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# Political Dissidence or Threat of Disintegration

## *The Impacts of the Migrant Crisis on Potential European Disintegration*

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**Abstract:** Ongoing discourses surrounding the success of the European Union (EU) have been brought forth since its inception. But within recent years, the migrant crisis has placed a significant strain on EU homogeneity. To assess the crisis' impacts, this paper highlights the EU's pre-existing structural components combined with increased racial tensions to be the potential demise of the system as a whole. Structural components including the Schengen Agreement and the quota system, along with xenophobic sentiments, have all led to division amongst EU members, leaving greater potential for disintegration. The UK's decision to withdraw from the EU was a clear example of the structural flaws existing in this system, which were only exacerbated with the onset of this crisis. While the likelihood of definite disintegration is contested, a heightened possibility undoubtedly exists since the migrant crisis' onslaught.

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The European Union (EU) is facing a dichotomy. How can it create uniformity amongst its member states while concurrently maintaining each country's national values? This tension has been a challenge to the EU since its inception. The 2015 migrant crisis displaced millions of Syrian, Turkish, Lebanese, Jordanian, and Libyan citizens from their homes, leaving them to flee to nearby countries to seek asylum and protection. The EU, in responding to this flux of migrants during the crisis, encountered many obstacles surrounding their displacement. The political and legal challenges the EU faced, which included open-border crossings due to the Schengen Agreement, the quota system, and xenophobic attitudes tied to the rise of right-wing populist politics, have led to greater disagreement amongst EU member states. Foundations of the EU rely on unity and homogeneity, and this crisis has created greater division and thus an increased possibility for EU disintegration. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ramifications of these three factors, which ultimately led to disagreement and consequently a heightened potential for EU collapse. This paper will consider how these factors have led to the heightened potential of disintegration within the EU and also situate Brexit within the context of this crisis. With the basis of the EU being prefaced around homogeneity, the rise of the migrant crisis in 2015 poses a significant threat to EU homogeneity and increases the chances of disintegration. Current quarrels may give way to greater disparities of opinion between current EU members, which should be considered a driving force for possible separation from the EU.

The distinction between the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' is important conceptually for understanding the crisis itself. The term 'refugee' refers to people seeking asylum who are forced to flee their country due to political instability, turmoil, oppression or economic persecution.<sup>1</sup> 'Migrant' refers to the entire movement of people, which includes refugees, immigrants, and those searching for improved life in a different country, regardless of status, the cause for movement, and the length of stay.<sup>2</sup> This distinction is important because the political arguments surrounding the swells of incoming people to Europe with an attempt to depoliticize the element of economics proposes a dehumanitarian front that is inherently political.<sup>3</sup> The migrant crisis has been the largest and most unprecedented crisis for Europe since World

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. "Migration." United Nations: Peace, Dignity, and Equality on a Healthy Planet. United Nations. Accessed November 14, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. "Migration." United Nations: Peace, Dignity, and Equality on a Healthy Planet. United Nations. Accessed November 14, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> D'Erman, lecture and personal communication, October 22, 2019.

War II.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted that there was a 16% rise in displaced peoples globally, which equated to roughly 60 million worldwide; the migrant crisis accounted for a significant portion of this displacement.<sup>5</sup> This flux of migrants seeking asylum in Europe was due to the political and religious turmoil, conflict, and instability in Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but also in Africa, namely Libya.<sup>6</sup> Syrian refugees were at the forefront of discussion surrounding this crisis: their migration to Europe was due to both the corruption of leadership that existed within Syria, as well as the Islamic States' (ISIS') rise to power.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, poor conditions that existed in nearby refugee camps were insufficient for many due to lack of supplies and overcrowding; as a result, many fled to Europe to improve their quality of life.<sup>8</sup>

The Schengen Area represents 26 countries comprising 22 EU members and four non-members, which allows open-border crossings between each other.<sup>9</sup> This gives individuals residing in the Schengen Area the ability to move from state to state without long-winded checks at each state's border. Upon the influx of migrants in 2015, the element of open borders posed a significant perceived threat to national sovereignty for many European countries. There was also evidence of a great deal of political disparity amongst EU member states. In September of 2015, a summit was held whereby member states expressed their concerns for security with the large swells of migrants moving freely between the Schengen countries.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, a smaller coalition formed, which included Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Finland, Germany, Greece and Sweden. This smaller coalition met to discuss the crisis itself and which countries would be willing to admit a higher number of migrants.<sup>11</sup> The existence of both summits speaks to the lack of uniformity and strength, which could have existed in the European

<sup>4</sup> Blasina, Niki. "Europe's Migrant Crisis Explained," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Khan, Mishal S, et al., "Pathogens, Prejudice, and Politics: The Role of the Global Health Community in the European Refugee Crisis." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 16, no. 8 (August 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Blasina, Niki. "Europe's Migrant Crisis Explained," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Brunet-Jailly, Emmanuel, Achim Hurrelmann, and Amy Verdun, eds. *European Union Governance and Policy Making: A Canadian Perspective*. University of Toronto Press, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Lehne, Stefan. "How the Refugee Crisis Will Reshape the EU." *Carnegie Europe*, February 4, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Council through this crisis. The ‘mini’ Schengen brought forth by Dutch finance minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem was proposed such that specific countries with a like-minded degree of acceptance would band together on issues surrounding the crisis.<sup>12</sup> It is important here to note the initial levels of disagreement, as the inception of the ‘mini’ Schengen created cracks in the EU’s political uniformity.<sup>13</sup> The increasing divide, which has arisen due to varying degrees of acceptance of migrants, has increased the possibility for a future divide. These varying degrees of acceptance coupled with the initiation of small-scale discussion groups excluding countries that disagreed, certainly did not create any form of structural strength to the EU: rather, it had the opposite effect.<sup>14</sup> The partition which exists amongst the EU’s 28 member states suggests that these disagreements contribute to the potential for European disintegration.

In an attempt to manage the open-borders, the Frontex Institution was the agency that oversaw border control of the Schengen regions, which was in alignment with regions of security along the coast.<sup>15</sup> However, Frontex could not adequately control the unprecedented amount of border crossings, which occurred in 2015 due to lack of funding.<sup>16</sup> Major political decisions were made amongst the European Council, including the relocation of 160,000 refugees from countries bordering water, such as Italy and Greece, to other countries who were a part of the Schengen Agreement.<sup>17</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel clearly asserted that the Schengen Agreement was in jeopardy if countries did not accept their portion of refugees.<sup>18</sup> Both Germany and Austria restored border controls after the acceptance of nearly 40,000 refugees over the course of one weekend.<sup>19</sup> Germany and Austria attempted to ameliorate this resounding opposition to the influx of migrants, yet several countries still opposed these protocols. Hungary established a high fenced border to prevent the mass movement of migrants; the country initially received a great deal of backlash, but other Schengen states later followed

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Frontex. “Key Facts.” Frontex. Accessed November 14, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Lehne, Stefan. “How the Refugee Crisis Will Reshape the EU.” Carnegie Europe, February 4, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Park, Jeanne. “Europe’s migration crisis.” *New York: Council of Foreign Relations* (2015): 311-325.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

in Hungary's footsteps.<sup>20</sup> The reinstatement of borders has been considered one of the largest setbacks to the Schengen zone in all of its existence.<sup>21</sup> Merkel's push for cooperation amongst EU members resulted in further fragmentation and opposition towards accepting migrants.

In 2015, the quota system was introduced by the European Commission under German leadership by Merkel through a proposal to distribute aid and to shelter asylum seekers to EU members proportionally. This was done with considerations for both the population and the economic factors of each state. There were immediate countermeasures upon this suggestion, such as the reinstatement of borders and Hungary's physical representation of a border to prevent the perceived "invasion" of migrants.<sup>22</sup> European countries continuously pushed back against the idea of a long-term quota, which became evident when appeals to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) were made based on an opposition to the quota system as a whole. This opposition to the quota system was supported by Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.<sup>23</sup> Hungary's Minister of Justice, Laszlo Trócsányi, argued that the quota system (1) sent the wrong message to migrants, (2) was ineffective, and (3) posed an issue to sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> Trócsányi also asserted that the distribution process was ineffective because migrants will return to their country of choice after they have been relocated. The ECJ ruled in favour of the quota system. Not only did the decision made by the ECJ exacerbate existing tensions amongst EU members, but it exemplified migrants' favour towards particular states. Shortly after, The European Commission accused Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic of non-compliance with the Commission's push for the relocation of migrants.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the varying degrees of hostility towards migrants, the existence of these disparities only continued to create a greater divide amongst EU members.

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<sup>20</sup> Lehne, Stefan. "How the Refugee Crisis Will Reshape the EU." Carnegie Europe, February 4, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Park, Jeanne. "Europe's migration crisis." *New York: Council of Foreign Relations* (2015): 311-325.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, Shaun. "Hungarian Leader Says Europe Is Now 'Under Invasion' by Migrants." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, March 15, 2018. para 3

<sup>23</sup> Kanter, James. "E.U. Countries Must Accept Their Share of Migrants, Court Rules." *The New York Times*, September 6, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Hungary and Slovakia Take EU Refugee Quota Scheme to Court." *Deutsche Welle*. 2017.

<sup>25</sup> BBC "EU to Sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs for Refusing Refugee Quotas." *BBC News*. December 07, 2017.

In 2017, Germany had a total of 478, 581 migrants, whereas countries such as Spain and Poland both had less than 15,000.<sup>26</sup> The large number of migrants in Germany can partially be attributed to Chancellor Merkel's push for proportionality of migrant intake, but also due to the high favourability of residing within this state. Germany is around the same size as Spain, but its population is roughly double: the proportionality of migrants does not reflect this economically or demographically. The Schengen Agreement and the quota system only exacerbated this trend. Despite the intentions of the quota system, migrants were allowed freedom of movement. Large swells of migrants were most notably seen in Germany, perhaps due to both welcoming migrants with open arms, but also its advantageous living conditions.

Prime Minister Andrej Babis of the Czech Republic highlighted that this quota system has only propagated anti-immigrant attitudes, and "played into the hands of the far-right."<sup>27</sup> Xenophobia is premised on the hatred and fear of the perceived 'other' and relates to elements of anti-immigrant prejudice.<sup>28</sup> This terminology has specifically become more widely used after the inception of this crisis. The hostility held by particular EU members towards the acceptance of migrants only intensified xenophobia across the EU.<sup>29</sup> This has created a greater divide amongst countries willing to accept displaced peoples against those who are not. The migrant crisis has made many European citizens feel endangered and threatened by people dissimilar to themselves, by which a demand for deportations and the formation of barriers to entry have been voiced.<sup>30</sup> For instance, countries such as Poland have demonstrated to have high amounts of fear towards Syrian and Iraqi refugees, insisting that they are dangerous despite Poland receiving a considerably low number of migrants comparatively speaking.<sup>31</sup> Conventional thought is that increased migration is directly correlated with anti-immigrant sentiment overall.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Map Room. "Map Room: Fear Thy Neighbor: Crime and Xenophobia in Europe." *World Policy Journal* 34, no. 2 (2017): 36-37.

<sup>27</sup> BBC "EU to Sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs for Refusing Refugee Quotas." BBC News. December 07, 2017. para 11.

<sup>28</sup> Yakushko, Oksana. *Modern-day xenophobia: Critical historical and theoretical perspectives on the roots of anti-immigrant prejudice*. Springer, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Park, Jeanne. "Europe's migration crisis." *New York: Council of Foreign Relations* (2015): 311-325.

<sup>31</sup> Map Room. "Map Room: Fear Thy Neighbor: Crime and Xenophobia in Europe." *World Policy Journal* 34, no. 2 (2017): 36-37.

<sup>32</sup> The Economist. "European Xenophobia Reflects Racial Diversity, Not Asylum Applications." *The Economist Newspaper*, July 25, 2018.

While this idea is widely held, it is not completely accurate. Correlational studies examining public opinion polls released by the Eurobarometer have revealed that although there is no direct link between the resentment of foreigners and the heightened flow of refugees. There is, in fact, a notably growing divide between accepting and hostile attitudes from different EU members.<sup>33</sup> There has been a 6% increase in positive sentiment towards migrants coming from western and southern EU members, whilst the northern and eastern regions of the EU have tended to become increasingly adverse towards migrants.<sup>34</sup> This increasing division of opinions towards migrants domestically has more broadly facilitated in increasing tensions amongst EU members collectively.

Not only have xenophobic sentiments created inconsistencies amongst EU countries, but also between EU citizens and incoming migrants. These attitudes can have detrimental impacts on the favourability of the EU and heighten the potential for nationalist ideals and a push for disunion. As EU member states' political viewpoints begin to stray further from each other, fragmentation is what will continue to follow to not only lead to decreased solidarity amongst EU members but also the increased potential for disintegration. The perceived threat of migrant differences and mounting racism has fueled right-wing nationalistic passions. This exemplifies this idea in that after long processes of integration within the EU, the return of national values is resurging significantly.<sup>35</sup> In the 2016 Austrian election, Norbert Hofer, a far-right party leader, was notably favoured, which demonstrated a resurgence in both populism and nationalism.<sup>36</sup> Italian populist movements have also recently been on the rise.<sup>37</sup> Merkel's advantageous work in Germany also does not go unnoticed, yet her work paid the political price as the far-right populist political party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) remains the official opposition in Germany.<sup>38</sup> While Merkel maintains the position of the most currently popular political figure in Germany, the rise of AfD speaks to the resurgence of nationalistic anti-immigrant sentiments. With fear-

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> The Economist. "European Xenophobia Reflects Racial Diversity, Not Asylum Applications." *The Economist Newspaper*, July 25, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Postelnicescu, Claudia. "Europe's New Identity: The Refugee Crisis and the Rise of Nationalism." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12, no. 2 (2016): 203-209. doi:10.5964/ejop.v12i2.1191

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Julian Coman, "'Italians First': How the Populist Right Became Italy's Dominant Force," *The Guardian*, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Lortie, Marc, email message to author, November 25, 2020.



mongering broadcasts continually being put forth by those maintaining nationalistic ideas, people may look to feel protected and safe: this is something that populist leaders are perceived to offer.<sup>39</sup> This impression explains the rise of populism as nationalistic ideals tend to create an othering effect on outsiders.<sup>40</sup> However, this is highly problematic for migrants. The sharing of borders with a country that is willing to accept a high number of migrants becomes troubling to countries that are unwilling. Expert on European affairs Marc Lortie, former Canadian ambassador and diplomat asserts:

The EU is a political institution in constant evolution and construction. Member states are the ultimate decision makers. They will need to decide whether it is worthy to make compromises and deal with migration or face disintegration. Populist forces are pulling for no more Europe and Europeanists are pushing for more integration.<sup>41</sup>

This dichotomy becomes increasingly apparent with the rise of populism within the EU. It is true that member states do indeed hold the ultimate authority in this process. Even if the EU did not objectively disintegrate, this dichotomy creates instability in a community that is premised on uniformity. This worry that has been instilled in European citizens from the migrant intake has given rise to isolation and a potential push to leave the EU altogether. The increasing crossroads the EU faces in managing both national values and uniformity is not a new struggle. However, the migrant crisis has only exacerbated these tensions, causing structural cracks in the EU's system of governance, which has incentivized countries to withdraw from this union.

A common contestation that arises regarding EU tensions and the migrant crisis is that additional asylum laws implemented in response to the refugee crisis supersede the disparities which exist amongst EU member states. Clear examples of asylum laws that attempted to create a degree of uniformity for incoming refugees include the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), The revised Asylum Procedures Directive, and The revised Qualification Directive.<sup>42</sup> While this system and these directives offer valuable guidelines for European countries,

<sup>39</sup> Postelnicescu, Claudia. "Europe's New Identity: The Refugee Crisis and the Rise of Nationalism." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12, no. 2 (2016): 203-209. doi:10.5964/ejop.v12i2.1191

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lortie, Marc, email message to author, November 25, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission. "Common European Asylum System." Migration and Home Affairs - European Commission, December 6, 2016.



fragmentation and disparity continue to exist amongst EU members: these asylum laws have been characterized as unfair and inequitable.<sup>43</sup> This is evident in both the opinion on open-border crossings, the quota system, and xenophobia. The differences which have arisen have disrupted EU uniformity and overall solidarity, which counters the basis on which the EU relies upon.<sup>44</sup> Because this fragmentation has occurred due to the refugee crisis, there is now a heightened chance for disintegration. One clear demonstration of this notion in practice is the United Kingdom's (UK's) push for withdrawal from the EU, which is commonly referred to as 'Brexit.'

Increased migration has been one of the many driving forces behind the UK's decision for withdrawing itself from the EU. The issue of free movement for refugees in the EU was a key component in the UK's Leave campaign.<sup>45</sup> Although economic and industrial factors also heavily played into the UK's decision to leave, the migrant crisis undoubtedly played a large role in this decision.<sup>46</sup> There is a general perception that the refugee crisis could be mended through the UK's relinquishing of autonomy and control, but this is a "fostered delusion."<sup>47</sup> Rather, implicit bias and a degree of hostility towards being an EU member, along with elements of xenophobia, is a formula that largely accounts for the actual reasons behind Brexit.<sup>48</sup> Despite the ongoing debate surrounding the causes behind Brexit, the UK's implicit push to leave the EU can undoubtedly be partially attributed to the rise in hostility and disagreement in conjunction with the migrant crisis. The rise of right-wing populism and nationalist ideals also becomes a greater threat to EU stability and solidarity. Not only have these right-wing, populist political campaigns coupled with xenophobic sentiments created an inhospitable environment for displaced migrants, but they have fueled a fire for disintegration whereby other countries could potentially follow in the UK's footsteps.

The EU has faced significant struggles between the maintenance and regulation of national values and creating uniformity amongst its

<sup>43</sup> Maani, Lana. "Refugees in the European Union: The Harsh Reality of the Dublin Regulation." *Notre Dame Journal of International & Comparative Law* 8, no. 2 (2018): 83.

<sup>44</sup> Brunet-Jailly, Emmanuel, Achim Hurrelmann, and Amy Verdun, eds. *European Union Governance and Policy Making: A Canadian Perspective*. University of Toronto Press, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Outhwaite, William. "Migration Crisis and "Brexit"." *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises* (2019): 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, para 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

members. With the migrant crisis came political and legal implications, which created fractures in the structural components of the EU, including the Schengen Agreement and the quota system. Xenophobic sentiments heavily associated with the resurgence of right-wing populist politics have only created greater disparities and challenges to EU uniformity. Challenges to the EU are not new. However, these implications pose significant problems for EU solidarity and uniformity, as a greater division amongst EU members has been made evident by Brexit. With the divide on public opinion ever-increasing along with the anxiety of preserving nationalistic values, there is a greater chance for future disintegration. The EU's reactionary measures were seen as insufficient for some of its members. The EU will continue to face conflicting visions of identity and must continue to work to regulate and appease its member states to maintain power and solidarity. If the EU fails to do so, its member states are likely to follow in the footsteps of the UK and push to leave a supranational entity that has failed to properly regulate the challenges it faces.

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