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The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on poverty among Syrian refugees in Turkey

Abstract

It is a global phenomenon that poverty is an everyday experience which can, however, be found universally amongst minorities, refugees and lower class migrants. All of these groups have in common the lack of access to a 'normal life' – an experience which can be even worse in countries where local hostilities are high due to economic scarcity and systemic racism. In this article, the author ranges widely over the poverty confronting refugees in Turkey who have fled the Syrian civil war, not least against the background of the country's own opaque and inadequate legislation on refugees, which offers only temporary protection and greater precariousness as a result of the lack of formal employment opportunities; the continuing inequalities stemming from neoliberalism; the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; and amidst the country's own extraordinary politics. Focusing in particular on the decline experienced in the pandemic in terms of access to education and the decline in access to healthcare, the article concludes that providing real support for the poor is not realistic under existing political and economic approaches.

Keywords*: Covid-19, refugees, temporary protection, poverty, precarious work, insecurity, access to education, access to healthcare*

Introduction

As a neighbouring country, the Republic of Turkey is one of the states that has received the highest numbers of refugees following the Syrian civil war. At this same time, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stressed in its annual report that refugees are 'one of the most vulnerable groups hit by this unprecedented crisis' (i.e. the Covid-19 pandemic) (UNDP 2021: 10). As in other parts of the world, Covid-19 has had its deadliest impact (in terms of death toll and serious illness) on the poor. This is undoubtedly a consequence of objective conditions such as systemic racism, the structural inability of neoliberalism to operationalise public spending and the enduring crisis of capitalism which has exacerbated its already existing tendencies towards 'necropolitics': a politics based on defining who matters and who does not; who is disposable and who is not; and who is deserving and who is not.

The outcomes and causes of poverty may differ spatially, temporally and even conceptually between absolute and relative poverty. Regardless of how it is theorised and measured, poverty is an everyday experience dominated by scarcity. In different places in the world, poverty has the greatest impact on minorities, refugees and lower class migrants who can all be identified as having in common a lack of access to a

'normal' life. Therefore, poverty is usually experienced in similar ways: it is manifested in daily living conditions, i.e. with a lack of healthy food, difficulty in finding housing, the absence of healthcare and undoubtedly in barriers to people's mobilisation. These experiences can be even more severe in countries where local hostilities are high due to economic scarcity and systemic racism.

My thesis is that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Syrian refugees can only be understood in the context of Turkey's backsliding from a human rights approach and its own structural deficiencies which are clearly reflected in its labour market.

Within the limits of a single journal article, it is not possible to elaborate all the historical, structural and contemporary perspectives on poverty and its use by the regime. Therefore, this review limits its focus to three aspects. The first section outlines some key information about Syrian refugees and the human rights approach of the country; while the second highlights some information about the structure of the labour market and refugee employment during the pandemic, as well as the primary impact of the pandemic in terms of increasing poverty. Finally, the third section summarises the current situation in Turkey with regard to the political impact being borne by Syrian refugees with specific consequences concerning the decline in access to education and the decline in access to healthcare.

Syrian refugees under the perpetual violation of human rights

According to Juan Somavia, then Director-General of the International Labour Organization, poverty is 'one of the biggest obstacles to peace and social justice' (ILO 2003: 3), meaning that the consequences of poverty are not just a lack of income. Similarly, the United Nations defined poverty as far back as 1997 in the following way:

> The denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development – to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others. (UNDP 1997: 5)

In line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there is near-consensus that the eradication of poverty can best be achieved through a human rights framework. However, it would be contradictory to expect such an approach to be sustained by the Turkish state, which had already started to deviate from a rights-based perspective at the point at which refugees from the Syrian civil war started to flee to Turkey (2011-).

The main difficulty in analysing conditions for refugees in Turkey is rooted in structural as well as some historical constraints. Turkey signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol with a geographical limitation, meaning that only those who come from western countries are considered refugees and can claim rights as such. For this reason, millions of people coming mainly from the eastern borders of Turkey are officially considered as 'guests' or 'temporary migrants'.

Since Turkey had not in its history faced such a number of refugees as in the 2011-2016 period, the national laws in place to deal with this situation were insuffi-

cient. Indeed, most of the laws and decrees were passed only some years after millions of refugees had entered Turkey, living in the meantime in poorly-constructed camps. The first law on Syrian refugees was passed by the Turkish parliament on 4 April 2013, assuring refugees of temporary protection status. This status was added to Article 91 of the 'Law on Foreigners and International Protection', referring to a security measure for refugees that was:

> Developed to find urgent solutions to ensure the need for international protection of foreigners who have arrived *en masse* at the borders of the Republic of Turkey and whose application for international protection cannot be examined individually. (Ministry of Health 2014)[1]

Under this law, Syrian refugees were officially considered as a single group. In contrast to a biopolitical approach, which would have given individuals rights-based protection by the state, capitalism's necropolitical tendencies does not recognise individualities and associate them with rights. Even the word 'refugee' could have implied international protection. However, since the very beginning of this flow of people, the word has not been used in the mainstream media or by Turkish politicians; refugees are identified as *Syrians* or *Syrian guests*.

The law states that people seeking temporary protection in Turkey who have not attempted to cross the Syrian-Turkish border in a group are obliged to register as soon as possible. It further states that people seeking temporary protection in Turkey will not – note the phrasing – be *punished* if they are identified and can provide 'a valid reason for their irregular (illegal) entry and/or presence in Turkey'.[2]

As a result of the ongoing war, more than 2.5 million people were forced to flee Syria into Turkey between 2011 and 2016. From the right to work to rights to healthcare and education, the laws were (and are still) opaque, leaving millions in an extremely precarious position. In 2013, refugee camps were so overcrowded that the government had to issue a decree allowing refugees to live outside the camps. Undoubtedly, this led to an unforeseen distribution of the population among various metropolitan areas, extending the emergence of precarious working conditions across a wide area.

On 18 March 2016, Turkey finally signed an agreement with the EU. However the Agreement, together with the Turkey-EU Action Programme of 2015 which preceded it, was aimed at the rapid return of all (irregular) migrants who are not considered as 'refugees' or temporary protection seekers. Since there is no universal measurement of the regularity or irregularity of migration from a country which is dominated by extreme deprivation and threats to life, those joint plans and actions offered no more than a simple justification of further displacement and for insecure living conditions, on top of which the threat of 'pushbacks' was added to the dangers facing

1 Editor's own translation of the original Turkish.

2 UNHCR (n.d.) 'Temporary Protection in Turkey' [accessed via the UNHCR website on 11 May 2022 at: https://help.unhcr.org/turkey/information-for-syrians/temporary-protection-in-turkey/].

refugees.[3] The tendency to divide and instrumentalise universal human rights was thus not catalysed only by the authoritarian shift of the Turkish state, but also by the decision makers of the EU.

A short while after the announcement of the EU-Turkey agreement, the Turkish Army began its three-pronged invasion of Syria, mainly targeting the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northern and eastern Syria known to Kurds as Western Kurdistan (or Rojava). These military offensives were firstly aimed at preventing the activities of Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), which is officially considered a wing of Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK; the Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Turkey. Secondly, by destabilising autonomy and suppressing large geographical areas, the Turkish authorities aimed to build a 'safe space' for the militant opposition of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and some civilian groups. From 2017 onwards, the government started officially to equip a section of the FSA with arms and military uniforms whose designs captured both FSA and Turkish flags. Consequent military offensives were executed largely by FSA groups backed up by the Turkish army. Finally, a compound reason for these offensives was to stop the migration of refugees from within Syrian borders.

The same year the first military operation started, Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı (TOKİ), which develops mass housing (or social housing) projects, started to build a 837 kilometre wall on the borders with Syria. Furthermore, dozens of so-called removal/detention centres (in Turkish: Geri Gönderme Merkezleri) started to be erected, subsequent to the EU-Turkey Agreement, to facilitate the deportation of irregular migrants. Their capacity has constantly been growing – reaching approximately 20 000 places in 2020.

To summarise in brief, the EU-Turkey Agreement eased the course of Turkey's political shift and also confirmed its military offensive. Indeed, various authoritarian and necropolitical tendencies became interwoven in the field of events following the 15 July 2016 attempted *coup d'état*. Seeking to control people's lives, creating a 'state of insecurity' (Mbembe 2019: 54) and military offensives for strategic displacement were not the direct targets of the Agreement. However, they were one of the by-products of the hypocrisy that is integrated in neoliberal thought. With pushbacks alone not being sufficient to prevent uncontrolled migration and the flight to Europe,[4] thousands of people are thus to be resettled with a little help from the Turkish authorities to places from which they can not easily escape. Even a former general of the Turkish Army (and the current Minister of Defence) tried to justify one of

3 A 'pushback' forces migrants back across the border they have just crossed. In the Aegean, this means that a boat crosses the maritime border, entering Greek territorial waters, and is then pushed back into Turkish waters by the Hellenic Coast Guard. With almost 600 coastguards, Greece has the biggest Frontex input in the whole of Europe (FRONTEX website, accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://frontex.europa.eu/we-support/main-operations/operation-poseidon-greece-/).

4 Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 40 000 people have been pushed back from EU territorial waters to Turkey (See 'Revealed: 2000 deaths linked to illegal EU pushbacks' *The Guardian* 5 May 2021, accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/05/revealed-2000-refugee-deaths-linked-to-eu-pushbacks).

the longest Turkish military offensives (in Idlib) under the cover of 'prevent[ing] migration'.[5] The silence of the EU has resulted in nothing less than a refreshment of the Turkish government's long-sought affirmation of its own sub-imperialism.

Even so, the flow of refugees has continued to increase. Including newborn children, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey reached 3 723 674 in October 2021, of whom 59 945 are living in refugee camps (Geçici Barınma Merkezleri; 'temporary accommodation centres'). Compared to a population of Turkey standing at just over 82 million, the Syrian population represents less than five per cent.

Precarisation and insecure living conditions in the time of pandemic

In contemporary Turkey, poverty rates are high not only among the unemployed population but also across the whole of society. The number of people who are without work has long exceeded ten million while a large part of workers are working for wages which put them below the starvation line. Even in the pre-pandemic period, the unemployment rate was about 22 per cent,[6] including as unemployed those who were actively looking for work but who had been unable to find it and those who had simply given up looking, mostly out of desperation. Seventeen million people (other than refugees) were already living below the official poverty line in 2019 (Sonmez 2021). Furthermore, youth unemployment has been at least twice as high as adult unemployment for many years.

When it comes to official data, it is clear that nothing should be taken as reliable, especially when it comes to issues like poverty and unemployment. TURKSTAT (the Turkish Statistical Institute) published its annual statistics in April 2020 with these being immediately questioned by the opposition media and by public opinion. According to its official data, the unemployment rate decreased by 0.2 percentage points year-on-year to 12.8 per cent. In other words, the pandemic had not resulted in job losses. TURKSTAT subsequently faced a massive blowback and even its former president, Birol Aydemir, said he was sure that the institution's officials 'had not knowingly' played with the data although he also said that he had no confidence in the figures either.[7]

The reason for this evasion is simple: in Turkey, TURKSTAT bureaucrats, like many other government officials, are under the influence and pressure of the regime. As proof of the fraudulent appearance of prosperity, Turkish labour minister Zehra Zümrüt Selcuk argued, in late 2020, that 'poverty, especially extreme poverty, is no longer a problem in Turkey' (Lıcalı 2021).

5 'Turkey launches "fresh" military operation in Idlib as tensions mount' *Deutsche Welle* 1 March 2020, accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-launches-fresh-military-operation-in-idlib-as-tensions-mount/a-52595869.

6 The official rate is currently – at the time of publication – around ten per cent.

7 'Turkey's economic data compiled by loyal officials and "detached from reality" says ex stats chief' *bne IntelliNews* 8 October 2020, accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://intellinews.com/turkey-seconomic-data-compiled-by-loyalofficials-and-detached-from-reality-says-ex-stats-chief-193763/.

Nevertheless, this data was only an indication of the direction of the government's policy. In April 2020, the Turkish government used a temporary article in the Labour Code to prohibit the termination of labour or service contracts by employers for at least three months, with the exception of 'Code 29' dismissals (Karaca 2020). This apparent prohibition was repeatedly extended until April 2021. However, there was no structural mechanism under which such measures could be tracked or at least reported by its victims. In the first year of the pandemic, a total of 176 662 workers were dismissed under the pretext of 'code 29' (Sonmez 2020).

The high level of informal working conditions also facilitated the unauthorised Covid-19 measures used by employers. In the midst of the pandemic, primitive forms of labour discipline were revived. Even at that point, there was no effective social distancing and health measures such as the distribution of masks and medical gloves were simply absent; furthermore, bad working conditions forced hundreds and thousands of workers to work side-by-side with others. There were cases in which workers were locked in a building and shuttled into factories even when there was a Covid-19 outbreak (Demir 2020). Similar to other countries, thousands of agricultural workers were forced to work even though they were living under the constant threat of contagion and were unable to obtain items of personal protective equipment (Hurtas 2020). Yet the Turkish government has covered up this deleterious treatment by falsifying Covid-19 case numbers (cf. Balta and Özel 2020).

When it comes to refugees, the labour market situation is much more dramatic and has deteriorated further during the pandemic. In February 2020, *Tagesschau* published a brief report that nearly half the refugees who had arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2016 had found jobs. Nevertheless, Turkey only officially issued work permits to a total of 140 301 refugees between 2011 and 2019: less than four per cent of the Syrian population in Turkey. The law granting work permits to Syrian refugees living in Turkey came into force in 2016. In consequence, Syrian refugees were also able to claim social security rights. However, developments since that law was passed prove that even seemingly humanitarian arrangements are simply not feasible where the structural and socioeconomic foundations are lacking. Insecurity is a solvable problem. However, it cannot be resolved if the economic system is fundamentally precarious.

To comprehend this unimaginable situation, the dynamics of the labour market of the country need first to be considered. While economic growth and employment growth moved together until 1998, the linear relationship between these two variables thereafter declined in the period up until 2006. In contrast to average annual economic growth of 7.2 per cent between 2002 and 2006, the increase in the employment rate was only 0.8 per cent. Economic growth that does not create jobs or reduce unemployment should be considered a product of an economic model based on speculative growth fed by neoliberal policies. The result was that the narrowly defined unemployment rate, which was 6.5 per cent in 2000, rose to 9.9 per cent nationwide and to 11.1 per cent in urban areas in 2006 (Mütevellioglu and Işık 2009: 179). This model did not last long, however, as can be seen in the GDP growth rates in the ten years between 2006 and 2016. With only a few exceptions, GDP in Turkey has steadily declined, to a growth rate of 3.3 per cent in 2016 before falling further in

subsequent years to reach a rate of just 0.92 per cent in 2019 and 1.76 per cent in 2020.[8] Indeed, boosting the short-term sectors of the economy, such as construction, and accelerating financialisation through privatisation have been the main sources of what growth there has been in the Turkish economy. In contrast to economic growth and in the face of rising unemployment, inequalities by income have not changed (Sazak 2018).

Furthermore, it is important to underline that the market is doubly divided. First, it is divided between formal and informal sectors. Second, although agricultural production has declined sharply in the last twenty years, the labour market is also divided into urban and rural dynamics. Informal employment is especially widespread in rural areas.

From the beginning of the flow towards Turkey in 2011, the distribution of refugees has mainly been influenced by opportunities for employment. After the law on temporary protection was passed in 2013, providing an opportunity for refugees from Syria to live outside the camps, this was followed in 2016 by a law on work permits aimed specifically at Syrian refugees with temporary protection. Consequently, a majority of people have been able to look for work – and, of course, this is substantially in parallel sectors to those in which they used to work in Syria. For example, those who have come from Aleppo and who predominantly worked there in the leather and textile industry have settled in Istanbul or Hatay, where job vacancies in those sectors are relatively high. Also, refugees who had been working on the land aimed to find places where the opportunities to work in agriculture are high. A general fact about such sectors as these is that they are predominantly informal. Other sectors which are occupied by refugees in no small numbers are construction, small-scale manufacturing and refuse collection.

In the pre-pandemic period, nearly 92 per cent of Syrian refugees in Turkey were working informally in low-skilled positions where productivity was relatively low. Many companies established by Syrian employers or where Syrians are among the partners operate in agriculture, textiles, bakery, garment, knitwear and leather production (Tarlan 2020), while another sector in which Syrian refugees have gained a foothold in the labour market is construction, where they have met a ready reception from employers, a situation which is a cause of concern for native Turkish workers (Çınar 2018). As Tarlan comments:

> It can be said that, in a country like Turkey, which is eager to expand construction and which is managed by conservative capital, the construction industry has saved the last six or seven years with this new and cheap labour force entering the market. (Tarlan 2020; author's own translation)

The high employment rate among young refugees, working in sectors dominated by informal employment, enhanced the danger of going hungry during the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting from April 2020, as a pandemic measure, young people aged between 18-20 were continuously not allowed to leave home during certain periods,

8 Turkey's GDP growth rate 1961-2021, accessed 2 November 2021 at: https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/TUR/turkey/gdp-growth-rate.

partly including working hours. Exceptions were formally documented employment (i.e. where work permits had been obtained) or for those with health issues. However, tens of thousands of young refugees were thus prevented from going out to work since they were undocumented.

In 2021, it was estimated that about one million Syrian refugees in Turkey are working informally, with neither legal protection nor rights (Ağbaba 2021). The number of Syrians engaged in formal employment in Turkey is therefore worryingly low, both in terms of the size of the Syrian working population and the number of refugees (Danish Refugee Council 2021). All this leads to those Syrian refugees who are working at whatever jobs they can find in the Turkish labour market having a much faster rate of churn: an average of 30.7 per cent of workers quit their jobs each year in Turkey, but this rate rises to nearly 50 per cent for Syrian refugees.

The coronavirus pandemic: a means to an end?

As stated at the outset, the impact of the pandemic on refugees in Turkey ought to be understood in the context of the regime's deviation from a human rights approach as well as Turkey's deficient economic structures. Ever since the pandemic, uncertainty about the future of refugees has been increasing.

World Bank data covering 113 countries show that some 589 billion dollars has been pledged during the pandemic for social protection, i.e. around 0.4 per cent of global GDP. However, according to its expert report, these initiatives will not prevent people from slipping into poverty. For one thing, a large number of people are not in a position to take advantage of this aid; and, as with the unemployment example, deprivation needs to be viewed from the broader perspective. For example, if a household does not have the internet at home, or the family cannot read or write, it is more likely that accessing social support services will be difficult.

At the same time, about four billion people worldwide already lack social protection and those working in precarious conditions, including the 2 billion workers in the informal sector, are often the first to lose their jobs. Job losses during the pandemic could turn out to be permanent in several sectors in many countries and this will inevitably lead to an increase in poverty. Indeed, the pandemic has put 100 million people in this situation worldwide. To identify it precisely: since the outbreak of the pandemic, neoliberal capitalism has sought to use the pandemic as a means rather than an end. At the beginning of the pandemic, various intellectuals emphasised its interruptive character from the perspective of the long-term. However, this tendency gradually retreated into silence – as it did in other parts of the world, including Turkey.

TURKSTAT surveys classify families as 'poor' if their income is less than 60 per cent of median income. This means that 21.5 per cent of families in Turkey are poor. One pre-pandemic report showed that the poverty rate among refugees was at least double the average for the population in Turkey: 45 per cent of Syrian refugees lived in poverty while 14 per cent lived in extreme poverty; furthermore, 25 per cent of children under the age of 5 are malnourished (Tekin-Koru 2020). In 2021, UNHCR estimated that more than 70 per cent of Syrian refugees were living in poverty world-

wide.[9] Considering that Turkey hosts over 3.5 million Syrian refugees, this percentage basically reflects what is happening within Turkey.

It should be noted that the lack of structural labour market mechanisms and the sheer indigence experienced by refugees implies that the refugee population constitutes nothing but a cheap productive force for the Turkish labour market which, in turn, facilitates their subjugation and exploitation. Nevertheless, there are also forms of resistance which means that not everyone has to give in to economic need.

The picture presented by these statistics is more dramatic than Naomi Klein's *Disaster Capitalism* because it is not a pessimistic projection of the future or theoretical analysis, but actual lived reality.

Pandemic poverty and its political impact

Limited access to education

Refugees' uncertainty about their future is increasing due to the deteriorating economic situation resulting from the pandemic. In particular because of the economic situation and the structure of the labour market, child labour has also become one aspect of refugee poverty during the pandemic. This is, on the hand, a result of decreasing access to education. On the other, child labour is welcomed by small business owners, especially in the sectors mentioned above. A report released just before the pandemic stated that only 29.4 per cent of Syrian refugee girls under the age of 15 were able to attend school, compared to 86.8 per cent of Turkish girls. The results for refugee boys under 15 were even more striking: in comparison to Turkish boys – among whom 88.4 per cent were estimated as being in attendance – only 12.9 per cent of Syrian boys were able to continue at school (Caro 2020: 11). According to Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği (Mülteci-Der; Refugee Solidarity Association), the number of Syrian refugee children under the age of ten is more than one million (approximately 27.9 per cent of the Syrian population). Even though there is no reliable data on the origin of child workers in Turkey:

> The children of the Syrian refugees are at an even higher risk of becoming permanently part of the sector of migrant labor due to lower access to education, discrimination and financial barriers. (Borgen Project 2021)

In June 2021, the education minister, Ziya Selcuk reported that 432 956 Syrian children do not have access to education because of the pandemic. Another report published in 2021 emphasised that increased child labour during lockdowns had made it possible for employers to cut labour costs and save the expenditure on workplace security measures (DTKİD 2021: 8).

Adding on top those child workers who are already in employment, this shows that an absolute majority of refugee children are unable to benefit from the human

9 UNHCR (2021) 'Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus' 18 March, accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/03/18/syria-refugee-crisis-globally-in-europe-and-in-cyprus-meet-some-syrian-refugees-in-cyprus.

right of education with many being compelled to enter the labour market to find work as a means of poverty alleviation.

Restricted access to health services

The Ministry of Health said, in response to the Presidential Decree issued on 13 April 2020 as part of the fight against the pandemic, that personal protective equipment, diagnostic tests and medical treatment would be provided free of charge to anyone coming forward with a suspicion of Covid-19, regardless of their social security status.[10] The items of personal protective equipment included on this list identified that medical facemasks was one of the most important items. The Ministry of Health statement represents a continuation of the other decrees announced to the public on 3 April according to which any person in indoor spaces, such as shopping centres, official buildings or public places (including the streets outside houses and markets), is required to wear a mask. As a result, free masks were distributed, but in a chaotic and insufficient manner, starting from 5 April while, on 6 April, the private sale of masks in supermarkets was prohibited. This order clearly applied to people who were not covered by formal social security arrangements, but refugees have evidently encountered problems in accessing masks (Karakaş 2020).

One indicator of the lack of support received by refugees from the Turkish government during the pandemic is the level of interactions that they have with UNHCR. According to its own report, users of UNHCR social media sites in Turkey increased by more than 60 per cent compared to the same period before Covid-19, while page views also increased by more than 55 per cent (UNHCR 2020: 3). Under temporary protection status, refugees have the right to receive hospital services free of charge. However, a law or decree does not work correctly if it lacks the necessary structural and social foundation.

A compelling example of this is the lack of health support for refugees trying to cross the Turkish-Greek border. In late February 2020, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey would not stop migrants trying to cross the border into Greece immediately following the attack on Idlib (Syria) in which 33 Turkish soldiers were killed. Following this declaration, thousands of refugees made their way to the western city of Edirne, seeking to cross the Turkish-Greek border at Pazarkule. However, things changed with the first case of Covid-19 in Turkey, discovered on 11 March. At the end of the month, the Ministry of Interior (Migration Administration Directorate) published a regulation on measures against coronavirus at Pazarkule. Mülteci-Der summarised this period in the following words:

> After a 30-day wait of 'hope' in an environment where rights such as life, security, shelter, health and nutrition are violated and we watch the most brutal forms of state violence on live broadcasts, the tent areas in Pazarkule were dispersed, burned and the waiting areas de-

10 Response of the General Directorate of Health Services of T.C. Ministry of Health to Presidential Decree No. 2399 on COVID-19 Treatment Expenses, last accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://khgmfinansalanalizdb.saglik.gov.tr/Eklenti/37729/0/covid-19tedavigiderlerive2399-sayilicumhurbaskanikararipdf.pdf.

stroyed, citing the Covid-19 outbreak. Refugees and immigrants were taken away from the border area on buses.[11]

Subsequently, some 5848 refugees were detained in dormitories for at least two weeks after which they were taken to repatriation centres spread across nine different provinces.

At the point when refugees have become the subject of public discussion, it is clear that Erdoğan and his Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party) – in contrast to other conservative and right-wing authoritarian figures in Europe – has asserted a positive discourse on refugees. This attitude is fuelled by the claim to be seeking to lead refugees under the flag of the so-called Muslim brotherhood and, where possible, to gain votes from those who have obtained Turkish citizenship. Such an approach has repeatedly been asserted from both right-wing and quasi left-wing nationalists (Kemalists) as Erdoğan's 'secret plan' to retain power.

Due to the deteriorating unemployment rates and rising prices, especially in autumn 2021, tens and thousands of workers and citizens started to protest and mobilise in massive strikes around Turkey. Many of them were not unionised but they were joining demonstrations in the attempt to secure increases in income due to ballooning energy costs and the artificial level of inflation in the costs of rented housing. These protests were an example of the interlinked economic-political agenda relating the basic experiences of class struggle to those in political power. These mobilisations had their peak in the middle of the first quarter of 2022.

However, since the beginning of April 2022 a new public discussion about refugees has politicised large groups of society. Umit Ozdag, an established far-right leader (expelled in 2020 from the centrist nationalist IYI Party) and a former vice president of the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), has been leading this politicisation. At the end of November 2021, he started a mass petition campaign advocating returning all refugees to their country of origin. This petition was instantly banned by the Ministry of the Interior. Even though only a small group of people knew about the campaign, he received sizable support during a TV show at the beginning of April and, in just one month, membership of his Zafer (Victory) Party rose from 4003 to 10 213. In the days following Ozdag's announcement of a brand new fascist documentary called 'Silent Invasion', some TikTok videos of a few refugees targeting Turkish women in public (on the streets, in shopping malls, etc.) were widely shared on the Twitter social media platform. Those videos were directly boosted by Ozdag's social media account and by other far-right groups, including Turkish nazis. As a result of Ozdag's interventions, almost all political parties have become obliged to announce whether or not they are willing to retain refugees in the country.

In general, AKP uses state repression to tackle criticisms made of it. However, in this case, AKP seems prepared to let happen whatever will happen, without basically

11 Mülteci-Der (2020) Press Release: 'Pazarkule sonrasinda ne yaşaniyor?' ('What happens after Pazarkule?') last accessed 11 May 2022 at: https://multeci.org.tr/2020/04/20/basin-aciklamasi-pazarkule-sonrasinda-ne-yasaniyor/ (author's own translation).

changing its discursive position. Considering all the previous occurrences of human rights violations, there is no good sign as to what will come next.

Conclusion

Even though various social groups in the country are suffering from parallel social problems, their demands are alienated from each other. This method is the well-known 'divide and rule' approach that has been practised in almost every period of history. Starting way before the Covid-19 pandemic, such segmentations have already been instrumentalised by the authoritarian presidential system to maintain ordinary power relations in extraordinary times.

The question of whether the Turkish government was prepared for the pandemic is irrelevant because the country was already on the brink of irreversible poverty and precariousness. Likewise, the implementation of comprehensive support for Syrian refugees could have been a decision made by international organisations (including the EU and its Member States) instead of exporting the crisis to Turkey. However, to expect real support for the poor is not realistic in the neoliberal European Union.

Likewise, many global institutions are also guilty of overlooking the increasing levels of poverty among Syrian refugees. In December 2020, the World Bank published a report on the worsening and the persistence of poverty and its impact on Syrian refugees and host countries (World Bank 2020); however, this report did not mention Turkey, focusing only on Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. There is no reason for this silence except the adverse explanation of the simple disposability in modern political terms of the poor and the refugee alike.

Ultimately, many of the unjust approaches led by the Turkish Republic are rooted in the 2016 EU-Turkey Agreement since it has paved the way for the instrumentalisation of the refugee situation. Therefore, the existing Agreement between Turkey and the EU needs to be abolished for the sake of universal human rights. Furthermore, both the European and the Turkish economies should be restructured beyond neoliberal economics: refugee labour should not be left to the small business community to exploit and specifically with regard to the opportunistic use of children in a time of poverty as cheap labour.

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