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How do local actors interpret, enact and contest policy? An analysis of local government responses to meeting the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey

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ABSTRACT
Although 98% of Turkey's 3.6 million Syrian refugees live outside camps, municipalities lack formal authority to initiate policies, while receiving no government funding for refugees. Drawing on interpretive policy analysis (IPA), the article unpacks the empirical puzzle of how formally weak local governments respond to refugee needs. IPA expects policy to be constituted through diverse sets of local meanings. Case studies in three districts in Istanbul revealed distinctive local narratives, some of which consolidated the national agenda of 'hospitality' while others focused on equal rights and integration. Municipal narratives reflected particular local contexts, selectively mobilizing deeper governing traditions. Local interpretations were enacted in specific approaches to refugee service delivery. Working with local NGOs, municipalities accessed international funds, despite national government's vociferous critique of EU refugee policy. Even in an increasingly authoritarian setting, refugee policy was being constituted through multiple and contingent processes of local government interpretation.

Introduction

Turkey hosts the world's largest community of displaced Syrians (about 3.6 million), who are not recognised as 'refugees' but given 'temporary protection'. From 2011, Turkey pursued an open-door policy based on narratives of hospitality and religious solidarity. As it became clear that Syrians' presence in Turkey was likely to become permanent, more emphasis was placed upon social cohesion, and the option of voluntary return. This article argues that a local government perspective is important for understanding Turkey's refugee policy. First, 98% of Syrians live as urban refugees throughout the country rather than being located in camps, which creates enormous challenges for local government. Second, in Turkey's highly centralised

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political system, local governments lack formal authority to initiate policies, receive no extra funding for refugees, and yet have to respond to their needs on a daily basis. The article investigates the way in which local governments interpret and enact – but also contest – the narrative of the Turkish state, which began as generally positive but has become more restrictive.

Although traditionally framed in relation to national models, migration research has experienced a 'local turn' (Zapata-Barrero, Capanio, and Scholten 2017), including studies on the local dynamics of Turkish refugee policy (Danış and Nazlı 2018; Eliçin 2018; Genç 2018; Woods and Kayalı 2017). Building on this literature, our research makes a contribution by identifying the distinctive policy narratives emerging in local government and the ways these are reflected in refugee services and facilities. Narrative is undoubtedly a contested concept, used by some to refer to characters and events within a plot (e.g. Feldman et al. 2004). However, we use the term more broadly to refer to a 'medium of expression', whereby purposeful social agents 'create and use stories to communicate meaning' (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy et al. 2005, 291), deploying language and other symbolic resources.

Although interpretive approaches have gained some traction in migration research (Scuzzarello 2015; Dekker 2017), our article is the first to apply 'interpretive policy analysis' (IPA) (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Wagenaar 2011; Yanow 2000). We use IPA to unpack the empirical puzzle of how traditionally weak local governments are stepping up to the challenge of meeting the needs of 3.6 million refugees. Turkey's national government is silent about local government's role in supporting refugees, but this absence conveys meaning – that municipalities must 'cope' with what is (increasingly unconvincingly) portrayed as a temporary situation.[1] IPA argues that less powerful actors are implicated in dominant narratives (having roles and meanings assigned to them) but are also 'storytellers' in their own right. Even in relatively authoritarian settings like Turkey (Esen and Gümüşcü 2016; Somer 2016), IPA expects less powerful actors, including in local government, to be actively and critically deconstructing dominant meanings. This article explores the ways in which dominant narratives are contested and new meanings forged, through local interpretation and action. The aim is to unravel the different meanings that inform local iterations of national policy.

The article starts by elaborating Turkey's national refugee policy. Then we present the IPA conceptual framework and explain our research methods. The remaining sections analyse qualitative research with municipalities in Istanbul. We demonstrate the diverse paths taken by local governments, reflecting specific social and political contexts but also the active and critical mobilisation of deeper governing traditions (sometimes in opposition to central government discourse). It was outside the scope of this research to analyse the interpretations of Syrians themselves, but our work complements

a small but growing literature on Syrian perspectives (Şimşek 2018; Uyan-Semerci and Erdoğan 2018; Gürsoy and Ertaşoğlu 2019; Thorleifsson 2020).

Policy context

Turkey hosts the world's largest community of displaced Syrians. In 2019, when the fieldwork was completed, more than 3.6 million Syrians were registered (4.5% of Turkey's population), with 98% living outside camps in urban settings. Turkey signed the 1951 Geneva Convention only with 'geographical limitation', so only those fleeing 'events occurring in Europe' are eligible for refugee status. Although Turkey does not recognise Syrians as 'refugees', we use the term throughout the article in line with the UNHCR definition and the extant literature (Koca 2015; Memişoğlu and Ilgıt 2017; Eliçin 2018).

Although Syrians were initially depicted as temporary guests, the 2014 migration law established a General Directorate of Migration Management, as their numbers surpassed millions, and granted Syrians 'temporary protection' status (with no time limit on their stay and no forced return). Reaffirming the original 'geographical limitation' rule, the law did not lead to formal recognition as refugees, although it enabled access to services like health and education. Opportunities for Syrians to work (formally) were introduced in 2016, but only 31,000 had obtained permits by 2019 (Mülteci-Der 2019).

The national policy narrative on Syrian refugees has proved both ambiguous and dynamic, responding to changing contexts and shifts in government perceptions of political, economic and social risks (Eder and Özkul 2016; Danış and Nazlı 2018). The absence of a universal, institutionalised, rights-based policy has led to significant variation in local responses to refugees, and in their living standards and level of integration. Biehl (2015) demonstrates how a proliferation of actors and regulations, a lack of information and high levels of discretion have all served to create a web of structural ambiguities and uncertainties for Syrians. An important factor driving variation in local government responses has been the lack of a clear legal framework; legally, municipalities do not have any responsibility to develop policies targeting refugees. With no special funds from central government, municipalities are fearful that spending their own resources on refugees could be deemed illegal and/or alienate their own constituencies.[2]

The number of arrivals in European countries led to an agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016. Greece was to return all 'irregular migrants' to Turkey and the EU was required to accept one Syrian refugee from Turkey for each returnee (20,292 were resettled by March 2019) (European Commission 2019). While the EU promised to provide Turkey 6 billion euros of funding for humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure and socio-economic support, only 2.1 billion euros had been disbursed by 2019 (Makovsky 2019). Turkey complained that assistance was being disbursed too slowly (and

with too many conditions), while the EU argued that Turkey was ill prepared to absorb funding and develop projects effectively (International Crisis Group 2018).[3] EU funding is important for municipalities which are struggling to finance their refugee services, in the absence of any additional funding from the national government.

Turkey's national narrative has been based upon religious solidarity (Korkut 2016; Polat 2018; Danış and Nazlı 2018), framing Syrian refugees and the hosting nation as 'Muslims' (despite the secular character of the Turkish republic). The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has claimed a moral and historical responsibility towards Syrian refugees, perceiving the modern Middle East as part of a wider Ottoman heritage. Demirtaş-Bagdonas (2014) argues that this is part of the AKP's attempt to create a 'great power' narrative and assert Turkey's moral superiority *vis-a`-vis* other actors in the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. The AKP government has crafted a negative narrative depicting the West as inhumane and irresponsible towards Syrian refugees, failing to share the financial burden or accept enough refugees (Guardian 2015). However, from 2018, President Erdoğan, champion of Turkey's original open-door policy, started to row back, stating that: 'Turkey is not in a position to continue hosting 3.5 million refugees forever' (Hürriyet Daily News 2018). Although mobility restrictions had previously existed, the government tightened these controls in 2019, for instance requiring Syrians living without approval in İstanbul to return to the border provinces where they were registered. In October 2019, Turkey launched a military campaign 'to provide security and stability' in North Syria, as a potential reception area for refugees 'sent back' from Turkey and in order to prevent further flows of refugees. In March 2020, Turkey removed border controls with Greece and Bulgaria, effectively abandoning the 2016 EU deal.[4]

In short, Turkey's policy towards Syrians has been characterised by the existence of multiple policy narratives of hospitality, social cohesion and latterly 'voluntary' return (İçduygu and Nimer 2020). It is important to investigate the local government's scope for action within this evolving national context. For example, Betts, Memişoğlu, and Ali (2020) demonstrate that municipal mayors matter because they may mediate the implementation of national policies and may adopt supplementary refugee policies. Our research analyses the ways in which local government actors are making sense of this complex and ambiguous discursive terrain, as they strive to meet the complex and urgent needs of the Syrian population while at the same time trying to balance demands from their local constituencies.

Conceptual framework

This article aims to identify local government policy narratives about Syrian refugees in Turkey, analyse how they are enacted, and investigate whether

they challenge or consolidate national narratives. To unearth these diverse and competing meanings we deploy conceptual tools from 'interpretive policy analysis' (IPA), combined with insights from the Bevir and Rhodes' interpretivism (2006, 2016). IPA considers 'not only 'what' specific policies mean but also 'how' they mean' (Yanow 2000, 8), asking: 'What are the various ways in which we make sense of public policies? How do policies convey their meaning?' (Yanow 1996, ix). IPA does not try to establish the 'real' meaning of a particular policy but to reveal the multiple meanings that, in effect, constitute the policy. As Wagenaar (2011, 5) puts it, meaning does not just influence the categories and content of public policy, but rather 'brings them into being'. An IPA approach challenges the idea that international or national policy pronouncements can be taken at face value, instead inviting exploration of the active (and varied) construction of what (and how) the refugee policy means at the local government level.

IPA focuses our attention on the way in which meanings are communicated symbolically, whether through linguistic form – laws, statements, speeches, debates – or physical form, via the design of buildings, organisation of public meetings, or style of dress of local government staff. Wagenaar (2011, 573) enjoins researchers to analyse language but also the way in which objects and images 'create social visions, constitute identities, create publics, and influence individual and group relationships'. We are interested, as Yanow (2000, 36) puts it, in the meanings that 'dance' around a policy and the ways in which they are expressed. IPA expects interpretation to vary between different 'communities of meaning' (Yanow 2000, 10), depending upon their distinctive sensibilities, prior experience and current context. Some communities of meaning have more power than others to advance their understanding of a policy, or delimit the scope of interpretation available to others.

From an IPA perspective, less powerful actors, including in local government, are expected to be 'storytellers' in their own right engaging in active and critical deconstructions of dominant meanings. However, dominant narratives may also be contested through local interpretation and action. Newman (2005) reminds us that less powerful actors may react to governing strategies by fashioning their own narratives and generating new capacities to act. Bevir and Rhodes (2016, 16–17) argue that local actors resist dominant narratives (and the 'restrictive power' they express) by drawing on their own, highly contextualised, 'local reasoning'. Narratives, they note, 'depend on the conditional connections between beliefs, desires and actions'.

Specific policy meanings can be situated in relation to broader governing 'traditions', or sets of 'inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, 7). Such shared traditions do not determine individuals' beliefs or behaviour but provide a context for exercising reason and creative agency. While legal and constitutional arrangements

reflect particular governing traditions (linked to history, geography, politics and culture), these may be contested over time (discursively and/or violently). A particular tradition (or mix of traditions) may dominate at any one time. For Turkey, traditions of democratic republicanism and secular military rule have alternated in dominance since the foundation of the modern Turkish state; both are characterised by a strong central state and weak local government and civil society. The AKP government also mobilises traditions of political Islam and 'neo-Ottomanism', referencing pre-republican legacies of guardianship of the Islamic community (Davutoğlu 2001; Criss 2010). Reflecting this, Turkey's national policy has depicted Syrians as 'guests' and 'Muslim bretheren' (rather than refugees), setting itself in opposition to EU policies that refer to 'rights' but actually minimise Syrians' access to European nations.

Following Wagenaar (2011, 62), we see meaning as 'action-oriented' and 'interactive'. In well-established policy areas, meanings are crystallised into durable institutions that provide parameters for action (Lowndes 2016, 110). However, in novel policy areas, meaning is 'held' in enactments that are relatively regular and predictable but lack the clear prescriptions and sanctions associated with public policy institutions. Refugee policy in Turkey is a new, fluid and contested policy domain, marked by an absence in settled institutional responses. Local governments face a context in which national policy is ambiguous and unstable, refugee needs are urgent and extensive, and available resources are extremely limited. However, they also face what Hupe and Hill (2007) call 'an action imperative'. In this research, we investigate local government narratives and the ways in which they are enacted in particular services and facilities.

Methodology

In Turkey, central government appoints provincial and district governors, but mayors and local councils are directly elected. District municipalities are responsible for urban infrastructure, town planning, food regulation, and cultural activities. Metropolitan municipalities oversee urban planning, transport, construction of facilities (social, educational, cultural, sports) and environmental protection. Municipalities lack financial autonomy and are heavily regulated by central government (Kadirbeyoğlu and Sümer 2012). Below the level of the district, the *mukhtar* is an elected but non-partisan individual, serving as a bridge between neighbourhood residents and the municipality. The *mukhtar* is responsible for identifying people in poverty, renewing voter registers and informing agencies of public service problems.

To investigate the varied meanings associated with refugee policy at the local government level, we adopted a case study research design, which is appropriate when 'a "how" or "why" question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no

control' (Yin 2009, 13). We wanted to understand 'how' refugee policy was constituted at the local government level, why policy narratives varied between localities, and whether they contested national narratives. In selecting case study areas, we kept the city context constant, given variation between cities with high refugee numbers. For instance, border cities in the South East hosted newly arrived Syrians in camps; Aegean coastal cities saw refugees congregating to seek passage to Europe; and Istanbul became the destination for refugees moving in search of work. Our research focuses on three districts in Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, which is home to the highest number of Syrian refugees (half a million – although registration irregularities means this is an estimate only). Istanbul has been a destination for migrant groups prior to Syrians' arrival, with approximately one million non-Turkish citizens living in the city (Erdoğan 2017, 29).

From among the 39 district municipalities in the metropolitan area of Istanbul, purposive sampling enabled us to identify three districts that had relevant refugee services and facilities, but also varied according to socio-economic status, ethnic religious composition, prior experience with migration, party control, employment patterns and class structure. Table 1 compares the characteristics of Sultanbeyli, Şişli and Zeytinburnu.

Our research design aimed to yield analytical generalisations (Yin 2009) and did not seek to generalise from cases to all municipalities in Turkey. There was not an intention to come up with law-like generalisations, but rather to infer the best explanation for our research puzzle – how traditionally weak local governments have stepped up to the challenge of meeting the needs of 3.6 million refugees in the absence of clear legal powers or targeted public funds. The interpretive researcher does not ask if an explanation is empirically generalisable but rather investigates whether 'it works in context' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 46–9). Thus we follow Small's (2009, 28) advice to 'pursue alternative epistemological assumptions qualitative better suited to their unique questions, rather than retreat towards models designed for statistical description'.

We undertook 32 semi-structured interviews with municipal actors, local civil servants (government appointees), and NGOs working with local government. Interviewing Syrians refugees was outside the scope of our research, which focused on understanding the interpretations of local government. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate method for exploring actors' interpretations of local measures to address refugees' needs, allowing us to tease out implicit meanings and tacit knowledge. Observation at refugee facilities and services enabled us to identify and compare ways in which policy actors' narratives were enacted in the three districts. Following piloting in April 2018, fieldwork was conducted between November 2018 and May 2019. Since this was a new policy area for municipalities (and intended to be temporary),

Table 1. Characteristics of the three local government districts.

	Sultanbeyli	Şişli	Zeytinburnu
Socio-economic status	Low (38th out of 39)	High (4th out of 39)	Medium (18th out of 39)
Political control (2014 local elections)	Strongly AKP (61%)	Strongly CHP (62%)	AKP (49%), CHP (29%)
Local population	322,000	274,000	290,000
Number of Syrians	20,192 (highest on Asian side of Istanbul)	15,269 (highest among CHP controlled districts)	25,000 (highest ratio in Istanbul)
Share from central budget	313 million TL	670 million TL	505 million TL
Local economy	Small business, textiles, automobile, shopkeepers	Textiles, retail, finance, luxury shopping, entertainment	Textiles and leather goods
Previous experience with migration	Rapid domestic migration in 1990s	Outward migration in 1950s (Greeks left) Migrants from Iran, Iraq, Africa in 1990s Domestic migration in 1990s (mostly Kurds)	Central Asian Turkic Republics, Afghans, Uyghurs Communities from Balkans Domestic migration in 1990s (mostly Kurds)
Other	Located on the outskirts of the city Mainly conservative residents	Cosmopolitan legacy Non-Muslim communities LGBT presence	

Sources: Şeker (2015), Erdoğan (2017), Sözcü (2018)

there was no standard set of roles to be sampled across cases. Relevant actors and departments were identified separately for each case, using information from websites, followed by 'snowballing'. Transcripts were anonymised and numerical references used to link quotations to individual respondents. Manual coding used themes derived from the conceptual framework and analysis of the national policy context, with further codes added based on observed regularities within the data. We triangulated our primary data via documentary analysis, including legal documents, think tank reports, government publications, websites, minutes, speeches and media accounts.

Given our interpretive framework, it is not possible to establish a neat separation between 'findings' and 'analysis', so these are presented together. First, we identify the main local government policy narratives, indicating which narratives predominated (among multiple narratives) in each case and why. Second, we show how dominant narratives were enacted through the provision of refugee services and facilities. Finally, we consider the extent to which local government narratives challenged those at the national level. Throughout we note linkages to underpinning traditions of governance.

Local government interpretations of refugee policy

Our research data showed that local government interpretations cohered around five distinct narratives: humanitarianism, pragmatism, social cohesion, equal rights and anti-refugees. We discuss these in turn, showing how they present themselves in different ways, and how the mix of narrative positions was changing over time in each of the three districts. It is clear that the meanings which dominated in each district were related to contextually contingent 'local reasoning' (Bevir and Rhodes 2016, 16), associated with spatially distinctive political and cultural sensibilities, linked to historical legacies and varied (and evolving) interpretations of the current policy context.

Humanitarianism

A powerful humanitarian narrative was apparent among local actors in both Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu, within the municipality and among local NGOs. (The humanitarian narrative was present to a lesser extent in Şişli). In Sultanbeyli we were told that: 'Our main motivation is humanitarian. If we opened the doors, we should provide them the minimum standards' (Sultanbeyli-05). Another respondent said: 'We need to provide humanitarian aid because there is an ongoing crisis. If the crisis gets bigger, these people will be the victims' (Sultanbeyli-04).

This narrative related less to a universal philosophical doctrine of humanitarianism and more to contingent local meanings linked to responsibility for Syrians' welfare, in the wake of the initial open-door policy. For our interviewees, this 'human-centred' narrative was connected to ideas of hospitality, charity and helpfulness. However, this narrative appeared to be waning in all districts, as Syrians' presence in Turkey became longstanding. Recalling the years when Syrians first arrived, actors emphasised humanitarian work aimed at meeting basic needs. Neighbourhood networks of volunteers were mobilised (alongside community groups and local NGOs), in the absence of state provision. Interviewees pointed out that the practical response of the Turkish nation began with such local action. Subsequent shifts in local response were linked to three factors. First, humanitarianism was seen as less significant once the central state started to take some steps to assist refugees (e.g. cash support and the selective issuing of work permits). Second, with the prolonging of the conflict in Syria, 'compassion fatigue' emerged among host communities. Third, due to the deterioration in Turkey's economic situation, many had come to see refugees as a burden on local government.

Equal rights

While humanitarian interpretations dominated in Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu, the dominant narrative in Şişli among municipal actors was that Syrians were individuals with equal rights. Actors in Şişli were dismissive of approaches based on humanitarian understandings: 'We shouldn't be providing aid. We should be serving their rights' (Şişli-11). Some actors criticised national humanitarian narratives as arrogant, implying an acceptance of inequality between Turks and Syrians. Understanding refugees' needs in terms of rights reflected a sense of pride in Şişli's social democratic character, which was linked to deeper governing traditions of secularism and republicanism. Interviewees in Şişli acknowledged Sultanbeyli's success – its large range of refugee projects and extensive international funding – but were critical too. As one respondent put it:

> Other municipalities may be providing much more aid but Şişli Municipality is not doing this, not providing aid from above. We meet refugees every month to give them voice . . . It is important for refugees to be visible in the city, to express themselves, to offer solutions to their own problems (Şişli-10).

As another respondent put it: 'Our policy is shaped by a concern for providing equal and inclusive services to different communities . . . This includes the disabled, refugees, the children, LGBT, Armenians and Roma community' (Şişli-06). In contrast to Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu, refugees in Şişli were understood as part of a multicultural and heterogeneous community, with a right to inclusion.

Pragmatism

We also identified a powerful local government narrative of pragmatism regarding refugee needs, which reflected a habitual disposition in the face of a strong central state (which appoints its own provincial and district governors alongside elected local government). While the term 'pragmatism' was not itself used by respondents, such a narrative was present in all three districts (with different nuances). Several respondents stated that they had not agreed with Turkey's open-door refugee policy but – given the Syrians' presence – it was their job to address refugee needs. Pragmatic interpretations were observed in three ways. First, municipal actors believed that, if needs were not addressed and opportunities provided, there would be bigger policy challenges in the future; thus providing Turkish language classes and vocational training was seen as benefitting the community in general. As respondents noted: 'Spending 1 lira on refugees today prevents you from spending 100 lira tomorrow' (Sultanbeyli-01); 'If we exclude them

now, they can go into crime. What we are doing is for the welfare of both communities' (Zeytinburnu-02).

Second, actors believed that they could access international funds through the presence of refugees, bringing material benefits to the municipality (for the local population too) along with prestige and visibility. Aiming to promote social cohesion, many international funding streams required wider community involvement: 'The International Blue Crescent provided funding to employ cleaning staff at local schools. This benefited the local community too. We are trying to disseminate this message' (Sultanbeyli-05). A Sultanbeyli respondent argued that, if a pragmatic approach was followed, municipalities could actually 'do anything except printing money' (Sultanbeyli-01), implying criticism of other municipalities who used legal limitations as an excuse for inaction.

The third aspect of the pragmatic narrative related to the long-term ambitions of Turkey's foreign policy. According to respondents in Sultanbeyli, providing decent services to refugees would improve future relations with Syria: 'Imagine 2 million Syrians go back and take important roles in Syria's reconstruction. Naturally they will be Turkey's friends' (Sultanbeyli-01). Teaching Turkish was seen as facilitating potential future trade links. This point was raised many times in Sultanbeyli (strongly AKP-dominated and pro-government) but only once in Zeytinburnu (AKP controlled but less strongly) and never in opposition-controlled Şişli. While appearing to be pragmatic, the meanings associated with this third point resonated with the governing traditions on which the AKP draws, linked to neo-Ottoman ambitions. While the pragmatic narrative was observed in Şişli, it was expressed more in terms of the benefits of international visibility that arose from working with the Refugee Solidarity and Support Centre, a local NGO receiving funding from France Expertise.

Social cohesion

Not only did different narratives coexist within and across districts, meanings were also shifting over time. While the 'guest' narrative associated both with central government and local humanitarianism had been very strong, there was increasing recognition that most Syrians were likely to remain in Turkey, perhaps permanently. This changing interpretation had led to a social cohesion narrative gaining ground, expressed in projects to integrate Syrians into district life. The Turkish government started to use the language of 'harmonisation', sometimes referring to the negative experience of Turkish migrant communities in Europe due to a *lack* of cohesion policies (reinforcing anti-EU narratives). As a respondent in pro-government Sultanbeyli put it: 'We should establish a partnership between communities right at the

beginning to prevent the problems experienced by the Turkish community in Europe' (Sultanbeyli-05). In sharp contrast to the more conservative districts of Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu, municipal actors in Şişli understood refugees as part of the broader multi-cultural and cosmopolitan character of the locality, rather than a 'special' group. As one interviewee put it:

> Şişli is a multi-cultural place with the Roma community, Jews and Armenians. Our policy should be seen not specifically as a refugee policy but a policy that respects diversity and works for social inclusion (Şişli-06).

In Zeytinburnu, the harmonisation narrative was expressed in terms of the need for 'living together'. Municipal services were made available to refugees on the basis of 'hemsehrilik' (local residency rather than citizenship):

> The kids who were born at the beginning of the Syrian conflict are now 8 years old. They don't know the Arabic alphabet. I believe that they will stay here and in order to prevent potential future explosions, we conduct these cohesion activities (Zeytinburnu-03).

Anti-refugee narratives

Negative and even hostile understandings of refugees' presence were identified in interviews with *mukhtars* (non-partisan elected neighbourhood leaders), who complained about economic implications (rising rents, unemployment), cultural differences, language issues and a perceived lack of social mixing. In Sultanbeyli, a *mukhtar* noted that, 'they shop from Syrian shops' (Sultanbeyli-03), while another in Şişli linked Syrians to increased crime (Şişli-08). Negative narratives were sometimes related to perceptions (real or imagined) of Syrians' wealth: 'they live in villas and travel with their jeeps' (Şişli-05). While municipal actors tended to interpret the Syrians' presence as a manifestation of Şişli's cosmopolitan and inclusive character, the *mukhtar* expressed the opposite view, interpreting refugees as a threat to diverse lifestyles, characterised as secular, gender-equal and multi-cultural. Some in Şişli felt the municipality was having difficulty 'selling' its interpretation of local refugee policy to residents. In Zeytinburnu, public opinion surveys demonstrated the extent of anti-refugee sentiment within the community, with Syrian migration cited as one of the biggest problems facing the district (Zeytinburnu Municipality 2015). The municipality had organised a public meeting with the local police to dispel rumours about Syrians' link to crime. Perhaps as the 'flip side' of the social cohesion narrative, it appeared that the anti-refugee narrative was gaining ground over time.

Enacting refugee policy at the local level

Our research investigated the services and facilities being developed by municipalities as they sought to make sense of the 'action imperative' (Hupe and Hill 2007) associated with the arrival of large numbers of refugees and the lack of a stable, coherent and resourced national policy. Local government officers took an active interest in developments in other districts and commented on the differences between them, confirming IPA's proposition that actors can reflect upon their understandings of policy, and distinguish between different communities of meaning. For example, a respondent in Zeytinburnu said that they were engaged in a 'sweet competition with Sultanbeyli' (Zeytinburnu-02).

Each district had one or more community centres providing facilities and services for refugees. Services fell into four main groups: legal counselling and advice on how to access public services (registering children at school, medical treatment, etc.); activities aimed at promoting social cohesion, including Turkish language classes, vocational training, and catch-up classes for children; specific personal services like dentistry and physiotherapy; and social and psychological support, including hobbies, trips and drama classes. However, as Table 2 shows, the extent and mix of services varied in each district, as did the mode of delivery (funding, buildings, projects), reflecting different interpretations of refugees' needs and identities, and their relationship with the host community.

Sultanbeyli had a dedicated community centre for Syrians (wryly described by local residents as the 'Syrian Municipality') and a second centre specifically for Syrian children and young people. The centres were operated by an NGO, *Mülteci-der*, created by the municipality in 2014 for the specific purpose of accessing international funds (primarily German aid) and deflecting local criticism regarding refugee spending (Sultanbeyli-01). Some respondents in other districts argued that the organisation was actually a GONGO, or government-organised NGO, created to further political interests at home and abroad by mimicking a civil society body (Şişli, 11). Sultanbeyli's comprehensive refugee provision was nevertheless highly regarded within and outside the municipality. Given that central government was reluctant to share data on refugees, Sultanbeyli had established its own refugee database, facilitating the preparation of needs-based proposals to international donors (e.g. using the number of school age children or elders). Recalling IPA's encouragement to study buildings as conveyers of meaning, we were struck by the large and visible nature of the community centres. The centres provided a physical showcase of Sultanbeyli's refugee policy, with policy meanings rendered solid and visible through the arrangement of concrete and steel. Interviewees explained that there was a steady stream of visitors from donors, NGOs and other municipalities. The role of international funders

Table 2. Enacting local government responses.

	Local narratives		Local enactment	Indicative examples
Sultanbeyli	Humanitarianism Pragmatism Social cohesion (Religion appears subtly, linked to social cohesion)	Focus on Syrians	Municipality created its own 'NGO' (Mülteci-Der) Two centres run by the NGO for Syrian community only (one general and for youth/children) International funding for staff, building and projects Large and highly visible buildings with donor signs and logos Comprehensive range of Syrian-specific services (not other migrants; later involvement of host community members)	• Turkish language classes from 8am to 10pm • Vocational training in cooperation with ISKUR • IT classes for children and adults • Cash for work with international donor support (open to both communities), e.g. mosque cleaning • Legal support for business start-ups, divorce and family issues • Nursery Syrian and local children (30% Turkish), free lunch and bus for all, cross-community parents' activities • School visits by education experts to identify integration issues, provide catch-up classes, aim to increase the number of host Syrians • Ideas Club (every three weeks, speakers emphasise that refugees are here to stay) • Friday breakfasts for women from both communities • Refugee Council bringing both communities together
Şişli	Equal rights/Rights-based Multiculturalism Pragmatism (less strong)	Focus on all migrants	Signed a protocol with and independent NGO (Migrant Solidarity Association) Established a joint Solidarity and Support Centre for all migrants (not Syrian exclusive) International funding for staff, building and projects Small and simple building without high profile Existing units within municipality (Migration Unit and Social Equality Unit) addresses Syrian needs as part of the community Focusing mainly on health needs and inclusion for all migrants (focusing on referral, advise, counselling)	• Support to access health services, including cash support for private treatment of non-registered Syrians • Community Centre (funded by UNHCR), newly established, not very active yet • Refugee Council (Syrians and other nationalities) aiming to meet monthly, informal and bottom-up, supported by UNHCR, but not currently active due to staff shortage • UNHCR funded project for training refugees to be hospital receptionists (led to some employment) • Very limited Turkish classes • LGBT solidarity network and secret shelter, open to Syrians and others (municipality delivers hot meals daily) • Free HIV tests for refugees (with New York State University) • Women's solidarity network • Social market run by the municipality (similar to food banks)

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

	Local narratives	Local enactment	Indicative examples
Zeytinburnu	Humanitarianism Social cohesion Pragmatism	Focus on all disadvantaged communities	Repurposed existing community-centre for disadvantaged groups Municipal funding (international funding to extend the building and for projects) Well-used, visible and multi-service building Long-standing municipal engagement with migrant needs including specific unit for integration (prior to Syrian arrivals) Non-Syrian specific services with emphasis on integration and needs of women and children	•All services available in 5 languages for different migrant groups •'Integration to the city' (training on history and geography of Zeytinburnu, local values and culture) •Long-term training for children: first stage provides Turkish classes, second stage is about integration (e.g. social norms and practical information about the city), third stage is a book club) •Turkish language classes for adults •Migrant women club (women's health training, hobby groups) •Women's training, integration and employability, *Kır Serçesi* (Sparrow) brand for marketing textile products produced by migrant women to be sold in chain stores (UNHCR supported) •Catch-up classes for 13–17 year old children •Trips to local attractions •Drama classes for children •Child protection project (with Save the Children) •Painting competition in local schools

was marked out by eye-catching signage, logos inside and outside, and brochures and leaflets.

Şişli municipality signed a contract in October 2016 with a local NGO, the Refugee Solidarity Association, to establish the Migrant Solidarity and Support Centre (initially funded by France Expertise) to address the needs of all migrants, including but not limited to Syrians. Although the NGO was not created by the municipality, as in Sultanbeyli, one of its staff members noted that: 'we are the "hand" of the municipality in relation to refugees' (Şişli-11). The costs of staff, building and projects were met through international funding, but the centre itself was a small, simple building (quite hard to find), on a different scale from Sultanbeyli. This may have reflected the municipality's understanding of refugees as 'just another' part of a diverse community; more cynically, it may also have been a tactic to forestall anti-refugee narratives. Reflecting its dominant rights-based narrative, Şişli municipality established its own Migration Unit in 2015, targeting all migrants (not just Syrians) and focusing on advice and referrals rather than front-line services (which the Migrant Solidarity and Support Centre took on later). The municipality also had a Social Inclusion Unit (one of just 25 in Turkey), employing staff to work on gender and LGBT issues, among migrant populations and the wider community.

Zeytinburnu municipality adopted another approach. Refugee needs were addressed through its own (directly run) Centre for Supporting Family, Women and Disabled (AKDEM), established in 2007. After 2015, the centre organised events and activities targeted at Syrian refugees. Local government actors emphasised that this centre was for all disadvantaged groups, not just migrants (as in Şişli) or Syrians (as in Sultanbeyli). While resourcing was largely through municipal funding, international funds were used to extend the existing building (in the visible form of an extra floor) and for specific projects. The re-purposing of an existing well-used and multi-purpose community centre was part of a strategy to deflect criticism that Syrians were attracting greater resources than local people (Zeytinburnu-01). Local refugee policy on the ground thus took a different direction from Sultanbeyli *despite* the similarity of the narratives observed in these two AKP-controlled districts. This pointed to the importance of studying how narratives are enacted in practice to understand 'how a policy means'. Whilst not sharing Şişli's narrative of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, Zeytinburnu municipality also had a long-standing unit for integration, reflecting the district's history of extensive internal and international migration prior to Syrians' arrival.

Contesting national refugee policy

We established earlier that IPA expects those with power to seek to secure their own understandings of a particular policy, which allocate

specific roles to other, less powerful 'communities of meaning'. In this section, we consider ways in which local government responses directly challenged the dominant meanings encapsulated in national policy narratives. As we saw earlier, national narratives stressed humanitarianism, religious hospitality, competition with the West, social cohesion and, more recently, repatriation. National narratives also reflected tensions among deeper governing traditions, particularly between secular republicanism and political Islam and neo-Ottomanism. Central government casts local government actors as those who must 'cope' with the refugee challenge on the ground, without dedicated resources or clear legal powers. The ambiguity of government refugee policy was criticised everywhere, even in AKP-controlled Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu, but most vociferously in opposition Şişli. As one interviewee put it: 'it is completely a mystery for municipalities … The government should put together a law or a policy. Lack of such policy makes the situation ambiguous and we can't have any standards' (Şişli-01). At the same time, this ambiguity opened up space for contestation and creative meaning-making, manifested differently in each district depending upon local contexts and reasoning.

Contesting the narrative of religious solidarity

We found evidence in a nuanced form of the national narrative of religious solidarity in Sultanbeyli but it was explicitly contested in Şişli and implicitly in Zeytinburnu. Decrying the religious rationale, a Şişli respondent commented: 'Of course there is a historical responsibility but it is not about *ensar-muhacir*.[5] We share the same culture; we share the same cuisine … It is not true to frame this issue as charity, aid or religion' (Şişli-02). Another Şişli interviewee called upon the secular governing tradition of the Turkish republic to argue that:

> These refugees could have been Jewish. Would the government still call them brothers? In a secular state you can only have policies based on equal rights, equal citizenship. Only then you can have a just system (Şişli-05).

NGOs with secular and humanitarian leanings in the districts acknowledged that religious narratives helped promote acceptance of refugees within conservative communities, but they differentiated themselves from religious NGOs by emphasising the different meanings they associated with refugees' needs. As one respondent said:

> Both in municipalities and public authorities in general we always hear talk about Muslim solidarity, our neighbouring Syria or the talk about *ensar-muhacir*. It is a narrative that we come across very frequently. We see this as a rights-based process. Our principle is reaching the most vulnerable (NGO actor).

Powerful pragmatic narratives at the local level challenged the heroic tone of national policy statements emphasising religious solidarity and Turkey's 'historical mission'. Municipalities did not themselves initiate the open-door policy that brought 3.6 million refugees to Turkey, but had to address refugees' needs for urgent humanitarian reasons. At the same time, as vote-seeking organisations, they were sensitive to allegations from their own local constituencies that social aid programmes favoured Syrians. As an interviewee explained: 'Municipalities are pragmatic organisations. They are accountable to their own residents and they need to understand and manage residents' attitudes' (Sultanbeyli-01).

Contesting the anti-Western narrative

In September 2019, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey had spent 40 USD billion on refugees since 2011, alongside criticisms of European countries for closing borders and not sharing the financial burden (Guardian 2019, 2015). However, our research demonstrated that many programmes at the local level were actually funded by EU countries, including in AKP-controlled districts. The scale and character of these programmes, and their collaborative approach, was in stark contrast to central government's framing of refugee policy as a heroic national endeavour. Despite the costs of meeting refugees' daily needs, municipalities received no direct support from the national budget. Budget allocations, were based on the number of Turkish citizens in each district, excluding refugees (20% of some municipalities' population). International funding enabled local actors to be more flexible, develop projects more quickly, avoid criticism from local constituencies, and prevent accusations of fraud or misuse of public funds (given legal ambiguities at national level). There were criticisms, however, among some NGOs of how the EU used funding to narrate a particular version of its role:

> … you see all the brochures and stickers of EU funders. Using their funds, we help people, we change lives. But we also see their hypocrisy. How many refugees have been resettled by the EU after the 2016 agreement? (Şişli-11)

Contesting the Syrian-focused narrative

Although Turkey had received asylum-seekers before 2011, refugee policy took on a new urgency given the scale of the Syrian refugee flow and links to AKP foreign policy in the Middle East. The government's refugee policy focused exclusively on Syrians and, given its strong pro-government position, Sultanbeyli followed suit, developing a bespoke package of services, delivered through centres focusing on Syrian's needs. Syrians' presence in the district was understood as a 'special case' requiring special treatment (initially regarded as

temporary), leading to criticisms elsewhere about the sustainability of the approach. In Table 2, we characterised this interpretive approach as a 'focus on Syrians'. In contrast, Zeytinburnu's interpretive approach can be characterised as a 'focus on disadvantage'. The municipality interpreted refugee needs through the generic lens of social and economic disadvantage, extending existing services. As an interviewee noted: 'Anyone who steps through the doors accesses our services. Syrian or not' (Zeytinburnu -04). Şişli's equal rights approach expressed a 'focus on migrants', with Syrians seen as one more group of migrants: 'Our policy is not shaped only by the presence of Syrian refugees. We need to address the needs of all groups. That is why we established a Migration Unit within the municipality' (Şişli-06). Both Zeytinburnu and Şişli challenged the 'Syrian-focused' narrative of central government (through different interpretive lenses), and offered a potentially more sustainable approaches to meeting Syrians' needs and promoting integration.

Conclusion

Using an interpretive policy analysis (IPA) approach, the article has investigated local government responses to refugee needs in Turkey, where 3.6 million Syrians reside under temporary protection. We have sought to show 'how the policy means' at the local level, analysing how refugee policy is constituted through the interpretations of municipal actors, via policy narratives and their enactments in distinctive repertoires of services and facilities. Rather than seeking to establish the 'real' meaning of the policy challenge, we analysed the plural sets of meanings associated with refugee policy across the three local government areas, and the extent to which they consolidated or challenged national policy narratives.

Two municipalities, both controlled by Turkey's governing AKP, expressed similar policy narratives relating to humanitarianism and social cohesion, resonating with national government discourses. However, we also identified an additional set of meanings around pragmatism, emerging in response to the practical challenges of addressing refugee needs in the context of limited local capacity and ambiguities in the national policy and legal framework. Although the narratives in Sultanbeyli and Zeytinburnu were similar, by studying the different ways in which they were enacted we were able to uncover the local distinctiveness of each district as a 'community of meaning'. Sultanbeyli became an AKP beacon for serving refugee needs, characterised by extensive, high profile services specifically for Syrians. Zeytinburnu, on the other hand, addressed refugee needs through a pre-existing community centre providing services to all disadvantaged groups in the district, hence maintaining a lower profile for its refugee policy, seeking to foster cohesion and deflect allegations of special treatment for Syrians. In opposition-controlled Şişli, refugee policy was understood mostly through an equal-

rights narrative (mobilising a powerful governing tradition of secular repub-
licanism), with Syrians seen as one among many migrant groups. Despite
a strong and distinctive narrative, Şişli found it harder to enact meanings
through a stable set of services.

Our IPA framework draws attention to the plural, competing and condi-
tional character of the meanings associated with any policy. We have identi-
fied distinctive local government responses within the three districts, but
these did not go unchallenged at the local level. Neighbourhood level
mukhtars acted as rallying points for anti-refugee narratives, associating
Syrians with threats, on the basis of crime, lack of integration or hostility to
local cultures. Such narratives were gaining traction as Turkey's economic
downturn led to a growing perception of refugees as a burden, and
a questioning of the original narrative of Syrians as temporary 'guests'.
These findings speak to the inevitability of contestation over meanings linked
to policy – between neighbourhood level and district level, and between
districts and central government. Despite its increasingly authoritarian char-
acter, the national government's policy narratives did not go unchallenged. In
seeking to address practical challenges on the ground, both AKP and opposi-
tion controlled local governments developed their own understandings of
refugee policy – becoming storytellers and performers in their own right –
even where this directly challenged national policy narratives (notably anti-
Western, religious and heroic elements).

This article has made an empirical contribution through its investiga-
tion of diverse local government responses to a major refugee situation
(with geopolitical significance), which in effect constitute Turkey's refugee
policy. It shows that international or national policy pronouncements
cannot be taken at face value. Instead, we need to understand the active
construction of what refugee policy means at the local government level,
in situations of intense need and limited resources. Given the epistemo-
logical assumptions of interepretivism, we do not seek to generalise
empirically from our three case studies to all Turkish municipalities.
Analytically, however, the research demonstrates that, despite being
weak vis-à-vis the central state, municipalities were able to develop
creative and varied responses to meeting refugee needs, even within
the same province. In policy terms, this points to potential benefits
from harnessing local government creativity and flexibility, in preference
to a 'one-size fits all' approach. Further research is required on the role of
individual leaders within local government in championing local
approaches and, of course, on the meanings attached to policy interven-
tions by Syrian refugees themselves. An important part of 'how a policy
means' lies in the (plural) understandings of service users and community
leaders, which may reinforce or refute those of municipal actors. Our
research has contributed to IPA scholarship by showing how concepts

can be operationalised in contexts beyond Europe and North America, offering insights for single-country and comparative studies of refugee policy and other local challenges.

Notes

1. Mourad (2017) investigates the role of national level inaction (and ambiguity) in Lebanon's response to Syrian refugee arrivals, linking this to the emergence of municipalities as key actors. We would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for directing us to these similar findings in the case of Lebanon.
2. Article 13 (Municipal Law 5393) states that: 'everyone is a townsman of the town in which he lives.. entitled to take part in municipal decision making and services, receive information on municipal activities and benefit from the aids distributed by the municipal administration'. Municipalities interpret the law differently; some exercise caution to avoid fraud allegations. More inclusive approaches are gaining ground as municipalities learn from one another.
3. International reports provide information on aims, recipients, partners and funding for local projects such as municipal infrastructure, refugee protection, education (UNHCR's Regional Refugee & Resilience Plans, Report on EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, Syria Crisis and Resilience Response of UNDP in Turkey).
4. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51707958.
5. National narratives portraying refugees as escaping the 'tyranny of the Syrian regime' use the term *muhacir* ('migrant') from Islamic history, denoting the move from Mecca to Medina in 7th century because of religious persecution. The Turkish people are referred to as *ensar*, a positive description of Medina inhabitants helping Muslims fleeing Mecca.

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