

When migrants compare: Decentring Europe in migration management



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literatures, it is common practice to study migration comparatively—putting numbers, legal frameworks, policies, and outcomes in international comparison. Such comparisons teach us about how migration dynamics are affected by state policies and national contexts with a bird's eye view. Qualitative sociology, anthropology and human geography, on the other hand, follow methods that get closer to experiences of migrants as persons, their daily lives and practices, struggles, strategies, emotions, and how all these relate to places of origin, transit and arrival. This valuably close-up view often does not engage with comparison but goes into the depths of a phenomenon and unravels its inner tensions. In my research

with Syrian migrants in Germany, I aimed to bring comparison into ethnographic research by positioning my research participants as the agents and undertakers of the comparative task.

In 2018 and 2019, in Berlin and Leipzig, I conducted life-story interviews with Syrian migrants, who had lived in Turkey before their arrival to Germany. My initial idea was to do a follow-up of my research in Istanbul which focused on informal neighbourhood initiatives that aided Syrians in their settlement in the metropolis (Alkan, 2021b). I wanted to understand how these informal aid groups were perceived and how Syrian migrants managed the power

asymmetries that were inherent in the relations that had been formed through these networks. With this purpose I chose people who had lived in Turkey at least for six months, so that they would have found jobs, flats and have had the intention to stay there until at least the circumstances changed in Syria. But my interlocutors were also people who had fled again, going through a second (or third) migration and facing the challenges of building lives from scratch, in another context, within a short period of time. They had a lot to say about what led to this second move and how they were met in Germany.



A line of Syrian refugees crossing the border of Hungary and Austria on their way to Germany. September 2015. Copyright: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

This was the first reason why I did not want to conduct semi-structured interviews that solely focused on the theme of neighbourhood support. Second, in order to test my hypothesis that such informal neighbourly aid had been important in their lives, I had to withhold

from providing too much direction and be open to hearing other narratives. So I chose to prompt very little and asked general questions like 'can you tell me about yourself, how you migrated here and how your life was in Turkey?' This general prompt gave my research participants freedom to expand on the aspects of their lives as they chose. Some talked a lot about the horrors of the war and the flight. Others dwelled more on economic struggles or changes in family structures. Some were more reserved to talk about their emotional burdens, others less so. But from the first interview on, although I did not ask them anything about Germany, it became clear that they retrospectively perceived their lives in Turkey in

comparison to their lives in Germany. Gradually I decided to take up this theme more deliberately and asked them to engage in a comparison towards the end of our conversations.

Their comparisons opened up many other themes than neighbours and neighbourliness—although neighbours (Alkan et al., 2021b), to my relief, still occupied a significant place—like labour conditions (Alkan et al., 2021a), rental market, human smuggling networks (Alkan, 2021a), education and family. When left to articulate contrasts and reflect on them, my interlocutors were very insightful. They carefully chose their words and engaged in a thought exercise about the reasons of differences

and similarities. Their talk was peppered with lots of 'but's, 'although's and 'however's, used as qualifiers and precautions against a one-sided perspective. During the interviews I sometimes took this as an indication of their kindness towards me—a Turkish woman who wanted to hear about their experiences in Turkey—as they sometimes apologized for what they were about to tell. But later when I listened to the interviews over and over again, I figured one more reason, and maybe a more important one, for their meticulousness. As agents of their own lives, they paid attention to how they would narrate these lives and how they would analyze the conditions that shaped their choices.

The nuanced descriptions and several clauses notwithstanding, social life and future-making were the areas which were presented with greatest contrast between the countries. In Turkey, most of my research participants were surrounded by families, extended kin, friends and neighbours. Turkey's initial open-door policy allowed Syrians to flee in larger constellations of kin and village/neighborhood networks, and because encampment was not preferred as a state policy, these large networks resettled in closer proximity to each other. The presence of familiar people, as well as the cultural affinity and shared religion with the Turkish and Kurdish residents of the cities they settled partially remedied the

pains of exile for my all-Muslim interlocutors. Moreover, many had felt welcome by their neighbours and co-workers (yet hostility and indifference were not excluded either) (Alkan, 2020), and easily established friendships. All three elements of social life—family, Syrian social networks and meaningful, close connections with the locals—were missing in Germany. Their new neighbours occasionally said ‘guten Tag’ and gave a nod when they met in the staircase, and they had very few relatives and family members in Germany, let alone in Berlin or Leipzig.

In Germany, on the other hand, they were more hopeful about their futures. A meaningful and aspirable future was not even imaginable in

Turkey. Their time was sucked away by exploitative, back-breaking work in the informal sector, and they did not have many chances to further their education or get their qualifications accredited. Germany promised them time—although it was incessantly interrupted by bureaucratic hassles—and a legal status which would lead to naturalisation after some years. Both made imagining a future possible, even though none of these were immediately accessible. However, on the flip-side they suffered from delayed normalisation of their lives, as they were not allowed to work until they fulfilled several requirements.



A worker at a textile workshop in Gaziantep. 2021.

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A global sociology does not have to be comparative. Yet comparison can be a good exercise, when the benchmarks are chosen carefully. Most often what we see in comparisons is an effort to situate non-western contexts on a scale that puts Western norms as the standard. Then differences become deviations from the norm. Yet, whatever we understand as the

international (read as European) standards, they are actually highly dynamic and contingent, especially in the realm of migration management. What is considered an absolute right one day, can be easily shelved the next day. Or different standards apply to different migrants, as we have clearly seen with the welcome treatment of the Ukrainian refugees in the EU while there is tremendous effort about increasing border security to stop the migrants coming from African countries, where wars are being waged simultaneously. Such Eurocentric benchmarking also leads to overseeing the politics and policies around migration that do not immediately fall in step with the 'international' standards.

These can be informal, ad-hoc solutions, rather than well-laid-out and formalized regulations but have tremendous effects on migrant lives whether positive or negative.

We should find ways to look into the specifics of any migration context without immediately subscribing to the norms set by the robust migration control and management regimes in Western Europe. In this line of work, Kelsey Norman identifies 'indifference-as-policy', (Norman, 2019) and Wendy Pearlman points to 'selectiveness,' (Pearlman, 2020) as defining features of the migration regime of Turkey. Both of these features have formative effects on how migrants establish and fit into the rhythms of daily

life, how they experience the current course of their lives, how they relate to their past, and what they aspire for their future. Indifference, as Norman poignantly illustrates, does not mean inaction. Turkey has had several implicit and explicit policies regarding migration. However, these policies (and non-policies) are much less interventionist than their counterparts in Western Europe (and particularly Germany, in this case).

Listening to migrants' own open-ended comparisons allow detecting these policies in a holistic manner. Because in their narratives they bring together work conditions with intimate family affairs, bureaucratic mile-stones with the

soundscapes of cities and give us a more nuanced and thicker understanding of migration contexts. Such comparisons are what a Global Sociology could offer.

Cite this article as: Alkan, H. (2024, February 4). When migrants compare: De-centring Europe in migration management. Global Qualitative Sociology Network. <https://global-qualitative-sociology.net/2024/02/04/when-migrants-compare/>

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