Biometric Technology and Policy Narratives on Migration Control: The Case of Turkey

Biyometrik Teknoloji ve Göç Kontrolüne Dair Politika Anlatıları: Türkiye Örneği

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses policy narratives on the use of biometric technology in mobile migration vehicles as a means of surveillance and control over irregular migration. Equipped with biometric control technology and appearing in random places with high migrant concentrations, these vehicles have been put into operation as effective control and surveillance tools. Drawing upon literatures on technological control, migration governance, and interpretive policy analysis (IPA), the paper demonstrates how these vehicles are deployed not only for controlling irregular migration but also for instilling a sense of control to the general public. Comparison of these mobile migration points to the 'Go Home Van' campaign in the UK in 2013 reveals interesting differences in their design, function, and public perception. The paper also demonstrates how new technologies enable governments to combine 'softer' and 'more subtle' approaches in migration control with more coercive measures such as detention and deportation.

Keywords: Interpretive policy analysis, Biometric technology, Migration control, mobile migration van, policy narratives

ÖZ

Bu makale, biyometrik teknolojinin düzensiz göçü gözetleme ve kontrol etme aracı olarak mobil göç araçlarında kullanımına ilişkin politika söylemlerini analiz etmektedir. Biyometrik kontrol teknolojisiyle donatılan ve göçmenlerin yoğun olarak bulunduğu rastgele yerlerde ortaya çıkan bu araçlar, etkili kontrol ve gözetim araçları olarak faaliyete geçirilmiştir. Teknolojik kontrol, göç yönetişimi ve yorumlayıcı politika analizi (IPA) literatürlerine dayanan bu makale, bu araçların sadece düzensiz göçü kontrol etmek için değil, aynı zamanda genel kamuoyuna bir kontrol duygusu aşılamak için nasıl kullanıldığını göstermektedir. Bu mobil göç noktalarının 2013 yılında Birleşik Krallık'ta uygulanan 'Go Home Van' kampanyası ile karşılaştırılması, tasarım, işlev ve kamuoyu algısı açısından ilginç farklılıklar ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda yeni teknolojilerin hükümetlerin göç kontrolünde 'daha yumuşak' ve 'daha incelikli' yaklaşımları gözaltı ve sınır dışı etme gibi daha zorlayıcı tedbirlerle nasıl birleştirebildiklerini de göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yorumlayıcı politika analizi, Biyometrik teknoloji, Göç kontrolü, Göç yönetimi, Mobil göç noktası, Göç anlatıları

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1. Introduction

The impact of migration on politics has been profound, shaping debates, policies, and electoral outcomes in several countries. In recent years, the mass arrival of migrants and refugees, particularly from conflict zones has sparked heated political discourse, often centring on issues of national identity, security, and social cohesion. This has led to the rise of populist and nationalist movements in many countries, which capitalize on public concerns about immigration to advance their agendas. During the Brexit campaign in 2016, for example, proponents of leaving the European Union (EU) argued that one of the main benefits of Brexit would be regaining control over the UK's borders and immigration policy. Migration was a divisive issue in the 2023 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands too contributing to the electoral success of right-wing populist Party for Freedom. Most recently, it has become a major polarizing issue in the 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign (Sanchez, 2024).

Within this political context, governments control migration through a combination of policies, regulations, and enforcement measures aimed at managing the movement of people across borders. Governments increasingly rely on digital and frontier technologies to manage borders and control migratory movements. They deploy various methods to control migration flows and benefit from latest technologies ranging from satellite imaging and GPS tracking to biometric identification and video surveillance. Migrants themselves increasingly benefit from technology in various stages of their migration journey (Yüksel, 2022; Merisalo and Jauhiainen, 2021; Alencar et al, 2019).

Biometric identifiers such as fingerprints and facial recognition have increasingly become a key element of border and migration management, especially in governing irregular migration and facilitating return and deportation of illegalized migrants (Stenum, 2017). Tracing the expansion of biometric technologies in the monitoring of populations following September 11 and the subsequent 'war on terror', Wilson (2006) finds that, since 2001, there has been a significantly expanded deployment of biometric identification technologies that seek to fix individual identities through the use of physical identifiers such as iris patterns and fingerprints. Used in combination with large scale databases, containing data of those who had been expelled, overstayed, deported, these biometric technologies enable governments to select and separate legals from illegals, the deserving from the non-deserving, citizens from unwanted migrants (Stenum, 2017). Considering that early biometrics were used primarily to identify criminals and others who were trying to evade the law (Olwig et al. 2020), it is thought-

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provoking that biometric technologies are now increasingly employed to monitor and control migration (Grünenberg et al, 2022; Wienroth and Amelung, 2023).

As a major migrant receiving and transit country, Turkey also uses biometric technologies in migration control. A new policy scheme called "mobile migration points" was introduced in July 2023. Equipped with biometric control technology and appearing in random places with high migrant concentrations, these vehicles have been put into operation as effective control and surveillance tools. Analysing policy narratives on the use of biometric technology in mobile migration vehicles, this paper specifically asks: What are the dominant policy narratives surrounding the deployment of biometric technology in mobile migration vehicles? How are these policy narratives constructed and negotiated? How does the use of biometric technologies in mobile migration vehicles help build a sense of state control in migration management? To address these research questions, the article draws upon interpretive policy analysis both as a conceptual framework and a methodological approach. Policy statements of prominent policy actors following the launch of mobile migration vehicles in July 2023 up until February 2024 are analysed to reveal dominant policy narratives.

Although the use of biometric technologies in *border management* attracted a lot of academic attention (Wilson, 2006; Koca, 2022), mobile points as less visible but no less evocative tools of biometric control has not been analysed sufficiently. This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing the role of mobile vans as an artefact of migration control in Turkey. This approach builds on the recent studies in critical border studies which focus on borders as 'zones' rather than 'points' or 'lines' (Jones and Johnson 2016, 196).

The effectiveness of these biometric technologies in controlling migration is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the paper analyses the deployment of these technologies by states as a demonstration of a renewed capacity to enact sovereignty and reinforce state power amid narratives of losing control of borders. As Bigo (2001:2) suggests "the proliferation of border controls, the repression of foreigners, and so on, has less to do with protection than with a political attempt to reassure certain segments of the electorate longing for evidence of concrete measures taken to ensure safety".

The paper is structured as follows. First, the paper discusses the emergence and evolution of biometric technologies as governing tools particularly focusing on their deployment in migration control. Second, the policy context in relation to migration management is discussed with reference to changing policy and narratives on migration in Turkey. Third, the paper

introduces the value of interpretive policy analysis as a conceptual and methodological framework to analyse various meanings of a particular policy. Finally, the paper analyses the dominant narratives in relation to the mobile migration vans revealing their significance in conveying a message of 'being in control' to general public.

2. Biometric Technology in Migration Control

Biometric technologies such as fingerprint, iris, and facial recognition are used to verify the identity of individuals during various stages of the migration process, including visa applications, border crossings, and immigration screenings. Biometric data collected from migrants are compared against databases to ensure accurate identification and prevent identity fraud. Today biometric passports or databases contain extended and new possibilities of governing through the body and not through representations such as ID cards, personal registration numbers, names, etc. (Stenum, 2017). The September 11 attacks drastically accelerated the adoption of biometric technologies in security measures worldwide. Concerns about heightened security threats prompted governments to invest heavily in biometric systems for identity verification and access control (Wilson, 2006).

The EU has been at the forefront of deploying biometric technologies not only in border control but also for processing asylum applications, improve identification processes, and streamline migration procedures. Reliance on these technologies evolved in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in late 2010 in Tunisia, when the heads of the EU Member States decided to reinforce the external borders using state-of-the-art surveillance technology, "thus turning the EU into an electronic fortress" (Unmüßig and Keller, 2012).

The Schengen Information System, for example, is a key tool for law enforcement and migration control within the Schengen Area including biometric data, such as fingerprints and facial images. Eurodac is a centralized fingerprint database used to store biometric data of asylum seekers and irregular migrants apprehended at the EU's external borders. The Entry-Exit System (EES) is being implemented to register entry and exit information of third-country nationals visiting the Schengen Area. It collects biometric data, such as fingerprints and facial images, to verify the identity of travellers and track their movements within the Schengen Area. Some EU member states issue biometric residence permits (BRPs) to third-country nationals residing legally within their territories.

The employment of these technologies is fostering existing trends such as 'securitisation' – the perception that ascertaining the correct identity of an individual, and particularly a foreigner, is accepted as a security issue (Zavrsnik, 2019:52). It is thought-provoking to remember that biometric technologies were first deployed in the policing of crime and only later started to be used in migration control. This almost implicates a link between crime and migration. As these tools are of military origin, their deployment in the management of migration reframes migration in security terms (Zavrsnik, 2019). Wienroth and Amelung (2023) describes how public support in favour of deployment of these technologies in the EU for the purpose of migration control peaked following a high-profile crime committed in Germany by a migrant in 2016.

In Turkey, the creation of a national biometric technology system in 2022 became a source of national pride. It is stated that Turkey is the 7th country in the world which developed its own national biometric system (Biyoteksan, 2022). This technology started to be used first by the Directorate of Migration Management. Turkey utilizes biometric identification systems such as fingerprint and iris scanning to register and track migrants and refugees entering the country. These biometric data are stored in Irregular Migration Joint Database to verify identities, manage asylum applications, and prevent identity fraud. After its introduction in 2022, identity verification and enquiry procedures of all registered migrants were carried out with this system within a year (Yıldırım, 2022).

Biometric bordering is most obvious in clearly demarcated physical sites such as airports or border checkpoints where travellers cross national or supranational (such as that of the EU's) borders. In 2019, Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, started using its own patrol cars equipped with a system of surveillance sensors in its various field deployments at Europe's borders (Frontex, 2019). In July 2023, the government in Turkey introduced a new scheme called mobile migration points. These are mobile vans equipped with biometric technology patrolling urban spaces with high migrant concentrations. The fact that these biometric technologies are deployed in mobile vans, not along the borders but anywhere within national borders also invites us to think about what a border means. We now turn into the policy context in which these biometric technologies are deployed.

3. Policy Context of Migration Control in Turkey

As an increasingly more important migrant receiving country, Turkey accommodates millions of migrants under various status. The country's relatively robust economy despite the recent

economic crisis, coupled with its proximity to conflict zones and regions of instability, attracts individuals seeking better opportunities. The onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011 has led to relocation of 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey under temporary protection (UNHCR, 2024). There are also 1.2 million regular migrants with residence permits (Directorate of Migration Management, 2023). The number of irregular migrants is not known and becomes a matter of controversy particularly during election campaigns during which opposition parties make exaggerated claims regarding their numbers (Radford, 2023). Turkey also serves as a crucial transit route for migrants and refugees traveling between regions. Bordering several countries, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Greece, it is a natural passageway for individuals seeking to enter Europe or escape conflict and persecution in neighbouring countries.

As the largest group of migrants in Turkey, Syrians have been granted a "temporary protection" status in 2014. This status enables them to access public services such as education and health. 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). Narratives of humanitarianism, religious solidarity, historical mission slowly gave way to an emphasis on "voluntary return" (Polat, 2018, Mencütek, 2021). Recent elections had implications for migration control through their influence on political discourse, policy priorities, legislative action, and public opinion. Particularly in local elections in 2019 and parliamentary/presidential elections in 2023, migration has become a hot topic. During election campaigns, political parties used rhetoric related to migration control to appeal to voters concerned about issues such as border security and refugee integration, and irregular migration. The politicization of the refugee issue is even more vivid in the electoral competition for mega-industrial cities like Istanbul, which are hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees (Mencütek and Kurt, 2023). According to surveys, more than 80 percent of the Turkish society wants Syrian refugees to be repatriated (UNHCR, 2019). The government's open-door and flexible refugee policy was perceived as a security problem, especially by opposition parties' constituencies, which led to an increase in the popularity of populist parties (Mencütek and Kurt, 2023). Observing these changes in public opinion, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) promised the 'voluntary return' of 1 million refugees to Syria (Göktürk, 2023).

Amid this political context and a growing economic crisis, the government introduced policies to tighten control on migrants. In 2022, Turkey's Directorate of Migration Management announced that foreign nationals would no longer be able to register residency in a total of

1.160 neighbourhoods across the country where the foreign nationals make up more than 25% of the population. This includes Syrians under temporary protection as well as other migrant groups. Syrians who live under temporary protection are also required to stay in provinces where they had been registered at the first place. Following earlier warnings, in July 2023, Turkish authorities gave Syrians living in Istanbul without being registered there two months to leave.

As another measure of border control, Turkey built a 3-meter-high wall along most of its 911-kilometer border with Syria (Amin, 2022; Koca, 2022). The EU has provided the Turkish government with security and surveillance technology valued at more than 80 million euros in exchange for the protection of its borders (Popp, 2018). Turkey has also increased its deportation capacity from 2000 in 2015 to 20.000 in 2022 by building new "removal centres" also supported by EU funding (Canga and Behrman, 2022; Ministry of Interior, 2022).

Migration control policies gained a new impetus following the appointment of a new minister of Interior Affairs in June 2023. The new minister announced that fighting against irregular migration is one of their main priority areas as the Ministry and that there would be a significant decline in the number of irregular migrants within a period of 4-5 months (Hakan, 2023). These targets have been set as part of a 4-step strategy to mitigate against irregular migration: to solve the problem at the source, that is, before it comes from the country of origin; effective border security measures; effective detection and apprehension within the country; establishing fast-track deportation procedures (Ali Yerlikaya, Twitter/X, 27 February 2024). The new Minister also championed the introduction of mobile vehicles equipped with biometric technology in July 2023 for random checks on urban spaces. The narratives surrounding the use of these vehicles as a means of surveillance and control over irregular migrants constitutes the main purpose of this paper. Interpretation of biometric technologies differ substantially depending on the relationship different actors such as policymakers, technology designers, law enforcement units, migrants and local population have with them. It is therefore very important to trace the narratives associated with biometric technologies and analyse the ways in which they are constructed and negotiated. The conceptual tools provided by interpretive policy analysis is very helpful in this endeavour.

4. Conceptual and Methodological Framework: The Value of Interpretive Policy Analysis

This paper analyses policy narratives on the use of biometric technology in mobile migration vehicles as a means of surveillance and control over irregular migration. Rather than focusing

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on the outcomes or effectiveness of this policy scheme, it aims to reveal various interpretations of biometric technologies in migration control drawing upon interpretive policy analysis. Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) focuses on understanding the meaning and significance of policies, rather than simply their implementation or outcomes. As Wagenaar (2011: 5) puts it, meaning does not just influence the categories and content of public policy, but rather "brings them into being". IPA seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions, values, beliefs, and narratives that shape policies and influence decision-making processes. IPA explores the social, cultural, and political contexts in which policies are formulated, debated, and implemented. By unpacking the multiple interpretations and contestations surrounding policies, IPA offers insights into how policies are constructed, contested, and experienced by various stakeholders. It highlights the role of language, power dynamics, and ideology in shaping policy discourses and practices.

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 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 (Lowndes and Polat, 2022). This paper follows the invitation of Wagenaar (2011: 573) who invites researchers to analyse the way in which objects and images "create social visions, constitute identities, create publics, and influence individual and group relationships". In this paper, vans as symbolic objects, their deployment, their portrayal in the media, the policy narratives in relation to their use and effectiveness will be explored.

In IPA, narratives play a central role in understanding how policies are constructed, contested, and interpreted by various actors. A policy narrative involves the strategic communication of policy ideas, often aiming to persuade stakeholders, build support, and shape public opinion. Policy narratives are crafted to resonate with target audiences, appeal to their values and interests, and address their concerns. They may draw on persuasive techniques such as storytelling, metaphor, and framing to make complex policy issues more accessible and compelling. While policy narratives seek to control the framing of events and outcomes, they also open up spaces for new interpretations (Lowndes and Madziva, 2016). Ultimately, policy narratives play a crucial role in shaping policy debates, influencing decision-makers, and mobilizing support for policy initiatives.

This paper analyses the various interpretations of biometric technologies in migration control through the specific policy scheme of mobile migration vans. The effectiveness of the mobile vans in controlling migration is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the paper analyses the narratives around these vans drawing upon interpretative policy analysis to understand their policy meanings. For this purpose, empirically, the paper analyses policy statements, social media posts, media appearances and video promotions in relation to this policy scheme. It focuses on the portrayal and presentation of these vans to identify the dominant narratives and/or interpretations.

5. Interpreting Mobile Migrations Points: Meanings, Symbols, Frames

The mobile migration vans have been introduced in July 2023 as part of a stricter migration control regime promised by the new Minister of Interior, Ali Yerlikaya, appointed in June 2023. The development of a national biometric identification system took place during the time of Süleyman Soylu, the former Minister of Interior. The use of this technology by the Directorate of Migration Management to register all regular migrants in Turkey also occurred during his ministry. Therefore, it is possible to trace some level of policy continuity in migration control. However, the deployment of these technologies in mobile migration vehicles started with the appointment of the new minister who promised a stricter approach to migration control. It is possible to state that Ali Yerlikaya's earlier career as a governor in Gaziantep and İstanbul, two provinces with high levels of refugees and migrants, contributed to this hands-on approach in migration control.

Starting with only 9 vans deployed in Istanbul, a huge metropolitan city with the highest number of migrants in Turkey, their number increased to 162 by February 2024 operating throughout the whole country including 103 vans in Istanbul. Unlike the Frontex vans deployed in hotspots along the EU borders, these vans operate in random places in urban areas near busy public transportation points, public squares, mosques, and shopping areas. Equipped with a migration expert and a translator and accompanied by police officers, vans are located in busy areas to check the "legality" of migrants based on their biometric data. Those who are found to be irregular migrants are transferred to "removal centres" to be deported.

The deployment of these vans has been touted as an "innovative" approach by the Minister of Interior Affairs, who declared Turkey to be the pioneer in utilizing mobile vans for migration control (CNNTurk, 2024). The author has only identified two similar applications. The first is the "Go Home Van," briefly employed in the UK in 2013. The Go Home Vans lacked biometric

technologies and primarily served as symbolic artifacts to intimidate irregular migrants in London. Lowndes and Madviza (2016) analyse how these vans conveyed messages about the illegitimacy and criminality of migrants. The second is the Frontex vans, often equipped with biometric identification systems and document verification tools for processing migrants and asylum seekers at border checkpoints. The mobile vans in Turkey stand out for their unique inclusion of biometric technology (unlike those in the UK) and their operational deployment across the country beyond borders (unlike Frontex vans). These vehicles have become symbols of effective migration control, as exemplified by the cover page of the Directorate of Migration Management's Twitter/X account, which features a visual of these vans. The statistics in relation to the number of apprehended people as a result of checks by these vans is being shared regularly by social media accounts of the Directorate of Migration Management, the Ministry of Interior, and the personal accounts of the Minister of Interior. For example, from its inception in July 2023 until February 2024, a total of 192.934 controls were conducted in İstanbul and 56.620 foreigners were referred to removal centres for deportation. In the whole country, 286.102 controls were made, and 61.429 foreigners were identified as irregular migrants (CNNTurk, 2024). As explained before, the effectiveness of these vehicles in migration control is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I analyse the narratives around these vans drawing upon interpretative policy analysis to understand their policy meanings. The research showed that interpretations of biometric technologies and mobile migration vans cohered around two distinct narratives on: "logic of bureaucratic efficiency" and "logic of being in control". I now discuss these narratives in turn, showing how they present themselves in different ways linked to evolving interpretations of the current policy context and policy goals of prominent actors.

5.1 Biometric Technology as Part of a "Bureaucratic" but "Humanitarian" Approach

The research demonstrates that policy narratives on mobile migration vans is being employed as part of a bureaucratic but humanitarian approach to migration management. Policy actors often emphasize the efficiency and speed gains thanks to deployment of these vans but also highlight how migration control is achieved in a humanitarian way. Humanitarianism has been an important element of the Turkish government's migration discourse particularly following the onset of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent migration flows from Syria (Polat, 2018). The government often compares its policy with that of European countries and claims moral superiority based on its policy of hospitality and humanitarianism (Polat, 2018). This approach is also reflected in the policy actors' assessments of the mobile migration vans.

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> *"In our fight against irregular migration, we cannot do what other countries do. Our civilizational values prioritize people. We respect rights and law. We comply with them" (Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, 29 February 2024, CNNTurk).*

> *"We always carry out the struggle in accordance with our civilisation and human values without compromising public order and security" (Ali Yerlikaya in his speech for the launch of 65 new vans in İstanbul, 27 February 2024).*

As part of this humanitarian narrative, policy actors often emphasize that their target is not the migrants themselves but human smugglers. This message is frequently repeated on social media accounts, press releases and policy statements by relevant actors.

> *"We will never give an opportunity to migrant smugglers who deceive people through hope trafficking; drag thousands of people to death on migration routes; and try to turn our country into a target of irregular migration and a transit route" (Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya on X, 31 January 2024).*

This humanitarian approach constitutes an interesting contrast with the "Go Home Van" campaign in the UK which had a very clear hostile message to irregular migrants who were treated as "aliens" asked to leave the UK which is not their "home". The use of a handcuff and the open threat of "arrest" increased the hostility of the message as powerful symbols (Figure 1). In Turkey, on the contrary, the design of the vans is very plain. There is no use of symbols except for the logo of the Directorate of Migration Management (Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı), which also represents the colours of the Turkish flag (Figure 2). The UK van evokes many emotions, both for migrants and the local population (Lowndes and Madziva, 2016). The Turkish one is much more neutral, bureaucratic, almost emotionless.

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Figure 1

The Home Office Go Home Van in the UK

Source: France24, https://observers.france24.com/en/20130807-british-humour-lambasts-racist-government-billboard-vans

Figure 2

Mobile Migration Van in Turkey

Source: TRT Haber, https://www.trthaber.com/haber/turkiye/duzensiz-gocmenlerin-tespitini-yapan-mobil-goc-noktasi-araclari-gaziantepte-hizmete-basladi-822059.html

Narratives on migration control often builds on a "logic of security" (Wilson, 2006; Koca 2022). In the Turkish context, a "logic of bureaucratic efficiency" seems to be more prevalent. When talking about the vans, policy actors emphasize the "speedy and efficient processing". The language used to describe their purpose on the website and the media appearance is "bureaucratic". For example, the Director of Migration Management stated that the vans enable them "to act rapidly in the field and have greater control". As a proof of this increased ability, the directorate shares relevant statistics frequently both on its website and through social media accounts. Policy actors also state that hundreds of thousands of people with expired visas or residence permits left the country voluntarily as a result of these stricter controls because they did not want to face deportation (CNNTurk, 2024). Although it is difficult to confirm the validity of this claim, these statements demonstrate how new technologies enable governments to combine "softer" and "more subtle" approaches in migration control with more coercive measures such as detention and deportation.

As another dimension of "efficiency", policy actors also emphasize how the deployment of biometric technologies enable them to distinguish migrants with legal stay from the others. As a metropolitan city with a special status for the national economy, İstanbul attracts many international students, tourists, and businesspeople. Policy actors make a distinction between these "deserving" foreigners and irregular migrants. "This logic corresponds to the selectivity of bordering processes functioning through a wide range of surveillance mechanisms in order to separate good/safe/wanted/legitimate mobilities from those that are deemed bad/risky/unwanted/illegitimate" (Koca, 2022: 1913). The distinction between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" migrants is reflected in policy narratives in Turkey with an emphasis on how this is done efficiently and gently:

> *"We cannot disturb tourists in our metropolitan cities like Istanbul. We can't hurt the people who has a legal stay such as students, investors… We check the identity in 20 seconds. Everything finishes in one minute in a kind way" (Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, 29 February 2024, CNNTurk).*

The deployment of mobile migration vans with biometric technology followed the development of a national Biometric Data Management System announced in January 2022. This has become a source of national pride as the government stated that Turkey is the 7th country in the world

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which developed its own national biometric system[2]. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this new system was first used by the Directorate of Migration Management to obtain the biometric data of all registered migrants in Turkey before its use rolled out to other administrative units. The development of this technological system and its subsequent use in "speedy and efficient" migration management has become intertwined with the government's efforts to bolster support for the narrative of "authentic and national", known as *"yerli ve milli"*.

Despite the humanitarian narrative and bureaucratic tone on mobile vans, it should be acknowledged that the mobile vans' meaning is built in reference to other texts and policy artefacts. The implementation of this policy scheme goes hand in hand with the so called "Shield" (*Kalkan*) operations which aim to catch irregular migrants and human smugglers through frequent police raids. Videos on both the mobile migrant vans and "shield" operations circulate widely on TV and social media. These videos often include images of police raids, apprehended people by police being taken to buses, planes flying over borders and so on (Ministry of Interior, X account, 31 January 2024). Although the narrative on migration control has a bureaucratic and humanitarian tone, the use of these visuals serves to convey the message of "being in control" in relation to migration management. This is discussed in the next section.

5.2 Symbolism of the Mobile Van: Being in Control Anywhere and Anytime

The research reveals that the mobile migration vans have also become important policy artefacts to convey the message of being in control of irregular migrants to the general public. This has become particularly important following the election campaigns and results especially after 2019. Migration control was one of the main themes in the election campaigns during which the opposition parties criticised the government for not having control of borders, not being transparent in terms of number of migrants and not having a plan to send Syrian refugees back (Saylan and Aknur, 2023).

Coupled with growing negative attitudes in public opinion in relation to migrants (UNHCR, 2019), electoral defeats in metropolitan areas such as İstanbul and Ankara in 2019 led to some changes in government policy towards tighter controls in metropolitan areas and an increasing emphasis on "voluntary, safe and dignified return" of Syrian refugees (Mencütek and Kurt,

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[2] https://www.biometricupdate.com/202201/turkeys-domestically-developed-biometric-data-system-becomes-operational.

2023). The dramatic increase in the number of deportations just after the 2019 local elections is particularly striking within this framework (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Number of Irregular Migrants Captured by Years

Source: https://goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikler
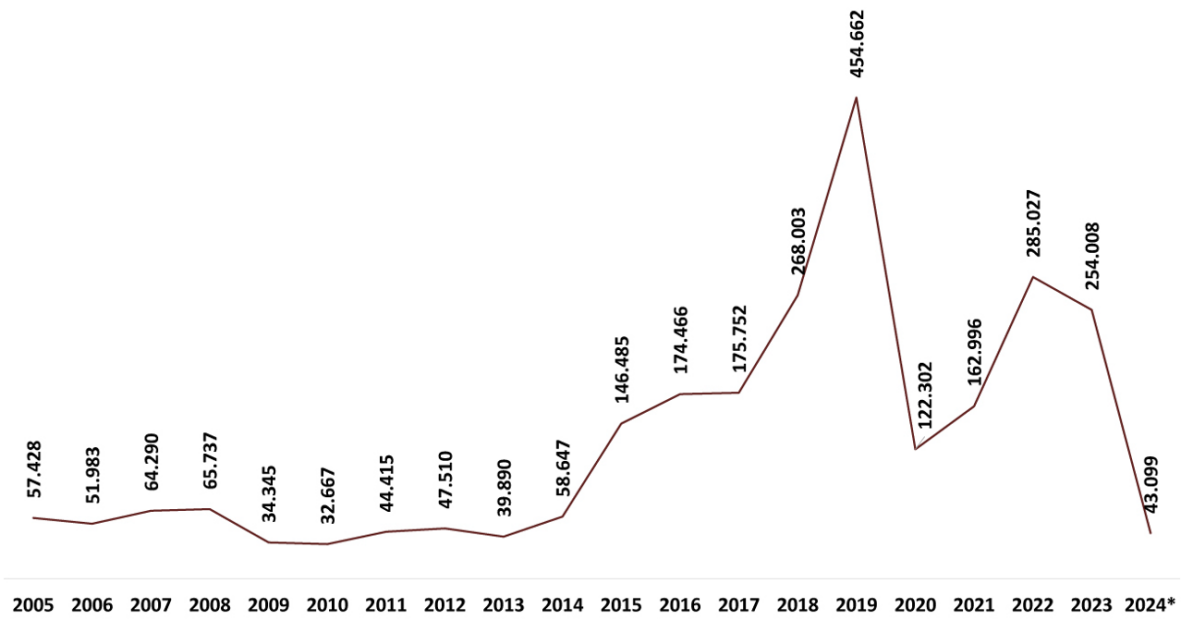
The appointment of a new minister of interior with a strong agenda for migration control after the parliamentary/presidential elections in May 2023 should be evaluated within this political context. It can be argued that the mobile migration vans have become one of the hallmarks of his ministry. These vans appear frequently in TV news and covered extensively by local media. Their launch in new provinces have been reported widely in the media during which the governors gave statements about the importance of these vans in controlling irregular migration. This "logic of control" features frequently in policy statements emphasizing the increased state capacity:

> "We are now on the field; our strength has tripled. From now on, the number of
> these vehicles will increase to 300 in İstanbul and other cities. From now on, **we**

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will have continuous control" *(Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, 29 February 2024, CNNTurk, emphasis added).*

The mobile vans not only detect irregular migrants but also "Syrians under temporary protection" who are required to live in the provinces that they are registered in. Some of these Syrians had moved to metropolitan areas, especially İstanbul, seeking better job opportunities. The government tightened its policy on this issue and gave a deadline for them to return to where they are originally registered within two months.[3] In short, the mobile migration vans also serve as surveillance tools to track where regular migrants live and manage their movement within the country.

The "logic of control" also goes beyond the national borders as policy actors believe that the deployment of these vans deters potential migrants and smugglers from using Turkey as a transit country *en route* to European countries. This is an important claim in terms of the Turkish state's capacity to influence migrant behaviour beyond its borders. It can also be seen as part of the 4-stage migration control strategy of the Ministry which involves deterrence of migration at the country of origin.

The deployment of these mobile vans in random urban areas transforms the urban neighbourhood into a "site of enforcement" (Weber and Bowling, 2004: 200). The capability to track migrants beyond borders through these mobile vans not only enhances the state's control capacity but also contributes redefining the concept of borders, transforming them from mere lines or points into dynamic 'zones' as suggested by Jones and Johnson (2016, 196).

The vans' mobility and random appearance in urban areas increase the ability to control as they create a feeling of "nowhere to hide" (Lowndes and Madziva, 2016). The testimony of migrants in relation to how they experience these mobile vans is assessed by policy actors as a sign of policy success:

> *"There are foreigners giving interviews to the BBC. They say: "we can't go out, they catch us outside, they don't let us open our eyes".* **That is how it should be"** *(Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya, 29 February 2024, CNNTurk, emphasis added).*

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[3] http://www.istanbul.gov.tr/istanbul-ilinde-ikamet-eden-gecici-koruma-kapsamindaki-suriye-uyruklu-yabancilarin-kayitli-olduklari-illere-donmeleri-hakkinda-duyuru.

To conclude, the policy narrative on mobile migration vans is characterised by a "logic of control" and a concern for assuring the general public that the government is in control of migrants anywhere and anytime.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

Analysing policy interpretations of the use of biometric technology in mobile migration vans revealed dominant narratives cohering around a "logic of bureaucratic efficiency" and "logic of being in control". The mobile vans are interpreted as efficient tools to distinguish between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" migrants gently by using biometric technology. Policy actors also highlight how such migration control would serve humanitarian purposes in the long run by deterring smugglers from perceiving Turkey as a transit country. The vans are deployed not only for controlling irregular migration but also for instilling a sense of control to the general public amid growing anti-immigrant attitudes in society. Beneath the narrative of bureaucratic efficiency, the logic of state power and state control, underpins the use of biometric technology in these vans.

The fact that the mobile vans appear anywhere and anytime, not just along the borders, increases the sense of state control. Conceptually, the deployment of mobile vans for the purpose of controlling migration not along the borders but anywhere within national borders invites us to think about what a border means. Further research drawing upon critical border studies can contribute to elaborate this point in the future.

Following the work by Lowndes and Madviza (2016), the paper highlights the importance of symbolic and non-linguistic policy artefacts in migration control. The ability of the vans to be anywhere and their use of biometric technology developed by Turkish engineers carries a lot of symbolism in relation to state power and national sovereignty. It can be argued that the narrative of "bureaucratic efficiency" has become entwined with the government's efforts to reinforce the narrative of "authentic and national" (*yerli ve milli)*.

Interpretation of biometric technologies varies substantially depending on the relationship different actors such as policymakers, technology designers, law enforcement units, migrants and the local population have with them. Future research can focus on analysing the interpretations of these vans by migrants themselves as well as the general public. What do these vans mean to irregular migrants? How does the general public make sense of these vans? Exploring these questions would reveal different "communities of meaning" and different interpretations "dancing around" (Yanow, 2000) these vans as a policy artefact.

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Finally, the paper demonstrates how advancements in technology empower governments to integrate "softer" and "more subtle" strategies into migration management alongside coercive tools like detention and deportation. As the utilization of biometric technology, data profiling, algorithms, and artificial intelligence tools in migration management becomes increasingly widespread, further research will be necessary to analyse their implications and consequences.

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