

Understanding the Surge of Anti-Migrant Sentiment in Turkey: A Social Network Analysis

BY

Dilale DÖNMEZ

Deniz SERT

Lülüfer KÖRÜKMEZ

REPORT

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Coordinators: Deniz Sert, Lülüfer Körükmez, Dilale Dönmez

Administrative Assistant: Ceren Demirel

Authors: Dilale Dönmez, Deniz Sert, Lülüfer Körükmez

Graphic Design: Ceren Demirel

Association for Migration Research (GAR)

📍 Abbasağa Mahallesi, Üzengi Sok. No: 13 34022, Beşiktaş / İstanbul

🌐 <https://www.gocarastirmalaridernegi.org/tr/>

✉ gar@gocarastirmalaridernegi.org

🐦 https://twitter.com/GAR_Dernek

📘 <https://www.facebook.com/gar.dernek>

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Table of Contents

6	<u>Executive Summary</u>
7	<u>Background and Context</u>
9	<u>Data and Analytical Approach</u>
10	<u>Mapping the Discourse: An Analysis of Network Dynamics</u>
10	<u>The Macro-Level Picture: Temporal Trends and Overall Network Structure</u>
17	<u>Discursive Alignments: Hashtag Co-occurrence and User Clustering</u>
24	<u>Interaction Dynamics: The Mention-Retweet Network</u>
29	<u>Community Structure: Uncovering Conversational Clusters</u>
40	<u>Discussions and Findings</u>
43	<u>Recommendations</u>
45	<u>Conclusions</u>

List of Figures

<u>Figure 1:</u> Evolution of Anti-Syrian Hashtag Usage on Twitter (2016–2024).....	10
<u>Figure 2:</u> Distribution of Hashtag Usage by User Type (Active vs. Passive).....	12
<u>Figure 3:</u> Total Yearly Network Connections (Mentions + Retweets), 2016–2024.....	13
<u>Figure 4:</u> Yearly Distribution of Mentions and Retweets (2016–2024).....	14
<u>Figure 5:</u> Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansToSyria.....	17
<u>Figure 6:</u> Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansGetOut.....	18
<u>Figure 7:</u> Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry.....	19
<u>Figure 8:</u> Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansGoBack.....	20
<u>Figure 9:</u> User-User Network Based on Shared Hashtag Use.....	22
<u>Figure 10:</u> The Mention-Retweet Interaction Network: A Visual Overview.....	24
<u>Figure 11:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Active Users.....	25
<u>Figure 12:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Top Active Users.....	26
<u>Figure 13:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Top Passive Users.....	27
<u>Figure 14:</u> The Top 10 Louvain Communities by Size.....	29
<u>Figure 15:</u> The Top 5 Louvain Communities by Size.....	30
<u>Figure 16:</u> Distribution of Active and Passive Users Across the Top 5 Communities.....	31
<u>Figure 17:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 1, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users.....	32
<u>Figure 18:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 2, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users.....	33
<u>Figure 19:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 3, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users.....	34
<u>Figure 20:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 4, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users.....	35
<u>Figure 21:</u> The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 5, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users.....	37

List of Tables

Table 1: A Comparative Summary of the Top 5 Louvain Communities.....38

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive network analysis of anti-Syrian discourse on Twitter in Turkey between 2016 and 2023. By examining four exclusionary hashtags (#SyriansGetOut, #SyriansToSyria, #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, and #SyriansGoBack), this study maps the architecture of online hostility to answer a central question: who drives the dissemination of anti-Syrian narratives?

The findings reveal that the spread of anti-Syrian sentiment is not a spontaneous, grassroots movement driven by ordinary citizens. Instead, it is the product of an organized partisan mobilization, strategically managed by a small, core group of politically affiliated actors and hyperactive accounts. While many citizens are exposed to this discourse, they primarily function as a passive audience rather than active disseminators.

Key findings from the analysis include:

- **An Elite-Driven Transformation:** The discourse evolved from a scattered, individual-led reaction into an organized political project. The establishment of the Zafer Party (Victory Party) in 2021 marked a critical turning point, dramatically increasing the weight of institutional actors. The party became not only the primary carrier of this discourse but also its institutionalizer and leading streamer, transforming it into a centrally guided campaign.
- **Confrontational, Not Diffuse, Engagement:** This campaign specifically targets two main categories of accounts: (1) State institutions (such as ministries, the Presidency, and state-affiliated media), which are mentioned to demand action, assign blame, or hold them accountable; and (2) Specific high-profile political figures (including both government and opposition party leaders), who are targeted to publicly question, criticize, or draw into the conversation. Therefore, the intense use of the "mention" function transforms the discourse from a simple discussion into a direct tool for political engagement, public pressure, and assigning blame.
- **Event-Driven and Cyclical Intensity:** The volume of anti-Syrian discourse is not constant but surges cyclically in response to key political and social events. The most significant peaks in activity occurred during the 2019 local elections and, most notably, the 2023 national elections and the aftermath of the February earthquakes, demonstrating that this discourse is strategically amplified during heightened political competition and societal crisis.
- **Consolidation Around Political Slogans:** Over time, the discourse consolidated around politically potent slogans, particularly #SyriansToSyria. This hashtag functioned as a central "hub," linking anti-refugee sentiment with nationalist and partisan frames, effectively mainstreaming a call for repatriation as the dominant solution.

In conclusion, this report demonstrates that anti-immigrant discourse on Turkish Twitter should not be mistaken for widespread, organic societal racism. It is, instead, a strategically nurtured discourse of polarization, directed by a concentrated group of political actors. Understanding this structure is crucial for developing effective counter-strategies that target the sources of organized dissemination rather than just its symptoms.

Background and Context

This report investigates how anti-Syrian discourse circulated on Twitter between 2016 and 2023. The dataset is built around four explicitly exclusionary hashtags, #SyriansGetOut, #SyriansToSyria, #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, and #SyriansGoBack, which together provide a systematic window into the online dynamics of hostility against Syrians in Turkey.¹

The digital age has fundamentally reshaped political communication, with social media platforms like Twitter becoming central arenas for public debate, political mobilization, and the rapid spread of hostility (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). These platforms are not neutral conduits for information; they are powerful tools that can amplify polarization and structure public discourse around divisive issues such as immigration (Tucker et al., 2018). A significant body of research argues that online hostility is often not a spontaneous eruption of public sentiment but is heavily influenced by political elites who frame issues and provide cues that shape mass opinion (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023). This process of elite polarization is particularly potent on social media, where political actors can bypass traditional media gatekeepers to directly disseminate narratives directly, often framing refugee populations as security, economic, or cultural threats (Flores, 2018; Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025).

In Turkey, this global phenomenon has a distinct local expression. The country hosts the world's largest refugee population, and the issue of Syrian refugees has become a central and contentious topic in domestic politics, deeply intertwined with party competition. Indeed, a recent comparative report highlights that in Turkey, anti-immigrant sentiment has been fueled by a combination of economic difficulties, pervasive misinformation, and politicized rhetoric, with both traditional and digital media exacerbating polarization and hostility (Danış, Karaçay & Özdemir Dal, 2024). This broader context of media influence provides the backdrop for a closer examination of specific online platforms.

A growing body of research has examined the anti-refugee discourses emerging on Turkish social media. Studies have revealed significant differences between the representation of refugees in the traditional press and in digitally mediated, user-generated discourses (Erdoğan-Öztürk & Işık-Güler, 2020). This research indicates that a large number of online users gather around a shared nationalist agenda, constructing a sense of collective identity through an emphasis on national superiority (Erdoğan-Öztürk & Işık-Güler, 2020).

A growing body of research has examined the anti-refugee discourses emerging on Turkish social media. Studies have revealed significant differences between the representation of refugees in the traditional press and in digitally mediated, user-generated discourses (Erdoğan-Öztürk & Işık-Güler, 2020). Erdoğan-Öztürk and Işık-Güler (2020) show that a large number of online users gather around a shared nationalist agenda, constructing a sense of collective identity through an emphasis on national superiority. Focusing on the popular hashtag #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, Özerim and Tolay (2021) demonstrated that tweets brought together like-minded individuals and produced a discourse containing populist elements.

¹ Respectively, the Turkish hashtags are: #SuriyelilerDefolsun, #SuriyelilerSuriyeye, #ÜlkemdeSuriyeliistemiyorum, and #SuriyelilerGeriDönsün.

Similarly, Gökçe and Hatipoğlu (2021) showed that tweets were highly politicized, that the notion of “security concerns” was widespread, and that there was strong opposition to granting citizenship to refugees. Other studies have revealed negative portrayals of Syrian men and women, showing that refugees and migration were criminalized and that discrimination was legitimized (Taşdelen, 2020).

This hostility intensifies during specific events; research on hashtags during Turkey's military operation in Northern Syria showed that Syrians were perceived as a threat to daily life (Özdüzen et al, 2020), while analysis of tweets during the Altındağ events revealed that othering, racist, and marginalizing language overwhelmingly dominated the conversations (Yılmaz et al., 2023).

While the tools and discursive styles of social media platforms vary, exclusionary and hate-filled content targeting Syrians and other refugee groups is present across all platforms. Yıldız (2018) demonstrates that Twitter produces more hate speech than mainstream media. Beyond social media, campaigns of this nature are also observed on platforms such as Change.org (Şimdi, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of expanding research on these platforms where hate speech is proliferating.

Therefore, this report's central research question is straightforward: who drives the dissemination of these anti-Syrian narratives on Twitter? Answering this question is crucial, as it sheds light on the actors and mechanisms through which anti-immigrant discourse spreads, providing a basis for constructing strategies to counter it. While the struggle against such discourse is multidimensional, social media's significant influence on ordinary people highlights the need to prioritize this digital space in these efforts.

Data and Analytical Approach

The dataset analyzed in this report consists of Twitter activity recorded between 2016 and 2024 around four explicitly anti-Syrian hashtags: #SyriansGetOut, #SyriansToSyria, #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, and #SyriansGoBack. The data include 2,281 unique users (nodes) and 4,068 interactions (edges) in the form of mentions and retweets.

This dataset is a subset derived from a larger data collection effort by the ERC-funded Politus project (Yörük et al., 2024). The methodology for that project involved gathering a massive dataset of over half a billion tweets from X (formerly Twitter) using the Twitter Academic API. Following this large-scale collection, a computational process was employed to identify and filter the specific posts relevant to political attitudes and positions. Due to evolving constraints and access issues with the official Twitter API during the research period, we could not independently collect the complete dataset.

To capture the different roles users played in the network, we distinguished between two categories:

- **Active users (n=1,042):** those who initiated at least one interaction through a mention or retweet.
- **Passive users (n=1,239):** those who were only mentioned or retweeted by others but did not initiate any interactions themselves.

This classification allowed us to separate accounts that actively spread discourse from those that became reference points. Our analysis follows a step-by-step methodological structure. The network visualizations and analyses were conducted using the R programming language. Several analytical strategies were employed to examine the structure of the discourse:

- **Temporal Analysis:** We tracked yearly changes in the use of the four hashtags and the overall volume of mentions and retweets.
- **Hashtag Co-occurrence Analysis:** We traced how different slogans overlapped to reveal users' clustering around shared discursive repertoires.
- **User-User Hashtag Network Analysis:** We examined how users were connected through shared hashtag use, making it possible to identify communities based on discursive alignment rather than direct interactions.
- **Community Detection:** The Louvain algorithm was used on the complete mention-retweet network to identify the five clusters with the highest concentration of users and map how they were connected.
- **Qualitative Notes:** We complemented these structural analyses with qualitative notes on the differences between active and passive accounts, particularly on the distribution of institutional actors.

This methodological design provides a systematic way to analyze the scale and evolution of the discourse and the organizational and discursive patterns that structured it. As a result of this analysis, we found that citizens did not entirely drive the spread of anti-Syrian discourse; rather, it was largely influenced by a small group of politically affiliated or organized individuals, while ordinary citizens appeared primarily as receivers, serving more as an audience to the discourse than as disseminators.

It is important to note that this finding is specific to the hashtag campaigns analyzed here and may differ from other digital spaces, such as the YouTube “street interview” ecosystem, where citizen-led content production plays a central role (Akgundogdu, 2023).

Mapping the Discourse: An Analysis of Network Dynamics

The Macro-Level Picture: Temporal Trends and Overall Network Structure

This section provides a broad overview by tracking the evolution of anti-Syrian hashtags over the seven years and mapping the overall structure of user interactions. These initial graphs collectively illustrate the key temporal and structural patterns that define the entire network, providing a foundational context before moving into more detailed micro-level analyses.

Figure 1: Evolution of Anti-Syrian Hashtag Usage on Twitter (2016–2024)

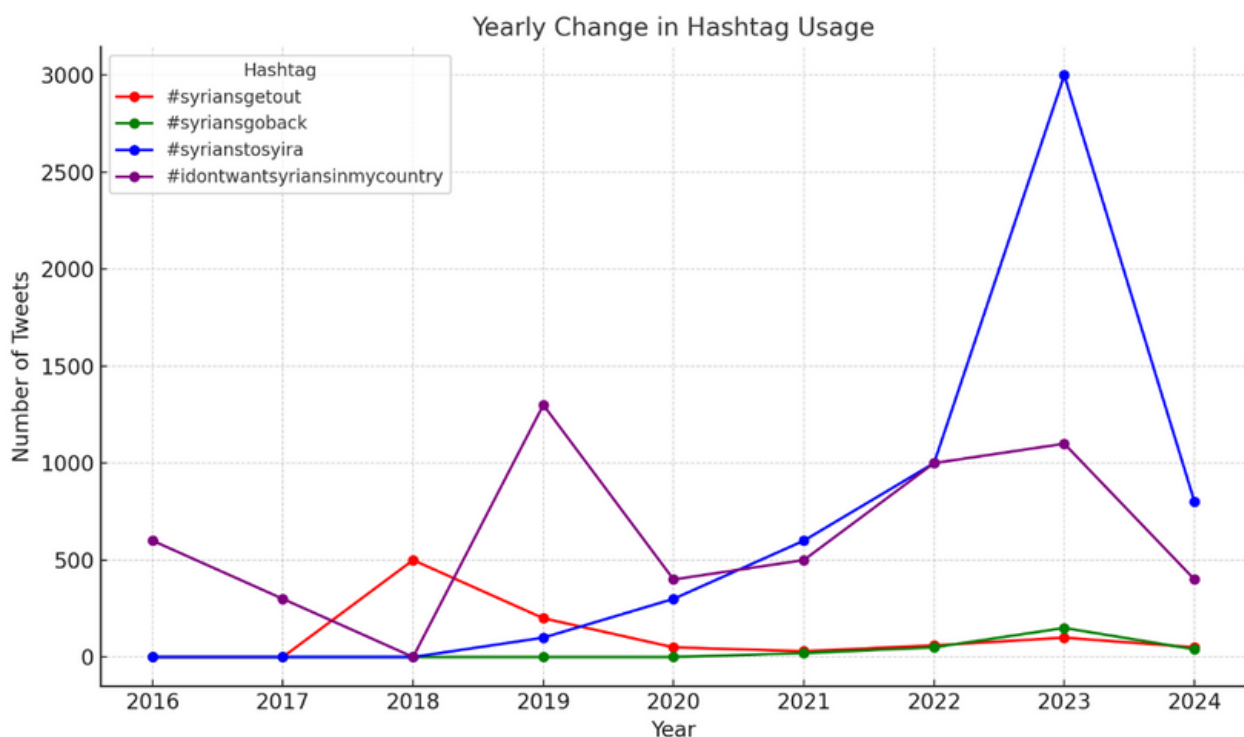


Figure 1, an analysis of the yearly use of the four anti-Syrian hashtags, reveals a clear temporal evolution between 2016 and 2024. During the early period from 2016 to 2020, Twitter interactions regarding the migration debate remained at a relatively low level. The most prominent slogan during this time was #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, which, as the data shows, maintained a consistent presence from 2016 onwards. The first significant spike in its usage and the overall visibility of anti-refugee discourse occurred during the 2019 local elections. This moment, when the presence of Syrians became a highly politicized issue in major cities like Istanbul and Ankara, marked a turning point where these exclusionary hashtags became a permanent fixture in the social media landscape.

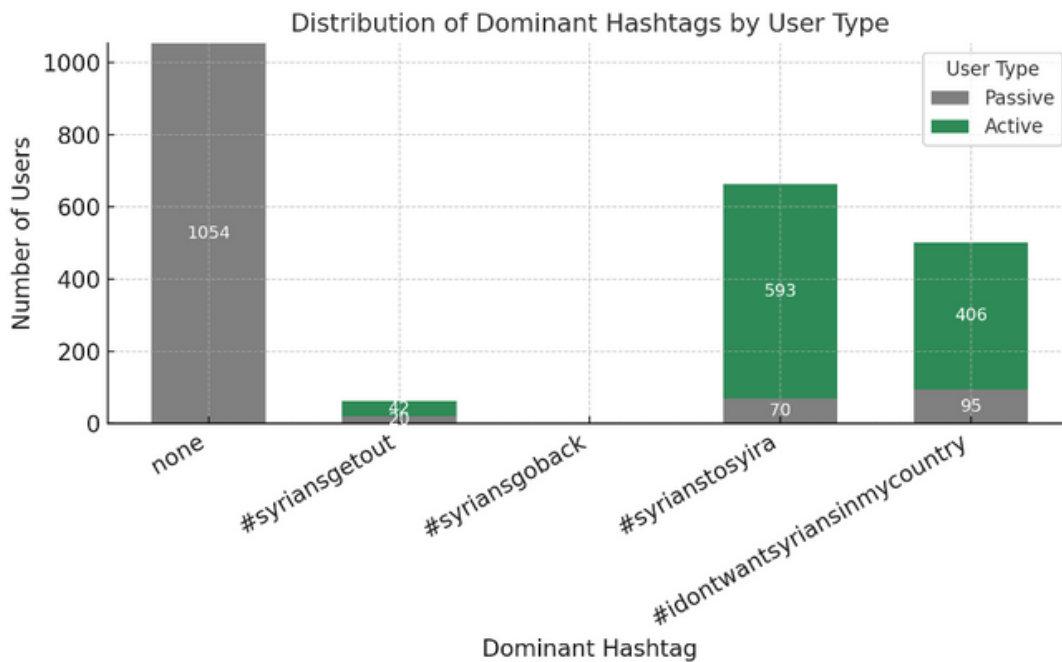
After 2020, the discourse entered a phase of steady escalation. A slogan, #SyriansToSyria, began a rapid rise, becoming the dominant hashtag from 2020 onwards. This upward trend was further institutionalized with establishing the Zafer Party in 2021, which framed the migration issue within a more organized political context. The impact of this development is visible in the significant jump in both mention/retweet connections and hashtag usage observed by 2022.

The main breaking point, however, was the 2023 election year. During this period, total mentions and retweet connections peaked at nearly 3,000, with a significant portion of the discourse being carried through direct, confrontational mentions. The intensity of the debate reached its historical high, driven by two coinciding dynamics: the national elections, in which the “Syrian question” became a central campaign theme, and the aftermath of the February earthquakes, which triggered a wave of scapegoating on social media. Rumors accusing Syrians of looting or misusing aid circulated widely, amplifying anti-Syrian sentiment online. The parallel rise of the two dominant slogans in 2019 and 2023 suggests that moments of heightened political competition and societal crisis fuel stronger engagement with anti-Syrian narratives. As academic work has noted, in the 2023 elections, political actors frequently used the refugee issue as a discursive tool to frame arguments against their opponents, cementing its place on the electoral agenda (Barkot, 2024).

Finally, although a decline in network connections and hashtag usage was observed in 2024, the level of interaction remained high compared to the pre-2019 period, indicating that the migration issue has retained its importance on the public agenda post-election. Overall, the yearly distribution shows a process of consolidation. While multiple exclusionary labels circulated, the discourse became increasingly dominated by a small number of prominent hashtags, especially #SyriansToSyria, which shaped the online debate leading up to 2023. By contrast, harsher slogans like #SyriansGetOut and #SyriansGoBack remained marginal throughout the period.

After illustrating the temporal patterns of the discourse, the analysis now turns to the roles different users played within it. Distinguishing between those who actively disseminated hashtags and those who were passively drawn into the conversation reveals the network's underlying structure. [Figure 2](#) shows the distribution of dominant hashtags among active and passive users.

Figure 2: Distribution of Hashtag Usage by User Type (Active vs. Passive)



As [Figure 2](#) reveals, a striking finding is the large “none” category, which contains 1,054 users who did not consistently use any of the four anti-Syrian hashtags. These are **passive accounts** that were mentioned or retweeted by others but did not themselves produce hashtagged content. This underlines that a significant portion of the network participated without actively disseminating exclusionary labels.

Among the users who did employ hashtags, two slogans clearly dominated: #SyriansToSyria (with 593 active and 70 passive users) and #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry (with 406 active and 95 passive users). In contrast, #SyriansGetOut and #SyriansGoBack were far less frequently adopted, appearing only at the margins of the debate.

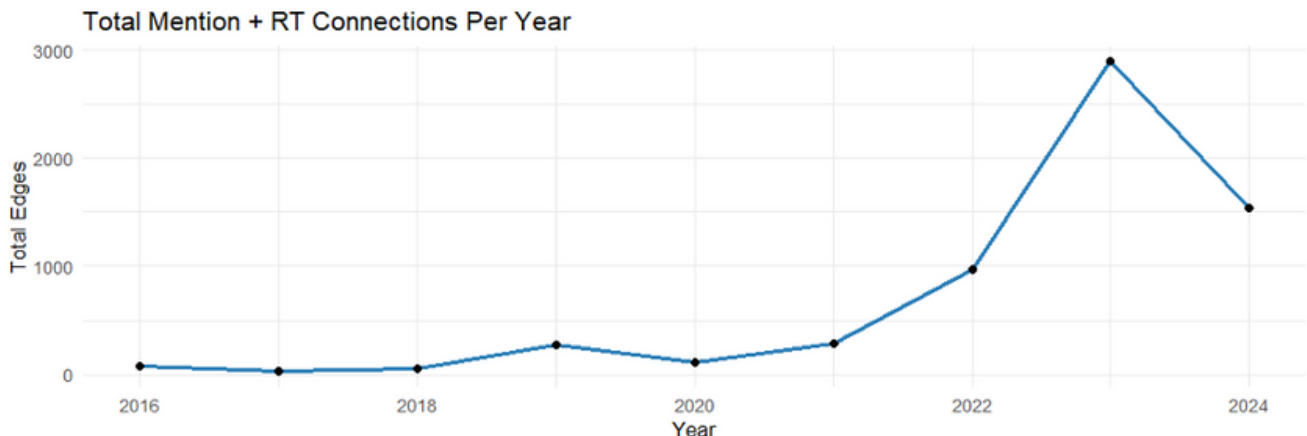
It is also important to clarify what the “passive” category represents within these hashtag groups. In our network, passive users encompass two distinct but related types of accounts. The first group consists of users who wrote tweets containing one or more of the analyzed hashtags but did not initiate any interactions through mentions or retweets, and whose posts did not receive reciprocal engagement. Their activity was thus limited to isolated statements that circulated only when picked up by others. The second group includes users who did not post any tweets themselves but appeared in the network as targets of interaction, accounts that were mentioned or retweeted by others, such as politicians, media outlets, or institutions (for example, a user tagging @RTErdogan in a tweet like “#SuriyelilerSuriyeye, hear our voice”). In both cases, these users contributed to the structure of the network not as active disseminators but as nodes through which discourse visibility and direction were organized. In effect, they were visible in the discourse but not its drivers. However, although they are not the original producers of the discourse, those who reproduce it play a key role in ensuring its public visibility and facilitating and strengthening its dissemination.

The distribution thus highlights a key structural pattern: while active accounts drove the spread of the dominant hashtags, a larger set of users entered the conversation either passively (by being mentioned or retweeted) or without generating interactions. This indicates an asymmetric dynamic in which organized actors produce and disseminate anti-Syrian narratives.

This structure reinforces the report's central argument: the discourse is produced and directed not by ordinary citizens but by organized actors. Of the 2,281 users in the network, 1,042 are active while 1,239 are passive. A very small portion of the active users are ordinary citizens; accounts with clear political identities are the primary drivers of the discourse. In contrast, citizens are positioned primarily as a passive audience, while the passive user list shows that politicians, media outlets, and institutional accounts are the primary targets of the interactions.

At this stage of the analysis, the focus shifts from the types of hashtags used and the roles of users to a broader perspective: the overall intensity of the discourse. The total volume of interactions per year (the combination of mentions and retweets) is a critical indicator for understanding when the debate escalated and during which periods it peaked. [Figure 3](#) reveals the evolution of these interactions over time.

Figure 3: Total Yearly Network Connections (Mentions + Retweets), 2016-2024



As [Figure 3](#) shows that activity remained relatively limited for much of the early period (2016–2020), with only modest fluctuations. This indicates that anti-Syrian hashtags were present but had not yet generated a sustained interaction network.

From 2021 onwards, however, the volume of interactions rose sharply. The network doubled between 2021 and 2022, peaking in 2023 with nearly 3,000 connections. Several interrelated factors contributed to this significant increase.

First, the importance of the 2023 elections made the presence of Syrians a key campaign issue. Second, the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict led to the belief that displacement had become permanent. Finally, the aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes sparked a new wave of scapegoating and online hostility toward Syrians.

Figure 4 breaks down the yearly activity into its components to show which of these two dynamics drove the conversation.

Figure 4: Yearly Distribution of Mentions and Retweets (2016-2024)

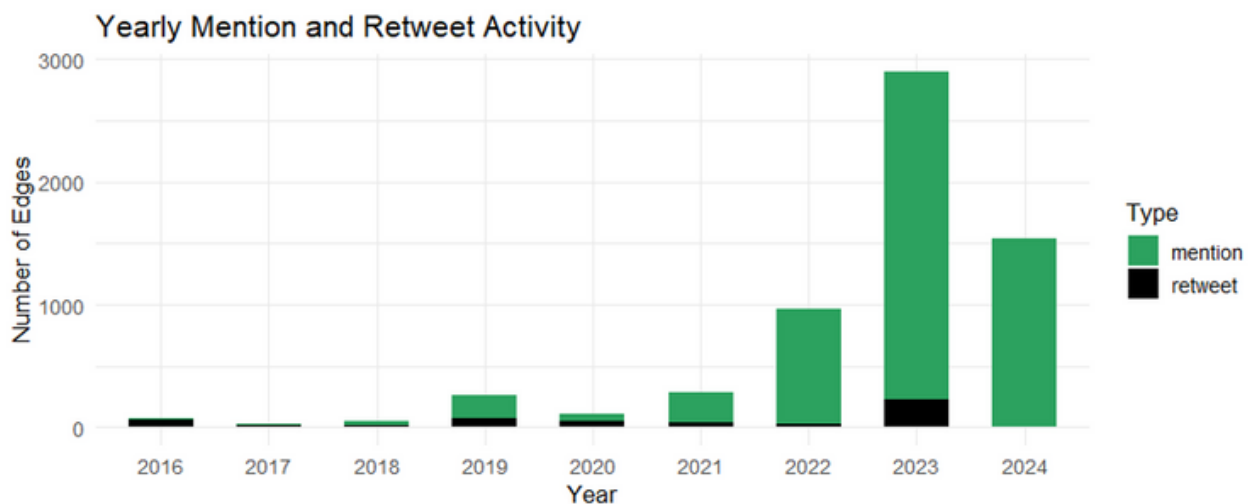


Figure 4 reveals that mentions have overwhelmingly dominated the activity across the years. This means the discourse around the four anti-Syrian hashtags was primarily carried through direct references to other users rather than amplifying content via retweets.

The difference becomes particularly striking in the peak year of 2023, where mentions alone account for most of the nearly 3,000 recorded connections. Retweets appear only in small numbers, showing that users did not primarily spread anti-Syrian content by amplifying existing posts but by actively directing discourse toward specific accounts. This pattern suggests that the debate was highly confrontational and relational, with users targeting or addressing others instead of passively sharing content.

The persistence of this asymmetry into 2024 confirms that mentions were the primary driver of interaction in this debate, underscoring that anti-Syrian narratives were sustained more by direct user-to-user dynamics than by broad diffusion mechanisms.

In summary, first, the hashtag usage trends show that the debate consolidated around two slogans, most notably #SyriansToSyria, which surged from 2019 onwards and peaked in 2023 with over 3,000 tweets, and #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, which maintained consistent visibility with spikes in 2019 and 2023. The harsher hashtags (#SyriansGetOut and #SyriansGoBack) remained marginal. The simultaneous rise of the two dominant hashtags in 2019 and 2023 corresponds with moments of heightened political salience: local elections in 2019 and, in 2023, the combined effects of national elections and post-earthquake scapegoating.

This pattern mirrors prior research showing that anti-refugee hostility in Turkey intensifies during periods of political competition and social crisis. For instance, Özerim and Tolay (2021) documented that the hashtag #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry first gained traction following President Erdoğan's 2016 citizenship announcement, while Ozduzen et al. (2021) found that racist posts on Turkish Twitter exceeded 95 percent during the 2019 military intervention in northern Syria. Similarly, Balta and her colleagues (2023) highlight how refugee-related discourse became central to the 2023 election campaigns.

Barkot (2024) shows that by 2022–2023, political elites used the refugee issue as a discursive tool against the opposition. These findings collectively support the view that spikes in anti-Syrian sentiment are not random but tied to electoral and crisis cycles, consistent with broader evidence that misinformation and hostility spread most rapidly under uncertainty (Silverman, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018).

Second, the distribution of hashtags by user type reveals that while politically engaged active users drove the spread of these narratives, a significant portion of the network (1,054 users) did not consistently employ the hashtags. Many of these were passive accounts that were mentioned or retweeted by others, often including politicians, media outlets, or institutional actors. Even within the hashtag groups, passive users typically wrote isolated tweets without initiating interaction, making them visible but not central drivers of discourse.

This asymmetry aligns with findings from social media network research showing that online debates about migration are dominated by a small, active core of politically engaged users, while the majority remain peripheral or passive (Barberá & Rivero, 2015; Preotiuc-Pietro et al., 2017). Studies on Turkish Twitter similarly indicate that opposition politicians and partisan accounts are central in shaping anti-Syrian discourse, whereas ordinary citizens act mainly as amplifiers rather than originators (Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021; Özerim & Tolay, 2021).

Third, the overall volume of interactions (mentions + retweets) remained limited between 2016 and 2020 but escalated rapidly from 2021, doubling between 2021 and 2022, reaching nearly 3,000 connections in 2023. This surge reflects the intersection of electoral competition, conflict fatigue, and crisis-driven scapegoating. The decline in 2024 shows that the intensity of the debate was cyclical and tied to these peak moments.

Such cyclical dynamics are widely recognized in the literature on digital political communication, where waves of attention and hostility correspond to political or social turning points (Flores, 2018; Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023). In Turkey, researchers have shown that migration discourse intensifies around elections and significant events, reinforcing the argument that elite rhetoric and partisan mobilization drive online hostility (Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021).

Finally, when separating mentions from retweets, it becomes clear that the discourse was sustained primarily through mentions rather than retweets. Users did not mainly amplify anti-Syrian content by sharing existing posts; instead, they engaged through direct, confrontational references to others. This relational pattern highlights that the debate was not about passive diffusion but actively targeting and addressing specific accounts.

This distinction between mentions and retweets is consistent with network-based analyses of polarization on Twitter, where retweet networks reinforce echo chambers while mention networks reflect direct, often adversarial engagement (Conover et al., 2011; Barberá et al., 2015; Tucker et al., 2018). The dominance of mentions over retweets in this dataset supports the view that anti-refugee debates on Turkish Twitter are structured around confrontation and blame assignment rather than horizontal diffusion among like-minded users (Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020; Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021).

The temporal dynamics reveal that anti-Syrian discourse online has been cyclical, intensifying during politically charged or crisis-laden moments, consolidating around a few dominant hashtags, and structured by asymmetrical interaction patterns in which organized actors disseminated narratives while ordinary citizens remained largely passive. Across all four graphs, a clear pattern emerges: anti-Syrian discourse on Twitter intensified sharply after 2020 and peaked in 2023. The vast “none” category (1,054 users) indicates that most users did not actively push hashtags. Even among those who did, passive users wrote isolated tweets without engaging in mentions or retweets. In contrast, active users were the main drivers of discourse. This asymmetry suggests that diffusion was led by a limited, organized core rather than a broad citizen base. Moreover, the sharp growth in connections after 2021 and the peak in 2023 reflect political and crisis-driven mobilization. This finding resonates with previous evidence that elite behavior and partisanship are key determinants of polarization and the spread of anti-immigrant narratives (Blumer, 1958; Flores, 2018; Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025).

Such spikes are typical of coordinated or organized activity responding to events, rather than continuous grassroots participation. Ordinary citizens did not sustain the discourse across time; instead, discourse intensity followed moments of heightened political salience. The dominance of mentions over retweets also shows that users were not simply amplifying content but directly addressing or targeting others. This points to a confrontational style characteristic of organized political engagement, rather than casual or diffuse citizen-driven activity.

These four graphs illustrate how the spread of anti-Syrian discourse was driven mainly by a small number of organized actors. The consolidation around a few politically salient hashtags, the asymmetry between active and passive users, the event-driven spikes in overall interactions, and the dominance of confrontational mentions over passive retweets all point to a dynamic where possibly organized accounts set the tone, while ordinary citizens remained largely passive or peripheral in the network.

Discursive Alignments: Hashtag Co-occurrence and User Clustering

After establishing the macro-level trends of the discourse over time, the analysis moves to a more granular level to uncover the underlying community and ideological structures. Simply tracking individual hashtags is not enough; the way they are combined and used by groups of users reveals the conversation's true architecture. This section examines how different slogans clustered together and how users aligned around shared discursive packages, moving from what was said to how and with whom it was said.

Following this sequence, from hashtag overlaps to mention-retweet interactions and community-level structures, we provide a systematic view of how anti-Syrian discourse was organized and circulated on the platform.

To understand the ideological context of the most dominant slogan, the analysis first examines the co-occurrence network for #SyriansToSyria. This network, as illustrated in [Figure 5](#), visualizes the other hashtags that are most frequently used alongside it, highlighting the discursive ecosystem surrounding the call for return.

Figure 5: Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansToSyria

Hashtag Co-occurrence Network (anchor: #suriyelilersuriyeye)

Top 30 co-tags; edges with weight ≥ 2 | Nodes = hashtags; Edges = co-occur in same tweet; Width = co-tweet count

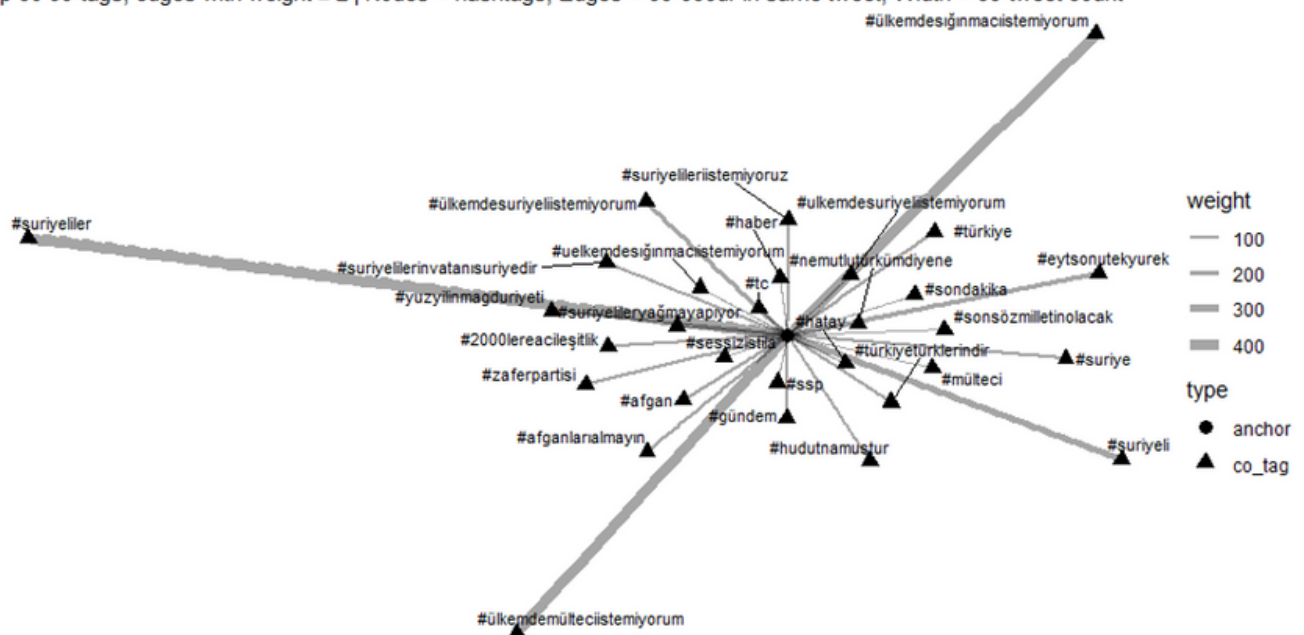


Figure 5 presents a hashtag co-occurrence network centered on #SyriansToSyria. It shows the top 30 co-occurring hashtags, with only edges that appear at least twice (edge weight ≥ 2) included. Each node represents a hashtag, while each edge represents the number of times two hashtags appeared together in the same tweet. The thickness of the edge corresponds to the frequency of co-occurrence, meaning thicker lines indicate hashtags that were used together more often. The network highlights how #SyriansToSyria was embedded in a broader discursive environment.

Importantly, the network also links to explicitly nationalist and political markers. The presence of #ZaferPartisi (#ZaferParty) reflects the role of a political party that has made anti-refugee positions central to its agenda. Hashtags such as #NeMutluTürkümDiyene (How Happy is the One Who Says I am a Turk) and #TürkiyeTürklerindir (Turkey Belongs to the Turks) tie the anti-Syrian discourse to nationalist frames, embedding hostility toward refugees within broader narratives of Turkish identity and belonging.

Overall, the visualization demonstrates that #SyriansToSyria functioned as both a core exclusionary slogan and a bridge linking refugee hostility with nationalist rhetoric and mainstream political debates.

Figure 6: Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansGetOut



Figure 6 shows a hashtag co-occurrence network centered on #SyriansGetOut. It includes the top 30 co-occurring hashtags, with only edges that appear at least twice (edge weight ≥ 2) displayed.

Compared to #SyriansToSyria, the network is less dense and more dispersed. #SyriansGetOut connects to other exclusionary slogans such as #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, #ÜlkemdeSığınmacıİstemiyorum, and #SyriansToSyria, situating it within the broader anti-refugee discourse, though with weaker centrality. At the same time, the network contains counter-narratives such as #SuriyelilerYalnızDeğildir ("Syrians are not alone") and even provocative responses like #TürklerDeDefolsun ("Turks should also get out"). These appear in the periphery, indicating their limited uptake compared to the dominant exclusionary slogans. Nationalist framings are also visible. While #NeMutluTürkümDiyene (How Happy is the One Who Says I am a Turk) does not appear here, #TürkiyeTürklerindir (Turkey Belongs to the Turks) does, with a thick edge but positioned at some distance from the core. This placement means the hashtag was strongly paired with a few other tags but not widely connected across the network. In other words, it reflects a strong nationalist emphasis among a narrower set of users rather than a mainstream rallying slogan.

Finally, the presence of #Afgan (Afghan) and #Afganlarıİstemiyoruz (We Do not Want Afghans) demonstrates that anti-Syrian discourse often overlapped with broader anti-refugee narratives, targeting Afghans alongside Syrians. This visualization suggests that #SyriansGetOut was part of the same exclusionary ecosystem but not the primary anchor. It circulated with both harsher slogans and counter-narratives.

The focus now shifts to the co-occurrence network for #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry. As a widely used hashtag that frames opposition more personally and declaratively, its discursive network is crucial for understanding how individual sentiment is connected to broader political and nationalist frames.

Figure 7: Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry

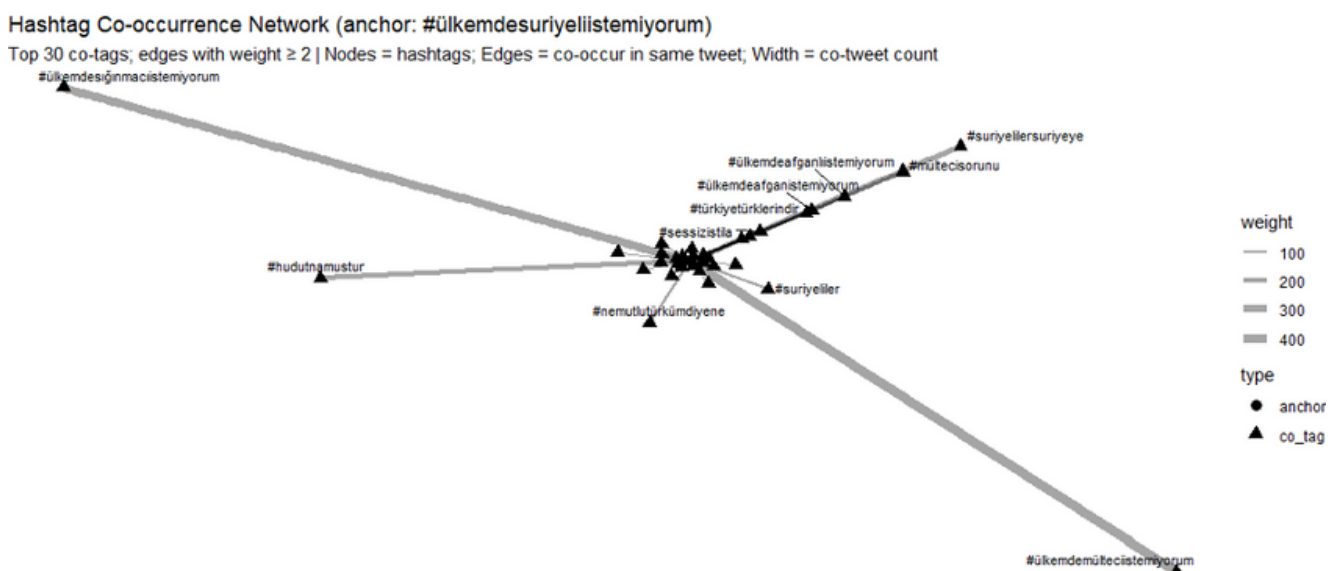


Figure 7 displays a hashtag co-occurrence network centered on #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, including the top 30 co-occurring hashtags with edges that appear at least twice (edge weight ≥ 2).

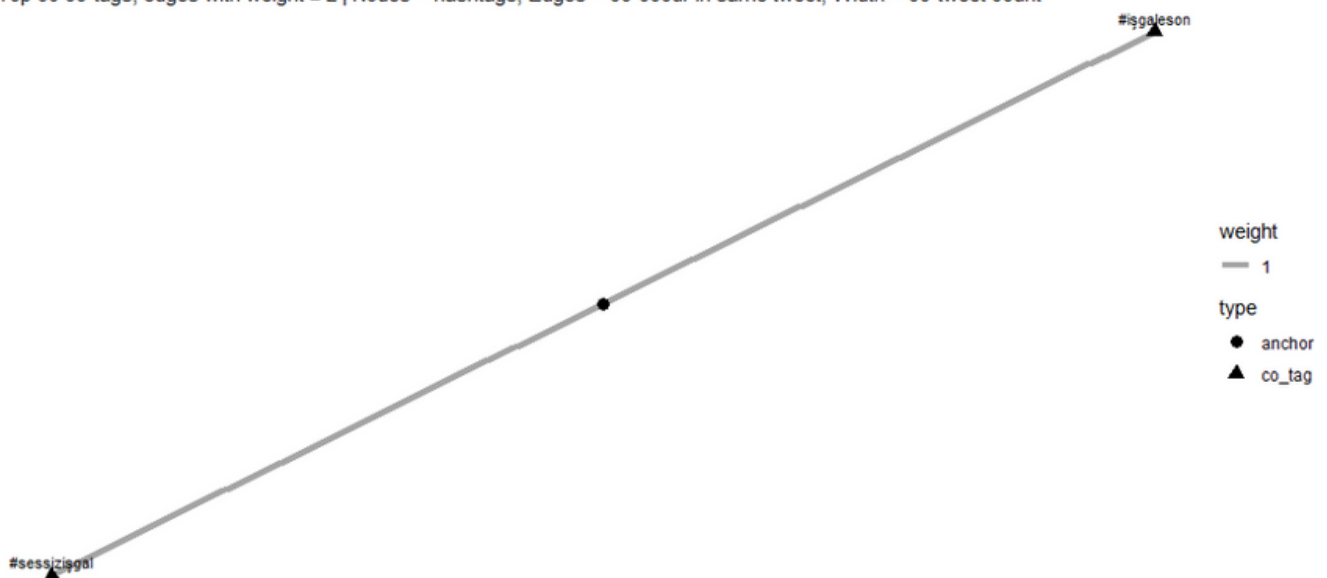
This visualization shows fewer overall connections than the previous two networks, with several hashtags arranged sequentially along the same line. This pattern indicates that #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry was typically used with a limited set of other exclusionary and nationalist slogans, producing repeated combinations rather than a wide variety of co-occurrences. In other words, the hashtag appears less dispersed across diverse topics and more tightly combined with a small cluster of companion hashtags. This distribution shows the role of the hashtag as part of a fixed rhetorical package rather than a flexible label applied across multiple contexts.

Finally, to complete the discursive analysis, Figure 8 examines the co-occurrence network for #SyriansGoBack. As the data shows, this hashtag was used far less frequently than the others; its network provides insight into the most peripheral and least influential corners of the discourse, revealing which ideas failed to gain traction and remained on the fringes of the conversation.

Figure 8: Hashtag Co-occurrence Network for #SyriansGoBack

Hashtag Co-occurrence Network (anchor: #suriyellilergeridönsün)

Top 30 co-tags; edges with weight ≥ 2 | Nodes = hashtags; Edges = co-occur in same tweet; Width = co-tweet count



As Figure 8 the network is extremely sparse: the anchor hashtag co-occurs only with two other hashtags, #Sessizİstila ("Silent Invasion") and #SığınmacıSon, and the three appear on a single straight line.

This configuration highlights that #SyriansGoBack had limited adoption and was not embedded in a broader set of discursive linkages. Instead, it was used in particular combinations, mainly tied to the "Silent Invasion" narrative and calls for an end to refugee presence. The lack of multiple branches or clusters contrasts sharply with the richer networks of #SyriansToSyria and #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, underscoring that this slogan did not spread widely across different communities or contexts.

In short, the visualization indicates that #SyriansGoBack remained a marginal slogan within the anti-Syrian discourse, showing little structural impact in the larger network.

The four co-occurrence networks illustrate how anti-Syrian discourse on Twitter was structured around overlapping but unevenly distributed slogans. #SyriansToSyria emerges as the most central and widely connected hashtag, linking strongly with other exclusionary slogans, nationalist markers such as #TürkiyeTürklerindir (Turkey Belongs to the Turks) and #NeMutluTürkümDiyene (How Happy is the One Who Says I am a Turk), and broader political or media-related tags. This indicates that it became the main rallying point in the discourse.

This pattern reflects what Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler (2020) describe as the fusion of exclusionary language with nationalist symbols, reinforcing a collective in-group identity. The use of hashtags tied to national slogans mirrors the “banal nationalism” mechanisms outlined by Billig (1995), through which everyday discourse reproduces ideas of ownership and belonging. Similar to findings in traditional media, where nationalist frames dominate discussions of migration (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017), social media hashtags replicate these rhetorical boundaries by coupling anti-refugee expressions with patriotic markers.

#IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry also shows strong connections within a narrower set of recurring combinations, suggesting that it circulated as part of a fixed rhetorical package with a handful of companion hashtags. Such clustering confirms previous research that specific exclusionary hashtags form stable “discursive packages” that carry predictable moral and emotional cues (Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020; Bozdağ, 2020). These recurrent combinations strengthen the normalization of hostility, as users repeatedly encounter the same co-occurring narratives (Wodak, 2001).

#SyriansGetOut, by contrast, appears less central but intersects with counter-narratives like #SuriyelilerYalnızDeğildir (Syrians Are Not Alone) and #TürklerDeDefolsun (Turks Get Out Too), highlighting the presence of limited pushback against the dominant exclusionary framing.

This limited counter-discourse aligns with Özerim and Tolay’s (2021) observation that while hostile hashtags dominate, a minority of users employ empathy-oriented or anti-racist responses that momentarily disrupt the exclusionary frame. However, such interventions remain marginal and fail to alter the overall structure of online debate (Bozdağ, 2020).

Finally, #SyriansGoBack shows an extremely sparse network, tied mainly to #Sessizİstila (Silent Invasion) and #SığınmacıSon (End Of Refugees), underscoring its marginal role compared to the other slogans.

Taken together, the co-occurrence analysis shows that anti-Syrian discourse was not evenly distributed across all slogans but instead consolidated around a few dominant hashtags that were repeatedly used in combination with nationalist and anti-refugee frames. At the same time, harsher or alternative formulations remained peripheral. The association of this hashtag with conspiracy-laden terms like #Sessizİstila (Silent Invasion) reflects the spread of fear-based narratives that frame refugees as coordinated threats, consistent with the “topos of danger and abuse” framework in critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2001; Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020).

The User-User Hashtag Network, illustrated in Error! Reference source not found., captures how users connect through hashtag choices. In this network, each node represents a user, and each edge reflects the number of hashtags two users have in common.

To focus on the more meaningful ties, we applied a filter of weight ≥ 2 , which means that only pairs of users who shared at least two different hashtags remained in the graph.

Users who had used only a single hashtag, or overlapped with others on just one, lost all of their connections under this filter. As a result, these users became isolated nodes and were removed from the visualization before plotting. This procedure ensures that the network highlights the stronger and more substantial connections among users, rather than incidental overlaps that could occur through a single standard tag.

Figure 9: User-User Network Based on Shared Hashtag Use

User-User Hashtag Network (Edge Weight ≥ 2)

Nodes = Users | Edges = Shared hashtag usage | Edge weight = number of distinct common hashtags

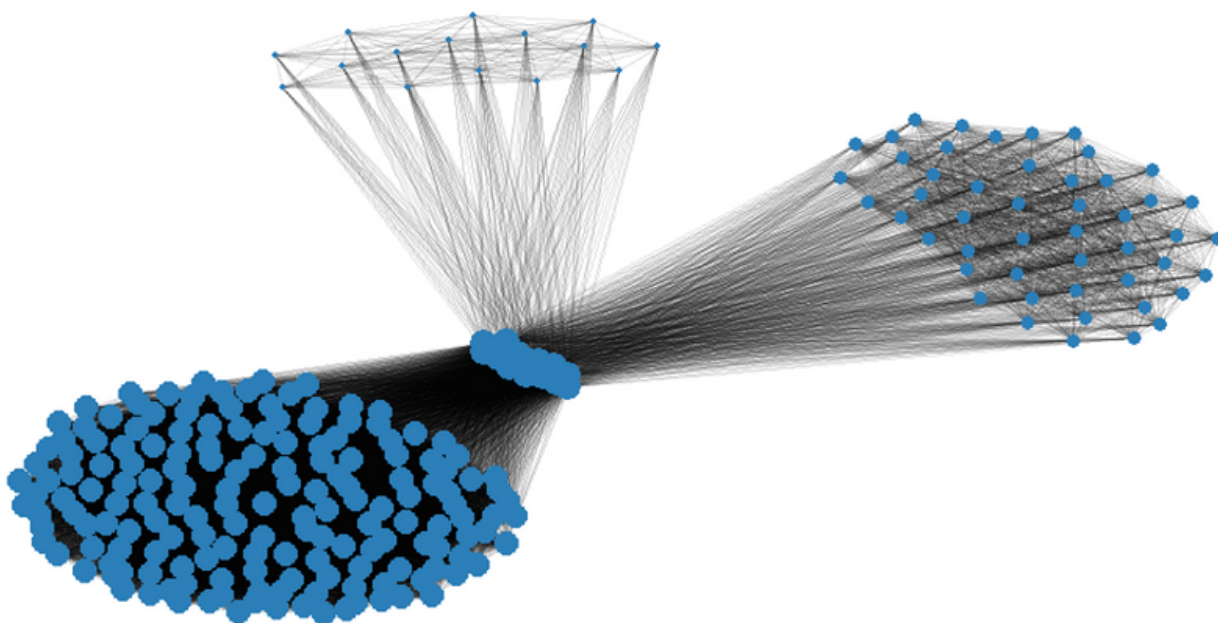


Figure 9 reveals four distinct clusters of users who consistently used overlapping sets of hashtags. Two of these clusters are particularly large and dense, encompassing the majority of users, while the other two are smaller but still internally cohesive. Within each cluster, users relied on a shared repertoire of exclusionary slogans, often combining the same hashtags repeatedly.

This pattern parallels what Tucker et al. (2018) describe as the emergence of ideologically coherent subnetworks, where small, cohesive clusters reinforce internal agreement while minimizing exposure to alternative viewpoints. The repetitive use of identical hashtags within clusters reflects the same “echo chamber” dynamic observed in retweet networks (Barberá et al., 2015).

The cluster separation indicates that the discourse was not fully integrated but instead organized into several distinct groupings. Users in one cluster tended to rely on one subset of hashtags, while users in another cluster used a different package of slogans. Although all four hashtags express similar anti-Syrian sentiments, the limited overlap across clusters suggests that other groups of users reproduced these narratives within their own circles rather than across the network as a whole.

This separation aligns with findings from Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler (2020) and Özerim and Tolay (2021), who both note that anti-refugee discourse in Turkey operates through multiple yet parallel publics that rarely interact directly, reflecting broader political polarization. The fragmentation of discourse into parallel clusters thus mirrors the structure of partisan and ideological divides identified in studies of online political communication (Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023; Tucker et al., 2018).

The high density of interconnections within each group highlights internal consistency: users were not simply repeating a single slogan but frequently combining multiple hashtags in predictable ways. This suggests that anti-Syrian discourse was reproduced in parallel but separate clusters, with little cross-connection.

Such findings support research on social media polarization, showing that tightly knit clusters of users perpetuate exclusionary narratives through repetitive co-occurrence rather than cross-group dialogue (Conover et al., 2011; Tucker et al., 2018). In the Turkish case, this pattern reinforces the view that organized political actors and ideologically aligned publics jointly sustain anti-refugee sentiment within self-reinforcing digital enclaves (Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021).

As a conclusion to this hashtag network analysis, it can be stated that the structure of the hashtag networks shows that anti-immigrant discourse clusters around specific central hashtags, which are supported by short-lived campaign hashtags surrounding them. Specifically, #SyriansToSyria functions as a "hub" that connects different discursive areas thanks to its high connection weights, placing it at the center of the debate. In contrast, #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum reinforces identity-based and emotionally intense discourses within a more limited scope. Campaign hashtags such as #SyriansGetOut and #SyriansGoBack only come to the fore during specific periods and generate limited interaction. This picture, consistent with Sunstein's (2001) conceptualization of "echo chambers," reveals that the discourse is concentrated around a few central nodes and that the permeability between different groups is relatively weak. Furthermore, considering that the hashtags are introduced and sustained by institutional actors, these findings also align with the discussions in the literature on "elite-driven polarization." Therefore, the quantitative data from social media interactions show that the discourse on migration reflects societal sentiments and is strategically directed by political actors.

Interaction Dynamics: The Mention-Retweet Network

After mapping the discursive alignments based on shared language, the analysis now turns to the structure of direct interactions. The mention-retweet network provides a comprehensive visual overview of the entire conversation, revealing the architecture of influence and information flow. This visualization moves beyond what is being said to show who is speaking, who is being targeted, and how these interactions create the core and periphery of the anti-Syrian discourse. Each node represents a Twitter account, while each edge represents an interaction in either a mention (directly addressing or tagging another user) or a retweet (amplifying another user's content). The size of the nodes corresponds to their out-degree, that is, the number of interactions initiated by the user.

For this network analysis, a key distinction is made between active users, who initiated interactions, and passive users, who were only the targets of mentions or retweets. This separation allows us to distinguish the accounts that actively disseminate the discourse from those primarily its symbolic targets.

Figure 10: The Mention-Retweet Interaction Network: A Visual Overview

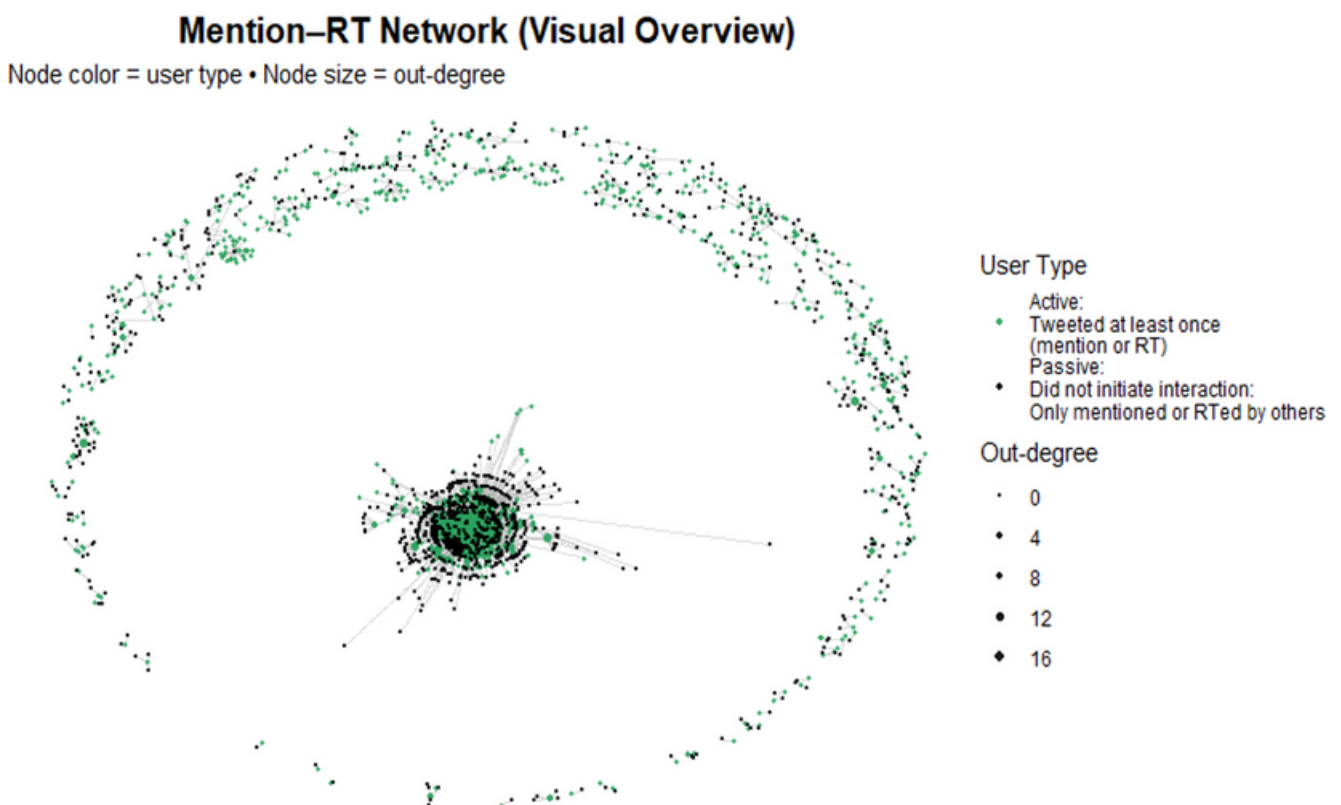


Figure 10 displays the entire dataset, including all active (green) and passive (black) users.

The structure of the network is asymmetric and concentrated. At the center, there is a dense cluster of nodes and edges, showing that a relatively small set of highly active accounts drives most of the interactions. In contrast, the periphery is populated by many users with few or no connections, reflecting limited participation in the circulation of discourse.

The size of the nodes highlights that only a minority of users generated a substantial number of outgoing interactions, while the majority engaged minimally. This visualization reveals a distinct core-periphery structure: a central hub of organized and institutional actors drives the anti-Syrian discourse, while a broad periphery of passive users is positioned primarily as receivers who are referenced but do not shape the conversation.

This asymmetric pattern closely aligns with network research showing that political communication on Twitter is typically dominated by a small, hyperactive core of users who generate most of the content, while the wider audience remains largely passive (Barberá & Rivero, 2015; Preotiuc-Pietro et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2018). Studies of anti-immigrant discourse confirm that organized clusters and politically engaged accounts disproportionately shape the narrative space (Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025; Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021). Similar “core-periphery” configurations have been observed in polarized issue debates, where central actors repeatedly interact within their own circles while peripheral users act as occasional amplifiers (Tucker et al., 2018; Conover et al., 2011). In the Turkish context, this structure reflects how politically motivated users and party-affiliated accounts sustain the visibility of exclusionary messages, while ordinary users primarily serve as their audience (Özerim & Tolay, 2021; Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020).

To isolate the core drivers of the discourse, the following figure visualizes the sub-network consisting only of active users and their interactions with one another. This filtered view allows us to see the architecture of the dissemination engine more clearly, without the periphery of passive targets, revealing who is central to spreading the narrative.

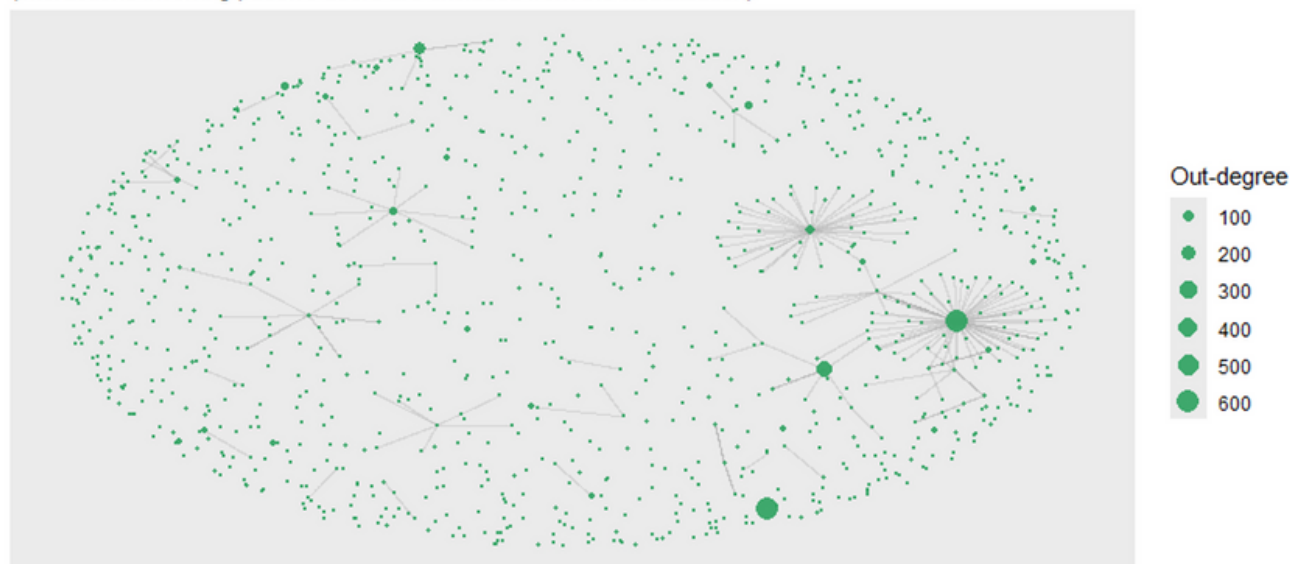
Figure 11: The Mention-Retweet Network of Active Users

Network of Active Users

Nodes = all active users

Edges = only active-to-active interactions

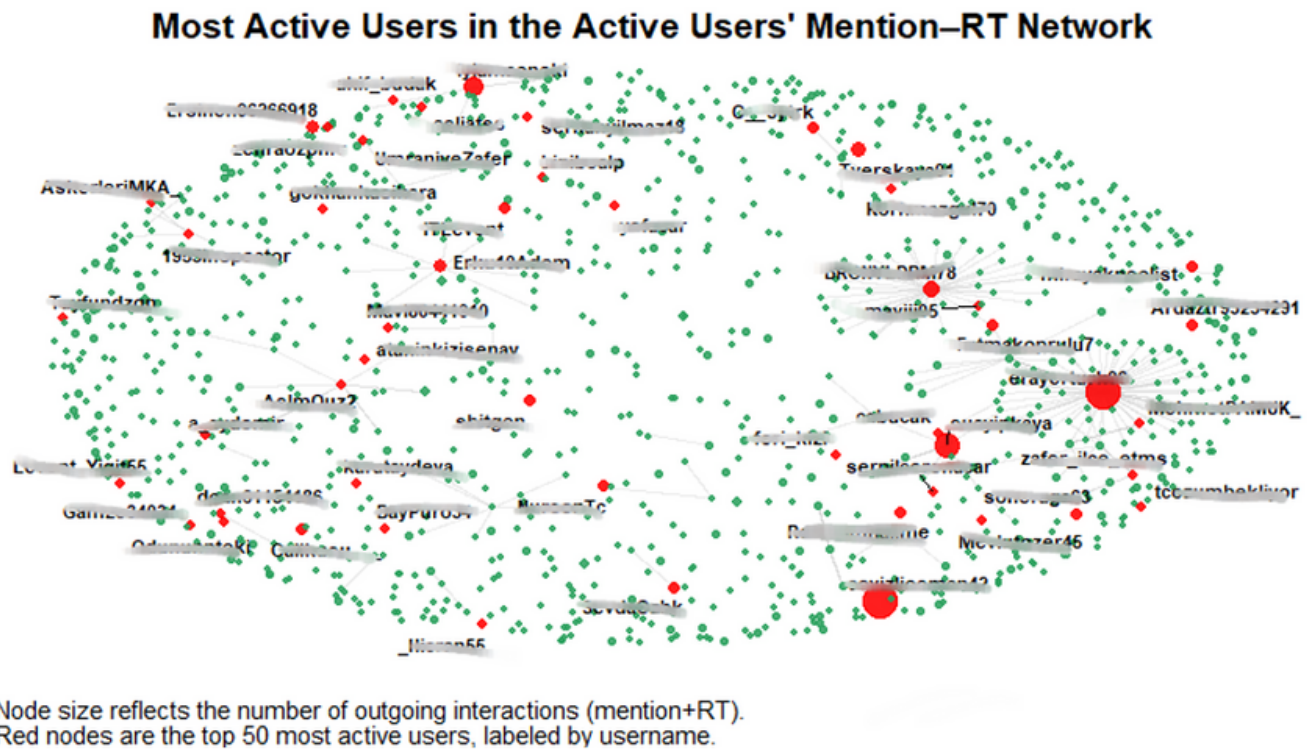
(interactions involving passive users are excluded from the visualization)



All 1,042 nodes represent users who initiated interaction (mention or retweet). Many appear isolated because they only interacted with passive users, who are excluded from the graph.

In [Figure 11](#), the presence of numerous small and isolated groups is noteworthy, with only a few central actors reaching high connection counts. The network shows a highly concentrated structure, where a small number of accounts dominate the flow of interactions while the majority remain peripheral. This concentration becomes even clearer when focusing on the Top 50 most active accounts ([Figure 12](#)). For ethical reasons, usernames have been blurred in the visualization.

Figure 12: The Mention-Retweet Network of Top Active Users



[Figure 12](#) reveals that the largest and most central nodes are not ordinary citizens but politically affiliated or organizational actors. The single most active account belongs to the chairperson of the Platform of Syrians to Syria and a member of parliament from the Zafer Party. In contrast, the second most active function is a bot-like account posting primarily hashtags and mentions. Other highly active accounts include a Zafer Party mayoral candidate in Gaziantep, several journalists, a former vice-presidential candidate, and a government ministry employee. There are also local party branches (including two Zafer Party district-level accounts and a DEVA Party branch) and two influencers with significant followings.

While some of the Top 50 accounts can be classified as ordinary citizens, most also carry clear political or partisan identifiers in their profiles, such as party tags or explicit affiliations. Out of the 50, only 17 accounts appear to be ordinary citizen profiles without formal affiliations, and even these often engage with partisan discourses.

The comparison between the complete active user network and the Top 50 most active accounts shows that the propagation of anti-Syrian discourse was disproportionately driven by politically organized or institutionally linked actors, rather than by a broad base of unaffiliated citizens. The network structure underscores that a small cluster of highly connected accounts played an outsized role in sustaining and amplifying the debate.

This activity concentration is consistent with the literature identifying elite and partisan actors as the principal agents of anti-immigrant mobilization. Studies demonstrate that political elites use social media strategically to define the terms of debate and mobilize hostility (Blumer, 1958; Flores, 2018; Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025). In Turkey, opposition and nationalist parties, especially emerging actors like the Zafer Party, have been shown to centralize the refugee issue within their online campaigns (Balta et al., 2023). Gökçe and Hatipoğlu (2021) similarly find that anti-refugee tweets overwhelmingly reference political parties. Özduzen and his colleagues (2021) show that periods of intense hostility coincide with organized nationalist rhetoric during military and electoral events. The presence of local branches, politicians, and influencers among the most active accounts thus reflects the managed, elite-driven structure of online refugee discourse described by Özerim & Tolay (2021).

After identifying the core disseminators of the discourse, the analysis now shifts to the other side of the conversation: the primary targets. The following figure lists the top 50 passive users, ranked by the number of incoming connections they received. This reveals which institutions, political figures, and media outlets were most frequently positioned as the symbolic focal points of blame, demands, and criticism within the anti-Syrian discourse.

Figure 13: The Mention-Retweet Network of Top Passive Users

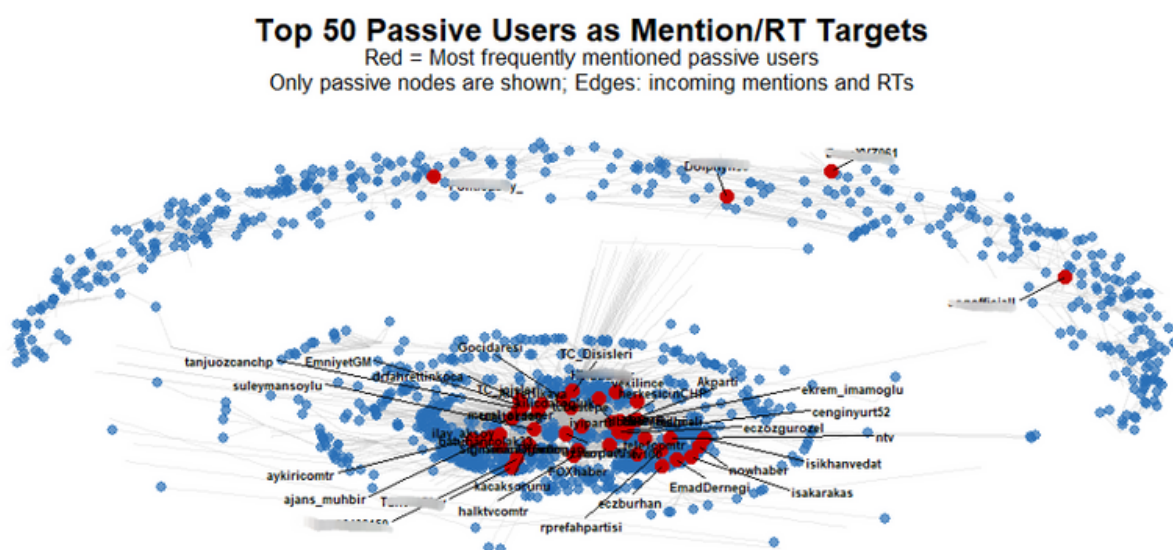


Figure 13 highlights the accounts most frequently mentioned or retweeted in the dataset. For ethical reasons, accounts that do not belong to public figures, institutions, or widely recognized organizations have been blurred.

The visualization shows that the most central passive nodes (in red) are overwhelmingly institutional and political actors. These include official government accounts such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Directorate General of Migration Management, and the Turkish National Police (Emniyet), as well as high-profile politicians such as the Minister of Labor and Social Security, opposition leaders, and parliamentary figures. Prominent party accounts (including the AKP and other opposition parties), well-known journalists, and national news outlets (e.g., NTV, Halk TV) are also among the top passive users. In addition, several NGOs, associations, and civil society organizations appear to be frequent targets of mention.

This distribution shows that passive users are not marginal or ordinary participants but the primary symbolic targets of anti-Syrian discourse. Rather than directly producing content, these institutional and political accounts were consistently invoked, addressed, or blamed within the debate. In other words, the anti-Syrian hashtags and narratives were directed at institutions and elites, positioning them as responsible actors in the controversy.

The structure of this network is distinct from that of the active-user maps: while active dissemination was concentrated in partisan or politically affiliated accounts, passive users essentially represent the objects of public criticism or demands.

This targeting pattern aligns with prior research indicating that online hostility toward refugees is often directed toward symbolic representatives of authority rather than toward refugees themselves (Erdogan-Ozturk & Isik-Guler, 2020; Wodak, 2001). In Turkish social media debates, ministries, journalists, and party accounts serve as proxies for political responsibility, embodying what Flores (2018) calls “elite scapegoating,” in which public blame becomes personalized through references to officials. Studies of digital populism in Turkey find that anti-refugee messages frequently frame state institutions as either complicit or ineffective, turning them into focal points of collective frustration (Özerim & Tolay, 2021; Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021). This aligns with global patterns of networked populism where institutions and elites are cast as adversaries, producing cycles of confrontation rather than deliberation (Tucker et al., 2018; Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023).

Community Structure: Uncovering Conversational Clusters

While the overall network analysis reveals the core actors and targets, a deeper understanding requires breaking the network down into its constituent parts. To identify these micro-level structures, the Louvain community detection algorithm was applied to the entire mention-retweet network. This method partitions the graph into distinct clusters, or 'communities,' where interactions are denser internally than they are with the rest of the network. Figure 14 examines the top 10 largest of these communities, revealing the distinct conversational neighborhoods that define the fragmented landscape of the anti-Syrian discourse.

Figure 14: The Top 10 Louvain Communities by Size

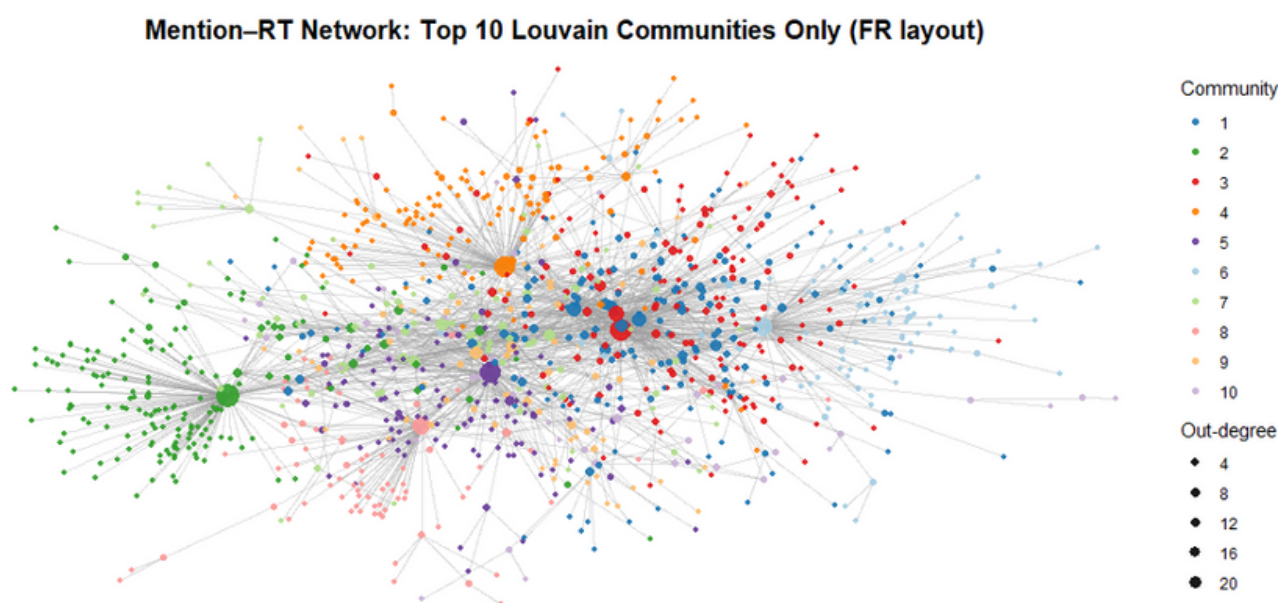
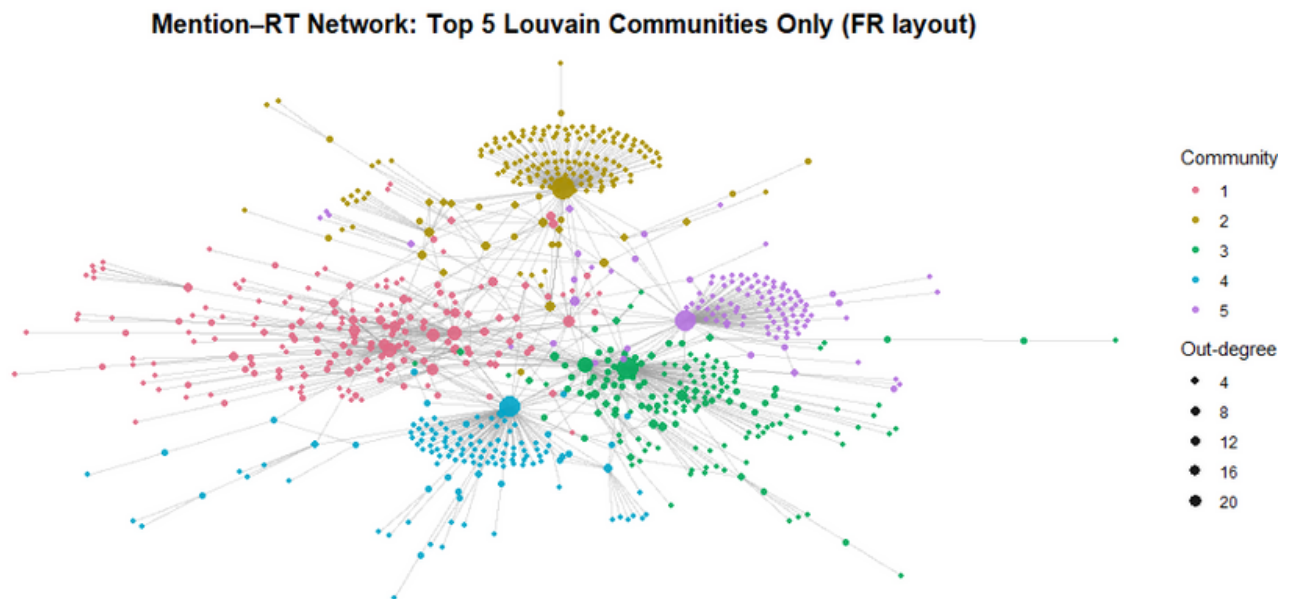


Figure 14 displays the ten most significant clusters detected in the data. The distribution shows a fragmented structure: while all users participated in the same anti-Syrian hashtag environment, their interactions were not evenly distributed across the network. Instead, activity clustered around distinct groups of accounts. Some communities are relatively large and densely connected; others are smaller and positioned at the margins. To highlight the most influential parts of the network, Figure 15 focuses on the five most significant clusters.

Figure 15: The Top 5 Louvain Communities by Size



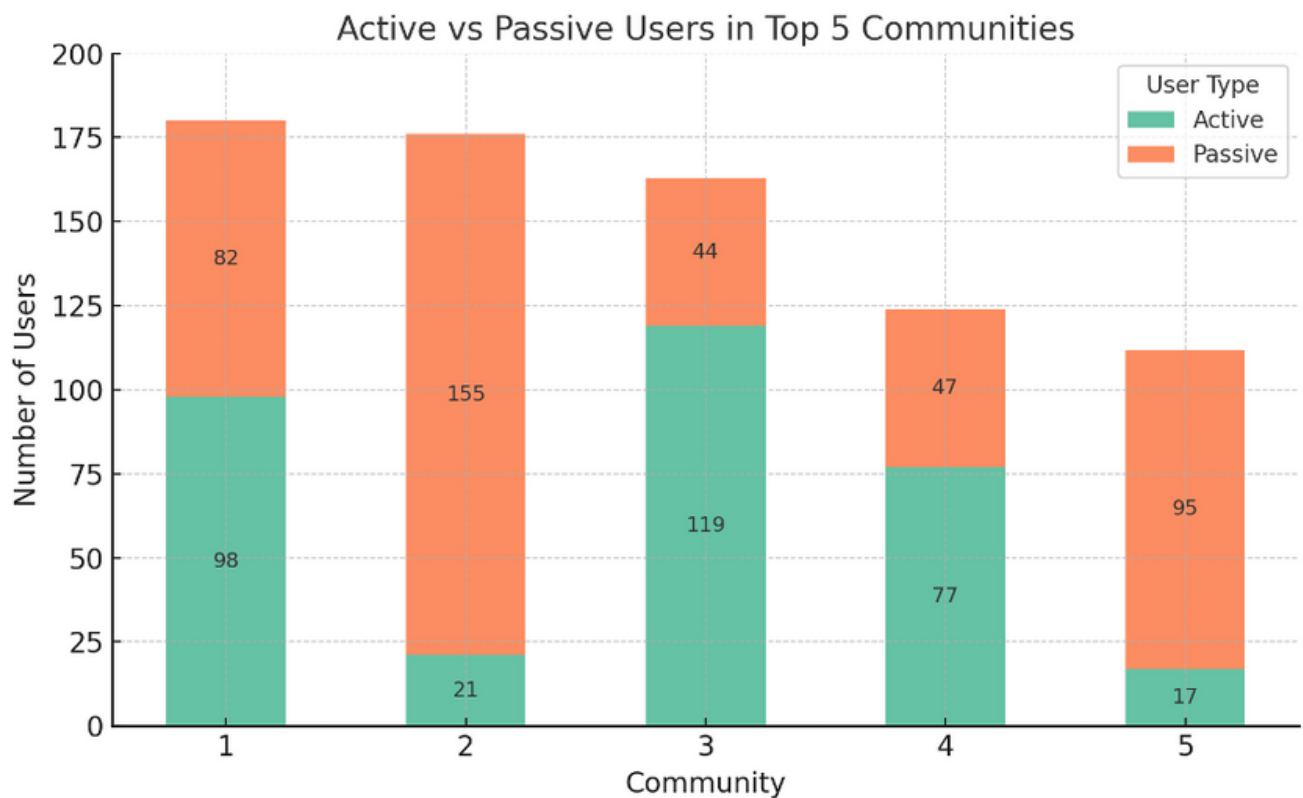
These groups are internally cohesive, in which users within the same cluster tend to interact frequently with one another, yet there are relatively few ties bridging across clusters. Notably, the pink cluster (Community 1) is the largest in terms of user count, spreading widely across the network. However, its density is lower than that of smaller clusters such as the green or purple groups, which are more compact and tightly knit. This suggests that while Community 1 includes the broadest set of users, its internal structure is looser, whereas other communities rely on more concentrated patterns of interaction.

The two figures of the Mention-RT network, obtained through Louvain community detection ([Figure 14](#) and [Figure 15](#)), reveal that the migration debates are fragmented around different political clusters and that there are only a limited number of bridges between these clusters. This indicates that the discourse is polarized along ideological lines. The conversation was structured through a handful of tightly connected communities, whose members repeatedly interacted with one another while maintaining limited cross-group exchanges. These clusters form the structural backbone of the mention and RT network and will be examined in detail in the following sections.

This fragmented configuration corresponds closely with what Conover and his colleagues (2011) and Barberá et al. (2015) describe as the modular organization of online political debate, in which users cluster into dense communities with minimal bridging ties. Such “communication silos” mirror ideological polarization and allow similar narratives to circulate within clusters but rarely across them (Tucker et al., 2018). In the Turkish context, Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler (2020) and Özerim and Tolay (2021) identify comparable segmentation, showing that anti-refugee discussions unfold within separate nationalist and partisan publics rather than in a single, integrated conversation. The concentration of interaction in smaller, highly cohesive groups, therefore, reflects both the global dynamics of echo chambers and Turkey’s broader political polarization.

Before going into the specific network maps of each community, it is crucial to first understand their internal composition. The balance between active and passive users within a community is a key indicator of its function: is it a broadcast hub, a space for dialogue, or a targeted echo chamber? [Figure 16](#) compares the number of active versus passive users across the five largest communities, revealing fundamental differences in their structural dynamics and setting the stage for the detailed individual analyses that follow.

Figure 16: Distribution of Active and Passive Users Across the top 5 Communities



[Figure 16](#) reveals an interesting asymmetry. In total, these communities include 332 active users and 423 passive users. There are more passive than active users, though the difference is moderate.

However, the balance between active and passive users varies significantly across communities. Community 1 is relatively balanced, with 98 active and 82 passive users. This indicates a mix of accounts, both disseminating and being targeted in the discourse. By contrast, Community 2 is overwhelmingly dominated by passive accounts (155 vs. only 21 active), suggesting that it functions primarily as a cluster of high-profile targets such as politicians, institutions, or media figures, rather than a space of grassroots dissemination.

On the other end of the spectrum, Community 3 shows the reverse dynamic, with a strong predominance of active users (119 vs. 44 passive). This highlights a group that was more engaged in producing and circulating anti-Syrian discourse rather than serving as its target. Community 4 also leans toward active participation (77 active vs. 47 passive), though less strongly than Community 3. Finally, Community 5 resembles Community 2, with a clear dominance of passive accounts (95 vs. only 17 active).

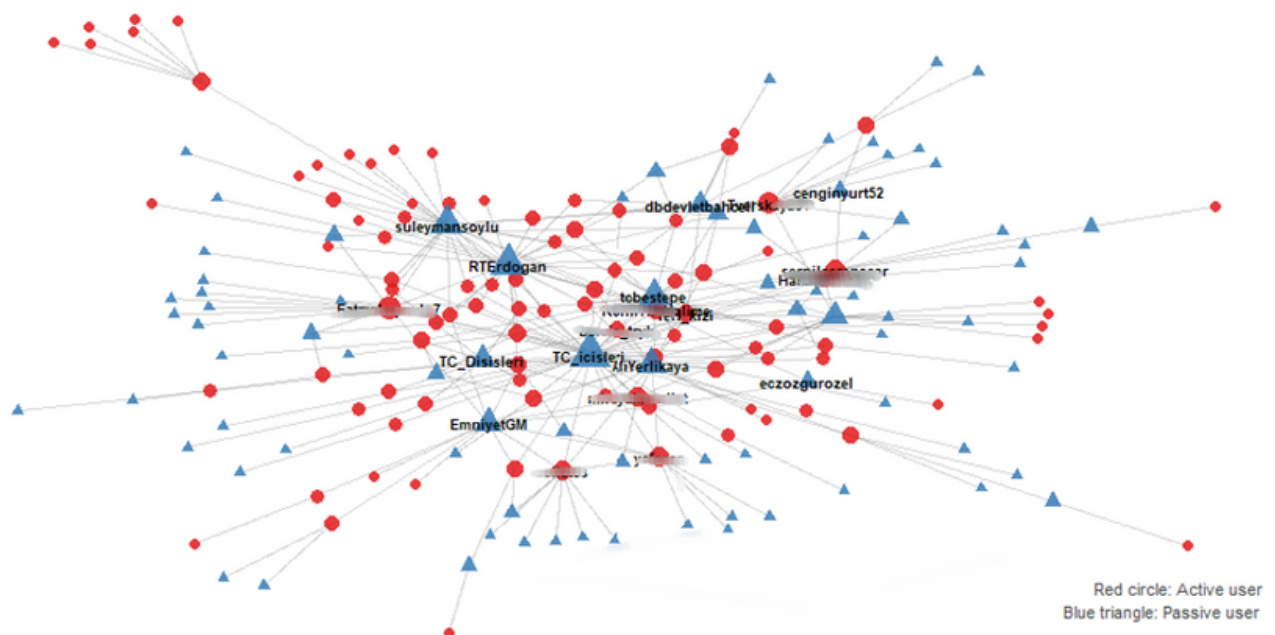
Therefore, the distribution of active and passive users across the top five communities reveals apparent role asymmetries. While Communities 3 and 4 are dominated by active users who generated mentions and retweets, Communities 2 and 5 consist primarily of passive users. Many of these passive accounts correspond to institutional or political figures. This variation indicates that different communities fulfilled different functions in the discourse. Some served as hubs of organized activity where exclusionary narratives were actively produced and circulated. Others clustered around high-profile targets that became focal points of interaction. This asymmetric structure reinforces the idea that anti-Syrian discourse in the network was shaped by dissemination hubs and clusters of institutions and political actors who were persistently invoked within the debate.

This functional differentiation echoes findings from digital political-communication studies showing that online networks tend to divide into “producers” and “receivers” of polarized content (Shore et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). Highly active accounts function as diffusion hubs, whereas institutional or elite targets act as symbolic anchors for public blame (Flores, 2018). Similar asymmetric interaction structures have been observed in previous Turkish Twitter debates, where partisan and media accounts dominate content creation while government or opposition figures are invoked as objects of criticism (Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021; Özerim & Tolay, 2021). The coexistence of production-oriented and target-oriented clusters therefore reinforces the elite-driven, non-reciprocal character of online anti-refugee discourse (Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025).

The detailed analysis of the communities begins with Community 1, the largest and most politically cohesive cluster identified in the network. Figure 17 visualizes its internal mention-retweet structure, specifically highlighting the top 10 active and passive users to reveal the key actors, primary targets, and overall dynamics that define this specific conversational sphere.

Figure 17: The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 1, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users

Community 1 Mentions & RT Network with Top 10 Active and Passive Users



Community 1 contains 180 users, with 98 active and 82 passive accounts, making it the most balanced cluster among the top five communities. In Figure 17, red circles represent active users who initiated mentions or retweets. In contrast, blue triangles represent passive users who were mentioned or retweeted but did not initiate interactions. The labels displayed correspond to this cluster's top ten active and passive users. The structure is dense and relatively decentralized, with several hubs of activity rather than a single dominant center. Many of the most prominent nodes are passive accounts belonging to political and institutional figures, such as ministers, party leaders, or state agencies, who appear primarily as interaction targets. Around them, active accounts generate and direct discourse by repeatedly mentioning or retweeting these central figures.

A closer inspection of this community's ten most active accounts shows that one belongs to the Istanbul provincial head of the Zafer Party, while the remaining nine are politically affiliated ordinary citizens. The central role of the Zafer Party affiliate is not incidental; it reflects a documented political strategy where the party actively amplifies anti-immigrant hashtags to build mobilization (DFRLab, 2022). This composition suggests that in Community 1, the active users are not just institutional actors but a blend of party officials and ideologically aligned citizens who collectively amplify exclusionary narratives.

Shifting focus to the second-largest community (Figure 18), the network's dynamic changes from one of active dissemination to one of targeted criticism, with passive institutional accounts at its core.

Figure 18: The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 2, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users

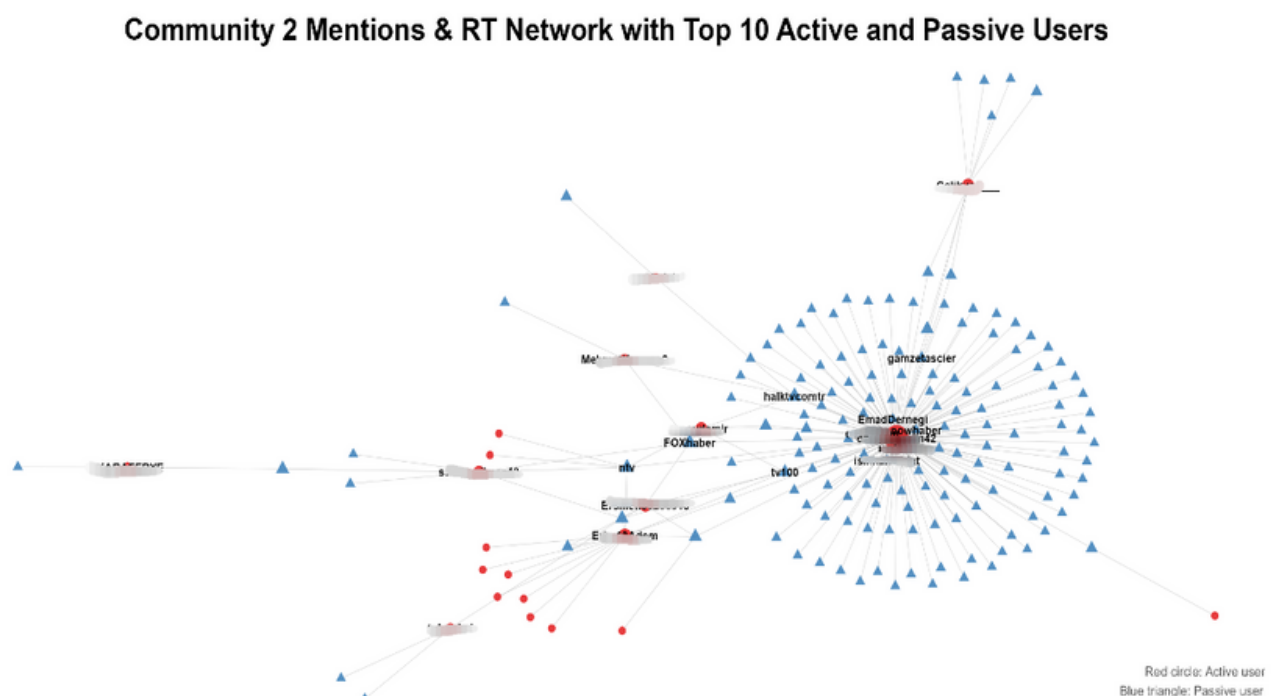
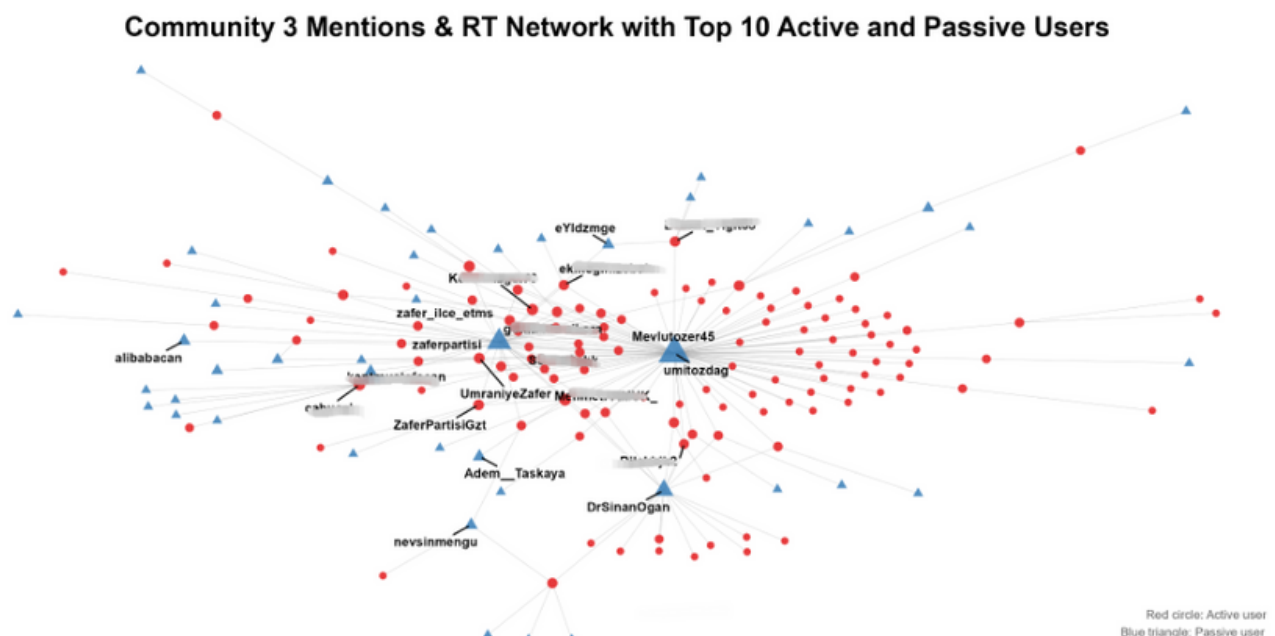


Figure 18 highlights a cluster overwhelmingly dominated by passive accounts, with 155 passive users compared to only 21 active ones. Red circles represent active users, blue triangles represent passive accounts, and the visible labels correspond to this cluster's top ten active and passive nodes.

The map shows a dense concentration of passive users at the center, including prominent political figures, party accounts, and journalists. This confirms that Community 2 primarily functions as a target hub where discourse is directed toward high-profile actors rather than generated from within. A closer look at the ten most active users in this community reveals that the group is heterogeneous: one is a bot-like account that posts almost exclusively mentions and hashtags, with an exceptionally high out-degree of 585, far exceeding the activity level of all others; the rest of the top ten include an association chair, a consumer federation account, and several ordinary citizen profiles, most of whom initiated only a handful of interactions (between 3 and 10 out-degrees). This imbalance underscores how activity in Community 2 was heavily skewed by the presence of a single hyperactive account, while most active users had minimal engagement. Consequently, the community's main characteristic is not dissemination but concentration around institutional and political figures as focal points, occasionally supported by a few active voices, with one bot-like account disproportionately influencing the flow of mentions.

The analysis now moves to Community 3 (**Figure 19**), a dense and highly active cluster with 119 active accounts and only 44 passive ones, that reveals another key facet of the conversation. Unlike Community 2, where passive users dominate, here the dynamics are clearly driven by active engagement.

Figure 19: The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 3, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users



Visually, the [Figure 20](#) shows a star-shaped structure with one dense center surrounded by multiple smaller and more loosely connected pockets. Most active users are clustered tightly around the central hub, while many passive users are dispersed across the periphery, linked to this core through thin radiating ties.

The high density of edges surrounding the one account results in a highly centralized structure, where discourse predominantly flows through a single actor instead of being evenly distributed among many. At the same time, small, isolated sub-clusters at the edges show that some users interacted only minimally, contributing to a more fragmented overall appearance than in Community 3.

While the network appears moderately dense, its structure is heavily shaped by one particularly influential actor: the account of the Chair of the Platform of Syrians to Syria ("Suriyeliler Suriyeye Platformu"), a parliamentary candidate for the Zafer Party. This account alone has an exceptionally high out-degree of around 600, making it the dominant hub of activity in the community. In stark contrast, the other top active users have out-degree values between only 3 and 7, showing that one account almost singlehandedly concentrated interaction flows. Among these remaining active accounts, the second most visible is the Zafer Party's Deputy Chair for Education Affairs, followed by the account of a news site. In contrast, three others are ordinary citizens who explicitly identify as Turkish nationalists in their profiles. The list also includes a figure linked to the İYİ Party and another account associated with the Platform of Syrians to Syria, suggesting that organized political activism and nationalist campaigning were central drivers of this cluster. On the passive side, several institutional and media accounts, including the EU Delegation to Turkey and Haberinizcomtr (news account), served as prominent mention targets. The composition of Community 4 highlights a highly asymmetric pattern: while a large pool of users participated, the discourse was dominated by a single Zafer-affiliated activist account, surrounded by smaller contributions from other party-linked figures, nationalist citizens, and media pages. This dynamic underscores the outsized role of organized actors in steering the flow of anti-immigrant narratives within this group.

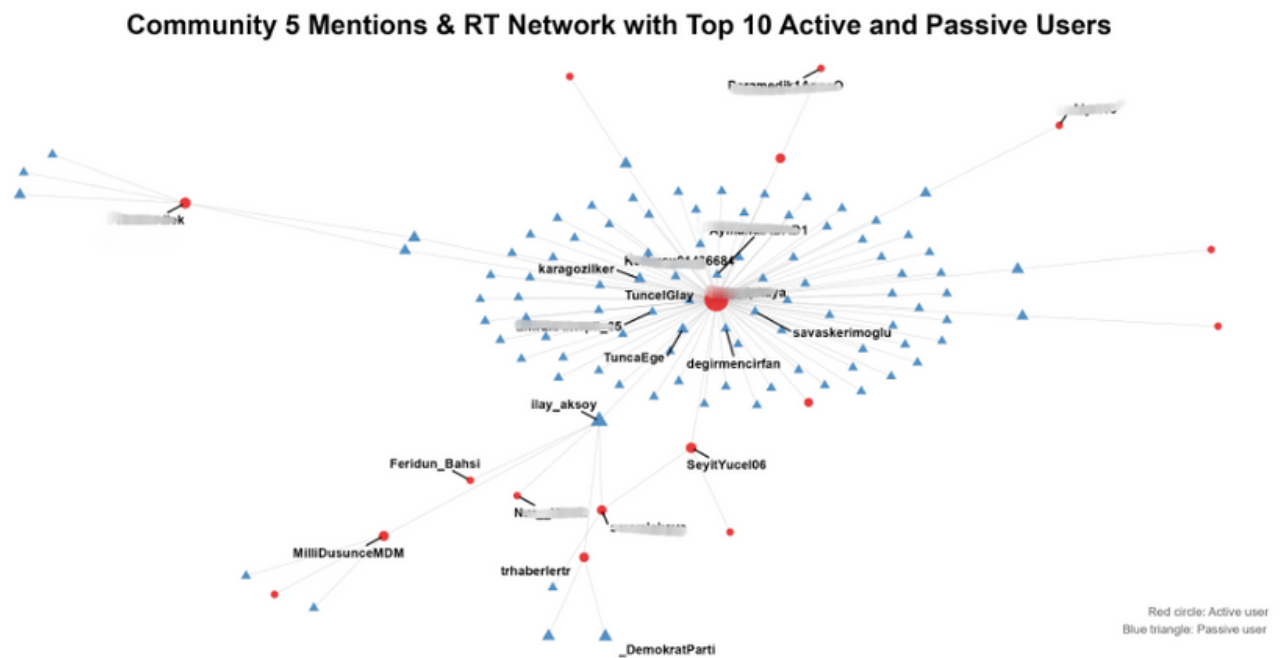
When comparing Community 4 to the earlier clusters, a striking contrast emerges. In Community 2, although there was one bot-like account with a very high out-degree (585), the rest of the top active users had minimal influence. This created a structure where activity was technically concentrated but not politically strategic, since the most active hub lacked organizational weight. Community 3, by contrast, displayed a much clearer political orientation: its top active users included a vice-presidential candidate, a Zafer Party mayoral candidate, multiple Zafer Party district branches, and an influencer, alongside two ordinary citizens. This made the cluster heavily dominated by Zafer Party actors, but still somewhat distributed across several individuals with visible political affiliations.

Community 4 takes this pattern of asymmetry to the extreme. Here, the overwhelming dominance of a single Zafer Party-affiliated activist account (the chairman of the Platform of Syrians to Syria, also a parliamentary candidate) overshadows all others, with an out-degree of around 600 compared to only 3–7 for the rest of the top 10. The presence of other party officials, media accounts, and nationalist citizens reinforces the political character of the community, but their relative contribution is marginal when set against the primary hub.

Taken together, these comparisons reveal different modes of asymmetry: in Community 2, concentrated but weakly politicized activity around a bot; in Community 3, multiple Zafer-affiliated actors jointly driving discourse; and in Community 4, a single dominant political activist orchestrating interactions while all others remained peripheral. This cross-community variation underscores how anti-immigrant discourse was not uniformly structured but took on distinct organizational shapes depending on the cluster.

Finally, the analysis turns to Community 5 illustrated in [Figure 21](#), the last of the major clusters, which reveals another distinct structural pattern

Figure 21: The Mention-Retweet Network of Community 5, Highlighting Top Active and Passive Users



Community 5 consists of 17 active and 95 passive users, making it one of the clusters where passives clearly outnumber actives. What stands out in [Figure 21](#) is the composition and the structure of connections. The most active user, an ordinary citizen, has 237 outgoing interactions and dominates the cluster. Around this central account, we also find other significant active users, including the founder and senior official of the Zafer Party, a Zafer Party provincial branch, a Democrat Party GIK member, an İYİ Party MP, the nationalist NGO (Milli Düşünce Merkezi), and a news outlet. These actors anchor the network alongside a few highly nationalistic ordinary citizens who explicitly present themselves as such in their profiles.

An interesting visual feature of this community is the distance and fragmentation among active accounts. Unlike the tighter clusters in Communities 3 and 4, the red nodes are scattered here into at least four relatively separate pockets, with limited direct links. This dispersion indicates that the actives did not interact heavily with one another but instead connected outward primarily to passive nodes. The passive users, in turn, include a mix of institutional and political figures and media outlets, reinforcing the impression that much of the discourse here was directed at visible public actors rather than circulated among ordinary users.

Taken together, Community 5 illustrates a hybrid structure. While one ordinary citizen account drove a large volume of interactions, most of the other highly active users were organizational or political actors, and the surrounding network of passives shows that these conversations were oriented toward recognizable institutional targets.

The fragmented layout of the active users underlines that this was not a cohesive activist cluster but a dispersed set of actors converging on the same issue space.

To synthesize the detailed findings from the preceding individual community analyses, the [Table 1](#) provides a comparative overview of the top five clusters.

Table 1: A Comparative Summary of the Top 5 Louvain Communities

Community	Active Users	Passive Users	Balance	Notable Active Users / Out-Degree	General Pattern
1	98	82	Actives > Passives	Mostly politically affiliated citizens; 1 Zafer Party chair	Grassroots-like cluster of nationalist/Atatürkist ordinary users
2	21	155	Passives >>> Actives	1 bot-like account (585 out-degree); others only 3–10	Star-shaped network around political/institutional passives
3	119	44	Actives >>> Passives	Presidential candidate, Zafer Party mayoral candidate, 2 district orgs, influencer	Firmly structured by political figures
4	77	47	Actives > Passives	Suriyeliler Suriyeye leader (600 out-degree); Zafer Party vice chair; İYİ Party figure	Dominated by one hyperactive hub, others are marginal.
5	17	95	Passives >>> Actives	1 ordinary citizen (237 out-degree), NGO, Zafer Party founder, Democratic Party, İYİ Party MP	Fragmented; actives dispersed into four clusters

As the [Table 1](#) shows, distinct structural patterns emerge across the five largest communities regarding how active and passive users interact. In Community 1, actives slightly outnumber passives (98 vs. 82), but the network is organized around clusters of active citizens who direct their interactions toward prominent passive accounts, such as politicians and institutions. Interestingly, the top 10 active users here are mostly politically affiliated ordinary citizens, with only one Zafer Party Istanbul provincial chair, suggesting that grassroots nationalist and Kemalist identities drive this cluster.

In Community 2, the asymmetry is reversed: passives far outnumber actives (155 vs. 21). The map shows a dense star-like structure centered on passive accounts, primarily political or organizational ones, that attract the majority of mentions and retweets. The most active user is a bot-like account with an exceptionally high out-degree of 585, while the rest of the top 10 active users generate only between 3 and 10 interactions each. This stark imbalance illustrates how a single hyperactive node and a large set of passive figures structure the community.

Community 3 again displays a majority of actives (119 vs. 44 passives). Still, the top influencers are not ordinary citizens: the most prominent accounts include a presidential candidate, a Zafer Party mayoral candidate in Gaziantep, two Zafer Party district organizations, and other affiliated figures. The prominence of political actors and affiliated structures highlights the organized character of this community.

In Community 4, the number of active participants (77) surpasses that of passive participants (47). However, there is a significant disparity in activity levels: the leader of the platform for Syrians in Syria, who is a parliamentary candidate for the Zafer Party, accounts for approximately 600 outgoing connections. In comparison, other top active participants have only between 3 and 7 connections each. Alongside him, the second most active user is a Zafer Party vice chair, while others include news accounts, nationalist citizens, and a member of the İYİ Party. The dominance of one single hub, with others only weakly connected, defines this community's structure.

Finally, Community 5 is dominated numerically by passives (95 vs. 17 actives). The most active user, however, is an ordinary citizen with 237 out-degree interactions, dominating the activity of other users. The rest of the top 10 include another citizen, the Milli Düşünce Merkezi (National Thought Center, NGO) news outlets, and political figures such as the Zafer Party founder, a Democratic Party board member, and an İYİ Party MP. The spatial layout of the network also differs from others: actives are dispersed and relatively far from one another, with four separate clusters rather than a single dense core, while passives form the gravitational centers of interaction.

These patterns show that anti-Syrian discourse in the top five communities is shaped not by broad citizen participation but by a combination of organized political actors, hyperactive individuals or groups, and large sets of passive institutional accounts that become focal points of mentions and retweets. The extreme out-degree values in Communities 2, 4, and 5 highlight how single nodes can dominate their clusters, structuring interaction flows around themselves rather than distributing influence evenly across the community. This also indicates that the discourse does not emerge as a grassroots movement from diverse ordinary citizens but is managed and amplified by politically affiliated figures. In contrast, ordinary citizens appear occasionally among the actives, often concentrated in a single account rather than spread broadly across the network.

This pattern resonates strongly with research on political communication hierarchies in social-media environments, where a few hyperactive or elite nodes control the flow of discourse (Barberá & Rivero, 2015; Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025). Studies on Turkey's refugee debate similarly identify organized nationalist clusters led by party figures and affiliated activists (Özerim & Tolay, 2021). The dominance of Zafer Party-linked accounts and affiliated influencers fits earlier findings that populist actors strategically use digital platforms to frame the refugee issue and channel public frustration toward political institutions (Flores, 2018; Gökçe & Hatipoğlu, 2021). The resulting structure, characterized by single-hub dominance and narrow citizen participation, exemplifies what Tucker et al. (2018) describe as a hybrid model of top-down coordination and bottom-up amplification in polarized online networks.

Discussion and Findings

This report demonstrates that the circulation of anti-Syrian discourse on Twitter between 2016 and 2023 was neither spontaneous nor broadly citizen-driven. The findings of this study reveal that anti-immigrant discourse in Turkey exhibits a structure that is largely directed and organized by elite actors, rather than a homogenous, mass-level social mobilization. Network analyses show that political parties, leaders, and media accounts are at the center of the discourse. In contrast, ordinary users are mostly in a passive position, making these central actors visible through mentions and retweets. While citizens appeared within the networks, their contribution to dissemination was limited and fragmented, with highly active citizen accounts representing outliers rather than a broad grassroots base. This picture is consistent with the concepts of "elite-driven polarization" and "echo chambers" in the literature, and it indicates that the debate on migration is not a widespread, grassroots mobilization as might be assumed, but is instead concentrated around the discursive strategies of political actors.

The analysis of hashtag trends and co-occurrence networks revealed that the discourse consolidated around two main slogans, particularly #SyriansToSyria and #IDontWantSyriansInMyCountry, which became the dominant frame of exclusionary narratives after 2020. These hashtags were closely linked to nationalist identifiers such as #TürkiyeTürklerindir (Turkey Belongs to the Turks) and #NeMutluTürkümdiyene (How Happy is the One Who Says I am a Turk), showing how anti-refugee discourse was embedded in broader claims of identity and belonging. This mainstreaming process often relies on the amplification of specific negative stereotypes, such as portraying refugees as an economic burden or as cowards who refused to fight for their own country, themes which become particularly prominent during times of political tension (Aydınlı, 2020). By contrast, harsher formulations like #SyriansGetOut and #SyriansGoBack remained marginal, occasionally intersecting with counter-narratives but failing to structure the debate. This demonstrates a process of rhetorical mainstreaming: slogans that appeared more "acceptable" or politically strategic came to dominate the conversation.

The mention of retweet networks further underscored the highly unequal nature of participation. In the whole network, a small number of active accounts concentrated interactions around themselves, while most users appeared as passive targets. Passive accounts included state institutions, government ministries, political parties, and media outlets, which became focal points for public blame and demands. Active accounts were often politically affiliated, particularly linked to the Zafer Party and nationalist organizations, highlighting the organized character of dissemination.

Community-level analysis confirmed this asymmetry. Some clusters, such as Communities 3 and 4, were heavily dominated by partisan figures and their close supporters, while others, like Communities 2 and 5, revolved around passive institutional or political targets. In three of the five largest communities, single accounts with exceptionally high out-degree values (585 in Community 2, 600 in Community 4, and 237 in Community 5) disproportionately shaped the flow of discourse, underscoring how individual nodes could dominate interaction patterns. Meanwhile, Community 1 displayed more balance between actives and passives, and it is the sole community where the majority of active users are ordinary citizens.

An additional noteworthy finding concerns the partisan distribution of actors across the network. Unlike the Zafer Party, which clearly dominates among active disseminators and central figures in the discourse, the AKP is not strongly represented in the network of active users. This absence reflects that the ruling party's official rhetoric has not centered on explicitly anti-Syrian messaging. Instead, most active politically affiliated accounts belong to the Zafer Party, followed at some distance by CHP, İYİ Party, and MHP users. On the passive side, however, AKP and President Erdoğan do appear as frequent targets of mentions and calls, yet not with the same intensity as Zafer Party leader Ümit Özdağ or opposition figures such as Özgür Özel and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. This asymmetry suggests that anti-Syrian discourse in Turkey's online space is not simply a cross-partisan phenomenon. Still, one disproportionately fueled by opposition actors, particularly the Zafer Party, while the AKP remains more often a reference point than a driver of exclusionary narratives.

The data clearly show that the establishment of the Zafer Party created a turning point in the transformation of anti-immigrant discourse. This discourse, which was carried out almost entirely by individual users in 2018–2019, diversified with the limited involvement of institutional accounts in 2020, but took on a completely different dimension with the emergence of the Zafer Party in 2021. This emergence did not happen in a vacuum; it coincided with a deepening economic crisis in Turkey, which created fertile ground for scapegoating narratives that framed refugees as a competitive threat and a drain on national resources. From this date onwards, the weight of institutional accounts increased dramatically, nearly equaling that of individual users by 2022. This development reveals that the anti-immigrant discourse evolved from being a scattered, bottom-up reaction into a line guided by organized, strategic, and institutional actors who capitalized on widespread economic anxiety. In other words, the Zafer Party became not only the carrier of this discourse but also its institutionalizer and main streamer, transforming online sentiment into what external observers have characterized as a deliberate campaign of hate speech and incitement (Cole, 2023).

Taken together, these findings point to three broader conclusions. First, anti-Syrian discourse was event-driven and cyclical, surging during political competition or societal crises, such as the 2019 local elections and the dual pressures of the 2023 national elections and earthquake aftermath. Second, it was organizationally concentrated, dominated by a small set of political figures, party-linked activists, and hyperactive accounts rather than diffused across a broad public. Third, it was structurally asymmetric, with ordinary citizens appearing mainly as peripheral participants, while institutions and politicians became the symbolic discourse targets.

In short, the spread of anti-Syrian narratives online was not the outcome of a broad-based grassroots movement, but the product of organized partisan mobilization amplified through Twitter's interactional dynamics. This amplification is not accidental; recent research demonstrates that hate speech itself is a powerful predictor of engagement on social media, meaning that toxic content is algorithmically favored for wider circulation (Yilmaz, 2023). By embedding exclusionary slogans within nationalist frames, political actors therefore leverage a proven strategy to mainstream and intensify hostility. This confirms that online anti-refugee discourse in Turkey functions less as an organic public sentiment and more as a politically managed campaign, in which ordinary citizens serve primarily as the audience for narratives orchestrated by organized actors. It is crucial, however, to contextualize these findings within the specific scope of our analysis. While our network data on major hashtags reveals a structure dominated by elite actors, this does not suggest that citizens are entirely passive across the entire digital landscape. Other platforms and formats foster different dynamics.

For instance, research on YouTube "street interviews" demonstrates that ordinary citizens are central to both the production and viral dissemination of anti-immigrant content, creating a powerful, bottom-up form of media that complements the top-down mobilization we have mapped (Akgundogdu, 2023). Therefore, our findings should be understood not as a description of the entire anti-refugee discourse, but as a high-resolution map of the organized, elite-driven campaigns that structure a significant portion of it on Twitter.

These findings align with broader research showing that anti-immigrant discourse in digital environments rarely emerges spontaneously but is instead coordinated through elite cues, partisan mobilization, and the affordances of social media platforms (Flores, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018; Hunter & Biglaiser, 2025). In Turkey, this pattern is particularly visible in the nationalist and populist framing strategies documented by Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler (2020), Özerim and Tolay (2021), and Gökçe and Hatipoğlu (2021), who each demonstrate how political actors transform refugee issues into markers of identity and loyalty.

Furthermore, our structural findings are strongly corroborated by recent content analyses, which trace a significant portion of anti-refugee disinformation and hate speech directly to opposition political actors, confirming that negative sentiment is strategically instrumentalized for political purposes (Mulki et al., 2023). The current analysis extends this literature by showing, through network-level evidence, that these dynamics are not only rhetorical but structural, encoded in how interactions, mentions, and community formations reproduce elite-driven polarization online. In this sense, the digital sphere functions as an amplifier of organized political discourse rather than a space of horizontal deliberation, underscoring the managed and hierarchical nature of Turkey's online public sphere around the refugee issue.

This report makes several critical contributions to the literature on digital discourse, political polarization, and anti-refugee sentiment. Its primary contribution is methodological: while much of the existing research focuses on discourse analysis to understand what is being said, this study provides structural proof through network analysis to reveal how these narratives are disseminated and by whom. It moves beyond documenting hostile rhetoric to mapping the very architecture of its circulation, thereby offering a measurable and visual confirmation of arguments that often remain theoretical.

The report's second key contribution is empirical. By demonstrating that targeted "mentions" overwhelmingly dominate passive "retweets," it quantifies the nature of online hostility. This finding provides concrete evidence that the dynamic is not one of an echo chamber where like-minded individuals share content, but rather a direct, confrontational, and targeted campaign aimed at specific political actors.

The report's another contribution is its conclusive, evidence-based intervention in the "organized mobilization" versus "spontaneous grassroots reaction" debate. By identifying a hyperactive political core and a large, passive periphery, our findings provide structural proof for the organized mobilization thesis. In doing so, our study offers an empirical validation for theoretical arguments that posit that the rise of reactionary politics is not a "bottom-up" demand from the people, but rather a "top-down" process in which elites (politicians, media) actively "construct" public opinion to legitimize their agendas (Mondon, 2022). Our findings, therefore, empirically demonstrate that the anti-Syrian discourse is not an organic public outcry but a centrally managed campaign.

Finally, the report makes a longitudinal contribution. By analyzing a seven-year period (2016–2023), it reveals the cyclical and strategic nature of this discourse, mapping its intensification during distinct political and social crises. This long-term perspective demonstrates that online hostility is not a static phenomenon but a resilient and adaptive political tool. In essence, while the existing literature describes the forest of anti-refugee sentiment, this report provides its high-resolution map, identifying the key actors, pathways, and temporal dynamics that define the ecosystem.

Recommendations

Based on the finding that anti-immigrant discourse on Twitter is an organized, elite-driven political mobilization rather than a spontaneous public reaction, this report suggests the following recommendations targeted at key stakeholders:

For Policymakers and Political Parties

It is crucial to reframe the problem not as a reflection of widespread public racism but as a strategic tool of political polarization. Counter strategies should therefore shift away from simply addressing public sentiment and focus instead on regulating the coordinated inauthentic and hostile behavior that drives this discourse. This includes developing clear policies against politically motivated mass mention campaigns and investing in robust digital literacy programs. These programs should specifically educate citizens on how to distinguish between organic grassroots conversations and centrally managed political campaigns orchestrated by a small number of actors, thereby building societal resilience against such manipulations.

For Social Media Platforms (X/Twitter)

The findings demonstrate that confrontational "mentions" are a more critical mechanism for spreading hostility than passive "retweets." Therefore, content moderation and platform policies must evolve beyond simply removing hate speech or banning bots. Platforms should develop and enforce policies that specifically target coordinated confrontational activity, such as mass targeting campaigns that aim to silence or intimidate opponents. Furthermore, there should be greater transparency regarding the activity of hyperactive, politically affiliated accounts that function as the "core" of these hostile networks. Investing in better detection of sophisticated, bot like behavior used in such campaigns is essential for disrupting their architecture and protecting the health of public discourse.

For Civil Society Organizations and Activists

Reactive counter messaging often proves insufficient against an organized campaign that sets the agenda. The focus should shift towards proactively building and disseminating alternative, positive narratives, particularly during non-crisis periods to build long-term narrative resilience and occupy the discursive space before it can be captured by hostile actors. Moreover, civil society can use the findings of this report as a powerful advocacy tool. By highlighting to the public and media that this discourse is driven by a small but highly organized group, not the majority of citizens, they can effectively delegitimize the narrative by exposing its artificial and manufactured origins and challenging its claim to represent the "will of the people."

For Media and Journalists

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Conclusion

The findings of this report, which point to the central role of political actors and crisis moments, are consistent with broader analyses of anti-immigrant dynamics in the region. A comparative study covering Europe and the MENA region similarly concludes that in Turkey, political actors have increasingly adopted hostile discourse since 2019, influenced by political and economic crises (Danış, Karaçay & Özdemir Dal, 2024). Our network analysis provides granular, empirical evidence of this political shift's impact on social media.

In light of these findings, this report offers a final, crucial conclusion. Although anti-immigrant discourse in Turkey is visible and organized on social media, it is characterized as an elite-driven and politicized discourse rather than a high degree of widespread societal racism. The actors at the center of the discourse are institutional and political identities; most citizens are in a passive position. Therefore, anti-immigrant discourse should be evaluated not as a "high-level societal racism," but as a discourse of polarization that is strategically nurtured by political actors.

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