

# ***Belonging in Motion: Belonging Trajectories Under the Dutch Civic Integration***

*A Qualitative Study of Turkish Political Refugees Sense of Belonging in the  
Netherlands*



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## Table of Contents

|                                                                          |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Abstract.....</i>                                                     | <i>3</i>  |
| <i>Introduction.....</i>                                                 | <i>5</i>  |
| <i>Theoretical Framework.....</i>                                        | <i>8</i>  |
| <i>Methodology.....</i>                                                  | <i>13</i> |
| <i>Analysis .....</i>                                                    | <i>16</i> |
| <i>Conclusion .....</i>                                                  | <i>29</i> |
| <i>Further Discussion and Limitations.....</i>                           | <i>31</i> |
| <i>APPENDIX I: Topic List for the Interview.....</i>                     | <i>33</i> |
| <i>APPENDIX II: Informed Consent Document (English version) .....</i>    | <i>36</i> |
| <i>Appendix III: Visuals Sense of Belonging trajectory drawings.....</i> | <i>38</i> |
| <i>Bibliography.....</i>                                                 | <i>42</i> |

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how Dutch civic integration policies shape the sense of belonging among highly educated Turkish political refugees. Based on ten semi-structured interviews, it investigates how belonging trajectories unfolds since the refugee's arrival in the Netherlands identifying three main trajectories: stagnated, fluctuating and progressive belonging trajectories. The findings demonstrated that belonging develops mostly in a non-linear form where different factors such as status decline, discrimination, social mobility, and interactions with the host society are shaping the trajectories by either supporting or hindering belonging's development. Lastly, it explores these different belonging trajectories under the light of two different policy frameworks: Wet Inburgering 2013 (Wi2013) and Wet Inburgering 2021 (Wi2021). Findings indicated that participants under Wi2013 valued the autonomy to manage their integration process which fostered positive sense of belonging. Conversely participants under Wi2021 reported lack of autonomy often leading to temporary setbacks hindering their sense of belonging. By highlighting migrant's experiences and voices the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the integration paradox calling for more inclusive, responsive civic integration frameworks.

**Key words:** autonomy, belonging, civic integration policy, highly educated refugees, integration paradox



## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, integration policies have been on the rise across Europe (Suvarierol, 2021). Many national governments have introduced civic integration programmes as responses to perceived societal challenges regarding the incorporation of migrants and refugees into host societies (Odé, 2008; Simonsen 2016). These policies, particularly prominent in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and France, require newcomers to meet a range of requirements mostly related to language acquisition, knowledge of cultural values, and labour market participation in order to access political rights, residency and eventually citizenship (Schnelzer, et al. 2023; Wolffhardt, et al. 2019; de Waal 2020).

A common feature of these emerging integration policies is the emphasis on the so-called ‘hard’ or structural aspects of integration, looking at labour market integration or language acquisition as key indicators of successful integration in other dimensions (Oliver & Gidley, 2015). This approach reflects traditional incorporation theories that assume a linear, one-way path of integration, driven primarily by employment and language learning (Ager& Strang 2008; Geurts et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, another essential dimension of integration, migrant’s identification with the host society and sense of belonging, is often overlooked in integration policies. Belonging is described as the essence of integrated community seen as a crucial condition for a successful integration (Ager& Strang, 2008). And it is increasingly recognized as of equal importance to successful integration and strong social cohesion (Simonson, 2016). Yet national integration policy frameworks rarely focus on these so-called ‘soft’ aspects of integration.

Despite their importance, belonging and identification are hardly being addressed in current integration policies. This raises questions about the consequences of an overly structural focus in these policies, whether employment and language alone can guarantee integration across all domains. One-sided focus on ‘hard’ aspects of integration can have unintended negative effects especially on the emotional and social integration of migrants (ibid.). For instance, the phenomenon called ‘integration paradox’ shows that structurally integrated migrants often report a weak sense of belonging, particularly among the highly educated migrants (Verkuyten 2016; Geurts et al, 2021). This phenomenon challenges the assumption that structural integration automatically produces emotional integration, showing that the current integration policies might have unexpected implications on the development

of migrant's sense of belonging. The identification with the host country tends to decline over time among refugees which questions this idea that structural integration will foster belonging over time towards the host country (Klaver&van der Welle, 2009).

Among European countries, the Netherlands has taken the lead in developing integration policies (Blankvoort et al, 2024). While Dutch integration policies once followed a multicultural approach, in recent decades it has shifted to a one-way model, prioritising a structural dimension of integration, placing the responsibility on the migrant (Ager& Strang 2008). Integration is now defined as a duty that newcomers must fulfil through language exams employment and cultural adaptation to gain access to rights (Cebolla-Boado & Finotelli 2015;Ersanilli & Saharso, 2011; Nooitgedagt & Dagevos 2024).

In January 2022, the Dutch government implemented a new civic integration policy by replacing the previous Wet Inburgering 2013 (Wi2013) with new Wet Inburgering 2021 (Wi2021). Under the Wi2013, the newcomers themselves were in charge of navigating their integration, choosing language courses independently, using the study loan of €10,000 with requirement to finish integration exams in three years (Haile&van Meijl, 2024). The new policy reform aimed to decentralise the process of integration, placing municipalities at the core of guiding newcomers in their social participation, (Sterckx&Fessehazion 2018). The intention was further facilitating the self-sufficiency of the migrant which would better support integration of newcomers by accelerating participation (Damen et al., 2024).

However, early evaluations of this policy change raised concerns in particular for the refugees with strong professional ambitions (Regioplan et al., 2024). Although some aspects of the new system are positively received, participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of autonomy, poor quality of language training, and increased municipal control (Damen et al., 2024). While the intention of the policy was to enhance, improve and support the integration process, for many refugees with high career ambitions, Wi2021 policy felt disempowering (Damen et al., 2024; Vos, 2024). As Damen denoted “What is initially provided as support for integration by focus could eventually get in the way of refugees’ becoming independent” (Damen et al., 2024, 287).

Against this backdrop, the Dutch integration context offers a unique case to examine how changes in civic integration policy impact the emotional and social dimension of integration, mainly sense of belonging. It remains unclear how different policy frameworks shape the feeling of sense of belonging in integration particularly among highly educated refugees. Current integration policy, with their strong focus on structural outcomes, leave little space for migrant's own perspectives and lived experiences. To gain a more holistic

fuller understanding of how integration policies influence belonging development trajectories, it is essential to include migrant's voices. Doing so offers valuable insights from newcomers' experiences and perspectives, into factors that shape their sense of belonging (Haile & van Meijl, 2024).

Although some recent studies address migrant's experiences (Regioplan et al., 2024), and group specific cases (Sterckx & Fessehazion, 2018; van Liempt & Staring, 2020; Haile & van Meijl, 2024), Turkish political refugees remains understudied, despite being the second biggest group of newcomers subject to civic integration in the Netherlands in the period 2022-2023 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2024, p. 2). Most of these recent Turkish refugees in the Netherlands are highly educated people, fleeing political repression and prosecution (Turkije: Repressie En Vervolging, n.d.).

This research seeks to address gaps in the literature by bringing the voices of underrepresented groups of Turkish political refugees who recently arrived in the Netherlands under the civic integration frameworks Wi2013 and Wi2021. By adopting a bottom-up approach, the study contributes to the tradition of public sociology, aiming to inform more inclusive, effective integration policy (Burawoy, 2005). It centres the lived experiences of migrants themselves, adding value to academic and policy debates through insights grounded in refugee perspectives. The research sheds light on how the integration policies and other factors shape refugees' sense of belonging trajectories of Turkish refugees in the Netherlands by asking the following research question: *How are the sense of belonging trajectories of Turkish political refugees in the Netherlands shaped, and what role do (changes) in civic integration policy (Wi2013 and Wi2021) play in shaping these trajectories?*

This study relies on semi-structured interviews with Turkish refugees in the Netherlands. It begins outlining a contextual explanation on the Dutch integration acts highlighting the differences in Wi2013 and Wi2021. Then, move to the theoretical framework, engaging with Esser's social integration theory, the concept of belonging and the integration paradox, later setting out autonomy as a concept. Following that, methodology discusses reliability, data sources, interview topics and external and internal validity of this research. The analysis section is guided by three sub questions: first identifying belonging trajectories from the data; second uncovering the factors that shape these belonging trajectories; thirdly examining how policy frameworks influenced these trajectories.

This study argues that the sense of belonging among highly educated Turkish refugees in the Netherlands unfolds mostly through non-linear and fluctuating trajectories. These are shaped not only by changes in civic integration policy (Wi2013 vs. Wi2021), but also by

other factors such as status decline, perceived discrimination, access to facilities, and the interactions with host society. More fundamentally, these trajectories are influenced by the experience of autonomy and flexibility embedded in the integration highlighting how both rigid control and flexibility can trigger fluctuating effects on belonging.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Integration as a concept**

Despite its widespread use, there is no universally agreed definition of integration in the academic literature (Castles 2002, Pennix 2016; Kutor et al., 2023). Generally, integration is understood as the inclusion of the newcomers into the existing social structures of the host country (Heckman & Schnapper 2016, 10). Many scholars emphasize that integration is not a fixed outcome, but a dynamic and ongoing process shaped by both the immigrants and the receiving society through mutual adjustments (Damen et al., 2024, 288; Pennix 2016, 14; Cebolla-Boado and Finotelli, 2015; Castles et. al; 2002; Klarenbeek 2021, 908; Pennix, 2019, 5).

In the literature, integration is often divided into structural dimensions focusing on the labour market position or socio-cultural dimensions including language acquisition, sense of belonging and interethnic contact (van der Linden&Dagevos , 2024; Huijnk & Miltenburg 2017). Following these multidimensional understandings of integration, Esser's social integration distinguishes four key dimensions: cultururation, positioning (position in society), interaction (social relations and networks), and identification (belonging) (Esser 2004).

Cultururation refers to acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies such as language proficiency, that enable meaningful interactions and participation in society (Esser, 2004). Positioning involves securing a recognized social status, such as citizenship, employment, or educational qualifications, giving individuals access to rights and opportunities (ibid.). Interaction focuses on building relationships across ethnic and social boundaries, fostering connections through everyday interactions like friendships and neighbourly ties (ibid.). Lastly, identification describes the emotional and psychological connection between an individual and society, where one develops a sense of belonging, loyalty, or shared identity with the collective. These four aspects together shape the process of social integration (ibid.).



In this article I will make use of Esser's social integration. With the focal point of attention being the identification dimension of integration looking at sense of belonging, while acknowledging how it relates to the other dimensions. This is done to emphasize the soft aspects of integration (identification and interaction) and their interaction with the other dimensions of integration (positioning and cultururation) (Esser, 2004). Soft aspects emphasize the emotional and mental connections migrants develop with the host society and social system, giving a sense of belonging with the other members of the society (Peperkamp, 2018). The aim of using this integration framework is to underline the experience of the immigrants in the identification part of the social integration by focusing on the feeling of sense of belonging in the host society and how they are interlinked to other dimensions of integration.

### **Sense of belonging**

Sense of belonging, although a soft aspect of integration, is very crucial in offering insights and serves as indicators on how immigrants experience the integration trajectories and policies in the host society (Pennix, 2016). The Esser's four dimensions of integration assume that having learnt the local language (cultururation), having a paid job (employment), and having interethnic relationships (interaction) is positively interlinked to identification, encouraging a sense of belonging for migrants.

In essence, the sense of belonging of the newcomers is shaped by interactions between them and the host society (Esser, 2004; Peperkamp, 2018). These interactions take place at different levels involving individuals, institutions and societal attitudes, shaping the sense of belonging of the migrants, to see whether they feel alienated or welcomed. Belonging is given shape by both the receiving society's attitudes and approaches to newcomers as well as the perception of the newcomer's acceptance within the society. Although sense of belonging is very subjective it reflects the interactive and mutual process of integration which is based on the actions and changes that the immigrant goes through as well as crediting the receiving society's role in this (Hecknman & Sharpener 10).

The classical integration perspective argues that structural integration, such as being employed, naturally fosters soft aspects of integration meaning identification with the host country and a growing sense of belonging (Vroome et al, 2014). In addition, cultural integration, meaning language acquisition, is seen as positively contributing to migrant's sense of belonging. Length of residence is also viewed as a key factor, with the assumption

that the longer migrants stay in the host country, the more likely they are to feel emotionally connected to it (Pennix 2016; Vroome et al, 2014).

Meanwhile the perceived rejection and low levels of acceptance by the receiving society can negatively affect the sense of belonging of the immigrants (Vroome et al, 2014). Besides that, the underqualified positions in the labour market or education can affect their sense of belonging negatively by dismantling the motivation to integrate (ibid.). The feeling of having equal access to services, fair treatment by the institutions and trust in the government institutions affect the sense of belonging and identification of refugees (Hujink et al. 2021).

However, this linear and optimistic view of integration has been challenged by other studies. For instance, Klaver & Van der Welle (2009) found that among refugees in the Netherlands, a longer period of residence did not lead to a stronger sense of belonging. On the contrary, the sense of belonging was found to be declining over time. While refugees initially prioritised safety and freedom in the Netherlands, later their focus on sense of belonging shifted to the opportunities on the labour market. When these expectations were unmet, their evaluations of Dutch society became more critical leading to disappointment and emotional detachment causing declining sense of belonging (ibid.). This suggests that structural integration does not automatically translate into a stronger identification with the host country, and that feeling of belonging is declining over time (ibid.).

Most of the integration policies traditionally focus on easily measurable ‘hard’ aspects, such as job employment, education and language acquisition. Yet, a sense of belonging plays a more encompassing role, emerging at the intersection of both host country factors, such as reception of the refugees, inclusivity, acceptance of diversity, integration policies and newcomer’s related factors, including individual efforts, actions and responsibility taken for integration (Simonson 2016; Hur 2023). This broader understanding of belonging touches upon the crucial role of legal frameworks, host society related factors and newcomer’s actions, all which shape migrant’s belonging trajectories and influence integration process (Ager&Strang 2010). Among these, national and local integration policies stand out as key legal frameworks that directly affect migrant’s experiences of accommodation and inclusion in the host society.

## **Integration paradox**

Recently, the concept of ‘integration paradox’ offers a new perspective on integration. This paradox expresses how integration in hard aspects of integration (language acquisition, education and employment) does not necessarily bring a stronger socio-cultural integration (sense of belonging) to the host society (Verkuyten 2016). This theoretical finding is relevant for highly educated migrants, including the Turkish political, who are the focus of this study. While these highly educated Turkish migrants achieved socio-economic integration, research showed that they still feel disengaged from the host society despite speaking the language and having a job (Esser, 2004; Geurts et al. 2021).

Highly educated Turkish migrants, who come here for work as expats have been previously examined, identifying three key factors that stand in the way of feeling more as a part of the Netherlands for this specific group: High unmet expectations, social exclusion, and the feeling of guiltiness towards Turkey (Geurts et al., 2021).

This weakened sense of belonging can be attributed to several factors. One explanation shows the mismatch between the high qualifications and lack of opportunities compared to the majority members of the society causing relative deprivation (Verkuyten, 2016; Diehl and Sabine 2024). This is also related to Weber’s concept of status groups, in which he explains that status groups are not determined by economic conditions rather it is defined by social honour and prestige and recognition (Weber, 2012). For highly educated migrants it is the case that even when they achieve employment, reach a certain economic class level in the host country, acquire language skills, their status might not be recognized by the host society. This mismatch between the actual position in the labour market and their qualifications may result in feelings of status decline among migrants put them in a downward mobility contributing to weakened sense of belonging (Steinmann, 2019; Verkuyten, 2016).

Another factor affecting the sense of belonging is the increasing expectations of the migrants (Van Doorn et al, 2012). Education level of the migrants raises the expectations of opportunities from the host society however the reality is further detached from these expectations causing high unmet expectations of the migrants resulting in migrants getting disappointed, feeling perceived discrimination and hindering their sense of belonging in the host society (Verkuyten,2016).

The perceived discrimination also plays a crucial role in the sense of belonging. Highly educated migrants are often more exposed to host society norms, values and culture at work or through interethnic contacts, speaking the language, making them more aware of

political debates, anti-immigrant sentiments and exclusionary acts (Verkuyten, 2016; van Doorn et al, 2013). This increased awareness combined with being integrated on paper having a paid job, speaking the language can lead to lower levels of social acceptance in the host society due to perceived discrimination (van Doorn et al, 2012; Verkuyten, 2016).

These mechanisms triggering integration paradox are closely related to integration policies shaping newcomers' experiences in the Netherlands. Both Civic Integration Acts Wi2013 and Wi2021 put emphasis on the hard aspects of integration such as education, work, language, neglecting the effects of this on belonging and perceived discrimination risking further disengagement from the host society. This paradox might even occur strongly under Wi2021 as it consists of closer municipal guidance which some refugees experience as a lack of their autonomy.

### **Autonomy and Belonging**

While autonomy is not often explicitly conceptualized in migration studies related to integration policies, the early evaluations of the new civic integration act Wi2021 have given initial signs that autonomy might be an important mechanism in migrants' experiences of integration. In general, autonomy is understood as self-rule, freedom of will and freedom from obligation (Dworkin, 1981). In migration studies, it is more common to refer to migrant's agency as a form of autonomy, illustrating the limited yet still real ability of the individual to make independent choices and act upon them, which may, in turn, influence the structures that shape or limit people's opportunities or freedoms (de Haas, 2021). In the context of integration policies, autonomy refers to the ability of refugees to shape their own integration process, which was shown to be an important factor in policy evaluations of the Wi2021, especially for the refugees with high ambitions to see how this unfolds for highly educated refugee's experiences of integration and their sense of belonging development.

Although this factor is not present in the previous research on integration paradox, several studies explored how individuals who have more autonomy, feel more connected to their environment such as school, university or work (Samadieh et al, 2024; Risen 2024; Brandt, 2022). A study conducted on the students' sense of belonging at university shows that space given for individual autonomy alongside some other factors fosters the student's attachment to the institution (Samadieh et al, 2024). Similarly, another research conducted on South African women migrant workers in a Western owned country demonstrated that workers who felt that their autonomy was restricted by the factory could not express a sense

of belonging with the institutional arrangements made for them discarding autonomous spaces these workers wanted to create (Brandt, 2022). In this study we will use these conceptualizations to see which factors are shaping the experiences of Turkish refugee's sense of belonging in the Netherlands under different integration policies.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts qualitative research methods, primarily in the form of semi-structured interviews with Turkish political refugees who recently went (or are still going) through the Dutch civic integration program under the Wi2013 and Wi2021. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to explore individual integration experiences allowing participant driven narratives with the guidance of the researcher (Feyduk& Zentai 2018). At the same time covering complexities that might be overlooked in standardized research (ibid.). They are particularly suitable for vulnerable groups like refugees whose voices may otherwise remain underrepresented in public as the voices and experiences of respondents are brought closer to the audience, in this case policymakers, public institutions and the Dutch society through this methodology (ibid.).

## **Data collection**

Given time constraints, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in April and May, either in person (in cafe's, community centres) or online, ensuring anonymity. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed with participant's consent using secure software. The interview questions were structured around a topic list based on the conceptual framework (see Appendix I), beginning with general background information before shifting toward deeper experiences (Creswell& Creswell, 2018).

Due to the political sensitivity of the targeted refugee group, a network sampling method was used to reach participants. The sampling criteria ensured theoretical relevance by focusing on highly educated participants (university degree or higher). To reflect potentially different experiences, participants were divided into two age groups: younger professionals (25-40 years old), who may experience strong ambitions and rising expectations, and older professionals (40+), who may face status decline compared to their careers in Turkey. However, during analysis, age did not emerge as a significant factor influencing sense of

belonging trajectories or experiences with integration. As such, the age division was not considered analytically relevant in the findings. The final sample included five participants under Wi2013 and five under Wi2021, with an intentional gender balance (four men and six women), and an equal distribution across two age groups. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant's privacy, and all data were stored securely. Copies of transcripts are deposited at the researcher's university.

### **Data analysis**

The coding of the interviews is done through Atlas.ti, applying a combined abductive coding approach. Deductive coding was informed by theoretical framework (e.g. Integration policies, sense of belonging, the integration paradox, autonomy), while also allowing inductive coding to capture emerging patterns and unexpected themes from participants' experiences. The coding involved three rounds, initially coding small fragments and entities, linking these codes to main explanatory concepts. Finally key categories were developed based on conceptual framework. In the first step the belonging trajectories were identified, followed by organizing individual codes into factors hindering and supporting belonging and lastly categorizing civic integration policy specific experiences and themes.

The analysis section, coming after the methods section, addressed the main research question through three sub questions. In the first sub question, the belonging trajectories were identified based on drawings made by participants during the interviews, visualizing their sense of belonging since their arrival in the Netherlands. The second sub question examined the factors influencing these trajectories, whether they supported or hindered the development of belonging. Finally, the third sub question served as an analytical bridge, connecting participant's lived experiences under Wi2013 and Wi2021 to the evolution of their belonging trajectories.

### **Validity**

Internal validity was ensured by grounding the study in a clear theoretical framework, particularly "integration paradox" to explore belonging trajectories, while introducing concepts like 'autonomy' that are shown to be relevant in other studies (Bryman, 2012). A standardized topic list was used in all interviews to systematically investigate participants' belonging experiences.

External validity, understood as theoretical saturation, was approached by aiming to include all relevant mechanisms, and concepts related to integration paradox and policies

shaping the sense of belonging in particular for highly educated refugees (Bryman, 2012). Although a study with small-N may not achieve full saturation, this aims to offer theoretical representatives by discovering “shaping mechanisms” in their belonging trajectories under different civic acts particularly representative for highly educated Turkish refugee group (ibid.).

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to replicability and transparency of the research process. Although qualitative research does not seek identical replication, it aims to reach reliability by ensuring subjectivity, transparency in theoretical conceptualization and describing steps taken in data collection clearly. To ensure data saturation, I have used theories that explain the change in sense of belonging throughout the previous research conducted in highly skilled refugees, thereby adding other conceptualisations to ensure that there is theoretical saturation.

### **Ethics**

Given the vulnerability of the target group, ethical considerations were central throughout this study. Using informed consent forms explaining participants rights, recording conditions, withdrawal options, all participants were informed about the research details and purpose to minimize any harm and stressful occurrences during or after the interview (Neuman, 2013). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the participants data collection is done by a secured software Atlas.ti, where the transcribed interviews are deleted from personal devices after analysis (Bryman, 2012).

### **Positionality**

The researcher’s positionality as a Turkish political migrant myself, played a quite important role in this study (Feyduk & Zentai 2018, 174-179). Sharing the ethnicity, language and migration background with the interviewees fostered trust. However, this insider perspective of the researcher required self-reflexivity during question design, interviews and data interpretations (Williams 2022). Supervisor’s guidance further strengthened reflexivity in data interpretation to distance the researcher from the group under study (see also Avides & Leerkes, 2024, 11).

## Analysis

### 1) What types of sense of belonging trajectories can be identified among Turkish political refugees in the Netherlands?

Based on the interviews and visual data, specifically drawings created by participants to present their experiences and development of sense of belonging, three main belonging trajectories emerged (see Figure 1 below). This is an analysis of the newcomers' sense of belonging trajectory since the very beginning of their journey in the Netherlands until today. Although we have distinguished them in the main three categories there are varieties in the process and factors affecting changes in the sense of belonging.

The first type of belonging trajectory, the stagnated trajectory, shows an early sharp increase followed by stagnation. Participants described initial optimism upon arrival, where hopes for integration, high motivation boosted a sense of belonging. Over time, due to barriers faced and possible unmet expectations it hit a ceiling. Because the findings for this stagnated trajectory actually showed that the belonging is stabilised at a certain level rather than declining. This type mainly characterised Wi2013 participants (Ali 2013; Aliye 2013; Sena 2013) living in the Netherlands for more than five years.

Second, and the most frequent one is the fluctuating belonging trajectory, marked by ups and downs illustrating the unstable and dynamic nature of sense of belonging for this group. These fluctuations are shaped by factors such as asylum procedures, integration policies, housing and political discourse. Belonging rises slowly, dips after certain experiences, and the overall picture from the findings is that it goes upward in the long term. This pattern of belonging trajectory is significantly apparent among Wi2021 participants (Elif, 2021; Cagla, 2021; Mehmet 2021; Zehra 202), whose refugee camp asylum procedures are recent and often longer than Wi2013 participants.

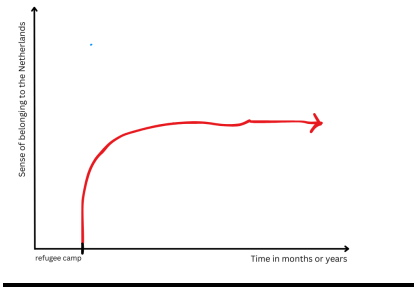
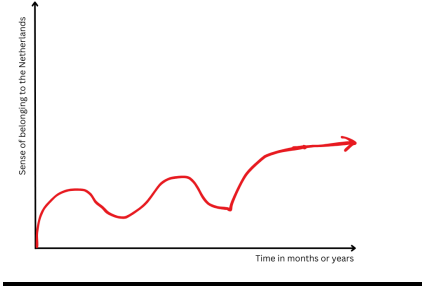
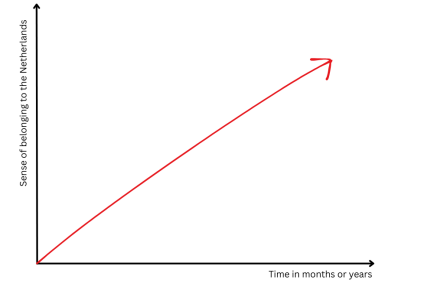
Third type is a progressive belonging trajectory, showing continuous growth in emotional connection throughout the time.<sup>1</sup> This group faces fewer barriers or benefits from the opportunities, conforming prior research, linking longer residence to a stronger belonging (Pennix 2016; Vroome et al, 2014). This type of trajectory mainly includes Wi2013 participants (Fatih 2013; Sena 2013), though one recent arrival also fits in this group (Ahmet 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Only, one case shows in the early periods of arrival in the Netherlands an interruption, followed by a steady progress afterwards (Sena 2013 Appendix iii).



**Figure 1**

| Trajectory Type | Name of the Trajectory           | Sample Visuals from the interviews                                                                                    |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Type 1          | Stagnated Belonging Trajectory   | <p>Interview 1: Ali W/2013</p>      |
| Type 2          | Fluctuating Belonging Trajectory | <p>Interview 8: Elif W/2021</p>    |
| Type 3          | Progressive Belonging Trajectory | <p>Interview 5: Fatih W/2013</p>  |

**1) What are the key factors that support or hinder the development of these belonging trajectories?**

**A) Stagnated Belonging Trajectory**

**Survival Phase: Reception and Absence of Connections**

In the initial phases of stagnated belonging trajectories, many participants identified starting with no sense of belonging, particularly during their stay at reception centres. This finding contrasts with an earlier study, which showed that refugees experienced stronger identification and belonging in the first years of their stay in the Netherlands, followed by a decline as their time of residence increased (Klaver and van der Welle, 2009). For these participants in this type of trajectory, belonging was not relevant in the beginning phase as survival was the focus when they first arrived in the Netherlands. They are described as having no connections, no work, no communication or relationships to encourage belonging. *“At that time, it was just about a sense of survival, really. So, whether I belonged or not wasn’t all that important. But there definitely wasn’t a sense of belonging.”* (Aliye 2013).

**Honeymoon Phase: Housing and Language Courses**

Despite the early hardships, many experienced an upward curve as they were assigned to a municipality, received housing and started language courses. This marked a shift from survival mode to a more structured integration process, increasing their sense of belonging. This reflects Klaver’s findings that early positive experiences boost belonging trajectories (ibid.). Quick access to language, buddy programs, language coaches, and taal cafes at community libraries were described as meaningful small steps supporting a sense of belonging. As one participant described: *“(…)At first, it was centred around the course, and later, using what I learned there, I tried to build a network through taal coaches, neighbours (….) Each one increased my connection to Dutch life and society a little more. (…).”* (Ali 2013).

This growing sense of belonging was also characterised by emotional connection as participants settled permanently bringing structure and purpose to daily life. Housing was repeatedly described as a milestone in this upward curve. Having a new home and access to language learning were described as essential to increasing belonging. *“(…) after I moved into my own home, that’s when the sense of belonging really started to grow. I think this is*

*very important feeling a sense of belonging in your own home. Then it continued to increase slowly as I started going to language courses.*” (Aliye 2021).

This phase of stability was described as emotionally supporting for participants. The upward curve after gaining access to official integration courses, language learning and housing is described as the *honeymoon phase*, where the participants felt that their efforts to integrate were acknowledged by the host society, strengthening their motivation.

### **Employment phase: Work relations, Status Decline and Discrimination**

After the initial *honeymoon phase*, many experienced stagnations in their sense of belonging particularly during their employment and entry into the labour market. This finding contrasts with classical integration theories, which suggest that longer residence and structural integration should lead to stronger sense of belonging (Vroome et al, 2014). Although, the stagnation observed here aligns with the logic of the integration paradox, in which highly educated refugees face growing disappointment due to unmet expectations in the labour market (Verkuyten, 2016). The findings reveal a more nuanced picture, rather than declining or increasing, sense of belonging reaches a maximum and stabilises.

For participants, entering the workforce was seen as an essential step to finally contribute and feel like a part of that society, participants often encountered status decline, discontents related to colleague relationships, and discrimination. These three factors drive the paradoxical effects on belonging development. One participant stressed that: *“Once I entered working life again, everything stalled. I realized that my Inburgering and the whole language journey weren’t actually over—in fact, they were just beginning (...) So after a certain point, my sense of belonging didn’t really progress any further. I guess that was my way of accepting it—like, “This is as much as I can belong here.”* (Aliye 2013).

### **Work relations**

One factor explaining the decline in belonging during employment was the colleague relationship at work. Some interviewees realized they could not fully belong to Dutch society in the workplace. Experiences with native Dutch before employment, were much more positive, as they were often familiar with refugee’s backgrounds, this changes in professional settings. As one of the participants explained his sense of belonging stagnation after entering the workforce: *“That’s where things kind of plateaued for me. I realized, ‘Okay, maybe I’ll never fully feel like I belong here 100%.’ (...). You’re not Dutch, you weren’t born here, you*

*came from the outside. And even though not everyone made me feel that way, some people in the workplace definitely did.*" (Ali 2013).

This experience reflects the integration paradox: despite formal integration through employment, participants still faced exclusionary attitudes. As highly educated migrants are more frequently exposed to Dutch norms and interethnic contact at work, their awareness of exclusion or othering increases which harms belonging (Verkuyten, 2016; van Doorn et al, 2013).

### **Status decline**

For many participants, another factor diminishing belonging during employment was feeling of status decline or overqualification. Several interviewees said their jobs did not reflect their educational background or professional careers from their country of origin, leading to loss of confidence and identity harming belonging. *"(...)in working life, you definitely become aware of things like status and qualifications. No matter how skilled or qualified you are, people see you as less intelligent or less competent—just because you're a foreigner or because your language isn't perfect."* (Deniz 2013).

One participant described the emotional consequences of this misalignment between her job and qualifications, undermining her sense of belonging to the Netherlands. *"Back in Turkey, I was someone who was educated, working as a teacher, and had completed a master's degree. But here, I might be doing a job that someone with a much lower education level would typically do. (...)I'm not the confident version of myself that I used to be."* (Aliye 2013).

These findings strongly resonate with key factors of the integration paradox, where status decline triggers paradoxical effects on belonging. The mismatch between participant's previous social positions in the country of origin are not taken into consideration. The qualifications, and the downward mobility the participants face compared to their origin country through underqualified work contributes to their stagnated sense of belonging (Steinmann, 2019, 1383; Verkuyten, 2016, 584).

Even participants who continued working in their original professions described the constant need to prove themselves to Dutch colleagues. This shows Weber's concept of status groups: economic conditions alone do not define social status; rather social honour and prestige determine recognition. Although these highly educated refugees achieved economic independence and speak the language their social status remains unrecognized by the host society (Weber, 2012, 926–932).

One participant, a math teacher, described this ongoing struggle as exhausting. Although he stated that it does not affect his belonging. As it is that person's fault on an individual level not on society level. *"(...)they sometimes see you as inadequate in your profession (...) It's exhausting, always feeling like you have to prove (...) I'm really good in my field—I'm a very good math teacher, I can manage a classroom very well too. But you constantly find yourself trying to prove all of that, and it wears you out. (...)." (Ali 2013).*

## **Discrimination**

Most participants in this trajectory reported experiencing perceived discrimination at work, though one participant said she had not encountered such negative experiences. The effects of discrimination were mixed: one explained that explicit discrimination did not affect his overall sense of belonging, as he interpreted it on an individual rather than societal level. *"It didn't really affect my sense of belonging. Since it was more of a personal issue, it didn't have a negative impact overall. Maybe it shaped the way I saw that individual—like, 'Okay, that's the kind of person they are'—but beyond that, it didn't affect me more broadly."* (Ali 2013).

Meanwhile, another one described a significant impact of explicit discrimination at work on her sense of belonging. She felt constantly reminded of being seen as a 'second class citizen' and a foreigner, regardless of her efforts to belong. *"(...)things like salary differences or being treated differently at work—people take you less seriously. Sometimes they act like you're less intellectual, just because you're a foreigner. (...) you come to understand that no matter how hard you try, you'll always be seen as a foreigner—as a second-class citizen (...)These things affect your sense of belonging."* (Deniz 2013).

This shows Verkuyten (2016) and van Doorn et al. (2012), who describe how highly educated migrants, despite structural integration through employment and language skills, still face exclusion and perceived discrimination from host society affecting their sense of belonging trajectories.

## **B) Fluctuating belonging trajectory**

### **Initial phase: The prolonged processes and relocations**

The general fluctuating pattern in participants belonging trajectories is caused by frequent reception relocations disrupting belonging. Constant moves required rebuilding the networks repeatedly *"(...)you change camps, it gets harder. Just when you start to feel a sense of*

*belonging, your camp changes. Since I changed camps seven times, you find yourself trying to feel like you belong to a new city again and again.”* (Cagla 2021).

Also, the long waiting periods for housing, residence permits, language courses or family reunification were causing dips in belonging. As one participant described the waiting period for settlement as feeling lost: *“Again, it was that feeling of not knowing where you’re going, not knowing what you’re going to do.”* (Elif 2021). This shows that the slow procedural periods and longer reception periods are negatively affecting the sense of belonging trajectories of these participants. The period in which these participants have stayed in the reception centres, and their process until getting residence permit and housing is also relatively longer than the other belonging trajectories which might explain the role these factors have on fluctuations in their sense of belongings development.

### **Upward hill: Residence permit, Housing and Host society attitudes**

Following that, belonging is mainly restored for the participants by gaining access to residence permit and housing. This shows similarities in the honeymoon phase of the stagnated belonging trajectory in which the participants belonging trajectory showing absence of paradoxical effects on the sense of belonging trajectories. *“After I moved into my house, I started to feel a stronger sense of belonging. (...)When interacting with Dutch people, I started acting with the mindset that this is something more permanent. (...)”* (Mehmet 2021)

Another positive factor that encouraged belonging trajectory upward is the host society's attitudes, feeling understood, welcome and accepted by the local Dutch people, especially interactions with language coaches and buddies are mentioned. *“I had Dutch Taal maatjes (language buddies) and Taal coaches. After that, I started going to language cafés. Their warm approach (...). These were all major factors in the development of my sense of belonging.”* (Zehra 2021).

### **Downhill: Political discourse**

Besides that, the political discourse about migrants in the Netherlands have created anxiety for some of the participants although not always directly harming belongings development it had paradoxical effects on some of the participants' belonging trajectories. These participants admitted that they are trying to stay away from digital platforms and news to stay positive about their thoughts and affection to the Netherlands. *“Political issues (...)as a migrant, even if you're not personally targeted, you're inevitably affected by such news. (...) if there are still*

*negative thoughts or prejudices about us, then of course that ends up affecting one's sense of belonging — in a negative way.*" (Zehra 2021).

This finding of fluctuating belonging trajectory presents a notably different picture from earlier research by Klaver and van der Welle (2009), who argued that refugee's identification tended to decline over time as their duration of residence in the Netherlands increased. In both the fluctuating and stagnated belonging trajectories identified in this study; belonging does not decline with time. It follows either a dynamic, non-linear path with ups and downs or reaches plateau and stabilizes. Contrary to Klaver and van der Welle's findings, belonging trajectories of Turkish refugees in this study indicate an overall upward trend in the long term despite temporary setbacks through the integration process.

### **C) Skyrocketed belonging**

#### **Early access to facilities**

In the initial phases, participants from the progressive trajectory, benefitted from early access to jobs and language courses, even while in reception centres. One found a job at university while residing at the reception centre and explained that getting into a different social environment and having a job boosted his sense of belonging. *"I was able to find a job, and I was able to hold onto that job. (...) That's why, from the very beginning, I felt a sense of belonging. I skyrocketed immediately."* (Fatih 2013).

#### **Social mobility**

In the following phases of this belonging trajectory, a key factor supporting the participant's consistent upward sense of belonging is the social mobility that most of them experienced in the Netherlands. The participants were able to continue their careers in similar positions to those they held in their country of origin. As a result, they did not experience any significant status decline or loss upon migration, which is diverging them from the participants in stagnated or fluctuating belonging trajectories, where status decline was more prominent.

This shows how continuity in the same profession and position as the country of origin and equivalent recognition at workplace by the native colleagues can support a sense of belonging in the new host society which is enabled by the social mobility of these participants. *"Teaching was my childhood dream, and I loved doing it in Turkey—so continuing as a teacher here gave me a deep sense of fulfillment. (...) It has positively affected my sense of belonging. That makes me feel comfortable—and yes, it makes me feel like I belong."* (Sena 2013). Another participant who described his feeling of job satisfaction

illustrated similar feelings: *"(...) Highly satisfied, while I was still in the camp (...) entering a different social status in the Netherlands, positively affected my sense of belonging."* (Fatih 2013). In Fatih's case, the international work environment allowed him to continue his profession in English, further facilitated his integration and satisfaction, this illustrated how factors such as language, workplace diversity, and professional recognition can support social mobility and belonging.

This pattern reflects Steinmann's (2019) findings, that social mobility plays a crucial role in shaping integration experiences of highly educated migrants. While in his study many highly educated experienced downward mobility after migration, which triggered integration paradox and weakened sense of belonging, this group avoided such paradoxical feelings by securing employment at comparable social level immediately upon migration (Steinmann, 2019, 1391). So, the absence of downward mobility may explain the positive development of sense of belonging observed in this group.

### **Inter-ethnic contacts**

Another common element across these upward trajectories is that there was a presence of positive interethnic contacts even during their stay at the reception centres. The interviewees expressed how the neighbours, volunteers at reception centres, and language instructors made them feel welcome in the Netherlands creating early feelings of sense of belonging that grew later on. *"(...) the Dutch families I met there were one of the most important factors in developing my sense of belonging. Their thoughts about refugees, the way they opened up to us, the way they opened their arms—their level of welcoming was amazing."* (Fatih 2013).

### **Media and Political Discourses**

In the 'skyrocketed' belonging trajectory, media and political discourse awareness does not directly hinder belonging trajectories besides making them feel anxious about it. Some participants stated that media and politics are not the main drivers of their belonging trajectory distinguishing political discourse from broader public attitudes in the Netherlands emphasizing that the extremist voices remain in minority or reflected back in the general attitude of the society. *"What really matters is how much the general public embraces or supports that agenda,(...). In that regard, I don't think Dutch society is shifting too far to the right. (...)"* (Fatih 2013).



### 3) How do the civic integration policies of Wi2013 and Wi2021 influence the sense of belonging trajectories of Turkish political refugees?

This third sub question serves as an analytical bridge between the lived experiences of Turkish refugees under Wi2013 and Wi2021 civic integration acts, and how these shape their belonging trajectories in the Netherlands. By linking the three belonging trajectories identified earlier, stagnated, fluctuating and progressive to integration policy, how the design of each policy and its delivery components facilitate, or hinder development of belonging will be examined. The findings demonstrate that primarily autonomy, flexibility and individual responsive guidance play a central role in shaping refugees belonging trajectories throughout their integration journey.

#### Wi 2013: Flexibility and the Integration Gap in Stagnated and Progressive Trajectories

The stagnated belonging trajectory is in particular linked to participants who integrated under the Wi2013 framework. Although this policy left room for flexibility, challenges encountered in the labour market after finishing the civic integration processes flattened the belonging trajectories. The initial autonomy granted under Wi2013, allowed participants to determine their own integration paths. However, this autonomy and flexibility crashed upon entering the labour market, where they were faced with unexpected situations of status decline and discrimination imposing stagnation on belonging.

Under Wi 2013, participants had the freedom to manage their own integration process, including selecting their own language courses using loans provided by government DUO. Many appreciated this flexibility, as it enabled them to enrol in fast-paced, high quality courses aligned with their professional ambitions to learn a high level of Dutch. In the early stages of integration, this autonomy fostered a sense of control and ownership over the process, contributing positively to the belonging. This phase, referred to as the “honeymoon phase” in stagnated trajectory, was characterized by hope, motivation, empowerment, and a growing sense of belonging. Many participants believed that a successful end of integration, passing the civic integration exams, would mean the end of their integration. *“But since I could choose for myself, I was able to pick good quality courses—especially ones that progressed faster. (...)That created more **motivation** for me as well.”* (Aliye 2013).

However, during the employment phase, many under Wi2013 encountered misalignment between their initial optimism with the self-governing options and the harsh

realities faced on entering the Dutch labour market by external constraints imposed on them. The autonomy offered earlier might have led to unrealistic expectations regarding the phase after the language courses. Primarily participants in stagnated trajectory highlighted the gap they experienced between the end of civic integration, passing language exams and lack of preparation for practical, linguistic and cultural skills demanded in the real-life work settings. The professional language level at work settings seemed to significantly differ from the theoretical skills offered in the classroom, leaving participants unprepared. This disconnect contributed to a plateau effect in their sense of belonging. *"The language course certainly lays a foundation for integration, but the Dutch taught in language courses and the Dutch spoken in everyday life are very different (...). When you enter real-life settings, you can feel quite lost because the two don't match."* (Aliye 2013).

In contrast, the progressive belonging trajectory is predominantly associated with the Wi2013 who have a continuing belonging trajectory unbothered. Unlike others under the same policy who faced stagnation after employment these participants used the flexibility offered for their advantage. Both began their integration even before the official inburgering started, one was employed in an international environment, using English, while the other enrolled in a high-level language school and later joined a special track for teachers. Neither participant received financial support from the institutions for more than a couple of months having limited contact with the municipality.

These cases show that the same flexibility can result in successful belonging trajectories when supported by personal and institutional circumstances. There was no feeling of status decline in their cases either by avoiding Dutch language barriers choosing for an international work environment. For instance, one participant explained that his experience with the Wi2013 was positive as the lower language demands of this policy enabled him to continue working in English without needing to stop to learn Dutch.

### **Wi2021: Rigidity and Disempowerment in Fluctuating Trajectories**

Under Wi2021, integration was managed by municipalities in an attempt to centralize and coordinate civic integration. Unlike its intention, many participants expressed their experiences under this new policy as rigid and impersonal which clashed with their own ambitions and capacities. Under Wi2021, the municipality assigned the newcomer an integration path and the refugees are following language courses that fall under the contract of the municipality. Therefore, the refugees cannot choose their own language provider or

language course in fact they have no other choice than going to the language course offered by municipal guidance. Wi2021 policy structure predetermines integration paths limiting ability to exercise autonomy in choosing their integration process.

Participants expressed this rigid structure of municipal guidance, especially the strict cut-off criteria that determines the newcomers' paths on integration based on fixed categorisations makes them feel distant from Dutch society. The fixed categories such as age, are determinant, rather than looking at personal aspirations and educational backgrounds of the refugee's causing frustrations in municipal guidance. This rigid cut of routes for integration offered in municipal guidance of the integration process causes alienation as if their real potential is invisible for those managing the process of integration at municipality. This disempowerment in choosing their own integration process, caused emotional highs and lows depending on the interactions with the municipality and the Wi2021 policy bringing fluctuations in their belongings. *"(...)sometimes there's this fixed path, and they try to fit everyone into the same mold. Your dreams don't really matter. They just say, 'This is the procedure—you'll follow it.' But you may not be someone who fits that procedure."* (Cagla 2021).

This lack of choices in language providers and determining their own integration path has a negative effect on belonging trajectory. As Samadieh et al. (2024) show, when individuals lack autonomy in their learning environment, belonging is hindered which is reflected in these participants' frustration and alienation. Classrooms were overcrowded, not matching their language levels, constant change of instructors slowed down the learning processes. These low-quality language courses offered by the municipality did not answer the needs and ambitions of these highly educated refugees. The combination of unengaged structure slowed down pace of the courses, structure and low-quality instruction resulted in feeling unmotivated seeing the official integration procedures in civic integration as 'waste of time' or leaning towards self-study in these participant's experiences. The nature of language course in Wi2021, partially explains the fluctuating development in participants belonging trajectories. *"The course offered to me by my municipality was very poor. (...)The two years I spent in that municipal course were a waste of time. I didn't really learn anything; I advanced mostly through self-study. (...) Since they made it so difficult for me to make my own decisions, it naturally blocked my sense of belonging. It's frustrating when your autonomy is taken away."* (Elif 2021).

### **Autonomy as a Core Mechanism Across Trajectories**

Across both Wi2013 and Wi2021, autonomy emerged as the decisive factor influencing the development of a sense of belonging throughout the policy change. Reflecting the conceptual framework, autonomy not only supports motivation and wellbeing (Brandt, 2022), but also fosters stronger institutional attachment and belonging (Samadieh et al, 2024). Participants under Wi2013 reported enjoying high levels of autonomy in managing their own integration process, which encouraged motivation during early phases of civic integration. Especially for the language courses the findings have shown that the newcomers experience more motivation to follow the integration courses and language development is more positively affected by the courses that they have chosen themselves. This makes them feel like having control over their own lives and the feeling of responsibility on their shoulders is referred to as being treated as adults by the state. *"(...) the government would give you a certain budget. You were treated like an adult—you could use that budget however you wanted. Things were more in your own hands. You could choose where to go, what to do. (...) I could manage my inburgering process at my own pace, according to my own level."* (Ali 2013).

Participants from Wi2021 contrasted this flexibility showing how constrained autonomy negatively affected their sense of belonging. Fixed rules, rigid integration routes, lack of choice in language course providers turned integration into a chore or punishment rather than a pathway that facilitates engagement for the refugees. *"The effect on my sense of belonging is this: they made it very difficult for me to make my own decisions, and naturally, that blocks any feeling of belonging."* (Elif 2021).

The mandatory structure of the new civic integration policy negatively affects the sense of belonging trajectories of participants. Participants described the punishment system in the municipal guidance also causes disengagement: *"(...) after those municipal meetings, I often think, 'Well, I'm not really part of this society anyway.' (...) The attitude is: 'You will do what we tell you. You must take these courses. If you don't, you'll face penalties.'" (Mehmet 2021).*

Despite the frustration experienced by lack of autonomy under Wi2021, some participants expressed that the negative effects of this on their sense of belonging were only temporary. The realisation of the fact that this rigid guidance and lack of autonomy are part of civic integration procedure which is a transitional phase in their life. *"I know this situation is temporary. Once I get citizenship or once my inburgering period is over, I won't have any more contact with the municipality. So, I try not to let it get to me anymore."* (Elif 2021).

Although this autonomy mechanism seems to play a more important role in Wi2021 participants' fluctuating belonging trajectory, they acknowledge that this is a bureaucratic obligation that needs to be endured. Overall participants maintain their motivation for the long-term dreams and plans where the belonging grows in spite of the experience of lack of autonomy in the Wi2021 civic integration. *“(...) I view it as something I simply have to get through. (...) Once I manage to get past the municipal hurdles, things progress in a more positive way.”* (Mehmet 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The contemporary debate on integration of migrants remains a highly contested and widely discussed topic in today's politics, media and broader societal discourse. Particularly, Europe's growing diverse groups of migrants and refugees enter host societies through formalized integration systems, often set by the government's integration policies. These policies tend to focus prominently on structural dimensions of integration, assessing success through measurable hard indicators such as employment rates and acquired language levels tested through standardized exams. While these indicators reflect the so-called hard structural aspects of integration, they often overlook the soft, socio-cultural, and emotional dimensions that play an equally significant role in determining a migrant's attachment, inclusion, and engagement in the host society, meaning feeling a sense of belonging towards the host society.

This overreliance on structural markers as the primary form of integration outcome has resulted in some cases in a misleading picture of integration success. Recent studies have highlighted the phenomenon known as the integration paradox, which illustrates how highly educated migrants, especially those who have successfully entered the labour market and acquired the required language skills continue to struggle with weakened sense of belonging. Despite finishing the formal markers of integration, these highly educated migrants face downward mobility, lack of status recognition and experience discrimination. This shows that structural integration on paper is not necessarily bringing a stronger sense of belonging.

Recent policy changes in the Netherlands provided a timely and relevant opportunity to examine how civic integration policies that are heavily grounded on structural aspects of integration affect refugees' sense of belonging trajectories. This study in specific, focused on Turkish political refugees, an understudied group, making up a big part of recently arrived highly educated refugees in the country after 2016.

This research was set out to examine how the sense of belonging develops in relation to changes in integration policy. The first sub question described three distinct belonging trajectories: stagnated, fluctuating and progressive. These belonging trajectories identify how Turkish refugee's sense of belonging develops through their journey in the Netherlands, from arrival and reception phases, through integration and into the phases after civic integration. The findings demonstrated that belonging trajectories do not unfold in a linear path but mostly follow dynamic and fluctuating ways, stagnation and for a small minority upward trajectory.

The second sub question explained key factors explaining the different belonging trajectories which either support or undermine participant's belonging development. Mainly, status decline, reception period, and discrimination worked as hindrance to belonging. While social mobility, positive interethnic contact and early opportunities to access facilities supported belonging.

The findings for the first part concluded that, most of the belonging trajectories of Turkish refugees in this study does not unfold in a linear path as assumed by classical assumption of integration theories, nor does the belonging of this group demonstrate a decline over time as Klaver and van der Welle suggested; rather it goes in dynamic forms, or it reaches up to a plateau. This indicates an overall upward trend in the long-term belonging trajectories of this highly educated group despite temporary setbacks in some trajectories, the big picture shows no decreasing sense of belonging.

In the third sub question, examining recent changes in civic integration policy highlights the decisive role that autonomy, embedded in these policies, play in shaping a sense of belonging. Under Wi2013 policy, participants who had the freedom to choose their own language courses and manage their integration paths expressed higher motivation and stronger belonging. While this high level of autonomy and flexibility might have raised expectations for the post-civic integration period, that issue is addressed in the discussion section.

In contrast, participants under Wi2021 faced a more rigid, and mandatory integration path, limiting their autonomy and self-control over the integration process. This was often experienced as paternalistic by participants, negatively impacting belonging trajectories. However, while Wi2021, participants reported fluctuations in their sense of belonging due to this lack of autonomy, these negative effects appeared to be confined to the integration process itself. In the long run they did not significantly affect participants' overall sense of belonging.

This study therefore argues that the sense of belonging among highly educated refugees from Turkey has mostly developed in a non-linear form of trajectories. These are not solely built by the changes in civic integration rather by the underlying lack of autonomy (Wi2021) and flexibility (Wi2013) in those policies and other additional factors such as status decline, mobility and discrimination.

### **Further Discussion and Limitations**

This study offers important academic contributions by providing a more nuanced understanding of the integration paradox. Current interpretations of the paradox often present it as a binary: migrants either develop a strong sense of belonging or experience a decline over time. However, the findings of this research challenged this rigid approach by conceptualizing belonging as a trajectory rather than a static state. Belonging as a concept needs elaboration as the study shows it is a fluid concept, shaped by ongoing personal experiences, changing political contexts, and other factors. It is not simply gained or lost but is negotiated in the experiences of migrants over time. This calls for a border and more dynamic look while studying belonging and integration paradox moving beyond dichotomous understandings.

This also enriches the societal relevance of this study by embracing the complexity of immigrants lived experiences and realities. This is done by the value added through qualitative research methods that capture these evolving belonging trajectories from migrant's own perspective. By centring the data on lived experiences of highly educated Turkish political refugees, this study challenges dominant narratives that overlook soft aspects of integration. However, it must be acknowledged that social desirability may have influenced how the participants have described and explained their experiences, particularly their evaluations about the civic integration touching policy judgement.

For the policy evaluation, the civic integration policies moving forward should aim to strike a balance between offering autonomy and providing targeted support in-line with the professional skills, social capital and qualifications of the refugees. While self-control over the integration process is evaluated positively under Wi2013 participants, it should be paired with realistic labour market orientation, to soft land in host society professional environments as the study observed stagnated belonging for this group after the employment phase.

Finally, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. It focuses solely on highly educated Turkish refugees, with a focus on ten in-depth interviews, although it is a

specific group the sample might not represent the full diversity. It also does not represent the newcomers' experiences for other highly educated groups in the Netherlands. Therefore, studying other refugee groups from different countries of origin, or a comparative study including lower educated refugee's experiences could broaden the scope and insights. This would bring a more comprehensive look on how civic integration policies impact the intersection of autonomy and belonging.



## **APPENDIX I: Topic List for the Interview**

The common interview topic list and possible questions to ask include:

### **General experiences in the Netherlands**

- How are you? How is your life in the Netherlands going?
- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- Are you currently employed in the Netherlands?
- What is your education level in your origin country?
- Did you complete the Dutch Civic Integration? Or are you in the process (for Wi2021)
- How was it getting used to living in the Netherlands? Asking about employment, education, language learning and interethnic contacts.

1) Can you describe your journey of integration since arriving in the Netherlands?

(Probe for housing, employment, language, education, social contacts—open invitation to tell their story)

### **Feeling sense of belonging**

How has your sense of belonging to the Netherlands developed/ changed over time?

- Can I ask you to draw your sense of belonging throughout the years that you have been in the Netherlands?

**Explanation:** From the moment you were in the AZC to now. (ask for key turning points explanations of the changes in the drawing, think about getting a house, residence permit, starting integration, family reunification, getting a job, starting language course, learning the language, getting NT2 exams)

**Possible probing questions:** Think about how your sense of belonging changes over time from when you first arrived until now? How is your sense of belonging to the Netherlands now? How was it in the beginning of your stay? What are the times of changes standing for?

What has helped you feel more (or less) connected to Dutch society?

**Possible probing question:** Asking follow up questions according to answers (education, job, satisfaction, family reunification, language, work, education, perceived discrimination, expectations vs reality, perception and behaviors of the host society, media news, political debates interethnic contact)

### **Civic Integration Program experience**

How would you describe your experience with the civic integration program? How do you experience your (civic) integration in the Netherlands? Can you tell me more about it?

**Possible probing questions:** Follow-up on language classes, exams, guidance from the municipality)

How is your civic integration process related to your sense of belonging? Can you tell me more about it?

How did you experience your language courses and your integration?

- How does this affect your integration?

How was your experience about civic integration and contact with institutions (municipality, contact person, client manager) any challenges or positive things that you want to share?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging in the Netherlands?

### **Autonomy and Civic Integration experience**

How do you feel about the opportunity to pursue your own goals and ambitions in your civic integration program?

**Possible probing questions:** Freedom in choosing your own integration path

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

How is the guidance and support (of municipality, contact person, client manager) in the integration program? (language wise vs. job hunting)

- How does this affect your sense of belonging in the Netherlands?

How do you feel about your autonomy in the civic integration path/process to pursue your own ambitions and dreams?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

### **Expectations vs Reality**

How were your expectations before coming to the Netherlands? Were they met in the Netherlands (housing, employment, language, integration policies)?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

### **Perceived discrimination**

How do you experience the acceptance or openness of Dutch society toward newcomers like yourself?

**Possible probing questions:** Can you describe that a bit more how host society's acceptance of newcomers affects your sense of belonging?

Have you encountered any forms of discrimination or exclusion?

- If so, how did they affect your sense of belonging?

How do you feel about the role of media, political and public debates on your integration?

How does this affect your sense of belonging?

### **Over qualification and status decline**

How do you feel about your current job here?

**Possible probing questions:** about feeling of satisfaction, it's effect on sense of belonging

How do you feel about your position in your job?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

How do you feel about your social status here in the Netherlands?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

How do you feel about your social status in the Netherlands compared to your origin country?

- How does this affect your sense of belonging?

Were there any other factors that influence your sense of belonging positively or negatively that were not mentioned in the interview?

What would be your recommendations for integration policies in the Netherlands?

## APPENDIX II: Informed Consent Document (English version)

### Researcher's Identity and Contact Details:

**Name:** Zeynep Kurban

**Affiliation:** MA Sociology, Erasmus University Governance of Migration and Diversity

**Email:** [708801zk@eur.nl](mailto:708801zk@eur.nl)

**Supervisor:** Arjen Leerkes

**Contact Erasmus University:** Data Protection Officer: [privacy@eur.nl](mailto:privacy@eur.nl)

**Contact for mental health support:** [info@pharos.nl](mailto:info@pharos.nl) Phone Number: 030 234 9800

### Research Project Overview:

**Purpose of the Study:** This study aims to investigate how changes in Dutch integration policies affect the sense of belonging of Turkish refugees. It specifically examines the experiences and perspectives of highly educated Turkish newcomers during or after the civic integration process under the 2013 and 2021 Integration Acts. The focus is on how these policies influence their sense of belonging as a soft aspect of integration, highlighting the importance of including migrant perspectives in evaluating integration policies.

### Short Definition of Key Concepts:

**Sense of Belonging:** The emotional and social connection that refugees develop with the host society, reflecting their feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and identification with the broader community.

**Social Integration:** The process through which newcomers become active and accepted members of the host society, participating in its social, cultural, economic, and political life. i.e. Learning language and cultural skills, achieving social status through work, education, or citizenship, forming social relationships across groups and developing a sense of belonging and emotional connection to society.

**Autonomy:** The ability to have control over one's own life without dependence on others—that is, to make decisions free from external pressure, based on one's own values, beliefs, and desires

### Legal Basis for Data Processing:

The processing of your data is based on your explicit and informed consent.

### Confidentiality and Data Protection:

To protect your privacy and ensure confidentiality, the following measures will be taken:

#### 1. Anonymization:

You will be assigned a pseudonym to replace your real name in all transcripts and research documents. Any identifying details, such as exact locations, dates, or other personal information, will be omitted or altered to protect your anonymity.

#### 2. Data Security:

All digital files containing your data will be securely stored. After transcription, audio recordings will be deleted from this software to further protect your privacy and ensure compliance with data security regulations. Data will be for plagiarism concerns secured at the school system of my supervisor Data Vault.

3. **Restricted Access:** Only the researcher (Zeynep Kurban) and the research supervisor (Arjen Leerkes) will have access to the collected data.

**Data Retention:**

Your data will be securely stored until 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2025, after which it will be deleted from personal devices stored securely at supervisors' data base.

**Your Rights as a Participant:**

As a participant in this study, you have the following rights under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR):

- Right to Access: You can request access to your personal interview data.
- Right to Rectification: You can request corrections, erasure, request restrictions to your own personal interview data.
- Right to Withdraw Consent: You may withdraw your consent at any time.
- Right to Lodge a Complaint: You can pledge a complaint with a supervisory authority if you believe your rights have been violated.

**Special Categories of Data:**

By participating in this study, you consent to the collection and processing of the following special categories of personal data:

1. Racial or ethnic origin
2. Location of residence (e.g., municipality)
3. Age
4. Education status
5. Employment status
6. Family situation
7. Language level
8. Living situation
9. Legal situation
10. (Mental) health status
11. Sex (gender)

By signing this form, you confirm that you have read and understood the information provided, and you give your voluntary, informed consent to participate in this research study.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

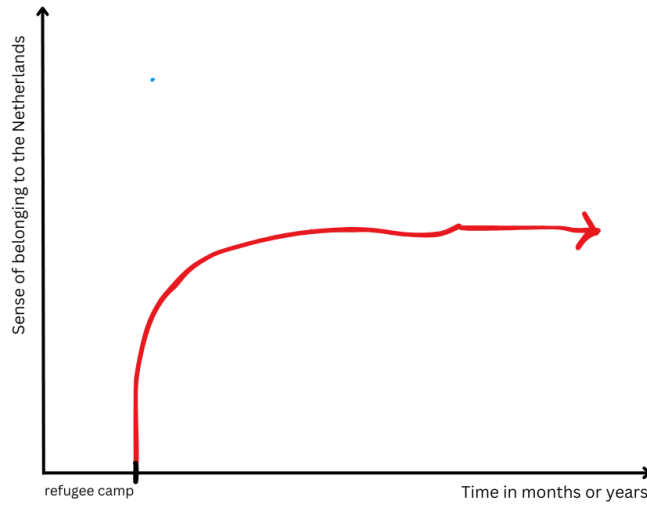
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: Zeynep Kurban Researcher's Signature:

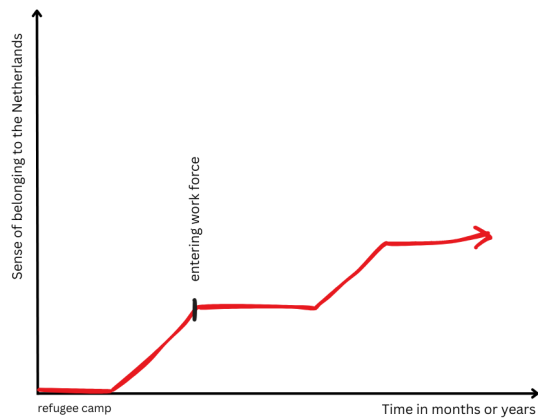
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### Appendix III: Visuals Sense of Belonging trajectory drawings

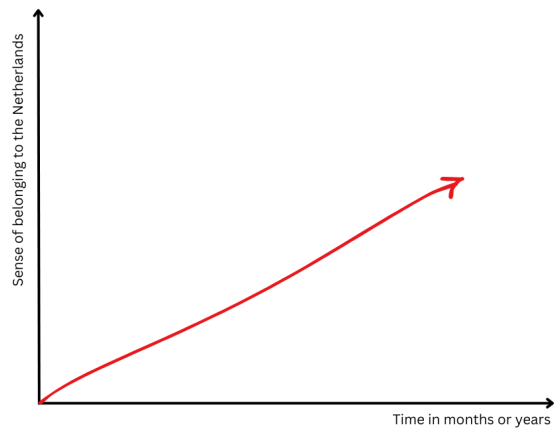
Interview 1: Ali Wi2013



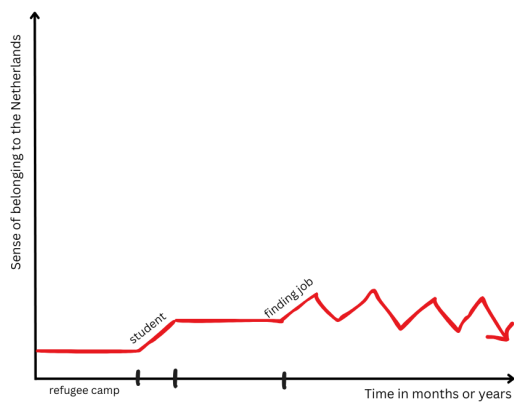
Interview 2: Aliye Wi2013



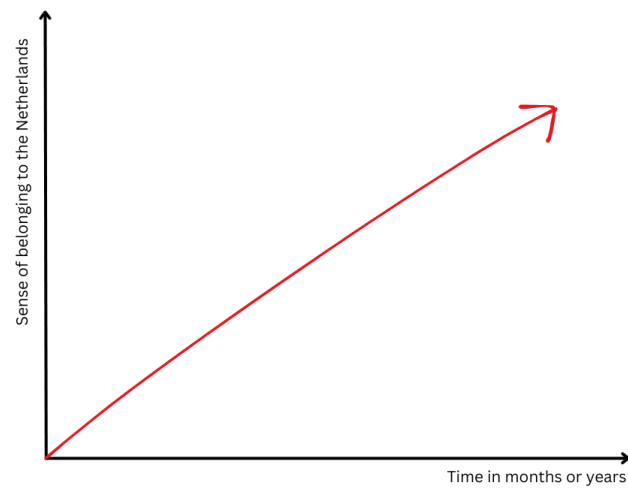
Interview 3: Ahmet Wi2021



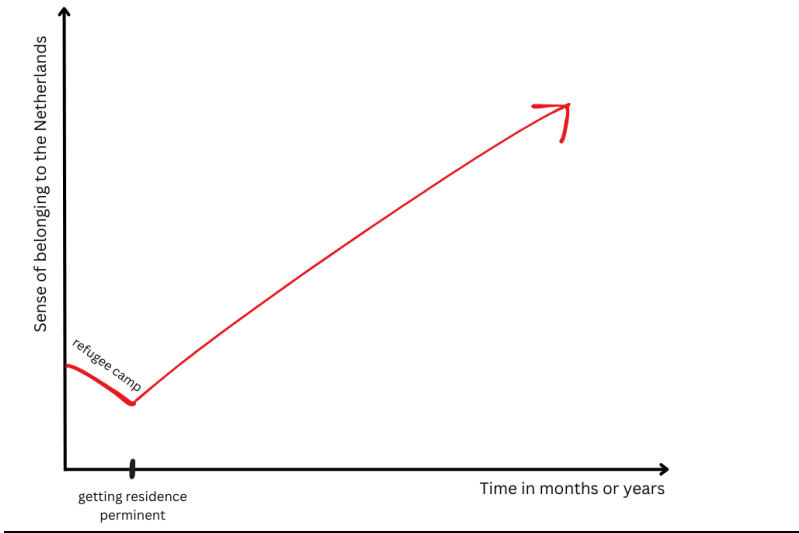
Interview 4: Deniz Wi2013



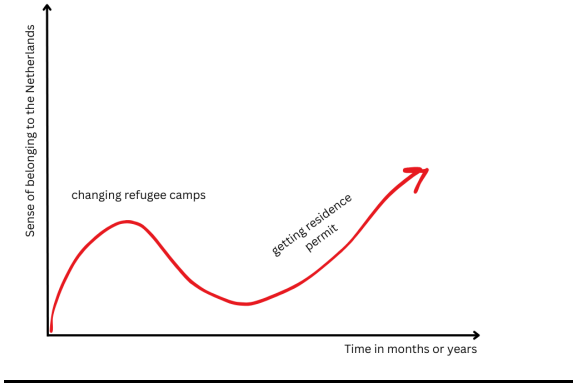
Interview 5: Fatih Wi2013



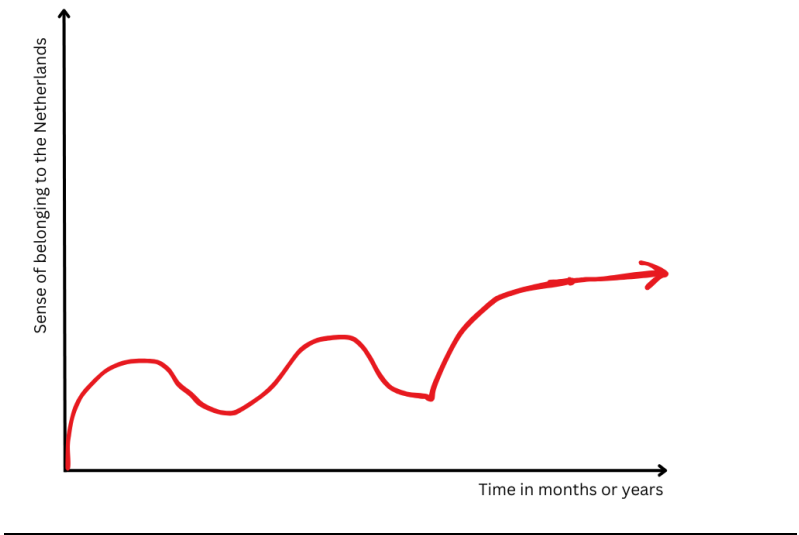
Interview 6: Sena Wi2013



Interview 7: Cagla Wi2021

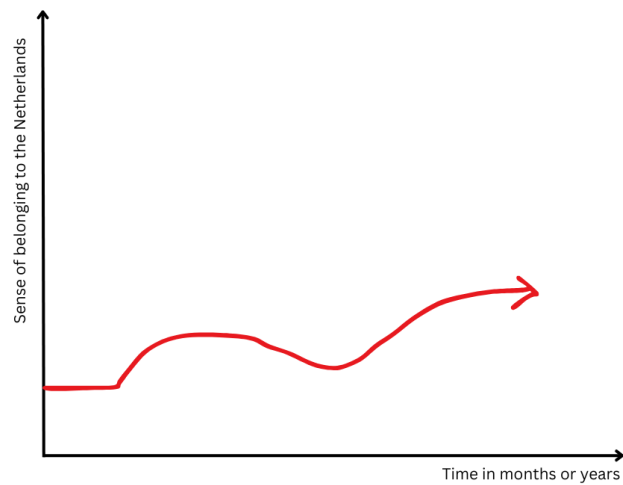


Interview 8: Elif Wi2021

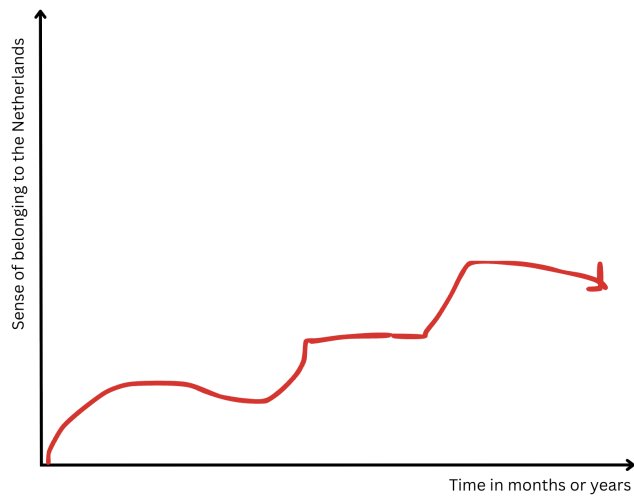




Interview 9: Mehmet Wi2021



Interview 10: Zehra Wi2021



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