

**READING XENOPHOBIA IN TURKISH MEDIA THROUGH SYRIAN REFUGEES:
SAMPLES OF YENİ AKİT AND SÖZCÜ NEWSPAPERS**

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ABSTRACT

In Turkish press, prejudiced and discriminatory discourses which lack of right-based approach take part on columns and the news that subjected to Syrian refugees. In this study, Sözcü Newspaper as an anti-government national press representative and Yeni Akit Newspaper as a pro-government representative were selected as samples; Xenophobia was examined within the discourses of humanist and anti-humanist; a seven-month process from the Joint Action Plan signed on November 29, 2015 with the European Union to the statement of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan about the citizenship which will be granted to Syrian refugees living in Turkey on July 3, 2016 (1 December 2015 to 15 July 2016) was revised. A total of 67 newspaper reports that related to the subject, including 37 Yeni Akit and 30 Sözcü were examined by using the keywords “*Syrians, Syrian Refugees, Syrian Immigrants, Xenophobia*”. Out of the 13 columns, only 2 news were in Yeni Akit and the remaining 11 news was located in Sözcü Newspaper. 13 positive reports were in Yeni Akit, while only 1 positive report was found in Sözcü Newspaper.

Findings were evaluated in three main case frameworks. These are; security oriented point of view, social based and economic based cases. In the research; 2 reports related to security oriented point of view was found in the Yeni Akit Newspaper and 7 reports in the Sözcü Newspaper. While 5 news in the Yeni Akit Newspaper was considered economically based, there are 7 related news was found in the Sözcü Gazetesi. According to social based perspective, it was seen that 4 news were in the Sözcü Newspaper and 28 news were in the Yeni Akit Newspaper. In the findings, the news headlines of Yeni Akit Newspaper were addressed the religious and humanitarian sentiments of the society in favor of the pro-government opposition line at the frontline. Conversely, when the news of the Sözcü Newspaper were examined, security and economic based cases has seen to be at the frontline and social based news were in the background.

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Xenophobia, Sözcü Newspaper, Yeni Akit Newspaper.

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INTRODUCTION

As it has recently been witnessed in Turkey, hate speech, discourses bearing prejudice, discriminative tones such as “we and others” which alienating and triggering xenophobia have been everyday language of media organizations, politicians and social media and numbers of ethical codes have been violated by such contentions. Social restlessness make refugees’ lives harder, who have already experiencing difficulty since they run away from a civil war and trying to adjust to a foreign culture; and refugees, target of discriminative discourses remained defenseless against this pressure and mostly exposed violent hostile perception.

Media is considered as the most fundamental and efficient communication tool. The objective of this study is to address xenophobia concept on the rise and legitimization of discriminative language and hate speech through media. In this study, Sözcü Newspaper, voice of nationalist groups, and Yeni Akit Newspaper, voice of Islamic groups, were investigated within the outline of hate speech or xenophobia as well as humanist and dehumanized speeches. This study reviews the 7-month period beginning with the Joint Action Plan executed by EU and Turkey on November 29th, 2015 and ending with public statement of President Erdogan about naturalization of Syrian refugees on July 3rd, 2016. Keywords (xenophobia, hate speech, violence against Syrian refugees etc.) were utilized to search national and international press; discourses of leaders were examined; and files related with xenophobic cases of Syrians were investigated. In this process, the present study is grounded on the incidents related with the hate speech against Syrian refugees and the reports prepared by the *Hrant Dink Foundation* under the framework of Monitoring of Hate Speech in Media.

1. THE CONCEPT OF XENOPHOBIA

The concept of ‘xenophobia’ derived from the combination of Antic Greek word of ‘xenos’ meaning foreigner and another word of ‘phobos’ meaning fear. While this concept refers distrust, fear and hate felt against strangers, it is directly related with racism. It could also predicate hostile perception against foreigners as well as the potential change that might occur in a local culture by alien culture. Additionally, it could stimulate prejudice, stereotype and discrimination (Yılmaz, 2008: s.29).

According to Alkan, projection lies under psychological foundation of concepts of xenophobia and prejudice (Alkan, 1983: P.134). “Individuals reflect the qualities that they ashamed of in themselves, 'sins', depressed feelings, hostilities congregated as a result of ambivalent attitudes towards the ruling group, self-hatred, aggressive instinct, and sexual impulses that they hesitate to fail keeping under control to “outside” groups.” This is what exactly happened to Turks who went to Germany for employment. According to Alkan, Turks were made “scapegoat” by Germans who need to cope with stress caused by high unemployment and depression in the country (Alkan, 1983: s.136). In personal identity development, core identity of individuals is internalized together with group identity of the society in which they live.

Over the time, prejudiced attitude and behaviors could be developed against the alienated groups unconsciously. According to the theory suggested by Vamik Volkan, attitude and unconscious self designs which remained fragmented threaten overall core identity of an individual. These externalized contents could return to individuals back or they could constitute foundation of serious prejudice such as xenophobia, racism, gender discrimination and terrorism (İlhan and Çevik, 2013: P.61). In this context, causes of xenophobia and prejudice were indicated as below;

- Bringing ethnic identity to forefront in government policies (chosen, divine race etc.),
- Past negative experiences with foreigners or immigrants,
- Using humiliating phrases about foreigners and immigrants in their everyday life and self-righteousness (nicknames, humiliating or insulting jokes),
- Comments made about cultural differences which do not reflect reality,
- Association of behaviors of a group of people with whole society through generalization (Beçene, 2012).

Economic distress and unemployment lie on the foundation of xenophobia experienced by Turks in Germany in 1980s (Alkan, 1983: P.140). This situation is not only limited with Germany in this period; it was observed with Western European and African countries. Developments results of social, economical and behavioral causes have evolved from each other; and streams such as terrorism hippiness replaced by xenophobia. Undoubtedly, this tendency will be replaced by another concept. In parallel with the advancements in technology, instead of ‘national’, international identities will play significant role in socialization. As it was addressed by Alkan, human beings could not be considered without their value judgment similar to the individuals who could not be thought without their prejudices. However, the important thing is to determine the things between prejudiced and unprejudiced behaviors as well as between conforming and non-conforming (Alkan, 1983: P.143).

2. SYRIAN REFUGEES AND XENOPHOBIA

In parallel with rise of xenophobia and right-wing political parties around the Europe, it has found greater place in media recently. The number of Syrian refugees has increased to 4 millions since the entry of the first refugee group comprised of 252 Syrians in 2011. While number of Syrians in Turkey was 2 million in 2014, their population increased to 2.73 million by March 2016 according to the public statement of Vice Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan (www.hurriyet.com.tr). Within the scope of the “Open Door Policy” adopted towards Syrians, refugees were supplied shelter, health services, education and vocational training. Based on the Global Humanitarian Aid 2016 Report, Turkey was ranked as “the most generous country” in the world with its aid summed up to 3.2 Billion USD (AFAD, 2016).

Turkey experienced with a new concept of xenophobia since it has not been target of such intensive refugee movement before. In deed Turkish society was familiar with this concept in Germany in terms of xenophobia and prejudice effected Turkish citizens who went there for employment. Sometimes it peaked through political statements as part of an effort of foreign politicians to steer public perception and through elevated street violence against Turkish immigrants in abroad. Anatolia, home of thousands of civilizations and proud of being tolerant to everyone, once again experienced harmonization process with Syrian refugees who were Turkey's guest in the period from April to October 2011 but then entitled with an interim protection status (Özer, 2015:P.46).

In the EU-Turkey Summit held on November 29th, 2015, the Joint Action Plan was put in action in order to strengthen cooperation to prevent illegal human trafficking over Turkey to the EU and supporting Turkey in this regard (www.ab.gov.tr). According to the report, Turkey was expected to strengthen capturing capacity of the Coast Guard Commandership and sustain fighting against illegal human smuggling. Moreover, since Turkey has already spent more 7 Billion Euro for refugees so far, it will be supported by a 3-Billion Euro fund from the budget of the EU and its member countries so that humanitarian aid, education and infrastructure projects could be conducted (www.avrupa.info.tr).

After the Readmission Agreement was executed on December 16th, 2013, it took affect on October 2014. Nevertheless, it was interrupted in spite of the endorsement of the President Erdogan at the end of the 3-year long transition period in the exchange of visa because of the 72-criterion obligation to be fulfilled by Turkey (www.hurriyet.com.tr). President Erdogan and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, have given public statements on this issue addressing their sensitivity time to time and warned their European counterparts.^{4 5}

President Erdogan stated in a Ramadan Dinner event in Kilis on July 3rd, 2016 that Syrian refugees will be conferred citizenship (www.bbc.com). Until July 15th, 2016, the military coup trial, aforesaid citizenship allegations have been discussed by various politicians, media and civil society organizations. Majority of these public statements released to appeal to their basic audience but humane and ethical values were ignored unfortunately.

4 "At the end of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, President Erdogan spoke at a press conference with the Secretary General of the United Nations Ban-Ki moon. Erdogan said "There is currently a step towards the readmission agreement as of June 1, and the visa point will be taken as of June 30th"... Our friends will make discussions about this issue... The results of these interviews were taken. I'm sorry if they're not taken. Otherwise, law to take steps for the implementation of readmission agreements for the Republic of Turkey's parliament doesn't pass,." (www.bbc.com)

5 In his Brussels speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said "We will send our last study to them. Then, we will meet once again to finalize the issue. After that, we clearly expressed the extent of our relationship with the EU; and voiced our disturbance... Especially, EU countries ignored the significance of Turkey because of numbers of reasons such as internal policies, populism, xenophobia, anti-Islamism..." (www.ntv.com.tr)

Numbers of media organization stir up racism and xenophobia; and lynching campaigns erupted on social media (www.change.org).⁶ Refuge Solidarity Association (*Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği*) remarked the hate and racist environment created within the society afterwards of citizenship rumors by their public discourse published on July 14th, 2016, and notified about the racist campaign on social media initiated under title of “I do not want any Syrian in my country”.⁷

From the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Selin Sayek Böke addressed that “It would cause such economic consequences that they could not be prevented. It would shatter social structure. Republic of Turkey is not property of any sect or group of people. Syrians must be given their own country instead of Turkish citizenship”. Böke also emphasized that such discourses result in xenophobia in society (www.hurriyet.com.tr). The Vice President of CHP, Yasemin Öney Cankurtaran, stated that “...the interesting point with Syrians is that all Turkey is against the citizenship that could be conferred to Syrians at the same time. Turkey came to an agreement on an issue for the first time. But this is not something good, it takes us to racism. The most important thing in here is avoiding racism discourse...”; and reflected opinion of the social-democrat wing of the party (www.hurriyet.com.tr).

The Co-President of the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, mentioned about the citizenship proposal for Syrians as well; and stated that "First of all, we need to recognize the people fleeing from Syria as refugees. Status of refuge means recognition of employment, residence, education and health rights. Thereafter, any Syrian who fulfill requirements and who request citizenship must be awarded this right. Syrian, Iraqis, Afghani, Pakistani, Somalian, whoever came to our country. Our country is also their country." (www.hurriyet.com.tr). These public equalitarian and humanist statements which represent opinions acknowledging fundamental rights put common-identity emphasis of the HDP and refused ethnic identity.⁸

6 “In my country, some campaigns like “I do not want any Syrians in my country” have been started; number of groups has supported these sorts of campaigns. (<https://www.change.org/p/%C3%BCIkemde-suriyeli-istemiyorum>)

7 “After, Syrians took refuge in Turkey, they have been mentioned in social media platforms frequently. The dispute between ruling and opposition parties on Syrians is continued on internet environment more roughly. Especially, university entrance right awarded to Syrians without the requirement of entering in general exam became top agenda on the social media and individuals used hate speeches on the internet comfortably. For example, on the *Ekşi Sözlük* platform, a campaign called “We do not want Syrians in Turkey!” was launched; and hate speeches and relevant comments were left under this campaign title. For example, under the expression of ‘*We do not want Syrians*’, Syrians were reflected as unwanted creatures; a comment was made such as ‘*they do not have any competency...*’ which humiliate them; in a comment of ‘*they clashed with police and took the flag down...*’ they were considered as threat to integrity of the country. In another comment of ‘*Some details of escape of Syrians from prostitution place in Urfa City are more interesting*’, Syrians were tried to be depicted as immoral human portrait who try to distort family structure and serious hate speech campaign is maintained against Syrians.” (<http://www.multeci.org.tr/haberdetay.aspx?Id=146>)

8 Demirtaş, in a solidarity dinner organized by his political party in Inciraltı County of İzmir City, stated that “This is our common identity; citizenship of Republic of Turkey. We cannot come together on a single identity. The one, who does not recognize this reality and who do not believe in in this, could only be fascist. We all could not be Turk; we could not be Kurd”.

On the Justice and Development Party (AKP) wing, Party Spokesman, Nurettin Canikli, clarified the statement of the President and implied that Syrians who would contribute into economy will be given priority so that informal employment could be prevented. He used the expression of "There will not be such a case that Syrians will steal jobs of Turkish people" to break the perception in the public opinion somehow (www.yeniakit.com.tr). The BBC Turkey Correspondent, Rengin Arslan, revealed that conferring citizenship to Syrians is not desired because of especially economic drawbacks, social and cultural reasons according to the public opinion pool conducted among the AKP voters (www.bbc.com). In the same pool, one of the respondents who was in Germany before as worker and returned to Turkey remarked that he is of the opinion that Syrians deserve citizenship; and brought the competition dimension of the issue to the agenda by saying "if Germans are capable of doing this, we could!" (www.bbc.com).

As the academic world is divided upon citizenship issue, PhD. Ferhat Kentel from Sociology Department of İstanbul Şehir University said to Sami Akbıyık, Correspondent of Haberturk Newspaper that "conferring Syrian engineer, doctor and lawyers Turkish citizenship means that kindness language transforms into an interest language. Like Europeans do, not only qualified Syrians must be accepted, an inclusive and kindness language must be preserved." PhD. Fatmagül Berktaş, a Faculty Member from the İstanbul University, Department of Political Sciences, remarked that citizenship to Syrians is an issue which requires careful consideration (www.haberturk.com). PhD. Haluk Levent, Faculty Member from the Istanbul Kemerburgaz University, explained that immigration law must immediately be enacted and said "one of the most substantial issues of Turkey is loss of multi-cultural structure of society afterwards of foundation of the Republic. Xenophobia is consequence of this loss. In spite of the common perception of traditional Turkish hospitality, it is just a word" (www.iha.com.tr).

In the period between President's statement regarding possible citizenship of Syrians and July 15th, 2016 military coup initiative, various groups declared their opinions on this issue. Some implications could be drawn out of these statements. According to the report with title of "Social Recognition and Harmonization of Syrian Refugees in Turkey" published by CHP on June 2016, it was seen that opinions of Turkish society deteriorates as Syrians' staying period in Turkey extends (www.chp.org.tr). In 2014, while percentage of "yes" votes for citizenship was 8%, this rate decreased to 1.7% by 2016. While 33.4% of AKP voters are against conferring Turkish citizenship to Syrian refugees, 66.6% of CHP voters think in the same way. Against the tolerant approach of Islamic sects regarding citizenship for Syrians, social democrats are more rigid and of the opinion of intensifying controls and of sending refugees back to Syria.

Another reason for deep conflict on naturalization of Syrians is that they are exploited as potential voters in the next election and they become instrument in political tricks in an unethical approach in terms of humanism. For instance, long before President's public statement on citizenship, *Oda TV* broadcasted two different news on this subject in 2013; and brought this possibility to the public agenda in two different times. As these news stimulated xenophobia, comments made for these news evidenced xenophobic approach.⁹

3. HATE SPEECH AS AN EXPRESSION OF XENOPHOBIA

Another instrument of racist ideology, prejudice and xenophobia is hate speech. Hate speeches propagated on ethnical and racist aspects and encountered in mainstream press and social media frequently have intensified recently and the groups from other ethnical heritage have been humiliated. "The concept of hate speech is described as all sorts of expressions which propagate, provoke or legitimize various forms hate based on various intolerance approaches including religious intolerance, racist hate, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, violence, nationalist and ethnic-centered, discriminative and hostile behaviors against minorities, immigrants and refugees. In this sense, hate speech is required to contain contentions targeting a certain individual or group of people" (Weber, 2011: s. 3).

Within the scope of the study conducted by *Hrant Dink Foundation* concerning Monitoring of Hate Speech in Media, the series of reports under title of "Hate Speech in Media and Discriminative Language" published quarterly and revealed elevating tone of hate speech in media. In this line, data relevant with xenophobia and racism has been published on the website of nefret.org. For instance, in the last quarterly report of 2014, hate speech in the national press led by newspapers on the Islamic track (see, Table 1), and it was seen that these news articles were made with an approach which does not view Syrian refugees as righteous subjects. Moreover, in the media news articles concerning accommodation, employment, education and health issues of Syrian refugees and local residents, an approach founded on humanitarian aspect of security is lacked; and such approach downsized economic and social rights of these people to a level which could be resolved by security and police forces (www.nefretsoylemi.org).

⁹ Another example of comments: "Other countries' fugitives could not be conferred Turkish Citizenship for political reasons. This must be considered as indictable offense. Especially, a massive population like 350,000 Syrians would shatter social balance in Turkey. They must be sent back to their country as soon as possible. Turkey's destruction could not be allowed like this. We do not recognize them as citizen. The war ignited by the US-Israel-EU but, refugees need to be sent to them..."

<http://www.odatv.com/n.php?n=350-bin-suriyeli-multeci-secimde-oy-mu-kullanacak-2504131200.html>

<http://odatv.com/suriyeli-siginmacilar-turk-vatandasligina-gecirilip-akpye-oy-kullandirilacak--0503131200.html>

Similarly, Tülay Yazıcı reports interesting results from her study conducted on hate speech used in *Ekşi Sözlük*, one of the social media instruments. Yet, as the researcher confirms that “the hate speech is widely used in the new media”, substantial entries using hostile and violent language were compiled and it was revealed that refugees are seen as war criminals instead of victims of civil war. According to Yazıcı, “...Prominent themes are those expressing that Syrian refugees are threats to Turkish State and people in terms of social, cultural and economic ways as well as internal and external security; and that critics against Turkish independence and government/ruling political party” (Yazıcı, 2016: P.19).

4. XENOPHOBIA IN TURKISH PRESS: A CASE STUDY ON SÖZCÜ AND YENİ AKİT NEWSPAPERS

In printed media, news articles and columns concerning Syrian refugees lack a point of view based on rights and they widely used stereotypes, discriminative discourses with prejudice. In this regard, the present study includes Sözcü Newspaper, an opponent public voice, and Yeni Akit Newspaper a pro-government media as sampling group. The study covers the period from December 1st, 2015 to July 15th, 2016. Medias in subject group were reached for keywords of “*Syrians, Syrian Refugees, Syrian Immigrants, and Xenophobia*”; and it was found that Yeni Akit and Sözcü Newspapers published 37 and 30 individual news, respectively. While totally 67 news articles were analyzed, it was seen that only 2 of 13 columns were published by Yeni Akit. Finally, it was seen that whereas Yeni Akit published 13 positive news, Sözcü published only 1 positive news.

In the light of these findings, newspaper articles and columns were evaluated on the basis of 3 basic phenomenon; Security-Oriented View, Economic-Oriented Phenomenon and Socially-Oriented Factors.

4.1. Security-Oriented View

In the news headlines researched, it was seen that Yeni Akit and Sözcü Newspapers published 2 and 7 security-oriented news, respectively. For example, the news published by Sözcü under title of “*Guests (!) are like a Crime Machine*” on May 15th, 2016, provides criminal statistics of incidents involved by Syrians through an alienating language and dehumanization. In another news published by Sözcü, a conflict that arose between Syrian group and local residents in Kayseri was reflected as a result of “stealing of a bicycle”, the same incident was reflected by Yeni Akit as an “allegation”. While labeling implications trivialize and discriminate one of the parties, expressions using “us” and “others” cause alienation as well.

4.2. Economically-Oriented View

Whereas 5 news reported by Yeni Akit were oriented on economic subject, the number of news published in Sözcü were 8. The news of Yeni Akit bearing title of “*Esad Regime Made 500 Million Dollars out of Refuge Crisis*” was published with picture of 3-year old Syrian Aylan Kurdi who drown while he was infiltrating the border between Greece and Turkey through air raft on September 2nd, 2015. Indeed this news is economic-oriented, a social vision was tried to be reflected to the public opinion so that humane senses of society could be touched. According to another news of Sözcü, with headlines of “*Employment Permission to 3 Million Syrians while There are 3 Million Unemployed in Turkey*”, “*If Refugees to Become Citizens, GDP will Fall Roughly*”, status of Turkish society was brought to agenda rather than nominating Syrians as “victims” as Yeni Akit does. The language of Yeni Akit used in economy-oriented news, similar to the tone used in the headline of “*Syrians will be Permitted to Work in Certain Cities*”, is the one addressing to their own audience and does not ignore concerns of society.

4.3. Socially-Oriented View

With respect to the third and final phenomenon of Socially-Oriented View, Sözcü and Yeni Akit published 4 and 28 news, respectively. At this point, Yeni Akit comes to prominence with its headlines addressing to religious and humane senses of society in relation to pro-government line. For instance, in news such as “*Heart-Wrenching Tragedy of Syrians Escaping from Syria*” and “*Tearful Testament of Syrian Girl*”, dramatic stories were drawn and refugees were approached from the concepts of “victim” and “common sense” rather than right-based points of view.

When news published by Sözcü is assessed, it could be seen that security and economic-related concerns stood out as social news remained secondary. For example, birth rate of Şanlıurfa City for 2015 was made an issue in news. In sum, social dimension of Syrians who introduced economic burden remained in the background.

RESULT

Syrians who took refuge behind Turkey and considered as “guest” since 2011 have incurred various violence until July 2016; and they felt threat because of discourses stimulating xenophobia. According to the results of the report on investigation into hate speech in media, it was seen that these discourses emerged primarily through religious sense of belonging; hate speech has been generated about 12 different groups with non-Islamic faith, non-Sunni or Atheist in totally 281 contents; 270 articles containing hate speech based on ethnic and national belonging targeted 22 different groups. Even at that time, hate speeches against Syrian refugees increased and encountered in 16 different articles (Table 3). The number of incidents have recently increased significantly and turned into a conflict material between ruling and opposition parties (www.nefretsoylemi.org).

The remarkable point at this point is that the xenophobia observed with the public newspapers representing Islamic groups was targeting Jews, Christians and Armenians instead of Syrians. Likewise 2014, until the naturalization of Syrians comes to the public agenda and tensions between Syrians and local people emerge, the news concerning Syrians remained quite limited and superficial in the media (see, Graphic 1). According to the 55 news articles and 13 columns in *Sözcü* and *Yeni Akit* Newspapers, pro-government *Yeni Akit* addresses humane senses and concentrated on socially-oriented news and put economic- and security-oriented issues in secondary place. While *Yeni Akit* centered on “Victim” Syrians concept, it makes call for “common sense” and spend effort to legitimize government policies. On the other hand *Sözcü* Newspaper, as voice of opposition, criticizes the government in every occasion. Furthermore, it does not reflect fundamental rights of Syrians in their attitude. As *Sözcü* concentrated on economy-based news, it reflected prejudiced attitude and behaviors on “others” Syrians though criticizing of government and reflected them as scape goat.

In general, the discourse which finds audience in the mainstream media and social media is “us” and “others”. Tolerance and commonsense towards Syrians, “our guests”, left their place to intolerance upon the occurrence of public perception that they become permanent, which was emerged as a result of naturalization discourses. In society, xenophobic and racist discourses have raised; hate speech started to be embraced in social media extensively. If alienation discourses continue to persist, hate crimes could not be avoided across the society. Therefore, media organizations and relevant parties are required to be advised to use a language respecting fundamental human rights and minorities. In this context, advanced methods are to be developed to fight against discriminative and racist discourses so as to progress in human rights and individual freedoms; social awareness must be raised regarding living peacefully in a multi-cultural environment with differences. In this path, government undertakes primary responsibility in terms of developing policy for international immigrants.

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