THE PANDEMIC–PREJUDICE LINK: YOUNG ADULTS' FEELINGS ABOUT REFUGEES AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Introduction

Since March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO)[1] announced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been in a state of emergency, with immense impacts on personal and public health and the economy. Yet, beyond more salient outcomes that can be expressed as concrete numbers reflecting infections, morality rates, and economic markers, the COVID-19 outbreak has also led to less visible and more latent changes that are yet to be investigated and understood. The evolving social cohesion within societies is one of these outcomes.

There is a vast literature on how the perception of threat and uncertainty may trigger shifts in how people view, define, and identify themselves. The perception of threats and uncertainty were proven to enhance individuals' social identities, meaning that their feelings of belongingness to several social groups (e.g., national, ethnic, religious) turn more salient under these conditions.[2] Such identification with social groups serves as a means to compensate for feelings of uncertainty and helps to restore feelings of safety and security.[3] Yet, there are differences in how inclusive different forms of social identities are, with implications for who is considered an in-group member (i.e., someone who is viewed to be on the same side) and who is not. For instance, depending on different situational demands, an individual may strongly identify as a member of a particular occupational, regional, national, ethnic, ideological, or religious group—or simply with all humanity. Notably, identification with all humanity can be considered as a very broad and inclusive way of social identification that has been shown to promote more favorable views of others, to be associated with lower levels of discrimination,[4] and to promote prosocial behaviors during the COVID-19 outbreak.[5]

Generally, two competing scenarios are proposed on how global threats affect societies and the relations between different subgroups that exist within these societies:

- One position argues that global threats may bring about a sense of unity by reinforcing a broader, more inclusive group identity that may be triggered by the notion of a common goal. Exposure to common threats may thus be helpful to appease conflicting groups.

- Another position posits that the perception of threat and uncertainty would further strengthen the boundaries between narrowly defined in-groups (e.g., the national group) and the view of out-group members as competitors for limited resources, which further exacerbates existing conflicts.

The COVID-19 outbreak represents an ambivalent and challenging construct in this regard. While it indisputably imposes a major threat to all humanity, establishes a high level of uncertainty, and thus triggers several shifts in people's social identity, the consequences of these shifts for intergroup relations cannot be clearly foreseen. While natural disasters and commonly faced threats usually blur existing group boundaries, push people closer to each other, promote a sense of unity, and enhance mutual help and support,[6] the COVID-19 outbreak paradoxically requires people to act together by being apart. Likewise, while the COVID-19 outbreak is a global, unprecedented, and long-term threat that can only be overcome when all humanity (beyond national borders) acts in concert, it has also led to the closure of national borders and to counting, reporting, and comparing the number of cases, deaths, and mortality rates across countries. Hence, while the former condition would enhance the notion of a global social identity that includes all humanity, the latter condition is likely to promote a revitalization of nationalist sentiments and to enhance people's national identity. Notably, these two ways of identification (i.e., identification with all humanity vs. national identification) may have opposing implications for prejudice against vulnerable minority groups.

So far, there has been evidence for both positions. For instance, the research by Zagefka[7] found that that British individuals have engaged in prosocial behavior beyond national borders during the COVID-19 outbreak when they endorsed a perception of a common fate in regard to managing and overcoming the current crisis. This association was mediated by participants' identification with all humanity. Similarly, a recent investigation from

Turkey found that the perception of the COVID-19 threat may promote more favorable attitudes toward refugees, mainly via the endorsement of a common in-group identity.[8] Data from the Social Cohesion Monitoring Survey conducted in Turkey found that both the tolerance toward immigrants has increased and that the perceived tensions between Syrians and Turkish citizens have decreased during the COVID-19 outbreak.[9] On the contrary, there has also been evidence from numerous countries showing that the pandemic has further fueled discrimination and populist and anti-immigrant attitudes.[10] While this started with negative attitudes and prejudice against those mainly of Chinese descent,[11] evidence shows that these negative attitudes also became more generalized to include other—mainly vulnerable—groups within different societies.[12]

The present analysis series will explore how the perception of the COVID-19 threat is associated with national identification and identification with all humanity and how these two ways of identification relate to feelings about refugees in participants' home countries. The analysis series will present results from a survey conducted with young and university-educated adults between 18 and 30 years old who live in various European countries. Young adulthood was selected as it is a developmental stage characterized by increased instability,[13] making young adults especially susceptible to adopting extremist attitudes in the face of global threats such as the COVID-19 outbreak.[14] A sample of university-educated respondents was selected to examine how a population that generally holds more favorable attitudes toward immigration and refugees[15] is affected by the perception of threat that is nurtured by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The goal of the present analysis is to provide a descriptive snapshot of young adults' (mainly university students) attitudes toward a highly vulnerable minority group amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In no way does the present analysis claim to be representative of the population of university-educated young adults across different countries. The analysis series will endorse data from several European countries that differ in terms of the number of refugees that their country is hosting; how prepared that country is to deal with the socio-political impacts of immigration; the domestic economic situation (e.g., the level of youth unemployment); and how the general population views immigration and immigrants.

The Study Sites

The present research will present data that has been collected from university students living in **Turkey, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Portugal, the UK, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania.**

Description of Research Methods

The proposed research consists of data obtained through online surveys. In each country, data were collected through the convenience sampling method targeting a sample of 300–400 young adults. Respondents were mainly recruited through student networks within different universities. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were asked to report their feelings about refugees, their frequency of contact with refugees, their perceptions of COVID-19 threats, their national identification and identification with all humanity, their level of trust in their government, and their political orientation. All questions were presented in the countries' local languages, with the exception of the Netherlands, in which the participants were highly proficient in English. In this first paper, preliminary descriptive results will be presented for the data obtained from young adults living in Turkey.

Turkey Report

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),[16] Turkey is the country that hosts the largest numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons in the world, hosting more than 3.9 million. Against the backdrop of such large-scale migration, Turkey's socio-political, economic, and societal preparedness seems insufficient. Socio-politically, Turkey achieved only 43 points (out of 100) on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX),[17] which is a tool to assess the policy indicators that are relevant to migrants' integration across countries. As such, Turkey qualifies as a country with only halfway favorable migration policies. The MIPEX score reflects the range and quality of migration policies in the domains of the labor market, education, political participation, access to nationality, family reunion, health, permanent residence, and anti-discrimination. In the case of Turkey, migrant integration seems to be least developed in the domain of political participation and most developed in the domain of health. Economically, Turkey seems to be facing adverse conditions, which may further nurture the perceived competition between groups for limited resources and thus feed prejudice. Turkey's GDP per capita has been constantly decreasing since 2013, down to approximately USD 8,500 in 2020.[18] The general unemployment rate for 2020 was 13.1%, while the unemployment rate among youth was almost double, 25.1%,[19] which may further strengthen the notion about competing for limited resources in the labor market among young adults. Turkey's society seems to strongly endorse anti-immigrant attitudes and anti-refugee sentiments. Representative survey data suggests that in 2017, 64% of the Turkish population considered refugees as a major threat,[20] and in 2018, 48.1% of Turkey's total population and 44.4% of Turkey's population under the age of 29 were unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors.[21]

The Turkish Sample

In Turkey, data were collected from 361 young adults that were on average 21 years old. In this sample 72% of the respondents self-identified as women and 28% as men; 96% indicated that they are university students. As data were collected mainly through a higher education institution that is located in Istanbul, 88% of the respondents reported to live in Istanbul. Data collection took place in October 2021.


Total population by 2021: 83 million[31]	3.9 million refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons
MIPEX score 43: Halfway Favorable Migration Policies	GDP per capita 2020: USD 8,500
General unemployment rate in 2020: 13.1%	Youth unemployment rate in 2020: 25.1%
64% consider refugees as a major threat	44.4% of Turkey's population under the age of 29 are unwilling to have immigrants as their neighbors

How Do University-Educated Young Adults Living in Turkey Feel About Refugees?

When participants were asked to quantify how they feel about the refugees that live in Turkey, ranging from 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), the average score was 26.6, indicating that participants' feelings about refugees were largely negative. The figure below illustrates the distribution of scores, showing that 87% of participants endorse a negative or rather negative feeling toward refugees, while only 13% reported a positive or rather positive feeling.

How do you feel about the refugees that live in Turkey?

- negative (0-25)
- rather negative (26-50)
- rather positive (51-75)
- positive (76-100)

%3
%10
%34
%53
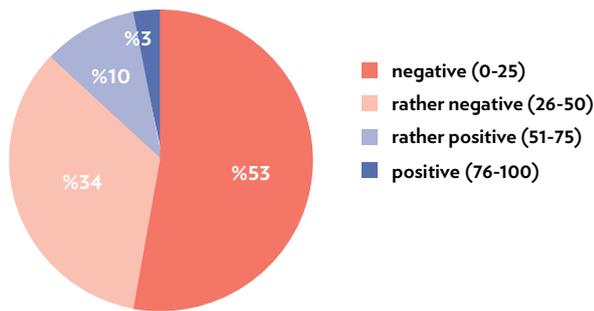
87% of participants hold a negative or rather negative feeling toward refugees.

Frequency of Contact with Refugees

We asked respondents to report their frequency of contact with refugees. Our analyses show that the majority of respondents reported to interact rarely with refugees; only about 10% reported to interact with refugees often or very often. This is striking considering the fact that Turkey is hosting the highest number of refugees in the world and that most of these refugees are settled in Turkey's metropoles, with Istanbul being the city where most refugees are currently living (i.e., more than 500,000).[22] The analysis illustrates that feelings about refugees were most negative among those who reported to never interact with refugees, as well as those who reported to interact with refugees very often. This pattern is somewhat in line with the biannually conducted Syrians Barometer,[23] which found that higher contact was associated with more negative views about refugees. This illustrates that rather than the frequency of contact, the quality of such interactions needs to be taken into account.

Feelings about refugees by interaction with refugees
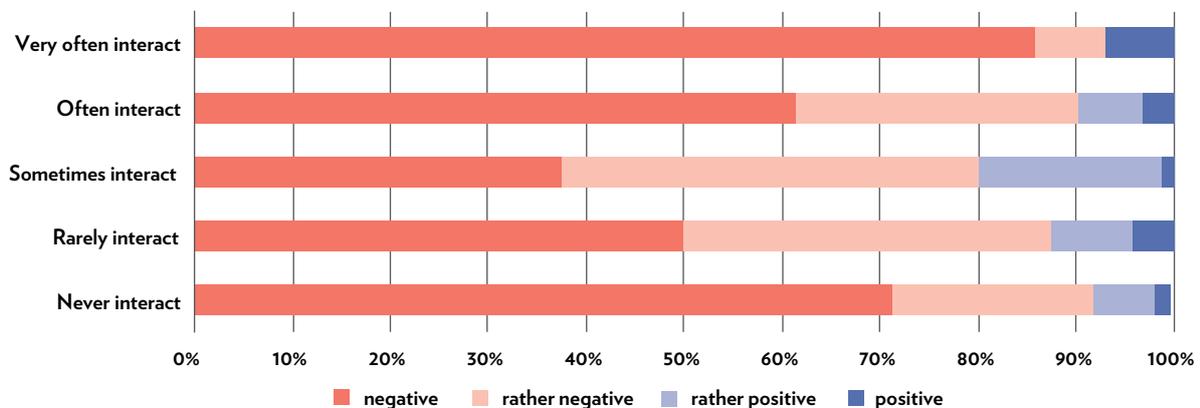
- negative
- rather negative
- rather positive
- positive

Feelings about refugees were most negative among those who reported to never interact with refugees as well as those who reported to interact with refugees very often.

## Associations with Demographic Factors: Gender and SES

When examining the associations of feelings about refugees with respondents' self-reported gender and their subjectively assessed socio-economic status (SES) relative to others living in their country, the present analysis found that the pattern of feelings did not substantially change: neither between men and women nor between those with rather low and those with rather high subjective SES.

Feelings about refugees by gender
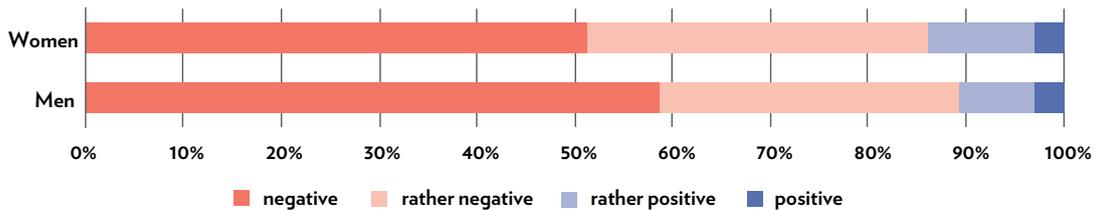
Feelings about refugees by subjective SES
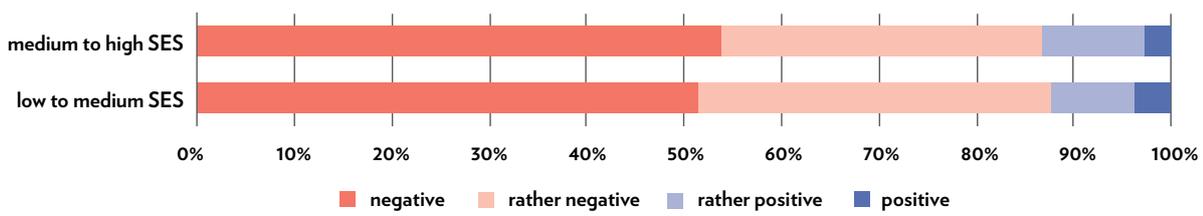
The pattern of feelings about refugees did not change substantially neither between men and women nor between those with rather low and rather high subjective SES.
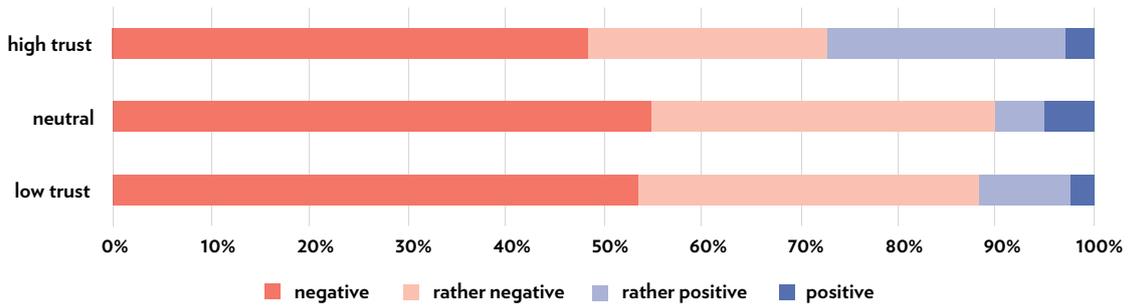
Associations with Trust in the Government and Political Orientation

Participants were also asked to position themselves in terms of political orientation and to indicate how much they trust in their government. In the present analysis, both variables were found to be associated with feelings about refugees.

Respondents who reported higher trust in Turkey's government also reported positive feelings toward refugees more frequently than respondents with medium or low levels of trust in the government.

Young adults who support right-leaning political views reported more positive feelings about refugees than young adults who support left-leaning political views. This pattern is interesting, as generally right-wing political orientation—not left-wing orientation—is associated with more negative attitudes about migrants.[24]

Feelings about refugees by trust in the government

Higher trust in the government was associated with more positive feelings toward refugees.

Feelings about refugees by political orientation
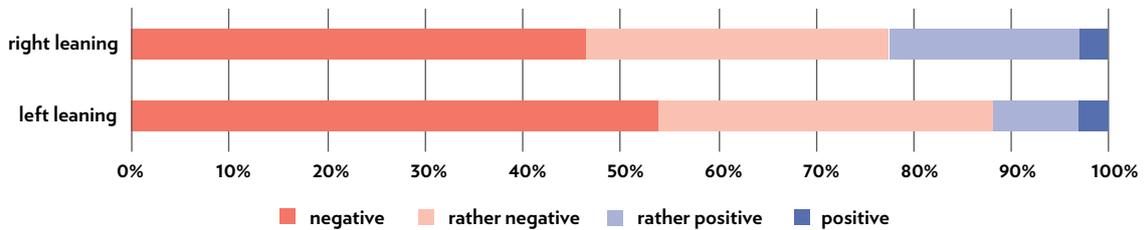
Supporting right-leaning political views was associated with more positive feelings about refugees.

## Associations with Respondents' Identification

Different views exist on how commonly faced threats affect attitudes toward others by means of how people identify with relevant groups. To assess national identification, we asked respondents to report how proud they are to be a citizen of Turkey. Those who reported to be proud are referred to as individuals with high national identification and those who reported little or no pride were referred to as individuals with low national identification.

The results of the analysis show that negative feelings about refugees were reported most frequently by individuals with high national identifi-cation, while positive feelings were reported most frequently by individuals with low national identi-fication. To assess identification with all humanity (IWAH), we asked respondents to report to what extent they believe in being loyal to all humanity. Those who reported low levels of loyalty are re-ferred to as individuals with low IWAH, and those who reported high levels of loyalty were referred to as individuals with high IWAH.

The results of the analysis show that respond-ents' IWAH did not affect much in regard to feel-ings about refugees, showing that individuals with high IWAH reported almost as few positive feel-ings about refugees as individuals with low IWAH. Across different levels of IWAH, feelings about ref-ugees were largely negative.

Feelings about refugees by national identification
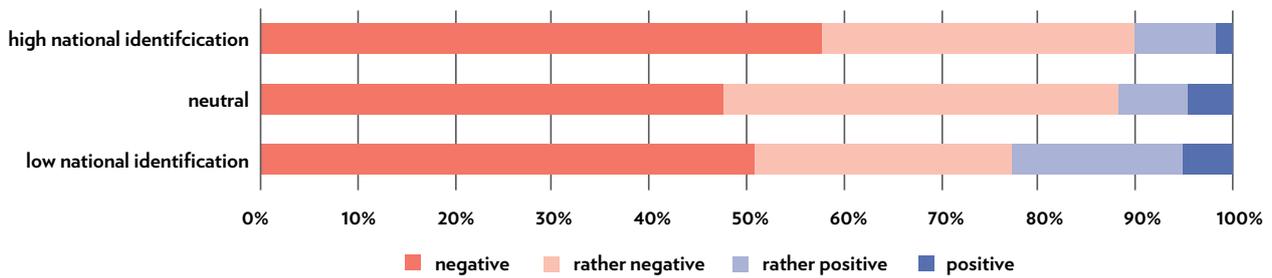
> *Stronger national identification is associated with more negative feelings about refugees.*

Feelings about refugees by IWAH
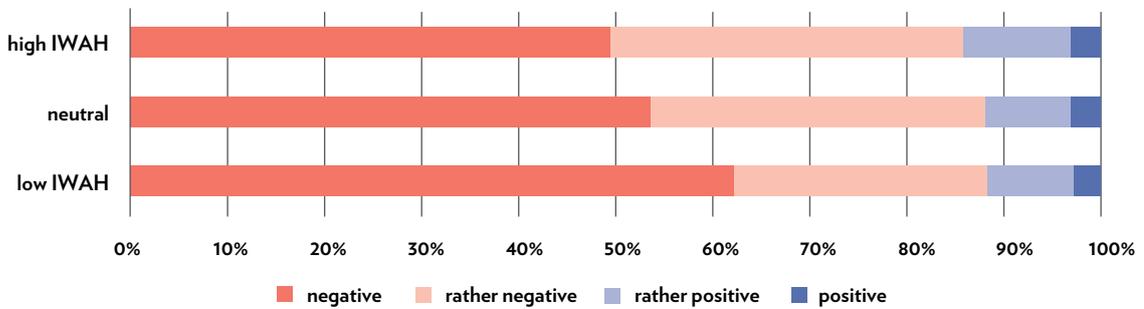
> *The level of IWAH did not affect feelings about refugees; across different IWAH levels feelings were negative.*

Associations with COVID-19-related Perceptions of Threat

We also asked respondents to report their threat perceptions in regard to the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, we asked them to indicate how much of a threat, if any, the coronavirus outbreak is to, a) their personal financial safety; b) their personal health; c) Turkey's economy; and d) Turkey's values and traditions.

The results show that participants' feelings about refugees seem to be little or not affected by how much they consider the COVID-19 outbreak as a threat to their personal finances, their personal health, and to Turkey's values and traditions. The only domain in which participants' feelings about refugees were affected was related to perceptions about how much the COVID-19 outbreak is a threat to Turkey's economy; in this area, a difference between those who

reported low versus high threat perceptions became evident. While those who rated the COVID-19 outbreak as a high threat to Turkey's economy were the ones that reported the least positive feelings about refugees, those who rated the COVID-19 outbreak as a small threat to Turkey's economy were the ones who reported the most positive feelings about refugees. However, it should be noted that the distribution of the present sample across the threat perception categories was very skewed. Except for the perceptions of COVID-19 as a threat to Turkey's values and traditions, where the distribution was more balanced, the threat perceptions in other domains were distributed very unequally: low threat perceptions for Turkey's economy were only reported by 3% of the respondents, low threat perceptions for personal health only by 9%, and low threat perceptions for personal financial situation only by 15%. Such unevenness in participants' responses limits the possibility for formulating valid conclusions.

Feelings about refugees by perception of COVID-19-related threats

Legend: ■ negative ■ rather negative ■ rather positive ■ positive
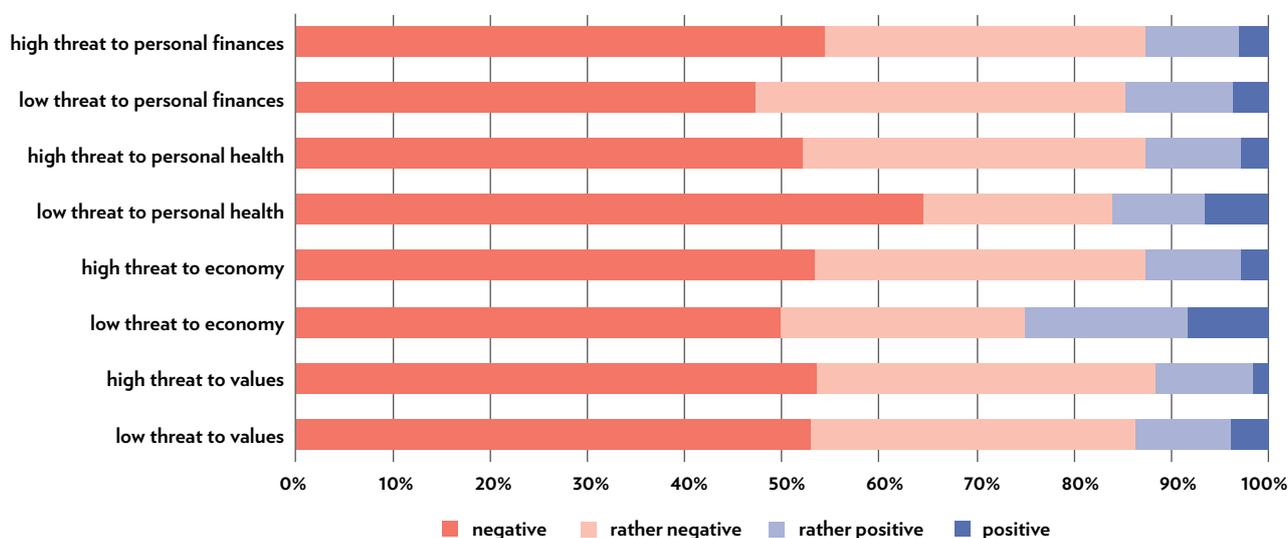
Young adults hold both extremely high threat perceptions of COVID-19-related threats as well as extremely negative feelings about refugees.

Turkey in the Spotlight

The results of the descriptive analysis suggest that the large majority of young adults hold negative feelings about refugees living in Turkey and that more frequent contact with refugees further promotes hostile attitudes. This may likely be associated with the economic hardship and unfavorable labor market conditions that young adults are facing in the country. As stated earlier, Turkey's economy is facing challenging times with decreasing GDP per capita and an extremely high rate of youth unemployment. Under such conditions, getting a job becomes increasingly difficult, even with holding a graduate degree. The large number of forced migrants living in the country may therefore be viewed as a major threat and come in as a handy explanation for tough economic conditions. While it is likely that pandemic-related threats may further exacerbate such perceptions about intergroup competition and therefore strengthen negative feelings toward minority group members, the present analysis could not document a direct association between the two. Instead, the pattern of results suggests that threat perceptions related to the COVID-19 outbreak seem to change little in the already negative atmosphere around refugees in Turkey.

Notably, results obtained from previous research assessed that the pandemic may have promoted an appeasement between Turkish citizens and migrants,[25] especially when a common in-group identity was endorsed (i.e., the feeling of belonging to one common group).[26] The present research, however, could not document a direct link between respondents' identification with all humanity (IWAH) and their feelings about refugees. Besides the fact that a more in-depth examination of possible indirect associations between threat, identification, and refugee attitudes is needed, the stage of data collection may also have a moderating effect on these associations. The referenced works[27] have been conducted in relatively early stages of the pandemic where the population was more optimistic and more hopeful about overcoming the outbreak through common action, and where the issue of forced migration gained relatively little attention across the Turkish media.[28] The present data, however, was collected in October 2021, more than 18 months after the WHO had officially announced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, in the summer of 2021, the Taliban took

over the regime in Afghanistan and media reports about another ostensible wave of forced migration from Afghanistan gained popularity in the Turkish media, nurturing greater anti-refugee sentiments within the Turkish population.[29]

In the present analysis, relatively favorable feelings were only obtained among individuals who considered the COVID-19 outbreak as a small threat to Turkey's economy, who reported low levels of national identification, and who expressed high levels of governmental trust and pro-governmental (i.e., right-leaning) political orientations. Certainly, the results are not generalizable to the whole population of young adults living in Turkey. Yet, it is striking to note that even among university-educated, rather liberal-oriented young adults who reside in the biggest and most intercultural metropole of the country (i.e., Istanbul), feelings toward refugees are extremely negative; and such views seem to change only slightly by socio-demographic markers and social identity mechanisms, outlining the need for more large-scale and structural interventions to promote peaceful and cohesive societies.[30] The core responsibility in this regard lies with policy makers as well on NGOs and educational institutions. They must work on creating the conditions that facilitate the successful integration of refugees and that help young individuals to look with more confidence and hope into their future, regardless of their migration background. Additionally, media organs including social media may contribute to establishing a more friendly climate by presenting objective information about refugees and by refraining from politicizing refugees and using them as scapegoats for existing problems and negative developments.

Acknowledgements

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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