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‘We are not Arabs and Taksim is Ours’: YouTubed Political Agency, Place-Making and Social Exclusion of Syrians

Abstract

Conceptualising place-making as a dialectic process that contributes to both empowerment and repression, this article examines a mediated and spatial form of ‘refugee voice’ and the reactionary responses to the presence of refugees through a widespread video from Turkey. By using video as a place-making tool, the paper investigates the political agency and reception of Syrians in Turkey through a recently controversial YouTubed event that showcases Syrians’ celebration of the New Year’s Eve in Taksim Square. This mundane event has received wide-ranging reactions on physical spaces as well as online geographies. To understand the online place-making practices of Syrians and reactionary Turkish ‘hosts’ and study the visual politics of the text and context of the video, the paper combines multimodal discourse analysis of the video and content and sentiment analyses of its YouTube comments. The paper contributes a digital perspective to both claiming rights to the cities and enclave societies in the so-called post-refugee crisis period, whilst throwing light on a new regime of nationalism in Turkey and on a global scale.

Keywords

YouTube publics, urban social media, anti-immigration, online place-making, online enclaves, Taksim, Syrian refugees

1.Introduction

As everyday life is increasingly surrounded by social media and networks, new forms of mediated place-making practices shape urban cultures. This paper studies ‘the overlap between social media and urban space’ (Karduni and Sauda 2020) and the unfolding of a mediated voice in the neoliberal period, which has deepened ‘the crisis of voice’ across political, economic and cultural domains (Couldry 2010, 1). The paper identifies a mediated form of refugee and anti-refugee voice in the so-called post-refugee crisis era, through an examination of the spatio-visual politics of the text and context of a recent and widespread video from Turkey. The paper focuses on the ways refugees claim their rights to spaces and media in the ‘host’ countries, whilst investigating the reactionary responses of the hosting communities to the presence and political subjectivity of refugees. The paper brings together sets of insights into geographies of immigrants and refugees in cities and studies the implications of the spatial aspects of the so-called refugee crisis through a ‘mediated’ instance of ‘transnational diaspora that ignites and/or counters the micro-politics of a nation-

state' (Appadurai 1990, 304). By recording videos in urban spaces and disseminating them through social networking sites, refugees 'maintain continuous contact with their home-nations in a deterritorialized context' (Appadurai 1990, 301), and form new connections within the new spatial contexts. The hosting Turkish groups have also recorded and disseminated images and videos on Syrians and other refugees to reinvent themselves by taking the law, city and media in hand, with an aim to undermine the presence and political subjectivity of refugees with calls to reclaim Turkish cities for 'Turks'. The paper identifies video as a tool of place-making and assesses its roles in the expression of political voice and the unveiling of social exclusion.

As its case study, the article studies a YouTube video that showcases Syrians' celebration of the New Year's Eve on Taksim Square, Istanbul on the 31st of December 2018. Following the celebration, this mundane event has received wide-ranging reactions on physical spaces such as streets, workplaces and/or coffeehouses, on legacy media such as the mainstream TV channels and newspapers as well as through the #SuriyelilerDefolsun (#SyriansGetOut) hashtag on Twitter, which became the number one trending topic in Turkey (https://trends24.in/turkey/) the next day. The article explores aspects of online place-making and digital political voice on Taksim Square, by combining a multimodal discourse analysis of the YouTube video with content and sentiment analyses of the comment-sphere of the four most viewed versions of the same video. Taksim Square has long been an identity place and the most important location for contentious politics in Turkey (see Inceoglu 2015; Whitehead and Bozoglu 2016; Ozduzen 2019), such as the Bloody May Day in 1977, where left-wing demonstrators were massacred by the Turkish state or the exceptional act of collective mobilisation during the Gezi Park protests (2013), where the riot police used every violent means to fend demonstrators from the square (Kuymulu 2013, 275).

The paper conceptualises place-making as a dialectic process, contributing to both empowerment and repression. Although the paper acknowledges the emancipatory characteristics of online engagement, it is based more on the reactionary, restrictive and undemocratic features of digital expression in the era of increasing populist movements and the mainstreaming of radical right-wing ideologies. The article is situated on the academic literature studying place-making, political voice and identity, which focuses on the empowering aspects of citizens' spatial practices in offline spaces (see Vradis 2009; Madden and Vradis 2012; Arampatzi 2017; Lundman 2018) and on digital geographies (see Arora 2011; Zebracki and Luger 2019; Karduni & Sauda 2020). Visual media and information

technologies have been consistent symbols of social movements and political agency of the human in digitally mediated cities (Rose 2017: 780), such as during the Arab Spring or the viral images and videos of the female protestor Alaa Salah giving a speech amid the protests against the authoritarian regime in Sudan. The paper is also built on the longstanding research traditions in cultural and political geographies on ethnic enclave and place-making (see Kaya 2005; Gill 2010; Hoffstaedter 2014; Hume 2015), as radical right parties, far-right movements and terrorist organisations equally use visual media and information technologies for their anti-immigration agendas and/or war propaganda (see Ekman 2014, 2018; Friis 2015; Atwan 2015). Analysing the Swedish far-right group Soldiers of Odin's creation of anti-immigration discourses through their online activities, Ekman (2018, 2-8) focuses on 'the formation of online publics with explicit anti-democratic values' (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016), the creation of 'communities with closure' (Atton 2006), or 'anti-publics' (Cammaerts 2009). Embracing a critical approach to digital cultures, this paper examines online publics with explicit anti-refugee views by studying political and socio-spatial conditions of a video on Syrians in Turkey, which produces both social inclusions and exclusions (Rose 2016, 22).

The purpose of the paper is neither providing an account of the highly multi-faceted economic, political, historical and legal aspects of the refugee debate in Turkey nor laying out an up-to-date account of the respective policies. Rather, the paper adds a spatial dimension to social media studies and contributes a digital perspective to studies in urban refugee experience (see Spicer 2008; Jacobsen 2006; Sanyal 2012; Fontanari 2015). The first part of the paper contextualises the racist implications of politics and culture in Turkey while the ensuing section provides an insight on the transformation of Taksim into an enclave. The remaining part outlines the paper's methodological perspective and methods and reveals the findings from the multimodal discourse, content and sentiment analyses of the YouTube videos featuring the place-making of Syrians in Turkey.

2.Towards a racist state and society in Turkey

Long before social media's invention, Turkey formed a homogeneous nation. Akçam (2004: 1) identifies the justification of persecutions and massacres of different ethnic and religious groups such as the Armenians as a core historical narrative during Turkey's transition from Empire to Republic (1923), which continues to shape people's political and everyday attitudes in Turkey, whilst obstructing its democratisation. With their neo-liberal and anti-communist ideologies, populist approaches and ethnic nationalist stances, radical right-wing leaders such as Thatcher in the UK, Reagan in the USA and Özal in Turkey achieved

landslide victories by the 1980s. Identifying illiberalism as neoliberalism's more mischievous twin, Buzogány and Varga (2018, 822) show that illiberal ideas and rhetoric have also been on the rise not only in Central, Eastern and Western Europe but also in Russia, the US and Turkey over the last few years. In Turkey, the current government AKP's (2002-present) populism is neoliberal, authoritarian, and nationalist (Özçetin 2019, 942). Saraçoğlu and Demirkol (2015, 305) describe AKP's nationalism as an ideological instrument of its political hegemony, an attempt to win consent as an extension of their populist strategies and mobilise large sections of society for their political project. The attempted coup in July 2016, according to Lüküslü (2016, 638-645), indicates a new phase imposing a new form of Turkishness, an Islamised version of national identity.

From 2011 onwards, approximately four million Syrians made Turkey their home while thousands of others used Turkey as a pathway for reaching the EU countries, following the so-called open-door policy of the AKP government for the Syrian refugees (Korkut 2016; Polat 2018). Despite its nationalist and conservative peers in Europe, the AKP government, a neo-liberal and Islamist right-wing party, initially did not use the mass flow of immigration from Syria to Turkey to consolidate 'immigration paranoia' within Turkish society. Rather, the AKP embraced "a values-based foreign policy that framed its role as the defender of oppressed peoples in the Middle East, while adopting a discourse of 'generosity' rather than 'rights'" (Oktav and Celikaksoy 2015, 411-416). The government presented the open-door policy towards Syrians and internal and external refugee protection as avenues of enhancing its standing and prestige within the 'Muslim world', which "depends on the humanitarian actor image that the AKP seeks to present to international and domestic audiences" (Korkut 2018, 3). Although humanitarianism qualified the initial discourse related to Syrian refugees, their presence in Turkey was later securitised (Koca 2016, 56). Policy change to facilitate comprehensive protection and integration of refugees is almost absent.

Although the Syrian refugee settlement in Turkey goes back to 2011, the 18 March 2016 migration deal between the EU and Turkey, aiming to manage illicit border-crossings, transformed the situation. Despite international obligations such as the Geneva conventions, the EU has aimed to construct a system whereby it did not have to take 'more' refugees fleeing from wars. Following the migration deal, Turkey accepted the return of all new arrivals in exchange for €6 billion in total. Since then, Turkey has acted as 'a protector belt' for 'maintaining' the borders of the EU and the AKP employed its refugee 'protection' policy as a trump card against the EU. In February 2020, Turkey re-opened its borders, which

allowed refugees to attempt to reach Europe. In the escalating conflict and occupations in Syria, in which Turkey is an active part, there are no safe and legal routes to Europe, forcing people to risk their lives.

In the meantime, attacks on Syrians in Turkey have multiplied not just through the police and border security. The migration deal between the EU and Turkey has created a public perspective of Syrians "taking money from the EU and Turkish state". Due to the increasingly legitimised securitisation approach, inter-communal tensions, lynching, and mob attacks against Syrians have been common across both rural and urban continuum. For example, on the 29th of February 2020, a Turkish soldier killed in Idlib, Syria was from the city of Kahramanmaraş, where his death was used as an excuse to form an organised mob and attack on the Syrian-owned businesses in the city. Digital attacks have emerged and reached a new peak since 2018, when some Syrians settled down, acquired Turkish citizenship and/or opened their own businesses across the country (Ozduzen et al. 2020). Some Syrians faced deportation in 2019 in the face of increasing online and offline discontent for the presence of Syrians.

This mainstreaming of the radical right-wing politics on immigration on both offline and online geographies, however, is not entirely related to the AKP government and their supporters. The anti-immigration message is disseminated widely by other communities and political parties such as the supporters of the CHP (Republican People's Party, 1919), which is a Kemalist and so-called social democratic political party. As an example, this attitude was a crucial part of their election campaign in 2017, where Muharrem İnce ran as a presidential candidate against Erdoğan. İnce promised to bid Syrians farewell to their 'home' with a flourish of trumpets, which received wider acclaim. This tendency recurred on the 'institutional' terrain in the recent local elections in March 2019, where the first act of the newly elected CHP mayor in Bolu was to ban the municipal aid for Syrian refugees.

3.Taksim as an Enclave

Since the early days of the Turkish Republic (1923), Istanbul has not been known for its free cosmopolitan communities and spaces, especially for minorities such as Greeks, Jews and Armenians (see Navaro-Yashin 2002; Werbner 2015). This attitude continued throughout Turkey's history, directed at the non-Muslims such as Greeks, non-Turks such as Kurds and non-Sunnis such as Alevi. At the heart of Istanbul, Taksim Square acted as the republican ideological showcase of modernisation in the republic's first decades (Gül et al. 2014, 64). Taksim Square transformed into a space of mass politics during the 1970s, whilst becoming a

spectacle of globalisation by the twenty-first century (Baykan and Hatuka 2010, 49). Additionally, Taksim has always been an alternative place for marginalised communities, such as gays (Özbay 2010), artists and performers (Özkan 2014), Kurdish and Roma populations (Aytar 2007) and now Syrian and Iraqi refugees (Celik Rappas and Kayhan 2018). It has been a 'physical' expression of official culture and memory and counter-culture in Turkey, although the AKP government has aimed to erase earlier versions of the official and alternative memories 'by targeting Taksim via a comprehensive neoliberal urban renewal and transformation project' (Eder and Öz 2015).

Starting from the late 2000s and largely in the early 2010s, global chains replaced independent shops and historical sites through the neo-liberal policies of the AKP. This created a swell of social movements to prevent the shopping-mallisation of historical sites, including the Gezi protests (Ozduzen 2018), which was met with waves of police brutality and state violence. Istanbul, especially Taksim, increasingly transformed into an enclave, which serves and sustains the hegemonic social, cultural and political order through the segregation of strong groups and the exclusion of weak ones (Allweil and Kallus 2013, 749). These sequestrations, exclusions and closures are military-political, social and cultural, and biological, putting into practice the preoccupations of sovereign, disciplinary, and security-minded modes of power (Casey et al. 2018, 2). Exercising its military-political power, the government has banned the organisation of political events on the square and suggested the demonstrations take place in alternative locations away from the city centre, such as Yenikapı and Kazlıçeşme. Turner (2007, 290) defines the term 'enclave society' as societies where governments and other agencies seek to regulate spaces and immobilize flows of people, goods and services. The enclave society in Istanbul is 'being constantly re-territorialised, where the territory is restructuring' (Shin 2018, 758). In addition to heavy police presence with their bodies, tanks and armours in Taksim, other agencies such as pro-government construction companies immobilized flows of people and goods by turning the area into a giant construction site.

In understanding the formation and consolidation of enclaves in Istanbul, the restrictive and repressive place-making activities of hosting communities is also crucial, as Taksim has witnessed Syrians' constant exposition of verbal and physical assaults. In line with Vradis' research (2014) on 'crisis-scapes', which entails urban poverty, deprivation, shrinking social rights and mounting everyday violence in cities during moments of crises, Istanbul unfolds as a crisis-scape not solely because of the erasure of previous memories and places. Although

Syrians settled down, worked or spent leisure time in Taksim, such as their own restaurants and community centres, Istanbul has become an important location of refugee hostility, such as 'we do not want Syrians' protests in İkitelli, Istanbul in 2014 and 2019. In line with AKP's pragmatic and populist open-door policy, Turkish society creates a hostile environment whereby refugees are exposed to violence when walking, celebrating New Year's Eve or selling goods on streets.

4.Methodology, Findings and Discussion

4a.Methodology

Despite being a commercial social media platform owned by Google, YouTube provides a fruitful source of analysis due to its accessibility, its combination of image, sound and comment function. YouTube affords an opportunity for video-makers to share DIY content reflecting everyday culture, politics and sociality and helps audiences actively engage in and comment on the visuals, sounds and/or texts of the videos. What is posted on social media platforms such as YouTube are posted for followers and onlookers, 'generating volumes of visibility labour and amplify content circulation' (Abidin 2016, 87), including the widespread circulation of and visibility for the right-wing and anti-immigration message and image. The videos generate visibility labour for Syrians whilst amplifying the circulation of the visual hate message. The Syrians' political voice unfolds in Syrian men's chanting, dancing and recording within the frame, whereas the political voice of the Turkish hosts is unveiled through the Turkish (male) video-maker's diegetic voiceover on the uploaded video and the non-diegetic comments below the uploaded videos, representing the voice of the ordinary users. Voice is socially grounded and having a voice depends on the shared resources of material life, social and practical resources that enable and sustain the practices of narrative and status if one is to be recognised by others having a voice (Couldry 2010, 7). Couldry (2010) conceptualises voice as a process and value. The value of voice can be registered through mutual recognition, which can take place through the process of 'listening' (Tacchi 2012, 655). Although Syrians claimed their rights to the city by working or celebrating in the city, the hosting Turkish communities attempted to suppress their voice online, thereby preventing 'mutual recognition' and listening from taking place.

The paper uses mixed methods of multimodality, content and sentiment analyses to study online political voice, place-making and political agency. Multimodal discourse analysis combines the study of language with other resources such as images, gestures and sound

(O'Halloran 2011, 120), unveiling discourses in the voiceover and chanting as well as the mise-en-scene of the video. Also, in using multimodality, a relationship between the creators, the readers of the images, and the subjects represented is the key to engage with audio-visual texts (Núñez Puente et al. 2015, 323). Multimodal discourse analysis serves to engage with the voice of the Turkish video-maker through the voiceover and the Syrians through their audio-visual acts on the video. Núñez Puente et al. (2015, 323) identifies four types of sign that interact with the audience in visual compositions: the image act and gaze; social distance and intimacy; the horizontal angle and involvement; the vertical angle and power (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 148–149).

Considering the circulation of the video, comments made on these DIY videos can give insights into user reactions to the issue in question or videos themselves (Thelwall et al. 2012, 616). To collect the comments of the four most popular versions of the video, I used Mozdeh software and accessed YouTube's API on the 16th of January, 2019. I employed Excel to map out the sentiment analysis and visualize the data in charts, Nvivo software to qualitatively categorise the data under several nodes such as national identity, gender, and religion and Python programming language to generate the word cloud and facilitate the content analysis of the most common words used in the commentary. Sentiment analysis sheds light on the role of emotion in online communication (Thelwall and Buckley 2013, 1608), including collective political preferences of citizens (Georgiadou et al. 2019). In applying sentiment analysis, I categorised sentiments into three groups, namely negative, positive and neutral/unrelated on publicly shared comments. The positive comments embraced Syrians as part of Turkey or went against racist views, the negative comments had overly racist discourses against Syrians and their political agency and the neutral ones were either unrelated comments or represented unidentified sentiments.

4b.Visual analysis of the video

The video primarily showcases the political agency of Syrians and their inscriptions into the city. However, the widely circulated version of the video was recorded by a Turkish video-maker to consolidate hate for Syrians in Turkey. The Arab Spring was characterised by a "new virality", a renewed meaning of public spaces, from the streets of Tunis to the Tahrir Square in Cairo (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz 2011, 620). The revolts were made 'real' through the activist-led production of photographs and videos (Abourahme and Jayyusi 2011, 625). Examining the revolutionary video activism in Egypt during the uprising, Westmoreland (2016, 253-254) shows how emerging from a local context of political

upheaval, these vernacular videos enact something akin to a mimetic claim to citizenship. Similarly, to relate to a cosmopolitan sense of solidarity for the oppressed, Syrian video activists reached out across state borders through their user generated activism, such as political cartoons in English uploaded and shared on social media platforms (Wessels 2017). In addition to activists, extremists, fundamentalists and/or conservative groups also make and circulate videos to mobilise and strengthen their movements (see Andén-Papadopoulos 2009; Ekman 2014; Atwan 2015). Atwan (2015, 10) shows how videos allow members or potential sympathisers of the Islamic State to stay on the message, hear the same sermons, view the same messages and witness the same punishments simultaneously.

The video showcases a group of Syrian men jumping, dancing, chanting 'Syria' and holding a Syrian flag, which constitutes 'the image act' within the visual composition. For Tuitjer and Batreau (2019, 4), as refugees are without political recognition and associated rights, their agency is generally expressed through their repeated clandestine inscriptions into the urban fabric, rather than through coordinated political campaigns or bodily forms of protest. Instead of engaging in clandestine inscriptions on the city or being entrapped within camps, the video displays the refugee agency developed in Istanbul by a recorded event, where refugees act in urban spaces with their own bodies, cameras and resources. As such, it represents a moment of becoming in which 'refugees transform their marginal position within the city' (Tuitjer and Batreau 2019, 4). The video shows an instance of Syrians claiming their rights to Taksim, with their own flags, dance and language.

On the left side of the frame, the viewers can discern the newly built Taksim Mosque and the neon lights of the banks and hotels surrounding the square (Figures 1 and 2), providing a snippet of the neo-liberal and Islamist hegemony of the AKP government on urban space. In the centre of the visual imagery are the cheering Syrian communities holding a flag commonly associated with the Free Syrian Army, which is actually the flag of the first Syrian nation following the French occupation in 1931. This flag is commonly referred to as 'the Syrian Independence flag', the flag of Syria between 1932-1958 and 1961-1963. A modified version of this flag was taken up by the Syrian opposition in 2011. Since then, it represents a Syria without mandates/occupiers, while the official flag stands as a symbol of Assad's regime since the 2011 revolution. On this background, the flag waved on the video has an additional meaning in going against the mandate of not only the external occupiers such as France, but also the current Syrian regime. The flag forms the centre of the horizontal angle and provides a reference point for the involvement of Syrian men in the action and their

community-making on the square (Figures 1 and 2). The shaky point-of-view shot of a chanting crowd of Syrian men, surrounded by concrete buildings creates an aura of hope and entrapment, emancipation and repression at the same time.

Figures 1 and 2 – Screenshot images from the YouTube video.

Two levels of physical interaction dominate the frame that revolves around the flag waving and cheering Syrian communities. Right in front of the Turkish video-maker, there is a Syrian recording crowd that oscillates between social distance and intimacy in their relation to the action in the centre of the frame. The viewers observe the recording mobile phones and the heads of recording participants from their back and their hands up above holding their phones (Figures 1 and 2). At certain moments, some faces turn to the camera of the Turkish video-maker, where viewers can see the cheerful but tense facial expressions of some Syrian participants. As Taksim has been a police-dominated area especially since the attempted coup, the tense feelings of participants may represent the concerns of police intervention in the events. Although the recording Syrian men also join the dancing and cheering crowd at

certain points of the video, the Turkish video-maker's only role is consistently documenting the event. Concurrently, the second group, namely the chanting and flag-waving Syrian community, moves into and outside of the frame. This constant movement is constitutive of the dynamic feature of the image. Being dynamic implies a moment of movement, noise and vivid colours. The feeling of passing flow also originates from the sounds of the protestors/celebrators chanting. Almost equal to the presence of body parts, there is the passing flow of mobile phones in the frame.

Although video-making of a seemingly leisure but in fact a political event with a flag could be viewed as an important example for the political empowerment of Syrian communities in Istanbul, it also functions as an effective strategic resource for Turkish nationalists to grab attention and recruit like-minded individuals and groups. The recording subject in the widely circulated videos constructs his political agency through place-making on the street by separating himself from the rest, thereby engaging in social distance and claiming a hostile gaze. The same recording subject forms his relation to the supposed Turkish audiences via the audio-visual space of the uploaded video through his voiceover that condemns Syrian identity and holds the AKP responsible for the so-called open-door policy. The viewers can clearly hear the video-maker's words in Turkish among the chanting crowds: 'we are on Istiklal Street, but no one is Turkish here'. Although Taksim has never been a homogeneous area in its history, the video-maker is worried that there are no Turkish people present during the event. At the end of the recording, the same male voice adds in Turkish: 'I curse those who are responsible for what we have become'. Burgess (2006, 210) writes that 'the primacy of the recorded voice places digital storytelling at some distance from the textual and visual emphasis of most "new media"'. In this digital storytelling, the only discernible two full sentences originate from the video-maker, whose recorded voice aims to dominate the imagery of the video through his attempt to reach and influence like-minded Turkish nationalist audiences by condemning Syrians and the AKP government and propagating a homogeneous Turkey and Turkishness.

As such, a racist Turkish YouTube user seized the means of representation of a video through his commentary and disguised presence to transmit fear and paranoia of the 'Other'. Through the video, he projects an image of Syrians as spatially and culturally occupying Istanbul and Turkey. Nationalists and far right groups in Turkey widely criticized Syrians for waving their own flag rather than a Turkish flag in this event and demonised them for having fun on the streets in Istanbul, instead of fighting in Syria. Syrians, however, have not been 'victims' on this audio-visual representation. The images and the recording have been

empowering for the Syrian communities as their voices cheering 'Syria' remain the most vocal voice of the video and, more importantly, they recorded the ways they claimed their rights to Taksim. Syrians thus created a sense of belonging in Taksim Square, connected to their "homeland" and reconstituted home abroad by coming together in public places, connecting with their communities, waving their own flags, dancing and recording their own actions.

4c.YouTube comment-sphere

As the most circulated versions of the event were recorded by a Turkish video-maker, different versions of the same video have been uploaded on YouTube with directly racist titles such as 'Syrians occupied Taksim' or 'Syrians at the heart of our city'. For Andén-Papadopoulos (2009, 20), 'the boundaries between those who fight and those who document the war are becoming more and more blurred'. In the case of ordinary people who uploaded these videos related to Syrians' everyday life, the boundaries between those who upload them and those who are represented in the video are consolidated. The voice establishes the 'ideal' Turkishness and Turkish public space, which is disrupted through the joy and resilience of the chanting crowd, but it is restored via the YouTube comment-sphere. In addition to the diegetic speaking voice in the video, the political voice on the YouTube comment-sphere undermines Syrians and their presence in Turkey, whilst degrading the refugee as a political subject. In these comments, users address the symbolic power of the Syrian flag -not the Turkish one- being used on a symbolic place in the history of Turkey (Taksim) to show that Syrians have 'crossed the line'. Although the user reactions challenge the initial official message of the government that Syrians are 'our Muslim brothers' and present an oppositional voice to the government's policies, they offer an equally right-wing perspective of immigration, refugees and Turkish national identity in their racist condemnation of the Syrian flag and identity.

Figure 3 – Word cloud for the comment-sphere of the videos

Word	Count
Türk (Turk)+Türkiye (Turkey)+Türkçe (Turkish)	412
Bir (one)	377
Taksim+ora (here) +bura (there)	238
Bizim (our)	199
Kadar (enough)	191
Bunlar (they)	186
Ben (I)	175
Suriye (Syria)	166
Var (present)	165
Kendi (your own)	163
Bayrak (flag)+paçavra (rag)	155
Yok (there is no)	149
Arap (Arab)+Arapça (Arabic)	146
Asker+Mehmetçik (Soldier)	133
Orospu (whore)	119
AKP	101
Vatan (homeland)	100
Allah	99
Gidin (Go)	92
Oy (Vote)	85

Table 1 - Most used words in the commentary

On the YouTube comment-sphere of the video(s) (see Figure 3 and Table 1), Syrians are presented as unfitting to the imagined national composition of Turkish society. The commentary resembles and reproduces the general discourse related to immigrants and 'others', attaching essential values alien to "ours" (patriarchal, sexist, etc.) to immigrants, and stressing the inherent violence of immigrants' behaviour (Ekman 2018, 4). Video comments not only vilify Syrians through caustic labels such as 'rapists' and 'gun grabbers', but also designate them as standing in the way of the changes modern Turkey allegedly seeks (Benford and Hunt 1992). Such framing of the collective character of a community or an antagonist/opponent functions to demarcate boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Van Stekelenburg 2014, 542). The commenters respond to the New Year celebration to show how Syrians cannot fit the 'imagined' culture produced and enjoyed in Turkish public spaces. YouTube users depict an "us" that (cannot) tolerate a "they" who are ferocious, although what 'they' have done or committed has not yet been delineated and is represented only through abstractions.

Extremely negative comments on the Syrian flag waved on the Taksim Square are key to not only the video through the voice-over but also the textual framework of the comments (see Figures 1, 2, 3 and Table 1). The words soldier and *mehmetcik* (a synonym of Turkish soldier in everyday language) are also commonly used (see Figure 3 and Table 1). Most of these comments include military discourses and compare leisurely and lavish Syrian men in Turkey (dancing and chanting) with Turkish soldiers fighting in Syria (under dangerous 'manly' conditions such as snow or draught). Syrian men are identified as cowards who are 'incapable' of defending their own country, which creates a gendered scale of men place-making in Turkey and Syria. On the one hand, Turkish users define Syrian men as rapists and gun-grabbers where the underlying tone of such commentary announced war against Syrians. On the other hand, users categorise Syrian men as lavish, lazy and cowards, which proves the contradictory nature of nationalism and points to the inconsistency of antagonistic views on the 'Other'. The few positive comments on Turkish soldiers generally rely on the discourse of 'Muslim brother', commenting on the alleged brotherhood of the Turkish soldier with Syrian men, which is in line with the newly constructed form of Turkishness, an Islamised version of national identity.

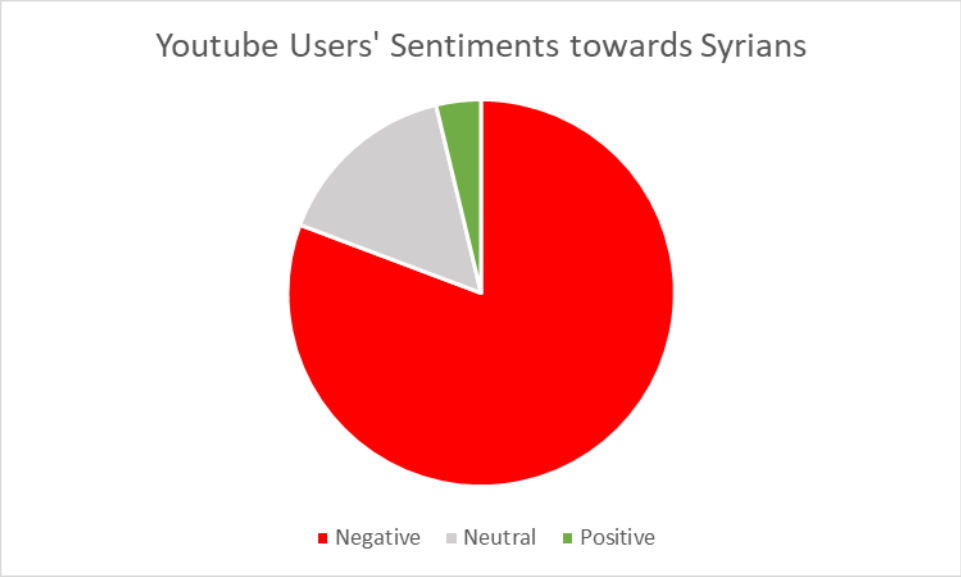

Table 2: Sentiments of YouTube users (in Turkish) on the video of Syrians' New Year Celebrations

Amongst the 2211 YouTube comments collected from the four versions of the same video uploaded on YouTube (see Table 2), 1785 (80%) had overly negative sentiments towards not only the Syrian identity, flag and/or presence in Turkey but also the AKP government and its so-called open-door policy. Within 2211 comments, 412 included the word Turk, Turkey or Turkish (among them 42 were positive, 21 were neutral/unidentified and 349 were extremely negative on Syrians). While some of these positive comments alluded to how Turks in Germany also use their own flags for various political and leisure events, the negative comments identify this celebratory event of Syrians as an insult to Turkish culture, flag and nation. Anderson (1991) shows how nation-building is based on imagining a national past and present while Gellner (1983) identifies it as 'inventing' a national identity. In line with such an imagination and invention, these comments glorify a unified and homogeneous Turkishness, Turkish language and heritage. The fact that another flag is being waved within the physical boundaries of Turkey angers most YouTube users that commented on the video, while the rest of the users that commented negatively complained about the Syrians' existence in Turkey since they allegedly occupy 'Turkish' places. One of the most common words were Taksim as well as 'here' and 'there', indicating Taksim and Istanbul as geographical spaces (see Table 1). The users also referred to the historical legacy of Istanbul to Turks since the Ottoman Empire. The commentary reminded potential audiences that Taksim has always belonged to Turks but not Arabs, with a view to

immobilize flows of people and sustain the hegemonic social, cultural and political order (Allweil and Kallus 2013).

The comment-sphere of the video also offers a homogeneous understanding of Arabic and Syrian cultures, undermine Arabic cultures and recommend Arabs to go back where they have come from. Interestingly, discourses on Kurds and Kurdishness also permeate the picture, which may be related to Syrians in their shared 'minority' presence in Turkey. The majority of these comments reinvigorate the nationalism over Kurdish people in Turkey, commenting 'if Kurds were to use their own flags, they would have been tear gassed, taken into custody or arrested'. Lim (2017, 422-424) defines algorithmic enclaves as a type of "imagined community", a techno-socially constructed shared identity online for defending their beliefs and protecting their resources from both real and perceived threats. Users and algorithms mutually shape each other in hierarchising people and political preferences as well as legitimising their own versions of tribal nationalism by excluding equality and justice for others. In line with the widely shared and commented versions of the video by the Turkish video-maker, the underlying tone of comments including "Kurdishness" also excluded equality and justice for Syrians by being critical of the alleged selective nationalism of the racial state and its armed forces towards different social groups, which consolidates the already existing algorithmic enclaves on platform societies.

In referring to Syrian men on Taksim Square, the YouTube commentary also consisted widely of the words 'real men', manhood, fag and whore (see Table 1), which undermine the manliness of Syrian men whilst glorifying toxic masculinity. Alonso (1994, 386) defines the persuasiveness of nationalism as a structure of feeling that transforms space into homeplace and interpolates individual and collective subjects as embodiers of national character (viewed as shared bio-genetic and psychic substance), hinging on tropes of kinship, gender, and sexuality. McClintock (1993) articulates the 'gendered discourse' of nationalism, which is not just gendered but also homophobic and heterosexist (Peterson 1999, 34). From the comments on Taksim as an imagined Turkish space to the comments on the glorification of Turkish soldiers fighting in Syria or undermining Syrian men having fun in Taksim preserves hegemonic and toxic masculinity, while reconstituting an Islamised version of a bio-genetic Turkishness through repeated references to symbols of Islam, Allah and the Ottoman past.

Conclusion

This paper focused on an instance of mediated political subjectivity and agency of Syrians in Taksim, Istanbul and the online reactions of Turkish hosting communities to Syrian everyday reality and place-making on Taksim Square. Taksim has not been a cosmopolitan place for its minorities, especially due to the formation of a Turkified nation in the 1920s. However, as a concurrent symbol of leisure and contentious politics in the history of modern Turkey, it has also always been a home for marginalised identities. Since the Gezi Park protests (2013) and increasingly after the failed coup (2016), Taksim increasingly functioned as an enclave because it has been under police blockage, was banned for political mobilisations and has been targeted with a comprehensive neoliberal urban transformation project (Eder and Öz 2015). While the governing party AKP's policies initially relied on an Islamist and neoliberal agenda, their policies in the late 2010s complimented these agendas with nationalism, which re-emerged as a unifying force that would prove attractive among wider populations. The AKP initially had a so-called open-door policy for Syrians with underlying populist and pragmatic reasons for its own image-making intentions in the Middle East (Korkut 2016; Polat 2018). However, policy change to facilitate comprehensive protection and integration of refugees has been very limited, which has -directly or indirectly- enabled online and offline attacks on Syrians.

Despite Taksim's transformation into an enclave, Syrians and other 'minorities' have continued to engage in cultural, social, economic and political activities in the area. The fact that Syrians claim their rights to Taksim points to Taksim's gaining a transient cosmopolitan character, despite the efforts to the contrary by the long Turkified and more recently Islamised and neo-liberal state. In this article, I have identified the mundane event of Syrians celebrating on Taksim Square with their flags and songs as an empowering political event, because minorities without associated rights claimed their rights to the city, rather than expressing their agency through clandestine inscriptions into the urban (Tuitjer and Batreau 2019). Although the mediated celebration did not seem to have any women participants, the continuous minority visibility and action in Taksim and other parts of Istanbul are still crucial in terms of rights mobilisations in and the re-cosmopolitanisation of Istanbul.

The event's online recording and circulation, such as its commentary on YouTube, became far less empowering for Syrians. Notwithstanding that the viewers can see Syrian men recording the event on the video, a Turkish video-maker's video of the event with his voiceover and intervention went viral on social media platforms. The study of digital place-

making and refugee and migrant reception resting on social exclusion is crucial at a time when the world's attention has drifted away from this humanitarian crisis. Due to the rise of populist movements and the mainstreaming of radical right-wing ideologies in this period, social media platforms such as YouTube provide an alternative space for the visual expression of a mediated political voice without mutual recognition and listening (Couldry 2010; Tacchi 2012), where the visibility of racism is bolstered. YouTube's audio and comment sections function as tools for radical right-wing propaganda, including racialisation and toxic masculinity. The lack of protection for, negative media framings of and socially exclusive social media reaction to Syrian refugees in Turkey, however, are not isolated incidences. The developments in Turkey have a conceptual potential to represent the global dimensions of this humanitarian crisis, despite being allegedly shaped by local dynamics. By depicting a snippet of online and visual anti-refugee and anti-immigrant rhetoric in Turkey, I have intended to feed the understanding of the rise of such rhetoric on social media platforms on a global scale today, including the UK and EU.

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