The European Union's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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The crisis began in Syria more than ten years ago, following a wave of popular unrest that swept the Arab world, also commonly known as the Arab Spring. In March 2011, pro-democracy protesters demanded an end to the authoritarian practices of Bashar al-Assad's regime, posing an unprecedented challenge to his authority. The Syrian government used police, military, as well as paramilitary forces to suppress demonstrations. Resistance militias began to form and, by 2012, the conflict had expanded into a full-fledged civil war, which drew in regional and extra-regional forces.

The Assad regime has received external support from Iran and Russia and indirect support from China. Russia and China's veto against western- sponsored proposals to the UN to take actions against Assad's regime also corroborate that support. Based on this backing, the regime managed to maintain control of crucial areas in terms of population, such as in Aleppo, Syria's largest city. On the other hand, the rebels, and later the coalition of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), obtained support from the United States of America (USA) and some European States, such as France (Kienle 2019; Phillips 2020). In addition, the country also experienced a fierce sectarian contest between the Shiite forces led by Iran and the Sunni camp backed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. As far as the war against terror is concerned, an apparent aim of the USA to defeat terrorism, as well as a Global Coalition against Da'esh, all contribute to a further involvement of various players in the region. Nonetheless, peaceful attempts by institutional actors, such as efforts from the UN-led Geneva process based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 or the ad hoc Astana process, which works to enforce the Resolution, comprising Russia, Iran and Turkey, have all so far failed to progress toward a political settlement to the conflict. What began with demonstrations against the Syrian regime is now a civil war with regional and international dimensions (Haass 2017; Baczko et al. 2018; Hinnebusch and Saouli 2020; Phillips 2020; Matar and Kadri 2019).

Considering the European Union's perspective, at the beginning of the crisis, the block presented a united front against Bashar al-Assad's repressive leadership, including severe sanctions against the regime. However, the EU failed to reach a genuinely Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As Cavatorta and Turcotte (2020) point out, the EU's involvement in Syria has swung between constructive engagement with the Syrian regime to marginalization of it. In addition, the refugee crisis that the Syrian Civil War provoked revealed the EU's internal malfunction and limits.

The massive refugee waves from Syria are exacerbating the economic and social conditions of Syria's neighbors and Europe itself. According to the Regional Strategic Overview 2021–2022 (3RP, co-led between UNHCR and UNDP), there are more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees across the region – whether fleeing the brutality of the Assad regime or Da'esh depravity, seeking safety in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and beyond. The UN Refugee Agency also reported around 6.2 million people displaced within Syria as of 2021 – the largest internally displaced population in the world. Furthermore, poverty rates for Syrian refugees exceed 60 per cent in some countries, while unemployment and

uneven access to basic services, such as education, persist. Thousands of civilians have also suffered at the hands of brutal non- State armed groups, including Da'esh, as stated by the Regional Strategic Overview (3RP). The European Council has characterized the conflict in Syria as 'the world's largest humanitarian disaster, with no parallel in recent history' (European Council, no date).

The Impact of the Refugee Crisis on the EU

During the last two decades, the Middle East has experienced a dramatic forced migration. The war in Syria alone produced one of the greatest shares of the Middle East's refugees. Millions have also fled wars, especially in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. North African States and Turkey have emerged as key transit hubs for refugee flows into Europe.

In 2015, at the peak of the EU's refugee crisis, the main countries of origin of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece were Syria (57 per cent), followed by Afghanistan (22 per cent) and Iraq (5 per cent). Those who traveled as far as Italy were mainly from Eritrea (25 per cent), Nigeria (10 per cent) and Somalia (10 per cent), followed by Syria (7 per cent) and The Gambia (6 per cent).

According to Eurostat, 1.3 million migrants applied for asylum in the Member States of the EU, United Kingdom (an EU Member State at the time), Norway, and Switzerland in 2015. In the same year, refugees from Syria totaled 378,000, accounting for 29 per cent of all of Europe's asylum seekers – the highest share of any nation. Similarly, the largest group of beneficiaries of protection status in the EU in 2015 remained citizens from Syria (166,100 people, or 50 per cent of the total number of persons granted protection status in EU Member States). The applications for international protection have ever since been a lasting reality. In 2019, EU countries granted protection to 295,800 asylum seekers, from which almost one in three (27 per cent) came from Syria. Still in 2020, Syrians (84 per cent), Eritreans (80 per cent), and Yemenis (75 per cent) had the highest recognition rates.

It is also worth highlighting that in 2015 and 2016 alone, more than 2.3 million illegal crossings were detected. Although the total number of illegal crossings had dropped to 114,300 in 2020, the lowest level in the last six years, Afghanistan and Syria, along with Tunisia and Algeria, remain the main countries of origin of people detected making an irregular border crossing. Under this prism, the necessary balance between, on the one hand, respecting human rights, while, on the other hand, prevention and protection from potential threats such as terrorism, required a special statecraft by the European governments and by the block itself (Goździak et al. 2020).

Migration has been posing significant challenges to European societies so far and has raised serious concerns over its medium and long-term economic and fiscal impact. The current migrant and refugee crisis has also been a disintegration challenge for Europe. Tassinari (2016, 72) has claimed that,

[t]ogether with common foreign and defense policies—another item on the European agenda that is becoming increasingly enmeshed with the refugee crisis—migration is the epitome of a highly sensitive issue that is threaded carefully at the domestic level by each European Union (EU) member state before it gets negotiated in the EU, almost always resulting in watered-down compromises.

Dinan, Nugent and Paterson (2017, 1) contend that apart from the 2009 financial crisis, 'the most recognizable feature of the EU in crisis has been the migration crisis'. Similarly, Buonanno (2017, 122) has suggested that the 'migration crisis is widely thought to threaten many of the foundations and bases on which European integration has been built'.

On the other hand, Webber (2019, 170) has argued that '[u]nlike the Eurozone Crisis, the Refugee Crisis did not produce a higher level of (horizontal, sectoral and vertical) political integration'. Instead, because of the restoration of border controls, the crisis resulted in limited political fragmentation. For Brack and Gürkan (2021, 13), 'during the Schengen crisis, cultural issues were central to debates in many Member states and attempts to depoliticize the issue through a delegation of power to a supranational structure failed'.

In the end, the EU responded to the Syrian Refugee Crisis using the power vested in it by its Member States. EU policy and its Member States' distinct national strategies have not always coincided. Consequently, unity was threatened, and the EU's credibility challenged.

The EU's Response to the Refugee Crisis: Policy and Politics

In times of crisis and in events of disintegration, the EU has been responding through institutional and operational adaptations (Niemann and Zaun 2018; Buonanno 2017; Schilde and Goodman 2021; Bosilca 2021). Within the Union's area of freedom, security and justice, measures have been taken in relation to asylum, immigration, borders, police and judicial cooperation. The EU has established a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and a European Migration Network. On the external front, the EU has been functioning within the context of its CFSP, and its Neighborhood Policy, seeking to enhance prosperity and stability to neighboring countries. The Union has also used the framework of its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), implementing humanitarian and rescue tasks.

However, it was on the European Agenda on Migration (European Commission 2015) that Europe would establish a comprehensive approach to improve the management of migration in all its aspects. The plan focused on three fronts: action at the border of the EU, by saving lives and securing the borders of the Union; action inside the EU, by developing a new policy on legal migration, and by relocating refugees to other Union Members and strengthening the common asylum policy; and last but not least, external action, by reducing the incentives for irregular migration, as well as assisting the refugees where they are and resettling them when possible.

How was this to be implemented in practice? A new European Border and Coast Guard (EBCGA–Frontex) was launched in October 2016 to ensure that Europe could protect its common external borders and face the new migration and security challenges in a united fashion. Its budget of 254 million euros in 2016 rose gradually, reaching 543 million euros in 2021. In addition, the EU has strengthened the role of Europol as well as of Eurojust. Other EU agencies have also been experiencing a similar transformation. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) based in Malta, which facilitates the implementation and improves the functioning of the CEAS, became the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA). The EUAA began its activities with a 172 million euros budget for 2022.

An altogether new concept, the Hotspot, was also inaugurated as part of the European Agenda on Migration, allowing EBCGA, Europol, and EUAA to work on the ground in affected EU Member States to identify, register and fingerprint arriving migrants and to assist in dismantling migrant smuggling networks (Niemann and Zaun 2018). Moreover, according to the Agenda, a series of other policies would be implemented, such as a return and resettlement policy, as well as emergency measures including the relocation of asylum-seekers from the frontline Member States to other Member States.

On 18 March 2016, the EU signed a controversial agreement with Turkey, aiming at stopping the flow of irregular migrants via Turkey to Europe. According to the deal, irregular migrants arriving on the Greek islands should be returned to Turkey, and, for every Syrian returned to Turkey, the EU would take in a Syrian from Turkey (European Council 2016). In exchange, the EU also agreed to reduce visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, to update the customs union, re-energize the accession process and to provide 6 billion euros in financial aid.

As far as the asylum claims are concerned, the Dublin Regulation establishes that the country where an asylum seeker enters EU territory is responsible for dealing with the asylum claim. During the height of the refugee and migrants' arrivals, this deal placed a particular burden on Greece and Italy, where most asylum seekers arrived. Under this prism, in 2016, the European Commission proposed a new corrective allocation mechanism. According to the document, although the point of entry would still determine which state was responsible, if, in turn, that government faced a disproportionate number of asylum seekers, the mechanism would trigger the transfer of cases to less-burdened states (European Commission 2016a).

In 2017, the European Parliament and the Council reached a broad political agreement on reviewing some of the CEAS legislative instruments. It agreed on establishing a full-fledged EU Asylum Agency, to reform Eurodac, review

the Reception Conditions Directive, examine the Qualification Regulation and the EU Resettlement framework. However, the Council did not reach a common position on the reform of the Dublin system and the Asylum Procedure Regulation. In 2020, the Commission proposed a fresh start, a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, aiming at tackling the imbalances in member states' burdens related to migrant arrivals and simplifying the asylum process (European Commission 2020). Concerning EU funding for migration, asylum and integration policies in the EU's budget, 10 billion euros went to migration and asylum management in 2014–2020. This amount rose to 22.7 billion euros for the 2021–2027 period.

The EU has taken some important steps towards managing the crisis, strengthening its institutions and tools. However, the overall approach can be considered as an example of 'defensive integration,' inclining to finding solutions to deal with the refugee flows outside the EU borders, but not managing the challenge adequately within its own borders (Kriesi, et al. 2021). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum has also been criticized as mainly technical and that it has not seemed to have simplified the asylum process so far (Donatienne and Erol 2020). The hotspots have given a significant contribution in managing the refugee and migrant flows, but there has been a lack of a precise legal framework governing the whole strategy and guaranteeing refugees' human rights. (Niemann and Zaun 2018). In addition, there has reportedly been an inadequate response to the refugees' needs for medication, food supply and accommodation supplying (UNHCR, no date). Furthermore, the Dublin Regulation fell short of the urgent solution to such a humanitarian drama. Entry countries carrying a disproportionate weight of migrants and refugees often neglected their obligations and allowed asylum seekers to move on to Northern European States. As a result, Northern States chose to temporarily reinstall border controls within the Schengen area, jeopardizing one of the greatest achievements of internal integration by the Union, the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. In this context, the EU Member States' response resembled what Biermann et al (2019) have called 'a 'Rambo' game situation,' in which 'the States least affected by migratory pressure were satisfied with the institutional status quo and were thus able to leave the more affected states aggrieved'. European Funds are important instruments of support. However, there are a series of other issues, such as monitoring allocations, that still need to be addressed.

Regarding the relocation plan, it did not fulfil its purpose and was ultimately abandoned. Indeed, the 'corrective allocation mechanism' immediately became a divisive issue. Proponents of the relocation deal supported the view that managing the refugee crisis was a shared responsibility, while opponents responded that no country should be under obligation by EU decisions to accept third-country citizens on their territories. The United Kingdom did not opt into the solidarity relocation scheme. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland openly refused to comply with the decision, based on their national political needs, triggering court cases (Niemann and Zaun 2018). The voluntary resettlement plan ended up being 'an enormous flop' (Buonanno 2017, 116).

The EU places 'building resilience' (European Commission 2016b) as a central objective of development and humanitarian assistance. Yet, as far as the CSDP is concerned, existing crisis management procedures and mechanisms remain limited and slow. Similarly, the EU-Turkey agreement has been criticized by EU Member States, as well as by other signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol), as to have avoided their international obligations to refugee protection (Rygiel et al. 2016; Niemann and Zaun, 2018; Abdat 2018; Ghosh 2018; Kaya 2020). Moreover, the EU, while considering Turkey a safe country of origin – this seems to contradict the Commissions' (2019) criticism to the country for discrimination against minorities and the politicization of the judiciary. The weaknesses in the EU's refugee management were further evident when Turkey, during the end of February 2020, suspended the deal, by opening its land border with Greece and leading to a deadlock situation. Both sides placed strategic interests above humanitarian principles (Kriesi et al. 2021).

Thus far, the EU-Turkey Statement has allowed the continuation of the resettlement process. It also significantly contributed to the reduction of irregular border crossings within the EU. However, it was the product of a 'German kind of solution format,' not a common approach to a common challenge. It appeared to be a way of protecting the Member States from supranational activism. As a result, the EU continued muddling through the crisis (Crawford 2021, 482).

Finally, the EU's lack of coherence and the subsequent weak responses to the crisis, were soon manipulated by the dangerous populist and extremist parties. In fact, the refugees arrived at a moment when Europe was just emerging

from the worst economic crisis of the post- war period. As a result, a series of far-right parties seized the opportunity to exploit public distress and build a 'factless' discourse against the migrant challenge in order to gain more power. In January 2015, the neo-fascist Golden Dawn became the third- largest political party in the Hellenic Parliament. Likewise, in 2017, the Freedom Party (FPO) became a coalition partner in Austria's new government, and Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered Germany's Bundestag for the first time in 2017, becoming the country's third- largest political party. In Italy, two populist movements – the Five-star Movement and the League – made large gains in the March 2018 elections, while Hungary's re-elected prime minister, Viktor Orban, has grown increasingly far-right and authoritarian. The rise of these forces put further negative pressure on the EU's national governments, making it more difficult for the Union to act with unity.

The EU's struggle to manage the flow of refugees has allowed the highest boosting of xenophobic and nationalistic forces in Europe since World War II, and the Syrian drama was not able to trigger any breakthroughs to the sharing practices in the EU. Overall, there has been a lack of comprehensive solidarity rules and EU governments have employed mostly unilateral and security-driven responses aimed at limiting the number of refugees that would enter Europe (Karageorgiou 2016, 210; Kriesi et al. 2021). Regarding the European Union's involvement in Syria's civil war, there has been unity in humanitarian aid, yet also division in external policy making.

The EU's Particular Response to the Syrian Crisis

The EU's response to the refugee crisis concerning Syrian refugees has been based on the European Agenda on Migration and on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, as previously discussed. Under this prism, steps have been made concerning humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, as well as to neighboring hosting countries. The EU and its Member States have provided more than 17 billion euros in aid since the beginning of the conflict to help those who have fled the war, inside and outside Syria. The EU's regional trust fund, the Madad Fund, has reached almost 1.4 billion euros in combined funding from the EU and its Member States. The EU focused on helping Syria's neighboring states not only through the Madad Trust Fund, but also through the Regional Development and Protection Programme for refugees and host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, as well as Iraq (Rosanne and Sinatti 2020).

A series of Brussels Conferences on Supporting the future of Syria and the region, seeking to mobilize humanitarian aid to Syrians within the country and in the neighboring countries, have also been taking place since 2017. On 29 and 30 March 2021, the Brussels V Conference pledged 5.3 billion euros for 2021 and beyond for Syria and the neighboring countries hosting the largest Syrian refugee population, the largest amount of that support came from Europe. Nonetheless, as Barbulescu (2017) has contended, such measures increased financial aid to the region – rather than shared the need to provide protection to refugees.

As far as the Union's external policymaking in Syria is concerned, before the 2011 Syrian Uprising, it was based on a policy of constructive engagement, despite the absence of an Association Agreement (AA). Syria was a partner in the 1995 Barcelona Process, set to create an area of shared prosperity between the EU and the Mediterranean countries of the southern bank. After the dramatic foreign intervention in Iraq in 2003, Europeans became even more convinced that diplomatic engagement was far better than military involvement in the region; and that dialogue combined with economic development could gradually contribute to more democratic accountability by the Syrian government (Cavatorta and Turcotte 2020, 261). However, the Syrian Uprising against the Syrian government put an end to that constructive engagement. The EU reverted its position turning against Assad's regime and focused on a strategy to bring peace and security in the region, as outlined in the EU's regional strategy for Syria and Iraq (Council of the European Union 2015), as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat and the EU strategy on Syria (Council of the European Union 2017).

Indeed, the terrorist threat of Da'esh and other terrorist groups in Syria implies a serious challenge not only to the internal stability of the nation, but also to its broader region and the international community. Hence, the regional strategy for Syria was set to support efforts by the Global Coalition to counter Da'esh; reduce the influx of foreign terrorist fighters, funds and weapons to Da'esh; prevent regional spillovers and improve border security; and provide humanitarian aid and international protection to those affected.

Since 2012, the EU and its Member States have also been implementing some restrictive measures, including sanctions. Overall, 270 individuals and 70 entities have been targeted by a travel ban and an asset freeze. EU sanctions also include an oil embargo and export restrictions on equipment and technology that might have been used for internal repression, among others. As part of its security response and the fight against terrorism, the EU has implemented UN Security Council sanctions freezing the funds of persons and entities associated with Osama bin Laden, the al Qaida network, the Taliban and Da'esh.

Nevertheless, the threat of Da'esh, in addition to the refugee crisis, has also triggered significant different policy positions by EU Member States, leaving the EU with a weak and divided voice in the face of one of the world's largest humanitarian disasters. Countries, such as Germany and Sweden were open to admitting refugees at the beginning of the crisis, while others, namely Denmark, Hungary, and Poland, refused entry from the very start. Europe's divisions were immediately apparent and also were revealed by attitudes toward the arms' embargo on the rebels. France and the UK pursued an end to the arms' embargo against the rebels in the spring of 2013, based on humanitarian arguments. In turn, several others, including the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Sweden, were more skeptical. The arms embargo was allowed to lapse, but all the other EU measures against Syria continued (Cavatorta and Turcotte 2020, 271).

In practice, as Saatçioğlu (2020) has pointed out, EU member states eventually united around the 'lowest common denominator solution' represented by the refugee deal, which illustrated Thin Europe (focused on a strategy aiming at resolving the 'crisis' on the ground – i.e., an EU-Turkey deal) at the expense of a more norm-based policy associated with Thick (a more EU integration approach) and Global Europe (focused on international cooperation and the EU's corresponding responsibilities to refugee protection). The current institutional architecture of the EU's foreign policy has resulted in a lack of determining influence on developments in the Syrian Civil War, be it from the EU collectively or from Member States individually.

Ultimately, the EU is what its members allow it to be. As Cavatorta and Turcotte (2020, 273) claim, 'the EU can only be a "player" in international affairs if its constituent parts allow it'.

Explaining the EU's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis through Theoretical Lenses

During the last years, there has been a vibrant theoretical discussion on European (dis)integration tendencies due to the successive crises of the last decades, including the refugee crisis, as well as on the applicability of grand theories to the study of crisis (Schimmelfennig 2018; Börzel and Risse 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2019; Smeets and Zaun 2021; Schilde and Goodman 2021; Biermann at al. 2019). For the purposes of this chapter, the theories, that were conceived with European integration in mind – neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism – also provide important explanatory tools by which to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's response to the Syrian Refugee crisis.

As previously discussed, the refugee crisis has revealed a series of EU flaws, related to the incoherent European reaction that led to the Schengen crisis and to the related failure of the relocation scheme, the rise of extremism inside the EU, the externalization of the solution through the EU-Turkey agreement and finally the failure in speaking with one voice in the world scene and reaching its humanitarian objectives.

Liberal intergovernmentalism explains cooperation based on the European States' functional interests and asymmetrical interdependence. States will only delegate or pool the authority needed to comply with a deal (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2019). In this regard, weak interdependence and incompatible preferences led to a fragile intergovernmental bargaining during the refugee crisis, and particularly the Schengen crisis, as well as a mix of unilateral measures that produced temporary disintegration. The Dublin system, besides tackling border crossing issues in the Schengen Area, was not designed to deal with such a shock as

the 2015–2016 peak of the refugee crisis. It was not intended to prevent uncoordinated and subsequently damaging actions by some Member States either. Greece and Italy were incapable of controlling the unprecedent refuge flows from crossing their borders and heading to the North. Germany's action also had a negative impact. At the beginning

of the crisis, Germany suspended the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees to admit them directly. However, just weeks later, the country changed its strategy and temporarily restored border controls with Austria. Several other Schengen states followed the same strategy, such as Austria, Denmark, France, Slovenia, Norway and Sweden. Furthermore, Member States interpreted the Refugee Convention definition differently. As a result, 'the Schengen/Dublin regime has been up in the air since the summer of 2015' (Schimmelfennig 2021, 68).

At the same time, liberal intergovernmentalism points out that the EU failed to replace the provisions laid down in the Dublin Regulation with a system of shared responsibility or reallocation. The European Commission's proposal for a Regulation on a permanent crisis relocation mechanism, as previously discussed, was rejected not only by Eastern Member States but also by some Western Member States, refugee's entry doors, such as France and Spain, (Schimmelfennig 2018). In the end, Europeans agreed on a one-time reallocation of up to 160,000 refugees. Still, even this ad hoc measure had a mixed record of implementation, and it was legally challenged by several Eastern Member States. In practice, over the last years, only dedicated schemes and voluntary relocations coordinated by the Commission have taken place.

The EU has also focused on externalization tactics to overcome the Schengen crisis. Member States, instead of strengthening the capacity of the EU to deal with migrants, have enhanced intergovernmental cooperation with third countries to prevent migrants from reaching the EU's borders, as seen in the 2016 EU agreement with Turkey. However, supranational institutions are not accountable for that agreement, leaving the process unsupervised and thus highly unpredictable. Ultimately, the Schengen crisis led to a quantitative expansion rather than qualitative deepening of the activities of EU agencies (Schimmelfennig 2018; Smeets and Zaun 2021).

In intergovernmentalist theorizing, Member States determine the course of European integration, while institutional actors play a minor role. (Moravcsik 1993, 1998; 2018; Smeets and Zaun; Hooghe and Marks 2019). Indeed, there was not 'a profound effect on governance institutions' (Crawford 2021, 482). The EU's agencies have been reinforced in terms of budget and personnel but remain dependent on Member States' decisions. They do not have any acquired supranational competencies (Schimmelfennig 2018).

EASO/EUAA continues to be limited to supporting the implementation of a Common European Asylum System and coordinating national authorities in the implementation of EU asylum rules. It cannot impose uniform asylum decisions across the European Union.

As far as the EBCGA (Frontex) is concerned, the original Commission proposal had provided supranational competences to the Agency in case of urgent situations. However, supranational competences for the agency were not part of the legislation adopted by the Council and the Parliament. Instead, the new Regulations provided that in case of situations at the external borders requiring urgent action, the Council may make a decision (Article 42, Regulation (EU) 2019/1896; Article 19 and 80 Regulation (EU) 2016/1624). Similarly, they allow member states to reintroduce border controls at their internal borders if another government fails to cooperate with EBCGA (Frontex) or to protect its external Schengen borders effectively. This is renationalization rather than supranational enforcement (Schimmelfennig 2018, 16). Smeets and Zaun have argued that the EU level actors involved played a significant role in Eurozone asylum crisis outcomes (2021), such as the Commission and the European Central Bank.

Although the EU's difficulties in coherently responding to the refugee crisis can mostly be explained by intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism captures other important aspects of the EU's actions. Neofunctionalism highlights supranational activism in proposing reforms to face the refugee threat. In May 2015, the European Commission proposed the European Agenda on Migration to equip the EU with the tools to better manage migration in the areas of irregular migration, borders, asylum and legal migration. Although the relocation scheme was rejected, supranational cooperation was upgraded concerning external border control, police and judicial cooperation inside the EU and registration of the incoming immigrants, as was the case of EBCGA and EUAA.

For neofunctionalists, European integration can address crises. Nonetheless, integration advances, but it does so while dependent on the effects of prior integration, transnational interdependence, and supranational institutional capacity (e.g., Niemann 2006; Niemann and Speyer 2018; Sandholtz and Sweet 1998, 2018; Lefkofridi and

Schmitter 2020). In the case of the refugee crisis, Member States moved forward with the suspension, but not abandoning the Schengen *aquis*. That fact suggests that, at a time of economic recovery, the internal market benefits appeared more important than the costs of ending a key pillar of European integration – the free movement of people (Hooghe and Marks 2019; Niemann and Speyer 2018, 31). For Hooghe and Marks (2019, 1121), 'while intergovernmentalism is pertinent to headline bargaining on refugee quotas, neofunctionalism's wider lens helps to explain why, beyond the limelight, there has been an incremental, albeit haphazard, increase in supranational activity'.

Neofunctionalists also see common interest in cooperation and interdependence among Member States concerning the Schengen *acquis*. Indeed, disintegration would represent high costs of policy adjustment, and at a time when States were trying to recover from a long financial crisis. Furthermore, permanent reinstallation of borders would put an end to the most popular achievement of the European project, the free movement of people. This would have a negative impact on the internal policy of the Member States (Niemann and Speyer 2018, 31). As far as the supranational activism is concerned, it was the Commission's European Agenda on Migration that outlined immediate steps to tackle the crisis along with medium-term reform of the Dublin system. The Commission's plan for a permanent refugee relocation mechanism was rejected, but supranational cooperation was upgraded for managing flows and monitoring borders (Hooghe and Marks 2019). Similarly, even in the case of the EU-Turkey deal, an extensive involvement from the Commission on the main issues of funding, visa liberalization, and the re-energizing of accession was ultimately required (Meets and Beach 2020).

As far as the rise of the extremist parties in Europe is concerned, post- functionalism highlights identity politics (Börzel and Risse 2018; Hoogh and Marks 2019). Börzel and Risse (2017, 20) assert that '[t]he influx of migrants and refugees changed identity politics, since populist forces framed the Schengen crisis in terms of "us" vs "them" and propagated an exclusionary "fortress Europe"'. For Kuhn (2019, 1221), '[t]his conflict about European integration, and relatedly, immigration, increasingly structures European and domestic politics in general'. Thus, the rising support for xenophobic parties made it even more difficult for national governments to harbor culturally dissimilar people and transfer power to supranational institutions to work on common European solutions. Hence, helping millions of refugees from Syria or other conflict zones intensified social cleavage in European societies and challenged European solidarity. Nationalist challengers across Europe impelled governments in re-imposing border controls in Germany, Austria, Sweden, France and Denmark. Three other countries – Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic – even breached EU law by failing to take in their share of asylum seekers. Even today, they oppose the EU's new migration pact. As a result, the increase of Euroscepticism seems to have diminished the EU's margin of action to collectively respond to crises.

Conclusions

The Syrian drama and the exodus it provoked occurred at a time when the EU was already facing a set of massive challenges, financial instability, Brexit uncertainties, the rise of extremist populist parties within numerous EU Member States, along with regional conflicts, and a persistent threat from terrorism. All in all, the EU has taken some important steps towards managing the refugee and migration test, by strengthening its institutions and tools and by introducing some new concepts, such as the hotspot approach. However, supranational institutions have not gained autonomous decision-making powers, which could allow them to reduce intergovernmental conflict and transnational pressures. Instead, the EU focused on externalization to overcome the Schengen crisis, revealing once again the limits of its commitment to act as a political union capable of offering strong common solutions.

The EU has offered crucial humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside the country, imposing restrictive measures, such as sanctions and undermining the Assad regime. However, this strategy has not proven to be sufficient, with the Union not having played a decisive role in resolving the conflict to date. The paradox is that the EU deals with a substantial part of the refugee crisis, having assumed most of the humanitarian costs, suffering from growing extremism, besides being threatened by terrorism and instability. Yet, it has not been able to resolve the conflict that creates these problems. In addition, the lack of a common stance towards the crisis by the Member States and the complexity of the EU policies themselves, all diminish the value of the EU as a trustworthy regional and global player.

Ultimately, all European responses, in terms of common policy and policies, touch on the very essence of the European integration debate. Should the EU advance in a more integrated way as a political union, or should it continue working as a platform of cooperation and integration *a la carte?* The EU needs to internally set up a genuinely integrated asylum system and better coordinate migration policy, while also externally coordinating a coherent and credible CFSP and a CSDP. For this to be achieved, deficits in solidarity among Member States must be addressed, and decisions over the future integration model of the EU should be made. If this does not happen, the EU will remain vulnerable to crisis.

Today's key security challenges such as demography, climate change, human rights and pandemics all have an impact on EU policy and policies. Member States should address those questions in a coordinated manner and not in isolation. In the same way, further integration and not disunity is the key to confronting the refugee crisis as well as the Syrian Civil War. It is basically a matter of security. After all, there is nothing new in that a correlation among crisis, security, and integration has been at the heart of the European project since its genesis.

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