RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST Project Report
Effects of, and Resistances to 'Anti-Gender' Mobilisations Across Europe:
A Report on People Living in Exile in the EU

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Table of Contents

List of Table and Figures

Exile

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Executive Summary

This case study examines the daily life experiences of exiles from Turkey and Northern Kurdistan who have been displaced by 'anti-gender' politics and now reside in Europe.

The participants recounted how under the AKP government, increasing 'anti-gender' and anti-feminist politics perpetuated by the media, religious institutions and social pressure from their families put significant pressure on LGBTQIA+ individuals, leading to harassment, abuse, and death threats.

These oppressive politics intersect with broader resistances against authoritarian state politics, compelling activists, politicians, and intellectuals to seek refuge in Europe. However, the migration journey and life in exile present ongoing challenges, including difficult migration processes, adverse conditions in refugee camps, and everyday racism.

In Europe, the loss of social status profoundly shapes the impact of 'anti-gender' politics on everyday life, with participants facing unique manifestations of this loss: from marginalised citizenship to professional displacement. Working in academia in Europe, exiled scholars are confronted with racism, precarious employment, and devaluation of their qualifications. Feelings of non-belonging and isolation are pervasive, exacerbated by anti-immigrant sentiments and integration barriers.

LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly trans women, face compounded marginalizations due to intersecting identities of race, gender, and refugee status. Participants who are also part of the leftist, pro-Kurdish movement, face multi-layered repression: LGBTQIA+ participants' struggles for freedom and human rights are intertwined with their experiences of racism and their refugee status in Europe.

Activists resist these challenging experiences through social media campaigns and transnational networks, yet mainstream LGBTQIA+ activism in Europe is experienced as exclusionary and dominated by cis white middle class perspectives, prompting the participants to create more inclusive, intersectional spaces.

Despite these challenges, they employ strategies to resist 'anti-gender' oppression, maintain their political agency, and navigate the queer immigrant experience through transnational networks built on solidarity. These networks are vital for sustaining activism and creating long-term support across borders, as participants continue to resist a broad spectrum of oppression even in exile.

Keywords: 'Anti-gender' politics in Turkey; exiles in Europe; LGBTQIA+ migration; transnational networks; resistance

Introduction

This case study report explores the lived experience of encountering 'anti-gender' politics and analyses the everyday resistance to those politics by Kurdish-Turkish communities living in exile in Europe.

It presents how 24 feminist academics, activists and public intellectuals negotiate and resist attacks on their identities, lives, politics and work in the field of sexualities and genders.

The report is based on the findings of 4 focus groups (with 20 participants, between 4-6 in each group) and 12 individual interviews (some of whom were in focus groups) with people based in Europe. They responded to the invitation to take part in the focus groups or interviews because they had experienced some form of 'anti-gender effects'. The sample was recruited through targeted emails to individuals and groups who might be affected (see Table 1: Respondent profiles Exile). This was followed by telephone calls/emails to encourage participation.

The study's participants include activists, academics, and intellectuals from Turkey and North Kurdistan who have fled to various European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, and Spain, as migrants and refugees from environments of oppression and violence, in part due to anti-feminist and 'anti-gender' politics that endanger their physical, social, political, and everyday lives. In this phase of the study, we focus on the effects of these 'anti-gender' politics and discourses on everyday life and how these effects might be influenced or transformed by the experience of crossing borders into Europe. 'Anti-gender' experiences continue through complex migration processes, illegal pushbacks, and poor conditions in refugee camps, along with everyday and structural racism in host countries. This shows how 'anti-gender' and migration politics and discourses intersect. Following an overview of the national context, the main findings are presented, summarising the main points that emerged from the focus groups and interviews.

Context

LGBTQIA+ Rights in Turkey: Oppression, Discrimination and Struggle

The history of LGBTQIA+ oppression and discrimination in Turkey is long, but key events such as the Gezi uprising in 2013, the June 7 elections in 2015, and the attempted coup in 2016 can be seen as turning points in the political landscape and the fight for human rights and freedom.[12] When the AKP came to power in 2002, it was viewed in opposition circles in Turkey and Europe as a defender of "moderate Islam" or a guardian of democracy. Over the years, the AKP's divisive and oppressive politics have become more pronounced, targeting the LGBTQIA+ movement and Kurdish people in particular[3]. This authoritarian, fascist regime was consolidated under the motto "the new Turkey", fueled by nationalist and Islamist ideologies[4]. The foundation of this societal agenda is the denial of women's hard-won rights and the demonisation of LGBTQIA+ individuals under the guise of family protection. The 2010s saw the rise of the AKP's Islamist-conservative-authoritarian regime, which rejected gender equality with the slogan "strong family—strong society"[5] and enacted anti-LGBTQIA+ measures in response to the global surge of right-wing populism and 'anti-gender' movements.

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[1] Çetin Z. (2016, January) *The dynamics of the queer movement in Turkey before and during the conservative AKP government* (Working Paper, Research Group EU/Europe 2016/01), SWP Berlin. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_RG_Europe_2016_01.pdf.

[2] Koylu M. (2015) Turkiye'de LGBTI haklarinin durumu ve oneriler. KaosGL. Ankara. Available at: https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2015de-lgbti-haklarinin-durumu-ve-oneriler.pdf

[3] Arat Y, Pamuk Ş. (2019) *Turkey between Democracy and Authoritarianism*. Cambridge University Press.

[4] Babacan, E., Kutun, M., Pinar, E., & Yilmaz, Z. (Eds.) (2021) *Regime Change in Turkey: Neoliberal Authoritarianism, Islamism and Hegemony* (1st ed.). Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003098638

[5] Kocamaner, Hikmet. (2022) The Politics of Family Values in Erdogan's New Turkey. MERIP Middle East Report. 288. 36-39.

A crucial turning point in the defence of the Turkish LGBTQIA+ community was the Istanbul Pride March. This march, with thousands of participants, provided a platform for the visibility and defence of LGBTQIA+ rights until 2015. When the HDP (pro-Kurdish political party) entered parliament as the third party in the June 7, 2015 elections, the AKP was unable to form a government on its own which led to the termination of Kurdish peace negotiations, the reinstatement of war policies in Kurdistan, and the targeting of all opposition media, NGOs, trade unions, and individuals[6]. This strategy included limiting the sites of expression available to LGBTQIA+ people, outlawing Pride Marches and other public gatherings, and labelling LGBTQIA+ individuals as "terrorists" and inciting "perversion" in the media and among AKP leaders[7]. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, nationalist-conservative groups, and partisan media have endorsed and reinforced the administration's discriminatory politics. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Directorate of Religious Affairs blamed HIV-positive and LGBTQIA+ individuals as the source of illnesses[8].

Additionally, withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention dealt a serious blow to the women's movement and LGBTQIA+ advocacy in Turkey[9]. Women's rights and gender equality advocates saw this decision as a significant setback, leading to large-scale protests. Despite these protests and global responses, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in 2021[10]. The AKP justified this withdrawal by claiming the convention harmed social and family values and was used by organisations that normalise homosexuality. During this period, hate marches were organised with government encouragement[11].

The AKP's electoral campaigns have primarily targeted LGBTQIA+ individuals and their fight for rights, especially during election seasons. Conversely, the opposition has occasionally adopted 'anti-gender' rhetoric and failed to take a strong stand against these attacks[12]. These extreme measures against people with marginalised gender and sexual identities have led to an increase in femicides, killings of transgender people, and hate crimes.

In this exile case study, 'anti-gender' is neither a term used to generally describe particular discourses and politics, nor used by participants in relation to their personal experiences. Experiences that might be described as 'anti-gender' are usually described by participants with specific terms such as 'transphobic,' 'homophobic,' 'racist' and 'anti-immigrant,' 'anti-feminist,' 'misogynist' and 'anti-queer'. Only one participant used 'anti-gender' as a theoretical and practical term to specifically address 'anti-gender' online discourses, spreading of misinformation and harassment strategies like doxxing.

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[6] Human Rights Foundation Turkey. (2016) HRFT Treatment Center Report, 2016. Available at: https://en.tihv.org.tr/treatment-and-rehabilitation-reports/2016-hrft-treatment-centers-report/

[7] Yackley A. J. (2020, July 27) Turkey's LGBTQ community at risk amid rise in homophobic rhetoric. *POLITICO*. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-lgbtq-community-risk-rise-in-homophobic-rhetoric/

[8] https://www.reuters.com/article/world/turkish-ruling-party-lawyers-clash-over-cleric-comments-on-homosexuality-idUSKCN2291LD/

[9] Baytok C. (2021) The Istanbul Convention, gender politics and beyond: Poland and Turkey. Available at: https://aramizda.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/012-The-IstanbulConventionGenderPoliticsandBeyond.pdf

[10] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/why-turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-is-a-global-problem/

[11] https://bianet.org/haber/thousands-gather-at-anti-lgbti-rally-in-istanbul-267328

[12] https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-elections-2023-lgbtq-recep-tayyip-erdogan/

Findings

1. 'Anti-gender' oppression was experienced in multi-layered ways in Turkey

Experiences of and resistance to 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in Turkey are linked to experiences of political repression, anti-Kurdish racism and lack of financial resources.

Our participants shared that **'anti-gender' and anti-feminist politics and discourses in Turkey have a severe, often violent impact on the daily lives of queer people in Turkey**. As our participants explained, massive state-led and media-led campaigns against LGBTQIA+ people in general, and LGBTQIA+ activists and politicians in particular, results in experiences of daily harassment, psychological and physical abuse, and even death threats from family members and colleagues. This not only decreases the possibility of being able to live an openly queer life but becomes a question of essential safety. Although daily life is often characterised by **self-censorship and self-policing in the public sphere**, being active in LGBTQIA+ organisations and finding ways to combat these experiences is prevalent. Queer activist and journalist Bawer explained:

> The situation in Turkey, the LGBTQIA+ struggle there […] for the first time in 2015, the AKP government started to directly attack the LGBTQIA+ movement in Turkey. Since then, it has been physically preventing the Pride March and banning the events […] it is difficult today, but it was always difficult. You know, homophobic violence on the one hand, violence against LGBTQIA+s on the other hand, it was always like this, it has many forms.

All trans women participating in this case study are particularly affected by 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in Turkey, as they face repressive hypervisibility in every aspect of their daily lives, resulting in them running away from home at a young age with no financial resources. Discrimination on the labour market forces them in particular to turn to sex work, which in turn increases their experiences of police violence. **Discrimination in the housing market—as well as harassment and physical violence from landlords and neighbours—leads to homelessness**. Often having to work from home, this leads to the inability to work and further poverty. Trans woman activist Arat summed up how it is almost impossible to stay safe under these conditions, concluding, "I would have died if I stayed in Turkey". Trans woman activist Lila explained:

> I was now caught up in this cycle. I experience the violence of the state, I experience it in the social sphere, I experience it in the bureaucratic sphere […] I experience it in my personal relationships. I have nowhere else to go. I did not know what to do.

As feminist academics, LGBTQIA+ activists and public intellectuals critical of authoritarian state politics and discourses, all participants in this case study are also part of the leftist, pro-Kurdish movement calling for peace and democracy in Turkey. It became clear that the political repressions that ultimately lead to life in exile are experienced in a multi-layered, intersecting way, as 'anti-gender' discourses and politics in Turkey converge with anti-Kurdish authoritarian politics and discourses. This is seen in Kurdish feminist politicians Penaber and EXIFG2.3 who experience anti-feminism and misogyny in parliament not just because they are women in parliament, but because they are Kurdish women in parliament; as well as queer academics for peace who signed a petition criticising state violence against the Kurdish population in Turkey/Kurdistan like Egemen; and LGBTQIA+ activists like Arat, who was active in an Alevi-Kurdish socialist left movement, the socialist women's movement, and the LGBTQIA+ movement and experienced multi-layered political repression as a result.

2. Exile is seen not only as a strategy for survival, but as a form of resistance

The impact of 'anti-gender' discourses and politics on everyday life in Turkey has led queer human rights activists, feminist politicians, public intellectuals and academics to flee to various European countries.

In Turkey, especially during the AKP government era, **rising 'anti-gender', anti-feminist politics and discourses have increased the pressure on LGBTQIA+ individuals in their daily lives, perpetuated by media, religious institutions, and families**[13]. Through our case study, it emerged that the multi-layered experiences of 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in their intersection with resistances against authoritarian state politics become the reason for queer human rights activists, feminist politicians, public intellectuals and academics to flee to several European countries as a way of seeking refuge from the impact of those 'anti-gender' and authoritarian discourses and politics on everyday life in Turkey.

The end of peace negotiations between the AKP government and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) for the democratic resolution of the Kurdish issue, and the prolonged state of emergency following the alleged coup attempt in July 2016, have led to dismissals through statutory decrees (KHKs), the closure of oppositional media outlets and civil society organisations, and the unemployment of hundreds of thousands of people[14]. In 2016, Egemen, for example, lost his position as a research assistant at the university because he signed a petition criticising state violence against the Kurdish population in Turkey/Kurdistan, and was furthermore threatened with prosecution. He explained how this political climate and his desire to live his sexuality more freely led him to apply for a scholarship for academics at risk in Germany.

The spiral of violence, which rose after the Gezi Park protests[15] and spread to all areas of society with the 2015 election defeat, has particularly targeted women and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Gay left-wing politician and LGBTQIA+ activist Yazan recounted his experience of 'anti-gender' politics in Turkey as a reason for leaving Turkey and seeking asylum in Germany. He explained how media scrutiny and the spread of misinformation, leading to several death threats, made it impossible for him to live in his neighbourhood in Turkey. The policy of impunity, where those committing hate crimes are rewarded rather than punished, has empowered the perpetrators of femicides, trans murders, and hate crimes, causing people to feel unsafe and prompting migration from Turkey and North Kurdistan to Europe in search of a safer life[16]. After speaking on behalf of a large LGBTQIA+ organisation on television, queer activist and journalist Bawer received death threats from family members who were previously unaware that he was gay. He explained how this led him to leave Turkey, stating:

> I mean, fleeing from a place where you don't feel safe, where you are threatened that you can no longer survive, where there are things that make you physically anxious [...] including the fact that there are political reasons behind these as well.

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[13] Çetin Z. (2016, January). The dynamics of the queer movement in Turkey before and during the conservative AKP government (Working Paper, Research Group EU/Europe 2016/01), SWP Berlin. Available at: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_RG_Europe_2016_01.pdf.

[14] Dinçer H (2024). Bir Siyasi Davanın Anatomisi: Barış için Akademisyenler Vakası Egemenlik Gösterisi Olarak Dava ve Hakikatin Tersi Yüzü. *Mülkiye Dergisi*, 48(2), 403-434.

[15] Andaç-Jones, E. (2020). The Gezi Protests in Turkey: On Movement Spirit, Coalition Building, and Responding to Authoritarianism. *SAIS Review of International Affairs 40*(2), 87-95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2020.0026.

[16] Busra Nisa Sarac, Hafza Girdap, Nancy Hiemstra, (2023). Gendered state violence and post-coup migration out of Turkey, Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 99. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102796.

In this politically oppressive atmosphere, some participants, even if they were not direct targets of 'anti-gender' politics, expressed that they "couldn't breathe" and "didn't feel safe" and therefore decided to leave the country. Ezgi explained how, as a cis woman in Turkey, her experiences of daily harassment and being a victim of stalking coincided with her disillusionment in the aftermath of the 2015 Gezi Protests and the increasing criminalisation of political opposition. She explained how she and her partner "needed to catch their breath" and how short-term migration turned into a permanent departure from Turkey. The examples and experiences of 'anti-gender' that the participants shared illustrate how migration and living in exile is a last resort to the worsening living conditions and political climate for (left-wing) queer people in Turkey. Deniz described this experience:

> But let me tell you this, being a dissident in Turkey […] or being a minority. Understanding yourself, the way to do that is definitely through exile. So, at some point, even if no one imposes exile on you, life shows you that leaving is the best possible way to go.

As a result of these politics particularly targeting LGBTQIA+ activism, the women's movement, and oppositional academics, journalists, politicians, and artists, the profile of migrants from Turkey to Europe has changed[17], giving rise to a new group of exiles referred to as the 'new wave' or 'new exiles'. Unlike previous exiles, the new exiles have come not only for economic or political reasons but also as a form of resistance against 'anti-gender' politics.

3. 'Anti-gender' politics and discourses are experienced in intersection with anti-migration discourses and politics

How experiences of 'anti-gender' violence and oppression change once in exile in Europe.

Although exile in Europe is seen as a way to seek refuge from 'anti-gender' violence and political repression, **the migration routes themselves become a continuation of 'anti-gender' violence**. While some participants were able to use regular migration routes, others had to enter Europe through illegalised migration routes and refugee camps. Illegalised migration in this case study is characterised by experiences of pushbacks to Turkey, assault and sexualised violence at the hands of border institutions. Kurdish activist and writer Meral explained how her experiences of sexualised violence at the hands of the Turkish state were continued by the violence of the European border regime. Upon arrival in refugee centres in European countries, **the refugee experience of trans women is particularly marked by transphobic violence and racism**. Arat spoke about her experience in a Swiss refugee camp as follows**:**

> In the camps, in the arrival camps, they humiliate you so much, they treat you so badly, they treat you like you're filthy, so you feel like a bug, so you think that at any moment someone will come and squash me with a spoon and take me away. It was a disgusting experience.

Experiences of invasive body searches and being housed according to the gender assigned at birth create living conditions of constant danger. Despite the seriousness of the situation being highlighted and formal complaints being made, trans women are still forced to live with cis men, which leads to physical violence and even attempted rape for which the trans women of this case study themselves are blamed. When trans activist Lila tried to challenge these living conditions, she was confronted with uncooperative and racist administrators who told her to "learn and speak German first." Several trans and genderqueer refugee participants emphasised that there is no real legal protection to rely on in refugee camps, which creates a sense of lawlessness, isolation and constant fear. As a cis queer single mother, Yasemin shared this experience, stating that there are completely different rules and order in the camp. She explained how

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[17]Turkmen, G. (2019) "But you don't look Turkish!": The Changing Face of Turkish Immigration to Germany. Available at: https://www.resetdoc.org/story/dont-look-turkish-changing-face-turkish-immigration-germany/

there are no real legal consequences for situations like rape because the police do not cover refugee camps and the camp guards tell you to "sort it out amongst yourselves."

Outside the camps, when asked about their experiences of 'anti-gender' oppression in the countries of arrival, **most participants spoke about how certain 'anti-gender' experiences have become less prominent in their daily lives, while experiences of racism, worries about their residency status and concerns about the rise of the far-right in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland dominate their daily experiences**. As trans activist Lila explained:

> In Turkey I experienced as much humiliation as possible because of my trans identity, but here I don't experience as much discrimination because of my trans identity [...] But here [in Germany] there are very disturbing things happening because of my immigrant identity [...] I wonder, have I escaped the rain only to be caught in the hail?

This illustrates how **the intersection of racism, migration and 'anti-gender' politics creates new dimensions of 'anti-gender' experiences that cannot be separated from each other**. Only one participant highlights an overall positive effect of exile in their daily life: queer activist Bawer, who lives in exile in Spain, attributed this to the left-wing government in Catalonia, to the people supporting the Kurdish cause, and to experiencing racism mostly from people from other parts of Spain.

These experiences illustrate how 'anti-gender' experiences are complicated and sustained through the refugee experiences by specific migration policies, including illegal pushbacks at European borders and disastrous—often transphobic—conditions in refugee camps in Greece, Switzerland, and Germany, as well as experiences of everyday and structural racism in the countries of arrival.

4. Bureaucratic violence brings LGBTQIA+ migrants' and refugees' daily life to a halt

Bureaucratic procedures in the countries of arrival, in state institutions, in the health system, in accessing financial resources and in the residency process, both during the asylum process and after receiving their residency, were frequently mentioned by our participants.

We found that they experience challenges which result in them engaging as little as possible with the state and its institutions and social services to avoid further humiliation. For instance, **they do not seek financial support when they need it, and they hesitate to call the police when they face racist and anti-LGBTQIA+ attacks.**

For example, EXIINT07 had to wait 6 months before being able to apply for asylum in Germany, meaning he had to survive being illegalised in Germany in that time period. Similarly, queer activist Ercan explained, drawing on his experience in France, how the bureaucratic paperwork during the asylum process—which demanded proof of any information he provided about himself—is extremely emotionally exhausting. Although these practices, which participants define as "bureaucratic violence", are simply accepted as a reality that "suspends" people's lives, in some cases, can put people's lives at risk. EXIINT07 shared an experience where he approached a queer refugee–friendly association for help, but they turned him down because he had irregularly migrated to Germany and had no legal status. Due to the fact that he could not access help, he was homeless for 6 months and almost died of hypothermia. Participants told us that the continuation of these acts by the state, executed through associations ostensibly intended to support and provide solidarity to refugees, repeatedly re-triggers traumas. EXIINT07 criticised these organisations because he feels forced to re-traumatise himself in seeking support, and finds his experiences are not believed, concluding: "You're selling your trauma just to get help."

Trans women shared experiences where **bureaucratic violence and anti-trans discrimination collide**. Trans activist EXIFG3.4 spoke of how, as a trans refugee in Switzerland, it was more difficult for her to

benefit from certain legal reforms regarding name and gender changes on official documents, as she was required to submit additional paperwork to what is demanded of Swiss citizens. The Kurdish trans activist and journalist Uli described the current trans law itself as transphobic, and explained how, during the process of changing her name and gender on official documents in Germany, she was not only confronted with transphobia, from the psychiatrists and judges involved, but also with racist comments.

Participants revealed a deep distrust and alienation in their relationships with the institutions they expected to offer support and protection. EXIFG1.3 discussed the intersection of racism and queerphobia in exile, recounting an incident where they and their queer friends of colour were harassed and threatened. The police were sympathetic to the perpetrators, highlighting the racial bias in the police response and leaving EXIFG1.3 feeling abandoned. Agender artist EXIFG3.5 avoids state and social services altogether to prevent further trauma. EXIINT07 shared a dehumanising experience with the police, leading to severe re-traumatisation. He described his exile as causing him to feel dehumanised, constantly under threat and unable to plan for the future due to bureaucratic pressures and existential threats:

> To them, you're just a number […] How can I live my daily life? I keep getting letters saying, "if you don't do this, we'll cut your money, we'll throw you out of the house." How can I dream of the future?

5. Migration to Europe frequently entails a loss of social status and career, especially for those who are trans

Loss of social status significantly shapes the impact of 'anti-gender' politics and discourses on everyday life.

Beyond the uncertainties, bureaucratic hurdles, and language barriers, one of the most striking consequences of displacement on the daily lives of exiles is **a loss of social status**. The study's participants represent a heterogeneous group, encompassing individuals from various professional backgrounds, social classes, ethnicities, and cultures, each at different stages of their careers. Therefore, the loss of status manifests differently for each of them. This ranges from being a marginalised citizen in one's own country, to becoming an asylum seeker/refugee in the new country and losing legal status in the eyes of states and institutions; from being a political representative of a people in one's own country to having no political presence in the new country; from being a representative of an organisation providing support and solidarity to refugee women to becoming a refugee woman oneself in need of that support and unable to receive it; and from having an established academic career to having no equivalent in one's new country and experiencing a loss of professional status.

The loss of status is particularly noticeable within academia. As an academic in exile, Raven explains how she experienced a great loss of status as an asylum seeker and faced racism in Germany. For example, her doctorate was questioned, she faced precarious working conditions in German academia, where she experienced short-term contracts, isolation, and the expectation to work through academic German. Speaking and teaching in English was not accepted as being sufficient by them. Similarly, despite having more international publications, projects, and achievements compared to many German academics, feminist academic Melek's mentor at the university tried to dissuade her from applying for the grants she wanted, claiming that she couldn't compete with German academics. Arat, a trans activist, who wanted to continue her interrupted academic career, restarted her university studies in exile. She explained how, during a career counselling session, the counsellor did not ask about her qualifications and recommended that she become a ticket inspector on trains. She wants to leave academia and work as a nurse because, considering the multiple marginalisations she has experienced as a trans woman refugee, including ageism and the language barrier, she does not have the energy to fight for her right to exist in academia. She noted that if she were a cis woman, she would have stayed in academia. Addressing these structural problems, PhD student Egemen explained how his loss of status in the process of migration, financial insecurities, and

11

the language barrier in Germany have a negative impact on many aspects of his life, as he no longer has any motivation to continue working on his PhD thesis and is, instead, working in a restaurant.

The effect of exile on the professional lives of our academic participants was especially significant as they lost the networks and environments for knowledge creation that they had meticulously built over the years. Many of them come from the field of social sciences, where their capacity to produce critical insights was suddenly disrupted, and they face the negation of their professional expertise. Melek added that:

> If we were in Turkey, in our own universities, as associate professors, our students would be around us. I mean, we could intervene in faculty committees, various committees of the university, we would have channels to be both politically and academically engaged there, and we would have channels to push through.

Melek argued that what is experienced is in fact not just a loss of status, but also the deprivation of being a political subject, which then limits critical knowledge production in the countries of arrival in Europe. These experiences illustrate how, according to the participants, 'anti-gender', hierarchical geographies and migration are affected by multiple asymmetrical dynamics and how status loss is a systematic problem.

Loss of status manifests in different ways. Gay politician and LGBTQIA+ activist Yazan outlined that some public intellectuals receive a lot of resources and support in Germany, while at the same time everyone else is forced into a **"victim competition"** to show who has suffered the most. He gave an example of two exiled journalists, a cis male heterosexual public intellectual/journalist who gets hired frequently, in contrast to his friend who is a trans woman journalist that, despite all her efforts, is not able find work with any publication. To escape these structural problems, avoid further exposure to 'anti-gender' and racist behaviours, and not constantly have to prove themselves, people develop different life strategies as a self-preservation reflex.

6. Life in exile is dominated by experiences of isolation and feelings of not belonging

As living in exile in Europe is a form of resistance to 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in Turkey, resisting 'anti-gender' politics is primarily understood as a way of enabling a sense of community, belonging, visibility and security in everyday life. Participants have been able to mitigate the impact of everyday experiences of 'anti-gender' politics and discourses to some extent through exile, but as they continue to be confronted with the intersections of 'anti-gender' and migration politics and discourses, feelings of isolation and non-belonging dominate life.

On the question of belonging, in the local contexts of Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Spain, the participants have different experiences. Again, **it is the refugee status and the period of immigration prior to receiving a residence permit that promotes feelings of non-belonging and massive anxiety**. For example, queer feminist activist and single mother Yasemin feels safe in Switzerland, especially after receiving her residence permit. Queer activist Ercan has deep feelings of estrangement that even make him think of returning to Turkey, which would likely mean he would be imprisoned. Queer artist EXIFG3.5, however, who has been in Europe the longest, explained that they feel a sense of belonging, especially since they are able to speak fluent German. They experienced an immense sense of relief after receiving German citizenship and described how they finally do not feel like they constantly have to prove themselves. Queer academic Egemen outlined how difficulties in accessing queer (migrant) networks affect his feelings of isolation, non-belonging and in-betweenness. Rising right-wing sentiments in Germany, as well as rising support for the AfD party, reinforce these feelings.

In Switzerland and Germany, Arat and EXIINT07 emphasise how **integration discourses play into these feelings of isolation and non-belonging**. Arat explained that as a trans woman she feels safer in

Switzerland, but as a trans refugee she will never belong in Switzerland. The discourse around integration and anti-immigrant sentiment prevents her from being able to integrate into Swiss society:

> I mean, I am very happy to be in Switzerland, let me say that from the beginning. But there is something in the migration system here. They always force you to integrate well, integrate, integrate. But they also do a lot of things to prevent you from being integrated [...] I know I will never belong here. And I know that they do not want me to feel like I belong here either.

EXIINT07 talked about the experiences of othering that mark his life as a gay man, belonging to several minorities in Turkey, now living in Europe. His intersecting exposure to racist and homophobic discrimination in Germany and Turkey, as well as the language barrier and integration discourse in Germany, mean that he does not have a safe space wherever he goes:

> I [was dreaming of] going to Europe and that I will have a safe life there. But how could I know that when I came here, I would experience racism, I would experience homophobia [...] I know that even if I am 100% integrated, I would be an Ausländer[18] for them. I mean, I was already an Ausländer for my family, I was an Ausländer at the school I went to, because I was half Armenian and half Kurdish, because I was gay in my family [...] I was always the other, my race, my sexual orientation, my femininity or my political view, you know [...] So there is no safe space for me.

It becomes clear that transphobia and homophobia, when intersecting with racism and integration discourses, can massively undermine the sense of safety and belonging in countries of arrival, which are among the main reasons for living in exile.

7. The struggle for agency in exile is characterised by continuities in resisting 'anti-gender' politics through various survival strategies

Developing different forms of resistance to 'anti-gender' politics, practices and discourses that participants encounter in their daily lives in exile emerges as a survival strategy.

The participants use different strategies to resist multi-layered 'anti-gender' experiences in Turkey and in exile, such **as community outreach, creating visibility online and filing formal complaints. They transfer and adapt the resisting strategies they know to the transnational space**.

The widespread use of social media that started during the Gezi protests continues to guide the participants in exile. For example, after experiencing transmisogynistic attacks in a refugee camp in Switzerland, trans activist Arat used her activist network in Turkey to put pressure on the camp's operator. Similarly, after experiencing a transmisogynistic assault in the refugee camp, EXIFG4.6, a trans activist, and Agit reached out to their feminist LGBTQIA+ community via social media and started an email campaign to make the case known. More than 200 emails were sent to the immigration office condemning the assault.

Social networks and organisations can play a key role in supporting queer refugees. EXIFG4.6 explained the importance of resistance in the asylum process, how resisting the unjust conditions in the refugee camp is the only way to get rights implemented. She described how, as an LGBTQIA+ person and a woman in Turkey, she has always resisted through survival strategies, and that this is also necessary in the camps. After a transmisogynist assault in the German refugee camps, Lila tried to file a formal complaint but was refused assistance; she recorded her recollection of the assault, and contacted several refugee and LGBTQIA+ support associations. With the assistance of an association that helped her to find a lawyer, and

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[18] "Ausländer" means "foreigner" in German and is used as a slur for racialised migrants or people with so-called migration background in Germany, no matter the legal status, citizenship or actual history of migrating.

after a long process, Lila was able to live in her own apartment. These accounts illustrate various ways of resisting the anti-trans refugee conditions.

It appears that being separated from their collective resistance networks pushes the participants to either collaborate with them via social media or to find individual solutions and create new paths for solidarity and resistance in exile. For example, Arat explains that in several situations, acting in solidarity with other cis and trans women and trans refugees through her personal activist resources was her way of resisting 'anti-gender' politics. **These forms of resistance have had both effects and counter-effects**. Arat's aforementioned action resulted in her being able to live in the family section of the camp and not with cis men. Similarly, the email campaign by EXIFG4.6 and Agit sped up their asylum process, allowing them to obtain residence permits. However, while waiting for their paperwork to be processed, they were sent to a more conservative canton in Switzerland where there was no trans healthcare, held at a deportation centre mostly populated by cis men, where they had serious fears for their safety; this felt like punishment for resisting or speaking out.

The limits of resistance and solidarity are often determined by the legal difficulties of being a refugee, such as travel restrictions due to lack of residence permits or passports, or the inability to access existing networks, which will be described in more detail in the next section. EXIF3.4 explained that her fears have changed in exile because of her refugee status. Wanting to avoid confrontation with the state leads her to refrain from activism. Overall, although participants in exile are confronted with various obstacles to resisting 'anti-gender', most participants find and create ways to resist, maintaining their political agency. On the other hand, **some participants, exhausted by the realities of the migration process, participate in less activism than before**.

8. Activism against 'anti-gender' in Europe is perceived as being dominated by cis, white, middle-class, gay and lesbian perspectives

The participants experience major difficulties finding their way into activism against 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in Europe. Participants shared experiences of racism, classism, anti-trans and anti-migrant sentiments.

Resistance to 'anti-gender' is made more difficult because of intersecting marginalisation. As a trans woman, a refugee and a woman of colour, trans activist EXIFG3.4 explained how upon arrival in Switzerland she wanted to participate in the organisation of the local Pride March. She was the only trans woman in the organisation team and they told her that she had to pay 250 francs to participate, although she is a refugee without funds. She explained that it was a cis– and white–dominated space, which led her to avoid participation in LGBTQIA+ activism in Switzerland. EXIFG3.4 said:

> There was no trans visibility, the big [big city in Switzerland] Pride and so I was the only trans person. Then it came to the voting stage of some decisions. They told me that I could not participate [...] I said, "I'm a refugee, I'm staying in a camp. I can't pay this" [...] it felt very wrong to me to pay 250 francs and have a say. There, I was faced with the whiteness of Europe [...] that dominant gay activism was something we criticised in Istanbul as well.

Queer activist Bawer shared his experiences of first contact with local Spanish-Catalan LGBTQIA+ activist groups. He expressed his frustration of being confronted with what he describes as very white and cis-centric views. Content with legal same-sex marriage and adoption rights, Bawer criticised the lack of solidarity with LGBTQIA+ migrants and refugees. This in turn led Bawer to search for activist spaces created by queer migrants and refugees:

> How is it that there are so many immigrants, but there is so much cis gay and lesbian-centred and white European-centred thinking [...] I said, "I can't do anything with them". Then I found

migrant LGBTQIA+ people, you know, not specific organisations but groups, for example, I stopped going to the mainstream Pride march. I go to the march organised by migrants, the places where I socialise are usually migrant, LGBTQIA+ rights, where they go, there is an LGBTQIA+ refugee organisation there.

Working in an NGO project in Germany that aims to increase the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people with personal or family migration experience, activist EXIINT05 shares his impression that white gay and lesbian activists in Germany do not consider a queer migrant and refugee perspective as, according to him, they reproduce a narrative that there is no queerphobia and misogyny in Germany, especially when compared to the Global South:

> Even queer activism in Germany, you can hear that there is actually not much queerphobia in Germany, that it is not institutional, especially among white, gay and organised people [...] Homophobia is interpreted [...] with a very binary view.

EXIINT05 explained how he feels like there is no support for him and no safety in white queer feminist anarchist spaces. He sees queer migrants confronted with deep-rooted white supremacist behaviour:

> I lost my white German friends that I had gained here one by one [...] many times when I criticised the place where I lived because of the problems I was experiencing, they said that I did not deserve Germany, and this was usually the people I thought I would take refuge with [...] The criticisms I have made since I came to Germany, when I criticised what I saw and experienced, I was told that I had no right to do this as an immigrant, by white mainstream and immigrant-friendly people.

Our participants experience activist spaces as white, middle-class, gay and lesbian spaces, where they have major difficulties advocating for themselves. This in turn, can be interpreted as a dynamic that weakens activism against 'anti-gender' in Europe, and **seriously affects the health and agency of our participants**.

9. Solidarity networks are being built around similar intersecting experiences

Seeking community and solidarity in exile, academic, intellectual and activist networks are being built around similar intersecting experiences.

In response to the ways participants identified their spaces as lacking intersectional perspectives and being dominated by cis-white gay and lesbian, middle-class viewpoints, **there is a growing movement to create networks that amplify intersectional 'anti-gender' experiences and resistances**. One striking project is the transnational platform that queer journalist and activist Bawer created in 2020, specifically focusing on LGBTQIA+ people in and from Turkey/North Kurdistan, to highlight different experiences that arise from immigration, as well as having a **transnational network** where people can connect over and write about queer, intersectional issues that are important to them. It has an English and Turkish website, and a space dedicated to queer literature; it publishes podcasts and Instagram Lives; and has contributions from Turkey, Germany, the US, and Spain. Bawer emphasised the need to create a supportive network that amplifies their voices and fosters understanding:

> When we think about Turkey's migration in the last ten years, I mean, when we think about the stream of people that have left Turkey, the website has turned into a place where LGBTQIA+ and other migrants who have left Turkey can also find something for themselves [...] To amplify the voice of the people there, to amplify the voice of the people who migrated here [to Europe]. Because the immigration experience is a difficult experience for everyone, especially for LGBTQIA+ persons [...] We are trying to focus a little bit on these [...] On the one hand, there is a disconnect in Turkey. The people there do not know the lives of the people who have

migrated, of asylum seekers. And they say that everyone who has left Turkey lives a very comfortable, wonderful life [...] So, there is such a tension, and on the other hand, right-wings are on the rise, all these discussions and camps are terrible experiences, especially for trans and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers [...] We are trying to figure out how we can voice these things, how we can amplify these experiences [...] Think of it like a spider web. To build a network. I think about how people can communicate with each other from a place that understands each other's issues, rather than through anger or resentment.

The majority of participants explained that they are active in or have sought out Kurdish-Turkish left-wing and/or queer immigrant and refugee spaces and associations, which can provide the sense of belonging that participants strive for. This becomes highly relevant to the question of an egalitarian solidarity practice. Activist EXIINT05 works in an NGO project in Germany that aims to increase the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people with personal or family experience of migration. He explained his experience of working with queer and trans refugees and migrants from Turkey, practising solidarity and power sharing in the form of sharing his—financial and social—resources and networks, which he has acquired through his work in the NGO project. He sees this as very important for actually being in solidarity in spaces where people have different privileges. Despite the changed and more difficult conditions caused by life in exile, **participants find transnational networks that make it possible to navigate the queer immigrant and refugee experience**. Intersectional approaches to activist networks become essential and the participants themselves use their lived experiences, knowledge and own networks to **establish long term solidarity networks on equal footing and across borders.**

10. Participants centre and create queer discourses rather than reacting to 'anti-gender' discourses

Instead of responding defensively to 'anti-gender' narratives, our participants emphasised that focusing on building and amplifying queer discourses provides a more empowering and forward-looking strategy for resistance.

Queer activist and journalist Bawer shared a specific resistance strategy that focuses on 'anti-gender' discourses online. He used the term 'anti-gender' to explain how it is harmful to LGBTQIA+ movements to only react to 'anti-gender' discourses. He used the concept of 'anti-gender' to explain that there is a difference between 'anti-gender' discourse online, specifically TERF discourses, and how it actually shows up as protest on the streets, and that we should not always react to 'anti-gender' discourse, but rather centre and create our own discourses.

Bawer is trying to centre queer discourses and perspectives with the transnational queer platform he has created. He emphasised that **coping with 'anti-gender' discourses also means to understand how they work, how they are funded and who is behind it**:

> I think this is also the way to look at the anti-gender issue. I mean, it is necessary to understand the conditions that feed this. It is necessary to understand who makes money from this. It is necessary to understand what kind of a political economy revolves around it. I mean, these churches, these right-wing groups, anti-immigrant groups, I mean [...] they came together with a very clear plan. Therefore, we should reject their attempts to limit the discussion to their positions. [...] I say, we should not play by their rules [...] Rather, we need to draw them away from their areas and produce our own discourse. Otherwise, we will lose a lot of time and effort.

Bawer specified this resistance strategy to 'anti-gender' actions by emphasising that **taking 'anti-gender' contributors seriously would mean playing by their rules**:

We also try not to give too much attention to this online aggression. For example, they threatened me in Turkey, they sent mails to the institutions that give money to our website saying "you are giving money to this misogynistic woman-hater" and so on. Because I said trans women are women, that's it. After that, I said, "do whatever you want". I lived in Turkey as a Kurdish gay man for 30 years. I wasn't afraid of anything, am I really going to be afraid of you? Do whatever you want. But what the hell. So many things about my private life were put out there. It's outrageous. I don't think this is a political debate or a debate about demands. This is a bunch of racist, transphobic, LGBTQIA+-phobic right-wing extremists, I'm not going to take them seriously, let them say what they want. I have better things to do than sit and respond to them every day.

This powerful statement illustrates how Bawer, despite facing online harassment and the spread of misinformation about him, is **strategically preserving his energy**. While his platform seeks to create a sense of community and solidarity in exile around similar intersecting experiences, it becomes clear that he is trying to go a step further with this strategy against 'anti-gender' discourses. It is an **additional strategy of resistance** alongside the strategies described above, such as community outreach, creating visibility for experiences of violence, and the filing of formal complaints by the other participants in this transnational case study.

Conclusion

This case study focuses on the daily life experiences of exiles from Turkey and Northern Kurdistan, displaced by 'anti-gender' politics and now living in Europe. Participants in the study, who are also part of the leftist, pro-Kurdish movement for peace and democracy in Turkey, face multi-layered repression in Europe as well as in Turkey. **These intersecting oppressions highlight that freedom for LGBTQIA+ people is intertwined with their status as racialised people and refugees. Exile, intended as a refuge from 'anti-gender' violence, often extends these experiences through difficult migration routes and bureaucratic hurdles.**

During the AKP government's tenure in Turkey, rising 'anti-gender' and anti-feminist politics and discourses have significantly increased the pressure on LGBTQIA+ individuals. As the participants of this case study explained, **these pressures are perpetuated by the media, religious institutions, and families, leading to daily harassment, psychological and physical abuse, and even death threats.** The result is **a severe impact on the daily lives of queer people**, making it challenging to live openly and safely.

Our case study reveals that these oppressive politics intersect with broader resistances against authoritarian state policies, compelling queer human rights activists, feminist politicians, public intellectuals, and academics to seek refuge in various European countries. **This migration is seen as a way to escape the hostile environment in Turkey, but the journey and life in exile present their own challenges. 'Anti-gender' experiences continue through complicated migration processes, illegal pushbacks, and adverse conditions in refugee camps, along with everyday and structural racism in host countries.**

Despite these challenges, participants employ various strategies to resist 'anti-gender' oppression, such as community outreach, creating online visibility, and filing formal complaints. They adapt their methods to the transnational space, maintaining their political agency even in exile. Nevertheless, the activist venues in Europe that are dominated by cisgender, white, middle-class, gay, and lesbian viewpoints present extra obstacles, which diminish the efficacy of their advocacy efforts and have a negative influence on their well-being and agency.

Transnational networks offer crucial support, enabling participants to navigate the queer immigrant and refugee experience. **These networks, built on lived experiences and solidarity, are essential for**

17

sustaining activism and creating long-term support across borders. To build on these findings, future studies could further explore how transnational solidarity networks can be strengthened to better support queer refugees and exiles. There is also more work to be done to amplify voices and experiences not covered by this case study, ensuring that those who should be part of these conversations are included in future research. Additionally, examining how host country LGBTQIA+ movements can become more inclusive of the experiences and needs of racialised and displaced queer communities remains a critical area for further investigation, both within the RESIST project and beyond. We extend our deepest thanks to the participants for sharing their stories, insights, and resilience, without which this work would not have been possible.

Respondent Profiles

This case study of people living in exile in Europe consists of four focus group interviews with a total of 20 participants, each with four to six participants. Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with eight of the focus group participants. Four more participants were recruited for in-depth interviews only. This transnational case study centres people from Turkey or North Kurdistan living in Exile across Europe. The following information about the participants in this case study is taken from demographic forms for 21 participants and, in 3 cases, from the interviews themselves.

Table 1: Respondent profiles Exile

Profile	No. of Respondents	Sample outline
Age groups	24	Most of our participants (13) are between 35 and 49 years old, followed by eight participants between 25 and 34 years old. Two participants were between 50 and 64 years old and one participant was between 18 and 24 years old.
Gender	24	The participants have different gender identities. 13 participants identified as women (five transgender women, nine cisgender women), eight participants as men (one transgender man, seven cisgender men) and three participants as genderqueer (two non-binary participants and 1 agender participant).
Sexual orientation / identity	7	Six participants identified as gay and/or queer, one participant as queer, 17 participants did not explicitly specify their sexual identity.
Country of residence	24	Most of the participants (17 out of 24) are living in big German cities, since a significant number of feminist and/or queer activists, academics and public intellectuals' migratory movements of the last one to two decades and their activist networks are located in Germany. In addition, four participants live in the French or German speaking cantons of Switzerland, one participant lives in Catalonia, Spain, one participant lives in the French countryside and one participant lives in a small town in the Netherlands.
Racial / ethnic identity	21	The majority of participants (14) are Kurdish and/or Alevi, one participant is Yezidi-Armenian and Kurdish, one participant is Laz and five participants are Turkish.
		Within our sample, it became clear that people who have experienced 'anti-gender' politics and discourses in Turkey/North Kurdistan and are now living in exile in Europe are predominantly marginalised ethnic minorities in Turkey who are also involved in left-wing pro-Kurdish movements.

Education Level	24	Almost all participants have a university degree, a significant number of them are the first in their family to have a high school and/or university degree. Only two out of 24 participants have only a high school diploma. This shows that we have a gap in our sample regarding people without higher education. However, to be able to go into exile in the first place requires contextual socio-economic privilege, which we suspect plays a role in our sampling.
Religion	18	Six participants identify as Muslim, nine as atheist or no beliefs and one as deist, the remaining eight participants do not specify their religious beliefs.
Social Class	10	All participants were irritated by the question about social class, often commenting that they no longer knew what to say about their social class due to their migration experience. 14 Participants did not specify their social class. Four participants identified as middle class, two as lower middle class, two as working class, one as upper middle class and one participant has indicated refugee as a social class.
Dis/ability	24	None of the participants have physical disabilities.
Settlement Type	24	Most participants (21 out of 24) said they live in a big town, the remaining three participants said they live in a small town.