

Chapter 1

Displacement in Europe today: Where do we stand after 1945?

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Introduction

Conflict, geopolitical tensions, and the resulting large-scale, unplanned movement of millions of people largely defined Europe during the latter half of the 20th century. By October 1945, 2,000,000 people from the Soviet Union, 1,500,000 from France, 500,000 from Italy, 200,000 from Yugoslavia, and tens of thousands of Poles and other European displaced persons were either repatriated or emigrated from Germany (Nasaw, 2020). During the Cold War, ideological differences and physical separation between socialist countries and Western Europe transformed asylum-seekers into strategic assets that were used to embarrass socialist countries by calling attention to the “bankruptcy of a system from which people had to escape, often at great peril” (Keely, 2001: 307). And, at the end of the century, new institutions and legal frameworks were tested as the fall of Yugoslavia and subsequent war on Europe’s eastern borders displaced millions of civilians. These events, in part, inspired the moniker “The Century of Displacement” which in many respects is a fitting characterisation as conflict and migration dominated the contemporary political arena and unsettled the lives of countless individuals. However, the effects of these events were not confined to the 20th century. They served as catalysts that transformed the political dynamics of the continent, leading to the emergence of new institutions and ideologies which continue to colour the lens through which politicians view and respond to similar events.

The policy and public perception towards migration and immigration has changed dramatically in the past 25 years as Europe has solidified its external borders and erected bureaucratic barriers to regulate the flow of immigrants. Acceptance of refugees which was once the pinnacle of Western liberal ideology is now a controversial topic among politicians. Yet paradoxically, there has never been more free movement throughout the continent. Many countries strive to uphold their commitment to human rights and refuge but operate with the dual mandate to fortify themselves against “security concerns” and the unpredictability of global crises. As a result, migration opportunities, and the rights afforded to those on the move, have developed unequally and continue to diverge as reactions to displacement events garner increasingly polarised responses. Given the divergence from the historical norms of the 20th century, this raises the question: what pre-empted these changes?

The aim of this chapter is to examine the transformation of European migration policy, bringing attention to the causal link between displacement events in the 20th century and contemporary European migration policies. The chapter is structured in two parts: first, it presents a historical perspective that chronicles the most significant displacement events in the second half of the 20th century and details the environment in which the institutions, laws, and values that have most significantly influenced contemporary migration policy were developed; second, the policies and discussions related to the arrival of migrants from Syria in 2015 and Ukraine in 2022 will be discussed with specific attention on how legal obligations and strategic considerations concerning displaced persons have evolved over time and what effect that has had on policy decisions and outcomes. Here, we adopt a more critical perspective and analyse how trends and legal and cultural artefacts from the 20th century have served to influence contemporary policy.

Postwar institutions

Among the lessons learned from the Second World War was the need to establish specialised institutions to oversee the migration of vulnerable individuals and safeguard the protection of human rights within the continent, separate from individual governments or leaders. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was one of these institutions and was established to address the protracted nature of the ongoing situation of displaced persons in Europe as the last displaced persons' centres closed in the early 1950s. The original mandate of the UNHCR was conceived with a similar scope to its predecessors — as a temporary solution to a specific regional problem. When it was first founded, its scope was fairly limited. This was partly due to rising Cold War tensions restricting its authority only to persons displaced before 1951 who experienced individual persecution. While there was both a geographic and temporal limit on the organisation's ability to intervene, it subtly sought to expand its mandate by arguing later displacements were the result of earlier political changes, and over time developed its own autonomous values separate from founding nation states.

Today, as the primary international agency dedicated to refugees, the UNHCR sets standards for protection, assistance, and solutions, shaping policies and practices worldwide. Its influence extends to mobilising resources, advocating for refugee rights, and fostering cooperation among governments and organisations to ensure the well-being and protection of millions of forcibly displaced individuals. The agency's positive track record and non-political mandate have enabled it to become a trusted and 'principal actor' in global politics and to exert influence on migration policy at a high level (Loescher, 2001: 6). The UNHCR's mandate defines it as exclusively responsible for refugees, thereby creating a class of individuals who must be distinct and distinguishable from other border crossers. Given the UNHCR's role as a legal advocate and the political influence it wields, it is the *de facto* arbiter of which vulnerable migrants receive assistance. In the context of a polycrisis where economic, political, and environmental conditions change simultaneously to generate mass displacements, the task of separating 'deserving' political migrants from 'undeserving' economic and environmental migrants becomes increasingly political rather than objective (Hamlin, 2021). The obligation of the UNHCR to arbitrate who deserves protection and ultimately to be an advocate for some and not others compels the agency to weigh its commitment to social realism against realist tenets that guide nation states to act in their own best interest and who ultimately resettle refugees and fund the organisation. Also, the dependency on external funding constricts the agency's ability to serve as an impartial diplomat as its existence is predicated on continuing support from relatively few states. This limits its ability to openly critique refugee status determination and the border control policies of the Global North (Cuéllar, 2006: 36).

The postwar period also spurred the creation of several new laws and international organisations to uphold them which would recast countries' legal obligations towards displaced persons, namely the passage of the fourth Geneva Convention, the establishment of the Council of Europe, and proliferation of civil society organisations. Unlike the first three Geneva Conventions, the fourth Convention, which was adopted in August 1949, dealt exclusively with civilians displaced as a result of war. As much as the document is a historical tool to identify and rectify past injustices (e.g. the creation of neutral zones and the treatment of non-combatants), it was also drafted with an eye towards tempering future conflicts amidst the backdrop of rising Cold War tensions.

The Council of Europe was established under similar pretences as the Geneva Convention, with the aim of promoting awareness of, and respect for, human rights. It adopted the European Convention on Human Rights as a cornerstone of its mission to uphold human rights and went a step further by establishing an enforcement mechanism through the creation of the European Court of Human Rights which was tasked with enforcing these laws and adjudicating potential human rights violations. A supranational body dedicated solely to the enforcement of human rights represented a major leap forward in Europe's commitment to these values, but both the Council of Europe and Geneva Convention suffer from the same fundamental weakness in that they require states to uphold to these principles.

Growing concerns about reliance on the cooperation of states and multinational organisations, prompted by events such as the Red Cross' inaction when faced with evidence of a German-led genocide during the Second World War (Forsythe, 2001: 20), were one of many factors that sparked a new wave of civil society organisations in Western Europe after 1945. Civil society, which is not expressly apolitical, collaborated closely with state actors to develop the social state and also to complement international organisations like the Red Cross by contributing diverse expertise and grassroots connections, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy of humanitarian responses.

Asylum seekers as political instruments in the 20th century

The Cold War marks the next major vector which left a lasting impact on how subsequent generations perceived and reacted to displaced persons. In an attempt to promote and defend their contrasting economic ideologies, countries in both Eastern and Western Europe passed laws and created institutions to manage labour and mobility which contributed to diverging attitudes towards migration. The ideological differences with respect to migration did not play a huge role during the Cold War itself since East-West mobility was limited, but these differences would later contribute to the composition of contemporary states and perceptions of migration.

Demographic changes

In the period after the Second World War, immigration to Western Europe was still relatively subdued. From 1950 to 1959, Western European states had a net loss of 2.7 million inhabitants as transnational ties abroad facilitated emigration (Bade, 2003). However, this period marked the inception of two trends which would attract millions of people in the coming decades and transform many Western European countries into cosmopolitan societies. The first was the recruitment of guest workers to fill labour shortages in Northwestern European countries. Between 1953 and 1958 industrial production increased 30% in Northwestern Europe (Dietz & Kaczmarczyk, 2008), and due to the population losses sustained during the Second World War and disinterest in blue-collar labour among generally well-educated populations, these countries looked abroad to fill the vacancies. Recruitment started in pre-industrial regions with high unemployment in neighbouring countries (e.g., Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia), but steadily expanded outside of Europe as these populations were tapped and Cold War dynamics limited East-West migration (e.g., Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey). In total the guest

worker schemes facilitated the migration of almost fifteen million people to the continent and established sizeable minority populations in destination countries (Meissner, 1993).

At the same time, the collapse of European colonial empires gave rise to the return of European settlers and the emigration of non-European collaborators towards continental Europe. The process of decolonisation started in the late 1940s with migration from Kenya, India and Malaysia to Britain; from North Africa to France and Italy; and from the Congo to Belgium. Both Portugal and the Netherlands also accepted and resettled large numbers of former settlers as they withdrew from their overseas territories. It is estimated that the total number of migrants of European descent resulting from decolonisation was between 5.5 million and 8.5 million (Bade, 2003). While these trends are not directly linked to displacement or forced drivers of migration, the impact they had on shaping the composition of subsequent generations would in turn influence public perceptions of migration.

In contrast to the rise in immigrant populations that took place throughout Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century, Eastern Europe, especially East-Central Europe, remained ethnically homogeneous in the postwar period (Gang & Stuart, 1999). Citizens of the Soviet Union did not have the right to freely migrate internally let alone internationally. Migration was carefully managed to maintain an economic balance, monitor dissenters and more easily surveil populations. Movement from one's location of residence, even for short visits, required permission from state officials. A high degree of direct official supervision and limited permission to move kept local populations fairly homogenous and by 1970, only roughly six percent of the population were considered migrants (Ibid). The Soviet Union also placed restrictions on foreign travel and immigration that were equally coercive despite the labour shortages. The risk that immigrants might influence Soviet Union populations or be used to transmit information was too great for a regime "that viewed itself as internationally and domestically embattled" (Light, 2012: 401).

Asylum during the Cold War

Western states essentially established a new, temporary international refugee regime by selectively enacting and interpreting the 1951 Refugee Convention. States implemented a broader interpretation of the refugee status determination process by recognizing arrivals *prima facie* as bona fide refugees and bucking existing guidance on durable solutions by prioritising resettlement as a preferred solution.

The West's strategic consideration of asylum seekers during the Cold War is exemplified by the response to the failed revolution in Hungary of 1956. The revolution initially emerged as a spontaneous expression of popular discontent and demands for political reform but was quashed within days and ultimately resulted in brutal suppression by military units from the Soviet Union and the continuation of communist control. Upwards of 200,000 political dissidents and civilians sought refuge abroad in neighbouring countries, fleeing the resulting generalised violence. Roughly 20,000 displaced persons entered Yugoslavia with the remainder seeking refuge in Austria, later resettled throughout 37 Western countries over the next three years (Cellini, 2017). The rapid recognition and resettlement of the Hungarians prompted policy changes given the strategic benefits they possessed. A later declassified U.S. intelligence document described the situation

as an unprecedented opportunity to produce propaganda against the Soviet Union and for the collection of intelligence on a “Soviet Bloc” country (Coriden, 2007: 1). To admit more migrants than was expressly allowed by existing quotas, the United States passed the Hungarian Escape Act of 1958 to grant an additional 30,000 Hungarians refugee status. The government justified the increase as a continuation of previous policies to only admit those who played a strategic role in Cold War dynamics and only recognising people fleeing communist states (Bon Tempo, 2008).

The widespread application of *prima facie* recognition and the policy of resettlement over repatriation were largely confined to the scope of the Cold War. This was partly because the popularity of the resettlement programs was predicated on a few key assumptions, namely that most refugees would arrive from the East, that flows would be limited and sporadic given emigration from the Soviet Union was controlled, and that there would be domestic political support for anti-communist policies. Since these changes were not directly motivated by the need to resettle refugees and restore order to the international community, but by an ancillary function which was to embarrass communist states, they were selectively invoked as precedent in similar future situations. While the strategic refugee regime during the Cold War was limited in duration, it had consequences for future displacements. The decision to assist migrants on strategic grounds on par with purely humanitarian reasons would in turn widen the binary between refugees and other border crossers and reinforce perceptions of who ‘deserves’ to be protected, ultimately providing future generations with the justification for neglecting certain vulnerable migrants.

Europe’s liberal values, tested

Organised violence on the territory of the former Yugoslavia came on the heels of the decline of communism in Europe and final stages of the Cold War in the summer of 1991. The ensuing conflicts, which lasted for the better part of the next decade, resulted in the loss of over 100,000 lives and the forced displacement of more than three million citizens (Nation, 2017). While the weakening of communism in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Soviet Union coincided with the collapse of Yugoslavia, the conflicts cannot be neatly attributed to being a proxy or spin-off of the larger Cold War. The looming transition from socialism to a market democracy and desire to reap the spoils of a prosperous Yugoslavia certainly played a role in the conflict, but the core dynamic and catalyst of the war was militant nationalism (Silber & Little, 1997). This distinction is important as the motivations and nature of warfare created unique legal and ethical challenges. The desire to consolidate power along ethnic lines and build homogenous societies contributed to a lack of militarily constraint and the escalating use of terror (Nation, 2017). As a result, systematic violence against noncombatants and the generation of displaced persons became a strategy in itself, contributing to the atrocities and war crimes that defined the conflict.

While the fall of communism was not directly responsible for the outbreak of conflict in Yugoslavia, the uncertainty and anxiety associated with changing geopolitical order did have an effect on the delayed and tentative intervention from the West. In the 1990s, as the Soviet Union stood on the brink of collapse, Western policy towards displaced persons contracted significantly. The change in attitude towards migration was driven by anxiety that large numbers of people would enter Western Europe, no longer fleeing communist persecution, but rather poverty in the wake of its collapse. Even though this

East-West mass migration never manifested, the fear of the migration itself prompted Western Europe to take preventive policy action. Intergovernmental organisations such as the Council of Europe, the International Labour Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development worked to coordinate the policies of Western European countries through agreements that sought to structure and regulate flows between receiving and sending states (Loescher, 2001). These restrictive migration policies and general attitude towards migration extended to Yugoslavia and contributed to later policies of containment despite the fact that the driver of the displacement was fundamentally different. Further, the lack of direct and decisive involvement from Western states would test the resolve and robustness of refugee and peace regimes created in the 20th century and hinted at a new attitude and policy towards displaced persons outside of the Cold War context.

Amidst these challenges, the UNHCR underwent significant changes in its approach. Simultaneously, it also faced an image crisis due to involvement in protracted situations, leading to policies limiting refugees' choices and tarnishing its credibility (Loescher, 2001). In response to reduced opportunities for conventional asylum, the UNHCR adopted a new *modus operandi* in the 1990s focusing on in-country protection, prevention, and solutions (United Nations, 1992). This expansion of functions faced severe tests in the former Yugoslavia.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war in Bosnia in early 1992, the UNHCR reinforced its commitment to preventive protection, deploying personnel to monitor human rights abuses on the battlefield and provide assistance. Aligned with Western states' containment policies, this approach aimed to mute the need for migration by providing resources directly to affected civilians. However, a miscalculation on the nature and scale of the war rendered even the monitoring of human rights abuses ineffective. The UNHCR, frequently impeded from establishing a presence in areas of ethnic cleansing, found itself powerless in the face of evictions and expulsions (Loescher, 2001). Over three million individuals experienced displacement or sought refuge within the former Yugoslav territories, with Bosnia and Herzegovina accounting for 2.2 million people. Over 800,000 sought sanctuary in various European nations, while 10,000 to 15,000 pursued asylum in overseas locations (Valenta & Strabac, 2013). As the number of vulnerable individuals ballooned from 15 million at the conflict's start to 26 million in 1996, the UNHCR faced the impossible task of delivering humanitarian assistance and legal aid to those on both sides of the conflict.

Despite missteps in their approach to the conflict, the UNHCR was restricted in its capacity to provide assistance due to limited cooperation from Western states who were reluctant to accept asylum seekers. Responding to a large number of internally displaced persons, many countries imposed strict immigration controls, limiting appeals for refugee eligibility decisions and creating barriers for those escaping war, persecution, or seeking new job opportunities (Silber & Little, 1997). The widespread closure of borders to deter unwanted refugee and migrant inflows expanded significantly beyond Cold War-era measures, driven by a new geopolitical landscape and anxiety surrounding mass flows of migrants from the former Soviet Union. Instead of providing legal protections, the UNHCR and Western states attempted to contain or prevent international migrants by providing direct humanitarian assistance and temporary protections. Missteps and lessons learned prompted the creation of institutions like the International Criminal Court and the Temporary Protection Directive, aiming to investigate, prosecute, and deter crimes against humanity and coordinate responses to mass influxes of displaced

persons. By the end of the 20th century, the perception of displaced persons had shifted significantly with the changing world order. Cold War tactics were supplanted by domestic anxieties surrounding migration and integration, transforming 'the refugee' from a symbol of Western liberal values into a burden that strained social resources and sparked divisive debates.

Displacement in the 21st century

During the 20th century, displacement in Europe was largely an internal affair, while during the 21st century displaced populations mostly originated from outside the continent, prominently from Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. One of the key differences regarding displacement between the 20th and 21st centuries has been the aggravation of historical drivers of displacement, such as violence and conflict, alongside emerging factors such as climate change (Braun, 2023). The combination of these issues has resulted in a historically high number of people compelled to leave their homes. At the end of 2022, the UNHCR declared that over 108.4 million people were displaced worldwide, the highest number recorded to date (UNHCR, 2023). This has had significant repercussions not only on a global level, but also on the European level because after the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Europe was once again required to manage significant immigration originating from inside the continent. Other recent events have also highlighted the need to address displacement in Europe, including the Syrian civil war in 2011, instability in North Africa (Lynch, 2017), and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, which all resulted in a significant influx of refugees and migrants into neighbouring countries in the Middle East as well as into EU territory. In the case of Afghanistan, the country has experienced decades of conflict and has a long history of displacement since the 2001 U.S. invasion and even as far back as the Soviet Union invasion in 1979 (Vine et al., 2020). Indeed, the displacement that occurred after the withdrawal of coalition forces, the fall of the Afghan government and the takeover by Taliban forces has marked the "eighth" phase of Afghan displacement since 1979. In a report for the International Organisation for Migration, Afghans are labelled a "forgotten" refugee group, with attention shifting to others such as those fleeing Ukraine (Iqbal et al., 2022).

The immigration of displaced persons has become a source of contention as EU member states on the national and transnational levels have adopted a 'crisis mode' approach. Since the influx of over one million refugees in 2015, many EU member states have felt compelled to counteract a perceived loss of control over arrivals at their borders with policies that aim to reduce migrant arrivals. Consequently, the EU's approach to asylum and migration policy has been described as myopic in responding to the refugee influx through improvisational policy measures, and the gradual shifting of asylum responsibilities to countries outside the EU (Rasche, 2023).

Unlike the 20th century where displacement took place primarily between European states, the EU is no longer the origin but the destination point for many people seeking protection and safety. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the significant role played by Western countries, including many EU states, in various conflicts, especially in the Middle East, forcing people to flee. This is particularly the case with Iraq and Afghanistan where military actions by US and European forces have been a major cause of displacement to EU countries.

To date there are no studies solely examining the impact of EU military interventions on displacement but Brown University has conducted research into the number of refugees caused by the various conflicts following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, to which several EU countries contributed militarily. This suggests that the eight most violent conflicts in which the US was involved as part of the 'War on Terror' - Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, northwest Pakistan and the Philippines - resulted in at least 37 million people fleeing their homes (Vine et al., 2020: 1). Most wars occurred in Middle Eastern countries and these nations have until today been amongst the main countries of origin for refugees in the EU (ibid.). Apart from violence-driven displacement, climate change is another major factor driving those affected by sudden or gradual climate-exacerbated disasters to leave their places of origin. While Western industrialised countries have historically produced high levels of emissions which led to the current climate crisis, countries in the Global South emit less but bear the brunt of the consequences, which can lead to climate-induced displacement (Braun, 2023).

Contribution of Western countries in violence-driven displacement in the Global South has barely been recognised in debates on migration and refugees with displacement in non-EU countries often being seen as being brought about by self-inflicted violence or the aspiration for migrants to benefit from welfare systems in high-income EU countries. Particularly, in the case of the 'refugee crisis', the role of Western countries, including European countries in precipitating displacement is often neglected.

The violence-driven mass displacement in the Middle East has come at a high cost for those seeking protection and taking the decision to migrate towards the EU. The migration routes have become longer and more perilous. In 2014, a record-breaking 219,000 Mediterranean crossings occurred, where individuals from the northern coasts of Africa and Turkey journeyed by boat to reach the shores of Europe. Later that year, the International Organisation of Migration started to record migrant fatalities, corresponding to when the Mediterranean Sea became a site of escalating numbers of migrant deaths. From 2014 until November 2023, 28,248 missing migrants have been recorded (IOM, 2023), turning the Mediterranean into the "largest cemetery" – a term also used by Pope Francis (ECRE, 2022). Daily news coverage of overcrowded migrant boats, shipwrecks, and constant reports of deaths at sea have reached a state of normalcy in reporting on migration journeys across the Mediterranean. This has transformed the sea's historical image as a crossroads of civilisations to one of being the European Union's "invisible fence" (Kassar, 2014).

The evolving meaning and (un)making of 'Fortress Europe'

A paradigm shift that has defined migration policy and public sentiment towards displaced persons in the 21st century is the development of 'Fortress Europe'. The term suggests that Europe, by fortifying its borders, is creating a metaphorical fortress to keep out asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. The term, especially among human rights advocates, is used to criticise the EU's investment in deterrence and infrastructure that is undermining the principles of asylum and humanitarian protection, as outlined in international law. While the term itself is not new – its origins date back to occupied territory controlled by Nazi Germany (Tava, 2014) – it has seen a reemergence in the 21st century as voters and policymakers have generally reoriented themselves towards a more sceptical approach towards migration in general. Anti-immigration political groups in Europe

even embrace the term 'Fortress Europe' for their own agenda and have reinforced the idea in their anti-immigration policy stance. The co-party leader of the German far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, Alice Weidel, has claimed in 2023 that the AfD "wants to turn the EU into a fortress against migrants to protect our homeland, and we do that together with our European partners" (Politico, 2023). This implies working with other right-wing movements across Europe and placing opposition to immigration at the centre of their policy aims.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, more than 1,700 km of border fortifications have prevented irregular migrants from crossing into Europe (Martin, 2023) which represents the equivalent of 12 Berlin Walls (Rigby, 2023). Yet the EU defines itself as "an area of protection for people fleeing persecution or serious harm in their country of origin" (European Commission, 2023a). With the establishment of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in 1999, different regulations have gradually been introduced "to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally in an open and fair system – wherever they apply" (ibid.). At the end of the 20th century instead of erecting new borders, borders were dismantled for the first time through the Schengen Agreement. The Agreement, which enabled the free movement of people, goods and capital within participating countries, has been widely regarded as one of the most influential integration methods and historical moments in the EU (Anderson & Bort, 2001). The Agreement essentially made Europe 'borderless' or, as described in a brochure by the European Commission:

On a continent where nations once shed blood to defend their territories, today borders only exist on maps... The creation of the Schengen area is one of the greatest achievements of the EU and it is irreversible. Now, free movement makes Europe smaller and unites us (European Commission, 2015).

While it was adopted at the end of the 20th century, the Schengen area was first envisioned several decades earlier. Systematic identity controls were still in place on the border between most member states. The motivation for abolishing border controls was economic rather than political (Salomon, 2023). In 1990, the Schengen Convention proposed the complete abolition of systematic internal border controls and a common visa policy. Controls at the internal borders between EU member states have been formally abolished since 1995 and border controls within the Schengen area "are meant to be a thing of the past" (The Economist, 2018).

Since 2015, border controls have been reinstated by five member states on a quasi-permanent basis. The first instance was in response to the 2015 'refugee crisis' and terrorist attacks in France, and subsequently in 2020 to counter the spread of COVID-19 (Salomon, 2023). The reintroduction of border checks as a chain of reactions after 2015 was interpreted as the dislocation of the Schengen area, as a "Schengen crisis" (Börzel & Risse, 2018) and the "death of free movement" (Le Figaro, 2015).

This evolution of Schengen and the temporary reintroduction of border checks suggests that there is a high dependency between enabling free movement in the EU territory for millions of its citizens on the one hand and the need to re-erect border controls for those who are not automatically deemed entitled to enter this territory on the other. The different legal tools and frameworks contained within the CEAS, the EU migration regime, ultimately decide which displaced person deserves protection and which one is to be kept out of the EU. Unlike the previous century, the current age has witnessed a more

contentious response to displacement in Europe. While a new era of free movement for 400 million EU citizens was heralded through the Schengen agreement and led to the abolition of border checks, the celebration of a 'borderless' Europe would only last until high numbers of non-European refugees reached the borders of the EU (Ekim, 2016).

The 2015 'refugee crisis' — a historic test for Europe?

By the end of 2016, approximately 5.2 million refugees and migrants had arrived on Europe's shores, primarily from war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (UN Refugees, 2023). Germany, France, Italy and Sweden were the primary destinations for most of these refugees, while southern European countries like Italy and Greece faced heightened challenges as they became migration hotspots due to their geographical locations (UNHCR, 2023a).

The displacement resulting from this violence was later dubbed the 'refugee crisis' and has since become a watershed moment in the 21st century for the EU's migration and asylum policies. The events of 2015 were characterised as a 'crisis' primarily because the governments of various EU member states struggled to exert control over the unfolding situation (van der Brug, 2021).

A core part of the refugee reception system in Europe is the Dublin Regulation, which determines which EU member state is responsible for processing asylum applications from individuals seeking international protection within the EU. The Dublin Regulation was originally signed in 1990 and is today also called Dublin III, having been amended several times with its third version coming into force in 2013. Whereas the Schengen Agreement regulates internal migration, the Dublin Regulation is part of the larger CEAS and provides a framework to manage external migration. However, the influx of migrants in 2015 shed light on some shortcomings of the Dublin Regulation and how it lacked a solidarity mechanism allowing the distribution of refugees across EU member states. The regulation placed a disproportionate responsibility on countries located at the external borders of the EU, such as Greece and Italy, as they were often the first points of entry for many refugees and asylum seekers and therefore were required to process the majority of the applications. These countries struggled to cope with the large numbers of arrivals and to provide adequate facilities and resources for processing asylum applications. For its part, Germany decided to welcome over a million Syrian refugees, by temporarily setting aside the Dublin Regulation (Davis, 2020).

The general acceptance of displaced persons did not last for long. Soon after, several member states began to reintroduce border patrols and tighten their national borders. This is still possible within the Schengen Agreement as Article 29 holds that internal border controls can be maintained for more than six months and up to two years if the EU Council of Ministers recognises a systematic threat to the entire Schengen zone. This was invoked for the first time in Greece in May 2016, due to the high surge in arrival numbers and later by Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The German government also made a temporary decision to reinstate border controls with Austria, arguing the move was necessary given the exceptionally large influx of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees attempting to enter Germany without proper documentation. Ironically the same German government that had previously opened its borders to those seeking refuge on humanitarian grounds was now essentially refusing entry and diverting refugees elsewhere (Etzold, 2018).

Understanding the context in which the Dublin Regulation and Schengen Agreement were created is key to understanding the differences in levels of solidarity, political discourse, and arrivals between EU countries. When these regulations were first introduced, they were not envisioned as a mechanism to facilitate responsibility sharing, highlighted by the shortcomings of the Dublin Regulation in 2015 and the disproportionate burden placed on EU border states. The inadequacy of these policies set off a chain reaction where EU member states, frustrated by perceived lack of support, started to build borders and barriers to manage the arrivals unilaterally. The development of these barriers prompted other countries deeper within Europe to construct their own walls, fences, or reintroduce border controls to avoid taking on asylum responsibilities (Armstrong, 2023). In addition to the reintroduction of borders, externalisation policies became an important measure aimed at reducing migrant arrivals on European shores. With a lack of unity in the EU states' response towards relocating refugees among member states and a shift to the right in political discourse, European decision makers have increasingly been looking for refugee policy solutions outside Europe.

Ukrainian displacement and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive

Russia's military offensive against Ukraine, which escalated on 24 February 2022, caused the fastest and largest forced displacement of people in Europe since the Second World War. By the end of 2022, around 7 million people out of a population of 38 million had fled the country, the majority of them to EU member states. In total nearly a third of the Ukrainian population was forced to flee as an additional 5.9 million people were internally displaced because of the war (European Council, 2023). This was an inflection point for EU migration policymakers as for the first time in the 21st century there was a strong EU consensus on migratory policy. Already before the war began Ukrainian citizens were already eligible to travel into the EU without applying in advance for a visa since 2017 and therefore had earlier on less barriers in EU movement compared to other non-EU migrant groups (European Council, 2017). The EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD, see below) and similar national protection schemes across the EU quickly provided prima facie legal protections and access to residency for the nearly 5 million Ukrainians that registered (European Commission, 2023b). Given the Ukrainians quickly received legal protections and were able to move freely within the EU, they could select their chosen destination. Roughly one million refugees from Ukraine elected to stay in Poland, a neighbour and first country of reception for many. The highest number of refugees had in fact crossed the border to Russia, with 2.85 million recorded by UNHCR by October 2022 although after this date no reliable data is available. Many Ukrainian civilians had little choice but to escape from an active war zone and some were deported by Russian authorities but there is little information about their situation as they are outside the scope of the international protection regime (Kuzemska, 2023). Approximately 1.5 million people transited through Poland and continued to neighbouring countries such as Germany and Czechia, while 1.4 million people sought refuge in other western and southern EU countries. Unlike 2015, the first reception countries were different, with Eastern European countries such as Poland playing a more prominent role. As in 2015, the distribution of migrants across EU member states was uneven, with the UK, France, Italy and Spain together having received just half as many Ukrainians as Poland (UNHCR, 2024). However, unlike 2015, there was a general consensus and willingness among EU countries to accept Ukrainian refugees, exposing a double standard with respect to EU wide quotas

and relocation mechanisms (Tränhardt, 2023). According to a UNHCR survey, around 76% of Ukrainian refugees in Europe plan or hope to return to Ukraine one day, with a few returns already taking place, showing there is a lack of clarity for both Ukrainian refugees and their host country regarding the duration of their stay (UNHCR, 2023b).

EU 'selective' welcome of refugees?

By definition, the TPD is an emergency mechanism which is activated in exceptional circumstances of mass influx. It was originally adopted in 2001 following the large-scale displacement due to the armed conflicts in the Western Balkans, in particular from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (European Council, 2023). The introduction of the TPD signified a shift towards more long-term planning that was largely missing at the time. However, the recent activation of the TPD and conspicuous absence of its use in 2015, has opened the EU to charges of double standards in asylum policy. This situation is best illustrated by the fact that the border with Ukraine has since the visa free travel scheme been open in Poland while asylum seekers arriving in Belarus from the Middle East and North Africa are frequently prevented from lodging asylum claims, sometimes through the use of force. Additionally, negotiations on the recently agreed solidarity mechanism have shown that the apparent unity among member states, as demonstrated when activating the TPD, is likely to be short-lived. Instead of having all member states commit to receiving asylum seekers, the TPD envisions voluntary relocations by a coalition of willing member states (Rasche, 2023). In a 2020 regulation, the European Commission had suggested it would not even consider this, stating it “no longer [responds] to member states’ current reality” and that its activation is not possible (European Commission, 2020). The possibility of using the TPD for refugees from Afghanistan was also raised during the mass displacement that followed the Taliban takeover in 2021 with one media outlet stating that:

“[t]here’s a directive from 2001 that has never been used, and this might be the occasion to use it in order to face the situation of mass migration problem that can affect some member states” (Euronews, 2021).

However, before the mass arrival of Ukrainians it was never activated.

With the Ukrainian refugee situation viewed differently due to a sense of shared European values and support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, the EU displayed a more welcoming approach than in prior displacement contexts. This U-turn demonstrates on the one hand that the EU is able to rapidly and uniformly find solutions and gather support for around 6 million displaced Ukrainians in Europe. At the same time, it has made the EU subject to the charge of having double standards with its migration policy towards non-Ukrainian refugees seeking protection in Europe and being confronted with border pushbacks and potentially deadly sea crossings. Ukrainian refugees are not perceived as a similar threat as refugees from non-European countries of origin, which partially explains the more welcoming stance of EU countries and their societies towards their reception. Some authors have argued the Ukrainian reception policy resembles Cold War migration policies, where welcoming refugee reception programs were tied to geopolitical and ideological goals (Stünzi, 2022). Yet the current development illustrates that it is unlikely that this is leading to a wider policy change that will be extended to other refugee groups. The Ukrainian reception currently exists in parallel with more discriminatory practices towards non-European refugee groups and thus far has not been shown to have led to more inclusionary policies on the whole.

Conclusion

Addressing mass displacement in Europe and giving protection to displaced populations has historically been a long and complex process, with different interests at play between individuals, states and institutions. Defining who counts as a refugee or who should be granted protection or asylum and receive support has been subject to long-standing discussions since its historical conceptions. In the aftermath of the Second World War differentiated international regulations for the protection of refugees were established for the first time. Around 60 million people in the European continent were forcibly on the move as result of the Second World War, which then equalled around ten percent of Europe's population.

However, as one writer noted, "in the 21st century, a border is not just a line on a map; it is a system for filtering people that stretches from the edges of a territory into its heart" (Trilling, 2018). Reflecting on the impact of the changes of the 21st century on migration, the initial celebration of a 'borderless' Europe through free movement agreements was called into question with the arrivals of refugees from the Middle East in 2015. These unprecedented high numbers of arrivals were also strongly linked to the rise of nationalist and populist movements in some European countries, prompting debates with growing concerns about immigration.

While in the 20th century the most important legal and institutional frameworks were created to offer protection for displaced populations, the 21st century has only witnessed a polarisation of debates on refugee reception and a further division of who is worthy of protection schemes and who is unwelcome in the EU. While the reasons for this are manifold and complex, one major change here that has to do with increasing securitisation is the perception of refugees and migrants as a threat to society. This is not a novel trend and opposition to migrants and refugees has always been debated, yet a stronger trend towards polarisation has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Despite the fact that most refugees are located in, and restricted to, the Global South, the tendency of local populations in Western industrialised states to feel threatened by an influx of refugees is highest. Political parties on the right in Europe have been making use of this perceived threat and often focus their political campaigns on claims that refugees and migrants are a burden on the labour market, the welfare system, and a direct threat to national and cultural identity. The 'otherisation' and use of xenophobic speech referring to refugee groups, especially if they are contrasted as being 'different' to the national population, has fuelled this perception that refugees pose a threat to national institutions. Refugees from Middle Eastern or African countries of origin are those that are most 'otherised' and discriminated against. This 'otherisation' however does not apply universally or equally. For example, Ukrainians were granted comparatively exceptional status in terms of treatment and protection schemes and Western media outlets described Ukrainian refugees deserving more protection as they were perceived as similar to Europeans than other non-EU refugee groups (Sales, 2023).

Perceived challenges related to border control, security concerns, and 'burden-sharing' among EU member states have more recently dominated the debate on migration and Europe — and at times become its Achilles heel. The pushback against immigration led to political polarisation and debates about the very essence of European identity. One contentious issue was the use of migrants as 'bargaining chips' in EU migration debates. The treatment and fate of migrants became entangled in political negotiations, further complicating the already intricate web of immigration policies and practices in the EU. The

EU's reaction to displacement occurring in Ukraine exemplifies a major contrast here, compared to its former focus on border controls.

These border practices and constant trends towards securitisation and externalisation of refugees and the many migrants and refugees who have died crossing the sea also undermine the ideas behind the 1951 Refugee Convention and make the differentiation more obvious between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees. The rapid response from EU member states and the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, for the first time in more than 20 years, unlike the case of Syrian refugees in 2015, has brought the stark contrast between the treatment of Ukrainian and non-European refugees to the fore. This has led to criticism of these perceived double standards and has also prompted calls for the unity and solidarity shown by EU leaders to Ukrainian refugees to serve as an example of how other refugee groups could be welcomed in the future.

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