

Fortress Europa:

An Assessment of Europe's Handling of the Refugee Crisis

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(Lukas Barth - Anadolu Agency)

European Union member states have been exposed to various forms of migration over the last decades, with the crisis of 2015 marking one of the most significant migrant influxes. Contrary to the refugee crisis sparked by the Ukraine war, in dealing with the migrant crisis since 2015, the EU has been unable to formulate a common policy. In addition, their dealings with the 2015 refugee influx also show wide differences between member states. This policy outlook seeks to draw a descriptive picture of the EU countries' responses to this ongoing crisis while delving into the position of various countries, analysing the EU countries under two groups: destination countries and border/transition countries.



Refugees are seen at a field near the Slovenian-Croatian border in Rigonce, Slovenia on October 20, 2015 (Aleš Beno - Anadolu Agency)

Introduction

European Union member states have been exposed to various forms of migration over the course of the last decades. Some of these were the result of agreements with other countries to meet labour force needs, and some emerged as a result of political disasters such as the collapse of the Soviet Union or the Bosnian war. There have also been significant waves of migration from decolonized countries. However, the so-called 'migrant crisis' of 2015, considered unprecedented, marked a new phase in this history, one that has continued until today. This policy outlook will seek to draw a descriptive picture of the EU countries' responses to this ongoing crisis.

Evaluating the recent influx of refugees within the context of the Ukraine war is beyond the scope of this study largely because the more than 3 million people who have been displaced due to the war so far have been welcomed with an open-door policy by neighbouring EU countries. In a much shorter time than in 2015, many more people have settled within the borders of the EU. The paradox here is a topic worth studying in itself, however, it seems more correct to exclude the influx of Ukrainian refugees from the scope of this study. It can be argued, however, that the reflexes in discrimination against [African and Indian students](#) fleeing the Ukrainian war show parallels with the methods of coping with the migration crisis that is discussed below.

Contrary to the refugee crisis sparked by the Ukraine war, in dealing with the migrant crisis since 2015, the EU has been unable to formulate a common policy. In addition, their dealings with the 2015 crisis also show various differences. While some, like Portugal, adopted a [positive](#)

[policy](#) toward the influx of migrants and refugees to their country, others have taken what can only be called an inhumane approach towards migrants, such as Denmark or Hungary. Moreover, some EU countries are geographical border countries of the EU such as Italy and Greece, while some are in the position of destination countries such as Germany or the BENELUX countries. In this respect, it is not easy to evaluate the policies of EU countries from a single perspective. Attitudes towards refugees and migrants, the geographical location of countries, and the way they have managed the crisis with the EU are all topics worth examining in their own right. From this point of view, this descriptive study has tried to present the position of countries in the migrant crisis within the framework of their most prominent features. However, as a starting point, it is appropriate to analyse the EU countries under two groups; destination countries and border/transition countries.

Destination Countries

Refugees generally aim to reach western and north-western European countries. For example, today Germany is one of the countries that refugees most want to go to. This situation is directly related to factors such as the fact that Germany currently hosts more than 1 million refugees, the relatively easy asylum application system, the fact that it has chosen to meet its own skilled labour needs through immigration, and the established diaspora communities in Germany that offer a familiar cultural environment for newcomers. In 2015, [35% of all asylum applications](#) within the European Union were made to Germany. Furthermore, Germany has taken new steps to increase skilled labour

migration in line with a [new programme](#) in 2021. It seems that these policies, developed during Angela Merkel's tenure, will continue to be implemented by the [newly formed coalition government](#). The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg are also among the countries most preferred by migrants and refugees. In 2015, [asylum applications to Belgium](#) increased by 178% compared to the previous year. The Netherlands, on the other hand, is home to nearly [100,000 Syrian-born immigrants](#), one-third of whom have been granted citizenship. Luxembourg is also one of the union countries with the highest number of refugees per capita. However, on the other hand, it can be said that immigration issues occupy an important place in domestic politics, especially in the Netherlands and Belgium. In both countries, anti-immigrant parties and leaders have deployed anti-migrant rhetoric that has raised public anxiety and put pressure on the government. For instance, in the Netherlands Geert Wilders has often made [racist speeches](#) about Muslims. In Belgium, right-wing parties organized [anti-immigration protests](#) in 2018. Belgium slowed down its asylum procedures during the 2015 crisis and started to make it more difficult. In this respect, it can be said that Belgium has implemented a [dissuasion policy](#). As an example of the tension regarding immigration in Belgium, in 2018, after the Belgian government signed an immigration agreement with the UN, the [government lost its majority](#). For its part, the Dutch government is following a more active pro-migrant policy. For instance, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has been [critical](#) of Hungary for its harsh anti-migrant policies. However, sometimes he also makes statements that openly characterize [refugees as a threat](#). In this context, it is also important to recall that there are also far-right tendencies in the Netherlands. It is also worth noting that Tunahan Kuzu, one of the founders of DENK, the first refugee-oriented party of the EU, [welcomed Syrian refugees](#) in the Dutch parliament in Arabic.

In 2015, Sweden received more than 160,000 refugees and it is the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in Europe after Turkey. At the peak of the crisis in 2015, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven made a striking [speech](#) in which he said: "We need to decide right now what kind of Europe we are going to be. My Europe takes in refugees. My Europe doesn't build walls". However, in time, the Swedish attitudes towards refugees have shifted. This can be seen in the increased support for the Sweden Democrats party, which has far-right features. In the 2018 elections, the party's support increased from around 12.9% (2014 elections) [to 17.5%](#). At the same time, the traditionally pro-immigrant Social Democrats have seen their support drop to [historic lows](#). As a result, [legal changes](#) are starting to make the situation of refugees more difficult than before. Denmark, once a preferred destination for migrants, has hardened its policy over time. As the first European country to define [Damascus as a safe zone](#), it began removing the refugee status from individuals who hailed from the Syrian capital. At the same time, the Danish government continues to put pressure on the refugee population with

various [policies](#) such as reductions in monthly wages. Finland appeared to be a very welcoming country at the beginning of the crisis. However, although the number of refugees received is comparably low, "the problem of refugees" is an important topic of discussion in domestic politics. In 2015, when thousands of migrants gathered on the EU's borders, then-Finnish PM Juha Sipilä said that his own [house is open for refugees](#). This was one of the warmest welcomes among the European leaders. However, this welcoming position proved unsustainable. Refugees have become one of the hot topics in Finnish politics. Anti-immigrant and nationalist arguments have become more visible over time and in this atmosphere, the right-wing populist Finns Party has become the [second-largest party](#) in parliamentary politics. They have been active in building an anti-immigrant sentiment in Finnish politics. For example, they campaigned for [a zero migration policy](#) against the increase of the annual refugee quota from 1,050 to only 2,000. It can be said that anti-immigrant discourses now have a place in the mainstream politics of the country. Following the crisis on the Turkish-Greek border in March 2020, Prime Minister Sanna Marin, who has been critical of the Finns Party, stated that Finland retained the [option to close the borders](#). This position is dramatically different from PM Juha Sipilä's offering of his house to refugees.

France can also be counted as another destination country. However, the attitude of France towards refugees has worsened over time. François Hollande, who was the president in the early years of the crisis, had kept a more migrant-friendly position despite internal opposition from both far-right political figures like Marine Le Pen and [public opinion](#). In 2015, France had taken a [leading position](#) with Germany in seeking to develop a common EU refugee policy. In this regard, France and Germany proposed a [quota system](#), in which each member state would receive refugees according to a quota. The French government also [promised to take in 30,000 refugees](#), although this is still a number that lags behind smaller countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden. However, the French government has not provided good opportunities and easy integration processes for refugees. For example, accommodation opportunities for newly arrived migrants, although [legally required](#), have not been adequately provided. It can be said that France follows a policy of dissuasion in this respect. It is not following a direct anti-immigrant policy on one hand, but it is trying to keep refugees away from its borders by increasing the dissuasive factors for them to come to France. French President Emmanuel Macron, who came to office in April 2017, has also followed the same path. Although he first defined France's stance in the crisis as ["saving Europe's collective dignity"](#), he later followed policies that focused on [protecting borders](#) and facilitated [the deportation of refugees](#). Another point that should not be ignored is the popularity of political figures such as Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour, both of whom are known for their anti-immigrant attitudes and Islamophobic statements.



A migrant climbs the border wall by throwing a rope with the help of another migrant in Spanish enclave of Ceuta on May 21, 2021. (Diego Radame - Anadolu Agency)

Almost all of the destination countries emphasize the importance of a common European solution, although they differ on what such a common approach might look like. Germany, which has received more refugees than any other EU country, emphasizes a common European solution characterized by a more friendly attitude towards refugees. In other words, when Germany talks about a common European solution, it seems to point to a policy that cares more about refugee rights. The Netherlands, Sweden and Luxembourg, which accepted more refugees per capita compared to other union countries, have a similar discourse about a common European solution. All these countries emphasize the importance of carrying the burden together. On the other hand, countries such as France and Finland mostly express a discourse on the protection of borders. For example, as mentioned above, Finland mentioned the option of closing its borders during the refugee crisis on the Turkish-Greek border in 2020 and France's Macron stressed the importance of [protecting the EU's external borders](#) in his visit to Hungary's PM Victor Orban who is known with his harsh anti-immigration policies.

Border and Transition Countries

These countries include Spain, Italy, Croatia, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia and Austria. France is also one of the EU's maritime border countries. However, since there is no significant influx of migrants into French coastal centres, it is not appropriate to consider it among EU border countries. The reverse is true for Austria and Slovenia. Although these countries are not on the geographical border of the EU, they have started to encounter the problems faced by the border countries as the crisis continued over time.

Bordering Turkey, which hosts the most refugees of any country in the world, Greece is not considered a destina-

tion country. Refugees arriving in Greece generally wait to be relocated by official means or attempt to continue their journey toward western European countries. However, it is not easy for refugees to reach Greece. Greek border forces often [push refugees back](#) violently. Moreover, conditions in Greece are not good for those who do reach. For example, the island of Lesbos, one of the first destinations in the EU for refugees, hosts what is considered [one of the worst refugee camps in the world](#). The Greek government's rhetoric about the crisis is that EU countries should take more responsibility. Although there is some direct EU involvement in Greece's handling of the crisis, for example, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#)) [helps](#) has deployed 600 officers to the country, Greek immigration minister Notis Mitarachi [says](#) "we still feel we are alone - Greece, Italy, Spain, Malta and Cyprus, the five Mediterranean countries - in tackling the pressures from migration." Under these circumstances, overall, Greece is [hardening](#) its attitude towards refugees and continues to call for more help from the EU.

Italy can be mentioned as one of the first countries to experience this wave of migration in 2014. More than [700,000 refugees](#) entered the country between 2014 and 2020. With the [2016 Turkey-EU agreement](#), refugee entries through Greece effectively stopped. However, this was not the case in Italy. In particular, as a result of the instability in Eritrea and Nigeria, an intense migration wave from Africa continued unabated. The Italian government made statements blaming and even [threatening the EU](#), similar to Greece. In the following period, Italy employed the services of the [Libyan Coastal Guard](#) to prevent migration, an organization that has become infamous due to its often [cruel behaviour](#) towards refugees. Moreover, the proportion of Italian people who see immigration as the country's most important problem has [increased dramatically](#). In parallel with this, the Lega Nord party, known for its anti-immigrant rhetoric, increased its share of the vote from 4.1% in 2013 to [17.4% in 2018](#).

The other EU Mediterranean border country is Spain. Spain has been the EU country that has received the most irregular migration since the early 2000s. Ceuta and Melilla, the only EU territories on the African continent, are also Spanish enclaves. These two small cities also have the first fenced borders in the EU. There are reports of both Spanish and Moroccan forces using violence against refugees in these areas. It has also proven to be the subject of tension between the Moroccan and Spanish governments. Regarding Ceuta and Melilla, in the times when irregular migration has intensified, the Spanish government has also emphasized that these borders are also European borders. This emphasis is parallel with other border countries' reactions. In other words, border countries tend to point out the responsibility of other EU countries. An important point to note is that the rate of Syrians among immigrants coming to Spain is very low. For this small number of Syrians, Spain, which usually has a long waiting period for asy-

lum applications and is not very good at providing social rights to refugees, [does not seem to be a destination country](#). However, a large number of irregular migrants, especially from sub-Saharan African countries, attempt to cross into Spain. According to [statements of refugees](#), the Mediterranean between Italy and Libya has turned into a war zone after 2015 and so they head towards Spain via Morocco. In this regard, it is important to note that African refugees seem to be in a disadvantageous position compared to Syrians. For example, according to [the investigation of Forensic Architecture](#), black Africans have been prevented from reaching Spanish offices in Ceuta and Melilla where they can apply for asylum. Conversely, the road for asylum applications for Syrians is more open, though it is important to keep in mind that Syrian asylum applications via Spain are minimal. Spain also uses language that emphasizes the importance of a common EU solution and it can also be said that, at various moments, Spain has played a constructive role. For example, Spain welcomed the migrant rescue ship [Aquarius](#), which was carrying hundreds of irregular migrants, and was refused port by Italy and Malta. The migration issue also has visible effects on Spanish domestic policy. In this respect, it should be noted that the Spanish people have a refugee-friendly attitude that is significantly [higher than the European average](#). However, it is also possible to talk about [a far-right trend](#) that has recently increased in Spain.

Hungary is arguably the country that has implemented the harshest policy since the beginning of the crisis. The government of Victor Orban started to build a wall on the border after the 2015 refugee crisis in order to stop the influx of refugees. Although this policy was [criticized](#), Hungarian authorities have refused to compromise. In September 2015, up to 13,000 people entered Austria, a fellow EU member, after being turned away from Hungary. Croatia and Slovenia, almost 7,000 of whom were [alleged](#) to have been shipped to the border by Hungarian authorities. Orban often speaks about the necessity of protecting so-called 'Christian values' and Europe not against hundreds of thousands, but tens of millions of migrants. In this context, he has characterized refugees as "[Muslim invaders](#)" and hinted that the Muslim world is a threat to Europe. One of the countries directly affected by this approach has been Austria. When tens of thousands of people arrived at the EU borders in central Europe in September 2015, unlike Hungary, Austria took a refugee-friendly stance. Austria's geographical position between Hungary and Germany was one of the main determinants of its policy. Germany's acceptance of refugees coming from the Hungarian border was a comforting factor for Austria, given that Austria was largely a transition country between Hungary and Germany. In this context, its policy was dependent on that of Germany. For example, when Germany closed its borders for a while, Austria [tightened border controls](#) at the Hungarian border. However, the number of asylum applications to Austria has also increased significantly. All these developments resulted in one of the most dramatic



Refugees wait to get on onboard the rescue vessel Golfo Azzurro, from a wooden boat sailing out of control in the Mediterranean Sea near Libya on Thursday, June 15, 2017. (Marcus Drinkwater - Anadolu Agency)

changes in public opinion in Europe. Instead of the moderate Austrian government in 2015, the far-right politician Sebastian Kurz became Chancellor in 2017. The far-right wave that follows a harsh anti-immigration agenda is still effective in determining Austria's policy. For example, the Austrian government follows an active deportation policy and even skilled asylum seekers face deportation. And although Kurz is no longer Chancellor, he is said to have a [significant influence](#) on the government.

Croatia has faced a wave of migration mostly through Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The fact that Hungary has closed its borders also makes Croatia a target. At the same time, there was an influx of refugees to Hungary via Croatia. This situation has caused tension between the two countries. It is estimated that 650,000 refugees have transited through Croatia on their way to western Europe since the start of the crisis. There is also tension within Croatia between President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic and Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic. Zoran Milanovic has been criticized for pursuing more moderate policies toward refugees whereas President Grabar-Kitarovic has advocated for [violent pushbacks](#). However, during the 2020 presidential elections, Milanovic took the presidency from Grabar-Kitarovic. It is very important for Croatia, which is an EU country but not a Schengen country yet, to be accepted into the Schengen area. In this context, the most important criticism brought to Croatia by the Schengen countries is that it should conduct its own [border controls](#) in accordance with human rights and should improve [asylum procedures](#). Slovenia, which is a neighbour of Croatia, has also become one of the countries with a high number of irregular migration inflows as of 2015. Although some of

the refugees who entered applied for asylum, a significant portion of them went to western and northern European countries. Slovenia has [violently pushed back migrants](#) to Croatia and complicated the asylum application process in order to dissuade them from applying for asylum in Slovenia.

Going to Europe via Bulgaria is a route that has been preferred by Afghan refugees rather than Syrians. However, 99% of Afghan asylum seekers' [applications have been rejected](#) by the Bulgarian government as part of Bulgaria's efforts to implement its [Zero Integration Policy](#). Bulgaria's northern neighbour, Romania, is another country that has been transformed into a transit country as a [result of Hungary's harsh measures](#). However, due to a lack of refugee support infrastructure in the country, refugees in Romanian border towns are reported to be living [in bad conditions](#). Although Romania initially opposed the EU's "quota" decision to disperse refugees, it later agreed to receive [2,474 refugees](#).

Poland stands out as one of the countries that have adopted one of the most negative attitudes towards refugees since the beginning of the crisis. As one of the countries that do not fulfil the quotas set by the EU, it has drawn criticism from other EU members. In 2021, several thousand migrants, mostly Iraqis and Afghans, gathered on the Polish-Belarusian border. In this crisis, Polish forces used [violent pushback](#) tactics. Poland stated that Belarus used refugees as weapons. EU countries, which were normally critical of Poland's position, similarly blame the Belarusian administration.

It cannot be said that the Baltic countries were under serious immigration pressure throughout the crisis. In the period of crisis, the entry of around [1,700 migrants](#) in 2021 to Lithuania via Belarus was the most intense migration movement on the Lithuanian border. As a result of this relatively insignificant migration movement, which took place a few months before the events on the Polish-Belarusian border, Lithuania became the first country to erect a [fence on the Belarusian border](#). A state of emergency was declared in the country and the border crossings were blocked by soldiers. Lithuania also abstained from meeting its quota of approximately 1,000 refugees in 2015. Irregular migrants entering the country as a result of these latest events describe their conditions as ["prison-like"](#). Another Baltic country, Latvia, started to [fence off the Belarusian border](#) soon after Lithuania's decision of erecting fences, although there were not many attempts of the border crossing into Latvia. Even the announcement that 531 refugees would be accepted in 2015 was met with [protests](#) in the country. [The living standards of refugees](#) settled in this country are also very low. Estonia, another Baltic country, stands out as one of the countries that have encountered the influx of migrants the least compared to other EU members, with the refugee population reaching a maximum of 405 in 2017. It should be noted that anti-immigration far-right views are also rising in this context in Estonia.

Finally, Malta and the Greek Cypriot Administration are generally not preferred destinations for refugees. However, many refugees come to these islands due to their location on migration routes. Even some refugees are deceived by smugglers and left to these islands supposing that they are on the continent. Some others come to these islands with the hope of finding EU opportunities. [The density of refugees](#) in these two island countries remains quite high. Refugees [report](#) that they have a life well below EU standards on the island. The administration says EU countries should take [responsibility](#) for the fair sharing of refugees by the member state.

Conclusion

The intensity of the 2015 refugee crisis appears to have subsided. However, millions of refugees continue to live in neighbouring countries and it should be remembered that these people have nowhere to turn. The emergence of a new crisis is only a matter of time. However, under the present conditions, the European Union does not seem to have achieved any sense of unity on how to approach the issue. Member states remain far apart and many still have yet to determine a long-term policy approach. In this respect, it can be said that the general European attitude toward refugees is negative. Subtracting Germany's position and weight leaves very few examples to evoke a meaningful positive European attitude. Furthermore, as a result of the refugee crisis, the European Union is experiencing its own crisis between border security and its commitment to humanitarian values. This crisis is accompanied by factors such as increasing Islamophobia and the continued rise of far-right movements. Denmark, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia stand out in this respect. For example, Slovakia, where an [anti-refugee attitude](#) has become entrenched in public opinion, did not accept taking in refugees under the quota system. Furthermore, officials stated that they could only accept two hundred refugees and only if they were [Christians](#). Czechia, as another example, also [did not comply with the EU quota system](#). There are less than [2,000 refugees](#) in the country, and these refugees are mostly from former Soviet Union countries.

Besides a large number of negatively divergent countries, it is possible to mention a small number of positively divergent countries. Besides the above-mentioned Germany, Portugal can also be mentioned as a country that follows a pro-refugee policy. Although Portugal is not on the route or destination of the refugees, it openly invites them to its country, with the interior minister stating that this represented an [economic opportunity](#). Catherine Woollard, Secretary-General of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, [stated](#) that the problem of demography is a problem of every European country and the policy of Portugal is exemplary in this respect. However, if there is a common thread in EU-member state policy, it is one that has shifted towards an anti-refugee sentiment over time.