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# Discussing the populist features of anti-refugee discourses on social media: an anti-Syrian hashtag in Turkish Twitter

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This article discusses whether it is possible to frame anti-refugee discourse on social media as a form of populism by analysing the case study of the hashtag #ülkemedesuriyeliistemiyorum (#IdontwantSyriansinmycountry), which emerged on Twitter in Turkey in 2016. Both network analysis and discourse analysis are used in order to delineate the characteristics of the tropes associated with the hashtag, to identify the existence of populist elements, as well as to scrutinize the linkage of the hashtag with the broader political context. The study shows that some elements of a populist discourse clearly exist (simple and popular discourse, anti-foreigner), while some others are missing (the existence of a leader). Most importantly, the discussion of the other elements (dichotomous views, othering and anti-elite) highlight the need to better conceptualize and contextualize these features to understand the connection between anti-elite (populism) and anti-foreigner discourses (nativism), the impact of tagged tropes such as a hashtag that can poke holes in echo chambers and the distinction between the concepts of anti-elitism and anti-establishment (especially in specific political contexts such as Turkey).

Keywords: populism, Turkey, Syrians, migration, social media, anti-refugee discourse

## Introduction

The prevalence of social media and the rise of populism are two markers of our contemporary world. Many observers have highlighted the ways in which the two are interrelated. Social media is often depicted as a tool particularly well suited to advance populist causes—one that connects and binds together the audience of populism (Jakobson *et al.* 2012). However, far from being a neutral medium, social media can also impact the form and nature of populism.



Accordingly, two simple discourses can be heard regarding the role played by social media. One defends that social media provides an unprecedented channel for individuals to engage and contribute to public discourses and political activism, free from the mediation of intermediate bodies (such as traditional media, political parties, parliamentary representatives, interest groups, unions, etc.). As such, social media can bring about the virtue of populism; those that allow the ‘people’ to be themselves direct actors of democracy. The opposite view posits that social media exacerbates the most damaging aspects of populism, by empowering a degraded form of dialogue, creating closed echo chambers where individuals are no longer exposed to alternative viewpoints and freely circulating damaging and erroneous information.

Additionally, contemporary studies of populism, which are centred on right-wing policies in Europe, have highlighted that, increasingly, anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment are a (if not the) central characteristic of populism (Mudde 2013). This trend can clearly be observed on social media as well (Kreis 2017), to the point that anti-refugee discourse on social media is often automatically assumed to be an expression of populism. Given the rise of populism, anti-refugee sentiment as well as social media, which is a crucial *locus* of public discourse, we propose here to better understand their relation. Do anti-refugee discourses on social media constitute a form of populism? In this article, we ask which elements of populism are embedded in anti-refugee discourses on social media and whether it is possible to understand this discourse as a form of populism.

This article tackles these questions by looking at a specific moment in the history of Turkish-language Twitter, when a hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum (translating as #IdontwantSyriansinmycountry) had a sudden surge of popularity on 3 July 2016 and during the following days. The hashtag had existed before and would have smaller surges after this episode, most notably on 2 January 2019 and also in December 2017, but only for a couple of hundreds or couple of thousands of tweets, respectively. In contrast, on 3 July 2016 and over the following 5 days, the hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum was used over 70000 times. We suggest that the overly simplistic nature of the hashtag, its popularity and its direct anti-foreigner message, as well as its tentative anti-establishment positioning, warrant its analysis and potentially qualifies it as a populist discourse. This hashtag also calls for a contextualized analysis to understand the specificity of the Turkish political landscape where populism, nativism and anti-refugee sentiments operate.

Accordingly, this study first reviews the old and new questions surrounding populism, in particular how to define it and how it relates to social media. The second section provides an analysis of the #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum hashtag, its background, its occurrences, its leaderlessness and its linkage with the Turkish political context. Discussion and conclusion follow, addressing the specificities of politics in Turkey and highlighting this study’s contribution to our understanding of populism and anti-refugee discourse on social media.

## Populism's Old and New Questions

### *What Is Populism? A Definitional Problem*

The many scholarly controversies surrounding the concept of populism seem to all direct to a point of consensus: populism has a definitional problem, i.e. different people mean different things when talking of populism. In their comprehensive analysis of the literature of populism, [Gidron and Bonikowski \(2013\)](#) define populism within three diverse forms, namely as an ideology, a discursive style and a form of political mobilization. Similarly, [Mudde and Kaltwasser \(2014\)](#) distinguish between four common conceptual approaches: a discourse, pathology, a political style and a strategy. Even if these ways of defining populism overlap, we are mostly interested here in the discursive aspect of populism, i.e. the specific arrangement of ideas through narratives.

[Kögl \(2010\)](#) claims that the most central problem of the populism literature lies in the lack of a sound theory of populism, despite its 50-year history, and he associates this debate again with the problem of definition. To solve these conceptual issues, [Mudde \(2004: 543–544\)](#) has proposed a ‘minimal’ definition of populism as follows:

a thin-centred ideology that considers the society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

We espouse here this thin discursive definition of populism as a set of ideas that polarize society and focus on issues that embody this polarization. Accordingly, one of the common features of populism is a discourse that divides society into antagonistic groups by promoting a conflict between ‘good and enemy’ or ‘elite and people’. While [Mudde \(2004\)](#) explains this polarization between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, [Urbinate \(1998\)](#) categorizes the populist polarization between ‘established social groups’ and ‘emerging social groups’. He defines populism as ‘a strategy of rebalancing the distribution of political power among established and emerging social groups’ and a way for people to express ‘their resentment against the domestic enemies’ ([Urbinate 1998: 111](#)). As a result, in many examples of populist discourse, it is easier to understand whom they are against rather than what they defend ([Mudde 2004: 546](#)). ‘Hostility’ and ‘othering’ that stigmatize one group as dangerous to another or as a threat to their identity and rights function well to create the required polarization ([Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008](#)). [Pasquino \(2008\)](#) underlines the centrality of this polarization as one of the structural elements in the ‘cohesion of the populist movements’ and indicates that the enemy can be ‘the establishment, the politicians, the financiers of globalization, the technocrats, the immigrants, the refugees, i.e. “those who are not like us”’.

The definition of who the enemy is helps also define the issues embraced by the populist discourse and used as political cards. These issues compose the major

mobilization tools not only to attract more ‘followers’, but also to homogenize this follower group. For instance, several populist political parties with anti-establishment views address the issues such as culture, immigration, taxation, religion and civic rights. Among these popular populist issues, immigration has become particularly prominent (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 4). The right-wing populism that has spread across Europe and North America in the twenty-first century has indeed used the issue of immigration as a rallying point. In fact, Mudde (2013: 1) argues that the impact of the populist radical right on the broader system have been ‘largely limited to the broader immigration issue’.

Indeed, another element that seems to characterize populism is the role played by leaders. Most scholars see the existence of a leader as an essential component, given their definition of populism as a type of relationship between a leader and his/her followers (De la Torre 1998: 87; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). In most cases, this leader is seen as a ‘populist entrepreneur’ who takes advantage of the frustration in a society concerning the deficiencies of democratic representation (Pasquino 2008: 28). In this case, ‘personalism’ is defined as an inevitable component of populism (De la Torre 1998: 88). For instance, O’Neil (2016: 31) defines populism based on experiences from Latin America and categorizes it as a strategy of politicians to address ‘electorate’s baser instincts’ while De la Torre (1998: 86) is also referring to a ‘powerful charismatic leader’ who triggers the mobilization among masses. Similarly, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008: 6) explain populism as an ideology and list the centrality of a charismatic leader as one of the common principles of all populist movements. This ‘personalistic leader’ is positioned as a powerful figure, who does not accept or tolerate any other mediator such as a parliament or a political party (Deiwiks 2009). More bluntly, Zaslove (2008) affirms that ‘the populist leader is essential for the success of radical-right populist parties’, implying that populism cannot exist without a personalist and/or charismatic leader (see also Canovan 1999; Kriesi 2014).

Accordingly, and for the purpose of this article, we summarize the insights from the literature as saying that a populist discourse is a discourse that combines the following elements: (1) a simple message that aims at gaining a large number of followers, (2) a dichotomous view that defines the world according to a ‘good vs. bad’ reading of actors, (3) a narrative that aims at othering and polarizing these two groups, (4) an emphasis on the ‘good people’ as opposed to an ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’ defined as the enemy, (5) clearly defined issues of interest that are seen as being threatening (globalization, immigration, consensus politics, etc.) and (6) the existence of a leader who exemplifies the discourse.

#### *Populism in the Echo Chambers of Social Media*

In addition to the continued debates surrounding the definition of populism, there is now a new momentum looking at the online opportunity structure that online communication and social media provide to populist discourses (Engesser *et al.* 2017). While it is important to note that the Internet provides communication channels to a wide range of discourses beyond populism, it is also clear that, both

in content (such as creating a direct connection to the people) and in style (e.g. using simple, emotional and dark discourse that catch the available attention of Internet consumers), ‘populism is particularly well-suited to be communicated online’ (Stanley 2008).

Media have always played an important role for populism (Mazzoleni 2008). A populist leader had to be ‘media savvy’ and had a lot to gain in creating ‘media complicity’ (Long 2014). But the emergence of new technologies and the development of social-media tools have changed the parameters concerning the creation, mediation and dissemination of information, and this has benefitted populists. Accordingly, scholars have been talking of online populism (Branson 2011) or digital populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2014: 28). The development of Internet technologies has provided more voice for the people; and it has diminished the gatekeeper role of the mainstream media in the process of transferring narratives (Bartlett *et al.* 2011: 15–33). Social-media platforms are used by several populist parties to transfer their messages to the voters, to mobilize them or to attract more voters. In contemporary societies, ‘online activism’ has become a major tool of political participation, that can be more easily accessed than traditional means: Bartlett *et al.* note that the number of Facebook group members of several populist political parties reached more than the number of their actual party members (2011: 103–107).

In addition to being accessible for everyone and relatively simple to use, the popularity of political participation via social media can also be explained by the changing and declining ‘trust’ relationships of the voters with the traditional actors of political communication, namely with political parties, but also conventional media channels (Engesser *et al.* 2017: 1284). In this regard, the problems related to democratic deficit and transparency problems in political processes have empowered alternative discourses and boosted social-media populism.

However, being more easily accessible to a wider public does not necessarily mean pluralism and polyvocality. Indeed, one of the flourishing areas of study has turned around the issue of ‘homophily’ in social media and the twin metaphors of ‘echo chamber’ and ‘filter bubble’. The term echo chamber is defined as ‘a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal’ (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: 76). Briefly, it refers to a ‘closed system’ of communication, which excludes any alternative views and which develops further through the circulations of the views of like-minded people. This metaphor is useful to explain the clustering of people within the same social-media platforms, in which they can find people with resembling views, in spite of the limitless space of Internet communication. This sort of clustering is particularly helpful for populist discourse and encourages followers to voice their populist opinions louder while preventing the existence of any alternative view within the chamber.

The echo chamber works in tandem with the ‘filter bubble’. Eli Pariser (2011), an Internet activist, introduced this metaphor in his book entitled *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding You*. With his metaphor, Pariser (2011: 8) criticizes the ‘personalized’ structure of the Internet world by claiming that

'Democracy requires citizens to see things from one another's point of view, but instead we're more and more enclosed in our own bubbles'. Accordingly, an autonomous and invisible filtering process brings people a world of knowledge, which is surrounded only with views and opinions that are similar to their own (Bartlett *et al.* 2011: 107; Pariser 2011: 11). As a result, this bubble blunts people's ability to consider alternative opinions and convinces them to be a majority, in turn amplifying populist discourses.

Most of the studies of online populism look at how political leaders use populist online communication and they analyse the online opportunity structures provided to them to amplify their populist message (Engesser *et al.* 2017). These studies presuppose the existence of a populist discourse. What has been largely missing from these analyses is the extent to which these online opportunity structures can spontaneously give form to populism, absent the existence of this discourse outside of social media.

### **Case Study: A Turkish Hashtag against Syrian Refugees**

#### *Data and Methodology*

In order to address the question of whether a particular social-media discourse can be qualified as populist, this article investigates a particular moment in the Turkish political life where an anti-refugee discourse enjoyed a sudden popularity on social media in the summer of 2016. On 3 July 2016, the hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum (translating as #IdontwantSyriansinmycountry) peaked and would be tweeted and retweeted over 54000 times on that single day and 71996 times between 2 July and 15 July 2016. While the hashtag was already seeing a decrease in its use after the peak of 3 July 2016, it almost ceased to exist after 15 July, as the political agenda and concerns of citizens move to issues related to the attempted and failed coup, as well as new restrictions on speech put in place.

To analyse this hashtag, we started by accessing the entire population of tweets mentioning the hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum from 1 January until 31 October 2016, using the online service Followthehashtag. The population of tweets here includes all variations of the hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum regardless of capitalization. Not only does the Followthehashtag service provide us with the entire stream of relevant tweets (through an agreement with Twitter's GNIP); it also provided ready-to-use analytical tools, such as coverage, different measures of influence, etc. Three main tools provided by Followthehashtag were explored extensively: the list of the 100 most influential tweets by the number of retweets and the 100 most influential tweets by the number of times it was selected as favourite (for a total of 120 original tweets once combined); tweets from the list of the most influential users by the number of followers and followings and the most influential users by the number of times they used the hashtag (for a total of 162 original tweets once combined); and the list of the 100 most used hashtags associated with #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum. Following insights from critical discourse analysis, the methodology used here consists of a discourse-historical

approach and interprets the available data through our knowledge of the social and political context of the time in order to identify possible answers to the question delineated above and generate further questions to critically understand the observed social phenomenon (Reisigl and Wodak 2016).

*The Broader Historical and Political Context of the Hashtag: Politics and Policies of Syrians in Turkey*

After the civil war started in Syria and until 2015, Turkey followed an open-door migration policy towards all Syrians. Accordingly, Turkey became the country hosting the largest refugee population, with around 2.75 million Syrians living in Turkey by July 2016 at the time of the #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum episode (and closer to 3.6 in 2019) (UNHCR 2019). This rapid increase in the number of Syrians in Turkey, of whom only a small minority (less than 4 per cent in 2019) live in the camps, has changed the demographic structure of both border cities and Turkey's larger metropolises. Turkey's policies towards the status of Syrians in Turkey have revolved, since 2014, around the status of 'temporary protection'. Meant to address the challenge of mass influx, this status gives protection to all Syrians in Turkey and provides, with conditions, access to residency, the labour market, education and healthcare. The temporary-protection status given to Syrians in Turkey is not a 'refugee' status as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention, and it is also distinct from the conditional-refugee status given to non-European and non-Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey (DGMM 2014; see also Çorabatır 2016).

Unexpectedly, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced on 2 July 2016 his new agenda of providing Turkish citizenship to Syrians living in Turkey. The announcement itself provided no specifics as to what the conditions and timeline would be, but it was enough to trigger a number of reactions and responses. Erdoğan supporters were somewhat surprised, given that the AKP (Justice and Development Party) leadership had made no indications of such a move beforehand. Asylum and migration experts were also surprised given that Syrian refugees so far had not been given an internationally recognized refugee status, yet were now promised the 'higher' status (i.e. including more rights) of citizenship. Simultaneously, this announcement triggered a significant social and political backlash by boosting anxiety for many Turkish citizens. The content, timing and possible impact of a naturalization process became major topics of discussion. And indeed, following these events, the Twitter hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum (#IdontwantSyriansinmycountry) began trending in Turkey.

*The Hashtag and Populism*

The hashtag #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum carries a straightforward message: the expression of a wish from the user of the hashtag that Syrians would no longer be in Turkey. This may imply both a stop to accepting more Syrians entering Turkey and/or to remove Syrians already in Turkey through returns or an onward journey beyond Turkey. While the hashtag existed sporadically before President

Erdoğan's citizenship announcement, it is as a response to the announcement that it found its sudden popularity. As such, the hashtag clearly presents an opposition to the policy announced by President Erdoğan and goes even further: not only should Syrians not get citizenship; they should not even be in Turkey.

Among the six elements of populism outlined in the previous sections of this study, two distinctive characteristics of the hashtag's message are easily observable (element 1 and element 5). First (element 1), it is a simple—if not simplistic—message that was successful at being popular. Beyond the peak on 3 July (with over 54000 tweets or retweets on that day), it was used 71996 times between 2 July and 15 July 2016, which is remarkably high for a hashtag that is only intelligible to the Turkish Twittersphere. It is also a very simplistic discourse. The hashtag does not allow nuances and amalgams all Syrians under one category, as well as, in this context, implicitly confusing residency with citizenship. Second (element 5), it is hostile towards a typical target of populism—a category of foreigners—and is very focused on that particular topic. The other elements—the dichotomous view (element 2), the othering and polarization (element 3), the anti-elitism (element 4) and the existence of a leader (element 6)—require further elaboration.

The existence of a leader (element 6) is the element that seems to be the most obviously lacking. In social science, it is always challenging to prove something that does not exist. At the onset of this research project, it seemed that there was no obvious leader championing this particular hashtag. But, in order to ascertain this more conclusively, a heteroclitic methodology was applied here to identify potential leaders of the hashtag.

The first step was to recognize that the hashtag became popular in reaction to a strong leader: as shown above, it was indeed the speech of President Erdoğan that triggered the reaction. However, in this situation, president Erdoğan is constitutive to the discourse, but opposed to it. In a sense, he is a counter-leader to the hashtag. Rivals to Erdoğan could, therefore, emerge as natural leaders to the hashtag. Leaders of other parties did express their opposition or concerns relative to the naturalization of Syrians. However, none of them, nor their entourage, mentioned this particular hashtag. In our Twitter data, there were only scant references to these leaders. Eight tweets mentioned Kılıçdaroğlu (the leader of main opposition party, CHP) and, interestingly enough, actually, all called for him to show leadership on this issue. Below is an example of such a tweet inviting these party chairmen to champion the hashtag: 'Bub, at least make some decent opposition on the issue of Syrians! @kilicdarogluk @dbdevletbahceli #IDontwantSyriansInMyCountry' (translated by the authors).

Traditional political leaders did not explicitly take advantage of the popularity of the tweet. However, as discussed above, populist leaders tend to not be 'traditional' or established leaders. Rather, they emerge somewhat unexpectedly, through the championing of a popular populist discourse. So the hashtag itself could be creating a new leader. In the 120 combined most influential tweets, only one celebrity, a well-known stylist, was mentioned as someone whom tweeters of the hashtag were looking to for some leadership. He himself did not use the hashtag, but one of his most popular tweets (showing hostility towards Syrian

refugees and the AKP government) was retweeted with the addition of the #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorom hashtag 292 times and liked 435 times. This stylist created significant buzz on that day (6 July 2016) but did not follow through with this particular discourse after that.

On the other hand, among the most influential users who had mentioned the hashtag, only a few of them were recognizable as a 'public figure' who could potentially play the role of leader. To assess this, we asked independently six individual Turkish Twitter users to read over the list of the most influential users and let us know which name they recognized. Among the few names recognized, most of them took on Twitter to criticize the hashtag (rather than champion it) and typically only mentioned it once. Two users both used the hashtag in several tweets (more than 10) and were recognized by readers: a fictional Twitter character and a journalist. However, both of these users are only known within the Twittersphere and tweeted this hashtag extensively only in a few sittings during the immediate days after 2 July 2016. The content of their tweets seems indeed more to relay a genuine emotional reaction or the willingness to offend and create a reaction (as would be expected of a Twitter 'troll') rather than create and lead a movement based on this issue.

From this data, it seems indeed that, as of the end of October 2016, the discourse supported by the particularly popular hashtag of #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorom did not either generate a *sui generis* leader, nor is there an existing norm entrepreneur taking advantage of the situation and championing the hashtag. The smaller January 2019 resurgence of the hashtag exhibits a similar trend. Depending on how the domestic political agenda in Turkey will evolve in the future, it is not inconceivable to see again a new surge in the popularity of the hashtag, as well as the emergence of a leader. However, the episode with the famous stylist's tweet is somewhat telling. His tweet—and the massive retweets and retweets of the retweet—created a backlash on traditional media outlets. By going against the hegemonic discourse of the government and media and generally shared norms of hospitality in the Turkish society, he gained both popularity and followings, but also opposition and bad press.

The absence of a leader here raises also the interesting issue of the role played by Twitter in this case. What would have happened had Twitter (or other social media) not existed, given that no public figure is championing this discourse? Speculatively, it is possible that this emotional adverse reaction to President Erdoğan's naturalization announcement would have been limited to isolated expressions and not creating immediately a community of people thinking alike. It seems clear that Twitter allowed this discourse to create this community and the feeling that many more people are sharing the same view. It made this discourse more visible. There is also evidence that #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorom existed on other social-media platforms. However, it is not clear that it empowered the discourse beyond social media. A cursory review of coverage of this hashtag in traditional media outlets actually reveals that the coverage is either descriptive or actually critical of the hashtag's discourse. So, while there is evidence that this discourse did partially exist beyond the echo chamber of a group of Twitter users,

the way in which the discourse was reflected outside of social media does not really support the popularity of the discourse. If anything, it seems to have revealed a popular feeling, but one that was not easily adopted beyond the hashtag community.

Additional insights can explain the absence of a leader for this 2016 occurrence of the hashtag, as well as why the hashtag had a limited impact. One has to do with the increasing use by the AKP since 2013 of ‘digital populism’: [Bulut and Yörük \(2017\)](#) claim that, after understanding the importance that social media could have on political development (which is both a factor of new technology and the discredit of traditional media, in particular in Turkey), the AKP started to recruit a social-media team to further its political message on Twitter. This has led to a certain level of polarization, but lowered the level of opposing voices ([Bulut and Yörük 2017](#)). Another explanation has to do with the nature of the broader pro-Syrian-refugee discourse of the AKP leadership, which can best be understood as a civilizationist discourse. By using language of benevolence and moral superiority in its generous policy toward Syrian brothers, ‘the AKP has taken hold of the discursive upper hand’ ([Yanaşmayan et al. 2019](#): 47). In turn, this makes it difficult for a leader to emerge and challenge the hegemonic pro-refugee discourse. In turn, the sharp decrease in the use of the hashtag immediately following the attempted coup of 15 July 2016 can be explained by either a change of focus to different areas of concerns or to the increased self-censorship in the face of increased political control on social media following the coup.

The discussion so far has highlighted that the #ülkemesuriyeliistemiyorum hashtag contains elements 1 (simple and popular) and 5 (focus on refugees). It does not, however, contain element 6 (existence of a leader). The question now remains as to whether it displays a dichotomous view (element 2), whether it otherizes and polarizes (element 3) and whether it displays anti-elitism (element 4). Tackling these three elements together, the discussion underlines interesting developments that are rooted in the nature of anti-refugee discourse, the structure of social-media discourse using hashtags, as well as the Turkish political context.

There is indeed ambivalence in the way in which the hashtag creates a dichotomous understanding of the issue. On the one hand, there is an implied clear distinction between two incompatible views: the ‘pro-Syrians’ (normatively assessed as bad) vs. the ‘anti-Syrians’ (normatively assessed as good). But, on the other hand, it is unclear, and the qualitative content analysis of the tweets highlights it clearly, whether ‘Syrians’ are the enemy or whether ‘Pro-Syrian policymakers’ are. In this sense, there is a constitutive ambiguity embedded in the hashtag that merges tropes of populism criticizing the elite (highlighting a hierarchical top-down understanding) and tropes of nativism or nationalism criticizing the foreigners (highlighting an inside–outside understanding) (see further elaboration on this distinction in [De Cleen and Stavrakis 2017](#)). There is ‘othering’ toward Syrians (the immigrants/refugees/foreigners). However, polarization is not against Syrians, but rather between the anti-Syrian segment of the population and the pro-Syrian leaders in government. This conflation between two logics is evident in the other hashtags that were often associated with the

#ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum one, which expresses both frustration/hate toward Syrians and anger towards policymakers (and whose existence also confirmed the robustness of the discourse online). Examples include:

#Suriyelilergitsin or #Suriyeligitsin [#Syriansshouldgo],  
#suriyelileriistemiyorum or #suriyelileriistemiyoruz [#IdontwantSyrians,  
#WedontwantSyrians],  
#suriyelilerehayir [#notoSyrians],  
#SuriyelilereVatandaşlıkVerilmesin [#DontgivecitizenshiptoSyrians],  
#SuriyelilereVatandaşlıkİstemiyoruz [#WedonotwantcitizenshipforSyrians],  
#SuriyelilerSınırDışı or #Suriyeliler SınırDışiedilsin [#DeportationforSyrians,  
#LetsdeportSyrians]

Another important aspect that challenges the assumption of a simple polarizing discourse is rooted in the structure of the hashtag, which is distinct from the structure of other messaging forms on social media. While untagged text is typically seen only by the personalized connection, hashtags potentially connect people who share the hashtag, whether approvingly or critically. As our coding of the most popular tweets carrying the hashtag reveals, while 75 per cent of the normative tweets were approving of the negative message of the hashtag, 25 per cent were criticizing the excluding message and presenting counter-arguments. The use of the hashtag that showed criticism included three types of tropes: 12 tweets (out of 120) were a call for mercy and empathy towards Syrians; 7 reflected values of solidarity and feeling of kinship, mostly with religious ‘brother’; and 8 highlighted an anti-racism discourse, accusing the hashtag of being racist and/or fascist. It is difficult to gauge how much users of both sides were affected by the other sides’ arguments, but this is an interesting structural aspect of a hashtag. And it is also one that can be used proactively to counteract certain discourses. In addition, while most tweets were relatively clear in terms of their support or opposition to the message of the hashtag (normative tweets), a significant portion of the tweets was more balanced and nuanced, showing arguments of both sides. In that sense, the structure of the hashtag poked holes in the echo chamber it was creating. It also created overall a more ambiguous overall discourse and may have partially prevented further polarization.

Finally, the anti-elitism element is further confounding given the specific political context of Turkey. As was mentioned earlier, the hashtag discourse became viral in direct response to the announcement of the Turkish president, after years of he and his party incarnating a pro-Syrian-refugee policy. In that sense, the hashtag is clearly anti-incumbent, i.e. opposing the current leadership. But, in the Turkish political context, conflating anti-incumbent sentiment with anti-establishment or anti-elitism is problematic. The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party (the AKP, Party of Justice and Development) was itself based on populist rhetoric by claiming to bring the voice of the people to power. President Erdoğan’s style of governance continues to follow a populist style given his initial self-portrait as an outsider to the political establishment, his frequent use of

anti-establishment appeals and his plebiscitary view of democracy (Aytaç and Öniş 2014). It could indeed be argued that, now that Erdoğan and his party have been in power for almost two decades, and have consolidated their power by taking control over most centres of power, they are now the new establishment. By challenging the legitimacy of Erdoğan's hegemonic populism, such a realization, as well as populist expressions of dissatisfaction and opposition, pose a clear risk to the current leadership. However, such a redefinition of power relation has not been clearly articulated by existing political movements challenging Erdoğan. Furthermore, the source of anger directed by this hashtag towards the political leadership is not articulated against their status of an elite ignoring the needs of the people, but more narrowly defined against Syrians and Turkey's Syrian-refugee policies.

### Conclusions

Anti-immigration is a remarkable instrument of populist policies and discourse. Such a discourse is also prevalent in social media. Based on this fact, we questioned whether anti-immigration discourse in social media can or should be understood as a sort of populism. Looking at a very specific case study of an anti-immigration discourse on Turkish social media, we found that some elements qualified it as a populist discourse (a simple, popular and anti-refugee), but others (a dichotomous, polarizing and othering, anti-elite discourse championed by a leader) were more ambiguous, highlighting new important insights regarding the linkage between anti-immigration in social media and populism.

Accordingly, our analysis contributed to the literature on populism by bringing to light the need to unpack the idea of 'elite' that is at the core of populist thinking. Learning from the Turkish case, there are conceptual differences between the elite/establishment on the one hand and incumbent political leadership on the other. Does any form of opposition to leadership or power qualify as populism? What happens when the new elite defines itself as anti-elite? Continuing in this line of thought, and of importance for studies of anti-refugee sentiments, what is the relationship between the elite and refugees in populist discourses? In most contemporary situations, the refugee population (together with the broader immigrant population) is seen as the lower bottom of the social scale, so how are anti-elite and anti-refugee understandings articulated together? Why are populism and nativism so naturally allied?

Another important set of insights generated by our analysis concerns the role of social media in constituting populist and/or anti-refugee discourses. Here, Twitter offered a venue for a hateful and unhealthy discourse to thrive and survive over time in the Twittersphere through the #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum hashtag. It also created a community of like-minded people who share a common willingness to exclude Syrian refugees. One of the most prominent divergences of this discourse from the traditional interpretation of populism is the lack of a leader or any norm entrepreneur who could instrumentally take advantage of the apparent popularity of this exclusive discourse. The hashtag itself, while powerful and

overwhelming on Twitter, did not really expand beyond social media and the structural nature of the hashtag also gave room for people critical of this discourse to connect to those approvingly tweeting the hashtag. As such, the echo chamber of #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum was not waterproof to external criticisms. The very absence of a leader to the hashtag can also be seen as a positive, if not puzzling, development: it allowed this form of popular sentiment to be expressed and partially heard, but without being easily mainstreamed. The implications of leaderlessness for such political discourse (whether populist or not) on social media should be further discussed and its implications for the practice of democracy further analysed.

This study also contributes new insights into the politics of immigration in Turkey. The hashtag seems to have been the messenger to a powerful populist discourse that revealed the existence and extent of frustration towards Syrians that is shared by a sizeable segment of Turkey's population. It also seems to have empowered and encouraged supporters of this message to express themselves freely—something that was clearly facilitated by social media. But the structure of the hashtag also allowed opening room for some alternative voices, in ways that would not be possible otherwise without the hashtag. However, its existence beyond Twitter is limited and mostly opened spaces to be criticized. And it was also a short-lived moment on social media. On the other hand, it was one element of a broader 'backlash' created by the 2 July 2016 citizenship announcement that led the Turkish political leadership to minimize the impact of the policy. The issue was no longer referred to in public speeches and, when prompted for explanation, the policy was reduced to a more restrictive policy in which only qualifying (i.e. qualified) Syrians would be granted citizenship. In January 2019, official numbers mentioned that roughly 75000 Syrians had been granted citizenship. How decisive was the #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum hashtag in this initial backlash is open to interpretation, but it should at least have been a contributing factor. And whether 75000 is a very low number (for people expecting millions of naturalization) or a high number (for people who were hoping for the prompt removal of Syrians in Turkey) is also a subjective assessment. What seems clear, however, is that this initial backlash was successful in convincing Turkish authorities to be more discreet during the process. It also corresponds to a realization that public opinion more broadly, and including a strong segment of the AKP supporters, remained largely frustrated by the presence of Syrians in Turkey and the policies accompanying them: as reported by a 2019 survey, '57.6 per cent of respondents prefers to end receiving refugees and only 7 per cent appear content with the existing Syrian refugee in Turkey' (Aydm et al., 2019). Eventually, starting from 2018, the Turkish president started to change the focus away from long-term settlement in Turkey and rather prioritize Syrian refugees' return to Syria. Such decisions could have taken their cues from, among other things, expressions of anti-immigration sentiments such as this hashtag. Accordingly, it seems very important to remain aware of the underlying concerns and anxieties expressed by the population, but also the ways in which it impacts the broader political system.

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