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Research on the European Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on EU Governance

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Abstract. This paper examines the 2015 European refugee crisis as a structural stress test of EU governance rather than a one-off humanitarian emergency. Triggered primarily by the Syrian civil war, the influx of over 1.2 million first-time asylum applicants in 2015 overwhelmed the EU's asylum architecture and exposed unresolved tensions between sovereignty and solidarity. The paper asks whether the failures revealed by the crisis merely reflect technical shortcomings or a deeper structural tension at the heart of European integration. Focusing on law, political science, and international relations, the analysis identifies three converging dimensions of governance dysfunction-the built-in pathology of the Dublin system, the East-West fracturing of solidarity, and the erosion of the Schengen regime-and critically assesses the 2024 New Pact on Migration and Asylum. It concludes that the Pact does not resolve the crisis's underlying tensions but institutionalizes them, leaving the EU more pragmatic in its instruments yet further diminished in its normative commitments.

Keywords: European Refugee Crisis, Dublin System, Border Control, EU Governance, Asylum Policy

1. Introduction

The refugee crisis that erupted around 2015, triggered primarily by the Syrian civil war, became one of the most severe governance crises the European Union had faced since the end of the Cold War. Within a single year, over one million refugees and asylum seekers reached Europe via the Mediterranean routes [1], with many continuing onward through the Western Balkans routes- a movement that exceeded the absorptive capacity of the existing asylum system. Yet the deeper significance of this crisis lies not merely in itself, but in the way it exposed and intensified fundamental tensions within the EU's governance structure - between collective solidarity and national sovereignty, between humanitarian obligations and border security.

Existing scholarship on the European refugee crisis can be grouped into three broad strands: legal critiques of the Dublin system and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS); political-science accounts of divergent member-states' responses; and international relations assessments of the EU's external arrangements, particularly the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Schimmelfennig has observed that crises do not automatically deepen integration: while the Eurozone crisis produced tighter institutional integration [2], the Schengen crisis instead led to a return of national border

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controls.This contrast provides a useful starting point for understanding how the crisis affected European integration.

This paper examines the European refugee crisis as a stress test of EU governance, asking whether the failures it exposed merely reflect technical shortcomings or a deeper structural tension between sovereignty and solidarity at the heart of integration itself. The paper then examines the scale and causes of the crisis, the dilemmas of EU refugee governance, and the reform pathway represented by the 2024 New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and finally returns to what these tensions mean for the future of European integration.

2. The scale and impact of the European refugee crisis

International law draws a clear distinction between a refugee and a migrant. Under the 1951 Geneva Convention, a person who is outside their country of nationality because of a well-founded fear of persecution is a refugee. By contrast, an immigrant is a person who voluntarily, permanently, or semi-permanently leaves their country of citizenship, moves to another country and settles down there. However, this binary fails to capture the complexity of contemporary cross-border movement. As Valenta et al. demonstrate in their paper on Syrian Mobility, a single individual's legal status frequently shifts throughout the migration journey [3]. For example, an internally displaced person may become a temporarily protected refugee in Turkey, an asylum seeker upon reaching Greece, and an irregular migrant if refused.

This phenomenon of "mixed migration" has direct implications for EU policy. Asylum and migration management instruments rest on legal categories, but real-life migration experiences constantly unsettle them.

The migration flows during 2015-2016 were unprecedented in post-war European history. According to Eurostat, more than 1.2 million first-time asylum applications were registered in the 28 countries in the European Union in 2015 alone- more than double the figure of the preceding year - with Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis accounting for the largest source-country groups [4]. Germany received the highest share of the applications, with approximately 440,000 in 2015, followed by Hungary, Sweden, and Austria, while frontline states such as Greece and Italy bore the brunt of initial Mediterranean arrivals [4].

The impact of the crisis was felt across three interlocking dimensions. From a humanitarian perspective, the mass arrivals exposed the inadequacy of reception infrastructure and produced acute protection gaps, particularly for unaccompanied minors and vulnerable groups. From a security standpoint, the crisis became entangled with concerns over terrorism and irregular border crossings, fueling political demands for reinforced external control. Economically, the fiscal and labor-market implications proved highly uneven across member states, deepening pre-existing north-south and east-west asymmetries.

Yet the crisis has not ended. Although irregular arrivals fell sharply after the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement [5], sustained pressure along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes [6], combined with new displacement triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war from 2022 onwards [7], has kept refugee governance at the center of EU politics for nearly a decade.

3. The analysis of the reasons for the refugee crisis

Understanding the European refugee crisis requires distinguishing between proximate triggers of displacement and the deeper structural conditions that sustained it. At the proximate level, the most direct driver was the Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011 and by 2015 had displaced more than

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half of Syria's pre-war population. According to UNHCR data, the conflict had created over 5.5 million registered refugees by the end of 2016, making it the single largest cause of forced displacement worldwide [8]. Parallel crises in Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and parts of sub-Saharan Africa added further pressure: Afghans and Iraqis together accounted for roughly a quarter of EU first-time asylum applications in 2015 [4]. Valenta et al. emphasize that Syrian flight followed a staged trajectory-first into neighboring states such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and only later, as protection conditions in transit countries deteriorated, towards Europe [3].

Yet these proximate conflicts were themselves shaped by deeper structural drivers. Kelley et al. demonstrate that the 2006-2010 drought in the Fertile Crescent-the most severe in the instrumental record-was made more than twice as likely by anthropogenic climate change, and that the resulting rural collapse and mass urban migration acted as a catalyst for the unrest of 2011 [9]. This linkage between climate stress, agricultural failure and political instability shows how environmental change and weak governance work together to make displacement pressures worse. Persistent development gaps between Europe and its southern neighborhood, combined with the political instability caused by external interventions in Libya, Iraq and elsewhere, further widened the structural divide that pushes migration northward.

Finally, EU policy itself has had mixed effects, both pushing and pulling migrants in different ways. The 2015 decision by Germany to suspend Dublin returns for Syrians, however humanitarian in intent, was widely interpreted as a signal that encouraged onward movement [2], while restrictive border policies adopted elsewhere did not so much halt arrivals as redirect them along more dangerous routes. The crisis, then, was neither purely external nor purely the EU's own making: it emerged at the intersection of distant conflicts, structural inequalities, and the EU's own policy choices.

4. The structure and dilemma of the EU refugee governance system

Three dimensions have emerged since 2015. The structural failure of the Dublin system, the fracturing of solidarity along the East-West axis, and the erosion of the Schengen regime. The Dublin system is the EU's legal framework for determining which member state is responsible for examining an asylum application. Its core logic is that the first EU country a refugee enters bears responsibility for processing their claim.

The first dimension is the Dublin system's built-in flaw. Under the Dublin Regulation, asylum responsibility falls on the first EU country in which an applicant arrives. As Maiani argues, this rule was designed for a steady, low-volume caseload and inevitably collapsed under the geographical asymmetry of the 2015 influx, when the burden fell disproportionately on Greece and Italy [10]. Maiani's central claim is that successive reforms have remained trapped "in a loop": every attempt to repair Dublin reproduces its underlying logic of first-country responsibility, while the solidarity mechanisms attached to it remain voluntary, weak, and contested. The 2015 emergency relocation scheme, which envisaged moving 160,000 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy, ultimately resettled only around 28,000-an outcome that exposed both the limits of mandatory quotas and the depth of member-state resistance [11].

The second dimension is the breakdown of solidarity between Eastern and Western European countries. Krastev interprets the open defiance of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia-who voted against the relocation scheme and largely refused to implement it-not simply as a lack of solidarity but as a "clash of solidarities" [12]. For these states, communitarian obligations to ethnic and national kin took priority over the EU's universalist humanitarian commitments. Krastev links this divergence to post-communist demographic anxieties: societies that have lost

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millions to westward emigration since 1989 have mixed feelings about open borders, and see migration not as an opportunity but as an existential threat. The divide is not, however, uniformly "East versus West": within Central and Eastern Europe, finer regional groupings such as the Visegrád Four operate as a more coherent veto bloc, while Romania and Bulgaria have at times taken more accommodating positions.

The third dimension is the pressure of the Schengen regime. By the end of 2015, seven Schengen states-Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Malta, Sweden and Norway-had reintroduced internal border controls, covering roughly 40% of the area's internal land borders [13]. Salomon and Rijpma argue that what was legally framed as a "temporary" derogation has in fact become quasi-permanent: a decade later, ten Schengen states still maintain internal border controls [14]. The deeper problem, for Salomon and Rijpma, is not the act of reintroduction itself but the Commission's reluctance to enforce the temporal limits set out in the Schengen Borders Code-a selective non-enforcement that quietly hollows out one of the EU's most tangible achievements [14].

Taken together, these three dimensions reveal that the crisis is not a contingent administrative breakdown but a structural condition: a Union that cannot agree on who is responsible, who must show solidarity, or what its internal borders mean.

5. Assessing the New Pact: internal solidarity and external partnerships

The structural dilemmas identified led to a long and contested reform process, which ended with the adoption of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in May 2024. This section examines three aspects of that reform: the substantive content of the Pact, the persistent challenge of internal responsibility-sharing, and the lessons drawn from external partnerships, in particular the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, formally adopted by the Council on 14 May 2024 after nearly four years of negotiations [15], comprises ten legislative acts and is scheduled to become operational by mid-2026. The Pact reallocates responsibility through the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, which replaces the Dublin III Regulation, and introduces mandatory border procedures, accelerated screening, and the controversial categories of "safe country of origin" and "safe third country". Wolff offers one of the sharpest critical readings of this reform [16]. While the Pact is publicly framed as a balanced response to the post-2015 governance crisis, Wolff argues that it institutionalizes an "embedded illiberalism": practices that were previously deployed as exceptions-fast-track border procedures, externalization, and the legal redefinition of protection thresholds-are now incorporated into the Union's permanent legal architecture. The Pact's adoption ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, she suggests, reflected less a principled consensus than a strategic accommodation of mainstream far-right migration discourse.

Internally, the question of responsibility-sharing remains unresolved. The Pact replaces fixed quotas with a flexible "solidarity mechanism" allowing member states to choose between relocating asylum seekers, providing financial contributions, or offering operational support. While this design avoids the political deadlock of 2015, Grimmel cautions that such compromises in wording tend to mask a deeper conceptual problem: member states have never shared a common understanding of what solidarity actually requires [17]. So long as solidarity functions as what Grimmel calls an "empty signifier"-talked about but not consistently put into practice-any responsibility-sharing scheme risks reproducing, rather than resolving, the East-West cleavage analyzed earlier.

Externally, the EU's reliance on partnerships with origin and transit countries has expanded considerably since 2016, with the EU-Turkey Statement serving as both a template and a cautionary tale. Ulusoy, drawing on a detailed analysis of the €6 billion Facility for Refugees in Turkey,

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demonstrates that the Statement marked a shift from a logic of Europeanisation (aligning Turkey with EU standards) toward a logic of transaction (paying for containment) [18]. While the Facility delivered substantial humanitarian assistance, it also weakened incentives for Turkey to develop rights-based migration policies with a structural approach and left the EU strategically dependent on a partner whose political trajectory it could not control. Subsequent agreements with Libya, Tunisia and Egypt have largely reproduced this transactional model [18].

Taken together, these three dimensions point to a deeper rebalancing of values and interests. The reform path adopted by the EU in 2024 prioritizes predictability and control, but at the cost of legal commitments that were once treated as constitutive of the European liberal order. Whether this trade-off proves sustainable will depend less on the technical implementation of the Pact than on the Union's ability to articulate-and act upon-a shared understanding of what solidarity, both internal and external, actually entails.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that the European refugee crisis is best understood not as a discrete event that peaked in 2015, but as a structural stress test that revealed the unresolved tensions at the heart of EU governance. The analysis identified three aspects-the built-in flaw of the Dublin system, the breakdown of the solidarity, and the erosion of Schengen regime-and traced how the 2024 New Pact on Migration and Asylum, rather than resolving these tensions, has translated them into a new institutional architecture. The reform path the Union has chosen prioritizes predictability and external containment, but at the cost of legal and normative commitments that were once treated as constitutive of European integration itself. In this sense, the crisis confirms Schimmelfennig's observation that a crisis does not automatically deepen integration: the EU has emerged not as more united, but as more institutionally pragmatic and normatively diminished [2].

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The word limit precluded sustained engagement with member-state-level variation beyond the East-West axis, with the experience of frontline states such as Greece and Italy, or with the lived perspectives of refugees themselves. Future research could examine three avenues: the early implementation of the New Pact after its 2026 operational date; the comparative effects of EU externalization arrangements beyond Turkey, particularly with Libya, Tunisia and Egypt; and the long-term implications of the Ukrainian Temporary Protection Directive for the EU's broader refugee-protection regime. Together, these directions would test whether the structural tensions identified here remain enduring in EU governance, or whether, under sustained pressure, they could be reshaped.

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