Logistification and hyper-precarity at the intersection of migration and pandemic governance: Refugees in the Turkish labour market

MAISSAM NIMER *
Istanbul Policy Center, Sabancı University, Istanbul, Turkey
msnimer@gmail.com

SUSAN BETH ROTTMANN
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Social Sciences Faculty, Özyeğin University, Istanbul, Turkey

MS received December 2020; revised MS received March 2021

This article analyses the governance of migration and the Covid-19 pandemic on precarious Syrian refugees in Istanbul. Drawing from a review of state policies and interviews with refugees before and after the pandemic, we argue that the intersecting governance of migration and the pandemic compounded inequalities. While refugees initially lost their employment without notice in lockdown periods, their partial lifting revealed unequal expectations towards their labour, as they were reincorporated within even more hyper-precarious labour relations. Unlike citizens who were somewhat protected by the state, refugees were under the limited care of international funders and subject to the whims of the market. Pandemic governance resulted in increased hyper-precarity and the need to rely on individual coping mechanisms for refugees. This research shows how shifting inclusion and exclusion shapes refugees’ hyper-precarity related to Covid-19 governance, transforming Syrians into ‘market buffers’ to prevent or delay bankruptcies.

Keywords: labour market, pandemic, refugee, migration, precarity, employment, governance, Turkey, inequalities

Introduction

The precarity of today’s refugees has been well-established in migration literature, as researchers show that a focus on refugees’ ‘economic potential’ contributes to institutionalizing various forms of inequality. The Covid-19 crisis reinforced precarities for labourers worldwide as the disparities in conditions between those who would be permitted, denied or urged to work became more stark and the health and economic risks compounded already pre-existing precarity. Drawing on
research in Turkey before and during the pandemic, this study brings these two strands of research together to explore how refugee (Syrians in Turkey who have fled the Syrian war that started in 2011 are not granted legal refugee status in Turkey due to the government’s geographical limitation to the Geneva convention. Yet, we still refer to them as ‘refugees’ to highlight that they are seeking asylum in the country.) labour power was cheapened to serve the market’s needs.

This topic warrants examination for several reasons: first, the pandemic has had detrimental effects on the economies of all countries, but all parts of society were not impacted in the same way as existing inequalities were exacerbated (Crawley 2021). More research is needed to understand the mechanisms through which these inequalities have been governed. While the pandemic provides a window of reflection for global health research (Ågarten 2020), there is also a significant impact on employment. This study looks at the effect on the still more vulnerable workers—non-essential refugee workers in the informal market. They number over one million people in Turkey. Our research echoes some of the most recent findings in showing that refugees, often the most marginalized of all migrants, are unable to protect themselves from the virus, face increasing economic precarity and find themselves excluded from measures to alleviate poverty (Crawley 2021). We further elaborate on how governance of a health crisis and of migration intersect and result in simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, which shifts according to market logistics. Second, the framing of precarity has been criticized for being ‘historically-bounded,’ as it is located in post-Fordist employment relations in the global North (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Munck 2013; Paret and Gleeson 2016). However, precarity has long characterized employment relations in the South, due to the larger place of informality in the labour markets of developing countries (ILO 2014). Refugee workers, especially, are vulnerable to conditions of precarity, and there is now a significant body of work on the specificities of their precarity (Canefe 2018; Baban et al. 2017). Despite having temporary legal statuses in some cases (such as the Temporary Protection status of Syrians in Turkey), they are still most often employed informally, subject to intense insecurity and lack access to government safety nets. They have been called hyper-precarious (Waite 2009), and their position differs from that of documented migrants or refugees in more advanced countries, who, at least, receive minimal state support. Yet, the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on this group of refugees in the South has not yet been documented because the pandemic is a very recent phenomenon, and it has been difficult to conduct research during a health crisis. Existing studies also tend to focus on economic trends and neglect refugee subjectivities.

This article draws on four years of previously established ties and community service with refugees to chart both how the pandemic affected labour-state relations and also how changes were perceived by refugees. Examining the case of Turkey is helpful for making sense of these trends as Turkey’s refugees work in the sectors most affected by the closing of businesses and slowing international demand. These workers are considered non-essential and as such, lack employment...
protections. However, we argue that their very non-essential-ness is itself essential: by laying these workers off and rehiring under worse conditions when needed, employers and the state protected themselves from potential losses at the expense of refugees.

By looking at what happens during the pandemic crisis, our research shows that the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Syrians make them an essential shifting surplus and disposable labourer within the Turkish economy. Prior research discusses the employment needs of refugees, and how the functioning of the Turkish migration regime responds to market demands (Nimer and Rottmann 2020; Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020). Other research points to Syrians being in competition over the lowest-level jobs with the poorer factions of society (e.g. Kurdish workers) (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020). However, not much has been written about impacts of a crisis on the market. While the public perception towards refugees is generally one of concern about their negative impact on a strained economy, the concept of ‘market buffer’ allows us to show that refugees are in fact an important cushion to keep the economy afloat in the most unstable times. Thus, the dual governance of migration and the pandemic serve to support the broader market-oriented governance system. This article examines the following questions: (1) What changes does the logistical rationality of the migration regime undergo in times of crisis? (2) What refugee subjectivities emerge in response to shifting inclusion-exclusion into the labour market and society as a whole?

In order to address these issues, we first present the theoretical framing of crisis in relation to labour and precarisation, building on concepts of differential inclusion and logistical rationality in critical migration literature. We then trace developments in how Covid-19 was governed in Turkey through policies to serve market needs. Next, through a close analysis of micro-level experiences, we look at how individuals were adversely impacted in terms of livelihood and highlight the consequent individual coping strategies that emerged.

Governing the Pandemic: Shifting Logistification and Refugee Hyper-Precarity

Critical migration scholarship has thoroughly examined the many pathways to precarity that migrants navigate due to their differential inclusion in host societies (Baban et al. 2017), with differential inclusion referring to ‘filtering, selecting and channeling’ of migrants as part of migration regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 165). Indeed, it has even been widely argued that the ambiguous legal status of refugees places them in positions that foster their subordination and contribute to their further differential inclusion (De Genova et al. 2014; Iłcan et al. 2018). By creating a spectrum of legal statuses, which let some people partially in while keeping others totally out (De Genova, 2005; Goldring et al. 2009), migratory regimes create cheap and disposable sources of labour without political influence or protection. This process has been understood as ‘logistification,’ whereby state migration policies support labour market needs that are increasingly ‘flexible, imponderable and even elusive’ (Altenried et al. 2018: 303). Within this system,
the labourer migrants constitute the ‘surplus population’. As such, they are not simply excluded, but included differentially as cheaply exploitable and dispensable labour (Rajaram 2018). While the concepts of exploitability and disposability are usually used interchangeably to describe surplus populations, in this article, we illustrate how they are experienced by refugees as shifting in the context of the pandemic. Exploitability and disposability evolve in line with changes in the logistical rationality that ensures the delivery of labour power (Altenried et al. 2018).

Crises are often considered to be ‘periods of disorder in the apparently normal development of a system’ (Nohrsted and Weible 2010: 3). However, crises can also be seen as part of an established order that actually reinforces existing structures and economic relations. Marx repeatedly drew attention to the impact of industrial crises on the condition of the working class as periods that lead to the forcing down of wages and extensions of the working day (Clarke 1994). Like the crises of capitalism described by Marx, pandemic crises can also reinforce inequality. Some have argued that pandemics generate their own system of more extreme disciplinary governance, what Foucault called ‘plague governance’ (Foucault 2008). Scholars have found that COVID-19 governance in the global North exposes the wildly exaggerated and grotesque disparities in how illness, death and suffering are unevenly distributed in society (De Genova 2020). In this article, we show that the dual economic and health crisis in Turkey did not lead to systemic disruption, but rather to a continuation of the governance system centred on ensuring the health of the state-market system. What changed is refugees’ precarity and their labouring subjectivities. The result of the crisis for refugees was a strengthening of already existing precarious labour relations based on market needs and an acceptance of even more harsh conditions.

In addition to exploring governance functioning under crisis, this article also contributes to research on refugee hyper-precarity in the form of forced labour experiences (Canefe 2018) by examining refugees’ subjective experiences. Hyper-precarity describes lives characterized by uncertainty and lack of security often originating from social unease, or from neo-liberal labour market experiences (Waite, 2009). Indeed, refugees are not only exposed to material (in)security, but to increasing exclusion associated with the politics of protection (Crawley 2021) during the pandemic. We also found that shifting exclusion even goes beyond precarity, which has been defined as stemming from jobs lacking in predictability and material or psychological welfare, such as part-time work and fixed period contracts (Barbier 2005; della Porta et al. 2015). Scholars studying migrants in Europe have begun to trace how pandemic governance worsened workers’ positions via the designation of ‘essential worker’, whereby some labourers were expected to continue working whether or not safety protections were adequate (De Genova 2020). These labourers are among the lowest paid and least protected, and they are disproportionately racially subordinated ‘minorities’ and migrants (Lewis et al. 2015). This article contributes to this work on refugee hyper-precarity, by showing that there are in fact new extremes in the global south, as exploitation is pushed to the ultimate limit.
Methodology

This research draws from fieldwork conducted before the pandemic in 2018–2019 as well as during the pandemic in April, May and September of 2020 in Istanbul. Specifically, we draw from 44 semi-structured interviews and 12 months of participant observation with refugees in 2018–2019 as well as 19 repeated interviews after the pandemic arrived in 2020. The pre-pandemic interviews included 25 women and 19 men, while post-pandemic interviews included 17 women and 2 men (interviewed several times). Participants came from a wide, but representative array of educational and social class backgrounds for Syrian refugees in the country. Interviews prior to the pandemic explored themes such as reception and protection experiences, family roles and parenting duties and employment, education and healthcare needs and experiences. After the pandemic, interviews covered updates or changes to information about employment, education and legal status provided in the initial interviews. Additionally, the interviews after the pandemic focused on information received about the pandemic and preventative mechanisms and also looked in greater detail at employment changes and how refugees managed the state’s online education curriculum.

All interviews lasted about 40 min and were conducted in Arabic and recorded with the participants’ permission. The interviews conducted in 2020 took place over telephone or whatsapp video or audio call. Observations were conducted in homes, workplaces and adult language classes prior to the pandemic. We also conducted 13 interviews with representatives of state institutions and 31 with CSO representatives. After data was collected, interviews were analysed with the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO and relevant themes were identified. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Serving Elusive Market Needs in Turkey through Refugee Governance

Migration policies at a macro-level, prior to and during the pandemic served the market through logistical rationality. When Syrians arrived in Turkey, the state established a Directorate General of Migration Management and passed a Law on Foreigners and International Protection giving them Temporary Protection (TP) status. As the number of refugees neared four million, the governance approach was criticized for its selective and hostile relation with civil society in managing migration (Mackreath and Sağnil 2017; Sunata and Tosun 2019; Nimer 2020), inadequate access to services, such as education (Çelik and İçduygu 2019) but most importantly limited access to formal employment (İçduygu and Diker 2017). Though refugees are allowed to work formally, in reality, as of March 31, 2019, a total of just 31,185 Syrians were given work permits due to bureaucratic barriers and the reluctance of employers to apply for the permits on their behalf (Bianet 2019). As a result, Turkey’s refugees generally work without social protection for longer hours and for lower pay than Turkish citizens (Kirisci and Uysal Kolasin 2019). Chaotic policymaking and a patchwork of initiatives...
with micro effects left refugees having to find their own way (ICG 2019). The result was a high degree of precarity for refugees who were treated as a cheap and exploitable labour force (Bélanger and Saracoglu 2020; Nimer and Rottmann 2020).

When the pandemic arrived in March 2020, the governance of migration exacerbated pre-existing conditions in favour of capital. Turkey was already going through an economic downturn at the time. International orders decreased further and so did the need for workers. The hardest hit sectors included the non-essential manufacturing (such as clothing), wholesale businesses and food and beverage service providers (Building Markets 2020). Confronting both inflation and recession, the priority of the state was to keep the economy afloat by any means necessary. At first, Turkey seemed to be handling the pandemic well compared to some European countries (Bryza 2020). It closed its borders and implemented travel restrictions already in February. A stimulus package was announced early on in March, including increased unemployment benefits, interest rate cuts, deferred loan payments and reduced social security responsibilities. There was a nationwide ban on layoffs, which was also accompanied by state payment of salaries; however, this benefit only applied to formal workers. In April, the curfew continued to be enforced and from May to June there was a phased re-opening of the economy. As for refugees, their situation, which was already precarious through their differential inclusion as temporary and informal, was further destabilized.

Indeed, as in most countries, the expectations about pandemic working conditions differed according to social positions in Turkey. While some members of the middle and upper classes were able to quarantine and work online, these online workers represent just 10% of the population. In contrast, the lower classes still had to go to work and faced long commutes on public transportation and a reduced ability to take precautions against infections (Balcioglu and Erdogan 2020). In addition, the workers in the lowest positions were the most affected by the loss of employment or salary cuts (Esin et al. 2020).

The distribution of the pandemic in Istanbul also shows that places with more poverty (and refugees) were more affected (Esin et al. 2020), due on the one hand to continued obligations to work and, on the other hand, to lessened access to the health system and the higher risk of catching the disease due to overcrowded housing. Refugees were among the most negatively affected economically and socially. According to a survey carried out by TEPAV in July 2020, 26.4% of Syrian workers were forced to take unpaid leave, 12.1% were fired from their jobs and the workplaces of 6.8% were closed or faced reduced hours (Akyildiz 2020). Refugees were rendered more precarious than the average Turkish citizen due to their fragile legal status and their higher likelihood of being informally employed. They depend on their employers to issue them work permits and are less able to defend their rights, due to the aforementioned legal situation as well as language barriers and lack of familiarity with the context. As populations were locked down to contain the pandemic, business slowed and many small or mid-scale businesses stopped trading. Refugees could be immediately laid off. While policies preventing the firing of Turkish citizens were implemented, the absence of
state policies protecting refugee workers during the pandemic reflected a desire to transform them into buffers against bankruptcies—into disposable labour (De Genova 2020), which is a crucial need in times of crisis. In addition to not being held accountable for disposing of unregistered refugee workers, employers did not have any incentive to keep them when the demand decreased due to lockdown.

Treating the displaced population separately from the general population as the state did before the pandemic had additional implications in the context of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, care for refugees was externalized to civil society, but these actors could not respond quickly or effectively enough to the needs of refugees in the new reality, leaving the most vulnerable with even less support than before. The only source of assistance continued to be through the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) program implemented by the Turkish Red Crescent which provided modest financial support to refugees before the pandemic, and continued to do so during the pandemic, in the same amounts, to the same families. However, even prior to the pandemic the amount received through this program was far from meeting the basic needs of refugees (Özkul 2020), and most still worked informally to make ends meet or received other social support from NGOs. Furthermore, the ESSN support only reaches 1.7 million Syrians out of the 3.6 million of registered refugees (Özkul 2020). NGOs who had been working with refugees were generally no longer able to continue their activities, though several did contact at-risk refugees by phone or e-mail and deliver aid (food, hygiene and cleaning products and protective products) (Akay Erturk 2020). In contrast, needy families in Turkey received extra social support of 1000 Turkish liras per month during the pandemic (Özkul 2020).

When the economy picked back up again over the summer, unequal expectations towards refugees emerged in terms of labour and mobility. Several were asked to come back to work on a part time basis, which meant a much lower income than before the crisis. In this way, logistification served the markets’ elusive needs by allowing it to dispose of refugees’ labour completely during full lockdown, and then recruit them again for cheaper wages when the need arose again. The governance of Turkey’s Syrians before and during the pandemic shows how inclusion and exclusion are not stable states, but are differentially mobilized by the governance system and, in fact, are quite flexible. The result of state migration and pandemic policy was a total transfer of responsibilities onto families and individuals to meet their own needs within the labour market. The state’s migration governance model prioritizing market needs remained the same before and after the pandemic, but the expectation of continued externalized care could not meet the needs of refugees. Covid-19 even speeded up or augmented precarity, making labour cheaper and workers more exploitable.

Disposability of Labour, Hyper-precarity and Unequal Expectations in Times of Crisis

By analysing the experiences of refugees at a microlevel, this section illustrates how inequalities were exacerbated during the state’s handling of the pandemic.
Refugees’ statements indicate that they were acutely aware of being subject to market shifts and becoming even more disposable. This resulted in a state of uncertainty and insecurity beyond precarity.

When we contacted refugees early in the crisis, as the lockdown had just been announced, the city was totally immobilized. All interviewees had become home-bound. Only one of the primary wage-earners from our sample of families interviewed was able to work from home (as an accountant) and two others were able to continue their work (albeit with a lighter load); one was a house painter and another was a shop owner. All worked informally in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are a key part of Turkey’s informal economy. The share of unregistered firms within the total number of firms is estimated to be 31%, which is well above the OECD average of 18% (OECD 2016). The shop owner received less income due to reduced demand. In an interview in March, his wife stated:

*Regarding my husband, his working hours changed. He has a shop for women’s purses. All his neighbors shut down, and now he makes fewer products. His income also dropped. Now, we spend from our savings, hoping that it will not last long. At some point, our savings will finish and our only income is from my husband.*

While the state supported registered businesses by covering the salaries of employees meeting certain conditions, owners of unregistered small businesses, often themselves refugees like this shop owner, received no support. In a follow-up interview, a month later, the shop owner had started to open his shop regularly again. However, he had dismissed his workers as he was serving just a few customers. Our study included a diversity of socio-economic profiles of refugees in terms of capital. Yet, this example illustrates that informality leads to increased precarity even for refugees with relatively better socio-economic positions. Of course in this case too, the shopkeeper’s employees served as a direct buffer and were much more negatively affected than this shopkeeper himself. However, the shopkeeper was also affected in that he was excluded from state support for businesses because his shop was not registered.

The vast majority of primary wage earners in the interviewed families worked in low qualification jobs, and they tended to be informally employed. Most of them had not been able to obtain work permits, as their employers had not been willing to apply for them. As a result, once the crisis hit, they found themselves both without a job and without any legal claim to a continuing salary. One example was related by the wife of a man who worked in a workshop that fits medical eye-glasses. They were living on a day-to-day basis without savings. She explained that he got sent home without pay when the crisis hit because her husband did not have an official work permit:

*They [the employers] wanted to get him [her husband] a work permit, but until now it has not come out, and it does not look like he can get it.*

Employers benefitted from the situation of having employees who were not registered because they could reduce costs by laying off workers without a day’s
notice, or compensation. One of our interviewees explained the situation of her husband who worked in a workshop:

- The head of the workshop in which my husband worked told him that there is no work, so they stayed at home. That’s all.
- Author 1: Did he get any compensation? Is he formally working?
- No, no he was not officially registered.

In the best case scenarios, some employers offered to provide loans, expecting refugees to repay them. For example, one woman, whose husband had been working in a workshop producing stainless steel bowls for three years and who had been an Arabic teacher in Syria, explained,

- Even my husband is staying at home. His employer makes him stay at home so that he does not come in and out much.
- Author 1: And your husband stopped work; is he being paid or not?
- [Silence]... he said he would pay... not pay, how to tell you, it’s like a loan, he will give him, but in return, he will have to pay it back in installments.

So in that sense, the financial worries of the family were not lifted entirely, but just postponed, as the husband would have to pay back the loans once he started working again.

Refugees thus became ‘buffers’ enabling their employers to avoid further collapse. Before the crisis, refugees were largely responsible for meeting their own economic needs (i.e. finding a job, convincing an employer to apply for a work permit, demanding payment. etc.). During and after the crisis, this situation continued, but the market context changed and could not be relied upon anymore to meet even their most basic needs.

Refugees faced severe financial precarity and fears about their futures. The following quote shows how precarious refugees became, as they relied on their daily income to eat and feed their families.

He used to work, and the day he worked, we’d eat, and the day he didn’t work, we wouldn’t eat. We do not have a continuous salary like regular employees have. There are people whose income continued [during lockdown], the employed, or those who are working in government jobs, those people were not affected, on the contrary, they are comfortable now. But not us, we work one week, we get a salary. When we don’t work, we don’t get a salary.

Indeed, refugees were aware that they are treated differently from so-called ‘regular employees’ who were less disposable. When the lockdown was eased, unequal expectations towards refugees emerged in terms of labour and mobility. A few weeks later, when we called the families a second time, and as the lockdown measures had slowly loosened, several had been asked to come back to work, but on a part time basis for just 2–3 days per week, rather than their former 5–6 days.
The families felt relief at this change, as this constituted at least some source of income after months of uncertainty and fear for their future with no end in sight. The following quotes are from the wives of a worker in a workshop and a house painter, respectively:

My husband now works 2 or 3 days only, as he was called by the usta [foreman], but the usta promised him more work after the Ramadan holiday.

My husband works 3 days per week, light work. They call him to fix things, he enjoys it, and we enjoy him being away. He is psychologically better. He works alone, as a painter.

Similarly, at the end of September, one of our interviewees told us that her husband was back to working in his former factory, but it was still unstable. Some days there was no work and he was not paid, as he did not have a work permit or insurance. These examples show how refugees first became buffers to attenuate the economic shock on their respective employers, but they later were reincorporated as more precarious surplus labour.

There were also inequalities in terms of who was able to come back to work. One of our interviewees reported that in her husband’s workplace, only Turkish workers were called back.

He works on construction sites and they called the Turkish workers, but not him, maybe they don’t need that many people. So there is nothing for him to do now.

This example is not unique in demonstrating the differential inclusion of Syrian workers.

Our research supports studies that have shown that some workers are expected to work and some are not expected to work, some become immobile and some cannot be immobilized during health crises (Dobusch and Kreissl 2020). Migration and Covid-19 governance in Turkey led to a situation of hyper-precarity accompanied by a fear for survival for refugees. At the height of economic shut-down, Syrian’s temporary legal status and lack of ability to demand rights -their refugeeeness- was reinforced. Most felt fear about their situation and were glad to even have a few days of work when lockdowns were partially lifted. Their exploitation benefitted business owners, and when the worst of the crisis passed, they were in a weaker position, willing to accept even less working hours and to give up on the possibility of obtaining a work permit.

**Emergence of Individual Coping Mechanisms in the Face of Exclusion**

As the previous sections have shown, Covid-19 resulted in a re-trenching of the neo-liberal governance system based on market logistics. In this section, we examine how refugees felt and responded. Studying the subjective dimensions of migration is essential in order to criticize the structural conditions of their struggle (Altenried 2018).
Refugees were adversely affected psychologically by the insecurities of lockdowns and the subsequent effects on their livelihoods. One woman related, 

_We are very scared of this situation, if it continues, there will not be a piece of bread left in the house... I am scared of this more than of corona, itself._

Our interviews with refugees’ illustrated their stark precarity and financial desperation. It is not only the disease that they needed protection from, but also the risk of starvation. Fears regarding the economic situation often dominated fears of the pandemic, but actually both situations compounded each other for refugees. For example, when people were affected by Covid, their recovery was endangered by malnutrition, due to economic difficulties. A refugee community centre board member, whom Author 2 interviewed, explained that the refugees had asked for the centre to be closed because they were scared of the virus. Two refugee families who frequently visited the centre had had very severe cases of Covid-19. The families’ children were hospitalized, and their doctors had told the family that they were hit so severely because they were malnourished. While the centre’s closure probably reduced further disease outbreaks, it also led to the isolation of families, and the centre workers expressed concern that they had less knowledge about refugees’ well-being.

Refugees were acutely aware that they were abandoned by the state. A woman who had been in Turkey for 6 years, whose husband worked as a tailor in a workshop, mentioned her disappointment at the lack of support as follows:

_Erdogan [president of the republic of Turkey] gave 5 billion Turkish liras to his people, but he didn’t consider us his people, and he did not help us. I found this very difficult. We are living here on his territory and under his protection, and he did not ask about us during this crisis. He helped all his people and not us._

This quote reveals that the image of the president Erdoğan remains associated with that of the protector who opened doors for refugees and advocated for charity towards so-called ‘religious brothers.’ As such, there were expectations about being included in the society as full members, which did not match reality and resulted in disappointment.

In one case, a woman stated that her husband, a porter in a shoe shop, had asked the local mayor for support as the shop closed.

_He [my husband] went to the neighborhood muhtar [community leader], the one responsible for the area, and told him about our situation. The muhtar told him ‘there is no help for Syrians, only Turkish people. You only get the Red Crescent card’._

For several families, the figure of the muhtar represented the face of the state, the way to understand state assistance and to access it. But even the state representative believed that Syrians already received sufficient financial assistance from the Red Crescent program. In fact—and in contrast to the public perceptions (including the ones held by this mayor)—there was no particular assistance given to Syrians for Covid-19. The same assistance that had always been provided to the
refugees with funding through the EU-Turkey deal, continued to be provided in the same limited amounts to the same families after Covid-19 hit. Many families do not qualify for this assistance because of the fact that the criteria are very restrictive. One refugee explained the role of social assistance during the pandemic as follows:

Coronavirus had a very bad effect especially in terms of the financial situation. I know people who are still not working, imagine it has been 4 months now and they are not working, not being paid, the situation is very bad. Also, government financial help is not available to all. As a Syrian, the ‘Red Crescent’ helps refugees, but the help is given only to the families who have 3 children and more, the ones who have 2 kids or only one are not included at all in the funding process. They can maybe only get the student compensation which is 40TL per month.

Even in normal times, assistance is limited but in pandemic times, existing difficulties were further exacerbated making the assistance even more inadequate.

The little support that refugees did receive was further impeded by logistical barriers, uneven distribution and an emphasis on individual goodwill and charity. For example, an exception to this general picture of state neglect is two initiatives launched by the Istanbul municipality. One was a system whereby families were allowed to pay their electricity bills in a delayed way. The second was a program called ‘askıda fatura’. This program allowed families in need to upload their bills online, or ‘hang them up’, so that individuals donors could pay the bills on their behalf. Yet, there were logistical barriers to claiming both of these benefits, because the bills were often not registered under their own name or because they were not able to fill out the forms, which were only in Turkish, due to language barrier. One refugee explained,

For the bills, we borrowed a bit from people. We were not able to access the support from the municipality because the electricity is registered under the previous tenant’s name.

In some cases, refugees expressed a lack of trust towards the online forms that they were asked to fill out to receive this support, as they worried about putting their personal information online.

In several cases, participants related that they had received some assistance from NGOs, such as food boxes, food coupons and in rare cases, rental support, but there was no official standard or distribution plan, meaning that most were left out. Actually, the externalization of care has been a major feature of migration governance before the pandemic (Nimer 2020), however the difference during the pandemic is that the external assistance through civil society was more limited because civil society’s ability to respond was stretched.

In the absence of state support, worries related to the precariousness of conditions were dealt with by refugees from an individual perspective. The chances of being able to get out of the situation were often dependent on the kindness and goodwill of private individuals, including fellow Syrians. For example, one Syrian
student at a Turkish university collected money for people that she knew. Some also relied on the willingness of landlords to accept late payment or friends and relatives to lend them money. There were worries across the board about the inability to pay rent. During our first contacts with them in the beginning of the pandemic, participants were anticipating their landlord’s reactions with fear as if a damocles sword would suddenly drop and determine their fate. They were at the mercy of the kindness of their landlords.

*We don’t know if the landlord will be patient or not. We are not very hopeful, but we don’t know what will happen.*

In the interviews a month later, some of the participants’ landlords were forgiving, while others were intransigent.

*The situation is very difficult and the rent situation is mentally draining. The government has now helped by dispensing us from paying our bills. Actually they did not dispense but postponed, which is better than nothing. But the problem is the landlords, and our landlord is one of them. He did not accept to wait to get paid the rent... he came to our house and took the rent. He said our problems do not concern him. He has bank loans and has to pay them, and you should see the quality of the house he is renting out to us.*

Refugees were scared to complain if their landlords demanded payment. In the best case scenarios, landlords agreed to postpone the payment of the rent for the next month. The damocles sword weighed twice as heavy for a payment date in the future. One woman related,

*The hardest thing is the financial aspects that keep accumulating. My husband is not working. Rent has now accumulated for two months. The landlord understood our situation up to this point. We can pay later hopefully, once my husband starts work again.*

Those who were forced to pay had to resort to solidarity strategies of borrowing from relatives and friends, who were more often than not in equally financially difficult situations. They resorted to previously built solidarity networks (Kaya 2017), which became more useful in this situation.

*My husband is still not working. Last month we got help for the rent, this month, we will see what to do, the landlord is not accepting to postpone our payment. My husband borrowed 10 TL to get some meat.*

This quote reveals that such types of support become essential and can vary from paying rent to small extras to be able to feed their family.

In the absence of state support, religion became a coping mechanism for many to face their dire situation. In April, one refugee whose husband had been working in a textile factory described her situation as follows:

*We are fine. Praise be to God. Since yesterday, I have not slept... The problem is that the situation can continue like this without work until May. And there is the rent of the*
house to consider, and my husband hasn’t worked for 3 weeks. Yesterday I called on God to inspire me to solve it.
We’re hopeful that God will not forget about us.

As such statements show, the situations faced by refugees were perceived to be individual, with each family trying to deal with their situation in the best way possible. These dynamics reveal how the logic of governmentality through exclusion operated in the state of a pandemic towards the weakest members of Turkish society, the refugees who were excluded. At the same time, this disciplinary project served to control, manage and maintain them as subjects who hold full responsibility for their own fate and have to resort to individual strategies, social networks and scarce assistance from organizations to survive.

Conclusion

This research shows that differential inclusion is shifting as migrants are alternatively surplus or disposable labour. In the situation of the pandemic, the ‘elusive’ needs of the market change. Cheap labour power is exchanged for the ability to shed excess workers and/or to employ them in a further precarized position. Refugees experienced abrupt exclusion from the market and from society as their livelihood and housing were compromised. At a time when other forms of support through civil society initiatives and social networks became more important, these were also under pressure and therefore insufficient. We observe that migrants are aware of state abandonment and of being subject to market ups and downs. They exercise their autonomy by finding meagre and barely sufficient ways to cope. The case of Turkey supports research documenting unequal expectations with regards to (im)mobility and the reinforcement of already prevalent inequality regimes based on class and migration (Dobusch and Kreissl 2020). While similar processes play out in the Global North, we found new heights of hyper-precarity resulting from migrants’ shiftable positions and the labour market structure in Turkey. In contrast to their precarious Turkish citizen counterparts, the mechanism for shifting refugees between surplus and disposable positions is their distinct and temporary legal status coupled with state reliance on material support from civil society. Thus, the pandemic highlights the extremes of hyper-precarity (Canefe 2018) and underlines a widening gap between precarious and hyper-precarious labourers.

Contributing to research on the logistical rationality of migration governance (Altenried et al. 2018) and pointing to how the pandemic reinforces inequality, we show that the governance of im-/mobilities during the pandemic served the needs of the labour market through differential inclusion. The crisis compounded the precarious situation of refugees leading to a situation of hyper-precarity, in which multidimensional insecurities contributed to forced labour experiences. Refugees were reduced to labouring ‘buffers’ to protect the Turkish market from further economic demise. Unlike Turkish citizens who were subject to increased control, but also protection of livelihood and financial support during pandemic
governance, refugees were left to the whims of the market, and had to rely on individual coping mechanisms. Not surprisingly, this research shows that the precarious are harmed more when markets face shocks or crises. What our case illustrates is how this happens for refugees in particular in quite dynamic ways. We show that labour positions defined in terms of insecure legal statuses shift in relation to elusive market needs in times of crisis. Marx argued that crises of capitalism become progressively deeper, eventually leading to systemic collapse. Here we see that the migrant labour force helps to prevent or at least delay this collapse.

This research raises the question: What might be alternate forms of ‘governing’ life and ‘managing’ resources? With alternative solutions in mind, Žižek (2020) describes the society he hopes will emerge as a result of the pandemic through the spread of a more ‘beneficent ideological virus, the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation’ (37). The state will ‘assume a much more active role’, abandoning ‘market mechanisms’ as a solution. Yet, even Žižek doubts his own utopic vision. Given that the most important role of crises is in relation to the tendencies of accumulation, characterized as the tendency to concentrate and centralize capital in the hands of the few, he writes that ‘the most probable outcome of the epidemic is that a new barbarian capitalism will prevail’ (Žizek 2020). Sadly, it seems that barbarian capitalism has already prevailed in Turkey, at least for refugees.

**Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank the refugees who gave their time in such a difficult period to share their families experiences. We are thankful for the support of Ayşe Beyazova and the team of Small Projects Istanbul for the support in parts of the research.

**Funding**

Part of this research results are based on data collected and reported as part of the Etkiniz EU Program funded by the European Commission. Part of this research was conducted under the EC-funded Horizon 2020 project “RESPOND—Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond,” grant No. 770564 (https://www.respondmigration.com).


