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The Portrait of Syrians: Media Framing across Electoral Cycle in Türkiye

Canan Çetin [1,2]

[1] Eskisehir Osmangazi University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, Eskişehir, Türkiye
[2] Visiting Research Fellow, Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton and Hove, United Kingdom

Abstract This study investigates the visual framing of Syrian refugees in Turkish media during electoral cycles marked by intensified political rhetoric. As migration becomes a polarizing issue, media may contribute to the politicization of refugee representations, reflecting or reinforcing dominant depictions. Using quantitative visual analysis, this study examines 3,748 news articles published between 2014–2023 by three major Turkish news sources (Habertürk, Hürriyet, and TRT News) between 2014 and 2023, including two non-election years (2020–2021). Images were coded into five categories to track shifts across elections. The findings show a statistically significant increase in 'criminal' and 'dehumanized' portrayals, particularly during local elections, indicating a patterned shift in visual framing that coincides with periods of heightened political attention to migration. Media outlets diverge in approach: mainstream newspapers often amplify security-focused narratives, while the state-run TRT emphasizes humanitarian frames, portraying Türkiye in ways that emphasize its capacity to protect vulnerable refugees. These distinctions demonstrate variations in editorial tendencies that may reflect sensitivity to political context. This study contributes to migration and media scholarship by offering empirical insight into how visual tropes—such as criminalization, dehumanization, and victimhood—are mobilized differently across electoral cycles and media outlets, shaping how refugee politicization is constructed visually.

Keywords Syrian refugees · Türkiye · elections · media coverage · visual framing · migration

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Corresponding author: Canan Çetin cetinc@ogu.edu.tr, ccc53@sussex.ac.uk

The Portrait of Syrians: Media Framing across Electoral Cycle in Türkiye

Media representations of refugees and immigrants, ranging from empathetic portrayals to stereotype-reinforcing narratives, have drawn global scrutiny. In the context of Turkish media, the depiction of such groups is particularly complex, shaped by the country's unique geopolitical position, historical experiences, and socio-political dynamics. Studies (Esses et al., 2013; Parker, 2015; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Vincze et al., 2021) suggest that these portrayals may vary significantly during specific periods, especially in response to political events, social changes, or crises. This variability raises questions about the consistency and impact of media representations in Türkiye, especially during times of heightened political tension or social upheaval.

In recent years, the presence of Syrian refugees in Türkiye has coincided with increasing political attention, especially at politically pivotal moments. Debates on integration policies, social welfare, and national identity have become central in political campaigns, influencing voter behavior and party strategies. Media portrayals of Syrians may influence public opinion and policy attitudes (Esses et al., 2013; Parrott et al., 2019). Biased or negative reporting may fuel xenophobia, social polarization, and the normalization of exclusionary discourses (Parker, 2015; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). Moreover, comparative studies have demonstrated that media portrayals play a central role in how refugee populations are imagined across national contexts—as seen during the 2015 and 2016 elections in Germany and the United States (Ogan et al., 2018; Trost, 2023). Thus, analyzing how Syrians are depicted in the media provides valuable insights into refugee representation and its political implications in the Turkish and broader global contexts.

Türkiye has a large and politically active electorate. As of the latest elections, the country had over 64 million eligible voters (YSK, 2023). Voter turnout in Türkiye is generally high compared to global standards, often exceeding 88.92% in the latest 2023 general election (YSK, 2023). This high level of participation reflects the interest of the Turkish public in the governance and political future of their country. Türkiye's electoral system is shaped by the differing dynamics of general, local, and referendum elections. Each carries varying levels of political salience and media attention, often shaping how different issues—including migration—are prioritized during campaigns.

This study examines how Turkish media portrays Syrian refugees across election cycles, focusing on shifts between outlets. Using quantitative methods, news articles from major Turkish sources are analyzed. This investigation not only contributes to the broader discourse on migration studies by highlighting the specific context of Türkiye—a country at the crossroads of significant migratory routes—but also underscores the role of electoral cycles in shaping media narratives.

Although the study does not seek to establish causal claims about editorial intent or political decision-making, it examines how visual representation patterns vary across outlets and election contexts. Rather than inferring motivations, the analysis focuses on observable editorial tendencies, such as securitization, humanitarian framing, and depersonalization, that appear to be responsive to political conditions. The objective of this study is to identify recurring visual tropes and trace their fluctuation over time, particularly in relation to election cycles, to understand how media outlets contribute to shaping the public discourse on refugees.

Global Perspectives on Refugee Representation in the Media

Before turning to the relevant literature, the conceptual orientation of this study should be outlined. Rather than committing to a single theoretical framework, the research selectively draws on concepts from visual framing theory (Entman, 1993), securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998), and critical discourse perspectives on media representation (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017). These frameworks serve not as testable models but as interpretive tools to guide the

descriptive analysis, which is in line with the study's non-causal, exploratory orientation. This study does not aim to attribute political intent to media institutions or to analyze editorial motivations. Instead, the focus is on the representational forms that emerge through visual content and the broader patterns that these forms reflect.

Within this conceptual landscape, the visual portrayal of refugees has become a central concern, particularly regarding its influence on public discourse and policy framing.Studies have explored how refugees are framed across different national and regional contexts. Parrott et al. (2019) showed that partisan-aligned visuals in U.S. media trigger different emotional responses—human-interest images elicit empathy, and politicized frames fuel negativity. Similarly, Chen et al. (2023) analyzed partisan U.S. media representations of Syrian refugees, showing that left-leaning media emphasized refugees' potential contributions, while right-leaning outlets portrayed them as security threats linked to Islamic terrorism, reinforcing fear-based narratives.

These U.S. context insights resonate with broader global patterns. Studies in South Korea, Finland, and the Netherlands (Hur & Yang, 2024; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Kox et al., 2023) reveal how national media systems frame refugees through distinct political and emotional lenses, often influenced by ideological leanings and editorial style. Other studies emphasize the evolution of visual strategies. Lenette and Cleland (2016) and Trost (2023) documented the evolving visual strategies of the authors, noting shifts from dehumanizing tropes to more empathetic representations during political crises. Scholars have highlighted how refugee imagery, while increasing visibility, often strips agency and reinforces securitized narratives (Xu & Zhang, 2024; Bleiker et al., 2013). Collectively, these studies suggest that visual strategies reflect and shape the discursive boundaries within which refugees are interpreted. While most studies focus on Western media, this research addresses a gap by analyzing Türkiye's refugee visual framing across election cycles in a non-Western context.

Media Representations of Refugees in Türkiye

Research on refugee representation in Turkish media has increasingly focused on understanding the role of discourse in shaping public perception. Gölcü and Dağlı (2017) describe the "guest" framing as reinforcing exclusionary narratives. This aligns with Sarıkaya's (2020) analysis of discursive divergences between pro-government and opposition outlets, which alternated between humanitarian and securitized framings depending on political alignment.

Studies by Çetin and Gürelli (2024), Keneş (2025), and Erdoğan and Erçetin (2019) indicate that both government and opposition parties strategically adapt refugee narratives, often invoking themes of security, demographic threat, and national identity—especially during elections. Their findings underscore how the media not only reflects but also reinforces broader populist narratives within electoral politics. Balta et al. (2023) showed that anti-refugee rhetoric has become mainstream across party lines, with media aligning their narratives accordingly. Their research reveals that anti-refugee themes, once marginal, have become normalized within party programs and political campaigns, leading to a rhetorical convergence among major parties, especially during the 2023 elections. Building on prior discourse analyses, this study offers a visual framing perspective that highlights shifts across multiple election cycles. By incorporating comparative insights across multiple electoral events, this study seeks to reveal how political conditions shape media representations in a shifting landscape.

Media and Electoral Politics: The Intersection of Refugee Representation and Political Campaigns

The politicization of refugee representation intensifies during election periods when media narratives become central to campaign strategies. Refugee portrayals have served to mobilize voters and define party platforms in various global contexts. Across Germany, Denmark, and the U.S., refugee framing often shifts in line with electoral campaigns

and partisan strategies (Trost, 2023; Dawood, 2023; Ogan et al., 2018). In Türkiye, during elections, media framing of refugees varies across outlets: state-run TRT emphasizes victimhood, while private outlets like Hürriyet fluctuate between humanitarian and securitized portrayals (Çetin & Gürelli, 2024; Keneş, 2025).

Based on prior research, this study assumes that refugee representations vary depending on media orientation and political context (Hur & Yang, 2024; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Parrott et al., 2019; Kox et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023), evolve over time in response to political or societal events (Çetin & Gürelli, 2025; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Lenette & Cleland, 2016), and may involve selective reporting strategies such as faceless imagery or omission of individual stories (Lenette & Cleland, 2016; Gölcü & Dağlı, 2017; Kox et al., 2023). This study addresses a gap in the literature by analyzing the visual framing of Syrian refugees during the electoral period in Turkish media.

Methodology

While Syrians hold temporary protection status under Turkish law, the study uses the term "Syrian refugees" to reflect common public and media usage.

Selection of the Media Sources

Habertürk, Hürriyet, and TRT Haber were selected for their readership and accessibility. According to the Net Circulation Report (2024), Habertürk and Hürriyet are among the most-read newspapers with open archives, enabling longitudinal analysis. Although ranked 26th, TRT Haber was included to represent state-run media, allowing a comparative analysis of government-influenced narratives. The selection intentionally avoids a political alignment-based approach because Turkish media landscapes exhibit sharp ideological polarizations. Instead, the focus is on how mainstream media, regardless of their political leanings, construct dominant representations and how state narratives are differentiated.

Pilot Years

2020 and 2021, which lacked elections, were used for comparison. A total of 357 articles from these years were analyzed to contrast with election-year trends.

Election Periods and Samples

Intense political competition in Türkiye brings national identity, economic policies, and the role of refugees to the center of electoral debates. The political landscape is also shaped by the diversity of parties, ranging from secularist to conservative and from nationalist to pro-Kurdish, each appealing to different segments of the electorate. The high frequency of elections, combined with deep political divisions, creates an environment of continuous campaigning and policy shifts, making the analysis of media representation and public opinion during these periods particularly significant. This study employs a meticulously structured quantitative methodology to investigate the portrayal of Syrian refugees in Turkish media, with a focus on the nuanced changes that may occur in relation to electoral cycles. General elections typically occur every five years, while presidential elections have been held every five years since the 2018 shift to a presidential system. In addition, Türkiye has a history of snap elections, called earlier than scheduled, often in response to political crises or shifting alliances.

The study covers seven electoral events over six years—2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2023—including three general elections for the national parliament, two local elections for municipal governments, one presidential election, and one referendum. Each election year is divided into quarterly periods to analyze representation variations before, during, and after elections. A total of 3,391 news articles containing the keyword “Syrian” were included in the dataset to filter relevant content and only news accompanied by visuals.

Visual Framing Categories

The visual data are categorized into five main themes (**Appendix 6**) based on an adapted version of Wilmott's (2017) framework, with Drüeke, Klaus, and Moser (2021) as an additional category. This expanded categorization scheme not only draws from Wilmott's original analysis but also introduces a critical dehumanization category:

Crowd: Images showing five or more individuals, often from a distance, to depict collective movement (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Wilmott, 2017).

Individual: Portrayals focusing on a single person, usually highlighting personal stories and fostering humanization (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Wilmott, 2017).

Criminal: Images featuring refugees with police, soldiers, or handcuffs, framing them as security threats (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Wilmott, 2017; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

Victimhood: Depictions aimed at evoking empathy, such as mothers with babies or children in conflict zones, to represent a sense of suffering or need (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017; Wilmott, 2017; Xu & Zhang, 2023; Friese, 2022).

Dehumanization: Visuals in which refugees' faces are obscured, blurred, or shown from behind, often accompanied by politicians or celebrities, reduce their subjectivity (Martikainen & Sakki, 2021; Bleiker et al., 2023; Drüke et al, 2021).

Handling of Ambiguous Visuals

Two coders independently assessed ambiguous or multi-thematic visuals to minimize subjectivity. The dominant theme was coded when multiple themes appeared in a single image. Visuals that did not fit any category were initially grouped under "unrecognizable categories," but they were excluded from the final analysis due to their low frequency. One area of potential ambiguity arose in the classification of "faceless" imagery. In this study, "faceless" referred specifically to visual strategies that obscure identity not for protective or ethical purposes (e.g., anonymizing individuals to ensure privacy), but in ways that strip away individual agency or personhood. Coders were instructed to distinguish between these uses based on context: images depicting refugees with blurred or obscured faces in large crowds or political settings were included, while images where anonymity served protective functions (e.g., blurred minors) were excluded. This reflects a conscious effort to interpret facelessness as a form of dehumanization rather than neutral anonymization.

Data collection and coding

The data collection process started on July 1, 2023, and concluded on February 1, 2024. A research assistant was recruited through a public announcement and trained in identifying and categorizing visual frames following project approval. While the assistant was informed about the years and newspapers included in the sample, they were blinded to the classification of election versus non-election periods, minimizing the risk of bias during data collection (Dan, 2018).

In accordance with established practices in visual content analysis, a double-coder approach was implemented to enhance reliability and reduce subjective interpretation (Parry, 2020). Two coders independently applied a detailed coding scheme that was developed and standardized through a comprehensive training process and the use of a codebook (Davison et al., 2016). Intercoder reliability was assessed using a randomly selected subsample of 75 images drawn from a range of news sources and dates. Reliability was monitored throughout coding (Parry, 2020). Krippendorff's alpha was calculated to determine intercoder agreement, yielding a value of 0.92, indicating a high level of reliability (Krippendorff, 2018; De Swert, 2012; Eisele et al., 2023). In this study, the unit of analysis was the image, not the article.

All coded data were systematically recorded in a spreadsheet, with each row corresponding to one image. Subsequently, the dataset was analyzed using SPSS to identify statistical relationships between variables. The combination of coder training, coder blindness to key variables, and the reporting of a high intercoder reliability coefficient supports the methodological design's transparency and replicability (Andersen et al., 2021; Davison et al., 2016).

Variables and Hypotheses

This study considers four primary variables: the type of election (general, local, presidential, or referendum), the timing of publication relative to election dates (organized by quarterly periods), the daily circulation of the media outlets, and the visual framing categories applied to each news item. The central hypothesis posits that visual framing strategies will vary significantly depending on the type and proximity of elections. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that media outlets with higher circulation may be more likely to employ specific visual frames and that proximity to election dates will intensify certain portrayals. These assumptions aim to explore how the intersection of media influence and electoral urgency shapes refugee representations, contributing to broader debates on the political instrumentalization of migration discourse.

Results and Discussion

This section integrates the findings' presentation with their interpretation, following a combined results and discussion format. This approach not only facilitates a clear articulation of the empirical outcomes but also underscores their broader significance within the context of the study's aims. In line with the assumptions derived from the existing literature, the analysis reflects on how the findings contribute to, expand upon, or complicate previous research. Given the volume of data, the diversity of electoral contexts, and the comparative nature of the media sources analyzed, this section has been organized into thematic sub-sections to enhance readability and conceptual clarity. Each subsection foregrounds a distinct analytical focus, offering a more accessible and structured engagement with the results.

The first sub-section examines variations in the overall volume of news across the temporal span of data collection, identifying fluctuations in media attention over time. The second study explores the temporal transformation of the Syrian refugee image, tracing how visual representations evolve across different periods. The third sub-section shifts focus to media strategies by comparing editorial choices across news sources and identifying divergences in framing practices. The fourth section, supported by correlation analysis, analyzes the influence of election types on news categories to assess how electoral cycles shape media portrayals. Finally, the last subsection presents the results of a regression analysis, discussing the key parameters that statistically account for the volume of refugee-related news coverage and their implications for understanding broader news production dynamics.

Trends in the News Volume

Coverage peaked in 2015 and declined during the pandemic, indicating a decline in media attention to refugee issues. By 2023, the issue no longer commands the same level of media attention as it once did. This trend underscores a shifting media landscape in which the intensity of coverage on Syrian refugees has waned over time, influenced by global events such as the pandemic and potentially changing editorial priorities or public interest. Such fluctuations in media attention are consistent with findings in the literature, which highlight how media coverage of crises, such as the refugee issue, often peaks during significant events (Keneş, 2025), before subsiding as the issue's immediacy recedes.

Figure 1

Yearly News Trends

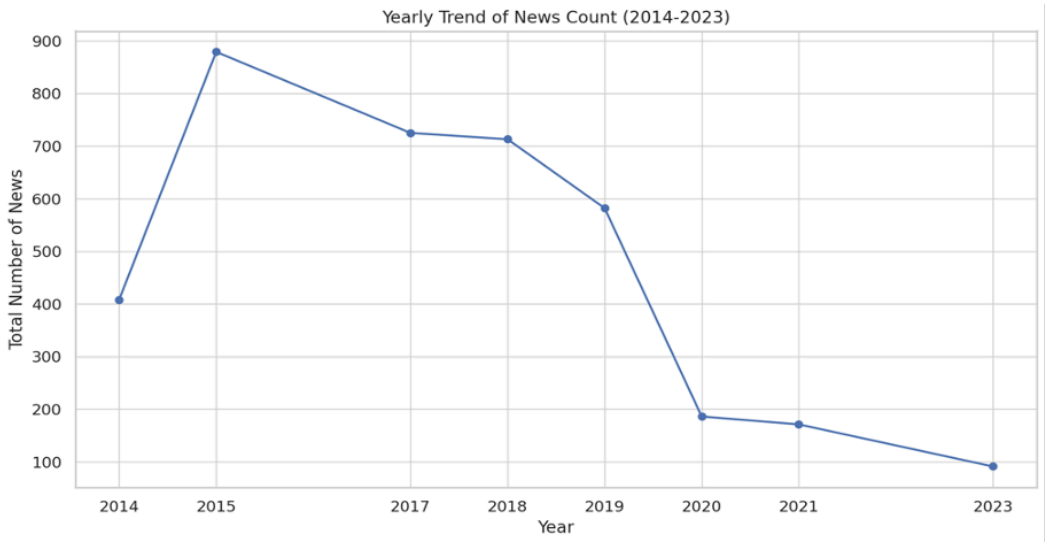
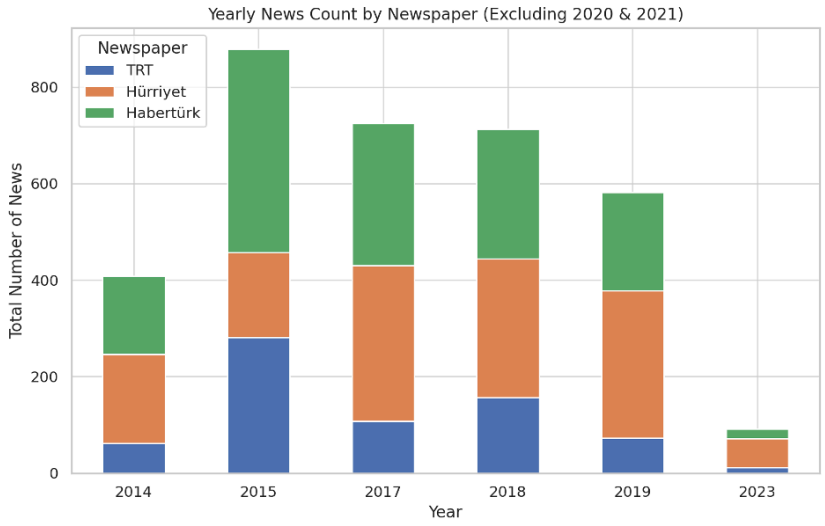


Figure 2, which details the year-over-year changes in the number of news articles during election years, an examination within the context of total news counts reveals that news coverage peaked in 2015, consistent with the literature linking media attention to political crises (Çetin & Gürelli, 2025; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Parrott et al., 2019; Lenette & Cleland, 2016), suggesting that media outlets may increase coverage in response to political conditions during moments of crisis. When analyzing the news output of the sources, it is evident that TRT, apart from 2015, consistently provided less coverage on Syrian-related news compared to Habertürk and Hürriyet across all other years. Habertürk emerges as the most prolific source of news on this issue, indicating a potential editorial strategy of continued attention to the refugee crisis. This finding aligns with Chen et al.'s (2023) discussion of media outlets using selective coverage to shape public discourse and align with broader political or commercial goals. Refugee coverage declined by 2023, most notably in Hürriyet. In 2018 and the subsequent years, Hürriyet notably increased its coverage relative to the other outlets, a shift that may be indicative of strategic changes or responses to evolving political climates, such as national elections or changes in public sentiment toward refugees.

Figure 2

Yearly news count by news source



The research findings, using ANOVA **(Table 1)**, allow us to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the volume of news coverage related to Syrian refugees between election and non-election periods. The primary goal of this test was to determine whether the electoral cycle itself influences the frequency of news articles about Syrian refugees, thereby highlighting the impact of political events on media coverage. During the election quarters, an F-statistic of 4.63 and a P-value of 0.00089 were observed, indicating a statistically significant difference in news frequencies among the different types of elections. The tests confirm a significant variation in coverage based on election timing. These results demonstrate that media attention fluctuations may coincide with different types of electoral events, reflecting potential editorial sensitivities. The statistically significant differences found in this study indicate a clear pattern of fluctuation in media attention, aligning with electoral events and underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of the interplay between political phenomena and media practices.

Table 1

Results of the ANOVA analysis for the election and non-election quarters

Context	F-Statistic	P-Value	Interpretation
Election Quarters	4.63	0.00089	Statistically significant difference in the number of news items
Non-Election Quarters	9.05	7.09e-08	Statistically significant difference in the number of news items

The T-test **(Table 2)** was conducted to compare the volume of news coverage between general and local elections, aiming to explore how different types of electoral events impact media narratives. The results show a statistically significant difference, with a T-statistic of −2.80 and a P-value of 0.0055, indicating that general elections tend to result in fewer articles being published than local elections ($p < 0.05$). The negative T-statistic value reflects that news sources prioritize coverage of local elections over general elections. The findings from this T-test further validate the hypothesis that the type of election profoundly affects both the quantity and thematic focus of media coverage on Syrian refugees. Local elections, often perceived as more immediate and relevant to the local population, may prompt higher media engagement, whereas general elections may lead to broader, more generalized coverage, affecting media priorities differently. Media outlets tend to emphasize issues that coincide with perceived local-level concerns, potentially aligning coverage with electoral agendas' salience.

Table 2

T-Test Results between Election Types (General Elections vs. Local Elections)

Analysis	T-Statistic	P-Value	Interpretation
Election Types (General Elections vs. Local Elections)	−2.80	0.0055	Statistically significant difference in the number of news items

Temporal Shifts in the Portraits

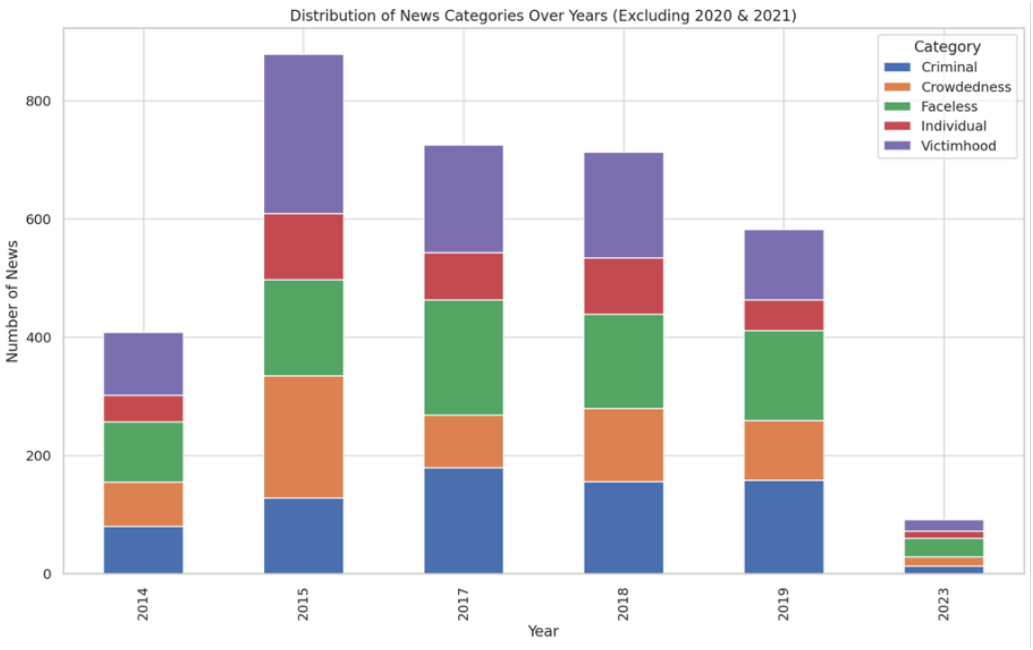
While statistical patterns offer insight into representational trends, the social and political meanings embedded in these portrayals warrant closer scrutiny—especially when images are deployed during electoral moments. Specifically, the prominence of categories such as faceless and crowdedness may be associated with the presentation of refugees in a more anonymized and dehumanized manner, which can result in a lack of empathy in society. On the other hand, the prominence of the victimhood category may lay the groundwork for more social support for refugees, particularly when victimhood narratives are strengthened during election periods. However, such portrayals may also reduce refugees to passive recipients of aid, shaping an affective economy where empathy is conditional and tied to perceptions of innocence. This may serve as a soft legitimizing strategy for state humanitarianism in electoral contexts while limiting more robust forms of political solidarity. The analysis of visual categories over time reveals notable fluctuations in the portrayal of Syrian refugees, which align with significant political events and shifts in societal sentiment. The distribution of visual categories is dynamic, indicating that editorial focus can vary depending on the political climate and media context.

The criminalized framing and faceless categories also saw an increase, indicating a shift toward negative and dehumanizing representations in the media as the refugee issue became a central point of political discourse. Over time, portrayals shifted from victimhood and crowding toward more dehumanized and faceless imagery, particularly in the years of the election. These findings are in line with the literature on visual framing and media representation (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Parrott et al., 2019; Kox et al., 2023), which suggests that media portrayals of marginalized groups, such as refugees, evolve in response to political events and public sentiment. This temporal analysis highlights the fluctuating nature of media framing, where different categories emerge or decline based on editorial decisions and the socio-political climate. This suggests that media portrayals may influence public discourse, especially in the

context of elections or significant political shifts, where portrayals may reflect or participate in public narratives that frame refugees as either humanized individuals or dehumanized others (Çetin & Gürelli, 2025; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024; Lenette & Cleland, 2016).

Figure 3

Distribution of News Categories over the Years



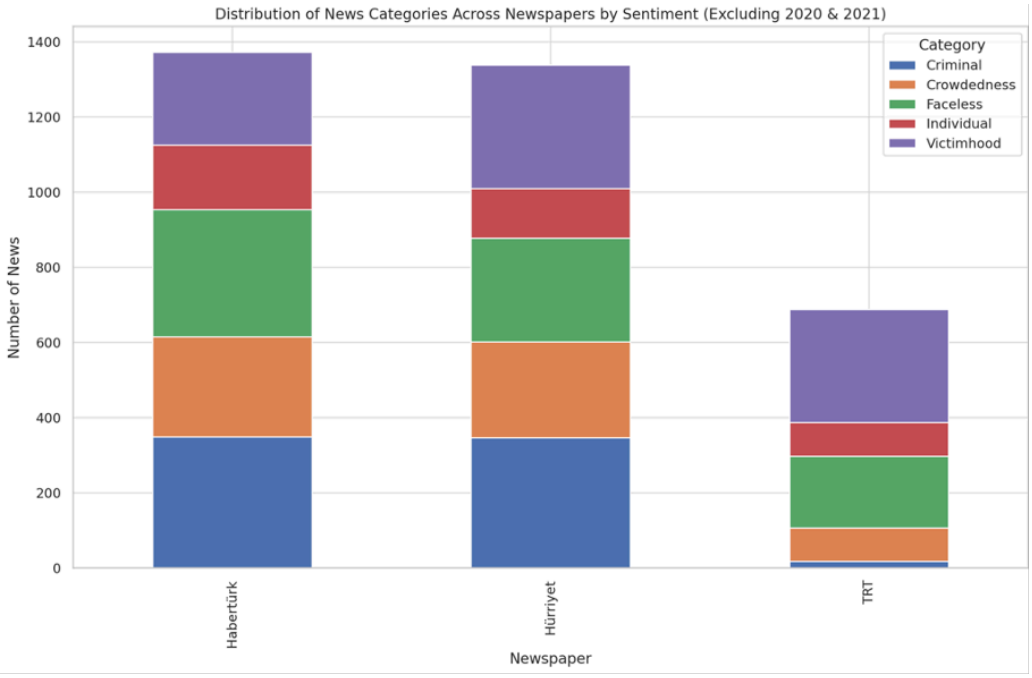
Upon examining the number of Syrian-related news articles with visuals, TRT—the state broadcaster—demonstrates a significantly lower volume than Habertürk and Hürriyet, amounting to nearly half the coverage. This discrepancy points to not only differences in output but also divergent editorial priorities. As shown in Figure 4, the minimal presence of TRT in the security-oriented category signals a deliberate avoidance of securitizing representations often employed by other outlets. Instead, TRT predominantly frames Syrian subjects through the categories of victimhood and dehumanization (faceless), pointing to a possible editorial preference for affective and anonymized portrayals.

This editorial preference aligns with Chouliaraki's (2006) conceptualization of the "spectatorship of suffering," where media coverage might mobilize empathy through victim-centered visuals. However, the recurring nature of such imagery risks transforming suffering into a spectacle, inviting emotional response without necessarily fostering structural critique or political engagement. The prominence of the faceless category further supports Martikainen and Sakki's (2024) notion of exclusion in representation, indicating how visual anonymity can abstract individuals from the social field and render them politically passive. In contrast, both Habertürk and Hürriyet distributed their coverage more evenly across categories, with Habertürk showing a stronger tendency toward dehumanized depictions and Hürriyet emphasizing victimized frames.

Notably, Habertürk also leads the overall volume of Syrian news coverage, which may reflect its more aggressive news production model. As shown in Figure 4, the representation of Syrians in criminal frames appears more consistently across Habertürk and Hürriyet, indicating a more securitized editorial strategy. This aligns with the Securitization Theory framework (Buzan et al., 1998), whereby the media contribute to the construction of refugees as societal threats. The fact that Habertürk surpasses Hürriyet in individualized stories further highlights an editorial preference for personalized narratives, although these remain marginal across all outlets.

Figure 4

Distribution of news categories across news sources by sentiment



When examined longitudinally (**Appendix 1**), the distribution of categories by TRT reveals further patterns. From 2014 onward, victimhood dominated TRT's coverage, followed by faceless and then individual portrayals, while security-oriented depictions were largely absent. The temporal shift was particularly evident in 2015, coinciding with the height of the refugee crisis, where victimhood and crowdedness surged in frequency. By 2023, victimhood had all but disappeared, with faceless and crowdedness becoming dominant, indicating a broader shift from empathetic framing toward depersonalization.

This decline in victimhood narratives may reflect a broader discursive fatigue, as posited in the literature on media studies, where prolonged crises often lead to desensitization and narrative restructuring (Chouliaraki, 2006; Entman, 2004). The emergence of crowded visuals, especially around politically charged periods, further supports the argument that media representations evolve in line with audience responsiveness and political utility.

Across Habertürk's timeline (**Appendix 1**), the faceless category consistently dominates, reflecting a visual rhetoric that erases individuality while maintaining visibility. This pattern aligns with the concept of "invisibility within visibility" (Bleiker et al., 2013) and Van Leeuwen's (2008) theorization of visual exclusion as a form of de-agentialization. Peaks in security-oriented imagery during 2016 and 2018 coincide with politically turbulent moments, suggesting that Habertürk leverages securitization frames in response to electoral dynamics (Çetin & Gürelli, 2024; Keneş, 2025). While individualized portrayals are somewhat more frequent at Habertürk than at other outlets, they remain marginal, indicating a limited editorial commitment to humanizing Syrian refugees.

Hürriyet shows a distinct editorial trajectory over time. Framing was relatively balanced in 2014; however, unlike Habertürk, it did not significantly increase refugee coverage in 2015. This reflects a more restrained editorial approach to the refugee crisis during that peak period. From 2017, Hürriyet intensified coverage, especially in the criminal, faceless, and victimhood categories, indicating a hybridized strategy. Despite the increased volume, the individual category remained underrepresented, while depersonalized imagery dominated by 2023. This sustained emphasis on facelessness reflects a structural editorial tendency to maintain media visibility of refugees while withholding political agency.

A Comparative Analysis of News Outlets

Examining the year-over-year category changes in Hürriyet, the distribution in 2014 mirrors Habertürk with nearly equal rates across categories. However, unlike Habertürk, Hürriyet does not exhibit the same sharp increase in news articles in 2015, suggesting a distinct editorial rhythm. Hürriyet's shift toward increased criminal and faceless categories in 2017 aligns with Çetin and Gürelli's (2025) assertion that refugee themes evolve over time, particularly in relation to political events. By 2019, Hürriyet had produced the highest number of Syrian-related news articles to date, and by 2023, facelessness had become the dominant category. Such visual anonymization may constitute acts of unsubjecting, in which political agency is stripped from refugee subjects (Isin, 2008). These patterns demonstrate an evolving media narrative in which the frequency of coverage correlates with political milestones, such as national elections (Parrott et al., 2019).

The absence of criminalized depictions in TRT also supports the idea that media coverage is influenced by the outlet's political orientation (Hur & Yang, 2024), with TRT opting for less aggressive framing when analyzing the categorical differences across sources of news. However, by 2019, the category of crowdedness became more prominent in TRT, which correlated with Lenette and Cleland's (2016) observation that media can selectively emphasize collective experiences to manipulate emotional responses, often downplaying the individuality of refugees in favor of a larger narrative. In line with Martikainen and Sakki (2024), the electoral cycles influence how refugee coverage fluctuates, with higher volumes of news articles in 2015 coinciding with the general election. The increase in victimhood and crowdedness during this time reflects a strategic effort to evoke empathy and highlight the magnitude of the crisis to influence public sentiment (Parrott et al., 2019). Subsequent years marked by a referendum (2017) and general election (2018) demonstrate a shift in the framing of refugees toward criminalization and depersonalization. This aligns with Çetin and Gürelli's (2024) observation that media can selectively omit certain elements, focusing instead on themes of criminality to reflect securitization narratives. By 2023, the decrease in coverage alongside increased faceless representations demonstrates a strategic media shift to reduce emotional engagement with the refugee issue, aligning with Kox et al., 2023s observation on media manipulation. In analyzing TRT, a distinct pattern of increased victimhood coverage during general elections (**Appendix 2**), followed by a decrease post-election, aligns with Lenette and Cleland's (2016) strategic manipulation of media content.

Habertürk's editorial strategy, particularly around criminality and facelessness during electoral periods, appears to reflect that some outlets tend to emphasize themes such as criminality in ways that resonate with broader political narratives (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). The distinct rise of the faceless category around local elections may indicate an editorial tendency to depersonalize the refugee narrative, reducing its emotional impact during these periods. On the other hand, the representation of Syrian refugees in the criminal category intensified around general elections, possibly reflecting or influencing public discourse on security and law enforcement issues. As the faceless and criminal categories gain prominence during electoral periods, the refugee subject becomes a risk object—one to be managed, monitored, or excluded—thereby reinforcing securitized logics within the electorate's affective landscape. As suggested in previous research (e.g., Bleiker et al., 2013; Parrott et al., 2019), repeated exposure to faceless or criminalized images may produce long-term shifts in how the electorate perceives who deserves rights, protection, or inclusion within the national community. In doing so, the media may participate in acts of unsubjecting by framing refugees through esthetic cues, visually scripting their political erasure during moments of intensified national self-definition (Isin, 2008).

Finally, Hürriyet demonstrates a more complex pattern across electoral periods. The increase in individual category coverage during local elections and the sustained rise in criminal coverage after general elections highlight a shift in editorial priorities likely influenced by political context (Hur & Yang, 2024). The fluctuating patterns of the faceless category further underline media responsiveness to the political environment, as discussed in Kox et al. (2023). For

instance, during the period of general elections, the number of articles decreased, only to increase in the subsequent period, whereas during local elections, there was an increase in the period of the election followed by a decrease thereafter.

Electoral Impact on Media Coverage

This nuanced analysis reveals that Hürriyet's editorial approach to Syrian refugee representation fluctuates significantly depending on the electoral context, demonstrating specific responsiveness to the type of election. The shift in individual category coverage during local elections, the sustained rise in criminal coverage following general elections, and the unique faceless category trend observed across both types of elections suggest a complex interplay between electoral events and editorial choices. These patterns underscore the dynamic nature of media narratives in relation to political milestones, offering valuable insights into the strategic considerations that inform news coverage of Syrian refugees within different electoral contexts.

Correlation analysis (**Appendix 3**) further supports these findings by examining how media outlets prioritize certain categories during electoral versus non-electoral periods. A distinct editorial approach emerges in non-election years (designated as Election Type 0). TRT predominantly highlights victimhood and individual narratives, reflecting a human-interest angle that focuses on refugees' personal struggles and resilience. This approach underscores the humanitarian focus of TRT coverage. In contrast, Habertürk shows a clear preference for the faceless and criminal categories.

During general and local election periods (classified as Election Types 1 and 2), both Hürriyet and Habertürk displayed a notable increase in articles within the crowd and faceless categories. This heightened presence of such narratives during election times emphasizes a shift toward stories that stress the collective aspect of the refugee experience or engage in depersonalization. This trend suggests that election periods are associated with a shift in editorial focus, highlighting group dynamics or abstracting individual identities (Martikainen and Sakki, 2024). This abstraction may function as a form of rhetorical containment, where the refugee is rendered politically mute, visible yet absent from deliberative democratic discourse. Acts of unsubjecting, as theorized by Isin (2008), refer to representational strategies through which individuals or groups are stripped of political agency, denied recognition as rights-bearing subjects, and thus removed from the sphere of citizenship and political participation. Such representational practices may participate in what Isin (2008) calls 'acts of unsubjecting', not simply excluding refugees from political voice but actively scripting them as non-agents within the national imaginary. In contrast, TRT, maintaining its editorial consistency, continues to prioritize the "Victimhood" category during elections, reflecting an enduring commitment to portraying narratives of vulnerability and suffering within the electoral discourse's context.

The analysis extends to other elections, identified as Election Type 3, in which a general decline in the volume of news articles is observed across all sources. Despite this overall trend, Habertürk maintains a high volume of articles within the criminal and faceless categories, signaling a continued editorial focus on these narratives even during non-standard electoral events. In contrast, both TRT and Hürriyet reported a reduction in news articles, reflecting a more selective publication approach possibly influenced by the unique characteristics of these elections or a diminished public engagement with them.

This comprehensive examination highlights the dynamic shifts in news publication strategies across various news sources during different electoral contexts. This study reveals how specific news categories receive varying degrees of attention depending on the electoral period, demonstrating how media outlets adjust their thematic priorities in ways that may reflect political environment shifts. The observed patterns indicate that news coverage patterns may shift in relation to electoral cycles, where categories such as victimhood, crowdedness, and faceless fluctuate.

Dynamics of news production

Before diving into the regression analysis results, a brief explanation of what regression analysis is and how it can shed light on the factors influencing news coverage is helpful. Regression analysis is a statistical method used to examine the relationship between a dependent variable (in this case, the number of news articles) and one or more independent variables (such as the year, type of election, news source, and frames). This helps us understand how much each of these factors contributes to the dependent variable's overall variation.

For example, using regression analysis, we can determine whether election periods, media sources, or specific news categories drive the number of articles published and to what extent these factors influence the overall volume of news coverage. Essentially, this analysis allows us to identify the key factors shaping the media's approach to covering the Syrian refugee issue while also accounting for other variables that might play a role.

The regression analysis (**Appendix 4**) provides insightful findings into the factors influencing the volume of news articles. Regression analysis confirms that election timing, media source, and framing category significantly predict the volume of refugee-related coverage, although other unmodeled factors remain influential. Furthermore, the F-statistic of 28.13 underscores the model's statistical significance (Prob(F-statistic) = 1.84e-24), confirming that the relationship observed between the independent variables and news counts is not due to random chance. This indicates that other factors—such as editorial decision-making, political developments, and the influence of unexpected events—may also play a role and deserve further attention in future studies.

Appendix 5 summarizes the results of the log-linear regression model and offers a comprehensive overview of how various predictors affect the count of news articles. The analysis revealed distinct patterns in the influence of different variables. Notably, the source of news—specifically, Hürriyet and Habertürk, along with certain news categories, including victimhood and faceless, show a significant positive impact on news counts. The fact that these two categories most strongly correlate with coverage volume shows a prevailing editorial logic that privileges emotionally charged or de-individualized frames. These sources and content categories are important drivers in determining the volume of news articles produced. In contrast, other variables, such as individual and criminal, do not demonstrate a statistically significant effect, implying that their influence on news counts is minimal within this model.

Furthermore, the statistical significance of most independent variables, with p-values below 0.05, underscores their importance in the model. This reinforces the idea that factors such as year, election type, quarter, source of news, and news category play pivotal roles in shaping the volume of news articles. However, the negative coefficient for "Year" suggests a decline in the number of news articles over time, indicating that the media landscape is evolving, with a potential reduction in news production (Lenette & Cleland, 2016; Gölcü & Dağlı, 2017; Kox et al., 2023; Martikainen & Sakki, 2024). This change calls for further exploration of shifting editorial priorities and the broader sociopolitical and technological factors influencing news content.

Conclusion

This study offers a statistically grounded account of Syrian refugee representation in Turkish media, shaped by election dynamics.Through an integrated analysis combining temporal trends, visual framing categories, and election types, the findings illuminate how news production is not only shaped by institutional logics but also deeply embedded in broader socio-political agendas.

Media outlet, frame type, and election cycle significantly influence refugee coverage and framing. While private outlets such as Hürriyet and Habertürk tend to shift their focus depending on the electoral stakes, state-run TRT consistently favors the victimhood category, with an observable emphasis on dehumanizing portrayals such as faceless

or criminal imagery during election periods. This pattern appears consistent with broader media narratives that position refugees within frames of vulnerability and protection—frames that may implicitly portray the Turkish state as a benevolent and competent protector.This aligns with state-building discourses that aim to legitimize national authority through humanitarian responsibility.

Refugee coverage shifts with election cycles; however, media responses vary by outlet. The differentiated behaviors of public versus private media reveal distinct editorial priorities rooted in their affiliations and institutional roles. Whereas private media respond more dynamically to political competition and public sentiment, state media appear to maintain a more stable, albeit ideologically aligned, narrative.

The findings support the literature on the contextual and politically responsive nature of refugee representation (Hur & Yang, 2024; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Parrott et al., 2019; Kox et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2023), while also contributing novel empirical insights from the Turkish context. The regression analyses further affirm that variables such as year, quarter, election type, and news category are statistically significant predictors of news volume, even though a portion of the variance remains unexplained, inviting further exploration into additional determinants such as political ideology, journalistic discretion, and audience preferences.

The contributions of this study extend beyond statistical insights to broader academic and societal discourse. In an era where migration remains a polarizing issue, particularly during electoral cycles, this study sheds light on how visual framing in state and private outlets may contribute to shaping public perceptions of refugees.

Nonetheless, this study has limitations. It focuses on a specific set of predictors—election type, source of news, temporal factors, and frame category—leaving out other potentially influential variables, such as the ideological leaning of media outlets and journalistic agency. Its findings, while illuminating, are situated within the Turkish media landscape and may not be directly generalizable to other contexts without comparative research. Additionally, although the quantitative methodology enables robust generalizations, it may underrepresent the interpretive depth and narrative tone conveyed through media texts, areas that could be explored in future studies through qualitative content analysis. Future research might also benefit from integrating audience reception studies to better understand how different segments of the Turkish public interpret, contest, or internalize such visual framings.

In sum, this study provides an empirically rich and theoretically informed account of how electoral rhythms and institutional affiliations shape refugee representation in Turkish media. This study invites scholars to further investigate the mediating role of the press in reproducing or resisting dominant narratives on migration, especially in politically charged environments. By doing so, it contributes to an expanded understanding of how media may not only reflect but also actively shape the contours of public discourse, political belonging, and national identity—especially through visual scripting that defines who appears, how, and under what emotional and discursive terms during electoral cycles.

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Author Details Canan Çetin (Lecturer. Dr.)

[1] Eskisehir Osmangazi University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, Eskişehir, Türkiye

[2] Visiting Research Fellow, Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton and Hove, United Kingdom

0000-0001-6228-6313 cetinc@ogu.edu.tr, ccc53@sussex.ac.uk

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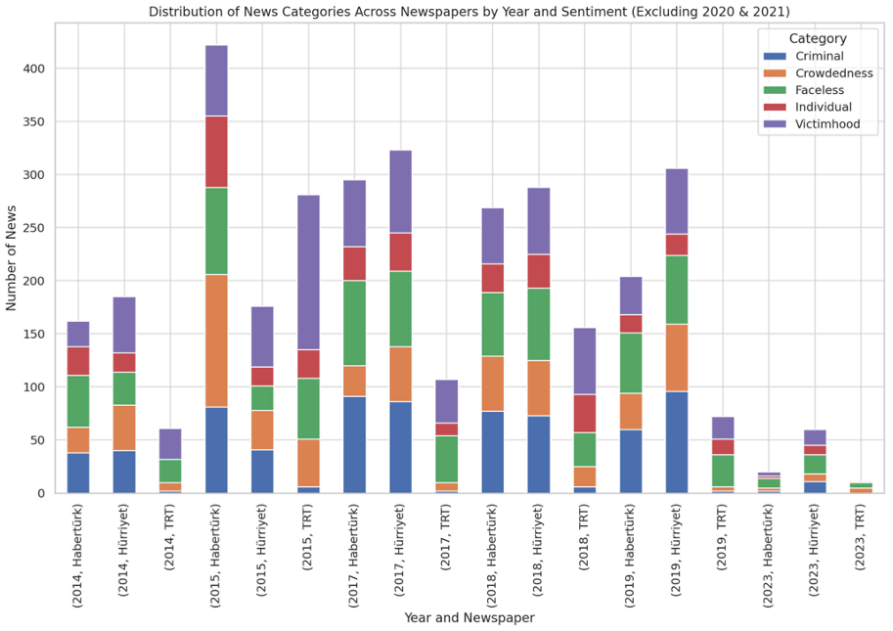
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Appendix

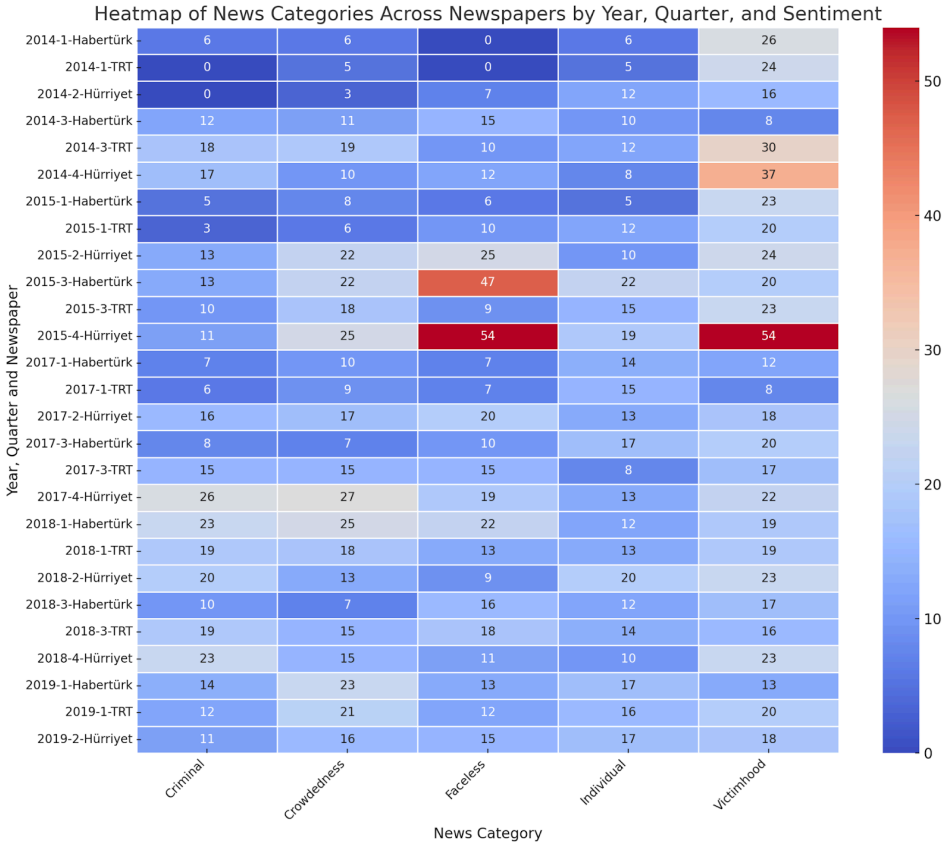
Appendix 1

Distribution of news categories across news sources by year and sentiment



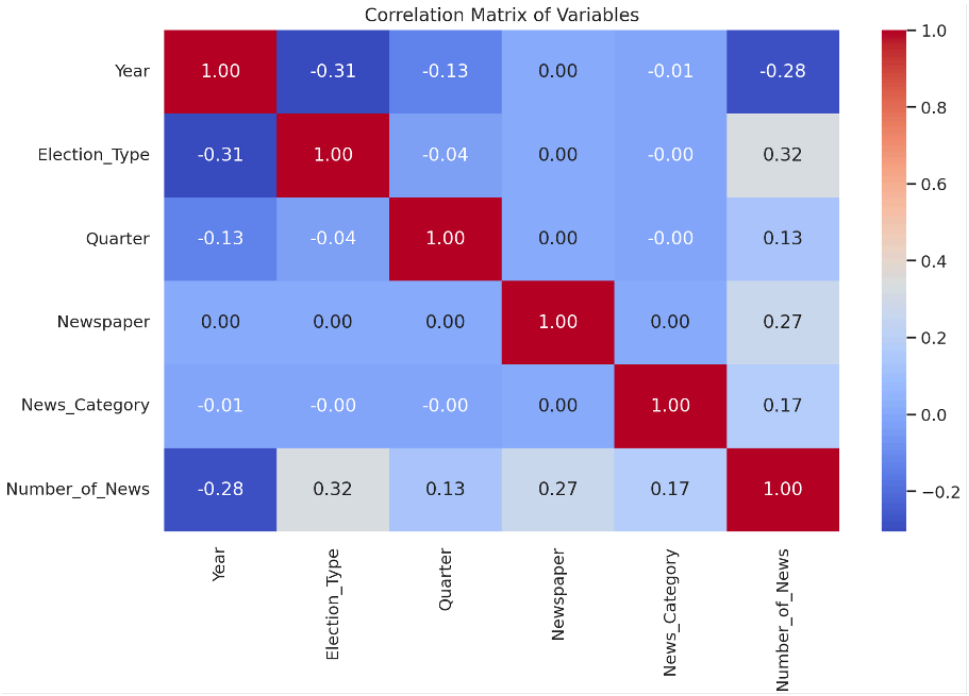
Appendix 2

Heatmap of news categories across news sources by year, quarter, and sentiment



Appendix 3

Correlation matrix variables



Appendix 4

Model Summary

Summary of the log-linear regression analysis model

	Coefficient	P-Value	Interpretation
R-squared	| 0.302		Model explains approximately 30.2% of variance in news counts
F-Statistic	28.13	1.84e-24	The model is statistically significant

Appendix 5

Log-linear regression analysis

Results of the Loglineer Regression Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	P-Value	Interpretation
Intercept (Constant)|	1.35	<0.001	Baseline level of news articles
Hürriyet	0.98	<0.001	Significant positive impact on news count
Habertürk	0.75	<0.001	Significant positive impact on news count
News Category 2 (Individual)	−0.10	0.402	Not significant
News Category 3 (victimhood)	0.50	<0.001	Significant positive impact on news count
News Category 4 (Criminal)	0.06	0.611	Not significant
News Category 5 (Faceless)	0.51	<0.001	Significant positive impact on news count
Non-Election Period	−0.14	0.123	Not significant

Appendix 6

Samples for the Visual Categories

Crowd:



Source: https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/04/160414_dabik_azez_isid_kilis_gocmen

Individual:



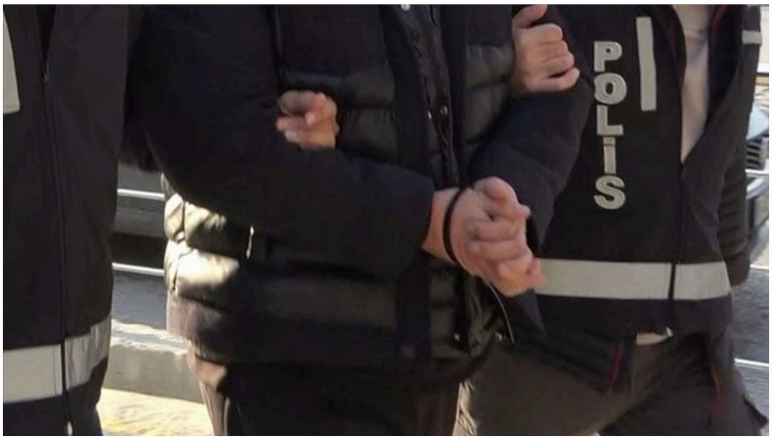
Source: https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/yasam/istiklal-marsini-ezbere-okuyan-suriyeli-kizin-bayram-sevinci/803332

Victimhood:



Source: https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriyede-cocuklarin-cektigi-aci-tarifsiz/182308

Criminal:



Source: https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/kayseride-cocuga-cinsel-istismarda-bulundugu-gerekcesiyle-yakalanan-suriyeli-zanli-tutuklandi/3262946

Dehumanization:



Source: https://www.hrw.org/tr/news/2018/07/16/320295