Başak Yavçan

Understanding Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey: Politics of the Local

The COVID-19 Pandemic harmed the livelihoods and mobility of vulnerable groups including displaced populations everywhere.[1] Already at risk before the pandemic, displaced people now face new barriers to work, education, food and social protection around the world.[2] Initial attempts to analyze responses to the needs of these migrants[3] focused on the national and, to a lesser extent, international levels (on the EU and UNCHR, for example[4]), reflecting the academic literature's predominant focus on national models of integration policy. Responding to this nation-state bias in studies of the politics of migration and integration, however, the recent literature suggests a local turn, pointing to diverging logics of migration at the local level. These approaches suggest that nationally and internationally determined factors such as migrants' status matter less in provision of their needs, and puts the municipalities, NGOs, grassroots mobilization, and migrant groups under the spotlight.[5]

The governance of migration at the local level can be both more exclusive[6] and more inclusive[7] than the national level due to a variety of factors. Examining local responses to the needs of displaced populations especially during the pandemic offers further avenues for exploring the utility of these new approaches in understanding this variation. This essay will address local responses to the pandemic's effects on displaced populations in Turkey, the country hosting the largest number of forcibly displaced persons in the world.[8] I differentiate and explain good practice examples from the others, taking cues from the bourgeoning literature adopting a local turn. I build upon my earlier work on two Istanbul municipalities with Fulya Memişoğlu and share the findings from numerous interviews I

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[1] UN OCHA Global Humanitarian Response Plan: COVID-19 United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April-December 2020 https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf

[2] UNHCR Livelihoods, food and futures: COVID-19 and the displaced story map 02/08/2021 https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/4b999f79628644df84ccb7c10a9edd9e

[3] The term "migrant" is more suited to refer to both forcibly or voluntarily displaced. However, as the focus of the essay will be mostly on Syrians in Turkey referred to by most of the international community as "refugees," the term "refugee" will be used even though Syrians in Turkey do not have refugee status according to international law.

[4] UNHCR Evaluation Brief, Evaluation Brief COVID-19 Response: Lessons from UNHCR's Evaluation Evidence April 2020. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5fbd1ee24.pdf
Sundberg Diez, Olivia; Neidhardt, Alberto; De Somer, Marie; Hahn; Helen., "*EPIM Policy Update*". European Policy Center. May 2020. https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EPIM-Policy-Update-May-2020~338768

[5] Strang, A., & Ager, A. (2010). Refugee integration: Emerging trends and remaining agendas. *Journal of refugee studies*, *23*(4), 589-607.

[6] Ambrosini, Maurizio. 2013. "'We are against a multi-ethnic society': policies of exclusion at the urban level in Italy." Ethnic and Racial Studies 36(1): 136–155.

[7] Caponio, Tiziana, and Maren Borkert. *The local dimension of migration policymaking* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010)

[8] UNHCR Turkey Fact Sheet September, 2020: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Turkey%20General%20Fact%20Sheet%20September%202020.pdf

conducted over the course of a year and a half, with representatives of municipalities hosting migrants and international institutions catering to the needs.[9] In brief, my findings suggest that what explains good practices in response to COVID-generated challenges is these municipalities' higher ability to increase their capacity and funds through pre-existing multilevel networks, established either through relations with the EU or in the course of humanitarian aid efforts as Syrians fleeing the civil war arrived.

The Turkish context constitutes an interesting case as it is neither fully a convention country nor fully outside of it as a country of first asylum. As a signatory of UN Convention on Refugees with a geographical limitation to migrants coming from Europe, Turkey provided temporary protection status to refugees arriving from Syria en masse that granted them basic rights and access to services. This provision falls behind the rights granted to refugees in many signatory countries, especially in relation to employment rights. Nevertheless, this provisionary status allowed Turkey to host 3.6 million Syrians, as indicated numerous times during my interviews with national policy-makers. The more precarious legal status of more than 200,000 Afghans, as well as Iranians and Iraqis, estimated to live in urban centers in Turkey presents many challenges to cities and their host communities regarding integration to the labor market, access to health care and education, as well as social cohesion. Given the high numbers, varied legal statuses, and urban concentrations of Turkey's displaced populations, local responses present an important case to our research on migration governance and politics of integration. At the same time, Turkey poses a "hard case" or good test[10] for local approaches due to the centralized character of its administrative structure. Put differently, if we find evidence of local turn in a country like Turkey, chances are, it should matter in most other contexts.

Turkish Refugee Response, Local Variation, and the COVID Pandemic

In line with Turkey's strong state tradition, state-appointed provincial governors and provincial offices of relevant state agencies are mainly responsible for migration governance. Still, a few years into the migration crisis, municipalities have also been at the forefront of providing public services and support for the socio-economic integration of migrants – as much as the vague and somewhat limited mandate regarding their jurisdiction and budget emanating from the Municipal Law[11] allows. The share municipalities get from the national budget is heavily allocated based on the number of

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[9] Memişoğlu, F., & Yavçan, B. (2020). Beyond ideology-a comparative analysis of how local governance can expand national integration policy: the case of Syrian refugees in Istanbul. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1-21.

[10] See King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 209.

[11] Article 13 of the Municipality Law establishes "Townsmanship Law," entitling all individuals residing in the area of jurisdiction to the services offered by the respective municipality. Article 14, on the other hand, conflicts with the previous one by designating the basis of entitlement to municipality services as citizenship, without clearly spelling out its content in terms of Turkish citizenship.

Turkish citizens living in their territories.[12] This poses major challenges for municipalities such as border province Kilis, where Syrian inhabitants outnumber Turkish citizens.

The policy challenges at the local level have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, which severely affected the livelihoods of Turkey's displaced populations in addition to host communities: approximately 80 percent reported loss of income, mainly due to losses of informal jobs as well as challenges in accessing services such as education and social welfare.[13] My recent interviews show that this impoverishment produced a regression to a basic needs approach to be addressed via humanitarian aid. Shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic, a 13 April 2020 presidential decree categorized COVID-19 testing and care as a national healthcare emergency and committed to providing these services free to everyone, even those not covered by social security.[14] In response to these needs, as I argue elsewhere with Başak Kale,[15] municipalities in different districts and regions provided information and service support, social aid (e.g. food, hygiene kits) as well as financial support. However, local government responses were inconsistent, varying across cities and regions. What explains this differentiation?

Municipal governments' concerns with rising public resentment toward immigrants (especially Syrians), party ideology, and mayoral leadership are certainly potential answers. Furthermore, the aforementioned budgetary limitations of municipalities are increasingly stressed with a rise in the number of people needing assistance in the form of social aid or vocational trainings as a result of the pandemic. This further reduces their material capabilities, a common excuse given by most municipalities with limited or no targeted policies for refugees as suggested in my interviews. Yet interviewees working at international and local institutions focusing on refugee response argue that this is mostly just an excuse for excluding refugees. They note national funds of municipalities are not the only income source if a local government is eager to implement an inclusive refugee integration policy.

Tracing Multilevel Networks of Municipalities in COVID Response

Some Turkish municipalities created near-sanctuary cities, which are welcoming of refugees beyond the national level, as an outgrowth of their previous cooperative projects. These projects had engaged with the international community to address vulnerable

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[12] The second and fifth articles of the Law No. 5779 regarding the transfer of the resources from the general budget to the local authorities, states that 80% of the budget of a municipality is allocated according to the population and the remaining 20% is allocated according to the level of development of the district.

[13] Akyıldız, Şenay. 2020. "COVID-19 İşgücü piyasasını nasıl etkiledi?" TEPAV, https://www.tepav.org.tr/tr/haberler/s/10155.

[14] Özkul, Derya. "COVID-19 Salgını Süreci ve Sonrası İçin Düzensiz Göçmen, Sığınmacı ve Mültecilere Yönelik Politika Önerileri" Istanpol Policy Report, September, 2020: https://www.istanpol.org/post/policy-recommendations-towards-immigrants-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-for-the-COVID-19-pandemic.

[15] Kale, Başak and Yavçan, Başak. 2021. "COVID-19 Pandemisinin Türkiye'deki Uluslararası Olarak Yerlerinden Edilmiş Topluluklara Etkisi: Çok Düzeyli Bir Yanıt" in Alemdar, Zeynep and Özdemir Sarıgil, Burcu (eds) *Almanak: 2020'de Kadınlar, Dünya Politikası ve Türkiye*: http://wfp14.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DPK-2020-Almanak-1.pdf

populations such as LGBTI+ communities and disabled members of society.[16] Some started establishing these networks with arrival of Syrian refugees and received support from national and international NGOs and international organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM (International Organization for Migration) in setting up information centers, migration departments, conducting needs assessments, vocational training centers, implementing cash for work projects and providing social aid. Here I argue that these mechanisms also helped them better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in protecting both the host communities and displaced populations. For instance, many districts and (larger) metropolitan municipalities (MM) seized this opportunity by reaping the fruits of multilevel network mechanisms they put in place earlier.

For example, Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir MMs set up solidarity funds to address the needs of all communities by delivering food packages and providing aid for rent and utilities. Seven municipalities – Adana, Ankara, Kilis, Sisli, Urfa-Haliliye, Izmir-Menemen, and GaziAntep-Sahinbey – also set up Soup Kitchens, serving about 11,500 bowls daily, supported by GIZ, WFP and IOM.[17] Adana MM's Meryem Women's Entrepreneurshıp and Production Cooperative focused on production and processing of agricultural goods as well as protective materials against COVID with the assistance of GIZ.[18] Bursa-Osmangazi municipality targeted the needs of refugee children with the support of UNICEF. Ankara MM also established a support center for refugee women and youth with the support of UNFPA, along with enrollment campaigns for children with UNHCR. In response to UN reports on increased domestic violence against women in Turkey during the pandemic, Istanbul MM launched a Women's Support Call Center with a 24/7 service in four languages including Arabic. Having completed a comprehensive needs assessment of women with the support of UNHCR, Izmir-Konak Municipality quickly put together a migration master plan, included its Refugee Council in the decision-making processes, and initiated a women's cooperative.[19] Izmir-Buca Municipality distributed food packages and hygiene kits with the support of UNHCR and initiated a language and vocational training program for disabled refugees with the support of Australian Embassy Direct Aid Program.[20]

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[16] See Memişoglu and Yavçan 2020 (endnote ix) for more on how Sultanbeyli and Şişli municipalities managed this process.

[17] , Cansu; Avşar Koyuncu, İlderya; Kenanoğlu, Murat; Kadkoy, Omar Güven, Sibel "*Zorunlu Göçmenler için Sosyal Eşitlik: Pandemi Sürecinde Yerel Yönetimlerin ve STK'ların Rolü*," December, 2020: https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2021/degerlendirme_notu/zorunlu_gocmenler_icin_sosyal_esitlik_pa ndemi_surecinde_yerel_yonetimlerin_ve_stklarin_rolu.pdf.

[18] "Büyükşehir ve ILO, dezavantajlı kadınlar için iş birliği yapıyor," *Adana Metropolitan Municipality*, 11 February 2021 https://www.adana.bel.tr/haber/buyuksehir-ve-ilo--dezavantajli-kadinlar-icin-is-birligi-yapiyor.

[19] "Konak Belediyesi mülteci ve dar gelirli kadınları güçlendirecek," *Kazete: Özgür Kadının Sesi*, 8 July 2020 https://kazete.com.tr/haber/konak-belediyesi-multeci-ve-dar-gelirli-kadinlari-guclendirecek-64008.

[20] "Buca Belediyesi'nden engelli mültecilere pandemi desteği," *Buca Belediyesi,* 8 January 2021http://www.buca.bel.tr/Haberler/2054/buca-belediyesi--nden-engelli-multecilere-pandemi-destegi.html.

What unites these service-providing municipalities is that prior to the pandemic they had established multilevel networks to receive and distribute international funds as part of the 2016 EU-Turkey Migration Deal[21] that provided fertile ground for cooperation for them and easier access to the field for international donors. Several projects and institutions eased this process by providing knowhow, mutual learning, and links between municipalities and international donors. For instance, the Marmara Municipalities Union established a common platform for its members to formulate regional policies on migration, facilitating knowledge exchange among member municipalities regardless of political affiliation and encouraging their members to enhance capacities and establish international partnerships to mobilize more resources. The Swedish International Development Agency-funded project RESLOG created a network of 12 municipalities, helping them assess their needs systematically and turning them into full-fledged partnered projects. The Turkish Municipalities Union liaised between the municipalities and the FRIT, the EU agency responsible for the distribution of EU-Turkey Refugee Deal Funds.

Collaborating with municipalities also helps international organizations. Local polities' less-bureaucratic structures provide flexible ground for implementation of international donors' projects. One may argue that negative factors can intervene in these seemingly ad hoc relationships, such as bilateral tensions with donor countries at the national level. Nevertheless, interviews conducted with municipalities and municipality unions attest to the opposite, suggesting that, regardless of these tensions at the international level, projects and programs continue to function and are expected to be long-lived. For instance, as argued by the MBB, the tense relations between the EU and Turkey do not spill over into reluctance to cooperate with EU institutions or its member states for the municipalities in the Marmara Region. In fact, as argued by a representative of RESLOG and two local municipalities, when facing the additional pressures imposed by the pandemic, they are even more eager to collaborate with international NGOs even on small projects. One municipality representative challenged the perspective of partnership for funds and emphasized how these partnerships increase their capacity for a methodological approach and help them speak a common language with the international community. From the donor's perspective, when they have difficulty in getting permissions for their operations at the national level, municipalities facing integration pressures are eager to collaborate with them and bypass the national level. Representatives of IOM, GIZ, Care International elaborated further on this point, describing municipalities as perfect solution partners when NGOs have difficulty in securing partnerships at the national level, getting permits for conducting needs assessments in the field, or bringing aid.

The struggle to respond to the needs of refugees and host communities is a bigger challenge for municipalities with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Even in a country like Turkey with a very centralized character, this response varied greatly at the local level. Some

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[21] "The EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey Factsheet," *The European Commission*, March, 2021
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/frit_factsheet.pdf.

municipalities shined thanks to the expansion of the multilevel networks they had established earlier. That is not to say that political affiliation, social acceptance of voter bases, and leadership of mayors do not matter. They do, but so do the networks municipalities create, so much so that their economic constraints no longer hinder them from building and implementing an inclusive policy framework regarding refugees. The implications are significant not only for municipalities but also international organizations and NGOs with a humanitarian aid focus, as local governments can be natural allies with which they form long-lasting partnerships. It is therefore not surprising to hear a potential larger role foreseen for municipalities in the new EU-Turkey Refugee Deal.

Başak Yavçan, University of Liege, byavcan@gmail.com