

Migration and War



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INTRODUCTION

In a 2022 address to the European Diplomatic Academy, European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell contrasted Europe, which he described as an idyllic garden of political freedom and economic prosperity where "everything works," with the rest of the world, which he called "a jungle" that might "invade the garden." No wall, warned Borrell, is "high enough to protect the garden." Borrell's remarks exemplify an increasingly popular narrative that frames undocumented/irregular migration as a threat to Europe's stability and well-being (Zarhloule 2025).

1.1 Migration and war as interconnected phenomena

Migration and war have historically been interconnected, with armed conflicts driving large-scale displacement and shaping international order. For the European Union (EU), this relationship has become especially salient in recent decades, as wars in the EU's neighborhood have produced repeated migration crises that test the Union's resilience, solidarity, and capacity for coordinated action. The 2015 refugee crisis, largely triggered by the Syrian civil war, marked a turning point in EU migration governance, pushing policies in a more restrictive and security-oriented direction. The 2015 refugee crisis, a watershed moment for EU, exposed fatal flaws in its asylum framework. Triggered primarily by the Syrian civil war, the arrival of over one million people overwhelmed frontline states and shattered the EU's principle of solidarity, fueling political polarization as well as justified criticism of the EU's insufficiently responsive and inflexible approach to a crisis of this nature. This has been coupled with legitimate concerns regarding the EU's lack of agility and preparedness in its crisis response. In response to the crises, the bloc pivoted decisively toward a security-oriented model, prioritizing border control and external partnerships. The legacy of this crisis continues to define EU migration policy and politics today.

The 2015 refugee crisis, largely triggered by the Syrian civil war, was compounded by a simultaneous migration wave from Libya and other parts of North Africa, which further intensified pressure on the EU. Libya's collapse into civil war after 2011 transformed the country into a major transit hub for migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean, leading

to thousands of arrivals and deaths alongside perilous sea routes. Together with the influx from Syria, these flows overwhelmed frontline states such as Italy and Greece, exposed the inadequacy of the EU's asylum system, and heightened tensions over responsibility-sharing among the EU member states. The convergence of the Syrian and Libyan migration routes not only underscored the EU's vulnerability to conflicts in its neighborhood but also drove the shift toward restrictive border controls, externalization deals with North African states, and a securitized approach to migration governance.

Yet the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 presented the EU with a qualitatively different challenge: a sudden mass influx of refugees from a neighboring country, addressed not by deterrence but by the unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. This divergence underscores the complexity of the EU's dual role as both a humanitarian actor and a geopolitical power. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caused over 6 million Ukrainians to flee, mostly to Europe, leading the EU to adopt unprecedented migration policies, including the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. This provided immediate and temporary refuge outside the usual asylum system, marking a significant shift from prior restrictive migration approaches. This response emphasized solidarity and responsibility within the EU and contrasted its democratic values with the aggression seen in the war.

The present paper introduces how war-induced migration has shaped EU migration and asylum policy, and how these policies in turn have been instrumentalized as tools of foreign policy. By focusing on the Ukrainian refugee crisis alongside broader developments in EU migration governance, the analysis highlights three interrelated dynamics. First, it considers the humanitarian dimension, whereby the EU has sought to provide protection and uphold its normative commitments. Second, it explores the use of migration policy as an instrument of geopolitical strategy, projecting the EU's image as a defender of democracy and freedom while leveraging restrictive measures against adversarial states. Finally, it examines the persistent challenges within the EU, including political fragmentation, the rise of criticism of the EU migration policies parties, and the reliance on external partners to manage migration flows.

One part of this paper is dedicated to case studies of two significant migration crises: the post-2011 period following the Arab Spring, which ignited civil wars in Syria and Libya, and the more recent crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine. The chapter analyzes the EU's evolving policy approaches towards these aforementioned crises.

This paper situates contemporary EU migration policy in the broader context of war-driven displacement, highlighting both the evolution of protective measures such as the Temporary Protection Directive and the growing reliance on restrictive, security-oriented strategies since the 2015 refugee crisis. In doing so, it seeks to examine not only the EU's current frameworks but also its preparedness for future challenges in an increasingly volatile global landscape. Critically, this paper subjects to criticisms and challenges the EU to confront a potential pattern of underestimating past and present developments and to prove its readiness for future tests. Ultimately, it casts doubt on whether the EU has ever accurately anticipated developments and whether it is ready for what lies ahead.

In doing so, the paper situates migration policy at the nexus of humanitarian, domestic, and foreign policy imperatives. It argues that the EU's responses to war-driven migration reveal both its capacity for innovation in times of crisis and its structural limitations in sustaining long-term, rights-based governance. The analysis contributes to the broader literature on migration, security, and European integration by demonstrating how war acts not only as a driver of forced displacement but also as a catalyst for institutional and political transformation within the EU. This paper also examines the critical importance of border protection, the complex challenges arising from irregular migration, and the subsequent discourses on preserving national cultural identities within the EU.

1.2 Research objectives and scope

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the interrelationship between war and migration in the context of the European Union (EU), with particular attention to how armed conflicts in the EU's neighborhood have reshaped its migration and asylum policies. The study seeks to understand both the humanitarian imperatives and the security-driven responses that define the EU's evolving governance of migration.

Specifically, the paper pursues four core objectives:

1. **To analyze the historical and contemporary impact of armed conflict.** Including the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on migration flows into the EU.
2. **To assess the EU's policy responses** to war-induced migration, highlighting the contrast between protective measures such as the Temporary Protection Directive and restrictive, security-oriented strategies developed after the 2015 refugee crisis.
3. **To critically reflect on the EU's readiness for future crises,** examining whether institutional frameworks and political mechanisms are capable of balancing humanitarian obligations with domestic and security concerns.

The scope of the paper is both thematic and temporal. Thematically, it situates EU migration policy at the nexus of humanitarian protection, security governance, and foreign policy strategy. Temporally, it spans from the Arab Spring in 2011 and the 2015 refugee crisis to the ongoing war in Ukraine, situating current developments within a broader trajectory of EU policy evolution. By adopting this scope, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of how war-driven migration has acted as both a challenge and a catalyst for institutional and political transformation within the EU. This paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. How have major armed conflicts in the EU's neighborhood. Particularly the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shaped migration flows into Europe?
2. In what ways has the EU's migration and asylum policy evolved from the 2015 refugee crisis to the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis, and what explains the differing policy responses?
3. Is the EU adequately prepared for future war-driven migration crises, or does its history reveal a pattern of underestimating emerging challenges?

1.3 Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive research design to analyze the EU's evolving response to migration crises. The methodology is structured around a multi-faceted approach that combines comparative case study analysis, policy and legal examination, and critical discourse analysis. The empirical investigation is built upon two primary case studies: the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, triggered primarily by the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia's full-scale invasion. These cases were selected to facilitate a comparative-historical analysis, allowing for the identification of both continuities and critical divergences in the EU's policy approaches, political cohesion, and operational mechanisms across different geopolitical contexts.

This research employs a systematic analysis of policy and legal frameworks, conducting a detailed examination of pivotal European Union legislation and policy documents pertaining to migration and asylum. Core instruments under scrutiny include the Dublin Regulation, the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, and the historic activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. The analytical scope is further expanded to incorporate a tripartite institutional review, encompassing European Council conclusions, European Commission communications, and relevant European Parliament debates and resolutions. This is supplemented by a review of scholarly articles and research papers that address the EU's approach to conflict-induced migration originating from its neighbourhood.

The synthesis of these sources is designed to elucidate the constitutive tension between humanitarian imperatives and securitization strategies that characterizes the EU's governance model. Complementing this, a political and discourse analysis will be conducted to evaluate how migration is framed and politicized across EU institutions and member states. This entails scrutinizing speeches, policy statements, and media narratives to understand the construction of crisis and the instrumentalization of migration policy as a tool of foreign policy and soft power. The study is grounded in a comprehensive review of secondary scholarly literature on migration, European integration, and securitization theory, as well as grey literature from policy think tanks, NGOs, and international organizations.

Ultimately, the interpretation of findings will be framed through core analytical concepts including solidarity, securitization, externalization, and soft power to provide a nuanced understanding of the structural and normative shifts in the EU's migration governance.



A Spanish legionnaire directs people who have swum across the border from Morocco to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in May 2021. Photograph: Jon Nazca/Reuters. Source: The Guardian 2023.

2 Historical Background and Legal Framework: Wars as Drivers of Migration to the EU

Wars have played a major role in shaping migration patterns to the EU, influencing its demographic and social makeup over the centuries. Historical records show that conflicts often led to large-scale, sometimes forced, population movements, which in turn affected migration trends and policy development in Europe. Migration in Europe has frequently occurred alongside military conflicts. From the Roman-Jewish wars and the movements of Germanic and Slavic tribes during the migration period, to the Ottoman expansions in the Middle Ages, these events caused significant shifts in population. In the 20th century, wars like the Balkan Wars, World War I, and World War II forced millions of people to migrate, leading to demographic changes and greater ethnic homogenization in some areas. The Holocaust and post-World War II expulsions further demonstrate how wars have resulted in large-scale population movements with lasting human and political effects (Sturm-Martin 2014).

Following World War II, migration patterns in Europe were influenced by the need for reconstruction, economic demands, and political divisions. Western European countries brought

in guest workers from Africa, Asia, and former colonies to aid in economic recovery, leading to more ethnically diverse populations. The Cold War split Europe, with Eastern states under Soviet control limiting movement, while Western democracies allowed varying levels of immigration. Later, conflicts like the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s led to significant forced migrations, as millions of refugees and internally displaced people moved across the Balkans, many settling in Western Europe (Dragostinova 2015).

In recent decades, conflicts in the EU's neighboring regions, especially in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and more recently Ukraine, have led to substantial refugee movements toward the EU. These recent conflicts reflect a longstanding trend where war, persecution, and instability force people to seek safety elsewhere, resulting in major humanitarian and political challenges for the EU. The 2015 migration crisis, largely driven by the Syrian civil war, highlighted how conflict-related migration can strain the EU's migration and asylum systems and trigger significant policy actions (EIB 2016).

The EU's migration policies have developed in response to waves of war-driven migration, aiming to balance humanitarian needs with border security. Over time, the EU has focused on coordinated approaches, such as the Common European Asylum System and partnerships with neighboring countries, to address migration flows from conflict areas (Niemann – Zaun N 2023).

The EU's legal framework addressing armed conflict as a driver of migration is fundamentally structured around the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, operating within the intersecting realms of international and EU law. This framework seeks to harmonize the provision of humanitarian protection with the coordinated management of migration flows across Member States. Its cornerstone is the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which provide the foundational definition of a refugee and establish core protections, most notably the principle of *non-refoulement* (the generic deportation of people) that prohibits the return of individuals to territories where they would face serious threats to life or freedom. This international obligation is further reinforced by Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes the right to seek asylum from persecution. The EU synthesizes these international legal commitments into a cohesive regional policy architecture, aiming to ensure a uniform standard of protection while facilitating a

collective response to migratory movements precipitated by war and persecution (Eqiraj, Gadd, and Grabowska-Moroz 2021).

The migration policy of the EU has undergone significant transformation over the past decades, shaped by the need to reconcile humanitarian obligations, border security, and intergovernmental coordination. This evolution reflects both internal institutional developments and external migratory pressures. The formalization of EU competence in migration and asylum policy commenced with the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, which conferred legislative authority upon the Union in these domains. This marked a pivotal shift from nationally governed approaches to a supranational framework.

Subsequently, the Tampere European Council (October 1999) laid the groundwork for the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), introducing key legislative instruments such as the Dublin II Regulation, which established criteria for determining the member state responsible for examining asylum applications. By 2005, the first phase of CEAS was operational, standardizing asylum procedures and reception conditions across the Union.

The second phase, initiated by the 2008 Policy Plan on Asylum, culminated in 2013 with the creation of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), aimed at enhancing member state capacities and fostering greater harmonization.

In response to the 2015 migration crisis, the European Commission launched a third phase of CEAS reform beginning in 2016. This process culminated in the 2020 Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to streamline asylum and return procedures, promote equitable burden-sharing, and strengthen cooperation with third countries. A central component of this reform is the proposed replacement of the Dublin III Regulation with the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR), which introduces a mandatory solidarity mechanism allowing member states to contribute through relocation, financial support, or capacity-building initiatives.

EU migration policy is anchored in international legal instruments, notably the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Within the EU legal order, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights provide the primary legal bases (Kicinger and Saczuk 2004).

Solidarity among member states constitutes a guiding principle, particularly in the equitable distribution of responsibilities related to migrant reception and integration. The policy framework also emphasizes the importance of data-driven governance and international cooperation in border management, recognizing the inherently transnational nature of migration. Several foundational developments and milestones have shaped the EU's migration governance until 2015:

- The Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its 1967 Protocol (International treaty ratified by the EU and member states). Defines the term refugee, protection rights, and prohibits *refoulement* (return to danger). This foundational treaty underpins EU asylum law.
- The Schengen Agreement (1985) and Schengen Convention (1990) eliminated internal border controls, reinforcing the Union's commitment to free movement while necessitating robust external border management.
- The Dublin Convention (1990) introduced mechanisms to prevent multiple asylum applications within the EU.
- The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) institutionalized cooperation in justice and home affairs, thereby embedding migration within the EU's broader policy architecture.
- Treaty of Amsterdam (1997, entered into force 1999) transferred asylum and migration policy into the "Community pillar" (EU competence), paving the way for harmonized EU asylum law.
- Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (proclaimed 2000, binding 2009 via Lisbon Treaty). Article 18: right to asylum in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and Article 19: prohibition of collective expulsion and protection against *refoulement*.
- Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) created an emergency framework to grant immediate protection to displaced persons fleeing mass influxes due to war or conflict. Not activated until the Ukraine war in 2022.
- Dublin II Regulation (Regulation 343/2003) replaced the 1990 Dublin Convention, reinforcing the principle of first-entry responsibility for asylum seekers.
- Reception Conditions Directive (2003/9/EC) set minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers (housing, health care, education, employment access).

- Qualification Directive (2004/83/EC) defined who qualifies for refugee status or subsidiary protection. Extended protection to persons fleeing war/serious harm even if not individually persecuted.
- Asylum Procedures Directive (2005/85/EC) established minimum procedural guarantees for asylum applications.
- Return Directive (2008/115/EC) regulated return of irregular migrants, balancing removals with fundamental rights guarantees.
- Qualification Directive (Recast) (2011/95/EU) strengthened standards on refugee and subsidiary protection. Harmonized rights (e.g., residence permits, access to work and education) for persons fleeing armed conflict.
- Asylum Procedures Directive (Recast) (2013/32/EU) improved safeguards for asylum applicants, including vulnerable persons and those fleeing generalized violence.
- Reception Conditions Directive (Recast) (2013/33/EU) enhanced standards on material reception conditions and detention safeguards.
- Dublin III Regulation (604/2013) updated Dublin II but maintained the “first-entry” rule. Introduced some procedural safeguards but kept responsibility concentrated on border states (EC 2025).

According to European Commission (EC 2014) the EU has developed one of the world's most advanced asylum protection systems, known as the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Since 1999, the EU has worked to create this system, with its first stage (1999-2005) establishing common minimum standards through initial legislative measures. A second stage followed, with new rules agreed in 2011 and 2013 that set out higher common standards and stronger cooperation to ensure asylum seekers are treated equally in a fair system, no matter where they apply. This framework is built on key instruments, including the revised Asylum Procedures Directive, which aims for fairer, quicker, and higher-quality decisions while providing special support for vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors; the revised Reception Conditions Directive, which ensures humane material reception conditions and stipulates that detention is a last resort; the revised Qualification Directive, which clarifies the grounds for granting international protection and improves integration measures; the revised Dublin Regulation, which enhances protection for asylum seekers during the process of

determining the responsible state and includes a mechanism for early problem detection; and the revised EUROSIS Regulation, which improves the EU's fingerprint database for asylum seekers to help determine responsibility and allows limited law enforcement access to prevent serious crimes. This system is supported by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), established in 2010 to ensure coherent implementation and aid states under pressure. Further solidarity tools include Relocation, which transfers refugees from overburdened member states, and the Temporary Protection Directive, an exceptional measure for situations of mass influx. Externally, the CEAS relies on Resettlement, which offers safe pathways to protection in the EU, and Regional Development and Protection Programmes, which strengthen the capacity of partner countries—both integral to the EU's Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM). The 2015 migration crisis served as a catalyst for comprehensive reform, emphasizing solidarity, efficiency, and external engagement (EC 2015).

According to *Directorate General for Communication European Parliament Article* – migration is a complex phenomenon driven by a multifaceted array of *push* and *pull* factors. These determinants encompass security, demographic pressures, human rights considerations, economic conditions, and increasingly, environmental and climate-related drivers. As of 1 January 2021, Eurostat data indicates that approximately 23.7 million non-EU citizens resided within the European Union, constituting 5.3% of the total EU population. In most Member States, third-country nationals form the majority of the non-national resident population.

Theoretical frameworks conceptualize migration as the movement of people to settle in a new location, a process that can be either voluntary or forced. These movements are typically analyzed through the lens of push factors (conditions that compel individuals to leave their place of origin) and pull factors (attributes that attract migrants to a specific destination). These can be categorized into three primary domains:

1. Socio-Political Factors

Wars and armed conflict, persecution based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or systematic human rights violations are significant drivers of forced displacement. Individuals fleeing such conditions are often accorded humanitarian protection status under international legal instruments, most notably the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. These migrants typically seek asylum in the nearest safe

country, though destination choices are influenced by the varying asylum policies of host nations. In 2022, for instance, over a quarter of the 384,245 individuals granted protection in the EU were nationals of Syria, followed by Afghanistan and Venezuela.

2. Demographic and Economic Factors

Demographic structures, including aging populations and youth bulges, significantly influence economic growth and labour market conditions in countries of origin and destination. Economic migration is primarily driven by push factors such as unemployment, poverty, and poor labour standards, while pull factors include higher wages, better employment opportunities, and improved standards of living. The United Nations International Labour Organization estimated that in 2019, there were roughly 169 million international migrant workers globally, representing over two-thirds of all international migrants, with the majority concentrated in high-income countries.

3. Environmental and Climatic Factors

Environmental degradation and natural disasters have historically induced migration. Climate change is projected to act as a threat multiplier, exacerbating the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and progressively rendering certain areas uninhabitable. The International Organization for Migration defines environmental migrants as persons compelled to move, either temporarily or permanently, due to sudden or progressive environmental changes that adversely affect their livelihoods. Quantifying this group is complex due to intersecting factors like poverty and governance, but projections for the number of people displaced by environmental factors by 2050 range widely from 25 million to one billion (EP 2024).

The EU's migration policy has evolved from a fragmented, state-centric model to a slightly more integrated and harmonized system. This transformation has been driven by the imperative to respond effectively to complex migratory dynamics, including conflict-induced displacement, economic migration, and humanitarian emergencies. The ongoing reforms aim to balance the principles of protection, security, and shared responsibility among member states,

ensuring a resilient and coherent migration governance framework. This paper examines exactly that.

2.1 Armed conflicts and displacement in the EU's neighborhood until 2015

Prior to 2015, the European Union's neighborhood was characterized by a series of armed conflicts and political instability that generated significant displacement pressures and humanitarian challenges, closely linked to migration toward Europe. The Arab uprisings of 2011 marked a turning point, as initially peaceful protests in Syria and Libya rapidly escalated into violent civil wars that destabilized the region, resulting in mass internal displacement and refugee flows directed toward Europe and its neighboring countries. At the same time, long-standing conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the unresolved question of Western Sahara between Morocco and Algeria continued to foster insecurity and displacement in the Mediterranean region (Colombo and Huber 2016). In the Eastern Neighborhood, unresolved territorial disputes in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as recurring tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, created instability and forced migration. The EU's Eastern Partnership, launched in the mid-2000s, sought to engage countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, but this framework was severely tested during the 2013–2014 Ukraine crisis, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and displacement both within Ukraine and across borders (Barrinha).

In policy terms, the EU responded through initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (1995) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), emphasizing economic cooperation, governance reforms, and diplomatic dialogue as tools to foster regional peace and stability. However, these instruments revealed significant limitations, as the EU largely relied on indirect, non-military approaches and often underestimated the complexity and intensity of intra-state conflicts. By the early 2010s, the Arab uprisings and subsequent regional wars further exacerbated challenges, with violence spilling across borders and generating refugee crises that highlighted the EU's limited crisis management capacity. The Union's role remained focused on development aid, security cooperation, and diplomacy rather than direct intervention, leaving structural gaps in its ability to respond to rapidly escalating humanitarian situations (Perchoc

2016). Prior to 2015, the most significant conflicts in the EU's neighborhood driving large-scale displacement were:

The Syrian Civil War (2011–present) emerged as the primary driver of displacement, making Syria the top country of origin for asylum seekers entering the EU. By 2015, more than 4 million Syrians had fled, primarily to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, with many subsequently seeking refuge in Europe. This crisis resulted in over one million asylum applications in the EU in 2015 alone, representing the largest refugee situation of the 21st century (Lehne et al. 2025).

Although earlier in origin, the aftermath of the **Kosovo War** (1998–1999) continued to generate migration flows well beyond 2015 due to persistent economic hardship and political instability in Kosovo and the wider Western Balkans. Asylum applications from Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia remained common, though applicants from these regions were frequently categorized as economic migrants rather than refugees.

Prolonged instability following the 2003 invasion and subsequent insurgency in **Iraq** also led to substantial numbers of displaced persons. By 2015, Iraq was one of the leading source countries of asylum seekers in the EU. Similarly, continuous conflict and Taliban-related violence in **Afghanistan** resulted in steady flows of Afghan asylum seekers to European countries throughout this period.

Other notable, though smaller, sources of displacement included **Eritrea** due to widespread repression and internal conflict as well as several **sub-Saharan African** nations, though the scale of movement from these regions was considerably less than that from the Middle East (Shekhar 2016).

The cumulative impact of these conflicts was profound: millions of people were internally displaced or forced to seek asylum abroad, with many turning toward the EU as a safe haven. Refugee flows from Syria, Libya, and Eastern Europe placed mounting pressure on EU asylum systems and border management, exposing structural weaknesses that would fully erupt during the 2015 refugee crisis. In sum, by the time the Syrian and Libyan wars converged with instability in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, the Union had already been grappling with the consequences of multiple unresolved conflicts. Its reliance on cooperative policy frameworks and indirect crisis management tools, coupled with its limited intervention capacity, meant that pre-2015 displacement challenges not only tested the EU's resilience but also laid the

foundations for the migration crisis that would fundamentally reshape EU migration and asylum policy (Gaub and Popescu 2015).

3 The 2015 Refugee Crisis and Its Aftermath

The Arab Spring of 2010-2011 triggered a wave of political upheaval and conflict in several Middle Eastern and North African countries, which directly contributed to the refugee crisis that heavily impacted the European Union EU around 2015. The 2015 refugee crisis, fueled by people fleeing from war, instability, and persecution in countries affected by the Arab Spring (notably Syria, Libya, and others), overwhelmed the EU with an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers and migrants.

The EU's response to the 2015 refugee crisis was multifaceted, combining emergency measures, policy reforms, and intensified coordination among member states, yet the crisis simultaneously revealed profound structural weaknesses in the Union's asylum system, border control, and overall migration governance (Carrera et al. 2015).

The European Union's migration obligations are best understood in relation to the complex dynamics of its immediate neighborhood. Large-scale displacement toward Europe can be traced to several interrelated sources: the persistent volatility in North Africa following the Arab Spring; the collapse of post-intervention Libya into a failed state; the political and environmental repercussions of Sahel-based fundamentalism across North and East Africa; ongoing instability across the Middle East; the fragile and uneven post-conflict settlement in Afghanistan; the protracted Syrian civil war; and the territorial incursions of ISIS into Syria and Iraq.

Much of this instability predates the EU's own foreign policy structures, exceeds its limited strategic depth, and is rooted in coalition led by America and interventions that have unfolded over more than a decade. Nevertheless, the demographic and humanitarian consequences of these conflicts are increasingly and disproportionately borne by the EU. This recognition is evident in the 2015 *EU Strategic Review, The European Union in a Changing Global Environment: A More Connected, Contested and Complex World* a precursor to the 2016 *Global Strategy* under High Representative Federica Mogherini which acknowledges the Union's challenging geopolitical environment. The review highlights how fragile states and

ungoverned spaces have fostered instability, violence, poverty, corruption, and conflict-driven electoral politics, culminating in the displacement of more than 50 million people (Hadfield and Zwitter 2015; European External Action Service, 2015).

The adoption of the *European Agenda on Migration* in 2015 sought to regulate migration flows through reinforced external borders, enhanced cooperation with countries of origin and transit, resettlement programs, efforts to dismantle smuggling networks, and the provision of humanitarian aid. However, the unprecedented influx of asylum seekers strained the Schengen Agreement, with several member states reintroducing internal border controls, thereby challenging one of the EU's core principles of free movement. Politically, the crisis triggered intense debates over migration management, integration, and security, fueling the rise of populist and Eurosceptic movements that criticized the EU's handling of migration and the perceived erosion of national sovereignty.

In practice, the Union increasingly externalized migration control, directing funds and policies toward addressing so-called “root causes” in Africa and the Middle East, a strategy often criticized for securitizing and depoliticizing the refugee question. In the aftermath, the crisis stimulated proposals for reform of the Common European Asylum System and mechanisms for burden-sharing, though consensus among member states proved elusive. Moreover, the EU's reliance on external partnerships including controversial cooperation with Libya underscored persistent ethical and humanitarian dilemmas. In sum, the 2015 refugee crisis, precipitated by the destabilizing effects of the Arab Spring and compounded by the wars in Syria and Libya, marked a watershed in EU migration governance, shaping a long-term policy trajectory defined by the tension between security imperatives, humanitarian obligations, and political integration within the Union (Hadfield and Zwitter 2015; Cusumano and Riddervold 2023).

In civil wars, violence against civilians whether selective, indiscriminate, or collective is often employed to advance ideological, military, or political objectives (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017, p. 40). Selective violence targets individuals or groups based on their specific behaviors, while indiscriminate violence typically involves attacks on residential areas without regard for individual identity or conduct (Stathis 2006). Collective violence, on the other hand, is directed at groups defined by shared characteristics such as ethnicity (Steele 2009 p. 429; Bakkour 2023).

3.1 The Syrian civil war and mass displacement

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, generated one of the largest displacement crises of the 21st century and humanitarian cataclysm, uprooting more than half of Syria's pre-war population and forcing millions to seek refuge both internally and abroad. The EU was profoundly affected by this displacement, particularly during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, when nearly 2.5 million forced migrants from Syria and other conflict zones arrived in Europe. Many Syrians undertook perilous journeys through Turkey and across the Mediterranean to reach frontline states such as Greece, with Germany emerging as a primary destination.

The EU's response combined humanitarian and security measures: it deployed substantial aid inside Syria and in neighboring host countries, while simultaneously reinforcing asylum systems and external border management. The 2016 EU–Turkey deal became a pivotal instrument in reducing irregular crossings, though it also drew criticism for outsourcing migration management. The crisis exposed systemic deficiencies in EU asylum procedures, strained solidarity among member states, and fueled political polarization, with debates over integration, sovereignty, and security intensifying across the Union. The displacement was not only the byproduct of conflict but also of the Syrian regime's deliberate strategies of siege and forced migration, compounded by indirect drivers such as climatic stress. In this context, the EU has struggled to balance humanitarian obligations with domestic political pressures and geopolitical considerations, revealing the enduring complexity of migration governance. Ultimately, the Syrian civil war and its refugee flows reshaped EU migration and foreign policy, embedding the crisis as a defining moment in the Union's evolving approach to humanitarian protection, border control, and international partnerships.

A significant milestone on the path to political instability in Syria was the 2003 Iraq War, which triggered a substantial influx of refugees into the country. By 2007, the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria was estimated at approximately 1.2 million. This demographic shift had clear and adverse consequences, including economic strain, rising food prices, increased living costs, and mounting pressure on public services and infrastructure (Al-Miqda 2007). Notably, in the year preceding the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Assad regime demonstrated relatively favorable outcomes in safeguarding religious freedom compared to other regional states, as evidenced by the 2010 U.S. State Department report on global religious freedom and provisions within the

Syrian constitution. Smith (2012) acknowledges that despite growing criticism from the predominantly Sunni opposition, the regime made efforts to treat its population equitably, mitigate sectarian tensions, and preserve national unity prior to the Arab Spring.

The initial spark of the Syrian uprising occurred in the first week of March 2011, when security forces arrested ten schoolchildren in the provincial town of Daraa for writing the slogan "Down with the regime (*nizam*)" borrowed from the Egyptian revolution on a wall (Gelvin, 2015, p. 127). The protests quickly expanded to address broader national issues, including regime brutality, the absence of democratic institutions, and widespread corruption. Demonstrations soon spread to Latakia, the coastal city, and to Douma, north of Damascus, where protesters voiced similar concerns and encountered equally violent repression (Gelvin, 2015).

After months of escalating protests and military oversight, the initially nonviolent demonstrations evolved into an armed uprising (al-Jazeera, 2012). Opposition forces emerged from defectors within the Syrian army primarily from its Sunni ranks as well as foreign Islamist radicals, including jihadists and al-Qaeda fighters, who joined the burgeoning civil war. By 2012, the conflict had reached the capital Damascus and the city of Aleppo, plunging the country into a prolonged and devastating civil war (BBC: Middle East 2014).

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, has triggered one of the most significant displacement crises of the 21st century, rooted in a complex interplay of political repression, sectarian fragmentation, and sustained military violence (Sampson 2021). Over half of Syria's pre-war population of approximately 22 million has been displaced, with around 13.5 million Syrians either internally displaced or living as refugees abroad. Turkey alone hosts 3.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the largest single-host country, while neighboring states and European nations have also absorbed substantial numbers. The conflict has resulted in over 200,000 deaths, including thousands of children, and has devastated critical infrastructure, exacerbating humanitarian suffering.

Displacement has occurred both through forced evacuations linked to military operations often described as strategic displacement and through migration driven by deteriorating living conditions, such as drought and economic collapse. The war's origins lie in the violent suppression of Arab Spring protests by the Assad regime, which escalated into a broader sectarian and ethnic conflict, further complicated by external interventions that fragmented the

country along sectarian lines. The regime's use of indiscriminate violence and strategic displacement has uprooted entire communities, while environmental stressors like drought heightened vulnerabilities before and during the war (Bedin, et al. 2024).

According to Abu Hashem (2021), data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) indicates that Syria holds the highest number of internally displaced persons globally, with 6.6 million individuals. The Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program (HNAP) highlights that this displacement has disproportionately affected the country's northwest regions particularly Idlib, West Aleppo, and rural Damascus—where approximately 30% of Syria's population resides (HNAP 2019 September 2019). In 2020, the UNHCR estimated that 5.7 million Syrians had fled the country (HNAP 2019). During the early phases of the civil war, displacement was limited and not overtly politicized, as the Syrian regime initially relied on conventional methods to suppress dissent. Over time, however, the regime increasingly adopted displacement as a strategic tool. Early displacement also occurred in religiously diverse areas and enclaves lacking a Sunni majority, often serving to secure or consolidate territorial control. The mass relocation of populations was not merely a byproduct of conflict but a deliberate objective. This is corroborated by findings from an independent UN commission, which concluded that displacement had been executed by government forces as part of an organized policy, constituting a crime against humanity and/or a war crime (United Nations General Assembly 2013).

In response, the EU has grappled with the influx of Syrian refugees, particularly during the 2015 crisis, and has pursued cooperative measures with Turkey, such as the 18 March Memorandum, to curb irregular migration. Nonetheless, the EU's approach has been largely reactive, with member states diverging in their policies Germany adopting a more welcoming stance, while others remained restrictive. Humanitarian aid efforts persist but face challenges in effectively addressing needs amid ongoing conflict. Moreover, gender and security dimensions are critical, as displaced men and women encounter distinct risks during migration and in host countries. This multifaceted overview underscores the scale of displacement, the intricate causes of the Syrian conflict, and the EU's constrained yet ongoing role in managing its humanitarian consequences (Şehitoğlu 2024).

The EU's policy toward Syrian refugees has undergone a marked transformation since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Initially, the EU adopted a humanitarian stance,

offering asylum and protection to large numbers of refugees fleeing the conflict. During the early phase (2011–2014), the EU maintained open asylum policies and extended financial support to frontline states and humanitarian organizations, while most Syrian refugees sought refuge in neighboring countries, with relatively few arriving directly in Europe.

However, the refugee crisis peaked in 2015–2016, when over a million refugees entered the EU, overwhelming border systems particularly in Greece and Italy and prompting a shift in policy. **The EU-Turkey agreement** of March 2016 marked a pivotal moment, aiming to reduce irregular migration by returning refugees crossing from Turkey and incentivizing Turkey to host them. This period saw the EU increasingly externalize migration management and strengthen cooperation with origin and transit countries. Post-2016, the EU pursued reforms under the Common European Asylum System, though implementation was hindered by uneven refugee acceptance and limited solidarity mechanisms among member states. Temporary protection mechanisms remained underutilized until the Ukrainian crisis in 2022 highlighted their potential. Despite efforts to address the root causes of displacement through foreign and security policy, the EU's response has largely remained reactive. Presently, the EU continues to rely heavily on external border management and third-country agreements to regulate refugee flows, while grappling with the challenge of balancing humanitarian commitments against political, security, and public opinion pressures. The persistent lack of a unified and coherent approach to refugee reception and integration underscores the complexity of the EU's evolving policy landscape, which has shifted from initial openness to a more containment-oriented strategy.

3.2 Migration flows from Libya and North Africa

The wave of intifadas, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, soon reached Libya. A coalition of diverse groups mobilized Libyans via social media, calling for participation in a "Day of Rage" to protest the country's dire political and economic conditions, scheduled for 17 February 2011. However, events escalated ahead of the planned date when, on 15 February, the Libyan government arrested Fathi Terbil, a lawyer representing families of prisoners who had disappeared in the Abu Salim prison. In response, hundreds of relatives and supporters gathered at the local revolutionary committee headquarters in Benghazi, where they clashed with regime security forces. By the time the designated day of protest arrived, approximately 6,000

demonstrators filled the streets of Benghazi, demanding the regime's overthrow. The protests and confrontations quickly spread to surrounding cities, and demonstrators declared Benghazi "liberated," asserting that the regime had been toppled (Gelvin, 2015).

Eastern Libya, historically marginalized and repressed under Muammar Gaddafi's rule, emerged as a critical epicenter of opposition. The uprising was driven by widespread discontent with Gaddafi's authoritarian regime, which had suppressed political freedoms for over four decades. The country was plagued by systemic corruption and deep social inequalities. Libyan society, marked by tribalism, was dominated by tribes loyal to Gaddafi, further entrenching social divisions. Černý (2012) notes that the regime was also characterized by severe human rights violations and the persecution of political dissent. According to the Freedom House Index, Libya under Gaddafi scored 7.0, the lowest possible rating – placing it alongside regimes such as North Korea in terms of political repression.

From the onset of the uprising, the regime responded with extreme violence. Security forces and the military treated demonstrators as armed insurgents, bypassing non-lethal methods such as tear gas and resorting immediately to live ammunition. The government deployed combat helicopters to suppress the rebellion in Tripoli. What began as a protest movement evolved into a civil war, eventually reaching a prolonged stalemate. Although the regime appeared poised to quash the uprising, on March 19, 2011, a coalition of predominantly Western states launched airstrikes, forcing government forces into retreat (Brtnický, 2016).

The international community responded swiftly to the Libyan crisis. In March 2011, following a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, NATO powers initiated airstrikes against government targets. The Security Council imposed sanctions, an arms embargo, and froze Libyan assets, citing Gaddafi's crimes against humanity and referring the case to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The Arab League subsequently suspended Libya's membership and called for the establishment of a no-fly zone, a request that the Security Council approved (Daalder and Stavridis, 2012).

With military support from Western and Arab states, and the deployment of NATO aircraft, rebel forces captured Tripoli after six months of fighting. Thousands perished in the conflict, but Western intervention shifted the momentum in favor of the opposition. In August 2011, Tripoli fell to rebel forces who identified themselves as *thuwwar* – revolutionaries and denied the Gaddafi regime any remaining legitimacy. After four decades in power, Gaddafi fled

and was ultimately captured and killed near the city of Sirte in October 2011 (Gelvin, 2015) and the country slowly descended into civil war.

Migration flows from Libya and North Africa to the EU remain a complex and pressing issue in 2025, shaped by geopolitical instability, humanitarian concerns, and evolving policy frameworks. Libya continues to serve as a primary departure point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the broader North African region seeking entry into Europe. These migration routes are fraught with danger, often involving smuggling networks, arbitrary detention by militias, and exposure to exploitative practices such as human trafficking and modern slavery. The collapse of the Libyan state following the 2011 uprising has resulted in fragmented governance, with various factions and militias exerting control over territory, thereby facilitating systemic abuses against migrants.

In response, the EU has pursued a strategy of externalizing migration management, notably through cooperation with Libyan actors to intercept migrants at sea and reduce arrivals on European shores. However, this approach has been widely criticized for its association with severe human rights violations. Fatality rates on Mediterranean crossings remain alarmingly high due to overcrowded vessels and dangerous conditions. The EU has allocated substantial financial resources amounting to hundreds of millions of Euros to support Libyan coast guard operations and regional containment efforts, with Italy playing a prominent role due to its geopolitical interests in Libyan sovereignty and migration control. Migrants face acute risks including torture, forced labor, and commodification within trafficking networks, while pushbacks and forced returns from EU member states raise serious concerns about refoulement and the violation of international protection norms. Migration governance in Libya and North Africa is further complicated by institutional fragmentation, competing authorities, and limited capacity to ensure migrant safety and rights. In sum, migration flows from Libya and North Africa to the EU are driven by conflict, state collapse, and coercive control mechanisms, with EU policy increasingly focused on containment through external partnerships, despite the significant humanitarian costs involved (Ceccorulli 2021; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022).

Since 2013, migration across the Mediterranean has increased dramatically, with the number of crossings more than quadrupling. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly 182,000 migrants departing from Libya arrived in Italy since the beginning of 2012, exacerbating an already critical refugee crisis fueled by

displacement from Syria and other parts of the Middle East. The journey across the Mediterranean has proven deadly for many; between 1993 and 2017, over 34,000 migrants and refugees are believed to have died attempting to reach Europe (UN Migration, 2019). The 2011 Libyan civil war significantly altered regional migration dynamics. Although Libya had long been a key node in the global South-South migration corridor, with 768,372 migrants leaving the country, the post-conflict collapse of state authority created a vacuum that enabled the proliferation of smuggling networks. These networks capitalized on the chaos, transforming Libya into a hub for human trafficking. The country’s extensive 1,100-mile coastline effectively became an unregulated border zone, with little to no governmental oversight of maritime departures. This breakdown in governance not only facilitated irregular migration but also contributed to the emergence of a lucrative and exploitative market for human mobility. Due to sea crossings on the Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy. Since 2014, over two million people have arrived in Europe by sea and over 20,000 (highlighted in red) people have died or gone missing. There are three primary routes through the Mediterranean, flows along the Western, Central, and Eastern Mediterranean routes from 2014–2020 described in Table 1.

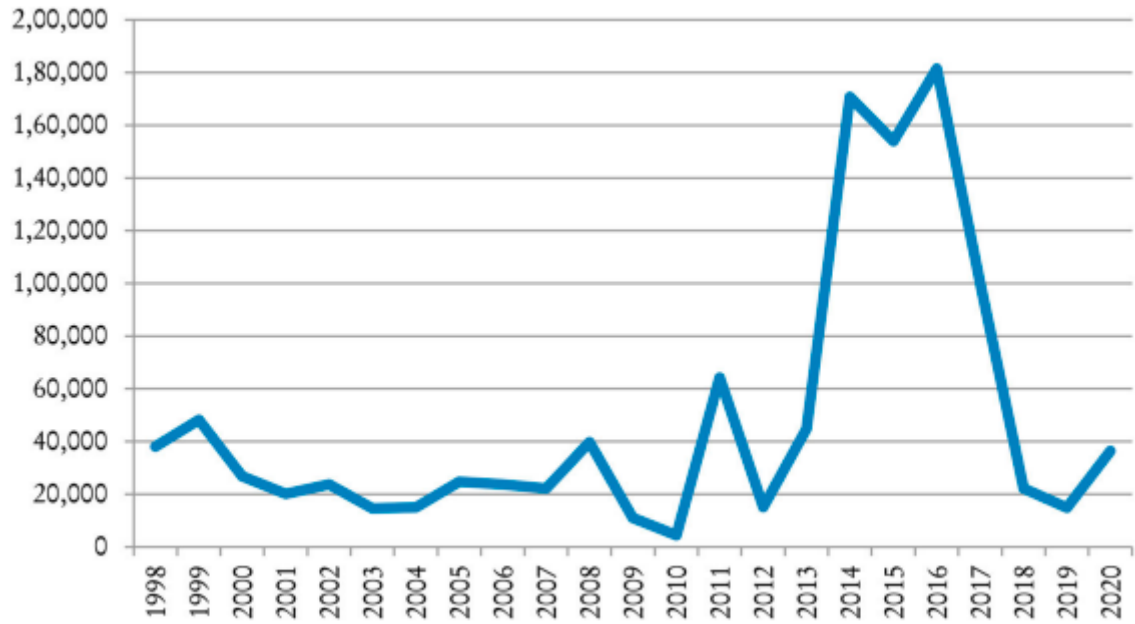
Table 1



Source: Hoffmann and Komiyama 2024.

Since the start of the Libyan crisis in 2011, over half a million migrants have attempted the dangerous sea crossing from Libya to Italy. Data show the number of arrivals by sea to Italy was around 62,500 in 2011, rising substantially to 170,000 in 2014. The peak of the Mediterranean migration crisis was in 2015 when about a million migrants reached Europe, many landing in Italy. The Central Mediterranean route including Libya-Italy remains a major point of entry, though arrivals have fluctuated over the years due to EU and Libyan cooperation on border control and fluctuating conflict dynamics within Libya. In summary, approximately more than 500,000 migrants have fled from Libya to Italy since 2011, with large influxes in the peak years around 2014-2015 and subsequent declines impacted by border enforcement and migration policies (Hoffmann and Komiyama 2024). Irregular seaborne arrivals to Italy and Malta, 1998–2020 from International Organization for Migration, UNHCR and Italian and Maltese governments in Table 2.

Table 2



Source: Cusumano and Riddervold 2023

3.3 Institutional shortcomings and criticisms of the EU

The migration crisis triggered by war and conflict, particularly since 2015, placed immense pressure on frontline EU states such as Italy and Greece, exposing deep fissures in the Union's principle of solidarity. Owing to their geographic position at the EU's external borders, both countries became the primary entry points for large numbers of migrants and refugees attempting to reach Europe, bearing a disproportionate share of responsibility under **the Dublin Regulation**, which obliges asylum seekers to submit their claims in the first EU country they enter. This structural imbalance left Italy and Greece struggling with overcrowded reception centers, inadequate resources, and the logistical challenges of managing irregular sea arrivals, many of which occurred under life-threatening conditions. The resulting strain on national capacities not only undermined social cohesion but also heightened political tensions within the EU, as many member states proved unwilling to participate in equitable burden-sharing (Yaseen 2025).

The 2015 migration crisis profoundly reshaped the European Union (EU), polarizing political landscapes, exposing institutional shortcomings, and provoking widespread criticism of the Union's ability to manage large-scale humanitarian challenges. Politically, the crisis deepened divisions among member states, particularly over the question of refugee relocation and burden-sharing. While the EU sought to introduce mandatory quotas to distribute asylum seekers more evenly, countries such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic categorically rejected these measures, fueling nationalist rhetoric and strengthening populist, anti-immigration movements. Mainstream political parties, responding to mounting public pressure and the electoral rise of radical right actors, hardened their stances on migration, contributing to polarized public debates and heightened social tensions. Both transnational and domestic conflicts emerged around asylum policy, with societies increasingly fractured between advocates of humanitarian responsibility and opponents of migration, further entrenching political polarization across Europe (Gessler and Hunger 2022).

For instance, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS) – PiS's rhetoric on refugees persistently shifted blame to the EU, framing Poland's reluctance to accept relocations as a direct result of the Union's failures. This was a stark departure from Poland's typically high levels of trust in the EU. During the crisis, the government openly criticized EU decisions, contending that

the lack of a safe mechanism was the EU's fault. As spokesperson Rafał Bochenek stated: *“the mechanism promised by the European Union for verification of people who were coming from the Middle East, doesn’t work at all. It turned out that those people that have been assigned to us, had several passports. We couldn’t verify their real names, their family connections. It shows that the system, which we have talked about from the very beginning, the relocation system that is proposed by the EU institutions, is firstly ineffective and secondly does not guarantee the security of citizens of the Member States”* (Kabatan and Jacobs 2022).

The crisis revealed the fragility of EU solidarity and contributed to the rise of nationalist and populist movements emphasizing border security and sovereignty over cooperative solutions. Efforts to implement relocation and resettlement schemes for asylum seekers met with significant resistance, including legal challenges from states such as Hungary and Slovakia, further eroding collective trust and undermining the EU’s ability to act decisively. The temporary reinstatement of border controls within the Schengen Area underscored the impact on one of the Union’s foundational achievements freedom of movement while also highlighting the difficulty of reconciling divergent national interests with shared governance frameworks (Pifer et al. 2016).

Institutionally, the crisis exposed fundamental weaknesses in the EU’s migration governance framework. The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) proved ill-equipped to deliver coherent and timely responses, revealing deficits in burden-sharing, coordination, and collective decision-making. The Dublin Regulation, which requires asylum applications to be processed in the country of first entry, placed disproportionate strain on frontline states such as Greece and Italy, exacerbating tensions and exposing the inefficiencies of existing governance structures. Attempts at relocation were further undermined by legal challenges and the outright refusal of some member states to comply, underscoring the limitations of EU solidarity during times of acute pressure (Beirens 2018).

In the absence of consensus, EU migration policy increasingly turned to externalization strategies, relying on cooperation with transit states such as Turkey and Libya to manage migration flows. While these arrangements reduced arrivals in the short term, they drew sustained criticism for human rights abuses and for failing to provide sustainable long-term solutions. Ultimately, the crisis laid bare the structural weaknesses of European migration governance: frontline states were left to navigate complex humanitarian, legal, and security dilemmas with limited support, while political fragmentation and contested asylum policies

weakened the EU's cohesion (Topala and Radeljićb 2023). Italy and Greece's experiences thus underscored both the asymmetry of responsibility within the Union and the broader systemic shortcomings in the EU's approach to migration management.

The EU also faced **sustained criticism for its reactive and fragmented policy responses**, which frequently prioritized securitization and border control over comprehensive humanitarian protection and long-term integration strategies. Externalization policies, including high-profile agreements with Turkey (Okay and Okay 2019) and Libya, were denounced for raising serious human rights concerns and for failing to address the structural drivers of displacement. Collectively, these shortcomings damaged the EU's credibility as a humanitarian leader, calling into question its soft power and moral authority within global migration governance. The 2015 crisis thus marked a critical juncture for the EU, *revealing the fragility of institutional and political cohesion in the face of mass displacement while simultaneously reshaping the trajectory of European migration policy* (Kazarinova 2025). According to European Commission Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood¹: *“Türkiye hosts one of the biggest refugee populations in the world, including more than 3.1 million Syrian refugees and almost 300 000 refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities. The EU is committed to assisting Türkiye in dealing with this challenge. Since 2011 it has directed close to €10 billion to assist refugees and host communities in Türkiye”* (EC 2025).

The 2015 migration crisis constituted a critical juncture for the EU, catalysing a significant policy reorientation toward a more restrictive and security-oriented model of migration governance. This shift, characterized by the prioritization of border control and the externalization of responsibilities, has had profound implications for the Union's internal cohesion and its stance on human rights.

The unprecedented scale of migratory flows in 2015 amplified anxieties among member states and publics concerning border integrity, national sovereignty, and social stability (Dennison and Geddes 2019). In reaction, the core policy focus of the EU shifted decisively

¹ One of the main mechanisms for managing this funding, the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey, coordinates a total of €6 billion in support to refugees and host communities in the country, designed to ensure that their needs are addressed in a comprehensive manner. The full operational budget of the Facility €6 billion has been allocated and contracted, and more than €5.7 billion has been disbursed. Support under the Facility focuses on humanitarian assistance, education, migration management, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support. The EU continues to support refugees in Türkiye also beyond the Facility. It mobilised supplementary humanitarian support in 2020 and ensures the continuation of key Facility interventions under an additional allocation of €3 billion for the period of 2021-23 (EC 2025).

toward "securing" external borders and implementing stricter controls, often at the expense of robust asylum and integration mechanisms. This was starkly demonstrated by the widespread reintroduction of internal border controls within the Schengen Area, a move that fundamentally challenged the principle of free movement and exposed the deficiencies of the EU's collective governance framework in times of crisis (Trauner and Ripoll Servent 2016).

A defining feature of the post-2015 period has been the effective "securitization" of migration, whereby cross-border movement was increasingly framed as an existential threat linked to terrorism, crime, and social unrest (Buzan et al. 1998). This securitizing discourse, prevalent in political rhetoric and media, legitimized a suite of enforcement-heavy measures. These included enhanced surveillance systems, the expansion of border agency Frontex, and the adoption of pushback operations, particularly in frontline states like Greece and Italy (Carrera 2020).

Concurrently, the EU increasingly externalized migration management through agreements with third countries such as Turkey and Libya. These partnerships, designed to contain migratory flows before they reach European borders, have relied on funding and equipping non-EU actors whose practices frequently violate international human rights norms, underscoring a preference for containment over protection (Collett and Le Coz 2018).

This governance shift was propelled by potent political forces within the EU. The crisis provided fertile ground for nationalist parties successfully pressuring national governments and EU institutions to adopt ever-stricter border policies and restrictive immigration laws (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). Consequently, EU institutions were caught in a tension between upholding their foundational humanitarian values and acceding to member states' demands for heightened security. This tension resulted in a fragmented and often reactive policy landscape, exemplified by the contentious and uneven implementation of the refugee relocation scheme, which ultimately gave way to a system focused on extra-territorial containment.

In summary, the 2015 migration crisis acted as a catalyst for a profound transformation in EU migration policy. The ensuing governance model, prioritizing securitization, externalization, and national sovereignty, has fundamentally reshaped the EU's approach to migration. While aimed at restoring control, this shift has exacerbated political divisions and posed significant challenges to the Union's commitment to human rights and international protection principles.



A young woman from Ukraine carries her baby and toddler across the border into Hungary on 27 February 2022.
Source: UNHCR 2025; © UNHCR/Zsolt Balla

4 The War in Ukraine and the Temporary Protection Directive

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the fastest and largest displacements of people in recent history. In an unprecedented move, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (2001/55/EC) for the very first time since its creation, granting immediate and collective protection to those fleeing the conflict. This directive provides Ukrainians with temporary protection status across all EU member states, including rights to residence, access to the labor market, housing, healthcare, education, and social welfare for an initial period of one year renewable as needed (EUR-Lex 2001; EC – Migration and Home Affairs 2025). By bypassing traditional, overburdened asylum systems, this mechanism enabled rapid protection and integration support, reflecting a uniquely unified and swift EU response to a large-scale humanitarian crisis within Europe.

The activation of the directive demonstrated remarkable European solidarity, offering quick and uniform protection to Ukrainians. What was a stark contrast to the fragmented and

politically contentious responses that characterized earlier migration crises. However, its exclusive application to Ukrainians has also sparked debate over selective protection and equal treatment for other displaced groups seeking safety in the EU. To coordinate the response, the EU established a solidarity platform, facilitating resource and information sharing among member states. Beyond meeting immediate humanitarian needs, these measures represent a clear political stance in support of Ukraine and the defense of fundamental rights. Looking ahead, ensuring long-term inclusion through healthcare, labor market integration, and social support remains a critical priority as millions of displaced Ukrainians continue to reside across the continent (Vitiello 2022).

4.1 Immediate activation of the Temporary Protection Directive and its criticism

The scale and scope of Ukrainian refugee displacement into the EU following the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 is historically unprecedented. Within the first two months of the conflict, more than 5 million people fled Ukraine, with the vast majority seeking protection in neighbouring EU member states (UNHCR 2022a). By the end of 2023, the total number of Ukrainians registered for temporary protection or similar national schemes in the EU had reached over 4.2 million individuals (Eurostat 2023).

The magnitude of the humanitarian crisis is staggering, yet the international response has been correspondingly robust, with UNHCR and numerous partner organizations striving to provide safety and dignity to those affected by the ongoing conflict. Since the full-scale invasion began, nearly 6.9 million Ukrainians have sought refuge abroad, while an additional 3.7 million remain internally displaced—collectively representing almost a quarter of the country’s pre-war population. Displacement disproportionately affects women and children, who together constitute 76% of all refugees and more than half of those displaced within Ukraine. Civilian casualties have been severe, with over 42,000 wounded or killed among them 2,500 children and more than 2.5 million homes damaged or destroyed, amounting to approximately 13% of Ukraine’s housing stock. Critical infrastructure, including transport and energy systems, has sustained an estimated \$176 billion in damage, compounding daily hardships for civilians and deepening the struggle for normalcy amid widespread devastation (UNHCR 2025).

The geographic scope of these flows was wide, yet the burden was disproportionately shouldered by countries sharing a border with Ukraine. For instance, Poland, which had previously been a staunch opponent of EU-wide refugee quotas during the 2015 migration crisis, became the largest recipient, registering over 1.5 million individuals (Polish Border Guard 2023, cited in EPRS 2023).

This massive influx was notably gendered in its scope, with an estimated 90% of adult refugees being women and children, a direct consequence of Ukraine's martial law prohibiting male citizens aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country (FRA 2023). The sheer velocity and volume of this exodus necessitated an unprecedented policy response, namely the first-ever activation of the TPD, which provided a legal framework for a coordinated and collective EU effort to manage this large-scale inflow (EUR-Lex – Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382).

Temporary protection is an exceptional mechanism designed to deliver immediate and temporary refuge in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons from outside the EU who cannot safely return to their country of origin (Directive 2001/55/EC). Formally adopted in 2001 following the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the TPD serves as a critical tool for the EU to ensure a coordinated response when the scale of displacement risks overwhelming the capacity of member states' standard asylum systems, thereby safeguarding both the efficiency of the asylum procedure and the rights of those seeking protection (Council of the European Union, 2001). This directive was activated for the first time in history in response to the mass flight triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The European Commission, recognizing the imminent strain that millions of arrivals would place on national asylum authorities, swiftly proposed its activation, leading to the Council's unanimous adoption of the implementing decision on 4 March 2022 (Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382). This landmark decision granted immediate protection to those fleeing the conflict, demonstrating the directive's intended role as a framework for swift and collective European action in the face of a large-scale humanitarian crisis (EUR-Lex 2001; EC – Migration and Home Affairs 2025).

According to *Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382* – the immediate activation of the TPD in response to the mass displacement from Ukraine in March 2022 was widely praised as a historic demonstration of EU solidarity and operational effectiveness. For the first

time since its creation in 2001, the EU invoked this mechanism to offer swift, uniform protection to millions of Ukrainians, enabling access to rights and services across member states without overburdening national asylum systems.

However, this unprecedented move has also attracted significant criticism, particularly concerning the selective and politicized nature of its application. Scholars and human rights organizations have pointed out that the same directive was never activated during earlier large-scale displacements from Syria, Afghanistan, or other regions, revealing a double standard in the EU's approach to protection (Collett and Le Coz 2022). This has led to accusations of a "hierarchy of vulnerability," where geographic, cultural, and racial biases influence whose flight is deemed worthy of a compassionate and efficient response (Freedman 2023).

Activation also exposes the contingent and geographically selective nature of European protection mechanisms. The directive's first-ever activation after 21 years of dormancy despite multiple large-scale displacements from Syria, Afghanistan, and other regions raises critical questions about the criteria for "mass influx" and the political will required to trigger this mechanism (Kälin and Chappuisat, 2017).

The swift unanimity among member states stands in stark contrast to the protracted negotiations and outright opposition that characterized the 2015-2016 migration crisis, suggesting that geographic proximity, cultural affinities, and perceived security threats rather than objective humanitarian need fundamentally shape EU responses to displacement (Collett and Le Coz 2022). Consequently, while the activation successfully provided immediate protection to millions of Ukrainians, it simultaneously reinforced a troubling hierarchy of deservingness in EU asylum policy, undermining the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in international refugee law.

Furthermore, while the TPD has eased administrative pressures, its temporary nature raises concerns about long-term integration prospects and the potential for creating a "protection limbo" should the situation in Ukraine remain unresolved (Zaun and Natarajan 2022). Thus, while the activation of the TPD represents a milestone in EU migration governance, it also underscores deeper structural inequities and ad-hoc political considerations that continue to shape regional asylum policy.

In summary, the activation of the TPD marks a historic milestone in EU migration policy, enabling a coordinated, rights-based approach to protection while also exposing ongoing tensions around equity and solidarity in regional responses to forced displacement.

4.2 Comparison of the EU's Response to the 2015 Migration Crisis and the 2022 Ukrainian

The European Union's response to the mass displacement of Ukrainians following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 stands in stark contrast to its handling of the 2015-16 migration crisis. While both events involved large numbers of people seeking refuge, the political, legal, and operational responses differed dramatically, highlighting lessons learned and the profound impact of political unity:

1. Legal Framework & Mechanism

2015 Migration Crisis: The EU relied on its existing, fragmented Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The core mechanism that failed was the **Dublin Regulation**, which places responsibility for processing asylum seekers on the first member state of entry, placing disproportionate strain on border states like Greece and Italy. The EU's attempt to introduce mandatory **relocation quotas** for asylum seekers from these countries was highly contentious, rejected by the Visegrád Group (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia), and ultimately largely unsuccessful (only a fraction of the proposed 160,000 people were relocated) (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022a).

2022 Ukraine War: For the first time in its history, the EU activated the **Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)** (2001/55/EC). This mechanism was designed for a mass influx where individual asylum processing is impractical. It provides immediate, blanket protection for a defined group without the need for individual asylum applications. It grants Ukrainians rights to residence, access to the labour market, housing, social welfare, and medical care. This was implemented unanimously within days of the invasion (Council of the European Union, 2022).

2. Political Unity and Solidarity

2015 Migration Crisis: Characterized by **deep political division and a lack of solidarity**. The crisis exposed a clear East-West rift, with Central and Eastern European states vehemently opposing mandatory quotas on sovereignty grounds. There was no common narrative, with the influx often framed as a "security threat" or "illegal migration." This discord paralyzed the EU's decision-making ability and led to ad-hoc, uncoordinated national responses, including the reinstatement of internal border controls (Collett and Le Coz 2022).

2022 Ukraine War: Marked by **remarkable speed and political unity**. The decision to activate the TPD was taken unanimously within days. The geographic and cultural proximity of Ukraine, the blatant nature of Russian aggression, and the clear status of Ukrainians as war refugees created a powerful sense of shared purpose. The response was framed in terms of **European solidarity** and support for a fellow European nation under attack. This unity facilitated a coordinated and generous response (Glorius and Bendel, 2023).

3. Public and Media Discourse

2015 Migration Crisis: The discourse was often highly **securitized and polarized**. Migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa were frequently portrayed through a lens of security, cultural threat, and irregularity. The term "migration crisis" itself was contested, with some viewing it as a crisis *for* the migrants and others as a crisis *for* Europe (Dennison and Geddes, 2019).

2022 Ukraine War: The discourse was overwhelmingly characterized by **empathy and welcome**. Ukrainians were widely seen as "genuine refugees," fellow Europeans fleeing a brutal war. The media coverage was sympathetic, and the public response across the EU was one of widespread support, with countless citizens volunteering to host displaced families. The language was that of "protection" and "safety," not "security" and "control" (Migration Policy Institute Europe 2022).

4. Operational Management & Burden-Sharing

2015 Migration Crisis: Ineffective and unequal burden-sharing. The EU's focus was on externalizing border control through deals with third countries like Turkey (the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement) and reinforcing the EU's external borders with Frontex. Internally, the lack of a fair relocation mechanism meant the burden fell almost entirely on the countries of first arrival (Collett and Le Coz, 2022).

2022 Ukraine War: More effective and voluntary solidarity. While the TPD did not include a mandatory relocation mechanism, the open borders and freedom of movement within the Schengen area allowed Ukrainians to choose their destination country based on family links, language, or community networks. The EU supported host countries with financial assistance and coordinated logistics. The **EU-Ukraine Solidarity Platforms** helped manage transit and reception (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022b).

Table 3 – Comparison of the EU's approach to 2015 Migration Crisis and 2022 Ukraine War

	2015 Migration Crisis	2022 Ukraine War (TPD)
Primary Tool	Dublin Regulation (failed quotas)	Temporary Protection Directive
Political Unity	Divided (East-West rift)	Unanimous & rapid
Narrative	Securitization, "threat", irregularity	Solidarity , "refugees", welcome
Burden-Sharing	Contentious & failed (mandatory quotas)	Voluntary & effective (freedom of movement)
Public Response	Polarized, fearful	Overwhelmingly supportive, hospitable

The difference in the EU's response to these two crises is profound. The 2015 crisis revealed the structural weaknesses and political fractures within the EU's asylum policy, leading to a reactive, securitized, and fragmented approach. In contrast, the response to Ukraine demonstrated the EU's capacity for swift, unified, and humanitarian action when political will exists. The successful activation of the TPD a legal, orderly, and rights-based framework that

had been entirely absent in 2015. This contrast underscores that the EU's crisis response capabilities are not just a matter of law and policy, but are fundamentally determined by political unity and a shared sense of identity & threat and sometimes political hypocrisy as well as double standard.

6 Persistent Challenges in EU Migration Governance

Persistent challenges in EU migration governance reveal a structural tension between the aspiration for a unified, rights-based Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the reality of entrenched national sovereignty, divergent political interests, and ad-hoc crisis responses. Despite repeated attempts to reform the system particularly following the 2015–2016 migration crisis the Dublin Regulation's core principle, which assigns responsibility for asylum seekers to the first country of entry, continues to place disproportionate strain on frontline states like Italy and Greece, fostering resentment and perpetuating a cycle of non-solidarity (Geddes 2021).

The EU's increasing reliance on externalization strategies, such as the controversial partnership with Turkey and funding arrangements with North African states, has effectively outsourced migration control to third countries, often at the expense of human rights and international protection standards (Collett and Le Coz 2022). Moreover, the highly politicized and selective activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians in 2022, while a milestone in coordinated response, underscored the absence of a universal protection mechanism and exposed a discriminatory hierarchy of deservingness based on geographic and cultural proximity (Freedman 2023). These enduring flaws sovereignty disputes, externalization, and politicized solidarity not only undermine the coherence and legitimacy of EU migration policy but also perpetuate a system where border control is prioritized over protection, and where comprehensive reform remains elusive in the face of rising populism and intergovernmental discord.

6.1 The EU's 2024 – Migration and Asylum Pact and its criticism

The persistent unequal distribution of asylum seekers across the EU has exposed fundamental flaws in the CEAS, particularly the Dublin Regulation's requirement that the first country of entry processes applications, which places disproportionate responsibility on frontline

states like Italy, Greece, and Spain (Geddes and Scholten 2016). This structural imbalance has fueled continuous quota disputes among member states, revealing deep political divisions between northern and western countries advocating for greater solidarity and eastern member states vehemently opposing mandatory relocation mechanisms (Trauner and Ripoll Servent 2016). The failed implementation of the 2015 temporary relocation scheme, which aimed to redistribute 160,000 asylum seekers from overwhelmed frontline countries but ultimately transferred fewer than 40,000 persons, demonstrated both the lack of trust among member states and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms (European Court of Auditors 2017). These distribution conflicts have not only perpetuated secondary movements within the Schengen area but have also encouraged the emergence of a two-tier system where geographic proximity to external borders determines a member state's burden, ultimately undermining the principle of solidarity that theoretically underpins EU asylum policy (Zaun 2018).

A significant political faction **The Patriots for Europe (PfE)** in the European Parliament has mounted strong opposition to the EU's recently adopted **Migration and Asylum Pact**, particularly contesting its mechanisms for the mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers among member states. This group has dismissed the Pact as effectively “dead” and advocates for its complete abandonment, arguing that it fails to reflect the expectations of both national governments and their electorates. Instead, it calls for a new policy framework centered on enhanced external border protection and a firm prohibition on irregular crossings, explicitly rejecting any form of compulsory refugee relocation (Orbán 2024; Agaci, 2024).

According to European Commission – Migration and Home Affairs: *“The Pact on Migration and Asylum is a set of new rules managing migration and establishing a common asylum system at EU level, that deliver results while remaining grounded in our European values. They are build on and amend previous reform proposals in the area of migration, offering a comprehensive approach that aims at strengthening and integrating key EU policies on migration, asylum, border management and integration. With firm but fair rules, they are designed to manage and normalise migration for the long term, providing EU countries with the flexibility to address the specific challenges they face, and necessary safeguards to protect people in need”* (EC 2024).

The EU's **2024 – Migration and Asylum Pact** represents a landmark, albeit deeply contested, reform of the CEAS, aiming to address long-standing structural deficiencies exposed during the 2015–2016 migration crisis. Central to the Pact is the principle of “mandatory solidarity,” which requires all member states to contribute to migration management through relocations, financial contributions, or operational support, thereby seeking to alleviate the disproportionate pressure on frontline states (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2024).

The legislation also introduces stricter border procedures, including accelerated asylum assessments and enhanced pre-entry screening for individuals with low recognition rates, with the objective of streamlining returns and discouraging irregular arrivals (Peers 2024). However, the Pact has faced significant criticism from both sides of the political spectrum: human rights organizations warn that its emphasis on expedited procedures and externalization risks undermining access to protection and violating international refugee law (Amnesty International, 2024), while certain member states and political factions condemn the mandatory relocation mechanisms as an infringement on national sovereignty and have vowed to challenge their implementation (Zaun and Scipioni 2024).

Thus, while the Pact marks a historic step toward a more unified asylum framework, its operational success and political sustainability remain uncertain amid ongoing legal, political, and ethical controversies.

Central to its critique is the assertion that mandatory solidarity measures which obligate countries to either accept asylum seekers or provide financial contributions fundamentally undermine national sovereignty. By framing resettlement quotas as an unacceptable infringement on state autonomy, the group reinforces a broader eurosceptic discourse that prioritizes border control over burden-sharing and asserts the primacy of national decision-making in migration policy (Orbán 2024; Agaci, 2024).

A central document outlining the migration policy platform of a major faction in the European Parliament, the so-called ‘**Budapest Declaration**’, presents a fundamental critique of the EU’s recently adopted Migration and Asylum Pact. The declaration, which prioritizes the absolute protection of external borders, the cessation of irregular migration, and the preservation of Europe’s cultural identity, condemns the Pact as illegitimate and ineffective (Patriots for Europe, 2024). It argues that the legislation was rushed through by mainstream parties and adopted in the Council without a unanimous mandate, thereby failing to reflect the democratic

will of European citizens expressed in the subsequent elections. Substantively, the declaration asserts that the Pact merely manages the consequences of migration while neglecting its root causes and, crucially, leaving the incentives for irregular entry untouched.

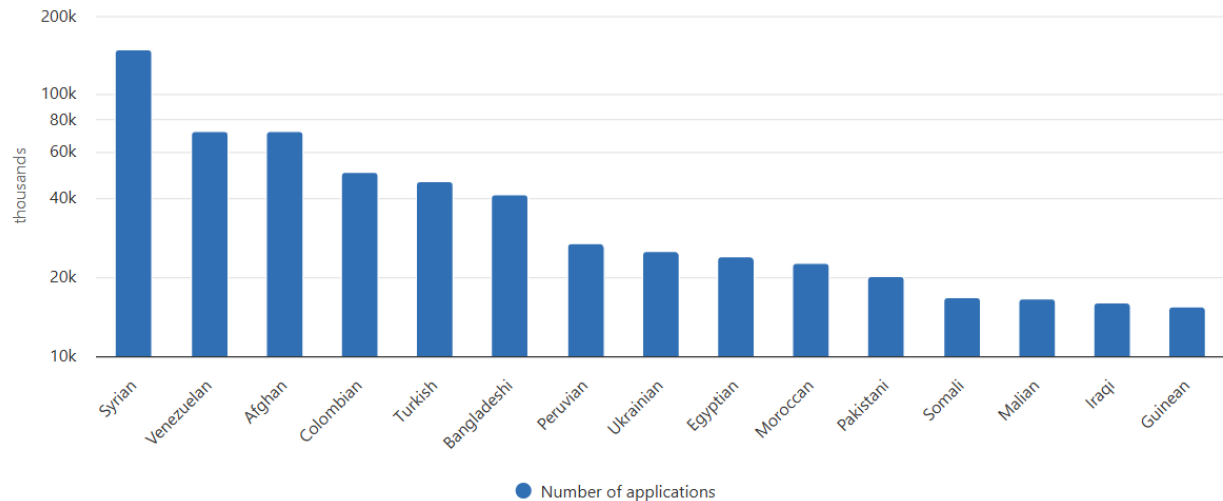
In lieu of the current Pact, the faction demands a radically different approach centered on stringent externalization and national sovereignty. Its key proposals include enforcing a prohibition on illegal entry, whereby individuals could only enter EU territory after their asylum claim is pre-approved abroad; establishing EU-funded reception and deportation facilities in third countries, modelled on the Italy-Albania protocol; and imposing lifetime entry bans on those caught crossing irregularly, inspired by the Australian model (Patriots for Europe, 2024). Furthermore, it calls for streamlined deportations backed by diplomatic and economic pressure on non-cooperating origin countries, the evaluation and revocation of protection status for refugees convicted of serious crimes, and sanctions against NGOs accused of facilitating irregular migration. A core tenet of the declaration is the unwavering prerogative of member states to act unilaterally if EU-level reforms are deemed insufficient, including the right to opt out of common migration policies and the immediate withdrawal of all financial penalties for states protecting their national borders. This position, which frames migration primarily as a security and sovereignty issue, rejects the Pact's solidarity mechanisms as a flawed concept and insists that any effective policy must begin by restoring national control over territorial admission (Magyar Nemzet 2024; European Conservative 2024).

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was formally adopted by the European Parliament in 2024, advancing a comprehensive framework intended to offer a unified European response to migration management. Set to take full effect in 2026, the Pact aims to strengthen border controls, accelerate asylum processing, and systematise the return of individuals deemed ineligible for protection. It introduces binding compliance mechanisms, enabling legal action against member states that fail to adhere to the new regulations.

However, there is considerable scepticism of the Third Sector regarding the Pact's capacity to reduce irregular migration. Previous EU migration measures have largely resulted in increasing the profitability of human smuggling networks and exacerbating risks faced by migrants outcomes extensively documented by civil society organisations highlighting systematic rights violations and the emergence of more dangerous migration routes. These troubling patterns are likely to continue under the new system. Opaque negotiations between the

EU and third countries, coupled with insufficient monitoring of reception conditions and widespread non-compliance with international legal standards particularly in transit states threaten to further endanger the safety and rights of people on the move (Zarhloule 2025).

Table 3



Top 15 nationalities of first time asylum applicants (2024). Source: EC - Statistics on migration to Europe 2025

As it is shown in Table 3, in 2024, the EU member states rendered 754,500 first-instance asylum decisions, with just over half (51%) resulting in a positive outcome. These included 164,900 grants of refugee status, 155,500 conferrals of subsidiary protection, and 67,300 awards of humanitarian status. An additional 165,500 final decisions were issued at the appeal stage, of which 20,700 resulted in refugee status, 14,400 in subsidiary protection, and 15,200 in humanitarian status. Cumulatively, these decisions extended protection to approximately 438,000 individuals over the course of the year, reflecting both the continued scale of asylum applications within the EU and the multifaceted nature of international protection as implemented across member states (EC - Statistics on migration to Europe 2025).

7 Critical Reflections and Preparedness for Future Crises

According to ICMPD Migration Outlook (2025): *“Despite the complex and multifaceted nature of migration, state fragility and violent conflict will remain key drivers of migration trends in 2025, as in previous years. According to UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced people had risen to an estimated 122.6 million by mid-2024, marking an 11.5% increase compared to 2023. Two billion people live in conflict-affected areas. Globally, these areas have expanded by 65% since 2021, with sub-Saharan Africa experiencing the most significant growth. All indicators suggest that this trend will continue into 2025, potentially exacerbated by escalating conflicts such as those in the Sahel and influenced by major geopolitical events like the latest presidential elections in the USA or the fall of the Assad regime in Syria”.*

7.1 Risks of future conflict-driven migration surges

The prospect of a durable peace in **the Middle East** remains highly uncertain, with experts assessing a lasting ceasefire between Israel and Hamas as unlikely in 2025. The conflict is ranked among the most significant risks to European Union interests, and while a fragile ceasefire was brokered in early 2025, the absence of a credible long-term political process ensures that tensions will remain elevated. This instability not only challenges the coherence of EU foreign policy in the region but also raises the risk of a broader military confrontation between Iran and Israel as a scenario considered moderately likely and one that would profoundly affect EU strategic interests.

Within this volatile landscape, state collapse in Lebanon is also viewed as highly probable, though with moderate direct impact on the EU. However, each of these crises carries the risk of triggering large-scale displacement toward Europe, a high-impact contingency that would significantly strain EU migration and asylum systems. At the same time, the Union cannot afford to disengage from other simmering conflicts, particularly in Africa including Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mozambique where escalating violence could similarly drive substantial irregular migration. The EU’s existing civilian and military missions in many of these regions position it to actively address root causes of instability, presenting an opportunity to deepen its global engagement while mitigating risks

through preventive diplomacy and stabilisation efforts (EEAS 2025; Anghel and Spatafora 2025).

In 2025, the European Union and its Member States are prioritizing the implementation of the newly adopted Migration and Asylum Pact. Nevertheless, significant critiques emerged even prior to its enactment regarding gaps in addressing irregular migration, spurring demands for supplementary measures (Carrera and Cortinovis 2024). In response, policymakers have promoted so-called “innovative solutions,” which extend beyond existing externalization models such as the Italy-Albania agreement, which has encountered numerous legal and operational hurdles—to include proposals for establishing “return hubs” in third countries. The feasibility of operationalizing such centers by 2025 remains uncertain given the complex practical and diplomatic challenges involved (Piccolino 2024). Nonetheless, the political commitment to these approaches remains strong, supported by ongoing legal adjustments including the potential removal of the “connection criterion” that seek to facilitate their implementation (ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025).

Concurrently, the unexpected fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime has introduced new dynamics into regional migration governance. This geopolitical shift has ignited debate regarding the possible revocation of international protection for Syrian refugees and their eventual repatriation. However, large-scale returns will remain contingent upon stabilized security conditions, significant economic recovery, and the resolution of myriad legal and practical obstacles. In the interim, host governments should anticipate continued fluidity, including pendular movements, temporary returns, and further internal displacement (IOM 2025). While voluntary repatriation linked to reconstruction efforts may be encouraged, sustainable large-scale returns are unlikely within 2025, necessitating ongoing protection-sensitive approaches and flexible policy frameworks (ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025).

By February 2025, the war in **Ukraine** will have entered its fourth year, with neither side achieving a decisive military breakthrough nor meaningful progress toward diplomatic resolution throughout 2024 (ICG 2024). The potential reduction of military aid from the new U.S. administration introduces further uncertainty, opening several plausible trajectories for the conflict in the coming year: a prolonged war of attrition, a frozen conflict, a Ukrainian victory, or a Russian-imposed territorial partition (EEAS 2025). Current expert assessments suggest that the most probable scenarios remain either a continued grinding war of attrition or a temporary

ceasefire that does not entail the return of occupied territories to Ukrainian control. Each of these pathways carries significant implications for displacement and migration dynamics. For instance, an armistice could facilitate the return of 1.2 to 2.1 million displaced Ukrainians, whereas a full Russian occupation could forcibly displace over 10 million additional persons (IOM 2025; UNHCR 2025). Although such extreme outcomes are not presently considered the most likely, European governments are urged to incorporate high-displacement scenarios into their contingency planning for 2025, particularly given the possibility of renewed large-scale refugee movements should the conflict take a sharp negative turn (ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025).

7.2 Structural limitations of EU migration governance

The EU's migration governance is constrained by several structural limitations that undermine its coherence, effectiveness, and adherence to human rights norms. A primary issue is **institutional and legal fragmentation**: the complex interplay of often contradictory national and EU-level laws and agencies leads to inconsistent policy implementation and operational dissonance (Trauner and Ripoll Servent 2016). This is exacerbated by **persistent solidarity deficits**, epitomized by the Dublin Regulation, which places disproportionate responsibility on frontline Member States and fuels political resistance to equitable burden-sharing (Geddes 2021). Furthermore, the prevailing **securitization of migration** prioritizing border control, externalization, and cooperation with authoritarian third countries often occurs at the expense of humanitarian protection and long-term solutions, reinforcing cycles of risk for migrants (Carrera and Cortinovis 2024). Deep **political divergence** among Member States, amplified by populist narratives, further obstructs the formulation of unified and rights-based policies, while **significant legal gaps** remain in protection standards, safe pathways, and integration mechanisms (Zaun 2018). Lastly, the **multi-level nature of governance**, involving numerous local, national, and international actors, complicates coordination and often results in contradictory actions and diluted accountability (Lavenex 2018).

The persistently low rate of enforced returns for third-country nationals is widely identified as a critical failure within the European migration governance framework. Recent data reveal that only approximately 20% of individuals ordered to leave the EU were successfully repatriated, underscoring systemic inefficiencies in return procedures (Eurostat 2024). In

response, EU policymakers have designated the enhancement of return rates as a central priority for 2025 (European Commission 2024). Proposed measures include pragmatic reforms such as the mutual recognition of return decisions between Member States, digitalization of case-management systems, clearer definition of returnee obligations, expansion of voluntary return programmes, and an extended operational role for Frontex in return operations (Frontex 2024).

Additionally, strengthening cooperation with countries of origin and transit particularly through capacity-building initiatives and readmission agreements remains a cornerstone of the EU's external migration strategy (EEAS 2025). Existing partnerships, such as those with Tunisia and Bangladesh, are increasingly portrayed as successful models and are likely to be expanded, despite ongoing concerns over human rights compliance and the ethical implications of externalizing migration management (Amnesty International 2024; Carrera and Cortinovis 2024).

In October 2018, Matteo Salvini, then Italian Minister of the Interior, used his social media to scrutinize the institutional dimension of the European Union's handling of the migrant/refugee crisis. In order to do so, he referred to the crisis between Italy and France as filled with disputes over the acceptance of migrants/refugees: *"Italy will no longer be helpless and cowardly. We will no longer accept being Europe's refugee camp"* (Béranger 2018; Topala and Radeljić 2023).

Research by Eyes on Europe and the Political Studies Association highlights how immigration has become a critical issue for voters across Europe. In Italy, nearly 30% of the population supports the anti-immigration policies of Salvini's Lega party. Similarly, France's National Rally garners substantial backing, with 25-30% of voters driven by concerns over immigration. According to political scientist Sarah de Lange, "For many voters, migration is now the defining election issue" (Arenthals 2024).

CONCLUSION

The European Union has faced significant challenges in managing migration flows caused by conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These conflicts have generated substantial forced displacement toward Europe, exposing the EU's structural weaknesses in migration governance. The 2015 refugee crisis, largely driven by the Syrian civil war, highlighted the EU's lack of preparedness for sudden mass displacement, revealing deficiencies in coordination, equitable burden-sharing, and timely foresight. The EU's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022, marked by the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, demonstrated a more unified and swift approach. However, this response remains an exceptional reaction rather than evidence of a systematic, proactive paradigm shift in EU migration governance.

Critically, the EU's migration policy has increasingly relied on externalization strategies, partnering with neighboring transit and origin countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to control migration flows and outsource asylum procedures. While these strategies aim to reduce arrivals in Europe, they have sparked criticism due to human rights concerns over the treatment of migrants and refugees in those countries. The EU's approach has been criticized for prioritizing border control and security over comprehensive humanitarian protection and long-term integration strategies.

The EU's 2024 Migration and Asylum Pact introduces accelerated asylum procedures, enhanced border controls, and expedited deportations, particularly in "mass influx" or security-sensitive situations. However, this Pact has faced significant criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. Human rights organizations warn that its emphasis on expedited procedures and externalization risks undermining access to protection and violating international refugee law. Certain member states and political factions reasonably condemn the mandatory relocation mechanisms as an infringement on national sovereignty and have vowed to challenge their implementation.

In summary, the EU's migration governance is hampered by fragmentation, uneven responsibility-sharing, securitized priorities, political divergence, legal gaps, and governance

complexity. Addressing these structural limitations is critical to developing a coherent, humane, and effective EU migration policy.

The EU has consistently underestimated the scale and complexity of migration flows generated by war and conflict, resulting in profound institutional, political, and humanitarian consequences. The 2015 migration crisis exposed the EU's lack of preparedness for sudden mass displacement, as its governance structures failed to provide effective coordination, equitable burden-sharing, or timely foresight to manage the crisis. Instead, member states often prioritized national interests, which fractured political unity and deepened institutional inertia. Similarly, the EU underestimated the protracted nature and impact of conflicts such as the Syrian civil war and instability in neighboring regions, overlooking the long-term humanitarian and integration challenges that large refugee populations would generate.

Although the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive in 2022 for Ukrainian refugees marked an unprecedented humanitarian response, this remains more an exceptional reaction than evidence of a systematic, proactive paradigm shift in EU migration governance. Moreover, institutional frameworks remain ill-suited to addressing the structural drivers of migration, including protracted conflicts and fragile states, with policy solutions continuing to rely heavily on externalization measures and cooperation with third countries. While such strategies provide short-term relief, they fail to address the geopolitical and humanitarian dimensions of displacement, reinforcing the EU's tendency to underestimate evolving migration crises. Taken together, these dynamics reveal a pattern of reactive rather than anticipatory policymaking, underscoring the need for a more coherent, humane, and future-oriented migration governance framework.

As mentioned above structural challenges lead to ineffective crisis management, humanitarian concerns, and undermine the EU's credibility as a unified actor in migration governance. The absence of a comprehensive, well-coordinated system contributes to persistence of irregular migration, human rights abuses, and political tensions within the Union.

The EU's migration governance suffers from several structural limitations that undermine its effectiveness and coherence. Key among these are the fragmentation of legal and institutional frameworks across member states and EU bodies, which creates coordination challenges and inconsistent implementation of migration and asylum policies. The Dublin Regulation

disproportionately places responsibility on frontline states like Italy and Greece, leading to tensions and resistance among other members over burden-sharing.

Moreover, EU migration governance often prioritizes securitization and border control over humanitarian protection and integration, relying on externalization policies with transit countries that can perpetuate cycles of violence and instability. Political divergences and rising nationalism within member states further fragment the EU's approach, delaying unified policy responses. Legal gaps exist in the asylum system, with limited complementary legal migration pathways and procedural safeguards, complicating safe and orderly migration. Migration governance is also characterized by a complex multi-level actor landscape that hinders policy coordination and enforcement. These structural constraints result in ineffective crisis responses, humanitarian challenges, and political discord, highlighting the need for deeper institutional reforms and stronger cooperation to achieve a more unified, humane, and functional EU migration framework.

In summary, the EU's migration governance is hampered by fragmentation, uneven responsibility-sharing, securitized priorities, political divergence, legal gaps, and governance complexity. Addressing these structural limitations is critical to developing a coherent, humane, and effective EU migration policy. The EU should be committed to safeguarding its borders, addressing illegal migration, and maintaining its cultural identity, in accordance with the preferences of the majority of European citizens.

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