Geopolitical Determinants of the European Union's Migration Policy Shift: From Open-Door to Closed-Border Approaches

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Abstract

Europe is facing an intensifying migration crisis along the Balkan and Central Mediterranean routes, prompting a shift from earlier open-door policies toward more restrictive approaches. This paper analyzes the geopolitical forces driving the EU's evolving migration strategy, focusing on border security, demographic pressures, and political tensions within and between EU Member States. Using a multidisciplinary framework and a critical case study design, it examines governmental speeches, media narratives, scholarly research, comparative national policies, and official data. Germany, Hungary, and Sweden are assessed to illustrate contrasting open- and closed-door models and their implications for security, regional stability, and collective EU governance. The study argues that sustainable migration management requires a more balanced, geopolitically informed framework that reconciles security imperatives with the EU's normative and humanitarian commitments, thereby ensuring long-term stability and coherent policy outcomes across the EU.

Keywords

Geopolitics; Migration Policy; European Union; Border Security; Balkan Route; Regional Stability; International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

"Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions."

- Samuel P. Huntington

Migration is a deeply divisive issue in Europe and other parts of the Western world, and it is arguably one of the most contentious challenges in contemporary politics. Major conflicts in the EU's immediate neighborhood and beyond, such as those in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel, have profoundly affected the EU through migration crises, security threats, and regional instability. The civil war in Syria was a key driver of the large-scale migrant and refugee influx that peaked in Europe in 2015, triggering significant political and social tensions as well as debates over border control.

This paper argues that the divergent domestic policies adopted by Germany, Sweden, and Hungary after the 2015 crisis not only shaped but fundamentally fractured the EU's migration policy. Their differing approaches contributed to a reactive, increasingly restrictive "Fortress Europe" model that prioritized border security over a cohesive, humanitarian strategy.

Despite the complex and multilayered nature of migration, the influence of state fragility and violent conflict remains central to understanding long-term migration patterns, particularly within the European context. As a result of the substantial increase in migration flows, Europe is now facing an unprecedented crisis. The challenge of managing the continuous arrival of refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, many of whom view the European Union as a promised land for themselves and their children, is generating significant tensions within and among EU Member States and all countries along the migration route.

Migration has played a significant role in shaping contemporary Europe, influencing demographic trends, economic development, and cultural landscapes. In recent years, the concept of an "open-door policy" has gained prominence, especially during humanitarian emergencies. Broadly defined, an open-door policy is a framework that supports the acceptance of migrants and refugees with minimal restrictions, often motivated by commitments to human rights, labor needs, and international solidarity. While some European countries have embraced this approach, others have pursued more cautious strategies, resulting in a fragmented and politically sensitive migration landscape.

Germany's open-door policy became a defining symbol during the 2015 refugee crisis, as people fled conflict and instability, particularly the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, and ongoing violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. At the peak of the European migrant crisis, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel adopted a welcoming stance, famously declaring "*Wir schaffen das*" ("We can do it"). Germany opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. More than one million asylum applicants were permitted to enter the country. A central concern was that Merkel's decision would signal an open-door policy to aspiring migrants worldwide, potentially increasing future migration to Germany and making the country more attractive to both irregular and humanitarian migrants. The idea of a "pull effect" has remained a cornerstone of policy debates ever since.

Sweden likewise adopted a highly open approach, accepting more refugees per capita than any other EU nation in 2015. Swedish policies provided extensive support for integration, including housing, education, and healthcare. Historically, Sweden has championed liberal and humanitarian principles, emphasizing collective responsibility and human rights. Rooted in its national identity as an empathetic and socially just society, Sweden is recognized for its transparency, solidarity, and commitment to humanitarian values (UNHCR 2018).

In contrast, Hungary and Poland pursued highly restrictive policies, constructing physical barriers and rejecting EU-mandated relocation quotas. These governments justified their positions by invoking security concerns, cultural integrity, and national sovereignty, thereby intensifying broader EU debates over burden-sharing for migration.

Based on the above discussion, the research question guiding this paper is as follows:

RQ: Did the domestic policies adopted by Germany, Hungary, and Sweden after 2015, specifically the open-door and closed-door approaches, influence the development of the EU's current migration policies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing on previous research by other scholars, this paper examines different normative migration claims, as outlined by Prof. Bauböck (2019), who introduces a political theory framework that addresses the tension between freedom of movement, global justice, and democratic autonomy. He argues that refugees and economic migrants each invoke distinct normative claims, complicating the implementation of a one-size-fits-all migration policy. Policies favoring either open borders or strict closures tend to blur these distinctions, undermining ethical governance.

According to Karolewski and Benedikter (2018) in their paper "Europe's Refugee and Migrant Crisis: Political Responses to Asymmetrical Pressures," the refugee and migrant crisis has emerged as a significant and contentious issue in contemporary European politics. Although it was sometimes mischaracterized as a "pure" refugee crisis, it was in fact a complex, asymmetrical "mixed" refugee-migrant crisis that generated substantial political and economic inconsistencies and further weakened the already fragile European Union. The article argues that the crisis's asymmetrical nature, combined with the EU's uneven structure, largely explains the EU's response.

Three primary aspects of asymmetry are recognized in the refugee issue. First, the crisis affects certain EU Member States far more than others. Second, the EU's unequal structure, characterized by horizontal divergence, opt-out clauses, and uneven burden sharing, tends to provoke asymmetrical responses. Third, Germany's role as a pivotal actor in the bloc has contributed to inherent disparities and significantly influenced the management of the crisis during 2015–2016. These three asymmetrical qualities have strongly shaped the challenges of achieving a unified EU response to the refugee issue.

This study will also explore how these dynamics have shaped the political landscape within the European Union, potentially influencing future immigration strategies. To trace the transition from emergency response to a lasting state ideology, this argument draws upon securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998) and the concept of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig 2018).

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, official policy documents, speeches, and Eurostat data from 2015 to 2025 for Germany, Sweden, and Hungary are analyzed. These countries demonstrate a striking dualism: a temporary "open-door" policy is motivated by humanitarian imperatives and normative values, while a more persistent, institutionalized "closed-door" strategy is emphasized, focusing on border security, deterrence, and externalization. These approaches are examined through descriptive data analysis, and the underlying tensions between ethical obligations, public opinion, geopolitical interests, and institutional cohesion within the EU are highlighted. Furthermore, the broader European divide concerning migration, national identity, and geopolitical considerations is addressed.

MERKEL VS. ORBÁN: TWO VISIONS OF MIGRATION IN EUROPE

The significant influx of refugees and other migrants, primarily associated with the year 2015 and the "long summer of migration," marked a pivotal turning point in multiple ways. Although the label "migration or refugee crisis" is debatable, the notion of a crisis as a decisive moment and critical threshold is highly appropriate. Despite the rise in migrant numbers during this period (IOM 2015; Eurostat 2015), scholars argue that the crisis was triggered by the inadequacy of EU policies to support humanitarian intervention, stemming from a deficient migration framework (Castelli Gattinara and Zamponi 2020, 626).

The migration corridor established in spring 2015 enabled third-country nationals to travel across the Western Balkans on their way from Greece to Western Europe. Since 2009, approximately 3.4 million people have entered the EU irregularly, representing the largest movement of people across Europe since the end of World War II.

More than one million refugees used the Balkan route to reach Austria, Germany, and Sweden, with approximately 578,000 registering in Serbia along the way (Oruc et al. 2020). These figures are only estimates. It is believed that around two-thirds of migrants are registered in transit countries; therefore, the actual numbers are likely much higher (Šabić and Borić 2016). The Balkan and Mediterranean corridors continue to serve as major migration routes today.
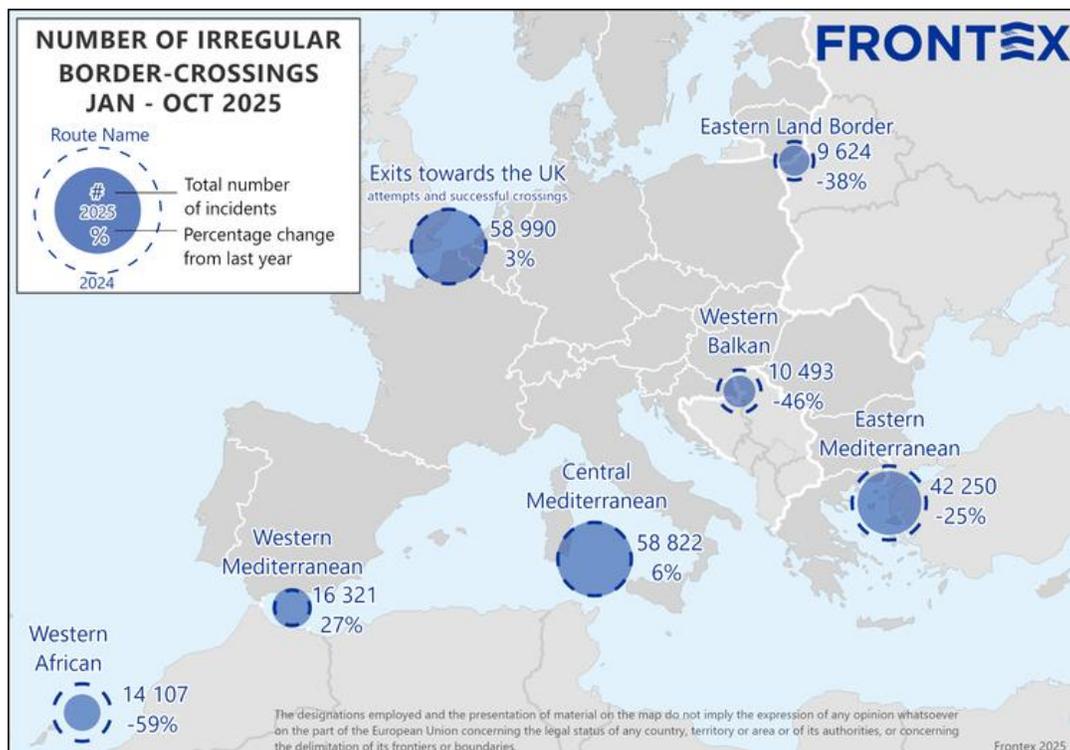

Image 1: Number of Irregular Border-Crossings, Jan–Oct 2025 (Source: Frontex 2025)

Image 1 illustrates irregular border crossings into the EU during the first ten months of 2025. The Central Mediterranean route remained the busiest, accounting for two out of every five irregular entries into the EU. According to Frontex data, irregular crossings on the Western

Mediterranean route increased by 27 percent, with Bangladeshi, Egyptian, and Afghan nationals most frequently reported (Frontex 2025).

The Balkan Route serves as an illustrative example of how externalized border "management" in the EU's neighboring regions is closely intertwined with the control of migration both within and beyond the Union, whether through pushbacks, chain deportations, or non-admission policies. The specific geographical imaginaries associated with the Balkan Route play a crucial role in the complex landscape of migration governance.

The significance of the Balkan Route and Macedonia's role in securing Europe was highlighted during the opening of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán praised Macedonia's Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski for his leadership in protecting Europe's borders against irregular migration, stating, "Our Macedonian hero Hristijan Mickoski won the election despite full support from Brussels for his opponent. He is the defender of the stronghold that protects Europe's southern border from migration. Long live Macedonia!" (Kocovska 2025).

Minca and Collins (2021) analyze migratory biopolitics within the Balkan Route, referring to it as "The Game." This term, used by migrants, captures their repeated attempts to reach the EU through the Balkan corridor and represents "a spatial tactic implemented by the refugees as a way of engaging with the impossibility of legally traveling to their desired destinations."

Over the past decade, twenty-nine million migrants, both regular and irregular, have entered Europe, placing substantial pressure on the continent's already strained and largely ineffective immigration system (Robinson and Roy 2024). In 2023 alone, approximately four and a half million immigrants arrived in Europe: three and a half million legally and one million irregularly. That same year, irregular migrants entering Europe primarily originated from Africa and the Middle East, with Syria as the leading country of origin, followed by states in West Africa and Afghanistan (Cook 2024).

Due to the large influx of people entering Europe, migration has become perhaps the most influential factor shaping European politics in the modern era. Concerns about crime rates and public safety, along with inadequate policies to support acculturation and integration, have contributed to growing public discontent throughout Western Europe and Scandinavia. The recent riots in the United Kingdom represent the latest manifestation of the political pressures building across the continent. Further complicating matters, Europe's asylum regulations have remained essentially unchanged for nearly two decades, leading to their effective collapse during the 2015 migrant influx. The expansion of the Schengen Area has also meant that entry into any one participating state is effectively equivalent to entry into Europe as a whole (Michta 2024).

The 2015 refugee crisis exposed deep divisions within the European Union, none more striking than the contrast between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Their respective migration policies have come to symbolize two competing visions for Europe's future: one rooted in national sovereignty and cultural preservation, and the other grounded in moral responsibility, humanitarian principles, and multilateral cooperation. Merkel emphasized long-term integration, prioritizing investment in language instruction, housing, education, and job training. Viktor Orbán, stating "We will not allow it," took the opposite approach, rapidly fortifying Hungary's southern borders and enacting strict anti-immigration laws. He rejected EU relocation quotas and framed migration as

a threat to Hungary's Christian identity and European values. Orbán portrayed Merkel's policy as naive and dangerous, arguing that it encouraged irregular migration and undermined national security (Reuters Staff 2015).

The clash reflects more profound ideological differences: Merkel advocated shared responsibility, human rights, and EU solidarity, while Orbán emphasized national sovereignty, border controls, and cultural homogeneity. Where Merkel viewed migration as a manageable challenge requiring compassion and coordination, Orbán saw it as an existential threat that demanded a hardline response. Merkel's approach initially received international praise but also sparked political backlash, contributing to the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Orbán, by contrast, consolidated his domestic power by rallying nationalist support and portraying himself as a defender of "real Europe."

Classical realist theorists, including Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, examined the dynamics of state competition, focusing on the pursuit of power and the expansion of military strength. Realism maintains that national security outweighs moral considerations, as demonstrated by Hungary's border closures, pushback legislation, and the securitization of refugee flows. As one of the most influential theories in international relations, realism asserts that states are inherently insecure due to human nature and therefore continually strive to enhance their capabilities. Wróbel (2018) noted that Orbán's statements reflected concerns that the presence of refugees would undermine the value of Hungary's "Christian state."

Their opposing positions contributed to policy gridlock within the EU and exposed the limitations of a unified European migration policy. Efforts to reform the asylum system have repeatedly stalled amid such deep ideological divisions (Schlee 2018).

The 2015 crisis concerning the reception conditions for asylum seekers highlighted a significant lack of solidarity among EU Member States. Eastern European countries refused to accept the refugee quotas set by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, which totaled 160,000 individuals, in stark contrast to the one million accepted by Germany and 1.2 million across the EU as a whole (Wihtol de Wenden 2019). This situation significantly disrupted European immigration and asylum policy, challenging the EU's core values of human rights and burden-sharing.

The Syrian crisis resulted in seven million internally displaced persons and generated five million international refugees. In the summer of 2015, widely broadcast images capturing the arrival of refugees drew public attention, as numerous European border posts along the Balkan route were closed following the landing of Syrians on Greek islands near Turkey, including Lesbos, Kos, and Samos. The EU Member States progressively established border controls, including those between Greece and Turkey, Greece and North Macedonia, and Hungary and Serbia, as well as within the EU, such as between Hungary and Austria, France and Italy, and Greece and Bulgaria (Wihtol de Wenden 2019).

"WIR SCHAFFEN DAS" A DECADE LATER

In 2015, Merkel's "Wir schaffen das" became the German equivalent of Obama's "Yes we can": a seemingly casual remark that nonetheless conveyed her determination to confront the logistical and political challenges she faced at the time. She also adopted Margaret Thatcher's famous line, "There is no alternative," which she literally translated into German as

"alternativlos," meaning "alternative-less." Her use of the phrase inadvertently catalyzed the creation of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the first right-wing party to enter the Bundestag since her CDU. Echoing Merkel's rhetoric against her, AfD politician Alexander Gauland declared at a party gathering in October 2015: "Wir wollen das gar nicht schaffen" — "we really don't want to manage this" (Oltermann and Connolly 2021).

A decade later, confronted with another surge in irregular migration, EU capitals are increasingly saying, "No, we cannot." More precisely, one might say, "We shall not." This shift is evident in Germany's changing migration policies: in September 2024, Germany reinstated border checks at all land frontiers; France pledged to restore "order at our borders"; the Netherlands announced its "most stringent" regulations to date; and Sweden and Finland proposed severe anti-migrant measures. Following Germany's border clampdown, Chancellor Olaf Scholz claimed that the government had already achieved an important turnaround in reducing irregular migration.

However, Scholz's approach risks triggering a chain reaction across Europe that could ultimately undermine the idea of "post-nationalism." In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the far-right Freedom Party, asked, "If Germany can do it, why can't we?" adding, "The sooner, the better." Other far-right parties celebrated these developments. By succumbing to anti-migration sentiment, supposedly "centrist" parties are advancing the far right's agenda and legitimizing its vision of a Europe with reinforced borders. It was therefore no surprise that Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán congratulated Scholz on Twitter, stating: "@Bundeskanzler, welcome to the club!" #StopMigration (Stierl 2024).

We are also witnessing a shift away from the previous open-door policies in other European countries, including the Netherlands, Finland, and Poland. The newly elected Dutch government in 2023, led by the far-right, anti-immigration Freedom Party (PVV), took decisive measures. The PVV secured an election victory by pledging to implement "the strictest admission rules in the EU," arguing that the country "can no longer bear the influx of immigrants." However, after a year and a half, on June 3, 2025, it was announced that the PVV would leave the governing coalition due to insufficient support for its asylum proposal. "We had no choice. I promised the voters the strictest asylum policy ever, but that was not granted to us," a party representative said. The PVV had presented a 10-point plan to reduce immigration, including halting asylum applications and temporarily suspending family reunification for all recognized refugees. After resigning, the representative noted, "We wanted a stricter asylum policy... You see that many countries in the European Union – Austria, Poland, Germany, and Belgium – are taking more stringent measures" (Roach 2025).

In Finland, the government is proposing changes to the healthcare rights of migrants residing illegally in the country. These amendments align with the Government Programme's objectives of facilitating the departure or removal of individuals with illegal status and enhancing public order and security. One proposed measure would revoke the rights of individuals residing illegally to access health and social services, except for urgent care, and to social security benefits. The goal of these changes is to eliminate incentives for illegal residence and encourage the return of individuals with such status (Finnish Government 2025).

In his first television interview after being elected, French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau stated: "The French people want more order: order in the streets, order at the

borders." He added that by cracking down on crime and immigration, Paris aimed to "review EU legislation that is no longer suitable" (Chrisafis 2024).

On March 27, 2025, Poland temporarily suspended the right of migrants arriving via its border with Belarus to apply for asylum. Prime Minister Donald Tusk emphasized that the controversial bill would be enacted "without a moment's delay" following its signing into law by President Andrzej Duda, stating: "I believe it is essential to enhance the security of our borders and the safety of Poles" (Paternoster 2025).

This new wave of restrictive sentiment across the EU raises questions about the future of the Schengen Zone. It may also jeopardize the EU's new asylum and migration pact, finalized in 2024 after nearly a decade of negotiations. Moreover, the European Commission's latest migration proposal is not entirely new. The plan introduces so-called "return hubs" in countries outside the EU, particularly in the Balkans, including North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo, to host migrants whose asylum requests have been denied. These hubs are intended to process migrants and either return them to their home countries or relocate them to other states willing to accept them. Critics argue that this approach merely shifts the burden to the "host-hub" countries without addressing the underlying migration challenges.

MIGRATION IS RESHAPING EUROPE: IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR THE CONTINENT?

In recent years, Europe has become a destination for large numbers of people fleeing war, political turmoil, and poverty in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Germany, France, Italy, and Spain all experienced consistent increases in their immigrant populations between 2010 and 2024, with Germany's growth beginning in 2016 and becoming particularly pronounced. Figure 1 reports the number of immigrants residing in the specified country for each year. Immigrants are defined as individuals born in a country other than the one in which they reside.
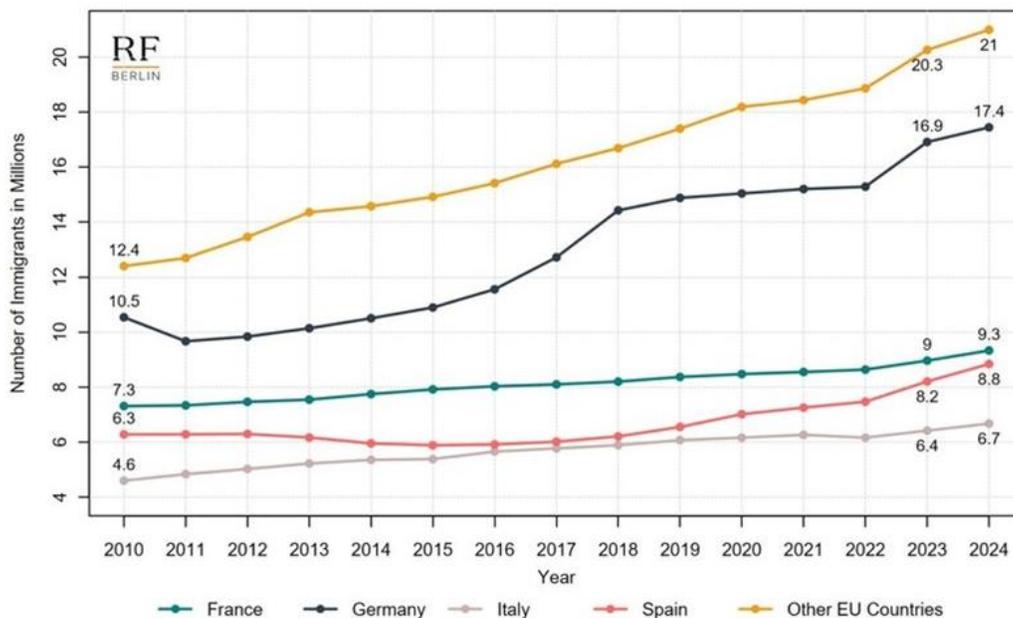

Figure 1: Number of Immigrants in EU Countries (Source: Frattini and Pulito 2025)

Germany's immigrant population rose from approximately 11 million in 2015 to 17.4 million in 2024, increasing from 13.4% to 20.9% of the total population. Spain received about 3 million immigrants during the same period, with its immigrant population rising from 5.9 million to 8.8 million (from 12.7% to 18.2% of the resident population), while France and Italy saw relatively modest increases. Collectively, all other EU countries experienced an influx of roughly 6 million immigrants from 2015 to 2024, a figure comparable to Germany's increase alone (Frattini and Pulito 2025).

These figures seem feasible for a continent with a population of around 500 million. However, the arrival of migrants, mostly entering EU countries illegally and from distant regions and foreign cultures, has created new social, political, and economic challenges in a continent still recovering from the financial impacts of the Great Recession. The migration crisis has disrupted the political economy of EU countries, particularly those near or at its external borders. Regions and communities in frontline states, such as Greece and Italy, have borne a disproportionate share of these challenges; in these areas, it often appears as though Europe is under siege (Kyriakopoulos 2019).

Politics, policies, and geography have played a significant role in these developments. EU decision-makers were caught unprepared to manage chaotic migration in a coordinated manner. Europe's ethnic map is changing. Although estimates vary, it is generally accepted that there are currently around 25 million Muslims in the 28 EU Member States. The issue of migration intersects with declining fertility rates across Europe. For instance, Europe's overall fertility rate has been below replacement level since 2008, when 4.68 million children were born. By 2022, the EU registered only 1.46 live births per woman, approximately one million fewer births than in 2008 (Eurostat 2024). In contrast, Europe's annual birthrate was around seven million in 1960 (Yanatma 2024).

By comparison, a 2017 analysis by the Pew Research Center found that the average Muslim woman in Europe had 2.6 children, one full child more than the average non-Muslim woman that year. Today, the largest Muslim populations in Europe are concentrated in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, and Sweden. Integrating these communities remains a prominent topic in the political landscape of these nations (Hackett 2017).

Cultural tensions are already palpable. Politicians opposing continued mass immigration argue that migration, particularly from Africa and the Middle East, is reshaping Europe's ethnic and cultural landscape, transforming a continent steeped in Judeo-Christian traditions for over two millennia into a multicultural and multi-confessional space. While this issue is expected to remain a central concern, it is often avoided, as European elites appear increasingly reluctant to engage in discussions about national identity and culture, discussions vital for societal cohesion and resilience. Consequently, Europe is likely to continue grappling with the dual challenge of, on one hand, formulating administrative measures to curb or manage migrant inflows, and on the other, addressing the more profound cultural implications of immigration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, which remain at the forefront of European political discourse (Michta 2024).

A majority of Europeans believe that the migration crisis has been mismanaged. This perception has become even more pronounced in light of EU Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos' 2018 remarks on Europe's migration management (2025), where he stated:

> We all know the current system is broken. If asylum systems were properly aligned, there would be no incentive for secondary movements. We must intensify returns and ensure the strict enforcement of return decisions. If Member States don't use these arrangements proactively and effectively, they lose their value. We also need to do more to address the root causes of migration. We need to do more with certain North African countries to help them stem irregular migration at the source.

The "securitization of migration" and other migration-related policies framed as security issues have gained increasing attention since the large refugee inflow into Europe in 2015. Public discourse and political debates often emphasize the stereotype of criminal migrants as "male, young, and delinquent," focusing on the perceived correlation between illegal immigration and crime rates, with integration considered an intermediary factor (Kraler et al. 2022).

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between crime rates and immigration, using a variety of research designs and parameters. Many rely on national crime statistics to assess the prevalence of crime among non-natives. In contrast, significant research on crime, integration, and related issues has been conducted at both national and local levels. The migration crisis is expected to continue widening the gap between Europe's policy elites and an increasingly dissatisfied public, particularly in the most affected countries of southern and western Europe.

Concerns about the involvement of immigrants in terrorist attacks since 2015 have further heightened worries about the potential radicalization of refugees and asylum seekers. In several instances, violent extremists have exploited migration flows to gain entry into Europe. Research has shown that refugees have, in some cases, participated in extremist attacks (Abushi and Nordbruch 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of terrorist attacks in Europe since 2015 have been carried out by domestic actors rather than by migrants.

Schmid (2016) noted that it is not the recently arrived migrants but rather subsequent generations who are more susceptible to radicalization. He stated, "If they are not fully integrated in host societies, they might develop resentment, and with some, that anger might become so strong that they, or more likely, their children, turn against the host society. That has been one of the reasons why so many of the foreign fighters from Europe were the sons of immigrants" (Schmid 2016, 45).

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) conducted three studies on the distribution of individuals registered as suspected offenders by native and non-native background for the period 2007–2018, with the latest study published in 2021. All three studies show that the overwhelming majority of people, regardless of origin, are not suspected of criminal activity. However, individuals with non-native backgrounds are more frequently registered as suspects than those with native backgrounds. According to the latest research, individuals born abroad are 2.5 times more likely to be registered as suspects in criminal investigations than those born in Sweden to two native-born parents. For individuals born in Sweden to two non-native parents, the relative risk rises to 3.2, indicating they are slightly more than three times as likely to be registered as suspected offenders compared to those with two native-born parents.

Significantly, the magnitude of this excess risk diminishes when adjusting for differences in age, gender, and living conditions, decreasing from 2.5 to 1.8 for foreign-born individuals and from 3.2 to 1.7 for those born in Sweden to two non-native parents (Brå 2021).

Among persons born abroad, the lowest proportions of suspected offenders are found among those from East Asia, Scandinavia outside Sweden, EU15 countries, Western Europe outside Scandinavia, and the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Conversely, the highest proportions of suspected offenders are observed among those born in West Asia, Central Asia, and various regions of Africa, including North Africa, East Africa, and other African countries (excluding those in North and East Africa) (Brå 2021).

The 2019 literature analysis by Brå presents findings consistent with Nordic studies on crime and individuals with foreign backgrounds conducted from 2005 to 2019. It indicates that individuals with foreign backgrounds are overrepresented in crime statistics, although this overrepresentation varies depending on the type of crime and the country of origin. Brå notes that factors contributing to segregation, such as limited education and employment opportunities, are associated with higher rates of criminality among those with foreign ancestry. Other contributing factors include experiences of war trauma, mental health issues, and the levels of crime, violence, and economic development in the countries of origin (Brå 2025).

Public anger and mistrust have escalated, particularly in response to the radicalization of native Muslim Europeans and extremist Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe. These incidents include a stabbing in Mulhouse, France, by an Algerian illegal immigrant under an expulsion order; a car-ramming attack in Munich by a 24-year-old Afghan resident; and a knife attack in Villach, Austria, by a 23-year-old Syrian refugee. These events have raised legitimate concerns about the security risks associated with immigration, especially given their rapid occurrence. In response, politicians quickly called for stricter immigration laws and drew clear links between immigration and terrorism. For instance, the leader of Germany's far-right party AfD, Alice Weidel, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) following the Munich attack: "Is this intended to carry on forever? Turn around migration now!" (Renard and Demuynck 2025).

Reports and data from European counter-terrorism agencies indicate a measurable security threat associated with migration. In France, data from the Ministry of the Interior in 2023 show that out of 20,120 individuals recorded in the National Database for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (FSPRT), 4,263 (21%) are foreign nationals. In Germany, 138 of the 480 individuals (29%) evaluated by security authorities as dangerous Islamist extremists did not hold a German passport (Renard and Demuynck 2025).

For context, France has 5.6 million foreign nationals within a total population of 68.6 million, representing 8.2% of the overall population. Germany has approximately 14 million foreign nationals within a total population of 84.4 million, representing 16.6% of the population (Balogog 2023).

Although much research on migrants focuses on their role as perpetrators, and a significant portion of the literature addresses right-wing radicalism, extremism, and xenophobic violence, there is a relative shortage of empirical studies on migrants as victims. Generally, studies give limited attention to the victim's perspective. However, examining the relationship between integration and crime provides an opportunity to view migrants not only as potential perpetrators but also as victims of criminal activity, including human trafficking (THB), hate crimes, and assaults on refugee homes and asylum seekers (Kraler et al. 2022).

POLITICIZED AND "VULNERABLE" NEIGHBORHOODS IN EUROPE

"Banlieues," "Ghettos," "Vulnerable areas," "Molenbeek," and "No-go zones" are official labels or derogatory terms used to describe a group of politicized neighborhoods in contemporary Europe. These neighborhoods share two key characteristics. First, they face challenges related to crime rates, employment performance, reputation, and various other factors affecting well-being and prosperity. Second, a significant proportion of residents are immigrants from non-Western backgrounds (Arbaci 2007; Escafré-Dublet and Lelévrier 2019).

In light of ongoing debates about migration and its societal impacts, these neighborhoods have become essential sites for exploring complex issues, including interethnic relations, the development of parallel societies, spatial stigmatization, systemic discrimination, social inequalities, and the broader foundations of social cohesion (Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024).

Angela Merkel may be the first European, and indeed Western, leader to publicly acknowledge the existence of "no-go areas." In a 2018 interview, she stated that "no-go areas" do exist in Germany and noted that the arrival of "so many refugees" in the country "has raised multiple questions" (The Associated Press 2018).

What exactly is a "no-go zone"? The term is not precisely defined and can vary depending on context. Broadly, it can describe areas considered unsafe for outsiders, including tourists, foreigners, and emergency personnel such as police or firefighters. In another sense, it refers to "parallel societies" within an existing society, defined as situations in which national social cohesion is lacking, and the state is either unable or unwilling to manage social diversity. These societies may emerge when immigrant groups self-segregate into cohesive communities or when non-violent alternative systems are established outside of state oversight. The term is often controversial, as it is frequently invoked in political debates to criticize perceived failures in integration initiatives.

There are two primary contexts for the term: self-segregation and unsuccessful integration. Introduced by the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, the term refers to immigrant communities that establish their own social networks, educational systems, and job markets, while remaining mainly segregated from the majority population. This can result in socio-economic isolation and is a contentious issue in countries with significant immigrant populations. Some nations have enacted policies to address this trend, such as Denmark's legislation to identify and mitigate "parallel societies" (Borch 2019).

Table 1 below presents the official labels used for neighborhoods in countries where debates over ethnically distinct or "vulnerable" neighborhoods are most pronounced (Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024).

Table 1: Country-Specific Characteristics of European Politicized and Vulnerable Neighborhoods (Source: Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024)

Country-specific characteristics of European politicized and vulnerable neighborhoods

Country	Official labels	Type of diversity	Main location
Belgium	Quartiers en difficulté (Neighborhoods with problems)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Inner city
Denmark	Parallell samfunn* (Parallel societies)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
France	Quartiers sensibles (At-risk neighborhoods)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Periphery
Germany	Benachteiligtes Quartier (Disadvantaged neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Mixed (both inner city and periphery)
Netherlands	Krachtwijken (Opportunity zones)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Mixed (both inner city and periphery)
Norway	Utsatte områder (Vulnerable neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
Sweden	Utsatta områden (Vulnerable neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
UK	Areas of multiple deprivation	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Inner city

Before 2021, the official label was Gettos (Ghettos).

Numerous observers have noted the existence of such parallel societies in Germany, as well as in Belgium, particularly in the Molenbeek district of Brussels (see Image 2), which is notorious for harboring terrorist jihadis. Similar phenomena have been observed in metropolitan areas of France, including certain Parisian suburbs, and in various enclaves within English cities.

It is somewhat ironic that Merkel is associated with this issue, given that in 2015 she unilaterally declared that Germany would allow an unlimited number of migrants to enter the EU via both maritime and land borders, a position she publicly reaffirmed in July 2017. While Merkel primarily emphasized Syrians fleeing their war-torn country, her statements effectively became a rallying cry for at least 1.5 million "irregular arrivals." Germany has since faced numerous challenges as a result of these policies, including widely reported sexual assaults on women by groups of migrant men congregating in public spaces during holidays, terrorist attacks on trains and Christmas markets, rising crime rates, and the tacit acceptance of polygamy among segments of its unassimilated migrant population (Cadman 2018).

Germany has not been the only country struggling with these issues. The Migration Research Institute in Budapest, affiliated with the Matthias Corvinus College, estimates that there are approximately 900 uncontrolled areas across Europe. The vision of a Europe with open borders has thus contributed to the emergence of numerous no-go zones (Meotti and Sheva 2024).

Image 2: Map of "No-Go Zones" in Western Europe (Source: Pietrobon 2021)

David Ignatius, writing in The New York Times, described some areas of Paris as having become "no-go zones at night" (Ignatius 2002). Even French President Emmanuel Macron, in a television interview, stated that foreigners, either illegal immigrants or those awaiting residence permits, account for more than half of the crime in the capital. To illustrate his point, Macron said: "If we look at crime in Paris today, we cannot fail to see that at least half of the crime comes from people who are foreigners, either illegal immigrants or waiting for a residence permit. In any case, they're in a very delicate situation, often coming in through these (illegal immigration) channels" (Lesueur 2022).

Former French Socialist President François Hollande also expressed concern over this phenomenon, asking, "How can we prevent secession?" He was referring to the emergence of neighborhoods, districts, and areas within cities where the law is no longer effectively enforced and where Western cultural norms have largely disappeared, replaced by alternative authorities

such as the supremacy of Sharia law, widespread banditry, and a lack of public services due to the threat of violence.

Alain Chouet, the former deputy head of the French foreign intelligence agency, recently published a book titled "Sept pas vers l'enfer" ("Seven Steps to Hell"), in which he describes a society deeply entangled in Islamic fundamentalist violence. In 1,514 neighborhoods, access to security forces, emergency services, and medical and social services is effectively prohibited. These districts are located in 859 cities and are home to approximately 4 million people, or 6% of France's total population. Chouet warns that mistakes in immigration policy carry serious consequences (Meotti 2022).

The ongoing discourse surrounding secession in Europe highlights a complex interplay of political recognition and societal challenges. Angela Merkel's acknowledgment of this phenomenon represents a critical admission that cannot be overlooked. At the same time, François Hollande's probing questions about the effectiveness of preventative measures underscore the urgency of addressing the underlying issues. Furthermore, the repercussions of mismanaged immigration policies illustrate that the path toward societal cohesion is fraught with difficulties requiring thoughtful deliberation and decisive action.

This concern is echoed by Rainer Wendt, president of Europe's largest police union, who stated: "We are confronting an unparalleled challenge in post-war history." Wendt warned that the possibility of collapse is "extremely tangible" and that police have lost control of the situation. He acknowledged, "Radical Islamists are questioning the power on our streets. If no action is taken, Sharia law will prevail instead of the constitution. It is time to return to the fundamental values of our societies. Otherwise, the country will collapse and the law of the strongest will prevail" (Meotti and Sheva 2024).

In Germany, following a court order, the government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the country's most populous state, complied with an information request from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party regarding neighborhoods and streets officially designated by police as "dangerous zones" over the past decade. The official list identifies 44 areas, of which only ten remain of particular concern today. Nearly all of these locations have significant immigrant populations (Federal Criminal Police [BKA] 2020).

However, the issue is not confined to Germany. The stability and integrity of Europe are threatened by numerous small and large enclaves that function as genuine parallel states. For example, authorities in Amsterdam have mapped out 40 no-go areas in the Netherlands.

The debate over neighborhoods that stand out negatively compared to the rest of society remains a significant issue in urban politics (Wacquant 2008).

In Sweden, significant integration challenges include criminal activity, honor-based violence and oppression, unemployment, reliance on social benefits, and the emergence of rival societies. The country's new integration policy emphasizes that individuals living in Sweden are responsible for assimilating into Swedish society. Everyone is expected to be self-reliant, proficient in Swedish, understand how Sweden functions, and demonstrate respect for national norms, standards, and values.

Compared to many other countries, Sweden has clear criteria for identifying neighborhoods for specific classifications. Since 2015, the Swedish police have identified neighborhoods characterized by socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic segregation, and high levels of criminal activity. These neighborhoods are categorized as "vulnerable," "at risk," or

"particularly vulnerable" (See Figure 2). In the latter category, challenges are so severe that residents are often unwilling to testify in criminal cases, and alternative social governance structures may emerge, complicating everyday policing efforts.
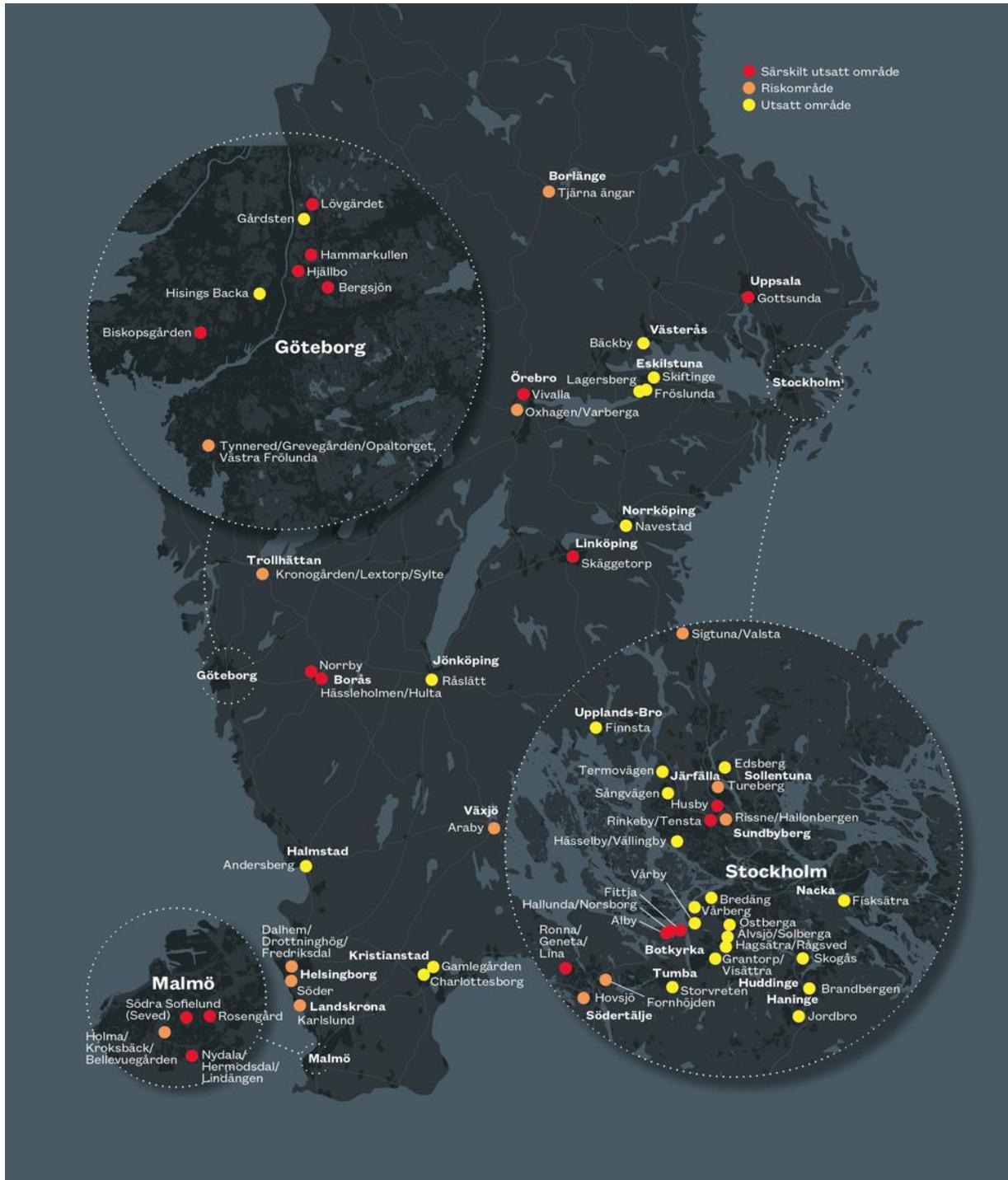
Note: yellow=vulnerable; orange=at risk; red=particularly vulnerable

Figure 2: Sweden's Police-Identified Vulnerable Neighborhoods (Source: Svensk Polis 2019)

The police list has faced criticism for relying on subjective criteria, stigmatizing communities, and overlooking other marginalized populations; nonetheless, it holds a crucial place in national political discourse (Gerell et al. 2022).

The 2021 list identifies 61 vulnerable neighborhoods, 19 of which are classified as "particularly vulnerable." Most are located in the metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, but several are also found in smaller cities in southern and central Sweden (Brå 2025).

According to Rothwell (2025), a recent study found that over two-thirds of convicted rapists in Sweden are migrants or second-generation immigrants. Researchers at Lund University reported that 63% of convictions for rape or attempted rape involved individuals born abroad or to parents born abroad. The study analyzed 4,000 convictions from 2000 to 2024 and indicated that the longer a foreigner has resided in Sweden, the lower their likelihood of committing rape. Mr. Khoshnood noted that rape convictions were more common among migrants who had lived in Sweden for less than five years.

These developments suggest that Europe's open-border policies are creating zones where social cohesion is under severe strain. When renowned political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, a professor at Harvard and Columbia Universities, published "The Clash of Civilizations" in 1993, he argued that future international conflicts would arise primarily from cultural and religious identities, with Islamic civilization potentially posing the most significant challenge to Western dominance. Huntington identified civilizations as the highest and broadest level of cultural identity, surpassing nation-states as the primary actors in international relations. He proposed that the most significant distinctions among people are cultural and religious, and that future conflicts would occur along these "fault lines" between civilizations. His theory directly challenges Francis Fukuyama's thesis in "The End of History," which predicted the universal triumph of liberal democracy following the Cold War (Thompson 2018).

The pressing issue is that European governments appear to have concluded that it is too late to prevent the current migration crisis. As a result, they seem to believe that the only viable course of action is to mitigate its effects in the short term while hoping that the resulting social and political challenges remain limited to certain areas, preferably outside their own jurisdictions.

WILL THE NEW PACT SHAPE EUROPE'S MIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICIES?

The implications of the migrant policy crisis were felt throughout the EU, affecting the capacity of European asylum reception systems and mainstream public institutions, including welfare, employment, and education sectors. The substantial influx of refugees and other migrants prompted reactions across multiple policy areas and at various geographic and political levels. The 2015 crisis continues to influence European migration and asylum policies for the foreseeable future (Kraler et al. 2022).

The EU asylum system has long struggled with an imbalance between EU Member States' responsibilities for asylum seekers under the Dublin rules and the need for solidarity in addressing their consequences. The new agreement on migration and asylum reforms, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, seeks to address this imbalance by creating a necessary but

flexible system for sharing responsibilities among countries under the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.

In September 2020, after multiple delays and unproductive negotiations, the European Commission formally introduced the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In addition to implementing enhanced procedures, the pact proposes that, in the interest of solidarity, EU Member States share the burden of managing migrant and refugee inflows and subsequent asylum claims. The concept of solidarity is emphasized through a novel framework for equitable distribution of responsibilities, incorporating "a new solidarity mechanism to instill fairness within the EU asylum system, acknowledging the diverse challenges posed by varying geographical contexts." This mechanism will primarily focus on relocation or return sponsorship (European Commission 2020).

The official press release acknowledges that "[t]he current system no longer functions. For the past five years, the EU has been unable to resolve the issue." In response, the new agreement was presented as "a fresh start" and, as EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson explained, is intended to "establish a long-term migration policy that can convert European values into practical management" (European Commission 2020a).

Under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, all EU countries are required to contribute in proportion to their population and GDP, helping to ease the burden on countries considered "under migratory pressure," primarily those in southern Europe.

While the pact aims to create a more efficient and cohesive approach to migration management, it has faced significant criticism for potential adverse effects on human rights, access to asylum, and the treatment of vulnerable individuals. In May 2024, the European Union formally adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum to address the escalating migrant crisis. The pact outlines procedures for handling individuals attempting to enter the EU illegally.

Key provisions include the evaluation of asylum seekers at entry points and prompt expulsion following the rejection of asylum applications. The most controversial element is the mandatory solidarity mechanism, which requires the EU to relocate a minimum of 30,000 migrants annually, obligating recipient Member States to accept and provide for a designated number of asylum seekers. Nations that refuse to admit migrants are subject to a fee of €20,000 per migrant (Sorgi and Barigazzi 2023).

DISCUSSION

The tension between Europe's open-door migration policy and the concept of "Fortress Europe," or closed-border strategies, reflects the EU's ongoing struggle to reconcile humanitarian ideals with political pragmatism and border security. While the open-door approach embodies Europe's commitment to human rights, international protection, and solidarity, most visibly during the 2015 refugee crisis, it has also exposed deep divisions among EU Member States, overwhelmed infrastructure, and triggered social and political backlash.

Conversely, the "Fortress Europe" strategy emphasizes border security, cultural cohesion, and the protection of national interests and identity. Critically, both approaches reveal an unsustainable dichotomy. A purely open-door policy without adequate structural support can invite political instability, while a strictly closed-border approach fails to address the root causes of migration. Europe's attempts to keep migrants out are unlikely to succeed unless

accompanied by substantial investment in development in the countries from which refugees are fleeing. Addressing the challenges of irregular migration, integration, and asylum management requires a nuanced strategy that balances compassion with effective control.

Migration has been a defining force in shaping modern Europe, influencing demographics, economies, and cultural landscapes. This paper has traced how the crisis measures adopted in 2015 became embedded in the EU's governing approach to migration, with Germany, Sweden, and Hungary serving as illustrative examples. The study examines how national identity, geopolitical factors, and the 2015–2016 refugee crisis have influenced immigration policies in these countries, highlighting broader divisions within Europe regarding migration.

Germany, long associated with humanitarian values, initially pursued an open-door policy under Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, as populism gained traction, security concerns intensified, and resources became strained, the country adopted stricter measures, particularly through the 2020 Immigration Act. Sweden, once seen as a model of liberal immigration policy, faced significant challenges in social integration and assimilation, prompting stricter asylum regulations and restrictions on family reunification. In contrast, Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has maintained a rigorously anti-immigration stance, leveraging the crisis to reinforce national identity and reject EU initiatives designed to promote solidarity and shared responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, twenty-nine million immigrants, both legal and illegal, have arrived in Europe, placing immense pressure on the continent's already overstretched and largely dysfunctional immigration system. By the end of 2022, Europe hosted one in three refugees worldwide (36%). The number of refugees residing in Europe rose from 7 million at the end of 2021 to 12.4 million by the close of 2022. In 2023 alone, approximately 4.5 million immigrants entered Europe, 3.5 million through legal channels and 1 million illegally. This substantial influx has made immigration one of the most influential factors shaping contemporary European politics.

The ongoing migration flow into Europe necessitates effective measures to address the crisis rather than maintaining the current *status quo*. The intricate relationship between humanitarian values and security imperatives underscores the complexity of the issue, demanding a nuanced and cohesive response. One of the strongest arguments in favor of an open-door migration policy is its economic benefit. Migrants often fill critical labor shortages, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, and technology. Their contributions can foster innovation, expand the tax base, and increase overall productivity. While humanitarian motives often drive open-door migration policies, they can carry profound negative implications if not carefully planned and implemented, including economic strain, social friction, political polarization, and security concerns.

These diverse approaches illustrate the ongoing challenge of balancing national interests with humanitarian obligations, an equilibrium that many EU Member States still struggle to achieve. The inconsistent responses to immigration in Germany, Sweden, and Hungary highlight

the urgent need for unified and flexible EU policies that account for both the internal challenges faced by EU Member States and the broader geopolitical landscape.

Integration is a process that requires refugees and migrants to adapt and acclimate to the culture of their new home, rather than the other way around. In 2002, the UN Refugee Agency defined integration as a "dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2002). This definition emphasizes that integration is a two-way process encompassing interrelated legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, all of which are crucial for migrants to become fully included members of society.

For migration policies to be sustainable, they must balance compassion with capacity, ensuring that newcomers can integrate successfully while maintaining public trust and social stability. The rapid influx of migrants and asylum seekers into Europe has reignited debates about European cultural identity and the methods for incorporating foreigners into society. Concerns about preserving European identity during acculturation drive much of this discussion, raising questions about a "guiding culture" and a "welcoming culture."

Ultimately, Europe's response to migration will shape not only its demographic future but also its identity as a union committed to human rights, solidarity, and global responsibility.

CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Larisa Vasileska: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Ivona Shushak-Lozanovska:** conceptualization, methodology, data curation, writing – review and editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

AI Declaration:
The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools, specifically Quillbot, to assist in translating and enhancing the clarity and quality of the English language in this manuscript. These AI tools were employed solely for language refinement and were not involved in the conceptualization, analysis, or development of the scientific content. The authors assume full responsibility for the manuscript's originality, accuracy, validity, and integrity.

Statement of Human Rights:
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed Consent:
Not applicable.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Neutrality Statement on Jurisdictional Claims and Institutional Affiliations:
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