participant in her 30s from Ankara, vividly recounted her frustration with rising rental prices, associating the problem with the presence of refugees:

We were looking for a flat a few months ago. And they said, 'If you're not going to rent it, a Syrian family will rent it.' Fifteen thousand [liras]. I can't afford it. But they can offer fifteen to twenty thousand for a flat. So yes, there is something we feel angry about.

Her statement encapsulated a common initial reaction from many other participants about refugees: the economic burden felt by Turkish citizens was, at first glance, attributed to the influx of refugees. This resentment is, however, more about grappling with rising costs of living, which is implicitly or explicitly misplaced on refugees. What is particularly revealing in Nazan's words is the vague reference to "something"—a nebulous target that signifies her frustration. This amorphous blame, symptomatic of wider economic grievances, was neither fully directed nor entirely understood by participants until deliberations unpacked it.

Scapegoating of refugees for economic burdens is foremost underpinned by a potent mix of misinformation and misperception. Many participants in the discussions, like Nazan, were unaware of the distinctions between different groups of foreigners in Turkey—refugees fleeing conflict, economic migrants, and wealthy individuals mostly from oil-rich Gulf states buying property in Turkey for citizenship. This confusion often led to the conflation of these groups, exacerbating hostility towards refugees underpinned by economic grievances. For instance, Gaye, another participant from Ankara, articulated her grievances by collapsing refugees and 'well-paid' foreign workers into one category:

We should not think of the issue only as Syrians. For example, many people have arrived from Kazakhstan lately—too many. They work under much better conditions than us. And they definitely do not receive the salary in Turkish liras; they demand it in dollars.

Here, Gaye's resentment was not aimed at Syrian or other refugees but at what she perceives as wealthier migrants and those who employ them. This confusion speaks to the broader issue of how misinformation has entrenched anti-refugee sentiments. The economic anxieties experienced by Turkish citizens are real, but the target of their frustration is often misplaced. Refugees, as a result, become the convenient "villains" in an economic narrative shaped by hardship and uncertainty.

However, during structured dialogues, these differences between 'wealthy foreigners' and refugees became clear to people, and many participants began to reconsider these initial reactions, gaining perspective and moving away from blaming refugees to

questioning the role of the public authorities. Rasim, a small business owner from Istanbul, captures this shift that happened often during deliberations:

So, I think the essence of the matter is that we [citizens] want to be valued a little by the state. If we didn't feel this way, I think we could be more tolerant towards refugees' rights. But we are not valued by our state. We feel unloved.

This perception of being "unloved" or neglected by the state was so widespread among participants. Rasim's reflection signals a critical turn in how many participants engaged with the issue of refugees' basic rights, such as access to education, healthcare, food and decent houses. Many started to identify that their frustration was not rooted in the presence of refugees or their access to basic human needs per se but in the abandonment by public authorities. Reflecting on different categories of foreigners made participants realise that rather than refugees causing inflation and rental price increases, the government's failure to manage economic challenges and migration effectively rests at the heart of their discontent.

This feeling of neglect from public authorities became a recurring theme during deliberations across eight cities. Many participants expressed a sense of abandonment, believing that the government prioritised refugees over its own citizens. Koray, a university student, echoed this sentiment, but the blame is redirected from refugees to governmental inadequacies:

If only the government cared about us as much as they cared about them [refugees]. That's where disregard begins. Our families were not given aid, and after a while, all citizens alienated refugees.

Here, the notion of "marginalisation" shifts. Rather than seeing refugees as privileged outsiders, Koray's words suggest a recognition that the state's differential treatment—real or perceived—fosters resentment. The discussions in Gaziantep further illustrate this process of rethinking and re-identifying the source of economic resentment. Kerim, a small business owner, initially viewed refugees as the cause of his struggles in maintaining his business. Yet, as the deliberations progressed, he, too, rearticulated his position through a new perspective: "There is only one mechanism that can control this situation, and right now, it is not doing its job. Because of that, both refugees and citizens of Turkey are victims."

Kerim's realisation highlights another critical shift in perceptions: the recognition of refugees and citizens as co-victims of a more significant systemic failure. This reframing is crucial because it breaks down the binary opposition between "citizen" and "refugee," suggesting instead a shared vulnerability under a government that has not adequately addressed either group's needs. In this sense, the government is repositioned as the true "villain" in the narrative, with its inability to regulate migration and manage the economy.

More surprisingly, this reorientation led some participants to reconceptualise migration not as a problem but as a fundamental right. Asya, a university student from Gaziantep,

captured this shift by linking migration to universal human aspirations: "People want to move to a better country globally because they hope to find better rights. If I leave Turkey and move to Europe, I would go there hoping to have the same fundamental rights as citizens." Asya's statement signifies a more profound ethical shift, where empathy and the recognition of shared human experiences begin to displace reactionary scapegoating. Migration, in this view, is reframed as an expression of human agency and a search for dignity rather than a disruptive force. This argument is further supported by Cüneyt, a resident of a refugee-dense neighbourhood in Istanbul, who acknowledged the universal desire for a better future by inviting other participants to empathise with refugees in Turkey:

If Germany were to open its borders like Turkey did to Syrians, which one of us would say no? Let's be honest. I would take my kid on my back. Even if I had to lose my leg, I would still go. I'd say, 'I will save my son's life.'

Similarly, Diyar, a journalist from Diyarbakir, urged participants to imagine themselves in the position of refugees:

This is not science fiction. Let's say, God forbid, a war broke out in this country. If bombs were flying over us tomorrow, where would we escape? Where will we go to save ourselves, to save our family? No one can say, 'I will not migrate'. I believe we need to have some empathy for refugees. We talked about Afghan youths—when faced with hunger and poverty, what would we do in such a situation? How are we treating those people today? How would we be treated tomorrow? We need to have empathy for refugees.

In conclusion, while initial reactions often framed refugees as the source of economic hardship, the deliberation process allowed participants to reconsider their views. The shift among participants occurred in gradations—from scapegoating refugees for economic hardships to ethical re-evaluation of migration as a fundamental human right. Most participants took a middle ground by just re-identifying the cause of their resentment and acknowledging that scapegoating distracts them from demanding better economic conditions from the government. By focusing on the government's role in mismanaging the economy and migration, participants could develop a more complex, empathetic understanding of the challenges refugees and citizens face. Through this critical reorientation, the deliberations revealed how misinformation, state neglect, and economic precarity intersect to produce scapegoating, as well as how these same forces can be challenged through collective reflection and empathy.

Reconsidering Refugee 'Criminality'

Social solidarity (Narrative 1) and injustices (Narrative 2) created an opportunity for participants to reconsider the widespread belief that refugees engage in criminal activities way more than citizens, a view perpetuated by dominant media discourses of 'bogus refugees' and their criminality. The deliberations revealed that while the myth of refugee criminality is pervasive, such totalising views can be challenged. Personal encounters with refugees—whether as neighbours, colleagues, or employees—often

become a counterweight to the misleading narratives circulated by the media and political elites. Many participants, like Ahmet, a retired man from Konya, questioned these narratives based on direct encounters with refugees:

In Istanbul, I worked a lot with Pakistanis and Afghans. They had no behaviour that would involve them in crimes. I mean, there are more decent people among them than criminals. Many perform daily prayers. Yes, some are vagabonds. But in Konya, for example, the majority of people call them 'Syrians' pejoratively, as if they are the same bad [people].

Ahmet's reflection challenges the generalised association of criminality with refugees, revealing a more nuanced perspective based on lived experience instead. His observation that there are "more decent people among them than criminals" directly contrasts with the prevailing narratives that paint refugees as a homogenous group and disrupts the simplistic dichotomy viewing refugees as a singular, criminal 'other.' Similarly, Zeynep, a young female participant from Izmir, critiqued the association of refugee status with criminality, highlighting how the refugee label itself shuts down further inquiry:

Being a refugee is equated to committing crimes or misbehaving. Their refugee status somehow explains everything. A debate is closed automatically when someone states that they are refugees. No one questions anything else.

Zeynep's comment points to the broader issue that the refugee label has become an all-encompassing justification for criminality attributed to a group. Yet, deliberations allowed alternative interpretations that challenge dominant narratives. As deliberations deepened, many participants began to question criminality through the lens of their everyday experiences. Dilek, a young woman from Konya, differentiated between 'genuine refugees' and those she deemed problematic:

Five or six years ago, I was working in Zafer Square. Two Syrian brothers worked at a tea shop (*çay ocağı*) there. Frankly, we loved them. They were very well-behaved, clean, and well-mannered. I can distinguish between genuine refugees from bad ones who waste time outside empty-handed and sit here and there in cafes (*kahvehane*). I am against those [latter] ones.

While Dilek initially expressed frustration about the number of refugees in Turkey, her perspective changed after reflecting on her experiences. This shift, however, also underscores a conditional acceptance—one that hinges on the 'quality' of refugees, dividing them into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories. Personal engagement can disrupt existing prejudices, but people prefer what they think are 'deserving' refugees based on their subjective evaluations of refugees' work ethic and conduct. Refugees who fit their image of a 'good' citizen—hardworking, polite, and law-abiding—are more readily accepted.

One of the most persistent myths addressed during deliberations was the stigmatisation of refugees as sexual predators. Far-right political figures and media outlets have

increasingly portrayed mainly Afghan men as 'natural sexual predators,' leading to heightened fears. However, it was young female participants who most vocally rejected this narrative. Ceren, a university student from Ankara, critiqued the manipulation of public perception by the media:

I think we are indeed manipulated. Let me explain it. There are good examples [among refugees], but the media will only talk about bad examples. Let's say a 25-year-old male from Afghanistan harassed a woman on a bus. This event in itself cannot be affirmed from any side. But the way this news is presented causes us to segregate refugees in our subconscious. The headlines emphasise the nationality of the person who committed the action. The readers inevitably tend to psychologically focus on the fact that he is Afghan, not on the wrong action. We generalise and assume that all Afghans are bad, push all the evil on them, and begin to alienate them in our minds. But the person who committed this action might well be Turkish.

Ceren's analysis reveals the role of media in reinforcing stereotypes. Her critique highlights how the media's selective portrayal of incidents shapes public perception, fostering a collective bias against refugees. The gendered dimension of refugee criminality also appeared in deliberations between male and female participants. When İlhan, a young male participant, challenged Ceren by asking if she would trust a refugee man to help her on the street, her response was both revealing and powerful: "I wouldn't ask for help from any man on the street in Turkey," she replied, subtly highlighting that gendered violence is a pervasive issue within Turkish society, not exclusive to refugees. This succinct rebuttal struck at the heart of the issue: the fear and insecurity of women in public spaces are not confined to interactions with refugees but reflect broader concerns about male violence in general. This response garnered support from other female participants who agreed that sexual harassment cannot be addressed solely by vilifying refugee men. Instead, it points to a deeper societal issue of gendered violence that transcends nationality or refugee status.

The criminality narrative reflects broader insecurities about social order and law within Turkish society. Yet, as the deliberations showed, these narratives are not impervious to questioning. Moreover, these deliberations opened a space for questioning the root of such widespread anxieties about refugee criminality. Dilek distinguished between 'genuine' and 'bad' refugees when given the opportunity to engage in reasoned debate. She was willing to reconsider her assumptions, especially when confronted with her own experiences and the realities of refugee integration. Ahmet and Ceren recognised that criminality exists in Turkish society and is not the defining characteristic of refugees. In conclusion, narratives of refugee criminality have not solidified into an unquestioned truth. The deliberations demonstrated that personal encounters and critical reflection can be powerful tools in challenging these dominant narratives. As participants engaged with alternative narratives of social solidarity and injustices, they began to dismantle the assumption of 'refugee criminality'. This shift underscores the potential of de-stigmatising narratives to foster nuances and critical awareness.

Empathy with Refugees through the Lens of 'Others Within'

The narrative about rights and solidarity (Narrative 1) sparked discussions about the enduring human rights violations and discrimination in Turkey. Participants likened

refugees to ethnic and religious minorities, Kurds, Alevis, Roma and non-Muslims, leading to expressions of empathy with refugees. The following conversation in Adana exemplifies how refugees became new targets of an embedded pattern of stigmatisation in Turkey:

Ayhan: Turkey has a specific problem. I mean, it is not only the Syrian problem or the Afghan problem. We couldn't accept the Kurds with whom we lived together for years. If we see a Kurd here wearing his traditional clothes, we will find it very strange also [referring to the demotion of refugees based on physical markers].

Çetin: In the past, our others were the Kurds. Now, Syrians are the other ones.

Derin: Gypsies [sic] are the same.

Çetin: Reactions suddenly turned against those who came from abroad. But actually, it seems like we are producing the same discourses by finding new targets.

Derin: When I was in high school, our Kurdish friends were not allowed to speak Kurdish among themselves. They did not allow them to listen to Kurdish music. They didn't let these people live here in peace. We remember the past.

Levent: The Sivas and Maraş massacres did the same [mob attacks against Alevi minorities in 1993 and 1978, respectively].

Participants recognised that dominant narratives currently directed at refugees are not new; instead, they represent a continuation of a long-standing process of "othering" within Turkish society. The treatment of refugees today is part of a broader pattern of social and physical exclusion that has long affected various groups in Turkey. Yaman, a male participant in his 20s from Gaziantep, echoed this notion, highlighting how the media plays a crucial role in perpetuating stigmatising narratives by shifting focus from one marginalised group to another:

If a Kurd did an unwanted deed twenty years ago, it was newsworthy. But now, because a Syrian does the same deed, it has value for news reporting. This is the manifestation of the social subconscious.

For many, the debate about the current situation of refugees induced a discussion on discrimination and forced assimilation of other groups. Participants noted there is a social habit towards generating social boundaries in Turkey along various identities, such as Turkish-Kurdish, religious-secular, and left-right, and more recently, between refugees and citizens, all of which were considered detrimental to social solidarity. For instance, in Diyarbakir, Kurdish participants drew from numerous personal experiences to associate their situation with that of refugees as the stigmatised 'other,' particularly by sharing stories of discrimination and exclusion during their experience as domestic migrants in the West of Turkey. Selahattin, a male participant in his 50s from Diyarbakir, stated

Our people [Kurds] can empathise the most because we are also marginalised in the west [of Turkey]. We are being othered. This is probably why our region opened their arms. When

a refugee family is in trouble, our community forms groups and collects aid. We step in when the state cannot. We maintain a sense of community.

Selahattin's account illustrates how Kurdish identity and historical marginalisation have fostered a collective empathy toward refugees, positioning them as fellow "others" who deserve solidarity and support. This empathy, rooted in shared experiences of exclusion, is particularly strong in other cities with mixed ethnic populations, such as Gaziantep and Adana, where ethnic or religious minorities have been subjected to discrimination. These cities emerged as essential sites of empathy toward refugees due to their residents' own experiences with discrimination. In these regions, participants could recall personal histories of exclusion, which in turn allowed them to empathise with the refugees' plight. This contrasts with other regions of Turkey, where empathy toward refugees may be less prevalent due to a lack of direct experience with social stigmatisation. However, even in Konya, where conservative Sunni-Muslim identity holds significant sway, participants drew connections between the situation of refugees today and the oppression of religious groups in the past when secular-military establishment dominated politics and oppressed the public display of religious symbols and piety.

Deliberations not only highlighted parallels between the 'others within' and refugees but also cultivated empathy after critiquing the recurring conditions of social and physical marginalisation of minorities in Turkey. The participants agreed that the ongoing search for 'others' was detrimental to social solidarity, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and division. By viewing refugees through the lens of "others within," participants were able to cultivate a sense of solidarity grounded in shared experiences of discrimination. This empathy, however, is highly localised, reflecting the specific histories of different cities and the ethnic and religious identities of their residents. This suggests that empathy is shaped by local and personal identities and experiences.

'Deserving Refugee' Found Among the Grandparents

Historically and culturally embedded narratives are more resonant or appealing to the hearer (Woodly 2015). By deploying the narrative that modern Turkey is a nation built on migration (Narrative 2), the aim was to probe the personal family histories of citizens to activate a collective cultural script in participants' minds. When participants were invited to discuss refugees in light of the history of the successful integration of forcibly displaced people in the past and their families' migration stories, they could adopt a long-term perspective of settlement and integration. For instance, Faruk, a middle-aged male participant in Izmir, stated,

If they are going to live here, and this is now obvious, they need to be integrated. We must provide them with a regular life so they see themselves as one of us. Otherwise, they will turn bitter towards us.

Gökay from Istanbul also raised similar remarks that refugees should be put on the right track of repeating the success story of previous refugees:

If the historical experience can be repeated, it will benefit our country. If refugees establish businesses and pay taxes through subsidisation instead of providing cheap labour, this means that they can overcome difficulties and achieve integration. They have children, and these children will also have children. They will say, 'You know, my father achieved like this, so I should be hardworking like him.'

These reflections illustrate how historical narratives can invoke a sense of responsibility toward contemporary refugees and foster a forward-looking view of their potential integration. In essence, participants were open to the idea that historical practices of integrating refugees in Turkey under hospitable conditions could be replicated. However, deliberations also revealed a tension between openness and a desire to impose conditional criteria on refugees based on participants' family histories. Particularly in cities like Izmir and Bursa, where migration from former Ottoman territories is part of many families' histories, participants framed their ancestors' experiences as a benchmark. Sezin, a middle-aged non-working woman from Bursa, noted that their ancestors were not granted unrestricted settlement rights; they had to cultivate rural lands first and construct their homes there as "deserving" "hardworking" migrants. For these participants, current refugees should undergo similar challenges and demonstrate similar perseverance to merit their stay in Turkey. This conditional acceptance, based on historical memory, created a distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees, reinforcing the idea that only those willing to work hard should be integrated. In other words, refugees were considered on equal footing with people from two or three generations prior.

Narratives based on collective and personal memory, however, led to decisive objections to indiscriminate deportation. Although opposition politicians, media outlets, and increasingly the government whitewash and promote deportation as an 'easy' and 'quick' solution in Turkey, during deliberations, participants concluded that after investing psychologically, emotionally, and materially in Turkey for more than a decade, forcing people to return to Syria would be immoral and unfair. Firat, a male university student from Adana, even brought up a hypothetical Kurdish state, a taboo topic in Turkey, to illustrate the irrationality and unfairness of deportation after refugees' extended placemaking in Turkey:

Let's say an independent Kurdistan was established. Would the Kurds in Izmir go to Kurdistan? I don't remember hearing my Kurdish friends say, "I would go." They have an established life, and their workplace, relatives, and friends are already in Izmir. Even if such a country were established, they would not go to live there.

In conclusion, participants' reflections on their family histories fostered empathy for refugees and opposition to blanket deportation policies. While the narrative of Turkey as a nation built on migration prompted many to adopt a long-term perspective on refugee integration, this empathy was often conditional, rooted in expectations of hard work and self-reliance. Nevertheless, the collective memory of forced migration proved to be a compelling narrative for fostering a sense of fairness and moral obligation toward refugees.

Accepting Own Complicity, Not Taking Responsibility

Emel: They get minimum wage, sir.

Cüneyt: I don't think so. Most of them are unregistered. That's the problem anyway. Rest assured, what will this give them even if they get a 500 liras voucher [referring to the aid refugees receive and funded by the EU]? Do you really believe the state provides them 10,000 liras or 20,000 liras? Believe me, I witness those lives.

When the participants were invited to discuss the refugee communities' daily exploitation in the job market and earning incomes (Narrative 3), the typical reactionary argument was similar to Emel's misinformation that refugees receive the minimum salary even if they do not work. Some also argued that refugees receive priority treatment in public hospitals and schools. In other words, there is a belief that refugees are more privileged than citizens. Surprisingly, Emel is a middle-aged, non-working woman from Üsküdar, an (upper-) middle-class neighbourhood, while Cüneyt is a working-class male from Sultanbeyli in Istanbul. Although a typical refugee is more likely to be a competitor in the job or rental market for Cüneyt, he confronted Emel. His way of engaging with Emel through inviting her to reflect ('Do you think?') and filling her epistemic gaps by sharing his own experiences ('Believe me') were examples of participant-generated convincing narratives during DCDs.

Indeed, people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups displayed a more profound understanding of the exploitation refugees encounter in the job market. Ferhat, a young male construction worker in Gaziantep, argued that the massive flow of refugees within a short time created downward pressure on salaries in labour-intensive sectors: "There are sectors requiring physical strength where refugees can work. Employers started not giving jobs to Turks because Syrians worked for less pay. For example, instead of hiring one guy for 3000, he pays two Syrians 1500 each and has two workers instead." However, Ferhat carefully avoided blaming refugees for stealing jobs. He added that Syrian workers were "forced to accept these conditions" despite unfair payment because they were in dire need or they did not know what payment they were entitled to, and the employers exploited them.

During deliberations, some participants argued that their exploitation and difficulty in earning basic income is harmful to society also because refugees are deprived of essential opportunities to thrive and integrate. Nazife, an unemployed female from Ankara in her mid-fifties, stated that the demanding working conditions of refugees resemble seasonal workers, who were dominantly Kurdish in the past but replaced by refugees nowadays: "They [employers] place these refugee families somewhere in the middle of nowhere. They do not meet anyone to learn the language. They load trucks the entire day there." Zafer, a middle-aged retired man, concurred: "They cannot find the time to learn Turkish and the Turkish way of life to resemble us. They need to consider basics like shelter, clothing, and food."

However, not only working class or poor participants rejected the claim that refugees were given privileges. Alya, a young female working in a salaried white-collar job in Ankara, stated that she knew some aid was offered to the refugees but added she did not see any Syrian overly benefiting and becoming privileged: "I see them on the street every day. They are either collecting garbage or trying to do something to survive. Apart from that, no people enjoy the advantages the AKP granted by the AKP and live in better conditions [than citizens]." Likewise, Damla, a young professional from Izmir, argued that the exploitation and informal work that many people blame Syrians for accepting to steal jobs from citizens did not start with them: "People who worked with manual labour, in construction, in industry, and many other invisible sectors, existed before. They were given less money and tough jobs without insurance. These conditions didn't start with the Syrians." Supporting her argument, she defended refugees' right to unionise alongside Turkish workers to demand equal payment.

Importantly, exposing injustices fostered introspection among some participants regarding their involvement or complicity within the exploitative system. A poignant illustration of this dynamic emerged from an exchange between two middle-class female participants in their 40s within the Izmir group. While Nevin exhibited staunch anti-refugee views, Leyla, despite expressing reservations toward refugees, demonstrated a willingness to challenge the assertions of Nevin during deliberations:

Nevin: Which of the refugees coming to Turkey are currently working to find themselves treated wrongfully? Look, despite doing nothing, they get paid.

Leyla: Can I say something now? When they first came to our country, we did a little something. You know, we always employ them without insurance as cheap labour. We said, 'This one is Syrian anyway; he would accept and work.' You know, while a citizen received 3 liras, we gave him 1 lira. I know it because my house was being renovated. We live on the third floor. The operative found a Syrian, and I swear he pulled those loads of debris in a big container for half a bread.

Leyla's engagement is another example of how people, albeit unhappy with large numbers of refugees, can develop empathy and modify their positions. Her resorting to metaphors ('half a bread') and engaging subjective pronouns when addressing the hearer ('You know', 'I know it') demonstrate that people not only engage with alternative narratives but seek to make them more resounding for others.

Acknowledging one's complicity in benefiting from injustices and exploitation can evoke a sense of guilt among many participants. However, this guilt often deflects responsibility onto higher entities. Following candid admissions of either ignoring or directly benefiting from the exploitation of refugees, participants, regardless of their socioeconomic background or age, often shifted blame onto corporate interests and employers. Public authorities and the social security system were also criticised for inadequate oversight of employers. The government was blamed for failing to enact legislation to prevent labour exploitation. Some even contended that the exploitation of refugee labour constituted a tacit agreement between the Turkish government and business interests to procure cheap labour, asserting that citizens lacked the agency to intervene. This stance led participants to clear their conscience by placing the burden

on the state and public authorities to address the integration of refugees, alleviate poverty and ensure equal opportunities.

Discussion: Changing Narratives, Changing Attitudes?

By exposing mixed groups of ordinary citizens to de-stigmatising narratives and facilitating their informed deliberations, this study has sought to identify how citizens can be encouraged to become more self-critical and reflexive about their biased attitudes and moderate their reified view of refugees. A clear advantage of DCDs in migration research is their in-depth and community-centred nature and attention to agency and intersubjectivity. Group dialogues exposed participants to various viewpoints and provided opportunities to further reflect on and articulate narratives to justify their responses and change their initial reactions. This methodological approach has clear advantages, such as identifying the most salient areas of misinformation and prejudices towards refugees/migrants in a given context. Compared to surveys that 'measure' attitudes, DCDs can identify how attitudes form and change by tracing the emergence of moments wherein people begin to question and subsequently modify their entrenched misinformation and stigmatising prejudices. DCDs can also identify common denominators across sociodemographic groups and promising areas of consensus where practitioners can more systematically deploy alternative narratives.

Findings show that de-stigmatising narratives can motivate people to think about a divisive issue through an alternative normative lens they do not usually encounter in mainstream politics or media. However, several intermediating factors have led to differential outcomes across framings, cities, and demographic groups. While extensively immersing in deliberations, people renegotiated and adapted de-stigmatising narratives.

Effectiveness of Different Framings. During DCDs, narratives were first presented through progressive frames, often eliciting reactive 'gut-feeling' responses. To engage reactive participants and to encourage deliberations to come forward, progressive frames needed to be supported by conservative-nationalist ones. This outcome might be intricately tied to Turkey, where nationalism and conservatism dominate the current socio-political landscape. However, inter-group relations also play a crucial role. In general, people exhibit a greater propensity to accept solidarity or empathy with 'outgroups' when they perceive tangible benefits for their own group or when they harbour the belief that the 'outgroup' will eventually emulate cultural norms to resemble 'the majority'.

DCDs in Turkey demonstrated that contextual factors and these mentioned intergroup relations frequently intersect. Citizens renegotiated narratives and created their own conditions (like 'genuine' or 'deserving' refugees) or reasonings (like denying opportunities and rights would 'turn refugees bitter against us', which would eventually ham 'us') while converging around them. This situation indicates that support for alternative narratives is conditional upon advancing social group interests and preserving identity. This sentiment was candidly but most radically articulated by Rabia, a young female participant from Konya, who openly acknowledged that the more

refugees adopt traits and behaviours of society, the less she would perceive them as a threat to cultural integrity and security. She remarked,

We hope that they will assimilate and become Turks. Other than that, there is no way to embrace them. For now, just as tribes do not want to mingle with outsiders, Syrians marry each other, and they don't blend. If Turks can also marry Syrians, they will be able to assimilate and become Turks. But if they multiply like tribes among themselves, then there is a risk.

Rabia's statement unveils a complex interplay between identity, securitization, and assimilationism that conditions refugee acceptance in Turkey on cultural anxieties and perceived threats to social cohesion. In this sense, the progressive framing of de-stigmatising narratives did not achieve a significant effect on its own. This situation might be related to the fact that the target group of progressive frames already had fewer misperceptions and was predisposed to accepting refugees' rights and integration. However, progressive frames still helped reactionary arguments based on misinformation be expressed and debunked upfront. Then, deliberations deepened because more participants took the stage to reason and renegotiate in search of a middle ground.

The Role of Subnational Dynamics. Local dynamics play an essential role in shaping citizens' attitudes towards refugees. Factors such as ethnic identity and historical background of residents in each city influenced how people perceived and responded to presented narratives. In Diyarbakir, participants exhibited the most inclusive and progressive attitudes, even regarding the naturalisation of refugees. Given the city's predominantly Kurdish population, narratives resonated with the participants because it was easy for them to empathise with the stigmatisation, exclusion and discrimination of refugees. Participants articulated their tolerance towards refugees through the lens of minority experiences. They also advocated for communal self-reliance and collective responsibility in facilitating the integration of refugees and ameliorating their socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Likewise, cities where local identity is shaped through migratory flows, like Bursa, Izmir, and Adana, were also receptive to alternative narratives. Historical experiences and geographical and linguistic ties—like in Gaziantep and Adana—facilitated the overall positive reception of de-stigmatising narratives. People articulated and deepened de-stigmatising narratives by emphasising the integration of refugees and better migration governance. This situation shows that geographical variations, personal experiences with previous stigmatisation and exclusion, and local culture of conviviality indicate the importance of targeted subnational strategies when crafting new public communication and policies regarding refugees.

Class and Generational Divides. Discernible variations in attitudes emerged based on key demographic factors. A minority of individuals, predominantly middle-aged and non-working women, adamantly maintained their negative perceptions towards refugees. Additionally, they expressed a categorical refusal to participate in activities fostering mutual understanding and cultural exchange between refugees and citizens.

Conversely, young and working-class participants were the most willing to embrace normative perspectives and engage with de-stigmatising narratives.

This situation suggests that social interactions, or the lack thereof, between citizens and refugees may mediate the divergence in attitudes toward refugees across different social classes and generations. Older and socio-economically advantaged groups often have limited interactions with refugees outside of hierarchical roles, such as landlords, and tend to rely on media portrayals that frame refugees as cultural or economic threats. In contrast, young people and working-class participants who demonstrated greater engagement with de-stigmatising narratives and expressed empathy more frequently mentioned first-hand interactions with refugees, such as classmates or colleagues. These individuals often challenged more reactionary viewpoints, using reasoned arguments and encouraging critical reflection to foster dialogue.

However, these differential engagements across sociodemographic groups imply that all misinformation and prejudices cannot be addressed. Typically, at the beginning of DCDs, participants began the discussions from relatively convergent positions shaped by common biases and misinformation about refugees. Those who remained unmoved by the end of deliberations exhibited a clear and recognisable pattern: their views remained consistent and reiterated their strong opposition to refugees, advocating for total repatriation and forced return. Not all people were convinced by replacing dominant stigmatising narratives with de-stigmatising ones. However, this was small (3-4 people out of 69 participants). A "moveable middle" constituted the majority of participants, who demonstrated some level of openness to re-evaluating their perspectives (Cassehgari 2020). However, the extent of this 'moveability' varies in degrees. Although this study does not aim to quantify or measure the precise extent of attitude change among participants, it illustrated that a significant portion of the people seem amenable to reasoned argumentation based on de-stigmatising narratives. The findings suggest that systematic and thoughtful engagement has the potential to persuade those whose views are not profoundly entrenched before far-right narratives sediment their opinions.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of alternative positive and rights-based narratives in encouraging ordinary citizens to reconsider their stigmatising, i.e. racialising and criminalising prejudices when they engage with the question of refugees. Deliberative citizen dialogues conducted across eight cities in Turkey revealed a willingness among the majority of citizens to attend to alternative narratives, with many expressing readiness to reconsider or moderate their views. However, citizens do not passively accept alternative narratives. They renegotiate, bend, and reformulate them—such as the category of deserving or genuine refugees—in light of subnational dynamics, age, gender and class.

The study offers clues for future research from theoretical, methodological and policy-relevant viewpoints. First, over the last decades, migration scholars have primarily

documented dominant narratives that stigmatise refugees. The study's interdisciplinary theoretical framework responds to a widely acclaimed call for reflective migration scholarship to avoid entrenching oppressive and discriminatory migration apparatuses. Thus, it aligns more with migration scholarship and other social science theories and shifts the spotlight from 'migrant populations' to encompassing 'overall populations' (Dahinden 2016). The interdisciplinary dialogue between migration studies, cultural sociology and cognitive fields provides an essential theoretical lens that can be applied in research with other disadvantaged and stigmatised groups.

Second, the study highlights the importance of participatory and bottom-up methodologies in generating original data, especially concerning polarising issues. The study invites spearheading non-hierarchical, right-based and participatory approaches in search of undoing social boundaries and destigmatisation by directly involving citizens. This methodological approach can minimise some risks of alternative methods, such as the risk of capturing non-existent and false opinions. DCDs can trace when people were misinformed, had no information, or started questioning and changing their own viewpoints. Even temporally and spatially limited deliberations could generate critical reflection and lead to a more nuanced understanding of forced migration and refugees among citizens. Future studies should expand and test these (and potentially other) de-stigmatising narratives in other countries and with different ostracised groups. DCDs can also serve as an essential step before researchers design surveys or survey experiments to answer the question of what to measure (construct validity) and how to measure (internal validity) by accurately identifying the narratives and frames that stand the best chance of garnering support.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of the generation and dissemination of de-stigmatising narratives in reshaping public perceptions about refugees, making it imperative to counterbalance the dominance of populist radical right and hate groups in this realm. These findings are relevant for practitioners and policy-makers working in refugee rights and integration. Joseph (2024) rightly worries that advanced communication technologies already permitted far-right groups to disseminate their narratives widely. Accordingly, alternative narrative interventions are already too late to curb the dominance of far-right narratives. Researchers alone cannot deploy alternative narratives sustainably to see the durability of their de-stigmatising and attitude-shifting effects. Time-bounded first exposure to rights-based narratives is insufficient for those insulated from refugees. This study's findings are limited temporally and geographically for this reason. However, they can still provide a blueprint for repeated and systematic exposure to such narratives that can generate a shift in norm perceptions and, eventually, attitudes. Sociodemographic nuances in citizens' engagement with alternative narratives underscore the importance of targeted interventions in future research as well as policy design and media's (online, TV, newspapers) reporting of refugees and migration to promote more normative shifts in attitudes toward refugees.

While no magic wand is in sight, researchers, reporters, educators, and practitioners can join efforts to persuade wider society to acknowledge refugees, asylum seekers, forcibly displaced people, undocumented migrants, and likewise, other stigmatised groups as

dignified rights-bearing agents rather than throwing the towel in despair. Producing and disseminating public narratives about refugees and other disadvantaged groups is too important to be left to the far-right monopoly.

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¹ Turkey has a complex legal position regarding refugees, largely influenced by its reservations towards the 1951 Refugee Convention's 1967 Protocol. Therefore, refugee protection is shaped by its domestic laws and policies. For instance, Syrians are subject to domestic temporary protection regime. Other nationalities are subject to international or subsidiary protection regime and in practice waiting for resettlement to a third country by the UNHCR.

Supplementary Material

Overcoming Prejudices and Stigmatisation Towards Refugees

Deliberative Community Dialogues (DCDs) were carried out in eight cities. This Supplementary Material is prepared to provide interested readers with background information about:

- the selection of cities
- living and working conditions of refugees in these cities
- participant recruitment

Selection of cities and Refugees' Daily Conditions of Living

Among selected eight cities for data collection, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir—Turkey's three largest cities—account for 30% of the country's total population. Gaziantep, Adana, and Bursa were chosen due to the refugee ratio to the local population and refugees' important role in the local economy. Konya was selected for its contradictory combination of solid and consistent electoral support for the government and yet a strong and growing opposition to migration governance. Diyarbakir, the largest city in the Kurdish region, was included to represent the Kurdish population. Except for Diyarbakir, all the other seven cities are among the top ten cities with the highest refugee populations.

However, the actual number of refugees present in a city might differ from the official statistics for many reasons. First, Turkish law does not foresee aid regarding shelter, food, and job-seeking, forcing refugees to rely on their own networks to make a living. This situation leads to many refugees migrating to big cities. Despite harsh sanctions and the threat of deportation, many registered Syrians and other nationality refugees seek to leave their registered addresses to find jobs in metropolitan areas of Istanbul. Second, in mid-size cities like Adana, Konya, Gaziantep, and Bursa, there are fluctuations in the number of refugees due to the seasonal (agricultural) workers and workers in animal farming and grazing, composed of not only Syrians but also Afghans (Kaya 2023; Dedeoglu 2016).

Third, the number of Afghans who mostly entered Turkey unauthorizedly via land border with Iran is more difficult to pin down. According to the estimates, there are around 300,000 Afghans who neither qualify for temporary protection nor refugee status in Turkey. Afghan nationals are evaluated through a case-by-case assessment of their claims for international protection. While some Afghans may be granted asylum in a third country and resettled by the UNHCR based on persecution or risk in their home country, others may face challenges in obtaining protection, depending on the circumstances of their case and the prevailing policies at the time. Therefore, they find themselves stuck in Turkey.

Fourth, there are significant problems and delays in updating refugee statistics in Turkey. This is mostly due to the inconsistent and discretionary implementations in

registering newborns and population movements of refugees within Turkey. Moreover, given the rising anti-refugee sentiments in the country, the government has strong motivations to strategically disclose/hide data about refugees (Yabancı 2024). Lately, for instance, the government assumed that more than 150,000 Syrians who could not be found at their registered addresses either travelled to Europe undocumented or returned to Syria hence crossed them out of the population registry.

Living and Working Conditions in Selected Cities

In all cities where deliberations were conducted, refugees live in social and spatially segregated areas, a general situation for refugees in Turkey (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). They are settled in the margins of the city, sunk districts where locals left or did not prefer to stay due to poor housing and transportation conditions (Balkan et al. 2018). Several participants in deliberative groups confirmed this situation and acknowledged that they or their relatives, friends, or neighbours rent their suboptimal properties to refugees and have a landlord-tenant relationship with them. Despite this fact, the practice of multiple families sharing a single flat or house is also common among refugees both because locals ask for exorbitant rents and because the income of refugee families is unstable and below the minimum wage; hence, renting a flat by one family is unaffordable (Şahin-Mencütek et al. 2023).

Following the general trend in Turkey, language barriers and social exclusion continue to limit refugees' access to healthcare in all cities covered in this study, especially reproductive health, schooling, and job market and training (Çelik and İçduygu 2019; Ozturk, Serin, and Altinoz 2019; Fehr and Rijken 2022; Dayioglu-Tayfur, Kirdar, and Koc 2021). The language barrier affects women more because women spend more time at home for domestic duties and are considered 'unfit' for socialisation or the job market due to the patriarchal codes among refugees (Açikalin et al. 2021; Rottmann and Nimer 2021; Knappert, Kornau, and Figengül 2018).

Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, a multifaceted approach was followed designed to engage a diverse cross-section of individuals rather than aiming for a strictly representative sample. The goal was to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives across different demographic and socio-political backgrounds, ensuring that DCDs could reflect the complexity of attitudes towards refugees in Turkey. Statistical representativeness was not the objective in this study. The aim was to reach out different opinions as much as possible, hence diversity in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, political orientation, and personal experiences with migration and displacement was prioritised.

The author also collaborated with an Istanbul-based research consultancy with extensive knowledge and experience in research participant recruitment for focus groups and surveys in Turkey alongside local civil society organisations and community centres where DCDs took place. These local partners also helped us reach individuals who might otherwise have been difficult to engage, such as marginalised groups or those not typically involved in public discussions.

In each city, local research assistants familiar with the community landscape further supported outreach efforts. They helped identify participants who could contribute meaningfully to the discussions, particularly by ensuring that we included those with varying degrees of proximity to refugee populations—whether as neighbours, employers, or fellow citizens who are indirectly affected by refugee-related policies. Participant recruitment relied heavily on digital communication, primarily through messaging platforms widely used in Turkey, like WhatsApp. These platforms distributed a standardised message containing basic information about the project, its objectives, and the structure of the DCDs and was distributed to make an initial voluntary recruitment.

Structure and Execution of DCDs

Once voluntary participants were recruited, they were provided with information about the time and location, usually an office of a local civil society organisation or community centre that people could easily reach. The author, who moderated DCDs, asked participants to sit in a roundtable format. After introductions, the author/moderator asked participants to read and sign the informed consent forms and asked permission to record the discussions in mp3 format. Depending on the participants' engagement DCDs lasted two to three hours. Data collection took place in October-November 2023 in one intensive schedule in order to collect comparable data across cities. Reactive public opinion can quickly ebb and flow with a single event on refugees and migration, e.g. intercommunal clashes would drive up anti-refugee sentiments, and another tragedy similar to the Aylan Kurdi case can unusually drive up empathy and solidarity. Therefore, data was collected within a short period to minimise the risk of running into such disruptive events during the data collection that would make interpretation of data across different DCDs very difficult. The preparatory stage before data collection took more than a year and included interviews with activists, lawyers, and civic organisations working on migration, as well as identifying and setting up participants and locations for DCDs.

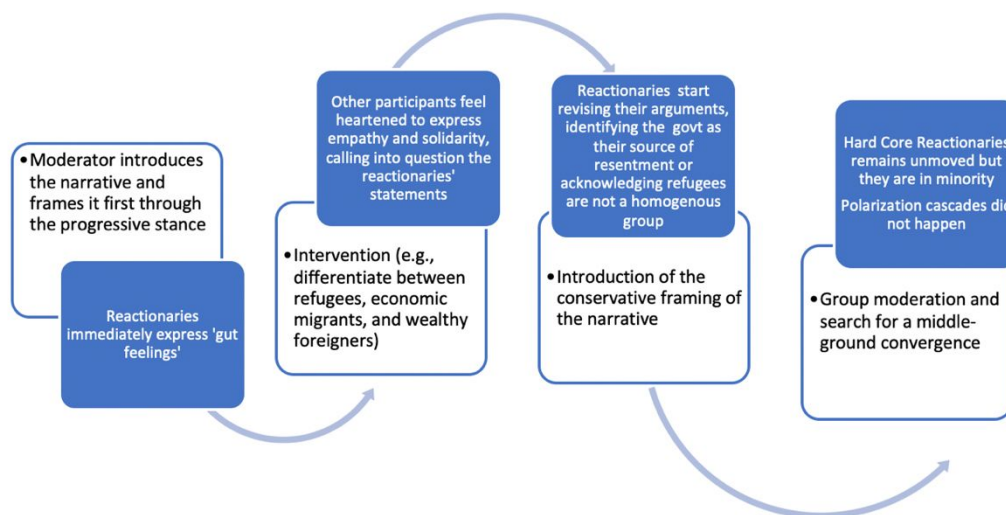
Although the informed consent forms already provided information, the author/moderator briefly mentioned the research project and explained the roadmap. They were assured that all opinions were equally valued for research purposes in the following statement:

“I am here today to learn from you. Please don't worry about your views being judged—there are no right or wrong answers to the questions we'll discuss. Your perspectives are important, and no opinion is too marginal, so don't hesitate to share your thoughts. Everyone's opinion is equally important and valuable to us for this research.”

Usually, the discussion was opened by asking participants what captured their attention in the news lately concerning Turkey and, if they wish, other countries. Often, one person at least mentioned refugees and irregular migration. This situation was used as a bridge to zoom in. The moderator introduced each narrative one by one, following the

same order: 1- Social Solidarity, fundamental rights and dignity, 2- Collective memory and formative life experiences, and 3- Injustices and Unfair Treatment.

Instead of reading, the moderator used a natural and conversational tone to introduce narratives. Before changing the narrative, each is discussed through progressive and then conservative/nationalist framing. However, the research, being interactive and participatory, occasionally saw changes in the sequence of discussed narratives within each group. Participants sometimes articulated narratives themselves, particularly to challenge stigmatising narratives raised by some participants. This active participation and interaction from people naturally facilitated steering between the three narratives. However, it also sometimes generated too many iterations back and forth between narratives, blurring the dividing lines. This complication was addressed at the data analysis level. First, voice recordings facilitated massively to recall all the debates in small details. Second, the findings are synthesised and presented in a cross-cutting manner instead of reporting the deliberations for each narrative.



Supplementary Material Figure 1: Generic illustration of the flow of DCDs across cities.

Deliberations among participants were crucial data to capture. The author/moderator constantly intervened throughout the deliberations to ensure equal opportunity for all voices and maintain the focus while allowing enriching detours. The task of moderator required being alert and always attentive to not only words but also gestures, facial expressions, or other behavioural/bodily cues. These cues revealed a participant who wanted to express a counterpoint or a nuance to the ongoing debate and needed encouragement to speak up. To unearth a rich array of views and interactions between participants, the author/moderator did not interrupt when participants expressed racist or politically incorrect views—the response and reaction from other participants to such views generated and enriched the deliberations.

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