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## **An Analysis of European Union Policy towards Syrian Refugees**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In 2015, millions of refugees, mostly Syrians, knocked the door of Europe for protection against war and violence in their home countries. The number of refugees that entered Europe in 2015 made only 0.2 percent of total Europe's population, considerably low number than other refugee hosting countries. In fact, for a continent as wealthy as Europe, the influx of refugees could be easily managed but European Union was unable to bring a common policy to cope with it. European Union already divided by the Eurozone crisis experienced further divisions due to refugee influx. The polarization in European politics and society reached the highest point since the Second World War. The failure of Social Democracy and center politics in solving the crisis created space for either right-wing or left-wing populist parties that won many seats in both European and national parliaments, while in some countries even managed to make governments.*

**Keywords:** *Arab Spring, European Union, Multiculturalism, Refugee Crisis, Syria*

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### **Background**

In 2015, millions of refugees knocked the door of Europe for protection. The refugee crisis marked the largest mass migration in the European Union since the Second World War. Millions of people fled into Europe surviving the perils of war, poverty and starvation. The Syrians constituted the largest group of these migrants who fled to Europe. This geo-political event has since sparked a fierce and heated debate among the public and stimulated a rise in political populism across the European Union.

On one side, large pro-immigrant groups expressed humanitarian concerns and pointed at the moral duty of Europe to help the refugees. Some of the pro-immigrant left-wing groups also came forward and welcomed the migrants. On the other hand, a large number of anti-immigrant groups were worried about the threat that refugees - mostly Muslims - would pose to the security of their country. Some on anti-immigrant side even expressed their concerns about the identity, cultural, religious and economic fallout of migrants on European society.

These ideological differences in Europe map onto a left–right dimension of political spectrum, where the political left placed more emphasis on helping and providing aid to refugees, while the political right placed more emphasis on tough policies and stricter border controls to protect the safety of European citizens. The refugee crisis hence created a strong distinction in political attitudes between the left and right (Julia Emmer, 2017). Resultantly, the political parties that demand less of a European Union are on the rise and aims to bring back more power to the nation states (Postelnicescu, 2016).

### **Material and method**

The influx of refugees into Europe has created a panic among the European countries. The European Union is unable to bring about a common EU policy to overcome the crisis and seems divided due to refugee influx. In this background, this study aims to analyze the response by European Union and its member states toward Syrian refugee crisis. It also aims to analyze the polarization in European society, the decline of multiculturalism, globalism, and the rise of nationalism. It does so through qualitative analysis of secondary data by basing its analysis on content analysis from newspapers, journal articles, documents, books and other sources.

Gholam Khiabany writes that the current refugee crisis is a product of humanitarian interventions. According to him the roots of the problem lie not in the inequality but in the production and maintenance of that inequality. Khiabany terms the response of liberal states towards refugees, as ‘illiberal’ (Khiabany, 2016 ).

Maria Hoel has divided the responses into three distinct categories such as Liberal, Restrictive and Moderate. (Hoel, 2015). Philippe Fargues and Christine Fandrich, however, recommend that EU should establish a Regional Protection Programme (RPP) by increasing refugee resettlement, continue positive asylum procedures in the EU, visa facilitation and family reunification for Syrian refugees. (Fandrich, 2012/14).

The surveys conducted so far suggest that European public prefer Christian over Muslim asylum seekers and those who can contribute in economic development of the country. (Kirk Bansak, 2016). Stephen Zunes opines that terrorist attack have strengthened xenophobic feelings, anti- immigrant sentiments and the electoral position of far right political parties in Europe. (Zunes, 2017). Moreover, Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski *and* Ronald Benedikter state that after a long constructive evolution of the European ideals of democracy and human rights, nationalism is once again on the rise and the European ideals are on a reversing course. (Roland Benedikter, 2017).

Sergio Carrera, Steven Blockmans, Daniel Gros and Elspeth Guild critically highlights the European Union’s policy dilemmas regarding refugee crisis and puts forward some guidelines for the next phase of European agenda on migration (Sergio Carrera, 2015). According to some scholars the 2008 financial crisis and the massive influx of Syrian refugees into Europe were the two major factors affecting the voting patterns (Vappu Tyyskä, 2017).

They claim that first, it is the ‘North-South divide’ where southern European countries such as Italy and Greece are vulnerable to the refugees coming through Mediterranean. Secondly, it is the “East-West divide’ where several eastern

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countries such as Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary have refused to accept any further refugees. Hungary even built a four meters high border barrier in 2015 after which the influx of refugees declined greatly (Press, 2016). The present reality is that the asylum seekers can only make a single application for the protection within EU and that application must be in the first country they enter (Hampshire, 2015).

Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban has called refugee influx as poison and raised concerns that the refugees (mostly Muslims) would pose a threat to Europe's Christian identity (Robert Mackey, 2015). He also warned that if Europe let the refugees into its borders, the continent would be dominated by Islam in the future (Brunsdon, 2017).

### **Historical perspective of the Refugee Crisis in Europe**

In May 1945 there were almost 40.5 million people displaced, excluding the Germans who fled Soviet invasion and those non-German forced laborers. When the war ended, thousands of Germans and Jews left their native lands and sought refuge in other countries. Moreover, one million refugees remained in the camps the Western Europe even after the war (Hoel, 2015). The refugee crisis brought by the Second World War pushed the international community to respond it organizationally and legally.

For this reason, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) (Britannica, 2018) was established in 1946 to deal with the refugee crisis brought by the Second World War. Most of the European countries issued visa restrictions against the citizens of Yugoslavia that helped reduced the influx of refugees into Western Europe. (Hoel, 2015). Resultantly, in 1951 26 countries gathered in Geneva, Switzerland and after weeks of tough legal disputes, the delegates adopted the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees (Hoel, 2015).

### **European Union's Asylum Policy**

Concrete work on European Union's asylum policy first began in mid-1980s when five EU member states France, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium, decided to abolish internal borders in order to enable the completion of the Single European Market. These countries argued that the abolition of internal and strengthening external borders will help in the cooperation regarding asylum and refugee policies. Therefore, in 1985 these five European Union member states signed the Schengen agreement which introduced common visa policy, right to asylum and strict external borders.

In 1993 Justice and Home Affairs were incorporated into European through Maastricht Treaty. It helped European Union build a mechanism of integration, asylum and immigration policy, handling of third country migrants and the rules applicable to the migrants crossing the external borders. (Hoel, 2015). The Amsterdam Treaty of 1999 that brought the Schengen agreement into the framework of European Union authorized the European commission was given authority to enact measures dealing with temporary protection, asylum, immigration policy and burden sharing.

The commission also became responsible for the actions to be taken against illegal immigration, conditions of entry and residence and third country citizens taking up

residence in other European Union Member States. Similarly, in 2009 more reforms came into effect with the Lisbon Treaty that put an end to the pillar system. According to the treaty the European Union Member States were bound to share the competences in the field of asylum and immigration. This treaty provided the binding acts to both the European Union and its member states.

### **Policy Response of European Union**

The European Union responded to the refugee crisis by creating specific agencies, allocating additional resources and introducing a European Coast Guard and Border Agency. However, the intervention has not been effective in sharing the responsibility for asylum seekers between European Union member states (Massimo Bordignon, 2017). All the main European Union countries, with the exception of France, saw a growth rate of over 100% in the inflow of asylum seekers and refugees from 2013 to 2015, reaching 300% in Austria and Germany.

Eurostat survey of 2017 suggests that the crisis was still ongoing in 2016, although at a reduced pace after the Turkey-EU agreement. For example, in the late 2016, more than 280,000 people applied for asylum in the European Union, two times the number in the late 2015 (Massimo Bordignon, 2017).

The European approach to the Syrian refugee crisis has primarily been to contain the refugees within countries neighboring Syria. European Union is providing large financial support for refugees in those countries, only to stop the influx into Europe and strengthen European borders. However, the numbers of refugees admitted into Europe are significantly low as compared with the overall number of refugees in the countries neighboring Syria. Moreover, there is wide variation within Europe, some European countries, such as, Sweden and Germany, have opened their borders to Syrian refugees to a much greater extent than other European states.

Moreover, some of the European countries treat Syrian refugees in appalling ways which clearly violate European and International law. Countries, such as Sweden, Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom, have highly developed laws regarding asylum and other forms of international protection; others, such as Bulgaria and Greece are in the initial stages of developing international protection and asylum laws and procedures. The difference of wealth and economic stability are remarkable among European countries, which strongly affect the capacity to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as immigration and refugee problem more generally.

Germany for example, is the largest economy in Europe. It has received one of the largest number of migrants so far. Statistics indicate that Germany's policy towards migrants has been comparatively more liberal and welcoming. Italy, due to its geo-strategic position is a country of first entry on Europe's southern borders. It has experienced an increase of refugee influx from Syria due to the same reason. In 2013 alone, more than 11,000 Syrians sought to enter Italy, mainly by crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt and Libya. However, Italy's treatment of Syrian and other refugees has also been criticized on various fronts, particularly with respect to refugees arriving by Mediterranean Sea.

Moreover, in Italy lengthy detention is common, and conditions, particularly in Lampedusa and Sicily, are inadequate and overcrowded. The treatment of authorities at times is appalling and allegedly includes abuse by authorities (HRW,

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2017 ). According to the report of Guardian, the European Union's Policy is also allegedly leading to abuse of migrants in Italy. It includes the 'hotspot' system and the failure of relocation scheme, which means more refugees are living in Greece and Italy in poor conditions (Patrick Kingsley, 2016).

Furthermore, with the formation of new government in Italy, the anti-immigrant political forces like Five Star Movement and Northern League are shaping the new political atmosphere. The far-right in Italy have rejected to take any further migrants and puts the pressure on other European Union member states to take in the boats that are coming to the Italian shore.

Greece, just like Italy, is also one of the first countries Syrian refugees enter through the Mediterranean Sea. Due to its geo-strategic position, Greece has seen a significant increase in numbers of refugees from the Syrian region since 2011. The accurate number of Syrian refugees in Greece is difficult to measure because majority of the refugees have not claimed asylum there. The fact however remains that most of the refugees have been unable to access the dysfunctional asylum system or they hoped to enter a more refugee-friendly European country.

The response of France represents a different story. The refugee crisis of 2015 made France to choose an unconventional path. The French government under François Holland rejected the European Commission proposal to accept at least 40,000 refugees that is far less than Germany. But after the crisis developed further, François Holland decided to accept 30,000 refugees. Soon after accepting the refugees, the anti-immigrant protests started in France that created troubles for the already troubled government (Muzalevskaya, 2016).

While President Macron has indicated to apply a humanitarian method by speeding up the processing of asylum seekers and apply firmness to deport those who do not qualify, Hungary has completely gone on to the extreme of not accepting migrants. Hungary has experienced a sharp increase in Syrian refugee inflow, particularly in 2014 and 2015. Hungary received 54.125 Syrian asylum applications between April 2011 and September 2015. However, the number of Syrian refugees accepted by Hungary is far-less than other European Union countries because of its geographical location.

Moreover, as Hungary is located near Greek-Turkish border and the refugees enter Hungary through Western-Balkan route. From 2013 to 2015 Hungary has only pledged to accept thirty Syrian refugees. (Hoel, 2015) The response of Hungary can be termed as restrictive as it began to fence the borders, change its asylum policy and declare a state of emergency in six of its counties. Victor Orban has openly rejected the proposals from European Union to accept more refugees, instead it has adopted the 'Zero Refugee Policy'. (Bayer, 2016) The issue of refugees is highly emotive in Hungary and the Far-right anti-immigrant political forces have capitalized on it and created a sense of hatred against the refugees in society. He even told that European Union must expel Hungary for treating asylum seekers "worse than animals" (Matthew Weaver, 2016)

Sweden so far has remained one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. From 2011 to 2014, Sweden provided €84,436,191 in aid. Besides that, Sweden has one of the best asylum systems in the world and has become a primary destination for Syrian refugees coming to Europe.

From 2011 to 2013, Sweden provided international protection to approximately 25,000 Syrians, more than any country outside the Syrian neighborhood.

Sweden is famously known for its welcoming attitude toward refugees and its commitment to family reunification. In 2014, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt made a speech urging Swedish people to “open their hearts” to refugees seeking shelter. A year later, the population of just 10 million welcomed more than 165,000 asylum seekers to Sweden, more per capita than any other European country (Cerrotti, 2017). Sweden also suspended all forced returns to Syria in the early 2012. The approval rate for Syrian asylum applications in Sweden has improved dramatically since 2012, when only 28% of asylum claims were approved, to an 80% approval rate in 2013. The Migration Board of Sweden estimated that in 2014, approximately 60,000 Syrians have claimed asylum in Sweden. In 2013 September, Sweden announced that it would grant asylum and permanent residency to all Syrians accepted for international protection in Sweden. The response of Sweden towards Syrian asylum applications is in line with its usual approach of granting permanent residence to people in need of international protection. Therefore, Sweden became an ideal destination for the refugees for many reasons.

During the recent refugee influx, the Austrian government and thousands of volunteers initially welcomed Angela Merkel’s ‘Open Door Policy’ and welcomed the refugees on the border. The Austrian people thought that how will they integrate and how will they find a work if the influx was that large. (Pongratz-Lippitt, 2016) Consequently, the Austrian government has put a condition on refugees that they have to register themselves in the country they are fleeing before entering Austria. (Lee, 2018) Some writers agree that it will be a huge challenge for Austria to introduce an integration program for the refugees of different backgrounds. (Kurz, 2017)

The Netherlands admitted 60,000 refugees. However, due to long processing time of granting asylum, refugees are stuck in these empty prisons for at least six months. According to a report, Netherlands approved almost 70 percent of the asylum applications in the first nine months of the refugee crisis far more than the European Union average approval rate which was 47 percent. (Majewski, 2017). The overall response of the Netherlands with the arrival of the new government can be termed as restrictive and it can be predicted that the Netherlands will continue to tighten its immigration policy in future.

In Poland, the anti-refugee rhetoric of the Polish politicians appears to be effective only since couple of years. According to polls conducted by Public Opinion Research Center in 2015, 74 percent of the poles agreed to the idea that refugees should be welcomed but according to a survey conducted in 2017, 75 percent of the poles opposed the idea of accepting refugees (Brzeziński, 2017). The Spanish government has largely dissociated itself from its neighbor nations in the Mediterranean, from which migrants and asylum seekers arrive (Lanni, 2016). But a series of other measures taken by the Spanish government have cast doubt on the notion that the Spain is maintaining a policy of tolerance (Hedgecoe, 2018).

Analysts suggests that civil society, for example, employers, immigrant associations, charities, trade unions and community-based organizations, should also work with the government to integrate migrants and refugees. Such organizations have to cooperate in the implementation of policies of the

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government, develop effective mentorship programmes, welcome the newcomers to the community and help with the appraisal of refugees' skills (Massimo Bordignon, 2017).

### **The Political Fallout of the Refugee Crisis**

The surge of refugees into Europe has resulted in the collapse of the political parties of establishment and it has destroyed the center politics. The European political scenario is now facing a large division and has moved towards both sides of the political spectrum. The refugee crisis featured prominently in the anti-immigrant rhetoric of right-wing political parties across the Continent and has even pushed United Kingdom to go to a referendum over the decision to quit the European Union. However, in some countries the left-wing has also gained considerable social and electoral support.

Furthermore, at the same time, the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels have also fueled public fears about terrorism. These attacks killed hundreds of people and the situation was capitalized by the anti-immigrant far-right political parties. As Pew Research Center survey illustrates that the threat of terrorism, lack of security and refugee crisis are very much related to one another in the minds of European public. According to polls, in eight of the ten European countries, half of the population or more holds the view that refugee influx on large scale can increase the likelihood of terrorism and shatter the security in their particular country (Richard Wike, 2016).

Most people in European countries disapprove the way the European Union has dealt with the refugee crisis (Connor, 2018).

The public remain fearful of security fallout. As survey findings show the extent to which the linkage has nonetheless been made in the minds of European public between refugees and concerns over terrorism (Helen Dempster, 2017). According to the PEW research survey half of the respondents in eight out of ten European countries believe that migrants will increase the possibilities of domestic crime (Richard Wike, 2016).

Besides security, people from various regions around the world shows clear concerns about the economic consequences of accepting migrants and refugees. Studies have found that half of population surveyed worried about immigrants and refugees imposing an economic burden on their particular countries (Helen Dempster, 2017). Moreover according to PEW research survey, in eight out of ten countries surveyed, almost half of the population raised concerns that migrants will have a negative impact on the economy of their countries (Richard Wike, 2016).

Another major issue is that of identity. The refugee crisis has created a polarization in in European politics and society with clearly separating the internationalists and nationalists. That is to say, on one hand, the Liberal internationalists in European politics are attached to the principles of European Union and aims to create a borderless utopia. While on the other hand the xenophobic politicians and far-right political parties are aiming to create fences on border and holds the view that migration is a modern barbaric invasion that will destroy civilization and culture.

In fact, 2015 refugee crisis created a sense of identity crisis in European society and people started asking themselves who we are and how shall we define ourselves? However, the migrants that entered Europe in 2015 were only 0.2 percent of entire

European population and it seemed manageable for the continent as wealthy as Europe (Nougayrède, 2016). Therefore, the refugee crisis was not a problem as much bigger as the media and far-right organizations have tried to create it.

In fact, Europe did not have a refugee crisis but the refugees were confronted with crisis of Europe. That is to say, if there were no financial collapse in 2008 the situation would be entirely different. The question is identity his multilayered and many factors play role in shaping the concerns. Some believe that migrants are a threat to their Christian identity as most of the refugees that are entering Europe are Muslims. Some have even developed a perspective that there is no such thing as European identity and we should be identified with our national identity. Moreover, the identity concerns also involve the racial, linguistic and historical aspects.

Culture is another element of this whole refugee issue. A Chatham House survey conducted in 2016, of 10,000 people in ten European countries found that 55% of the population agreed that all further migration from essentially Islamic countries should be immediately stopped. Austria, Poland, France, Hungary, and Belgium in particular showed a strong sentiment towards this statement (Helen Dempster, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The refugee crisis in particular has been the most heated debate among European public and member states. The destruction of the center parties and polarization on both sides of the political spectrum is shaping the political scenario in Europe. The longstanding alliances of the political parties crashed in the recent elections paving way for the left-wing and right wing populist parties. However, most of the rhetoric on the issues of refugees is ranging between right and ultra-right wing narrow spectrum while the left wing has not found the space in most of the countries.

The European Union has failed to project a unified response. Instead, in media and politics most of the voices allowed are those who are arguing for sealing off the internal borders and unrestrained Nationalism. Besides that, some even argue for the militarization of the European Union's external borders and a notorious deal with Turkey. The right to protection and asylum, compassion for refugees, aid and hospitality are all banished from the official discourse.



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