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Walking on a Tightrope: Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society Organizations Working with Refugees and Migrants in Turkey

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Abstract This qualitative study sheds light onto the working structures, make-up, and strengths and weaknesses of civil society organizations working with Syrian refugees in Turkey. The research includes 22 interviews with a variety of national and international civil society organizations (CSOs) and aims to reveal strategies they employ to communicate with and advocate on behalf of refugees. The strategies utilized by international and domestic organizations are compared and their relationships elaborated within the specific sociocultural and political context of Turkey. Results reveal that Syrian refugee advocacy in Turkey can be defined as a balancing act, where civil society organizations need to establish and nurture positive government relations, while engaging closely with their beneficiary communities and each other due to their mutually dependent funding and implementation arrangements, as well as work closely with the media to ensure effective advocacy.

Keywords Syrian refugees · Civil society organizations · Turkey · Advocacy · Communication

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Introduction

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syria represents the biggest humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century, with 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 45.7 million classified as internally displaced within their country of origin, and 26 million who were refugees at the end of 2019 (UNHCR 2018). In the aftermath of the Syrian war, many countries have been confronted with ongoing migration; Turkey has taken the largest number of Syrians as a result of its open-door policy. According to the UNHCR, the main Syrian refugee-hosting countries are Turkey with 3,600,000 people, followed by Lebanon with 950,000, and Jordan with 670,000. An estimated four million Syrian nationals often arrive in Turkey without local connections and little knowledge of the language or local environment. Yet for many families that have migrated from Syria, Turkey has become a "temporary" home where kids grow up and parents need to find work to provide for their families. Of the few local actors who offer support and advocate on behalf of refugees are the civil society organizations (CSOs), consisting of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), and international organizations (IOs). Despite numerous challenges, these organizations (many of which emerged in response to the influx of Syrian migrants) have become critically important actors in Turkish civil society. Following the call of Garkisch et al. (2017), this study investigates the advocacy efforts and communication strategies these organizations have developed, and analyzes how their strategies differ, capturing the levels of cooperation, competition, and interconnectedness between the organizations and the role of media in their work.

CSOs or third-sector organizations (TSOs) include international non-profits, local and national civil society organizations, and voluntary organization grassroots initiatives that function as a supporting pillar to facilitate the integration, inclusion, and well-being of refugees and migrants through services, humanitarian aid, and public and social initiatives (Wilson and Post 2013). In developing countries where governments may not be able to tackle every social problem or need due to financial or political constraints, civil society is often expected to affect social change for traditionally disadvantaged groups. Civil society in Turkey has been blooming since the 1980s, with enhanced social activism and civil society expansion. Currently, an active civil society scene exists, which focuses on a variety of issues including gender inequality, human rights, democratic participation, identity articulation, and coexistence (Paker 2019). Recent statistics by Turkey's Ministry of Interior show that there are 118,678 active registered NGOs currently operating within the country (Ministry of Interior n.d.).

Civil society organizations play a critical role when it comes to humanitarian crises such as the Syrian refugee crisis. Their main purpose is to articulate and represent the interests and concerns of disadvantaged groups, using information as a key advocacy tool to influence not only dominant media discourse, but also public opinion and policymaking (Jordan and van Tuijul 1998). Garkisch et al. (2017) underline the importance of the advocacy role of civil society "in the public, legal and political spheres" such as "campaigning, the building of networks and the empowerment of migrants" (2017: 1859). This research focuses on a comprehensive, qualitative analysis of various types of CSOs, such as non-governmental organizations and international organizations, working with and on behalf of refugees in Turkey. Specifically, we examine the communication strategies, media relations, and advocacy efforts of the CSOs working with refugee and migrant communities to provide a snapshot of the growing CSO scene in Turkey, which could be considered one of the most important host countries and has had extensive experience with refugees in the aftermath of the Syrian civil war. Understanding the perspectives of active CSOs contributes to the growing body of literature on civil society advocacy and communication by providing lessons learnt related to advocacy, inter-agency collaboration as well as competition from the Turkish context. Focusing on the challenges as well as the opportunities, the study identifies strategies that may lead to the successful integration of disadvantaged populations not only in Turkey, but in other nations facing irregular migration.

With varying levels of governmental support and local funding toward the refugee crisis, a heavy load of the crisis is handled by civil society organizations who offer immediate response for humanitarian needs and, later, engage with development and integration projects (Panizzon and van Riemsdijk 2019). Prior studies have examined the CSO scene in Turkey to map out the main actors working with Syrian refugees. Various reports have already mapped non-profits nationwide and show the activities and roles of civil society organizations receiving refugees (see Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017; Özden 2013; Woods and Kayalı 2017). While most of these studies tend to be about understanding the nationwide CSO field, some have focused on very specific locations to reveal more detail about the kinds of activities CSOs engage in. While there is a growing body of research on how media portrays the refugee issue and how NGOs function in relation to other actors, there is still paucity in scholarship regarding civil society communications and advocacy when it comes to how NGOs reflect their strategies and accomplishments (Ihlen et al. 2015; Garkisch et al. 2017). Ultimately, this study contributes to the literature on refugee communications by offering a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges CSOs face when trying to advocate on behalf of migrant populations. Furthermore, the study sheds light onto the CSO inter-agency cooperation structures and advocacy styles implemented in Turkey, the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. The research focuses on the following research questions:

RQ1: What kinds of collaboration and communication strategies do CSOs employ in Turkey?

RQ2: What kinds of advocacy do CSOs utilize to support refugee rights and integration in Turkish society?

RQ3: What are the main challenges CSOs face within the specific socio-cultural and political contexts of Turkey in dealing with refugees?

Review of Literature

The Refugee Crisis in Turkey

Turkey is often given as an example of a nation which welcomes Syrians, despite the changes in the Turkish government's political rhetoric over the past 9 years. The majority of Syrians living in Turkey reside in city centers and tend to congregate in specific areas (Icduygu 2015; Kirisci 2014); remaining largely marginalized in Turkish society. The government designates Syrians as visitors under "temporary protection" and has offered a significant amount of services in the aftermath of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Deal, an agreement intended to curb the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Europe and to diminish the number of refugees drowning while traveling to Europe (BBC 2016). Under this agreement, refugees are to be

returned to Turkey in exchange for European funding (Long 2018), which is supposed to be used to support refugees through various CSO initiatives. In his study focusing on Czech Romani NGOs and civil society, Koubek (2020) found that the availability of European funding has resulted in increased "professionalization" (p. 412). Turkey's CSO scene has also flourished, becoming more vibrant in the aftermath of the EU-Turkey Deal (Paker 2019).

Initially, the Turkish government's rhetoric and open-door policy toward Syrian refugees were positive and welcoming in tone. More recently, the rhetoric has changed from offering a safe haven or sanctuary for refugees to sending them back to a safe zone (established along the Turkey-Syrian border) or even opening Turkey's borders to allow refugees to escape to Europe. This change is due to increasing resentment against Syrians in the country (Gall 2019). The immigration debate in Turkey is highly polarized and emotional. The accommodation of close to four million Syrians in Turkey has presented several challenges to this multi-faceted humanitarian crisis. Public opinion shows that 43 percent of Turkish citizens perceive Syrians as a "liability," 39 percent as "dangerous people who will cause trouble in the future," and 24 percent as "beggars/living on aid" (Erdoğan 2018). Additionally, many believe "Syrians should be sent back to their country once the war in Syria is over" (Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci 2018).

CSOs as Strategic Actors: Civil Society Advocacy and Communication

Organizations use advocacy to increase attention and support for their missions. INGOs in particular use advocacy "to get their message across to governmental actors, garner donations, and educate a target population" through strategic communication (Stroup and Murdie 2012: 426). They try to impact public opinion, persuade governments to act in certain ways, and, potentially, change policies to be more supportive of those in need. According to Jordan and van Tuijul (1998), the main purpose of CSOs is to articulate and represent the interests and concerns of disadvantaged groups. Therefore, they work closely with administrative leaders and political executives, and engage with issues through raising awareness and lobbying efforts (Ihlen et al. 2015). Other tools include legal activism, community action, and mobilization (Paker 2019). When it comes to effecting existing policies, working closely with the local government and political authorities is critical. In addition, "(b)uilding or developing trust and communicative effectiveness is indispensable to the effectiveness of non-profit partnerships" (Atouba and Shumate 2020: 312). As suggested by Egholm et al. (2020: 1), CSOs have been under close examination by public institutions and

academics due to the role they play in "social cohesion, promoters of active citizenship, and guardians of the common and greater good in society through their special characteristics and values." The changing social and political climate presents challenges for CSOs working in the area of migration and highlights a need to analyze the "activities of civil society actors, their varying approaches to addressing refugee-related endeavors, and their capacity to facilitate coexistence" (Paker 2019: 11).

Stroup and Murdie (2012: 425) have suggested that CSO advocacy ranges from cooperative (where organizations assume a cooperative approach and work closely and in line with government bodies and other institutions) to confrontational (where CSOs take on a more argumentative and aggressive tone to impact public opinion and thus put pressure on governments to change their policies and operations). The choice between cooperative or confrontational advocacy by an organization may depend on the specific cases and circumstances where advocacy projects are being implemented. An important tool that CSOs can utilize in their advocacy, especially when taking a cooperative approach, is media relations. Traditional and online media offer opportunities to launch campaigns in order to promote solidarity with migrants (Moskovich and Binhas 2015), create positive attitudes (Agustin 2012), and reflect the concerns and perspectives of refugees to society (Martin 2012). Research shows that national and international CSOs develop publicity campaigns to counter negative portrayals or dispel misinformation within the host country (e.g., Ihlen et al. 2015; McPherson 2016). Stroup and Murdie (2012: 425) have argued that an international organization's national origin, such as being a "wealthy industrialized democracy" with high availability of "material resources and an institutional environment supportive of INGO work" may strongly influence its decision to use confrontational or conciliatory advocacy strategies. While some campaigns and approaches might work in a Western European setting, it is not clear how successful they might be within the unique political and social environment of a country like Turkey. Therefore, it is critical to examine how CSOs conduct advocacy and communicate within the specific socio-political national context in which they operate.

In their study of Flemish NGOs, Verschuere and De Corte (2015: 231) demonstrate that national NGOs tend to use cooperative rather than confrontational advocacy strategies through "an indirect but non-conflictual way," and try to gain media coverage via press releases, conferences, and publicity campaigns to influence public opinion. Prior work in Scandinavia has further documented that CSOs working on migration not only understand the importance of media coverage, but also have leverage when working with the media. This indicates that CSOs

possess strong human capital and a professional understanding of media logic and journalistic practices. As Ihlen et al. (2015: 824) point out, CSO actors "stand a better chance of gaining coverage if they identify and exploit news conventions by various forms of 'information subsidies' (press releases, press packages, contacts for sources, etc.) and by providing striking visuals and strong rhetoric."

At the same time, research has also documented that CSOs face significant challenges when working with the media, whether it is online or traditional. The main challenges include financial resources, political goals (explicit in the case of activism or remaining neutral), human capital, and an understanding of shifting target audiences (see Ihlen et al. 2015). Other examples of an in-depth understanding of media routines include organizing media events, using celebrity endorsements or pitching human-interest stories, and creating successful media messages and communication campaigns (McPherson 2016). In sum, CSOs working with refugees and migrants tend to utilize established media conventions not only to attract media attention, but to shape media coverage and influence public awareness.

Inter-agency Collaboration

As strategic actors within civil society, CSOs work not only with the news media but also with governmental and transnational actors, CSO networks, and social movements. CSOs face many challenges in establishing partnerships and achieving changes in policy on behalf of those they serve, especially in the case of humanitarian relief organizations (McPherson 2016). Sowa (2008) has argued that inter-agency collaborations for service delivery and various forms of networks are usually seen as a solution to fragmentation and duplication in CSO services.

Research reveals that external communication is key for CSO collaborations and relationships. Indeed, effective two-way communication can be a desirable strategy for civil society organizations supporting immigrant communities and fostering integration (Ozdora-Aksak and Molleda 2014). CSOs also understand that working with key partners (outside of the organization) and altering public attitudes is critical (Ihlen et al. 2015). Policymakers inadvertently respond to media coverage, as in the Netherlands where mass media significantly impacted governmental response to migration (Dekker and Scholten 2017). Thus, ensuring visibility and positive publicity is critical for CSOs, as is establishing credibility with the news media and government agencies (McPherson 2016).

In addition to building strong external relationships with governmental officials and media representatives, CSOs build partnerships for project acquisition, coordination, and management. The way international projects are structured in Turkey, EU grants through the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (commonly referred to as ECHO funds) are acquired by large international or inter-governmental organizations such as the UN or the World Bank and implemented through the close coordination of government agencies. Smaller local NGOs are integrated into these projects as implementing partners, and work very closely with government institutions at the state and local levels. Money is available for operational projects that impact the daily lives of refugee communities, such as health, education, and vocational training. This funding structure has resulted in civil society growth, and the arrival of many international NGOs in the country.

Thus, a major challenge for CSOs is the increasing competition over resources—usually from the same sources, which may lead to a type of "corporatization" of the non-profit sector (Maiers et al. 2005). Garkish et al. (2017:1864) also pinpointed the "interconnectedness and the sequential dependency" of the third sector, stressing the need for increased coordination and cooperation between organizations. The authors suggest that researchers look further into these third-sector relationships and interdependencies. Fagan (2005) has stated that many NGOs find themselves in competition for scarce funds, switching from project to project to attract donors and funding. The situation is especially palpable for smaller national CSOs trying to become implementing agencies for larger international organizations.

In fact, the funding dependencies created by the EU-Turkey Deal have resulted in different types and levels of collaborative relationships between various types of organizations. Kagan (1991: 308) suggested that "funding can be exchanged across organizations with a simple exchange"; however, the partnership can take place at shallow, medium, or deep levels (this determines the level of the collaboration taking place). According to Císař and Navrátil (2015), however, there are two sides of the argument: while the EU funding dependency may increase the networking and collaboration capacity of advocacy organizations, it might also hinder inter-agency collaborations, creating fragmented and financially dependent organizations that compete with their domestic peers (whom they see as competitors). Thus, as suggested by Sowa (2008), inter-agency collaborations need to be further studied to reveal variations in partnerships.

Consequently, the main goal of this research is to uncover the types of advocacy efforts and collaboration and communication strategies CSOs use, as well as the challenges they face, in working with refugees and migrants. Approaching the issue from a qualitative perspective allows us to develop a deeper of understanding of the work CSOs engage in. Turkey serves as a particularly

interesting case for investigation due to its high refugee population.

Method

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the communications staff of twenty-two CSOs based in Ankara and Istanbul were conducted during September and October 2019. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to tell their stories and provide detailed insights, and create the flexibility to pursue a response in more detail, resulting in the discovery of information that may not have been considered initially (Gill et al. 2008). They also allow for the exploration of the particular issues that emerge from each interviewee (Hill et al. 2005), and reveal the meanings participants assign to phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). In order to maximize validity and minimize bias, two researchers were present during the interviews and alternated between questioning and note-taking. The interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality and assured that no personal or organizational information would be identified due to the sensitivity of the refugee issue. We selected a range of CSOs, international and domestic, to gain in-depth understanding of different perspectives on CSO communications and advocacy. Thus, specific persons with relevant expertise and positions were interviewed. As suggested by Maxwell (1997), snowball sampling techniques were utilized to recruit additional participants. Figure 1 shows the organization type, interview types, and duration.

All interviews were conducted face to face, with the exception of three interviews conducted via Skype. They ranged from half an hour to more than 2 h in duration, with an average interview time of 70 min. Most interviews were conducted in English. The researchers' host institutions approved the interview questions as *Exempt* (in advance of the research project) to ensure confidentiality and avoid outsider bias. Following protocols recommended by Beck and Manuel (2008), we started with the easier and simpler questions, gradually moved to questions related to sensitive topics after we'd established good rapport. The interviews were managed carefully to ensure comprehensive and representative data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Saturation was achieved relatively quickly because we were working with a very specific population.

The researchers read the transcripts several times and discussed them in order to identify dominant themes and patterns, utilizing the constant comparative technique (Creswell 2007). Two research assistants—one a native of Turkey and the other with experience working for CSOs in the Middle East—also read the transcripts and made additional observations. The list of predominant themes emerged through this reiterative process. Findings were compiled in continuous text, and examples and direct quotes from transcripts were integrated to make the data easier to analyze (Garkisch et al. 2017). In cases where the specifics of a project were too narrow and possibly risked identification of the specific organization or population under study, we decided to omit specific details to protect identities.

Findings

Turkey's Syria agenda began in 2011 and had a humanitarian approach and an open-door policy until 2015, during which time the number of refugees increased and the welcoming atmosphere disappeared. The Syria issue has continued to be politicized, especially after 2016, when it "*shifted from a humanitarian crisis to a developmental crisis and Turkey finally called out to the international community for help and the EU-Turkey deal was signed,*" as succinctly put by an interviewee from an international organization. The year 2019 came with an economic downturn where many businesses shut down, the job market shrank, and unemployment rates went well above 10 percent. The political rhetoric changed in 2019, when Syrians were no longer referred to as "our neighbors"; hostility emerged between Syrians and Turkish citizens. As a national NGO representative stated, "*refugees became a soft spot in Turkey, almost all parties promised to send them back during the local elections in 2019.*"

Within this political and socio-economic environment, the major finding that emerged from the interviews is that Syrian refugee advocacy in Turkey is a balancing act with CSOs feeling as though they are "*walking on a tightrope.*" Participants noted that positive government relations are crucial for their work, for their survival, for their sustainability, and for the success of their activities. Thus, CSOs need to be careful not to upset the government authorities, while taking into account the shifting public opinion about Syrians. Semantics can be very important, even how one refers to beneficiaries; the terms "Syrians under temporary protection" or "refugee" become political. The temporary protection legal status currently assigned to refugees creates confusion. "People unfortunately mix refugees with irregular migration. Some people wrongly refer to them as Syrian migrants, but this terminologically is not correct. Their status needs to be clarified and clearly emphasized, especially for advocacy purposes," says an interviewee working for an international humanitarian organization.

Dealing with bureaucracy is also a major challenge for CSOs that must work with ministries; they face challenges getting approval for projects and even basic communications materials such as videos and animations. In one case,
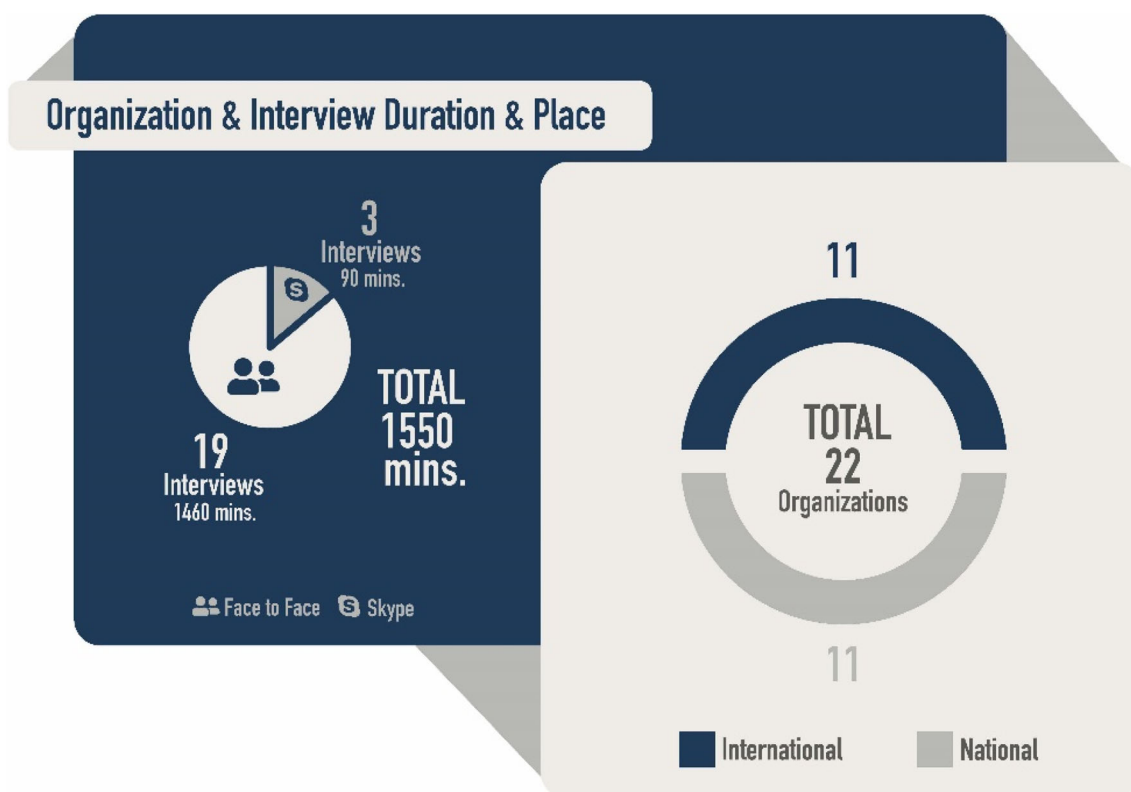
Fig. 1 Organization type, interview duration, and place

an IO representative wanted to make research results public, yet faced a government permission problem. The communications person explained the rationale as, "people are fed up with Syrians and the government is afraid of further unrest in the cities, so they are afraid to release the data." Interviewees pointed out that there might be a lack of coordination between government institutions and ministries, which makes communications even more challenging.

Advocacy and Communication

Almost all interviewees emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with various counterparts, including partner CSOs and ministries for effective advocacy. However, CSOs are faced with "administration-related obstacles, frequently changing regulations and policies where NGOs are approached with suspicion." Walking on a tightrope pressures individuals to meet the expectations of multiple publics, and CSO employees commented on the need to put themselves in different stakeholders' shoes. Some participants noted that there would always be an upset party when dealing with a humanitarian issue such as the plight of refugees, and it is impossible to fulfill the demands of every group. One participant from a local NGO stated:

It is very important to have good relations with government. We must find compromise solutions. Sometimes you feel like you are not working in the civil society. You need to focus on the rights of your beneficiary and convince public authorities that you are working together for refugees' rights.

One CSO advocacy strategy is to remind government counterparts "that the refugee issue is a human-rights issue. It is a humanitarian and non-political issue. You should not position according to the ideological stance of the government." However, this may be easier said than done when one depends on government approval to function and work with refugees. CSO representatives say that effective coordination and communication with authorities is critical for their work. For example, opening a vocational training center for refugees in areas close to the Syrian border requires working closely with local authorities. It also requires incentivizing the local population to become involved and clearly communicating to them the potential benefits, such as acquiring professional training or learning how to set up a business.

Many of the CSO communications specialists we interviewed are former journalists with years of experience in either print or broadcast media. Not surprisingly, they exhibit an in-depth professional understanding of newsworthiness principles and are able to utilize these principles

in their communication and advocacy efforts. As former media practitioners, they still have a strong journalistic instinct and are aware of how to engage with the media, and are aware of the internal dynamics. As former journalists in Turkey and abroad, they have strong credibility as well as close personal contacts that are particularly useful for media relations and communications.

These specialists are also aware of challenges the Turkish media faces due to strong government pressures. "Often times we cannot get traditional media coverage for our projects due to their sensitive nature, no journalist wants to write about refugees. We can't get permission to have our experts on air." Another interviewee said, "media is nonexistent, it is like a soap opera." Even when there is a news story about refugees, there are no direct quotes from the refugees themselves. "We would like to talk about the rights of these people, such as jobs, quotas, sustainability, harmonization; but we can't. It is not at that level yet," says one CSO representative. She added, "we need to let their voices be heard, not become the voice of the refugees." Others agreed on the need to encourage Syrians to speak up and find platforms from which to voice their opinions.

Although it might sound contradictory, according to some CSO representatives sometimes advocacy for policy change might mean remaining low key, especially when the work is related to sensitive or political issues the government does not want to openly publicize (such as family planning or LGBTQ rights). For example, one interviewee from an inter-governmental organization said, "we never invite media to advocacy meetings. The government doesn't want to show to media that they work in these areas." They engage in (minimal traditional) media relations and they don't invite the press to events (or even outwardly avoid the press) because some believe that the media might disseminate negative stereotypes intentionally, or even unintentionally, to the point of promoting hate speech.

However, not all CSO representatives feel negative about media relations. They try to provide factual and timely information to the media and remain available 24-7. They invite journalists to the field and allow them to tell their story, "go(ing) back to face-to-face communication." They don't work with media only for visibility, but for public opinion change and advocacy as well. Some of the success stories the interviewees highlighted were possible because of their close relationships with traditional media; this allowed for some risk-taking in order to gain more media attention and better reporting on issues. For instance, they would invite reporters with an "unfriendly" reputation to the field to observe how refugees work in local communities. This personal contact and strong human-interest appeal typically resulted in publishing more positive

stories, and in one case, a two-page article in which the journalist openly discussed the challenges the refugee community faces in Turkey. Sometimes highlighting "soft communication, focusing on simple news or events that locals can relate to," has helped CSOs connect refugees with local communities.

Another strategy utilized by CSOs to increase visibility is celebrity endorsements. One INGO representative said, "Celebrities are important to influence public opinion as spokespersons. They are much more powerful. They even help set the agenda in traditional media through their popularity and get sensitive issues covered." Working with media means CSO representatives serve as expert sources when needed, organize events to highlight the launch of new projects, and regularly issue news releases and engage with journalists at an informal level. Several of the smaller NGOs talked about serving as panelists at local conferences or guests at various media shows in order to increase the visibility of their work. CSO communicators are clearly aware of how mass media operates and can take advantage of journalistic routines.

Partnerships and Inter-Agency Collaboration

The growth of the third sector in Turkey is partly driven by purely humanitarian concerns about serving "beneficiaries." CSOs put a lot of time and thought into how to achieve "social cohesion," or the seamless integration between the Syrian and local populations. Specific programs are designed with relevant beneficiaries in mind, and target women and girls, children, or other sub-groups considered to be most vulnerable. This was reflected in the range of services they offered, including vocational training for specific jobs, incentivizing Turkish employers to hire refugees, or offering social services and language training for children (so that they are better prepared for the local education system and university entrance examinations).

While many of our respondents talked about the coordination of activities and inter-agency collaboration for various special events or social services (such as the SADA Women's Center mentioned by many UN Agencies), there was an implied distinction between funding agencies and "front liners." Some CSOs referred to themselves as front liners because they do the work "hands-on" in the field; they believed this gave them an advantage. One of the things they criticized was that some international CSOs only target European audiences as donors, some partner organizations, and the Turkish public. They do not communicate in Arabic or treat Syrian refugees like a direct audience, and they rely on local partners and community centers to reach out to the refugee communities.

While CSOs have used partnerships to increase public engagement as well as their impact on beneficiaries, they mention territoriality in regard to competition for funding and resources. In fact, Syrian refugee aid has turned into a new business sector. Many newcomers, along with established local and international CSOs, are developing projects and applying for grants to support Syrian refugees, with the most substantial amount of funding coming from the EU. This type of project-based funding creates challenges. According to some of the older NGO representatives who have been active in the field for over 20–30 years, "everyday a new NGO is established, their goals are not only humanitarian but also money is very appealing. They simply write a project, partner up with a larger CSO and get funds." They say that a new profession has started which includes "project writing, management, implementation, fundraising. But how much of the motivation is humanitarian or financial is a real concern." Additionally, some of the more experienced professionals are concerned about the long-term sustainability of refugee support work. Whether projects or local CSOs will survive beyond the current funding cycle, or continue to function in the long term, remains uncertain. There is also a question about capacity building: a lot of new professionals have been trained, and local capacity has been developed through investing in people working in international aid and social support. However, where this human capital will be transferred if the funds run out remains uncertain.

The CSO communications professionals are highly educated, passionate about their work, and connected through a community-like network. They use their media knowledge and experience strategically and are competent in their work, showing dedication and creativity. But they are also a closed group, which means that access for outsiders may be limited; one needs to have internal connections to access and communicate with them. There was an observable "inbreeding" trend, with cross-transfers between organizations and frequent movement of staff from one CSO to another. This explains why some of the talking points and examples provided by interviewees were quite similar, especially for international organizations. There are also implications in regard to sustainability; it is hard to have long-term strategies based on staff members when one is faced with a high employee turnover.

Differences Between CSOs

While there are a number of similarities (such as government relationships, focus on strategic media use, and cooperation and co-dependencies) across the CSOs that we interviewed, we observed some distinct differences between the domestic and international organizations. The first obvious difference is capacity and size due to accessibility to resources. The larger organizations, especially those under the UN umbrella, are generally located in luxurious, protected working environments, with high-tech offices and well-trained, multi-lingual staff. The INGO offices are business-like environments, with impressive meeting rooms in high-rises and people working in hierarchical organizational layers; staff are able to produce high quality publicity materials and hire college students as interns. However, the situation for the smaller local NGOs is significantly different. They are mostly located on the ground floor of small apartment buildings with weak infrastructure. They seem a bit less organized; however, they are more dynamic and enthusiastic about their work. Except for the *Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants*, which functions more as a state agency rather than an NGO, the national NGOs have a less hierarchical organizational structure and a less clear division of labor, with one person taking on several responsibilities. Many of the people interviewed emphasized the need to remember their mission, especially in the face of funding challenges and sustainability issues.

Another difference between international and national CSOs is how they define and measure effectiveness. The large IOs and INGOs, by design, need to follow specific evaluation metrics and show quantifiable outputs, which are important to their donors. However, smaller local organizations tend to focus on the individual refugee and argue that true impact is about how many lives have been changed as a result of real outcomes, a metric that is undeniably much harder to measure. As one noted: "No lives are changed with a news story but maybe we change one life with our project!" Another one commented:

> We believe in … personal impact. It has been 17 years, but nothing has changed—we go to the field, we talk to them. We are with these people. We are traumatized—but it is the happiest moments of our lives.

The local grassroots organizations tend to criticize the approach of large IOs and INGOs for being too removed from the people. The unique funding structure and procedures that INGOs and IOs are expected to follow may inadvertently lead to an over-emphasis on the quantity of tangible outputs at the expense of quality. The national NGOs focus on individual human stories and highlight the importance of showing the public the real impact of their initiatives on Syrian communities, especially through personal accounts. The smaller NGOs intentionally try to avoid "cold-hearted project jargon," such as how many trainings they'd held and the number of refugees they'd 'reached.' One local NGO representative complained:

There is just too much paperwork. Statistics, numbers—this is what UN agencies want. They want to see outputs, but unfortunately, they don't care about social impact. I'm not sure if UN agencies focus on this question of social impact as much as national NGOs.

Despite these notable differences, however, IOs, INGOs, and national NGOs work as partners at the local level and depend on each other for projects and implementation. Although different in capacity and size, there is a symbiotic relationship between the international and national CSO communities. Most of the time there is cooperation between institutions, as local organizations act as implementing partners for the large international organizations, and they are mainly funded through them as part of the EU-Turkey Deal.

Main Challenges

Almost all organizations highlight the shift in the political climate and the deteriorating economic situation in Turkey in relation to the changing public opinion regarding Syrian refugees as the main challenges. In this regard, one respondent said:

People say refugee women are here to take our husbands, they are doing nothing laying down all day, European countries are supporting them while we suffer, young refugee men are in Turkey doing nothing while our soldiers are dying fighting in the border, they carry contagious diseases, they are dirty, ugly, they steal stuff, they rape women! This is how Turkish people see refugees. This prejudice also impacts refugees, they hate to be refugees and they don't want to be identified as such.

Understanding the public sentiment and the local situation is critical in CSOs' work. As one CSO professional put it, it is critical to "keep the pulse of the people, the street." She continued, "when people are against Syrians and they are hateful, I can't tell people about the employment story of a Syrian." The changing rhetoric of the Turkish government and the less favorable public opinion are two of the major challenges. As mentioned above, donor support is critical for the continuation of projects and the integration of Syrian refugees. Strategic partnerships with the donor community are key. The lack of guaranteed funding and the shifting support of the government are significant challenges. The general public may have reached a saturation point and become exhausted by hearing about Syrian refugees. This idea of limited resources being distributed to refugees is a challenge for

CSOs. In fact, investing in refugee support may lead to resentment in the host communities:

People may believe that Syrians receive kits, donations but Turkish host community doesn't. So people feel like that the already limited existing resources are transferred to Syrians. There is public outrage and, unfortunately, the media also feeds into it.

Monitoring and evaluating projects to reveal results also poses a challenge to civil society professionals. Despite CSOs' best efforts and strategic partnerships, it is challenging to measure the human impact of their projects. This is especially true in the case of refugee and migrant populations, such as seasonal agricultural workers or victims of domestic violence. Some interviewees expressed concern that the most vulnerable populations appear to be the hardest to reach, physically and emotionally, and require long-term solutions. In addition, it may be hard for some refugees to open up or they may not want to share their stories. A local NGO representative working with marginalized communities stated:

We work with victims of extreme violence, rape—people whose rights have been taken away from them. They are already marginalized populations. It is sometimes hard to advocate for them due to the sensitive nature of some of these LGBTQ communities. A lot of colleagues hide where they're working because they are afraid of the reactions.

Discussion and Conclusions

The particular sociocultural and political context in Turkey affected CSO work in the area of migration in a number of ways. First and foremost, our findings show that government relations created a challenging environment for civil society organizations (RQ3). CSO professionals had to navigate carefully between satisfying the requirements of their donors and meeting the expectations of local and national government agencies, tailoring their messages to emphasize they are working *together* on behalf of the migrant population in Turkey. Cooperation with other CSOs was also needed for the success of refugee projects, although as shown in other research (e.g., Kagan 1991; Maiers et al. 2005), competition for resources was not uncommon (more on that below).

In her study on government and non-profit collaborations in Canada, Brock (2020: 267–268) warned against the dangers of public sector politicization and its implications on the non-profit sector, where non-profits "may find themselves closely associated with the government's political objectives in order to maintain alliances and

funding relations." This warning applies to Turkey, where nation-specific contingency factors and political structures make CSO professionals particularly concerned about the perceptions of their work as well as the sustainability of their organizations. In this context, it is not surprising that they prefer "softer" advocacy strategies as a "complement, rather than an adversary of government" (Verschuere and De Corte 2015: 234), choosing a non-confrontational approach to avoid making enemies and jeopardize future projects.

The inconsistent government policies and shifting public opinion also created challenges for communication and media work, as discussed in our findings (RQ1). While CSO media professionals relied on traditional communication campaigns to promote their projects, they felt underlying tensions and constant need to justify the purpose of their work. The increasingly negative public attitudes added extra pressure to "soften" the tone of their media messages and to try to predict which social media posts might backfire. This type of environment may have hindered some innovative ideas and media platforms from being utilized. It is important though to recognize CSO's critical awareness and targeted communication campaigns on behalf of disadvantaged communities in Turkey, indicating that as communication professional they have developed an in-depth understanding of the power of media. Based on their experiences as former journalists, they are intimately familiar with newsworthiness criteria and journalistic routines, a pattern similar to that identified in other European countries (Dekker and Scholten 2017; Ihlen et al. 2015). Extending prior research in this area, we suggest that working with media can be a challenge in cases of shifting and increasingly negative public opinion. Therefore, it is crucial to use media strategically by deciding not only when and how to engage journalists, but also when to stay silent.

The study also addressed the types of programs CSOs have developed to support refugee rights and integration in Turkish society in general (RQ2). It was evident that both local and international organizations strongly believed in the importance of working toward social cohesion and seamless integration between the Syrian population and local residents. The respondents showcased a number of programs specifically designed with that goal in mind. Similar to non-profits in other countries, some of the programs identified and targeted selected sub-groups such as a women and girls, for example (Paker 2019; Özden 2013). The take-away message here is that the success of such programs is dependent upon factors external to the beneficiaries themselves. For example, a project may offer vocational training to Syrian men about how to become electricians, but getting a job as an electrician would be dependent upon a local hiring company. In other words,

incentivizing Turkish employers to hire migrants would be a critical part for the success of such training programs. Taken together, our findings demonstrate that refugee work in the civil society sector in the Turkish context, at least at the time of this research, is like "walking on a tightrope." Civil society organizations face significant challenges, including funding, strained government relations, competition for resources, and shifting public opinion. Despite these challenges, however, CSO professionals remain dedicated to their work and ground their efforts in the founding principles of their organizations. Through highly reflexive personal accounts, CSO representatives show that they are acutely aware of the potential, as well as the limitations, of their work on behalf of refugees in Turkey's current socio-political environment.

One of the shortcomings of previous research, as Sangar and Meyer note (2018), is that it treats CSOs as a homogenous group and tends to focus on large international organizations based in the Global North. It does not pay enough attention to other types of NGOs or to the differences between INGOs, which may impact their communication capacities and impact. As Garkish et al. (2017) and Wren (2007) note, it is critically important to uncover the interdependencies among CSOs, from cooperation to competition for resources, beyond Western contexts. Our research not only extends prior research to a non-Western context, but also captures the interdependencies between the large number of CSOs working with refugees in Turkey, from new—usually local—players as well as well-established, typically international, CSO actors. Consistent with other authors, we conclude that CSOs must cooperate as partners and share their experience and knowhow, while at the same time competing for external resources (e.g., Ataç et al. 2017; Atouba and Shumate 2020). In some ways, "competition creates secrecy and an atmosphere of seeking comparative advantage over competitors, putting the focus on the organizations and the humanitarian sector itself, rather than on the people they serve" (Maiers et al. 2005: 89). This was certainly the case in the Turkish context, where smaller NGOs seemed more focused on the human impact of their work, and also expressed concern that the pressures of monitoring and standardized evaluation criteria followed by larger international organizations shift the focus to evaluation activities, inputs, and outputs rather than human impact. This tendency may lead inadvertently shift lead to focusing more on quantity rather than quality, forgetting the humanitarian aspect of the work.

Furthermore, the initiation date of inter-agency collaboration was noted as critical, which is line with Kagan (1991: 318) who argued that "the more that is shared between organizations involved in an inter-agency collaboration, the more intense that relationship becomes and the

more value is created by the collaboration." Particularly smaller CSOs reported feeling that the collaborations were simply based on sharing funds and nothing else. NGO representatives expressed concern about not being involved in the project writing or initiation phase, or being consulted about how projects could be implemented better. As suggested by Císař and Navrátil (2015: 552), "the need to gain additional expertise from other organizations and to establish partnerships with them to successfully meet the project's requirements" is critical for inter-agency collaborations; however, local/smaller CSO actors are rarely involved from the beginning, at the critical project initiation phase.

While this study documented trends in CSO work with refugees within the Turkish socio-political and economic context, including the symbiotic relationships between different types of CSOs as well as existing government actors, future studies should investigate whether the same patterns are found in other international settings to unearth potential similarities and differences. Non-profit organizations working with refugees in other countries could be interviewed to reveal how different sociocultural, religious, and political backgrounds may impact CSO work in general and communication and advocacy efforts specifically. Such cross-cultural comparisons may provide important lessons about the role of civil society not only for academics, but also for policymakers and third-sector organizations as they develop effective migration policies and extend prior research in this area.

This study has certain limitations. First, the interviews included a limited number of CSO representatives in Turkey and relied on their self-reflections rather than observation of specific activities. Future studies could expand the list of participants and incorporate an analysis of the CSO communication materials, including traditional print publicity materials as well as digital communications. Furthermore, focus groups or in-depth interviews with the refugee communities could reveal how they perceive the CSOs and outreach strategies to be successful while identifying their blind spots. Such studies would provide refugees, a mostly silent community, a voice and perhaps an opportunity to share their perspectives.

Despite these limitations, this article offers an in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities for CSOs working on behalf of refugees and migrants in Turkey, the country hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. The perspective of CSO practitioners demonstrates that these organizations engage with strategic partners (including the media, government institutions, and host communities) to enhance communication and maximize the impact of their advocacy efforts. Thus, these organizations deserve credit for contributing to the diversity of Turkey's civil society, as they aim to build the road toward integration and social cohesion for refugees. Building resilience among refugee populations and ensuring their self-support and guarantee their livelihoods seem to be the main goals for CSOs.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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