

2022, Vol. 3(2), 287-303  
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<https://dergi.bilgi.edu.tr/index.php/reflektif>  
DOI: 10.47613/reflektif.2022.71  
Article type: Research Article

Received: 15.04.2022  
Accepted: 16.05.2022  
Published Online: 01.06.2022

Warisha Aslam\*, Sedef Turper-Alışık\*\*

## Misinformation on Refugees: Surveying the Consequences, Perpetuators and Workable Solutions *Mültecilere İlişkin Mezenformasyon: Sonuçları, Sürdürücüleri ve Çözüm Önerileri*

### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between misinformation and refugee integration and discusses the challenges and opportunities for fighting misinformation about immigrants in the Turkish context. To this end, we utilize in-depth interviews conducted between October 2021-January 2022 with Turkish citizens and migration experts working in the academia, non-governmental organizations and migration units of state and local government agencies. Our findings demonstrate that the prevalence of misinformation presenting immigrants as threats foster negative attitudes toward refugees and reinforce separationist and assimilationist acculturation orientations among the refugee community. Our expert interviews point to the lack of political will to fight misinformation about immigrants and suggest that resilience building, rather than misinformation correction can be a viable strategy that non-governmental organizations can adopt to combat misinformation.

### Öz

Bu çalışma mülteci Mezenformasyon ile mülteci entegrasyonu arasındaki ilişkiyi irdelemekte ve Mezenformasyon ile mücadelede karşılaşılan güçlükleri ve çözüm önerilerini tartışmaktadır. Bu amaçla, çalışmada Ekim 2021 ve Ocak 2022 tarihleri arasında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti vatandaşları ve akademi, sivil toplum kuruluşları ve yerel ve merkezi yönetimlere bağlı göç birimlerinde görev yapan göç uzmanlarıyla yürütülen derinlemesine mülakatlardan faydalanılmıştır. Çalışmamızın bulguları göçmenler hakkındaki yaygın mezenformasyonun ev sahibi topluluğun mültecilere karşı tutumlarını ve mültecilerin kültürlenme tercihlerini etkilediğini göstermektedir. Göç uzmanlarıyla yapılan görüşmeler mezenformasyonla mücadelede siyasal iradenin eksikliğine dikkat çekmekte ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarının bilgi düzensizliğiyle mücadelenin yanlış bilgiyi çürütmek yerine yanlış bilgiye karşı dayanıklılığı güçlendirme çalışmalarına odaklanmasının daha etkin bir strateji olacağına işaret etmektedir.

### Keywords

Misinformation, intergroup relations, threat perceptions, social integration

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Mezenformasyon, gruplararası ilişkiler, tehdit algısı, sosyal entegrasyon

\* Koç University, waslam@ku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1238-895X.

\*\* Koç University, sturper@ku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-5659-3181.

## Introduction

Natives' attitudes towards migrant communities can pose a significant barrier against the social integration of the migrant communities into the host society as those individuals displaying high levels of anti-immigrant sentiments are found to be more likely to support exclusionary immigration policies (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007) and to display lower levels of willingness to extend social rights to immigrant populations (Erisen & Kentmen-Cin, 2017). While earlier research highlights the centrality of threat perceptions in shaping natives' attitudes towards immigrants, recent studies also indicate that various sources of misinformation frame migrant communities as posing threats to the prerogatives of the host communities. Given the significant implications of anti-immigrant sentiments for migration policy preferences and intolerance towards immigrants, it is crucial to disentangle how misinformation affects the formation of attitudes towards immigrants and what the effective ways of fighting against misinformation would be to facilitate the social integration of migrant communities, especially in settings experiencing recent flows of migrants.

The current study aims to explore the relationship between misinformation about immigrants and immigration attitudes in metropolitan settings where natives are most likely to rely on sources other than their own experiences to form their perceptions of and attitudes towards immigrants as they have limited opportunities to personally interact with recently arriving migrant populations. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with Turkish citizens, academics, representatives of international, and Syrian-led humanitarian organizations and government officials between October 2021- January 2022, we first survey commonly held misinformation about Syrian refugees in Turkey and discuss to what extent misinformation about Syrian refugees affects natives' attitudes and tolerance towards immigrants in Istanbul and Ankara. We further explore how the prevalence of misinformation affects the social experiences and acculturation strategies of Syrian refugees in Turkey and discuss possible strategies for and challenges in fighting against misinformation about immigrants in the Turkish context.

The employment of qualitative methods in the current study allows for exploration of the causal links between the prevalence of misinformation and attitude formation processes of the native and host societies, as well as of the mechanisms that perpetuate such misinformation and hinder corrective efforts. Our findings demonstrate that the prevalence of misinformation considerably affects acculturation outcomes for refugees through its impact on natives' attitudes towards refugees and acculturation expectations by the host community. Despite having far-reaching implications for intergroup relations, misinformation about immigrants is expected to be perpetuated as experts point to a lack of political will to fight against misinformation. Resilience building, rather than misinformation correction, can be recommended as a viable strategy for non-governmental organizations to combat misinformation in the absence of political support for such efforts.

## **Attitudes towards Immigrants and Acculturation of Immigrants: The Role of Threat and Misinformation**

Academic research into attitudes towards immigrants often explains intergroup relations by adopting a threat framework and postulates natives' opposition to immigration and intolerance towards immigrants to be a response to competition over scarce resources between natives and immigrants (Esses et al., 1998). *Group Conflict Theory* (Blumer, 1958), embracing a rational choice perspective, postulates that natives are expected to develop anti-immigrant sentiments to the extent that they perceive immigrants as presenting a threat to their individual or collective well-being (Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Accordingly, the theory predicts natives to develop anti-immigrant sentiments, display lower levels of tolerance toward immigrants, and support exclusionary immigration policies when they perceive immigrants as presenting a threat to their individual or collective economic, social, and political well-being. In line with those expectations, earlier research documented that natives' tolerance for immigrants and support for inclusionary policies significantly diminish when natives fear adverse outcomes of immigration, such as economic hardship in the forms of increased job competition (Sides & Citrin, 2007), reduced social welfare benefits and increased tax rates (Helbling & Kriesi, 2014), increased crime rates (Mayda, 2006; McLaren & Johnson, 2007), and loss of security (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2008; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012), political power (Stephan et al., 2005; Yakushko, 2008) or social status (Oliver & Wong, 2003).

Recent studies further suggest that perceived threat from ethnic groups considerably influence natives' acculturation expectations and subsequent acculturation strategies adopted by migrants (Rodionov, 2021). While acculturation theories posit that migrants' acculturation strategies reflect their preferences over the extent to which they would like to preserve their original culture and to adopt the host community culture, those theories also note that the host community's acculturation expectations can severely constrain the acculturation choices available to the migrant communities (Berry, 1997; Bourhis et al., 1997). Research reveals that when natives perceive immigrants as threats, especially economic threats, they are likely to endorse 'assimilation' and 'separation' acculturation orientations in an attempt to exclude migrants from competition over scarce economic resources (Rodionov, 2021). Accordingly, when immigrants are perceived as posing threats, especially to the economic prerogatives of the host society, natives are expected to restrict the option of integration as an acculturation strategy for the migrant group (Vezzali & Giovannini, 2010), and instead, expect them to follow either separation strategy by maintaining their cultural identity while largely avoiding interactions with the host community, or to adopt an assimilation strategy by abandoning their cultural distinctiveness in their daily interactions with the natives.

Earlier research already documented that it is the perceptions of threat rather than the objective threat conditions that derive immigration attitudes (Sides & Citrin, 2007). Given the centrality of perceptions in shaping immigration attitudes, the notions of disinformation and misinformation come to the fore in discussions of immigration attitude formation, especially for those individuals living in metropolitan settings with limited opportunities to socially interact with migrant communities, and hence, rely on media portrayals of immigrants to form their opinions of and attitudes towards immigrants (van Dijk, 1993, p. 243).

While both disinformation and misinformation are information disorders, disinformation refers to information contents that are deliberately altered and disseminated to mislead, whereas misinformation is defined as false information that is circulated without the intent to mislead (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Misinformation can take the form of the dissemination of different types of false information ranging from “*outdated news initially thought to be true and disseminated in good faith, to technically true but misleading half-truths, to entirely fabricated disinformation spread intentionally to mislead or confuse the public*” (Lewandowsky et al., 2020, p. 5).

Even though misinformation is circulated without having the intent to mislead, the false information content that is circulated can have significant implications for the formation of the attitudes of those who have been exposed to misinformation. While the broader public opinion literature emphasizes the impact of information on political preferences in key policy areas such as healthcare (Bullock, 2011) and environment (Gilens, 2001), recent studies also document the impact of misinformation in shaping citizens’ evaluations of political candidates and attitudes on various policy issues including migration (Cobb et al., 2013; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan, 2010; Sides & Citrin, 2007).

As far as misinformation about migrants is concerned, it is found to be more prevalent in contexts where migration has become a politically salient topic (Flynn et al., 2017). DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) note that misinformation often arises in those contexts marked by ambiguity and potential threat, and it serves the function of helping people to regain a sense of control and defend themselves against the threats. Although there are only a few studies exploring the extent to which misinformation about immigrants affects natives’ attitudes towards immigrants, recent experimental studies document an aggrandizing impact of misinformation on threat perceptions relating to distant minority groups even when the participants were warned against the dubiousness of the information presented to them (Steinfeld & Lissitsa, 2021). Therefore, misinformation about immigrants, especially those relating to the social and political rights or economic privileges that they are entitled to are anticipated to breed threat perceptions of the natives as they are expected to signal an increased level of competition over scarce economic, social and political resources between the two communities. As such, misinformation relating to immigrants and immigration policies is expected to breed in anti-immigrant sentiments and lead to acculturation expectations of assimilation and

segregation among the host society, especially in those settings where migration policies mark the electoral campaigns and political debates.

## Migration and Misinformation in the Turkish Context

Turkey has historically been a country of origin for migrants, yet, it has growingly become a major destination and transit country for those fleeing conflict, poverty and disasters due to recent regional events (Şanlıer Yüksel & İçduygu, 2018). The recent migration history of Turkey has been marked by refugee intakes starting with the acceptance of refugees from Bulgaria in 1989, followed by the short-term hosting of Iraqi refugees in 1991, and most recently, the admittance of the refugees from Syria since March 2011 (Kirişçi & Karaca, 2015).

Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, Turkey adopted a generous open-door policy toward those Syrians fleeing conflict. While initially, the number of Syrian refugees entering Turkey was relatively small, the number of Syrian refugees seeking protection in Turkey rapidly increased due to the emergence of the radical group ISIS (İçduygu, 2015). As of March 2022, over 3.6 million Syrians sought temporary protection or asylum within Turkey's border (UNHCR, 2022). As Turkey retains the geographic limitation on the 1951 Geneva Convention that grants asylum rights only to those who have become refugees due to events occurring in Europe, Syrian nationals in Turkey are not granted refugee status, however, their access to basic services including education and healthcare are regulated through the temporary protection regime that was adopted in March 2014 (İçduygu, 2015). In addition to the access to health and education, in January 2016, 'The Regulation on Work Permit of Refugees under Temporary Protection' took effect, allowing Syrian refugees to apply for work permits six months after their registration under the status of temporary protection (Kirişçi & Uysal, 2019).

Historically, the immigration policies of Turkey aimed at solidifying the nation-building by mainly restricting formal immigration channels to people of 'Turkish descent and culture' from the establishment of the Turkish Republic onwards (İçduygu, 2015), and migration has not traditionally been a salient topic in Turkish politics. However, as Turkey has been facing unprecedented levels of irregular migration flows and temporary protection applications in the last few decades, immigration policies have growingly become a salient issue marking public debates in Turkey. While the durable solutions for refugees promoted by UNHCR (2016) entail the options of integration in the host society, resettlement to a third country and voluntary repatriation, the durable solutions that will apply to Syrians in Turkey are still far from being clear. As such, the protracted status of Syrian refugees under the temporary protection regime has increasingly become the center of public discussions and political campaigns.

Given the centrality of migration policy debates in the Turkish context, misinformation about migrants is also quite prevalent as it is expected to be the case. False claims about Syrian refugees that are frequently circulated in news media and social media often entail misinformation on the social rights that Syrians under temporary protection are entitled to or criminal

misconducts that are attributed to offenders of Syrian origin. A recent study based on the analysis of contents tagged as ‘Syrians’ by Teyit.org illustrates that misinformation pieces about Syrian refugees are often purposefully generated disinformation contents that are put into circulation through anonymous social media accounts and become highly circulated misinformation contents especially when the politicians and the traditional news media outlets with large numbers of followers disseminate those contents and help them gain publicity (Erdoğan et al., 2022). Erdoğan and his colleagues (2022) further reveal that the misinformation content on Syrian refugees often falls into the information disorder categories of ‘misleading content’ and ‘false connection’, and they often relate to the topics of economy, safety and violence next to social and political rights. Those widely disseminated contents falsely claiming that Syrian refugees receive citizenship at the Provincial Directorate of Population and Citizenship in İzmir (Korkmaz, 2019) or that they have sexually assaulted a Turkish woman in Bursa (Çavuşoğlu, 2017) constitute well-known examples of ‘misleading content’ that intentionally alter information with the purpose of misleading the readers. Coverages such as the visually aided misinformation contents claiming that Syrians have killed a horse in Bursa (Foça, 2017) or stepped on the Turkish flag during a protest in Turkey (Arabacı, 2019), on the other hand, constitute well-known examples of ‘false connection’ type of information disorders about Syrian refugees that associate visual images or narratives with Syrian refugees when in reality they are not.

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While there have been efforts to correct the misinformation about immigrants that are frequently circulated on various media platforms by several civil society and independent fact-checking organizations (e.g. Çavuş et al., 2019; Mülteci Derneği, n.d.), studies on Turkey’s information ecosystem also suggests Turkish population to be highly susceptible to misinformation as both the news media and social media remain plagued with all types of false information and coordinated manipulation campaigns in a political context marked by extreme polarization and toxic/uncivil political discourse (Kirdemir, 2020). Consequently, misinformation about immigrants, particularly Syrian refugees, can be traced in public perceptions of immigrants and immigration policies. To exemplify, a recent study illustrated that 86 percent of the Turkish public believes that Syrians in Turkey live on social aids regularly provided by the state, while a concurrent survey among Syrian refugees revealed that only 30 percent of them have benefited from aids provided on an irregular basis (M. Erdoğan, 2018).

## **Methodology**

Based on the discussed theoretical expectations and the contextual information, the current study seeks to explore the extent to which misinformation presenting refugees as threatening the privileges of the host society shapes natives’ attitudes towards refugees and affects the acculturation orientations of refugees, as well as the processes that perpetuate disinformation and hinder the efforts to correct misinformation. However, to the best of our knowledge, studies focusing on the mechanisms through which misinformation about immigrants is perpetuated

and the extent to which such misinformation affects natives' attitudes and refugees' acculturation orientations are highly scarce (Hopkins et al., 2019; Sides & Citrin, 2007). Therefore, we adopt a qualitative approach to examine the relationship between misinformation and refugee integration and utilize in-depth interviews as they are established to be highly useful in revealing causal mechanisms, providing insights into perceptions and attitudes, and establishing an evidence-based direction for a new research agenda (Greenstein & Mosley, 2020).

To explore the consequences of misinformation for intergroup relations and ways to address the challenges to combat misinformation we have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Turkish citizens, field experts working in NGOs and migration governance units in local and governmental organizations and scholars that specialized in migration studies. We have conducted a total of twenty-five interviews between October 2021- January 2022 either through in-person or virtual meetings.

We recruited expert participants through contacting representatives of various governmental and non-governmental organizations, migration research centers and scholars specializing in refugee integration and migration management. Consequently, our expert group consisted of scholars from various universities mostly located in Istanbul and Ankara, migration experts working at the migration units of metropolitan municipalities and other governmental agencies, as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations including, but not restricted to, IOM, UN Migration and Support to Life. The non-expert group consisted of participants with different ideological leanings recruited through referral chains. Participants in this group were aged between 27 and 43, and identified themselves as supporters of Justice and Development Party, National Movement Party, Republican People's Party, People's Democratic Party and the Left Party except for one participant expressing no political allegiance.

All interviews were conducted in English and each interview lasted approximately an hour. The questions posed to interviewees changed significantly between the expert and citizen groups as we inquired about the personal views and attitudes of the non-expert interviewees whereas we inquired about the professional observations and experiences of the field experts regarding the causes and consequences of misinformation epidemics on refugees and possible solutions to overcome the challenges that misinformation pose on intergroup relations. Interviews are recorded through written notes taken by the researchers, and to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of our participants, pseudonyms are utilized in the reporting of the research findings.

**Tables 1**

Occupation and Nationality of Participants

	Turkish	Syrian	Other	Total
<i>Expert Group</i>				
Academia	10			10
NGO	2	3	1	6
State Agency / Local Government	2		1	3
<i>Non-Expert Group</i>				
Other	6			6
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>

## Findings

In the discussion of study findings, we rely on our interviews with Turkish citizens to explore the role of misinformation in shaping natives' perceptions of and attitudes towards Syrian refugees, whereas we rely on interviews with field experts working in NGOs and migration governance units in local and governmental organizations serving Syrian refugees to assess the impact of misinformation on integration experiences and acculturation strategies of refugees. To survey the factors that contribute to the perpetuation of information disorders relating to refugees and to evaluate the possible strategies for combating misinformation, we utilize expert interviews conducted with scholars specializing in forced migration, representatives of several international and Syrian-led NGOs and experts working at various migration governance units.

### *Misinformation and Natives' Perceptions of Syrian Refugees*

Our interviews with Turkish citizens suggest that information disorders are echoed in the public perceptions of Syrian refugees. Those misinformation contents depicting Syrian refugees as posing economic, political, cultural and safety threats to Turkish society are often self-reported as factors contributing to interviewees' negative sentiments about refugees.

Starting with the link between misinformation and economic threat perceptions, our interviews reveal that the misinformation on financial support streams for Syrian refugees has a profound impact on citizens' perceptions regarding the refugees' impact on the national economy. Our study demonstrates that all but one of the Turkish citizens we interviewed capitalizes on the misinformation regarding the extent of the social services and the sources of financial aid provided to refugees when expressing their negative evaluations regarding Syrian



refugees' impact on the Turkish economy. To exemplify, Sultan, a former journalist, suggests that Turkish citizens pay for the luxury items provided to refugees such as baby food and natives wait in long queues to access healthcare services as hospitals are overburdened by the free health services provided to refugees. Refugees being a burden on the Turkish economy, hampering Turkish citizens' access to services and deteriorating the economic standing of natives by depressing wages and inflating the housing market are commonly raised points by the interviewees who advocate that refugees should not be allowed to stay in the country unless they are studying or working in Turkey. Berfin, a Kurdish language teacher, on the other hand, expresses an empathetic stance towards refugees and mentions the economic difficulties that the refugees face in Turkey. Knowing the financial sources utilized to support refugees are predominantly provided by the European Union, she observes that the resentment in Turkish society often stems from the misperceptions of Turkish citizens' tax money being spent on refugees.

Our interviews further demonstrate that the perceived political and cultural threats are quite intertwined as they jointly drive the fears of losing political privileges to a culturally dissimilar refugee group that is expected to outnumber Turkish citizens in the near future. Echoing the highly circulated misinformation contents on Syrian refugees, interviewees often express their perceptions of Syrian refugees as being a highly religious community failing to respect the rights of women and as a rather uncivilized group of people who speak loudly in public places and smoke shisha in inappropriate spaces. Given the perceived cultural disparities and the expressed concerns over relatively high birth rates among the Syrian refugees, several interviewees identifying with both the governing and the opposition parties express anxiety over becoming an ethnic minority and losing political power to refugees. However, it is also worth noting that, interviewees who self-identify with opposition parties, further demonstrate concerns about naturalization and resulting enfranchisement of refugees that in their opinion might lead to further 'Islamization' and 'Arabization' of the country.

Safety threat perceptions of natives also seem to be largely shaped by commonly disseminated misinformation contents falsely associating refugees with sexual and criminal offenses by utilizing visual images or narratives allegedly depicting Syrian refugees. While Sultan expresses her belief that there resides a vast number of unemployed Syrians in Istanbul who frequently get involved in criminal activities such as stealing money and sexually harassing people, İrem, a Turkish language tutor at a university, reports that, as a woman, she feels unsafe around Arab men. Hakan also claims that Syrian refugees pose a significant threat to the safety of women, as it is his experience that Syrians are 'inhuman' people who would consider women dressing in a certain way as deserving sexual harassment.

Given their conceptualizations of the refugees as posing threats to the economic, cultural, political and physical safety of the host society, all the interviewees, except for Berfin, also expressed their preference for not equipping refugees with social and political rights, and

advocated repatriation, rather than integration, as the durable solution they would support for refugees.

### ***Misinformation and Refugee Experiences***

While our study suggests that natives' negative perceptions of and attitudes towards Syrian refugees are closely linked to their belief in misinformation contents presenting Syrian refugees as economic, social, political and safety threats, our study further indicates that those commonly held misperceptions significantly affect refugees' social interactions with the host community and their acculturation strategies.

Our interviews with Syrian nationals who also serve in non-governmental organizations providing services to Syrian refugees in Turkey demonstrate that the perceptions created, based especially on misinformation about the source and the extent of the financial support provided to refugees, together with the false associations of Syrian refugees with criminal activities, significantly affect their social interaction experiences with the host community. Jawad, a Syrian refugee who holds a BA degree from a Turkish public university and currently volunteers at a Syrian-led NGO in Istanbul, shares that his professors blamed Syrians for lowering the educational standards of the university, living on Turkish taxpayers' money given to them as stipends and receiving housing aids from the government. Hence, he had a hard time socializing with his peers, because his classmates believed in the misinformation coming from authority figures and socially excluded him. Similarly, Muhtadi, a Syrian refugee with Palestinian roots and the founder of a community center serving Syrian refugees in İstanbul, explains that the community center was originally located in a landmark building in Beyoğlu, but they had to move out as the building administration was calling on the police to intervene on the suspicion that the refugees visiting the community center might be committing criminal activities.

Experiences of social stigmatization and exclusion such as these, in turn, affect refugees' preferred levels of contact with the host society. One of our expert interviewees working at the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration in Istanbul indicates that the spread of misinformation resulting in negative public attitudes towards refugees increases the psychological pressures on the refugee community and has detrimental consequences for the social integration of refugees. Reiterating this view, Nafisa, a Syrian national who formerly worked at an NGO aiding Syrian refugees in Turkey, observes that those refugees who are well-educated try to represent the Syrian community to the best of their ability, whereas the ones with less human capital try to avoid mingling with the Turkish community, in an effort to avert violent reactions of the natives. Our interviews with field experts working closely with refugees at migration units of various governmental agencies and Syrian nationals suggest avoidance and seclusion to be frequently employed coping mechanisms for the uncertainties that the daily encounters with the locals and public authorities entail. Muhtadi, for instance, explains the rea-

son behind his decision to move the community center to a new location as to avoid troubles that tenants with close connections to the police would cause, whereas one of the field experts from the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality Migration Unit suggests that refugees also often refrain from contacting municipality to avoid public authorities.

For those refugees who would like to mingle with the host community, on the other hand, assimilation rather than integration seems to be the acculturation strategy that refugees turn to after being discouraged by the difficulties they face in socially and economically integrating into the Turkish community. Based on their personal experiences and professional observations, our Syrian participants expressed the opinion that Turkish society would never welcome refugees unless their Syrian identity becomes indiscernible. While Nafisa suggests that Turkish society would not tolerate refugees as it would require them to meet the refugees in the middle way to reach a compromise, Jawad having obtained a Turkish citizenship explains that he introduces himself only as a Turkish citizen with his newly acquired Turkish name and avoids displaying cultural markers of his Syrian identity to fit in the social life in Turkey, because he was rejected by his peers at university and was turned down for several internship positions when he gave his Syrian identity away.

### ***Fight against Misinformation: Challenges and Workable Solutions***

Having traced the impact of misinformation on natives' attitudes and refugees' acculturation strategies, we utilize expert interviews to survey the factors that contribute to the perpetuation of information disorders relating to refugees and to evaluate the possible strategies for combating misinformation. Starting with the discussion of the reasons for the prevalence of information disorders, experts participating in our study point at various factors enabling and accelerating the dissemination of misinformation about Syrian refugees in Turkey. While several experts pointed out that the uncertainties surrounding the temporary protection regime leave ample room for misinformation, they further drew attention to the lack of quality contact between the host and refugee communities in metropolitan settings, the existence of strictly controlled traditional media and high levels of political polarization that marks the Turkish political landscape over the last couple of years as the factors that contribute to the creation of an information ecosystem vulnerable to disinformation campaigns regarding refugees. The view that the misinformation epidemic in Turkey is not something peculiar to the refugee issue, but prevalent in many other issue domains has been frequently raised in our interviews and it is suggested to be signaling the vulnerability of the Turkish information ecosystem to disinformation. The observed weaknesses of the Turkish information ecosystem together with experts' predictions of increased political polarization in the face of upcoming election, lead the majority of experts in our study to expect the misinformation epidemic on refugees to become more challenging in the upcoming years.

As far as the most commonly distributed misinformation contents and the perpetrators of such disinformation are concerned, a substantial majority of our experts highlight the centrality of the role that misinformation regarding the financial sources of support provided to refugees play in shaping intergroup relations, and point at political actors as the perpetrators of information disorders. Experts in our study working closely with the refugee and native communities observe that the misinformation presenting Syrian refugees as recipients of extensive social services and financial aids paid by Turkish citizens' tax money leads to resentment in Turkish society as they feel burdened by Syrians' needs. Our participants from academia, non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies alike, express there to be frequently disseminated misinformation regarding the financial support streams for Syrian refugees, because the information about the financial aid provided by the European Union is largely withheld from the public. Regarding the perpetrators of such disinformation, on the other hand, while our experts holding positions at governmental offices refrain from attributing responsibility to any actor, a great majority of our experts representing academia and non-governmental organizations assert that disinformation about the financial support streams is perpetuated mainly by the governing party, and to a lesser extent by the opposition parties to serve different political goals.

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To elaborate, a great majority of our experts from academia and non-governmental organizations pointed at the lack of transparent and regular reporting of the financial sources utilized for the refugees as the main reason for the public to believe that it is their tax money that is used to support the refugees. One of our participants, a scholar working closely with the state authorities and various NGOs on refugee integration, suggests that the information government provides about the monetary sources being used in serving refugees' needs falls short of being sufficient and accurate. In the absence of regularly shared credible information, several other scholars and NGO representatives further acknowledge that statements made by the government authorities suggesting that the government is spending billions to host refugees and not receiving help from other countries disinform the public about the financial support provided by the EU. They further highlight that the governing party would be expected to have little interest in fighting against this misinformation since the misinformation sustaining the 'generous state' image equips the government with a soft power that can be utilized in both domestic and international politics.

Most of the NGO representatives and a few scholars also pointed to the role that the opposition parties play in the dissemination of misinformation process either indirectly by highly politicizing the migration issue, or directly by contributing to the creation and dissemination of misleading information content about refugees. Our experts highlight the role that the opposition parties play in politicizing the issue by provoking especially economic resentments against the refugees as an electoral strategy in the face of upcoming elections. Some participants further suggest that the opposition parties have an interest in actively perpetuating misinformation about refugees as the heightened sense of economic, cultural and safety threats

serve their political goals of turning the public opinion against the governing party and attaining support for their electoral campaigns centering on stricter migration policies.

Observing a lack of political will to fight against misinformation about refugees, many experts turn to non-governmental actors and assess the role that NGOs can play in the fight against misinformation about refugees. Despite perceiving NGOs as the most likely agents that can carry out the task of debunking misinformation on refugees in Turkey, experts in our study also note that NGO based efforts to correct misinformation are expected to be highly limited in their societal impact due to two reasons: firstly, because NGOs are reliant on government to provide them with information, and secondly because they are not perceived by the public as credible sources of information. While several experts suggest that NGOs' capacity to correct misinformation is largely restricted because they lack alternative channels of reliable information, one of the academics with several years of collaboration experience with NGOs observes that NGOs in Turkey became even more dependent on government for information with the institutional changes introduced to the framework of migration management in 2018. Next to limitations in accessing reliable information, NGO representatives further note that their capacities to conduct effective corrective information campaigns are restricted even in cases where they possess reliable information, since Turkish people are highly reluctant to believe in the corrective information provided by NGOs, especially when such information contradicts with the statements made by political authorities.

Given the assessed limitations in misinformation correction capabilities of NGOs, the findings of our study point that the main contribution of NGOs can be expected in the domain of building resilience against disinformation about refugees. A great majority of academics, experts working in migration governance units in local and governmental organizations, as well as those field experts affiliated with international NGOs suggest that resilience to misinformation about refugees can be attained through facilitating micro-level quality interactions between the native and refugee communities, as it is expected to increase the socio-cultural understanding among the two communities. However, those field experts of Syrian origin, bringing in not only their professional but also personal experiences to the discussion, suggest that the intergroup relations facilitated by the projects carried out by NGOs might be highly limited in their impact on resilience building. One of our Syrian experts, Jawad, asserts that natives often refrain from generalizing their positive views about the refugees they personally get to know and socially engage with the larger refugee community. Agreeing with Jawad, some scholars and representatives of international and Syrian led NGOs accentuate that building resilience to disinformation about refugees would require going beyond the existing project-based approach adopted by the NGOs into diversifying and maintaining quality interactions between the two communities for longer periods of time.

## Discussion

In the current study, we investigated the relationship between misinformation and refugee integration through in-depth interviews conducted with Turkish citizens and migration experts from academia, non-governmental organizations and migration units of state and local government agencies. To this end, we explored the extent to which misinformation affects natives' perceptions of and attitudes toward refugees and examined the impact of misinformation on integration experiences and acculturation strategies of refugees before introducing a discussion of the factors that contribute to the perpetuation of information disorders relating to refugees, and possible strategies for combating such misinformation.

Our findings suggest that misinformation relating to immigrants, especially those regarding economic privileges that refugees are entitled to, breeds threat perceptions and elevates anti-immigrant sentiments that are manifested in the form of support for more exclusionary migration policies for Syrian refugees in Turkey. Prevalence of misinformation is also found to affect refugees' social experiences with the natives and contribute to the adoption of separation or assimilation as acculturation strategies by Syrian refugees in Turkey. As such, our findings also lend support to those recent studies documenting the impact of threat perceptions on immigration acculturation orientations (Rodionov, 2021).

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Despite the suggested implications for intergroup relations and social integration outcomes of the Syrian refugees in Turkey, however, migration experts participating in our study point to a lack of political will to fight misinformation about immigrants. Given the limitations of accessing reliable information and credibility, experts suggest that resilience building, rather than misinformation correction, would be a viable strategy that non-governmental organizations can adopt to combat misinformation about immigration.

The current study provided an analysis of the causal processes that lead to the perpetuation of misinformation about immigrants and the consequences of such misinformation on intergroup relations and acculturation outcomes of refugees. While the findings of the study point to the existence of a strong link between misinformation and attitudinal outcomes, as well as to the role of various actors in perpetuating and fighting misinformation, future studies should further explore the link between misinformation and migrant integration by adapting different research strategies that can also allow for testing of the relationships put forward by the current study.

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