

# **Refugees: Why Do Some Countries Reject While Others Accept?**

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## **Abstract**

The European Union has been tested time and time again with different crises throughout the decades. The refugee crisis has presented a whole new set of challenges for both member states and European institutions. For the European Union to come out of this crisis successfully, they must implement effective policy but also have the support of each member state when it comes to relocating refugees across Europe. The Mediterranean states like Italy and Greece have been affected the most severely ever since the migration crisis escalated in 2015 which sparked the European Council to vote for a proposal to relocate migrants throughout member states. This relocation scheme was approved by the majority of member states yet some have failed to follow through. An estimated 120,000 refugees were projected to be relocated throughout Central and Eastern Europe but resistance from different member states has led to the failure of the relocation scheme. How have Austria and Poland, two countries who both approved of the relocation scheme, taken polar opposite approaches to relocating refugees? This article will examine how their history, rising populist parties, and relationship with the European Union have influenced their decision making in regards to accepting asylum seekers. These variables will bring insight into future decision making by the European Union in regards to the refugee crisis and their relation to those member states who refuse to aid one another during this humanitarian crisis.

*Keywords: Refugees, Migration, Austria, Poland, Populism, Nativism, Relocation*

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## **Introduction**

The current Refugee crisis in Europe today is one of the largest adversities to face Europe yet. This crisis has challenged European institutions to their core along with the member states that make up the EU. The way the EU manages this crisis will affect the future of structure of Union, relations with member states, and the fate of the refugees. When considering the refugee crisis, the EU's response can only be so effective because it relies on the dependence and compliance of member states. What happens when the Union implements policy to alleviate the crisis but countries refuse to oblige? What variables cause some EU member states to accept refugees while others reject them? I will examine Poland and Austria and how their history, position in the EU, and populism have influenced their decision making when it comes to relocating refugees during the current crisis affecting Europe today. Lastly, I will speculate the future of the EU's relation with both member states along with other possibilities for a different approach to the relocation scheme.

The migration crisis, more specifically, the refugee crisis began and intensified in 2015 with over a million refugees arriving that year alone. The main nationalities are Syrian, Afghan, Nigerian, Pakistani, Iraqi, and Eritrean . The death toll has reached to almost 10,000 in the Mediterranean alone so far (European Parliament, 2017). The European Union's main law concerning refugees is the Dublin Regulation; this is a law that determines which member state is in charge of managing asylum claims, so a country that a refugee arrives in is where they must stay file for asylum. Since Italy and Greece are the main countries receiving refugees from the Mediterranean, they have been the ones impacted the most significantly. The Union's response to Italy and Greece's cries for help has been the emergency relocation scheme. This relocation

scheme proposed by the Commission aimed to relocate 160,000 refugees throughout the Union by assigning member states with relocation quotas. Two years after the emergency relocation scheme was implemented, only one-fifth of the 160,000 have been successfully relocated.

This leads to my question: why have some member states obliged to their given quotas while others have flat out refused? The two case studies I chose were Austria and Poland because of their similarities at the beginning of the refugee crisis yet their varying differences when it comes to relocating refugees. Neither country was run by far right or populist leaders at the beginning of the crisis and both countries voted for the emergency relocation scheme and agreed to oblige to their quotas. Today, both are fueled with rising populist movements that are shaking up Europe. Yet Austria has taken in refugees, roughly 90,000 asylum seekers in 2015, and has helped with the relocation process while Poland has refused completely. This has caused immense amount of controversy, considering that fact that Poland has not relocated a single refugee out of its assigned 6,182 and is the largest beneficiary of the European Union budget, receiving €9.5 billion. The way their history, position in the EU, and populism greatly diverged their responses made Poland and Austria model case studies.

## **AUSTRIA**

Historically, Austria's experience taking in refugees has been impressive. They have always been open to resettling refugees from different parts of Europe; author James Michener stated in his book *The Bridge at Andau* "If I am ever required to be a refugee, I hope to make it to Austria" (Michener, 1957). During the Hungarian uprising of 1956 it opened its borders to thousands of Hungarians and after World War II, more than 500,000 displaced persons permanently resettled in Austria. Even during the Balkan war of 1995 it took in thousands of

people fleeing the former Yugoslavia. This has led to Austria becoming a more ethnically diverse country, with 9.1% of its residents being foreign citizens (Migration Policy.org, 2016). The Austrian Chancellor at the beginning of the crisis, Werner Faymann, was a close ally to Germany and supported Angela Merkel's open door policy. Austria's support of Germany's policies goes beyond their common political opinions but rather they are "two neighbors which share a difficult history were working together to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe" (Reuters, 2016).

This common history and closeness to Germany has influenced Austria's decision making immensely. Their relationship has molded Austria's position in the EU; Austria has similar values as the European Union and has not been as problematic as other Central/Eastern European countries. An example of this relationship is Chancellor Faymann backing up Angela Merkel's "open-door" refugee policy in 2015 thus becoming Merkel's closest ally during the crisis. Faymann and Merkel had such a strong relationship at the time that "a joke circulating between Berlin and Vienna was that Faymann entered meetings without a position on a given issue and left with Merkel's" (Politico, 2016). This relates to how Euroscepticism plays a role in Austria; although far right populist parties like the Freedom Party (FPÖ) are Eurosceptic, they don't want to leave the EU and polls have shown that neither do the citizens of Austria. Paul Schmidt, the Secretary General of the Austrian Society for European Politics, stated "In the aftermath of the UK's referendum, support among Austrians for leaving the EU immediately declined in these surveys by 8 percentage points. The FPÖ, at least for the time being, has reacted to this shift in public opinion by refraining from calling for a referendum on Austria's EU membership" (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016). In an interview with Al Jazeera, Political scientist Cas Mudde commented on this issue by saying "The FPO are

less openly anti-EU because Austria has a very pro-European electorate. Being outspoken against the EU would be electoral suicide for the party” (Al Jazeera, 2017). No matter what happens in Austria domestically, their relationship and position in the EU will truly influence their policies and actions.

Populism in Austria has definitely proven to be a movement not to be ignored. Austrian Far right parties thrive off of nativism, authoritarianism, and fear. Austrian Chancellor, Werner Faymann, stepped down becoming the first European leader to become victim to the refugee crisis, he was soon replaced by Christian Kern. Austrians were opposed to former Chancellor Faymann’s support of Merkel’s open-door refugee policy last year while those that did support him accused him of catering to right-wing voters by quickly changing his position on the issue when populist politicians started to speak out. This led to elite damage and the governing party had to change its stance to appease the opposition. At first Faymann had supported Merkel’s open door policy and had accepted 90,000 asylum seekers but as his public support plummeted, he changed his stance on the issue immediately (Aljazeera, 2016). Faymann’s response then changed to implementing strict quotas on asylum-seekers and closing the Austrian border to refugees. The populist movements do not seem to be stopping anytime soon especially after the most recent elections, predicting Sebastian Kerz, of the People’s Party, to become the future Chancellor of Austria. The far right populist parties seem to only be moving forward and Russia is following closely behind. An example of this is an agreement signed in Moscow after the recent polls between the Freedom Party and Putin’s United Russia Party. The former Presidential candidate for the Freedom Party Norbert Hofer argued against the sanctions the EU has on Russia and agreed with their anti-muslim/migrant views (New York Times, 2016). The influence

of populism on Austrian decision making has escalated since the refugee crisis started and it's changed the trajectory of domestic politics immensely.

## **POLAND**

When it comes to Poland's history, the way it influences domestic politics today is a lot more complex in comparison to Austria. Before World War II, minorities like German, Ukrainian and Belarusian made up about one-third of the country's population and the population was ethnically diverse. In the following years, Poland was devastated by occupation, genocide and communist rule which led to Poland losing 16% of its population in WWII. This turned Poland into a largely mono ethnic, Catholic, and economically feeble country. Poles have a long history of constantly being the ones forced to migrate but have never experienced large waves of migration within their country like Austria has in the past. After World War II, millions were deported after the Polish borders changed and were moved hundreds of kilometers to the west. Beginning from before the first World War to present day, Poles are also one of the largest groups of citizens in other countries like the United States with 2 million moving to Chicago in 1930 and the United Kingdom where Polish is the second largest language spoken today. Critics have come out against Poland stating that they are one of largest beneficiaries of refugee policies in European history, especially after the military regime in the 1980's, yet they are refusing to allow anyone to resettle in their country (Politico, 2016). Poland's history influenced their decision making in the beginning of the crisis; the Prime Minister in 2015, Ewa Kopacz, said "we have a moral obligation to help refugees" referencing back to their history and religious beliefs (Politico, 2015). Poland's history also influences it today because of the way its loss of population affects nativist sentiment. Today, the foreign citizen population in Poland is .03%, making Poland the most homogenous country in the EU. This has fueled a call for an "ethnically

pure” Poland by far right movements and has spread the rise of one of the biggest nativist movements in all of Europe.

Populism in Poland has been one of the strongest influences in the political sphere more than anything else in recent years. On November 11, 2017, Poland’s independence day, 60,000 nationalists march in Warsaw calling for a “white Europe.” Signs like “Clean Blood”, “Poland for Poles”, “We Want God”, “Refugees Get Out!”, and “Europe Will be White” signs flooded the streets of Warsaw by the thousands (Al Jazeera). Poland is experiencing a strong wave of nativist populists, who talk about difference in ethnicity and security interchangeably whereas Austria’s populist leaders mainly focus on security; this stems back to their history and ethnic makeup. The nationalist marches only grow in size every year which comes by surprise since “56 percent majority of Polish interviewees in a Eurobarometer poll, called for Poland to help refugees in reply to a question on whether the country should do so” (Reuters, 2017 ). The Law and Justice Party is the most popular political party in Poland at the moment with double the popularity of the Civic Platform party, the party of Donald Tusk that was in power at the beginning of the refugee crisis. The leader of the Law and Justice Party, Jarosław Kaczyński, said during his campaign against refugees “There are already signs of emergence of diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for a long time: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna. There is also talk about other, even more severe diseases” (New York Times, 2016). The current Prime Minister Beata Szydło, of The Law and Justice Party, is incredibly anti-refugee. Prime Minister Szydło has not accepted or relocated a single refugee during the Crisis and Poland will continue to refuse refugees under the European Union’s relocation scheme even though the EU’s highest court is allowed to force countries to accept asylum seekers. Beata Szydło’s reasoning for denying refugees is because she wants to protect

Poles and their children from immigration because it will keep Poland safe from attacks. This comes as a surprise since Poland has not fallen victim to a single terrorist attacks yet they have one of the most anti-migrant policies in Europe. Beata Szydło's views on migration are so extreme that she was even quoted at a speech at Auschwitz saying "In our troubled times, Auschwitz is a great lesson that everything must be done to defend the safety and the lives of citizens," (BBC News, 2017). Nativism, fear, and populism have strengthened Poland's Law and Justice Party and will only continue to do so if the refugee crisis continues to be managed the way it currently is by the European Union.

Poland's position in the European Union today is an unstable one due to their constant conflicting views on a variety of issues. Poland stands against many EU values and ideals like gay marriage, anti-abortion rights, etc., due to their conservative Catholic beliefs. The Law and Justice Party "has come under fire for truncating democratic norms and institutions through policies set up to neuter judicial independence, weaken civil liberties, politicize the civil service, and exert control over media" (Council of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Most recently, Poland has come head to head with Brussels because of their recent unconstitutional judicial reforms that politicized their Judiciary. Euroscepticism in Poland is growing within the current Law and Justice Party because of their discontent with the way the European Union is dealing with the crisis. The Polish government still supports integration but it will not let go of its national identity, national interests, and national security. Poland believes the Union should allow member states to play a stronger role in creating the EU's future. The Polish government supports giving national parliaments in European politics more power and they believe that the relocation and acceptance of refugees and economic migrants is a matter of national security so it should be considered and handled with at the member state's level. This constant negotiation and

backlash has only weakened Poland's position within the European Union and they are likely to face various consequences. In an article by the New York Times, lawmakers in the Union

“voted to begin a process that could result in a loss of voting rights within the European Union for Poland, drawing a furious reaction from Warsaw. The European Parliament voted, 438 to 152, to adopt a resolution to begin the first stage in a lengthy process to invoke Article 7 in the European Union's founding treaty” (New York Times, 2017).

After months of threatening Poland, the Commission is finally going after Poland for violating its democratic and human rights standards. In reference to Russia, no formal agreements have been signed but like with every populist party in Europe, the rise of far right would benefit Putin. The strengthening of populist forces means more leaders wanting to divide Europe which would work in Putin's favor; an agreement like the Russian-Austrian one would not come as a surprise if it arose in Poland's future.

### **WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?**

The future for Austria and Poland is up for question but seem to be very different for both. The countries who uphold EU standards and values will be the ones who benefit the most in the future. Austria's future Chancellor, Sebastian Kerz, does not want to relocate anymore refugees stating that Austria has done more than “enough”. The EU normally would go after countries who refuse to comply, like Poland, but since Austria did relocate 90,000 asylum seekers before the emergency scheme was implemented, it isn't a main concern of the EU at the moment. The future of Austria will only become more conservative as Sebastian Kerz comes into office since he mixes his Catholic faith with his political decisions.

The Commission had been threatening Poland, along with Hungary and Czech, that if they would not start relocating refugees they would start an infringement process. Even the current Chancellor of Austria, Christian Kern, brought up the issue of possibly cutting contributions to the EU budget if Poland continued to refuse to help the crisis. Now that the Parliament has voted on using the ‘nuclear option’ on Poland, they will lose their voting rights. The reality of Poland’s future is sinking in, if they continue to refuse, further consequences could become more severe, possibly putting their membership up for question. The President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, was behind the unconstitutional judicial reforms but just recently changed his opinion on the issue “in an effort to secure broader political support for an overhaul of the judiciary that the European Union fears will harm democracy” (Reuters, 2017). This came after immense amount of backlash and pressure from the EU to do so. No matter what domestic politics seem to arise, the EU has the strongest influential hand in politics.

The future of the EU’s management of the refugees crisis is slightly scattered due to the failure of past solutions. The Dublin Regulation put all of the weight of the crisis on frontline member states making it simply unfair. The conditions of refugee camps are poor in these countries, resources are low, and each country is suffering domestically. The response to these cries was the emergency relocation scheme which made it mandatory to relocate asylum seekers but that too has failed with only one-fifth of the 160,000 refugees relocated. Recent talks suggest possibly removing the mandatory relocation scheme all together. Estonia, the current leader of the Council of the EU, has suggested a new plan to reform the Dublin system and give the Commission the head role in migration policies. It would not so mandatory but rather one member state would voluntarily take asylum seekers only if the original country agrees to it. The Commission would also determine the amount of asylum seekers to relocate for each member

state depending on the country's population size and wealth (Politico, 2017). Politicians, like Swedish MEP Cecilia Wiksöm, came out against this proposal stating "is very far from what could be an acceptable solution for the European Parliament" (Cecilia Wiksöm.eu, 2017). The Dublin system and the relocation scheme can only manage this crisis so effectively but its faults are becoming increasingly more evident and reforms or a completely new framework will soon have to be implemented.

## **CONCLUSION**

The refugee crisis is a complex and arduous crisis that the European Union has little experience dealing with. Europe has seen waves of migration before, like after the breakup of former Yugoslavia, but never a wave of migrants in the millions in the span of just two years. The wave of populism that is currently going through Europe can be seen in every country; this dissatisfaction within the European Union can be attributed to causes outside of the refugee crisis but currently the anti-migrant sentiment is what is fueling populist sentiment. Their history with migration, relation with the Union, and populist movements will continue to dictate how they choose to navigate this crisis domestically but ultimately the European Union will have the upper hand in determining how the crisis will be dealt with overall.

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