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Migrant integration in Turkey: Travels of a concept across borders and domains of knowledge production

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Abstract

In Turkey, the concept of migrant integration has risen to prominence in both academic and policy fields following the arrival of Syrian refugees. In this article, we first trace the resurgence of migrant integration studies in Western Europe in the past two decades following the decline of the discourse on multiculturalism. We argue that the policy concept of migrant integration has travelled to Turkey as part of the European Union's (EU) externalization of migration management; however, the term has been reshaped in Turkey through a process of vernacularization as displayed in official documents, programs, and projects funded by the EU and other supranational actors, and policy studies. Although the vernacularized form of integration, named 'harmonization', has gained specific connotations in the Turkish context, this article demonstrates that it still carries assimilationist features, since it cannot go beyond the limits of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis, and cannot escape from the binary opposition of native citizens and migrants. The article elucidates how knowledge production by governmental institutions, supranational and international organizations, researchers, and the civil society helps legitimate a certain understanding of integration of migrants into the host society that assumes each group to be homogeneous in terms of socio-economic characteristics and culture, and which emphasizes Islam as a common denominator between the two.

Keywords: migration; integration; harmonization; social cohesion; Turkey; EU.

1. Introduction

In 2010, then German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that 'the country's attempts to create a multicultural society have "utterly failed" … the idea of people from different cultural backgrounds living happily "side by side" did not work' (The Guardian 17 October 2010). The proclamation of the death of multiculturalism marked the revitalization of the debate on integration in Europe. Also in 2010, then Turkish Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a meeting with Merkel in Berlin, said Turkish immigrants in Germany should integrate but not assimilate into German society, claiming that assimilation was a crime against humanity (Hürriyet 2010). During the 2010s, migrant integration also found its way into Turkish policy documents and policy studies but transformed as 'harmonization'. What were the trajectories of these terms—assimilation,

integration, and multiculturalism—as they travelled from North America to Western Europe and finally to Turkey? Through which channels has migrant integration as a set of policies, practices, and research activity has arrived in Turkey, currently home to 3.4 million refugees, making it host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world?

In trying to answer these questions, we argue in this article that migrant integration as a policy concept has been exported to Turkey in the process of the Europeanization of migration management in, and the European Union's (EU) concomitant externalization of migration control to the country. In our critical discussion of the concept below, by integration we refer to its commonly used definition as the process of migrants' becoming an accepted part of society that has legal/political (citizenship and political participation), socio-economic (labour market, education, housing, healthcare) and cultural (mutual perceptions between migrants and host society) dimensions (Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). Policymakers', implementors' and researchers' involvement with EU funding institutions and research networks have mediated the arrival of integration as policy concept and research output into Turkey. In that process, the concept has also been 'translated' by state institutions in policymaking and implementation in a way that emphasizes cohesiveness of both migrants and host society based on Islam. This translation is a form of vernacularization, defined as the cultural, social, and political contexts within which concepts are locally adopted.

By exploring a social category salient both in migration studies and political debates in its transposition from a Euro-American register into the Turkish context, our article contributes to the Special Issue's aim to illuminate and counter integrationist, migranticizing, and nation-centred paradigms. We illustrate how knowledge production based on a vernacularized notion of 'migrant integration' produces and legitimizes policies that envisage both the natives and migrants as cohesive population groups, much in the same way as van Reekum and Schinkel (2024) problematize the cohesiveness of notions of native and migrant subjects. While Dodevska (2024) shows how the manipulation with 'policy-relevant knowledge' via EU-funded research, exchange networks, and dissemination platforms normalized the idea of migrant integration, this article shows how the same mechanisms introduced the concept in a very different context. Together with Nimer and Osseiran (2024), we challenge nation-state centred and migranticizing theoretical perspectives from the vantage point of a case outside of the EU as part of a wider critique of migration-related North-South hierarchies in knowledge production.

2. A conceptual and methodological note

We investigate several sites of policymaking, knowledge production, and policy implementation to elucidate the trajectory of integration into Turkey. To describe the transmission and reshaping of the policy concept of integration in Turkey, we employ the terms of policy diffusion, translation, and vernacularization, notions used to examine the way globally circulating ideas, concepts and policies have been adopted in local settings. The transfer of policies at international levels take place through global networks of professionals, scholars, policymakers, and administrators (Cochrane and Ward 2012). This may happen through either direct borrowing or be mediated by researchers and policymakers (McCann and Ward 2012; Rickinson and McKenzie 2021). During mediation, 'global value packages', such as a set of policies, may be translated differently by different actors. Levitt and Merry (2009) call this socially and culturally mediated appropriation and local adoption process vernacularization.

Mediators at various levels have played roles during the travels of migrant integration in Turkey. Supranational institutions such as the EU, international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) but also Europe-based research institutions and networks; national institutions; migration researchers and civil

society organizations (CSOs) are among them. While the diffusion of policy and knowledge production on 'technical' aspects of integration has been more linear, we aim to show that regarding its cultural aspects (such as notions of cohesive host and migrant communities, mutual social acceptance), there has been a process of vernacularization.

To demonstrate this, we first focus on the arrival of the migrant integration concept through Europeanization of migration policy in Turkey. We look at the wording of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) as the first site where vernacularization took place. Then, we explore the impact of EU's externalization of migration policy, in particular, the EU-Turkey Statement on migration as a process that triggered integration-related policy making. For this, we scrutinize the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT). Next, we examine the involvement of researchers in integration-related networks and projects. We analyse this overall process at four different levels: (1) the role of EU funding programmes and international organizations; (2) EU research networks and data-gathering platforms; (3) governmental policymaking and implementation; and (4) CSOs.

Our investigation of these different sites of policy transfer, formulation, research, and implementation will take place through a selective assessment of policy documents, reports, and secondary sources, since our goal is more to offer some hypotheses for further study than to reach conclusions.

3. From multiculturalism to migrant integration: a trajectory of concepts in Europe

Different versions of the concept of integration have been in use for nearly a century. The notion of assimilation, first introduced in the USA, predicted that migrants would be gradually integrated into and take on the characteristics of the host society. Yet, later studies on assimilation showed that the American 'melting pot' was not open to all migrant groups, and that ethnicity and social class mattered (Heisler 2000). Assimilation, as a unidirectional understanding of social change for migrants, was also criticized because *only* migrants were expected to change, and since it assumed a mainstream society into which assimilation would take place. A unidirectional expectation of integration also prevailed in Western Europe after the start of massive labour migration in the post-war period, but multiculturalism later appeared as a rival discourse.

Multiculturalism emerged from the debates over the tension between universalism and pluralism, two important pillars of liberal democracy (May 2002: 126). The 'politics of recognition' as defined by Taylor (1994) defends a reconciliation of the universal value of human dignity and the recognition of identities to resolve this tension. Using Taylor's perspective as a basis, multiculturalism was adopted by Canada, Australia, and Western European countries during the 1980s as a response to the cultural and ethnic difficulties experienced by minorities and immigrant groups. A common objective of multicultural policies was to achieve a socially cohesive multicultural society which would be fortified by cultural diversity.

Then, what caused the demise of multiculturalism? The turning point came with the September 11 attacks in 2001; terrorist attacks in several Western European cities and assassinations of right-wing personalities in the Netherlands exacerbated the long-standing criticism against multiculturalism (Koijman 2009: 181). Some scholars opined that multiculturalism had never existed. For Ahmed Djouder, all the scene around the funeral of multiculturalism was a well-staged artistic play: '*l'art d'enterrer ce qui n'a jamais existé*' (the art of burying that which never existed) (Djouder 2011). Schinkel (2018) asserts that multiculturalism should be considered just a rhetorical devise to disguise old school assimilationist policies in new clothes.

After declaring the failure of multiculturalism, Merkel said that from now on 'the onus [is] on immigrants to do more to integrate into German society' (The Guardian 2010). This proclamation of the death of multiculturalism revived scholarship and policymaking on integration, which had already been in the works at the EU level, as we discuss below.

3.1 Europeanization of integration policy in the EU

Since the 2000s, migrant integration policies in EU countries were gradually Europeanized, understood as the diffusion and institutionalization of procedures, policy paradigms, and shared norms defined at the EU level and then incorporated in Member States' policies (Radaelli 2003). In migrant integration, Europeanization entailed a knowledge infrastructure that included directives, policy frameworks, institutions, and research funding (Geddes and Scholten 2015; Klarenbeek 2021), which involved actors at national and supranational levels within networks of policymakers and researchers (Block and Bonjour 2013).

In 2003, the European Commission defined migrant integration as a dynamic 'two-way process based on reciprocity of rights and obligations of third-country nationals and host societies and foreseeing the immigrant's full participation' (European Commission 2003). In 2004, the Common Basic Principles of Immigrant Integration Policy were adopted which included not only structural aspects of migrants' inclusion in host societies (such as education, the labour market and access to public services), but also normative aspects such as linguistic, historic and civic knowledge, and respect for EU values (Council of the European Union 2004). Such Europeanization of integration policy was also expected to strengthen an EU cultural identity as opposed to third-country nationals who were supposed to integrate (Barbulescu 2015).

The EU started to monitor the outcome of integration policies through 'core indicators' (based on official statistics and quantitative data) on employment, education, social inclusion (e.g. median income, poverty risk) and active citizenship (citizenship, permanent residence, political participation; European Ministerial Conference on Integration 2010). Since the 2010s, policy studies and scholarship on migrant integration have proliferated, often financed by public bodies and research funding through EU institutions (Geddes and Scholten 2015). Such scholarship, it may be argued, helps legitimate EU policymaking on integration through knowledge production (Dodevska 2024). Increasing Europeanization of migrant integration policy, Barbulescu (2015) argues, reflects the EU's 'technical approach' to highly politicized issues, downplaying culture and emphasizing the economic impact of migration. In tandem with the increase in policy studies and integration monitors utilizing the core indicators, a body of scholarship that criticizes the notion of migrant integration has also been growing, which we review below.

3.2 Criticizing integration

The Common Basic Principles on Integration Policy say that 'integration implies respect for the basic values of the European Union' (Council of the European Union 2004). This definition, which aims to secure the access of migrants to fundamental rights and services, but also to guarantee the protection of basic values of democracy, has also been the target of criticism. Schinkel says integration is a floating signifier, whereas for Rytter it is an open signifier that can mean different things in different contexts without any theoretical complexity (Schinkel 2018; Rytter 2019). This floating slogan-like feature of integration makes it easily adoptable in anywhere from policy documents to popular discourses and everyday descriptions (Schinkel 2018).

Under the two-way approach, enabling migrants to access health, education, and employment, namely the structural or technical aspects of integration, appear as the EU's responsibility, but the cultural burden still lies on the shoulders of migrants. For instance, the core indicator of active citizenship is quite fitting for the neoliberal ideology of 'active

citizens' or 'responsible citizens' who should take care of themselves without relying on the sources of the society or the state. Since immigrant individuals are inherently embedded in their ethnic identities, their individual failures in integrating into the larger society can be attributed to their cultural differences (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010).

Critics also address pitfalls in the concept of integration. Integration, they say, is built upon an a priori notion of coherent and unified society. The research on integration generally conceives the host society as culturally homogenous, bounded, and self-contained (Spencer 2022: 225). Society is assumed to be a homogeneous whole whereas migrants are assumed to be individuals outside of society, hence making a distinction between those who are the object of integration (migrants, ethnic minorities, etc.) and those for whom integration is not a requirement (mainstream native society) (Schinkel 2018: 5). Two categories of averages are created, each defined *only* through its difference from the other (Favell 2019). Thus, 'society' is treated as a whole without problems, while migrants and ethnic groups are seen as 'problematic' population groups (Korteweg 2017).

Production of policy knowledge on integration seems to be about systematic observation of the ups and downs in the fulfilment of criteria pertaining to basic rights and services. This apparent absence of normativity in integration research, for critics such as Schinkel (2018) and Rytter (2019), is at the very core of knowledge production. The concept of integration presupposes the receiving society as homogeneous within its national borders. This methodological nationalism which a priori takes the nation-state as the unit of study produces knowledge to control borders, since it objectifies the migrant as the other to be filtered at the borders (Schinkel 2017, 2018; Takle 2017).

Following from this, integration research in Europe, it is contended, regards Western European societies as the epitome of democratic values and institutions; so, if a criterion of integration is not satisfied, this is viewed as the responsibility of the migrants who are not democratic, tolerant and civilized enough (Spencer 2022). Then, the crux of knowledge production pertaining to integration in Western European societies appears as mainly cultural. Despite the claims about the technicality of integration, it is fundamentally a cultural discussion (Schinkel 2018; Spencer 2022).

Defining integration as technical renders it applicable and transportable in different contexts. Being a floating signifier makes it have an easy applicability from academia to policy making. However, during the transplantation of integration policies or knowledge production on integration to other national contexts, translation or vernacularization of the concept also take place, as we demonstrate in this article.

4. Europeanization of migration policy in Turkey and the introduction of integration into Turkish policy vernacular

Following the onset of EU accession negotiations in 2004, Turkey took legal and administrative measures to adopt the EU *acquis*, leading to 'selective Europeanization' of policies (Alpan 2021). Migration management also came under the ambit of Europeanization; yet, due to growing uncertainties in the accession negotiations, legislation and policymaking on asylum processes, border controls and the visa regime took many years (İçduygu and Üstübici 2014; Kaya 2021).

Europeanization of migration policy is simultaneously a process of EU's externalization of migration control to Turkey, similar to other countries in its Mediterranean borderland. Hence, the EU demanded Turkey to more effectively police irregular migration and shifted certain responsibilities for migration control to the country (Üstübici and İçduygu 2019: 185). The signing of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement in 2013 was important in this regard.

Also in 2013, and after much delay, Turkey enacted the LFIP, a comprehensive law that draws the contours of Turkey's protection system, migrants' rights, and the principles of

migration management. The first time a 'translated' or 'vernacularized' version of migrant integration appeared in official documents was Article 96 of the LFIP on 'harmonization' (*uyum*).[1] A clear definition of harmonization is not provided in the law, yet Article 96 talks about

> 'facilitation of mutual harmonization of the society and of foreigners, international status applicants and international status holders (…) and equipping them with knowledge and skills that will allow their self-reliance in all spheres of their social lives without any dependency on third persons' (LFIP 2013).

'Mutual harmonization' is an allusion to the two-way approach and mutual accommodation in EU's definition of integration. Article 96 charges the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) with planning harmonization activities in consultation with local, national, and international institutions. It also says that foreigners *may* participate in courses on the language, and legal and political system of Turkey and their rights and responsibilities in the country. PMM is also tasked with organizing courses to enable foreigners to have better access to public services and for social and cultural communication.

The PMM notes that '[h]armonization is a voluntariness-based policy which targets both the foreigners' and host society's socio-cultural and economic development, *which is not assimilationist*, and whose goal is both for the host society to harmonize itself with migrants, and for the foreigners to develop their skills in all aspects of life including economic, social and cultural spheres' (PMM n.d.). The claim that harmonization is *not* assimilation is associated with the negative connotation that assimilation has regarding Turkish immigrants' experience in Europe where, it is presumed integration was mandatory (Şahin Mencütek et al. 2023). It is for this reason that harmonization is said to be voluntary, and that Article 96 does not make courses on Turkish language and culture mandatory for migrants. However, it is also clear that Article 96 does not talk about the rights of migrants and refugees, and it does not reckon full social inclusion in society. Nowhere in Article 96 is there any mention of migrant or refugee settlement, an absence which stems from Turkey's geographical limitation on the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Turkey does settle refugees originating outside Europe on its territory according to this limitation. While asylum seekers may apply for and get 'international protection' status in the country under LFIP, status refugees then need to wait for resettlement in another country.

The LFIP's 96th article was thus the first instance where migrant integration was formulated in an official document. This was however a vernacularized version of the concept borrowed from EU policy documents as harmonization (cf Özçürümez, Hoxha, and İçduygu 2021).

5. The Turkey-EU Statement of 2016 and its (un)intended consequences

Following the crossing of more than one million refugees and irregular migrants into EU territory through Turkey in 2015 and rising anti-immigrant backlash in Member States, Turkey and the EU reached an agreement in March 2016, which is considered an important milestone in the externalization of EU's migration policies (Üstübici and İçduygu 2019), one of whose main impacts has been to contain migrants and refugees in Turkey (Yıldız 2021). Under the terms of the EU-Turkey Statement, the Union agreed to provide funding for migration-related capacity building and assistance to refugees in return for Turkey's promise to keep Syrian and other refugees in its territory and to control its borders more strictly to prevent irregular migrants from crossing into the EU.

Although the delegation of the responsibility for border controls to Turkey is the immediate goal of externalization, more relevant for the purposes of this article, is that externalization also opens new arenas of EU intervention, such as the transfer of responsibility for the well-being of migrants and refugees to transit countries (Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019). Not only border controls, but migration management itself is viewed as part of externalization and may involve various actors for ensuring the immobility of migrants in transit countries. Following from this, Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz (2019: 3) describe the externalization of migration management as 'a set of policies and practices generative of specific social mechanisms. The term (social) mechanism refers to recurrent processes or pathways, linking specified initial conditions (not necessarily causes in the strict sense) and specific outcomes'. Studies on externalization in Turkey underscore the Turkish state's agency in its dealings with the EU (e.g. Gökalp Aras and Şahin Mencütek 2018). Üstübici and İçduygu (2019) show the government's use of externalization rhetoric to create differentiated legal status among migrants and asylum seekers. Karadağ (2019) demonstrates that Turkey strategizes and exerts its agency in the implementation of border controls in the Aegean.

We contend that one of the consequences of EU's further externalization of migration management to Turkey through the 2016 Statement has been the devising of migrant integration policies. This is not to say that the Turkey-EU Statement included stipulates on integration. However, in the same vein that Stock et al. talk about 'social mechanisms' generated by externalization, the framework within which Turkey was tasked with the management of migration, and the initiation of FRIT for the disbursement of the promised six billion Euros under the Statement have been productive of policies, documents, discourses, and studies on integration. Nevertheless, this was not a linear or even process. On one hand, a 'technical' approach to migrant integration is echoed in policies and policy-related knowledge production that have been fuelled by EU-level involvement in policymaking and research networks. On the other hand, the policy concept of migrant integration has been translated by the state in its official discourse, in certain policies as well as in policy studies on 'harmonization', in a way that presumes or promotes the idea of cohesive and homogeneous host and migrant communities.

Although the LFIP mentions harmonization, the term was not used much until a few years later. What were the factors behind the sudden interest in harmonization or integration beginning in 2016? One reason was related to Syrian refugees' increasing numbers and mounting problems. Between 2011 and 2014, Turkish authorities called Syrians 'guests'— a notion that had no basis either in national or international law (Kirişci 2014; Toğral Koca 2016)—mainly due to the Turkish government's expectation that they would return soon. As the arrival of Syrian refugees intensified, Syrians were given temporary protection status in 2014, based on Article 91 of the LFIP. By 2016, the Syrian refugee situation had become protracted, and there was a realization that Syrians, then numbering 2.8 million, were not returning any time soon (Kirişci 2014).

Another factor behind the growing interest in harmonization—both in policymaking and knowledge production—was the impact of the Turkey-EU Statement. Formally introduced in 2015, FRIT immediately became operational after the Statement was signed, as the coordinating mechanism for the disbursement of the promised six billion Euros, and various EU institutions and international organizations became instrumental in its implementation.

FRIT's priority areas are humanitarian (cash assistance, access to education and health) and development assistance (building schools and health centres, vocational training, and skills development; European Commission 2023). Yet, the stated aim of FRIT, improving refugees' living conditions, also contributes to their containment in Turkey. In a study scrutinizing the impact of the EU-Turkey Statement and FRIT, all stakeholders agreed that the 'underlying purpose of the EU financial instruments, especially FRIT, is to prevent mobility' (Ovacık et al. 2022). For instance, the enrolment of refugee children in Turkish schools,

refugees' access to basic healthcare, and getting work permits reduce the mobility of Syrians within Turkey since access to public services are based on registration in a specific locality. Indirectly, they also reduce Syrians' cross-border mobility since entitlement to rights is tied to their presence in Turkey. Arguing that the major objective of FRIT is containment, the study suggests that the EU has adopted a 'subtle way' of achieving that by outsourcing migration control to Turkey. It is within this fold that integration policymaking and knowledge production was triggered in 2016.

6. Implementation of FRIT-funded integration policies

Integration, as defined at the beginning, has political/legal, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions (Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). While the legal/political dimension is problematic in Turkey since the LFIP precludes settlement, policies have been developed since 2016 regarding the socio-economic dimension. Following the Turkey-EU Statement, Syrian children were integrated into the Turkish education system. Also in 2016, a regulation on work permits for Syrians under temporary protection status was issued. Still, most Syrians, around one million, work informally. Syrians' and international protection applicants' access to primary healthcare services has also improved (European Commission 2023).

All these steps taken in or after 2016 were supported through projects and programmes under FRIT. For example, the project entitled 'Promoting Inclusive Education for Kids in the Turkish Educational System' (PIKTES), run by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), has entered its third stage. The project entitled 'Improving the Health Status of the Syrian Population under Temporary Protection and Related Services Provided by Turkish Authorities', now into its second stage, is also EU-funded and run by the Ministry of Health (MoH). Also under FRIT, there is a social assistance program targeting people under temporary or international protection, which disburses small amounts of monthly cash assistance to more than 1.5 million people through the Turkish Red Crescent. While the MoNE, MoH, and the Turkish Red Crescent are the primary Turkish institutions using FRIT funds, the rest of the funding goes through international organizations (e.g. UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, the World Bank, etc.), EU Member States' institutions, and international NGOs (Ovacık et al. 2022). International organizations thus mediate the diffusion of EU-led integration policymaking and knowledge production through FRIT projects, which we discuss further below.

What is the impact of these projects and policies on Syrians' and other migrants' living conditions? Some studies draw attention to problem areas in migrant integration (e.g. Şimşek 2018, 2021; Rottmann 2020). Şahin Mencütek et al. define Syrian refugees' experience as 'one of never-ending liminality', but nevertheless conclude that 'many refugees do achieve a fragile, tenuous and partial integration' (2023: 127, 146). Critical scholarship also points to the impact of rising political backlash against migrants and refugees in an environment of deepening socio-economic inequalities across Turkish society. Racism and discrimination worsen socio-economic outcomes for migrants, prevent their more equitable social participation and trigger the intensification of border control policies (Yükseker et al. 2023). Deportations and 'voluntary' repatriations have increased in the past two years (BBC Türkçe 2023). Ironically, the discourses on border control and harmonization go hand in hand, perhaps because they may be part of the same package of the externalization of migration management.

7. Travels of integration through EU research networks

The mid-2010s were a turning point for knowledge production on integration or harmonization in Turkey. In a reading list compiled in 2020 on 'migration and social

harmonization', only a small fraction of studies prior to 2016 contained keywords such as *uyum*, integration, social cohesion, or inclusion, and most of those were about Turkish immigrants in Europe (Akçin, Balta Özgen, and Koçak 2020). In a 2019 review of scholarly articles published in Turkish and English on Syrian refugees in Turkey, the most frequently used keyword was integration, the first instance being in 2015 (Akdemir 2019). To understand why knowledge production on integration intensified, international research networks through which the concept arrived in Turkey should be examined.

As migration research in Europe increased since the 2000s, the field also became internationalized (Pisarevskaya et al. 2020), a catalyst for which was EU's emphasis on evidence-based research. In 2004, a Network of Excellence named International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE) was established, funded by the European Commission until 2009. IMISCOE has had a big impact on the internationalization—albeit geographically uneven—of migration research in Europe (Levy, Pisarevskaya, and Scholten 2020). A university research centre (Migration Research Center at Koç University—MiReKoc) as well as individual scholars in Turkey have joined the network since 2010. Turkey-based scholars have been involved in research consortia or conferences under the auspices of Horizon 2020 or IMISCOE.[2] Research output on migration has accelerated since the 2000s, and studies on integration have been an important component of that.[3]

Turkey has also come under the fold of international data gathering related to migrant integration. It was included in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) in 2010, a policy monitoring index initiated in Europe in 2007 (Solano and Huddleston 2020). It is also one of the countries included in the joint OECD-EU immigrant integration indicators reports, launched in 2015 (OECD/European Commission 2023).

Another way in which policy-relevant research on integration has proliferated is through project funding by FRIT or EU institutions. For example, as part of projects on strengthening municipalities' reception of refugees, commissioned studies were published;[4] The German Heinrich Böll Foundation's Turkey Representation has commissioned a desk study (Şimşek and Çorabatır 2016) and a quantitative survey (Yükseker et al. 2023) on integration. The German Institution for International Cooperation (GIZ) co-organized an international conference on integration in Istanbul.[5] Some municipalities (such as İzmir or Ankara), in cooperation with UNHCR or the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), have implemented projects—some funded by European embassies in Ankara—that have 'social cohesion' among their various goals;[6] international organizations also bring together policy implementers and researchers in workshops related to their projects, thereby contributing to the diffusion of integration policy knowledge. Therefore, we may argue that EU-based research networks and FRIT projects have mediated the diffusion of integration policy knowledge and research through inclusion of scholars and research institutions under their fold.

8. Vernacularization through policymaking and implementation

Official policy documents reflect the adoption of aspects of the 'technical' side of integration on migrants' incorporation into education, the labour market, and social services; however, we contend the emphasis is on 'social harmonization'. The Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023) for the first time included a section on 'External Migration', whose main goal is defined as migration management. Among the numerous policies and measures to achieve that goal, some are related to integration, such as 'harmonization' of Syrian and other refugees 'to social life' and 'awareness raising to remove negative perceptions' towards them (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı 2019).

As called for under the Development Plan, a 'Harmonization Strategy Document and National Action Plan 2018–2023' was prepared (PMM 2018). Its title is reminiscent of the

European Commission's 'Action Plans on Integration' (European Commission 2016, 2020), not surprisingly since it was prepared through consultations with various public agencies, international organizations and CSOs. The strategy document defines six areas of strategic priorities: social harmonization, information, education, health, the labour market, and social support, social services, and assistance. The sections on priorities related to public and social services contain general statements, however, the priority area of social harmonization is worth examining. Social harmonization is defined as 'enabling the development of a sense of belonging through cultural, social and economic inclusion in the society; mutual recognition of difference, maintaining respect and enabling coexistence through intercultural interaction, consultation and social dialogue'. Describing the goal of social harmonization as 'the social acceptance of migrants and the culture of living together,' the document also talks about the importance of recognition of differences such as language, religion, and culture, 'in short, the social acceptance of diversity' (PMM 2018). The thrust of the first priority area, with its emphasis on sense of belonging and coexistence, seems to be on a cohesive society.

The goals set for social harmonization are 'managing perceptions and attitudes towards migrants' and 'developing coexistence and mutual dialogue at the local level'. Targets under these goals pertain to strengthening the 'social acceptance' of migrants. Activities under these targets mostly aim at public and media communication for reducing prejudice, but also include expanding the ban on discrimination and the principle of equal treatment to include migrants. We observe that many of the goals and activities described under social harmonization relate to the 'cultural' aspect of integration, both in terms of perceptions, and migrants' 'harmonization' into Turkish society. Regarding the goal of coexistence, for instance, one interesting target is 'strengthening the required infrastructure such that foreigners can effectively make use of religious services'. Most of the activities listed for achieving the target assume that migrants are Muslims, such as opening Quran schools for migrants, distribution of pamphlets on sermons, and organizing visits to sacred Islamic sites.

The preoccupation with Islam also appears in activities organized by the PMM on social harmonization, as well as in educational projects. The PMM organizes workshops on social harmonization in cooperation with the UNHCR, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and the MoNE. In these workshops held in various cities since 2019, the role of religion in the achievement of social harmonization is emphasized. The Head of the Directorate General of Harmonization and Communication of the PMM repeatedly said at the workshops that the West could not understand that it is impossible to manage migration solely with 'mind and reason', but that it can be done with the help of conscience as Turkey does (e.g. Söz 2019). By conscience, he means the significance of religion in shaping the policies of social harmonization. This emphasis on Islam as the most important cultural commonality between Turkish society and Syrians has repeatedly appeared in the discourses of government officials as the nexus of religious solidarity (Karakaya Polat 2018). Indeed, government officials often describe the Syrians as *muhacir* (referring to the first Muslims who emigrated to Medina from Mecca) and the Turkish society as *ensar* (those who welcomed them).

Religion intertwined with nationalism also draws the boundaries of—and thus defines—the Turkish society into which migrants are supposed to harmonize. The PMM, in a project funded by the British Embassy, prepared several videos as part of its communication strategy for promoting social acceptance of migrants. Babül (2023) argues that in these videos the government emphasizes guesthood and the *ensar-muhacir* rhetoric even under the discourse of social harmonization, and that this discourse also claims an ethno-religious and civilizational morality over Syrians. The intertwining of religion and nationalism can also be seen in PIKTES. The 'Manual for Teachers Who Have Foreign Students in Their Classes', prepared by the Ministry of National Education (Aktekin 2017), was distributed

to all schools to sanction an 'inclusive' education to embrace migrant students under the PIKTES project. The manual explains inclusive education in two contradictory terms: the first one is the universalist conception of human rights to have equal access to education and the respect for identities and languages, whereas the second one is the nativist-culturalist basis which was described as the ethical root of inclusion (Çayır 2022). According to the manual, Islam and Turkishness are the ethical roots which define the borders of an inclusive educational system.[7] Thus, based on the tenet of 'ethical roots' the manual's references to universal values and human rights appear as empty references. As Çayır (2022) notes, inclusive education according to this understanding defines the host society as a hegemonic socio-cultural realm which would then include foreign elements such as migrant children.

Using Islam as a common denominator for harmonization has also been taken up by some researchers. For instance, studies from a 'sociology of religion' perspective argue that Turkish culture is inherently inclusive and embracing for Syrian refugees because the backbone of this culture is Islam, which is the most important shared element with Syrians, whereas the Western approach to migrants is exclusionary and discriminatory (e.g. Şallı 2022). Islam calls Syrians into a harmonious integration into Turkish society, whereas all the problems related to migration in Turkey can be attributed to non-believers, political dissidents, and some media! (Şallı 2022). The role of religion in migrant harmonization also appears in a study on Meskhetian Turks from Ukraine who were resettled in a provincial town after Russia's invasion of Crimea. The authors argue that inculcation of Islamic values through religious education of these Muslim migrants is the only way for their social acceptance, since they drink alcohol, dress liberally, and benefit from social housing, all of which leads to reaction from the locals (Koyuncu and Şimşek 2020). In a way, the insistence on Islam as the cement of harmonization wants to kill two proverbial birds with one stone: it attributes homogeneously Muslim identities to both host and migrant communities, and in doing so, it seeks to appease both.

9. UNHCR's mandate: from integration as a durable solution to social cohesion

UNHCR is one of the UN organizations that receives funding under FRIT for projects on protection and improving refugees' access to services. While using these funds, it has also become involved in the discourse on harmonization. UNHCR's mandate stipulates three possible durable solutions to refugee situations, namely voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in third countries. However, UNHCR Turkey acknowledges that the Turkish legal framework does not refer to local integration. But it also points out that 'efforts of increasingly including refugees in services provided through the national system continue, in line with the principle of harmonization' (UNHCR Turkey 2019). Referring to harmonization in its English-language documents as social cohesion, UNHCR Turkey says it closely cooperates with the PMM as well as local authorities, academia, and civil society in its activities on social cohesion (UNHCR Turkey n.d.). Social harmonization workshops organized by the PMM in collaboration with the Religious Affairs Directorate and the UNHCR are part of these activities.

UNHCR also sponsors a series of policy studies on social cohesion. The flagship study is the Syrians Barometer conducted and published regularly by the same academic team since 2017 and subtitled 'A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey'. The study includes national samples for both Turkish citizens and Syrians under temporary protection, and is primarily focused on their perceptions towards each other, in conformity with the target of the Strategy Document for increasing social acceptance of migrants (PMM 2018). Syrians Barometer defines social cohesion as 'the way of life in which different communities, whether they came together voluntarily or involuntarily, could live in

peace and harmony on a common ground of belonging where pluralism is embraced in a framework of mutual acceptance and respect' (Erdoğan 2022). This definition, an allusion to Article 96 of the LFIP, seems to also subscribe to the notion of social harmonization in its emphasis on a 'common ground of belonging'.

While the Syrians Barometer provides valuable empirical evidence on mutual perceptions of the host and Syrian communities, UNHCR, by commissioning these studies, contributes to the promotion of a certain understanding of harmonization through a departure from its international mandate that includes local integration.

10. CSOs: EU-funded social harmonization activities

Some projects funded through EU Member States' foundations, embassies or development agencies are on integration-related issues, such as livelihoods trainings and social harmonization activities, which are often implemented by CSOs.

The PMM, in cooperation with MoNE, has developed Social Harmonization and Life Trainings (*Sosyal Uyum ve Yaşam Eğitimleri*), which migrants and refugees can attend on a voluntary basis. These trainings are on topics including rights and responsibilities, Turkey's language, history and culture, public services, the educational system, healthcare and legal aid. A national CSO, the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) has been implementing a programme of social cohesion trainings targeting tens of thousands of people in various provinces since 2020 with financing from the British Embassy (ASAM n.d.). In addition to ASAM, many local CSOs carry out harmonization activities as part of funded projects in which they seek to bring together Turkish nationals and Syrians in cultural activities and day trips with the goals of increasing mutual social acceptance.

Implementing harmonization policy has thus partly been outsourced to CSOs. Some degree of vernacularization of what social harmonization entails can also be observed in the activities of CSOs, depending on their own political stance. Because, while the Turkish state outsources some of its responsibilities towards refugees to CSOs (Mackreath and Gülfer Sağnıç 2017), it does so selectively. Danış and Nazlı (2019) point out that in the distribution of EU funding to CSOs, the government favours those that are politically or culturally closer to it. Lending support to our argument about the use of Islam in harmonization activities, their study on CSOs that work with Syrians in a district of Istanbul shows that these organizations use the Islamic notion of welcoming of guests (*ensar-muhacir*) while trying to promote acceptance of Syrians among the local population.

11. Conclusion

Migrant integration policies based on a two-way approach replaced multiculturalism in Europe in the 2010s. As migrant integration policy was Europeanized, it emphasized the structural or 'technical' aspects of integration, supposedly leaving aside the cultural dimension, despite its continued presumptions about homogeneous host societies and migrant communities. The emphasis on its technicality renders migrant integration to be a portable policy concept that can be transplanted in different contexts. In the past decade, during Europeanization of Turkey's migration policy and the EU's externalization of migration management, integration was exported to the country with the help of EU research networks, EU funding, and international organizations. However, while some of the policy-making and research display a linear process of transplantation, official policy documents and some sites of implementation and knowledge production point to a process of vernacularization.

A growing body of studies have produced knowledge gauging the degree of migrants' access to health, employment, and education in Turkey. Regarding the cultural aspect of

integration, the discourse of social harmonization and in particular the religious brotherhood rhetoric comes into aid, both in terms of knowledge production and policy implementation. However, beyond this façade of integration/harmonization talk, the reality on the ground is different. In the past two years, anti-migrant and racist discourses have intensified. Anti-migration political parties demand the repatriation of all refugees and irregular migrants (Sözcü 2023). The Turkish state has not expanded the ban on discrimination and the principle of equal treatment in legislation to include migrants. Meanwhile, government officials make frequent statements about tightening migration control. Tens of thousands of Syrians and irregular migrants have been deported, put in deportation centres or 'voluntarily repatriated' to their countries of origin (BBC Türkçe 2023).

As critics argue, integration takes the host society and migrants as two separate entities whereby the host society defined as homogenous is described as facing a challenge from migrants. The starting point of knowledge production and policy making on integration is such an a priori separation between a homogenous Turkish society and a homogenous migrant and refugee community. Yet, just like other societies, Turkey is deeply divided by socio-economic, ethnic, religious class-based differences. This begs the question, then, what purpose does the emphasis on Sunni Islam or the *ensar-muhacir* rhetoric serve in harmonization policies? One of the goals might be to discursively represent Turkish society as a pious unity as reflected in the mirror of migrants as a homogeneous entity. This would be in line with the AKP government's long-standing ideological quest to raise and train 'pious generations' as a panacea to all social ills (Evrensel 2019). Another goal might be to emphasize Islam as a common denominator between migrants and the host society in an attempt to appease both groups in an environment of deepening inequities.

The notion of social harmonization also harks back to the assimilationist and multiculturalist discourses in Western Europe of earlier periods in its blindness towards unequal relations of power and class between the migrants and the host society. In conclusion, many of the goals stated in official documents on harmonization remain as empty references. President Erdoğan's rejection of assimilation and his call on Turkish immigrants in Western Europe to integrate, while talking about *ensar* and *muhacir* for Syrians in Turkey falls into place in this sense. Integration could convey the idea that the Syrians are here to settle, however, the use of harmonization with high doses of Islam and nationalism ultimately denotes a momentary form of modus vivendi for the supposedly temporary stay of migrants and refugees.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

Notes

1. The LFIP and the PMM translate '*uyum*' into English as 'harmonization'. The UNHCR and various studies use 'social cohesion' when referring to *uyum*. We use both terms.
2. For example, a Turkish university was part of the Horizon 2020-funded RESPOND consortium, and published Country Reports on Turkey on border management, refugee protection, refugee reception policies and integration policies and practices (https://respondmigration.com/projx). MiReKoç has hosted international conferences and summer schools as part of IMISCOE, including one on 'borders and integration' (https://mirekoc.ku.edu.tr/tr/events/turkiyenin-goc-siyaseti-sinirlar-ve-uyum/).
3. According to IMISCOE's database, there is a palpable increase on all migration-related publications from or on Turkey since 2013. Likewise, migration incorporation/integration-related research output about Turkey starts to increase around 2010, reaching a peak in 2018-9 (see: https://www.migrationresearch.com/search?query=&page=1&sorting=relevance_desc&taxonomies%5B%5D=81&taxonomies%5B%5D=416).
4. A project by the German Institution for International Cooperation (GIZ) on municipalities and social cohesion (GIZ 2023) also involved a policy study (Yavçan and Memişoğlu 2023). The Resilience of Local Governance (RESLOG), funded by the Swedish Association of Local Administrations and Regions, commissioned a study on co-existence of refugees and host societies and social harmonization (Kaya 2020).
5. For the conference organized by GIZ, see https://www.ffvt.net/de/events/refugees-integration-harmonisation-solidarity-hospitality-or-what-philosophies-policies-and.

6. Some examples are: https://www.izmir.bel.tr/tr/Haberler/izmir-buyuksehir-belediyesi-ve-bm-nufus-fonu-ortak-projeler-icin-isbirligi-yapiyor/48967/156; https://www.izmir.bel.tr/tr/Haberler/buyuksehir-ile-bm-arasinda-isbir ligi-mutabakati/45114/156; https://www.ankara.bel.tr/haberler/buyuksehir-belediyesi-ve-unfpadan-kadin-cocuk-ve-gencler-icin-is-birligi-14160.
7. The 'Turkish-Islamic Synthesis' (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*), based upon a selective amalgam of Turkishness, nationalism and Islamic ideals, has been around since the 1970s and embraced by the AKP government. Integration policies can work in such a way as to produce and re-produce belonging and identity. In Turkey, these policies are used to reinforce the defining lines of the national identity prescribed by the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.

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