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## Refugee Crisis, the Politics of Migration and Its implications on the Nature of European borders

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### Abstract

Migration has been a significant phenomenon in human history as it brought considerable change in the nature of politics, borders and identity of the nation-state. With the advent of the European Schengen border, the borders of several member states of the EU acquired the nature of openness, softness and flexibility in their functionality, however in 2015 the unprecedented influx of refugees from the conflict-ridden regions of the Middle East and Mediterranean has forced to rethink about the nature of borders and rendered politicians to harden their approach towards borders by securitizing and associating them with the idea of sovereignty and sanctity.

The refugee crisis has emerged as a fulcrum of EU politics that is shaping the political culture and the nature of borders, it has sparked a fierce debate within the political circles of the EU member states and laid bare the divisions in their approach to dealing with the issue. Within this context, this paper seeks to examine how this crisis has acted as a catalyst in conceptualizing the nature of borders and tries to locate the deeper nexus of borders, politics and refugee crisis it will also critically analyze how this crisis has changed the political direction of the member states.

**Keywords:** Refugee crisis, security, borders, and European Union.

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### Introduction

The EU open border policy has been a landmark policy since the end of the Cold War, the Schengen agreement has facilitated the establishment of Europe's Schengen region in which the internal borders have been eliminated, the fundamental objective of the open borders was to create "whole and free Europe" by facilitating the free mobility of goods, services and people, therefore it proposed to remove the internal borders among member states (European Commission 1985). In a broader framework European open border policy is the manifestation of its larger political values, such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy. However, the 2015 "refugee crisis" has exposed the weaknesses and loopholes of the Schengen border and brought back the traditional understanding of the borders that continue to frame the borders within the ambit of security debate, which is largely rooted in the principles of security, sovereignty, sanctity, identity and exclusivity. The understanding of the massive influx of refugees and migrants within the framework of the "crisis" has been subjected to debate, as the issue has invited multiple perspectives about the massive influx of people, it is argued that it is not the refugee or migrant crisis but rather the policy crisis of the European Union that has created obstacles for the movement of the people and rendered it a crisis (Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2015).

The Refugee crisis should not only be gauged through the increasing number of people trying to enter Europe by various hazardous routes but also by looking at the diverse perspectives (security versus humanity) of the problem, created diverse responses to the issue have triggered anxiety within the political circles of the European Union and has paved the way for policy paralysis (Bendixsen 2016). Migration in the Mediterranean region triggers multiple facets of the crisis; however, this is fundamentally a humanitarian crisis due to the dramatic rise in the number of deaths. In addition to this, the massive flow of people from this region can be understood as a crisis because the states of origin of this migration have been embroiled in a political crisis. (Attinà, 2016). Scholars like Bilgin argue that it deserves to be called a crisis because it is widely understood to call for immediate policy response (Bilgin, 2017). In addition to that, it is constructed as a crisis largely because of the Media's sensationalizing and dramatizing of the issue in terms of the hazardous routes taken by migrants and refugees to reach Europe (Harteveld et al., 2017). Moreover, the crisis can be attributed to the complicated EU border policy, its inability to deal harmoniously with the large number of people entering Europe has rendered it into be humanitarian crisis at the borders by amplifying the policy paralysis at the borders. (Guiraudon 2018).

The present debate over the intensified security narrative of migration is primarily premised on the notion that the policies designed by the supranational institutions are merely a reflection of the sentiments of the elite ecosystem that has no resonance with the larger electorates, therefore the assumption that the grievances related to identity, culture and border have been well articulated by the rightwing politicians has rendered the issue of the refugee crisis to be battle of narratives about the EU.

The growing gap between the European elites and the European public has failed to convey and strengthen the fundamental principles on which the EU is built, staying aloof from emotional issues like identity, and culture while making political pronouncements has caused greater damage to the image of the EU, not just within domestic circle but also globally.

This paper is largely divided into three broad themes in which the issue of the refugee crisis runs through all themes. It proceeds as follows, section one discusses the framing of migration within the context of security, it takes the speeches, interviews and domestic policy responses of the politicians of the EU member states and looks at the dividends of the politics of migration, by examining the electoral victories of the politicians who have intensified the campaign against the refugees and migrants. Second, it seeks to examine the trajectory of the EU borders, and how the nature of borders has changed from being open and soft to hard and complicated and argues that this militarized nature of the EU border sits uneasily within the EU's openness spectrum. Third, it seeks to unfold how the issue of migration has emerged as the watershed movement for creating a battle of narratives seizing and dismantling the dominant liberal narrative and building the EU that is purely dictated by the principles of culture, security, identity and exclusivity.

#### **Locating the nexus of migration, border security and politics**

The expansion of the security concept is primarily attributed to the Copenhagen School, an academic thought on the concept of securitization, it rejects the monopoly of the sovereign state as a principal-agent over the security and emphasises the social and cultural dimension of security. It also suggests the assumption of new risks and threats that demand new ways of response, prompting “preventive diplomacy, good governance and economic and social development” to prevent society from plunging into a crisis point (Estevens 2018). The notion of securitizing migration dates back to the early 1990s when the “Copenhagen school” tried to understand how the political leaders frame migration within the security paradigm merely by speech acts (Huysmans 2000). In the European Union case, nexus of the migration and

security is not a deliberate invention of some rightwing political leaders to further their political agenda, but it was introduced and taken forward by the European Union itself through instruments of its foreign policy. After the establishment of the Schengen region, the EU began to reflect on the association of migration, organized crime and Terrorism. The introduction of border management agencies for external borders is to compensate for the abolition of internal borders. Several European politicians like Marine Le Pen, Victor Orban, and Matteo Salvini have projected migration as a threat to the stability and security of the state (Bello, 2020). Although the EU officially declared migration as one of the major security concerns in the 2016 EU global strategy document, the foreign policy initiatives undertaken by the EU after implementing the Schengen agreement bear the elements that seem to suggest the securitization of migration (European Commission 2016).

Adamson argues that migration can impact multiple areas of nation-state such as the idea of sovereignty, balance of power among the member states and national security and also the nature of conflicts in the international system. Therefore, its ability to harm and impact several sectors of the states makes it natural for politicians to frame the process of migration as a security concern (Adamson 2006). The various facets of borders like “e-borders, offshore borders, juxtaposed borders, smart borders” have often been associated with the notion of securitization of immigration (Bigo 2002). The politicization and securitization of migration have given borders much attention not just by the politicians of both right and left but also the academicians (De Genova 2002). EU's border regimes involve criminalizing smugglers through penalties for both migrants and asylum seekers (Van Liempt and Sersli 2013). The EU's border management agencies' transformation from being merely a facilitator of smoothening the process of migration to securitizing the migration is evidenced through the EU's purported involvement in not only criminalizing volunteers trying to help the refugees but also charities (Bendixsen 2016). The process of migration and asylum are essentially associated with border politics and they are politically charged as they can stoke the sentiments of national identity, integration and security, therefore often subjected to be fodder for the politicians to exploit emotions and sensationalize the issue to consolidate their political power by selectively framing these historical phenomena within the ambit of the security paradigm. The issue of granting an asylum claim to refugees is largely seen within the framework of threat to both physical and ontological security among the EU member states. This became evident with domestic legislation and political campaigns of the several member states of the EU (Gazit 2018).

Several Central and Eastern European politicians refused to share the burdens of migrants and refugees because allowing them would be a source of threat to the nation-state's integrity and stability and instead called for strengthening external borders by building walls and erecting fences in Hungary and Bulgaria. In addition to that Slovenia and Austria also paved the way for closing of the external and internal borders (Panebianco 2020).

Several political parties of the EU member states harbour antipathy towards migration and often display their discontentment about migration through political actions. "UK Independence Party (UKIP), Alternative for Deutschland in Germany, Le Front National in France, Lega in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary, Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ) Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), The Finns Party of Finland" (Panebianco 2020). Many of these parties have increased their share of electoral support by merely running their electoral campaign on issues such as identity, culture, and border that seem to raise the emotions of the larger public. In addition, he argues that the difference in perception between the EU and its member states is a clear reflection of the EU's inability to make political decisions on issues that personally and emotionally affect a larger number of people, this void seemed to be filled by the actions of the member states (Panebianco 2020). Donahue argues that political rhetoric on the securitisation of migration issues is not confined to just radical rightwing ideologues but is very often conveniently adopted to some extent by the larger political discourse within the European political circle. In addition to this scholars draw the comment of Marcus Pretzell a member of (AFD: Alternative for Germany) after Anis Amri attacks the Christmas market in Berlin in December 2015: 'These are Merkel's dead' (Donahue, 2016)

Thierry Balzacq argues that the phenomenon of migration at the EU or domestic level has often been politicized within the security discourse. Eurosceptic parties and several European politicians who seek to strengthen and defend external borders often project migrants as a potential security threat. Therefore the process of securitization and politicization of migration goes hand in hand. In addition to this, he further stresses that the large amount of literature, on securitization has largely recognized that few of the EU member states tried to project migrants and refugees as threats to the fabric of the European culture and Welfare systems (Balzacq et al., 2016). In this context, several right-wing political parties have powerfully voiced the problems of those electorates who felt threatened by the increased cultural diversity with the large number of refugees and migrants entering Europe. Their covert crucial message is "nativism" which holds the notion that

the "state should be inhabited particularly by members of the native group" (Mudde 2016, 4). Scholars like Zürn and de Wilde (2016) define the emerging dichotomy as "communitarianism and cosmopolitanism" pointing to the competing claims of political ideologies presented in response to the phenomenon of globalization on issues like porousness of borders, the division of authority and normative values of the political system. Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak (2018) try to frame the politicization of the refugee crisis in terms of competing claims for power within the state system by projecting all issues as political which are matters of public concern. In addition to that, post functionalist perspective of European Integration projects the politicization of the EU decision-making process as visible progress or empirical development applicable since the implementation of the "Maastricht Treaty" when a larger number of public started participating in EU affairs in a "constraining" way (Hooghe and Marks 2009).

Several scholars point out four key points from post functionalist perspective a) "the increased salience of EU governance in public debates, b) the polarization of opinions expressed about EU policy decisions, and c) the expansion of actors and audiences involved in these public debates" (De Wilde, P., Leupold, A., & Schmidtke, H. 2016). "Scholars following the second approach agree on the increased politicization of EU immigration and asylum policy in recent years. In fact, studies on the transformation of political conflict in Western Europe have identified cultural diversity as one of the two dimensions around which electoral polarization occurs in the 21st century" ( Hooghe and Marks 2018). In addition, this framing of refugees and asylum seekers as a matter of security concerns can be largely found in the official narrative of the European Union and also widespread in the social media reporting across the several member states of the EU. The report produced by the Council of Europe in 2017 about the migration crisis acknowledges the presence of widespread xenophobic sentiments against the refugees and it further argues that the European press played a significant role in constructing a security narrative over the issue of migration (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

#### **Changing nature of European borders: vacillating between hard and softness**

Borders can be conceptualized as a set of rules and practices that distinguish between different territories, authority and laws. Borders can be open, closed and porous. They can be territorial, cultural and functional in their structure, their nature is dynamic and often subjected to change with change in circumstances and they are all the result of social and political construction (Del Sarto, Chiara

Steindler, 2015). In 1648 treaty of Westphalia has brought the notion of territorial politics and also the concept of the hard borders, where these borders were premised on the principles of sanctity, sovereignty and security, however with the establishment of the European project and advocating open border policy among member states, has set the tone for change in the traditional understanding of the borders. The process of change in the nature of European borders has been a constant factor within the framework of European integration, every phase of its integration involved the process of deepening and widening that has brought significant challenges ranging from sharing borders with the belligerent neighbors to the increased flow of people from the fragile states and triggered anxiety among several member states. Makarychev argues that with the advent of the EU's open border policy and facilitation of the free movement of people, goods and services radically rejects the idea of territoriality in international relations (Makarychev 2018).

This constant expansion of the EU borders has triggered a multidimensional understanding of borders, scholars like Rumford (2010) identify the multiple facets of the borders as “e-borders, juxtaposed border, smart border, and offshore borders”. The present border politics is primarily driven by the advent of new geopolitical reality, and economic and technological advancement these factors have been at the forefront in determining the nature and shape of the European borders.

American political scientist Jenaka Zieolenka identifies and calls the changing nature of borders as “Unbounding and Rebounding” by which he means that the present phenomenon of borders is riddled with conflicts where the party of territoriality seeks to restore and strengthen the Westphalian idea of the border has come in conflict with the party of globalists who seeks to overcome geographic boundaries which act as a shackle to free mobility of goods, services and people (Zielonka 2017) “In fact, borders and border policies are at the Centre of political contestation at present and the official architectural designs look outdated if not obsolete”(Zielonka 2017) The nature of the border eventually depends on the nature of the state and nature of polity and the geography of the member states, the more the state is closer to the EU external border the more the possibility of a hardened approach to the borders. Countries like Greece, Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia have erected fences with barbed wires to prevent refugees from entering. With the advancement of technology more emphasis is laid on the use of technology in the development of border control mechanisms in Europe, since the last few years European governments have heavily invested in highly advanced technological devices to strengthen and protect the external borders, some of

the initiatives include camera surveillance systems, radar and sensors, large scale IT systems handling biometric data and unmanned aerial systems (Leonard and Kaunert 2020). Besides, an emphasis on the practices is more adequate in Frontex-like initiatives. Considering its sophisticated bureaucratic nature as an EU border agency, it is not supposed to make official pronouncements in the same way as the President or a Prime Minister (Leonard and Kaunert 2019, 27).

Indeed, the European Union's policies to securitize the process of migration and asylum and its ability to strengthen the external borders by outsourcing border control mechanisms for the neighboring countries have generated fierce political debate with regard to the soft nature of European borders (Bialasiewicz 2012). However, it is often argued that the EU's border control mechanisms have often played in the hands of anti-immigrant “Euroscepticism” by aggravating the spectrum of humanitarian crisis and imageries of “migrant invasion” (Gorondi 2018). Scott points out that borders have clearly emerged as a centre of politics to the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's idea of significantly changing the nature of European Union's fundamental principles. He further argues that the present Hungarian dispensation seeks to challenge the EU's fundamental principles and authority through powerfully politicizing the national and European borders (Scott 2018) The willingness of the EU member states to abolish the internal borders has stemmed from the confidence that the external Schengen borders will be protected and strengthened. Although the authority rests with the EU. However, instead of owning the responsibility to protect the external borders, the EU had outsourced the responsibility to the fragile and failed states through an instrument of its foreign policy mechanisms such European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) which was embroiled in their political crisis. EU's inability to exercise control over the external borders has sent shock across the member states sharing the external borders and forced them to adopt the nationalist approach to protect the borders. This has also given a fillip to the politicization of migration and framing of the phenomenon as a security concern causing detrimental to the EU's ability to forge consensus among the member states in dealing with the issue.

However, scholars like (Kallius, Rajaram, etl, 2016) argue that the EU's failure to develop consensus and coordinated policy response to the issues related to migration and asylum has increased the political and symbolic priority of the EU's external borders as the focal point of European security. Several politicians are using the notion of strengthening external borders as an instrument to consolidate their own political power.

Militarization of borders has become the dominant practice of several EU member states sharing the external border EU, Recently Frontex was forced to leave the Hungarian border on the proven allegation of its involvement in the pushback of refugees (Grant, Fallon, 2021). The reconstruction of state and capital in present Europe has resulted in the establishment of the “Fortress Europe” that is based on the intense violence across its borders. Although the European Union’s Schengen region is heralded as the borderless region, it may hold true for the mobility of goods and services, but stranded and detained migrants at the EU’s external borders busts the rosy narrative built upon the EU borders and present harsh and inhumane nature of European borders (Varada Raj 2006).

### **Borders and Migration: A battleground for building a Narrative of EU**

The 2015 Refugee crisis has emerged as a watershed movement for several politicians who wanted to change the fundamentals of Europe, it has unleashed a series of domestic crises that has generated multiple and often conflicting narratives about the vision of the EU, and it has brought the long-held division of East and West within the European community to the surface and laid bare the underlying divisions of the member states of the EU. The borders and migration have often factored powerfully into the politicians’ political campaigns and enabled them to emerge victorious in national elections and increase their share of presence in the 2019 EU parliamentary elections. Several political commentators like Steven Erlanger and Megan Specia point out that the 2019 EU parliamentary election results clearly reflect the fragmentation and polarization because the share of traditional dominant parties like Centre left and Centre right has shrunk and that space has been occupied by the smaller eurosceptic and populist parties. In addition to that the share of eurosceptic parties has gone up from 20 percent in 2014 to 25 percent in 2019. (Erlanger and Specia 2019). Several radical rightwing political parties of the EU member states have achieved electoral victory by running their campaign against migrants and refugees, “United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Swedish Democrats, the Freedom Party in Austria under Joerg Haider and, more recently, Heinz-Christian Strache, the National Front in France, the League in Italy, the People’s Party in Denmark, the Freedom Party under Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and the Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) in Belgium” (Leonard and Kaunert, 2019).

As Aliaksei Kazharski in his article makes the case of central Europe that the future of the region will be largely shaped by the deep-rooted tensions between the belongingness to Europe in economic matters and towering discontentment with EU’s liberal norms that are assumed to be granting

excessive tolerance and permissiveness towards the migrants and refugees. This is how the influx of new immigrants became a challenge to the values of liberal cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism that are constitutive of the EU’s identity as a normative power (Makarychev 2018). The Survey released by the Euro barometer on Europe’s attitude to security underlines a drastic drop in the percentage of people who believe that the EU is a secure place from 79 per cent in 2015 to 68 per cent in 2017. More emphasis is laid on issues such as terrorism, organized crime, man-made and natural disasters, as well as cybercrime and the security of external borders (Kaunert, Pereira, Edwards 2020). James Scott argues that border politics goes deeper than mere exploitation of migrants, refugees and borders, nevertheless, they certainly signify xenophobia and political power strategies but they also “reflect struggle over national identity and purpose as well as discontentment with market liberalization and the political domination of the Core Europe” (Scott 2018). Growing discontentment towards the European Union seems to suggest a lack of trust towards the project of European integration, however, it is also conditioned by the multiple interests, sentiments and various motivations and national political and economic contexts that shape the perceptions of the EU and its role (Scott 2018). Several countries like the UK, Germany and the US have often highlighted the East-West divisions within the EU member states over migration and refugee crisis. The underlining tone and tenor of such political pronouncement is that the Central and Eastern European member states are falling out of step, therefore deviating from the widely embraced norms of the EU. Nevertheless, these remarks convey the danger of broader simplification of the complicated phenomenon to build a suitable and convenient narrative for the image of the EU (Scott 2018).

As rightly pointed out by the journalist Kenan Malik “There is a tendency among liberals to see a great divide on immigration between a more liberal Western Europe and a more reactionary East. While differences clearly exist, the divisions are not nearly as sharp as often suggested. It is the rhetoric and the policies emerging from the mainstream and from Western Europe that have helped to legitimize the hostility to immigration expressed by the populists and in Eastern Europe.” (Kenan Malik 2018). The frequent reminder of the East-West binaries by a “Core Europe” has less to do with the geographical positioning of the member states and more to do with the ideological, and political culture and their conformity to the democratic norms of the EU, and very often this has given fillip and legitimacy to the growing Eurosceptic sentiments. In addition, it also seems to suggest the paradox of the EU’s actorness globally, as its inability to

consolidate power and forge consensus domestically with regard to a series of crises has stripped off its legitimacy in its quest to become a global power.

### Conclusion

The elimination of the EU internal borders to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, and people, as well as the establishment of the Schengen region was heralded as the beginning of the borderless Europe. The process of migration and the notion of borders have always been at the center of political discourse, as they can impact every sector of the state. However, in 2015, the unprecedented flow of people from the conflict-ridden fragile states has amplified the discourse, the refugee crisis has challenged the very notion and assumptions of EU's open borders by fueling the tensions between several member states. politicization and securitization of the borders have become the norm in the hands of politicians to consolidate their power. The idea of "borderless" Europe is often contradicted by presenting "Fortress Europe" which represents the postmodern medieval empire of sorts. The changing nature of the EU borders can be attributed to the unwillingness of the member states to share the burden of the refugees, closer the geographic proximity of the EU member to the fragile states and the external Schengen border puts it in the vulnerable position of attracting a large number of refugees.

Therefore, countries like Austria, Hungary and Greece are building walls and erecting fences with barbed wires and presenting a notion of an impenetrable Europe, the notion that sits uneasily within the liberal political spectrum of the EU. The process of migration and the notion of borders have triggered fierce debate among several member states about the idea and vision of Europe and laid bare the diverging perceptions about the European Union, the diverging perception of the member states is a clear reflection of the different responses and perception about the refugee crisis. The EU's failure in forging consensus about combating the refugee crisis has paved the way for the intensification and the growth of the Eurosceptic sentiments, that seeks to build an alternative narrative dictated not just by the sentiments of the larger people but also to be dominated by the marginalized member which is often accused of falling out of step with EU norms. The urge to build a parallel narrative of the EU stems from their experience of being sidelined in decision-making and the belief that several core European members were essentially colonial powers and trying to invoke the feeling of superiority by placing themselves within the block of norm creators, thereby expecting others to follow them.

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