

Coming to Terms with the European Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis that hit the European Union (EU) and its member states during 2015–16 was just one in a series of crises over recent decades, but perhaps the most critical for the EU's resilience. This book shows how policymakers in the EU polity have tried to come to terms with the crisis. To explain how they reacted to the crisis domestically and jointly at the EU level, the study relies on an original method to analyze political processes. It argues that the policy-specific institutional context and the specific crisis situation, defined in terms of asymmetrical problem pressure and political pressure, to a large extent shaped the crisis response. The authors suggest that the way in which the refugee crisis was managed has resulted in conflicts between member states, which have been further exacerbated in subsequent crises and will continue to haunt the EU in times to come.

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Frontmatter

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Part I The Refugee Crisis in the EU and Its Member States: Our Approach in Context	1
1 Introduction	3
2 Theoretical Framework	19
3 Design of the Study	40
4 Crisis Situation: Policy Heritage, Problem Pressure, and Political Pressure	62
5 The Variety of Policy Responses at the EU and National Levels	85
Part II Policymaking: Actors and Conflict Structures	119
6 Conflict Lines in the Member States	121
7 Actors and Conflicts at the EU Level	152
8 Government Composition and Domestic Conflicts	173
9 Framing the Refugee Crisis on the Right	195
Part III The Dynamics of Policymaking	221
10 The Drivers of Elite Support in the Refugee Crisis	223
11 Dynamics of Politicization of Policymaking between Polity Levels	243
12 Dynamics of Policymaking in the EU–Turkey Agreement	275
	v

vi	Contents	
	Part IV Outcomes and Conclusion	297
13	Policy-Specific Conflict Configurations on the Demand Side	299
14	The Electoral Consequences of the Refugee Crisis	331
15	Conclusion	356
	<i>References</i>	379
	<i>Index</i>	397

Figures

1.1 The analytical building blocks of the theoretical framework	<i>page</i> 9
3.1 Policy action arenas at the national and EU levels	53
3.2 Policy action types at the national and EU levels	54
3.3 Initiator actor types at the national and EU levels	55
3.4 Issues at the national and EU levels	56
3.5 Frames at the national and EU levels	57
4.1 Refugee crises in Europe: number of asylum requests in the EU and in Germany, 1982–2020, in thousands	64
4.2 Monthly submissions of asylum requests in 2010–2019 as a percentage of the population	74
4.3 Asylum seekers and arrivals in Greece as a percentage of the population (arrivals are three-month rolling averages)	75
4.4 Number of asylum seekers and arrivals in Italy as a percentage of the population	76
4.5 Salience of immigration in national publics: Google trends and share of Eurobarometer respondents who consider immigration to be one of the most important issues	78
4.6 Political pressure: radical right vote shares by country, monthly vote intentions	80
5.1 Development of politicization of the policy response during the refugee crisis at the EU and national levels. (a) Sum of national politicization: smoothed curves; (b) average of national politicization: smoothed curves	87
5.2 Starting dates of the episodes in relation to problem pressure (asylum requests) and political pressure (public salience). (a) Frontline states; (b) transit states; (c) open destination states; (d) closed destination states (smoothed curves).	91
5.3 Thematic focus of policymaking at the EU level: development of issue-specific politicization over time	95
5.4 Politicization by episode type and level of polity	96
5.5 Share of border control actions by member state type and crisis period: percentages	101
	vii

viii List of Figures

6.1 Average level of conflict intensity by country and broad actor types as instigators (a) and targets (b)	130
6.2 Conflict scores for the four dominant conflict lines in the policy episodes	133
6.3 Relative strength of conflict lines in policy episodes (by country type: frontline states, transit states, open destination states, closed destination states)	136
6.4 Problem pressure, demand-side salience, and political pressure by conflict type	140
6.5 Average levels of politicization and support behind government policies across the policy episodes	141
7.1 Overall configuration of conflict structure at the EU level: MDS result	165
7.2 Politicization and its components by actor types: standardized averages. (a) Actor types; (b) actor camps	167
7.3 Politicization by broad actor camps and episodes: standardized averages	168
7.4 Politicization by episode and phase, average index value	170
7.5 The conflict structures at the EU level, by phase: MDS results	170
8.1 The sources of intragovernment conflicts in the refugee crisis	178
8.2 The sources of partisan conflicts in the refugee crisis	180
8.3 Ideological position (a) and distance (b) of governing coalitions in the refugee crisis	182
8.4 Government fragmentation and intragovernmental conflicts	184
8.5 Government ideology and partisan conflicts	186
8.6 Relationship between the content of the conflict and their partisan source	188
9.1 Differences in percentage use of frames between mainstream right and radical right actors	205
9.2 Frame type shares by country: percentages	206
9.3 Differences in percentage usage of themes between mainstream right and radical right actors	208
9.4 Theme type shares by country: percentages	209
9.5 MDS configuration of parties' relative proximity based on their use of frames	213
9.6 MDS configuration of parties' relative proximity based on their use of themes	214
10.1 The evolution of average elite support over time	233
10.2 The impact of problem pressure across country types, episode types, and crisis periods	238

List of Figures	ix
10.3 The impact of political pressure across country types, episode types, and crisis periods	238
11.1 Politicization of Greek episodes	252
11.2 Politicization of Italian episodes	259
11.3 Politicization of the episodes in Hungary	265
11.4 Politicization of German episodes and EU episodes concerning asylum rules	269
12.1 Politicization of German episodes, phase 1	282
12.2 Politicization of Greek episodes, phase 1	287
13.1 Policy-specific distribution of support, by country type. (a) Relocation quota; (b) Dublin regulation; (c) EBCG; (d) externalization	306
13.2 Transnational conflict configuration according to citizens' policy positions in the refugee crisis: MDS solution	310
13.3 Development of immigration attitudes over time, mean factor scores by country	313
13.4 Policy support by immigration attitudes. (a) Relocation quota: support; (b) Dublin regulation; (c) external border control; (d) internal border control; (e) externalization	317
13.5 Policy support by party family. (a) Relocation quota; (b) Dublin regulation	321
13.6 Transnational and domestic conflict configurations according to citizens' policy positions in the refugee crisis: OLS regression coefficients	323
13.7 The effect of immigration attitudes on the six policy positions in frontline states and other states	325
13.8 Transnational and domestic conflict configurations according to citizens' policy positions (p = pro/c = contra immigration) in the refugee crisis and immigration attitudes: MDS solution	326
13.9 Transnational and domestic conflict configurations according to citizens' policy positions in the refugee crisis and party families: MDS solution	327
14.1 The salience of immigration, measured as a share of immigration issues over total issues	337
14.2 Average weighted position of each party-system across time	339
14.3 Interparty salience for each party family on immigration issues per election, 2002–2020	342
14.4 Share of core sentences of each party that refer to immigration, 2002–2019	344
14.5 Average party family positions on immigration per election, 2002–2019	347

Tables

3.1	Average rejection rates 2010–14 for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Nigeria, and annual budgets for national asylum systems in 2018 (in million euro)	<i>page</i> 43
3.2	National-level policy episodes in the refugee crisis	46
5.1	Correlations between politicization and problem/political pressure, by member states	89
5.2	Basic characteristics of the episodes	115
6.1	The distribution of broad actor types across the forty domestic refugee crisis episodes (column percentages)	127
6.2	The distribution of broad targeted actor types across the forty domestic refugee crisis episodes (column percentages)	128
6.3	The dominant conflict line across the refugee episodes	135
6.4	The distribution of dominant conflict lines by types of episodes (frequencies and column percentages)	140
7.1	The distribution of actor types across the six EU-level episodes	158
7.2	The distribution of targeted actor types across six EU-level episodes	160
7.3	Executive decision making by level, percentage shares	161
7.4	Executive decision-making at EU level and policy stage, percentage shares	162
7.5	Conflict intensity scores for the dominant conflict lines, by episode	163
7.6	Episode by phase, shares of actions	169
9.1	Frames and frame classification in our analysis	200
9.2	List of themes in speech analysis	201
9.3	Frame distributions in speech analysis and PPA: percentages	203
9.4	Distribution of themes in our database: percentages	207
9.5	Frequencies of frames per party: percentages	212
9.6	Frequencies of themes per party: percentages	215

List of Tables	xi
10.1 The impact of problem pressure and political pressure on levels of support behind government policies	236
10.2 Actor-specific models predicting levels of support for government policies	240
11.1 Overview over the four types of cross-level policy interventions	247
11.2 Cross-level politicization of policymaking episodes: OLS-regression coefficient, <i>t</i> values, and significance levels	250
A11.1 Politicization of episode types	274
12.1 The distribution of actor types in the EU–Turkey episode, by level and country	277
12.2 The distribution of target actor types in the EU–Turkey episode, by level and country	278
12.3 Executive decision-making in the EU–Turkey agreement by level and country, share of top leaders	279
12.4 Role of actors from different countries by policy stage, percentages	281
12.5 Conflict scores for the dominant conflict lines, by episode	282
12.6 The salience of the different types of actors in the four episodes of phase 1: percentages	283
12.7 The salience of the different types of actors in the three episodes of phase 1: percentages	287
13.1 Transnational polarization by policy and country, Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic	308
13.2 Immigration attitudes by country (ordered by share against)	312
13.3 The case of Sweden	314
13.4 Domestic polarization between pro- and anti-immigration groups, by policy and country, Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic	316
13.5 Comparison of overall polarization, transnationally and domestically by attitudes and party family, across policies: Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic	320
14.1 Patterns of party family positioning toward the radical right and issue ownership of immigration in the elections after the refugee crisis	349
14.2 Vote changes per party family, comparing the election immediately before and after the refugee crisis	350
15.1 Summary of member state characteristics	364

Preface

This study presents key findings of our research on how the EU and its member states managed the refugee crisis of 2015–16. This was not the first refugee crisis in Europe, nor has it been the last such crisis. The most important previous crisis was linked to the Balkan wars in the early 1990s, when the break-up of former Yugoslavia led to the inflow of roughly 1.5 million refugees into the EU, and into Germany in particular. The refugee crisis we study here peaked in 2015–16, when Europe received no less than 2.5 million asylum applications, mainly from Syrian refugees who had fled the civil war in their country, but it lingered on at least until spring 2020, when the focus of attention abruptly turned to the Covid-19 pandemic. More recently, the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered the greatest inflow of refugees into Europe ever. At the end of May 2023, more than 8 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe. Although the number of refugees who needed to be accommodated far exceeded that of the crisis that we focus upon, this new crisis proved to be much less contentious in the EU and its member states. As a matter of fact, the 2015–16 refugee crisis posed a greater threat to the EU than the inflow of refugees that resulted from the Ukraine war has.

During the last two crisis-ridden decades, the EU has had to face other crises as well. Thus, the 2015–16 refugee crisis was preceded in fall 2008 by the great financial crisis, which, in Europe, mutated into the Eurozone or sovereign debt crisis – a crisis that lasted until the third Greek bailout in summer 2015. It was followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which exploded in spring 2020, and partially overlapped with the Brexit crisis, which was precipitated by the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and ended provisionally with the adoption of the agreement on the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU at the end of 2020. In addition, more “slow-burning” crises, like the climate crisis and the social crisis, loomed in the background – latent crises with a constantly increasing potential political fallout. In this period of the European “polycrisis,” when the sum of the interdependent challenges

has been creating a compound effect that is expected to exceed that of its individual parts, the 2015–16 refugee crisis was a crucible that, for a moment, brought out the underlying tensions of the EU polity and tested its resilience to the core. This was not a “good” crisis for the EU, and our study of how the EU polity managed it shows in detail what has gone wrong. The way the EU and its member states have come to terms with this crisis relied on short-term expedients, which exacerbated internal tensions, compromised the polity’s humanitarian values, exposed it to blackmail by authoritarian third countries, and prevented it from reforming its dysfunctional Common European Asylum System.

To empirically analyze questions related to the EU polity’s crisis management, we use an innovative method that we have developed for the study of political processes, policy process analysis, a method that builds on related methods such as protest event analysis (Tilly 2008; Hutter 2014), political claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999), and contentious episode analysis (CEA; Bojar et al. 2021). This method focuses on the analysis of the public debate on policymaking episodes, and we apply it to key episodes of policymaking during the 2015–16 refugee crisis at both levels of the EU polity. While requiring a great coding effort, this methodological approach has the advantage of combining quantitative analyses with the reconstruction of qualitative narratives. In this volume, we try to systematically illustrate our quantitative results with detailed accounts of specific episodes that put some flesh on the bare quantitative bones. The downside of this approach is that it requires some effort from the reader as well, since it is not possible to do justice to the qualitative details of the episodes in just a few words.

Our theoretical approach is inspired by the polity approach that is being elaborated in the SOLID project into which our team has been embedded. This project is an ERC synergy project that brings together scholars of different orientations and disciplinary backgrounds and that relies on generous financial support from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 810356). The polity approach is still a work in progress, but a paper by the three principal investigators of the project provides a first outline (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). We have benefited enormously from debates within the SOLID project to elaborate our theoretical framework for the present study. Even if our colleagues might not be entirely convinced by our way of adapting the common framework for our own purposes in this study, we are heavily indebted to them and would not have been able to come up with the framework we use here without having been constantly exposed to their constructive critique in the context of the project. For us, this has been a synergistic experience, and we are very grateful to our colleagues in

the SOLID project, which is composed of the team of Maurizio Ferrera (including Niccolò Donati, Anna Kyriazi, Joao Mirò Artigas, Marcello Natili, Alessandro Pellegata, and Stefano Ronchi) at the University of Milan and the team of Waltraud Schelkle (including Kate Alexander-Shaw, Federico Ferrara, Joe Ganderson, Daniel Kovarek, and Zbig Truchlewski) at the London School of Economics and Political Science/European University Institute (EUI), in addition to our team at the EUI (which also includes Alex Moise and Chendi Wang).

We have also received detailed feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript from Andrew Geddes, Ruud Koopmans, Frank Schimmelfennig, and an anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press – for which we would like to express our gratitude. We would also like to thank Maureen Lechleitner, our administrative assistant at the EUI; Eleonora Scigliano, the project manager of the entire SOLID project at the Feltrinelli Foundation; and Manuela Corsini, our project manager at the EUI, without whose daily support our study would not have been possible. We are also grateful to the coders involved in the data collection process for this part of the project: Maria Adamopoulou, Claudia Badulescu, Viola Dreikhausen, Marcus Immonen Hagley, Afroditi-Maria Koulaxi, Eleonora Milazzo, Fred Paxton, Adrian Steinert, Zsófia Victória Suba, and Mikaella Yiatrou. Together with us, they went through thousands of newspaper articles and for countless hours coded what is now condensed in a few dozen figures and tables.