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The influence of the 2015 migration crisis on European integration with a specific focus on Italy,
Greece, Spain, and the United Kingdom

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Executive Summary:

The 2015 Migrant Crisis was one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the 21st century and an important part of the history of European integration. In this paper, I analyzed the public opinion and media over 4 member states of the EU during the crisis. While Italian, Greek and Spanish public opinion and media strongly supported the migrants while criticizing the EU's lack of leadership, the British media used its position to vilify migrants and criticize many elements of EU's migration policy. Italy, Greece and Spain followed EU plans and worked together with member states. Nationalistic tendencies also increased in all four case studies however they were only exploited in the case of the UK. This raises an important issue within the EU surrounding nationalism.

The 2015 Migration crisis is one of the three most influential political crises in recent European history alongside Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people believed that the lack of unity during the crisis was the first step toward the disintegration of the Union. In this essay, I will be looking at the perspectives of the three most affected countries during the crisis, namely Italy, Greece, Spain and the UK. For this essay, I have researched the public opinion in these four states to analyze the support for EU integration. I have also looked at the EU policy during the crisis. From this information, we can see how the EU's policy and the crisis in general affected public support in these countries and therefore how it affected integration. I will also look at the effect that the crisis had on the economic aspects of the EU. The migration crisis is not over, only less. There are still people fighting for their lives to cross over into Europe. Therefore it is important to understand both how and why these countries reacted in the ways that they did. From this, we can understand the fundamental problems with the EU's migration policy and how to solve these problems before the number of refugees increases substantially. With the case study of the United Kingdom in particular we can see whether or not the crisis or the lack of EU support was a main driver in the Brexit negotiation and hopefully by the end we can further understand the steps that need to be taken to better EU migration policy for the future. Finally, I also analysed the nationalistic tendencies and the effect that they could have on the European Union and further integration attempts moving forward.

European Union

Most countries of the European Union are in need of migration to continue growing as states. Birth rates have been declining in recent years and migrants allow EU countries to continue to grow. However, the EU migration policy in 2015 was very limited and inefficient. They were based on the Dublin I & II regulations which significantly and unfairly hurt the border nations of the EU such as Italy, Greece and Spain while landlocked states such as Hungary and Luxembourg remain largely unaffected. One of the main steps towards European integration is the establishment of a fully operational migration policy. Originally created in 1990, the goal of the regulation was to stop migrants from applying for asylum in multiple EU states at the same time and then use the Schengen rules to move to their preferred country. Therefore you must apply for asylum in the first EU country you enter and you may not reapply in a different state. This system disproportionately affects the states with the largest borders to foreign countries. In the case of the 2015 Migrant crisis, this system heavily affected Italy, Greece and Spain. These three states have also pushed for a more fair migration policy. On the other hand, states such as Poland, Slovakia and Hungary have opposed any changes to the Dublin regulations which causes more divisions within the EU (Brekke 2014). The Dublin regulation allows states to send asylum seekers back to their country of origin if the application is denied. However, the European Court of Justice has forbidden EU states to follow this part of the regulation as it is in contention with European human rights law (Fullerton 2016). The European Union kept migration out of the free

movement of people and simultaneously pushed the topic towards Frontex, the EU external border service. Frontex was severely understaffed and underprepared for this crisis which led to a further lack of trust in EU institutions as they could not prepare for this crisis (Kalkman, 2020). Although initially slow in its response, the EU did create new initiatives and plans to support both the refugees and member states. The European Union proposed a reform to the Dublin regulations which although eventually futile due to excessive legal pushbacks, did manage to resettle a large proportion of refugees. By 2016 the EU also increased funding for Frontex to allow it to adequately deal with future crises. The EU also signed an agreement with Turkey where in return for financial aid, Turkey would host the majority of refugees attempting to enter the EU.

Italy

In the late 20th century, Italy was very welcoming of immigrants and refugees. However, since 2002 Italy has had a more restrictive immigration policy which was established by the Berlusconi government. However, the main turning points came between 2011 and 2013 with the Arab Spring and the sinking of a ship outside Lampedusa with 366 casualties. Public opinion swayed towards helping refugees and migrants who were crossing the Mediterranean. Operation Mare Nostrum was launched with the goal of rescuing migrants. When the 2015 Migrant Crisis gained momentum, Italy was at the forefront of both accepting and rescuing migrants. Public opinion however started to sway against the migrants as more and more of Italy's resources were spent. There was, and still is, a fierce public debate surrounding the EU's response to this crisis. The Italian government requested reforms to the Dublin regulation which oversees the European asylum system and further funding from the EU as Italy and Greece needed more resources to document and save all of the migrants. As already mentioned above, the EU has difficulties establishing a common migration policy which caused Italy to suffer throughout the crisis. Luckily the EU eventually did provide assistance which improved public opinion somewhat however the low level of relocation from Italy and postponements of the reformation of the Dublin regulation kept public opinion low.

Another major change came when the picture of the child lying dead on the beach was seen around the world. There was a massive increase in humanitarian support and Germany alongside other major European countries changed to a humanitarian policy. This change however created more divides within the EU. Italy however stayed true to EU beliefs and continued to follow EU regulations. They also denounced the building of fences in member states. They kept supporting the Schengen Area which had also been called into question at this point in the crisis. The Italian government and media kept working with member states to keep EU values and protect migrants. They focused on efforts with France and Austria as they were the main targets for refugees.

Although the Italian government remained true to the EU values, public opinion in the country started favouring disintegration as they saw the EU as both incompetent in handling the crisis

and simultaneously pushing the crisis onto Italy. They were called the “refugee camp of Europe”. Not only is this negative rhetoric hurting EU integration policies, but it is also increasing nationalistic ideologies. These nationalistic tendencies became more prevalent in the Italian government. However as the EU’s policies became more efficient and the crisis started to wane, Italian support for the EU grew with increased funding for refugee camps and Italian military operations like Mare Nostrum.

Greece

Greece has always acted as an entry gate into Europe due to its geographical position. This was especially the case during the Migrant Crisis. Furthermore, Greece was and still is facing a financial crisis which hindered its ability to adequately deal with the crisis. The financial crisis has already played a large part in the negative public opinion of the EU in Greece. The inherent gaps in the Eurozone and the unfair “rescue packages” have caused a large amount of poverty for Greek citizens (Barlai, 2017). Before the crisis even started there was a general feeling of distaste in EU policy although it was still very dependent on the EU.

Similarly to the Italians in the 20th Century, Greeks are very pro-migration as they themselves emigrated during the Second World War and the Civil War. This humanism helped during the crisis to support the refugees. However, nationalism was still on the rise in Greece until 2013. An activist was murdered by a member of the far-right party which broke the support for the party and the pro-migrant policies of Greece returned.

During the crisis, the main focus of the Greek media was to focus on the economic aspect. This included the influence that the EU would have on assisting Greece and how the new influx of migrants would affect the Greek labour market. As 600 refugees were arriving in Greece every day, the main humanitarian aid was being offered by locals and volunteers as there was no organized EU response (Skleparis, 2016). Foreigners were underrepresented in the media and migrants were visualized as a threat instead of victims (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012).

Spain

Spain has an interesting relationship with migration. In 2010, there were close to 5 million foreigners living in Spain and the first asylum policy was incorporated into their 1978 constitution (Barlai, 2017). Public opinion within Spain before the crisis was highly in favour of migrants however the media represented the exact opposite (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012). After the sinking at Lampedusa, the media changed approaches to align with public opinion and showed migrants as victims instead of threats. Furthermore, Spanish newspapers used refugees as their main sources to give them a voice. They did put the blame on a lack of EU leadership during the crisis. However as they had less refugees than Italy and Greece, they were still supporting EU policies throughout the crisis.

United Kingdom

Immigration has been a contentious topic within British politics throughout history. This rhetoric continued during the 2015 crisis. A large focus was put on both UK and EU policy during the crisis and about the refugee camp at Calais. The Calais camp was a major refugee camp where refugees lived until they could find a way into the UK. The British government however, stayed true to the Dublin regulations and stated that these refugees had already passed through many EU countries where they should've applied for asylum. (Barlai, 2017). In August of 2015, an EU plan was developed to introduce a mandatory quota for each EU member state. Then prime minister David Cameron rejected this plan and instead increased funding to stop the crises in Syria and Somalia. This was badly received by the British public who forced the prime minister to accept 20,000 refugees over a 5 year time period. The British government further reduced benefits for asylum seekers by 30% and increased inspections for companies who hired illegal immigrants. This shows a high level of distrust in the refugees which aligned with Hungarian and Polish policies during the crisis. Euroscepticism became rampant throughout this period which is one of the underlying factors which led to the infamous 2016 Brexit vote. The British government had a clear goal of securing its borders which was highlighted by a statement in 2016:

“The ECHR can bind the hands of parliament, adds nothing to our prosperity, makes us less secure by preventing the deportation of dangerous foreign nationals—and does nothing to change the attitudes of governments like Russia’s when it comes to human rights . . . it isn’t the EU we should leave but the ECHR and the jurisdiction of its court.” (Outhwaite, 2019).

The UK had issues with the EU’s attempts to reform the Dublin regulations and with the rulings of the ECHR surrounding the Migration Crisis. The British government and parts of the public saw the advantages in remaining with the EU but public opinion swayed out of favour which in part caused Brexit. Although there were attempts to rebrand migrants as refugees and victims, these efforts were fruitless. The prime minister referred to the migrants as “a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean” (Barlai, 2017, pp. 345). Unlike the previous three case studies, the media surrounding the crisis was incredibly dehumanizing and rude against the migrants which played a role in the public opinion surrounding them. There was a large focus on the economic aspects as well highlighting the fact that refugees would “steal our jobs” and hurt the British economy which had no basis.

The Economic Aspects of the Crisis

Most of the focus of the migration crisis covered the impact it had on the free movement of people, however, the economic aspect is equally important. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the fiscal cost of asylum seekers increased by 0.05-0.3% of the national GDP of each state. This was somewhat proportional to the number of refugees each state had to deal with. For example, the cost for Italy increased from 0.17 to 0.24 and Austria's increased from 0.08 to 0.31 between 2014 and 2016 (Borowicz, 2017). As the fiscal costs increased, states considered reducing payment to the EU Cohesion Fund as they did not see an adequate response from the EU.

The European Commission estimated that the 3 million new migrants would only increase the bloc's GDP by about 0.25% (Calamur, 2015). This would show that the migrants would somewhat hurt the economy as the increase is so low however the benefits come from the ever ageing and decreasing European population. As birth rates lower, there is a need for migration. The Commission also created an emergency fund to address the crises in the Middle East and North Africa with a total fund of 1.8 billion euros. (Barnato 2015).

Democratic deficit and EU disintegration

Although public opinion was in favour of migrants in three out of the four cases, we can see that there was a general trend increasing the nationalistic tendencies in countries across the Union. These nationalistic tendencies go hand in hand with euroscepticism and could lead to the downfall of the European Union. A lack of strong EU leadership or support during a crisis leads people to believe that the EU's disadvantages outweigh their advantages (Scuira, 2017). The only true way to beat this nationalism would be to create a new European identity, however the national identities are currently too strong and whenever the EU is weak, nationalistic politicians will exploit this identity (Fligstein, Polyakova & Sandholtz, 2012).

This is especially evident in the United Kingdom, where the UK Independence Party (UKIP) used the lack of leadership within the EU alongside the migration crisis to push for a referendum on leaving the EU. Their main slogans used nationalism and euroscepticism to sway a majority of the population who were not fully informed on the matter. This is the power that the media can hold over a state. The EU must be especially careful moving forward. The reason this is so powerful is because the EU is a slow moving organization which does not have the legislative power to efficiently deal with a crisis. Furthermore, they need approval from a majority of member states who all have different opinions and methods. Therefore if one state is in trouble, the nationalistic groups will use this advantage to claim the inefficiency of the EU. There is no easy solution to this problem but governments need to realize from this crisis that although slow, the EU does provide assistance.

Conclusion

The 2015 Migrant Crisis is one in a long list of crises faced by the EU but it is not over yet. There are still migrants and refugees entering the EU on a daily basis. In this paper I analyzed the public opinion of four states during this period.

Italy had a relatively pro-migrant opinion leading up to the crisis especially with the sinking at Lampedusa. However there was a distinct lack of support or leadership by the EU which led public opinion to sway against the EU at this time. The Italian government however remained true to European norms and actively fought against attempts to close the borders and disregard EU plans. They lobbied for change to the inconsistent and unfair Dublin regulations and eventually public opinion swayed back in favour of the EU.

Greece was one of the worst affected countries during the crisis as they were the main entry into the EU. There was already a high level of euroscepticism within the country due to the ongoing economic crisis within Greece. Due to the unequal economic policies from the EU, Greece was in a bad shape and then had to take care of the majority of refugees. Despite all of this, public opinion was pro-migrant due to the historical background of Greece and when the EU eventually increased funding, public opinion pushed slightly towards the EU. However this increase is minor as the financial crisis is still ongoing so it is hard to tell how much influence the migration crisis truly had on the Greek opinion of European integration.

Similarly to the previous two cases, Spain also has a good public opinion on migration, due to a large proportion of the population being foreign born. Before the crisis hit, the media in Spain was the polar opposite of the public opinion in the country. Migrants were treated like threats instead of victims. However after the incident at Lampedusa, the media changed its pace and started following the public opinion and supporting migration. They even used migrants as sources in some of their pieces. Spain was less affected than Italy and Greece by migrants and therefore it had a more positive opinion of the EU.

Finally, the United Kingdom had a completely different policy throughout the crisis. The public opinion was already split on the topic of migration due to cultural and historical precedents however the media and governments took a very clear side. Their policy was very anti-migrant by refusing EU requests and barely accepting refugees. Furthermore, the British prime minister used aggressive language to hurt humanitarian efforts. This negative trend in the media was used by nationalist parties in the UK to push for the Brexit vote.

To conclude, from the case studies we can see that the lack of leadership and a coherent plan by the European Union caused rifts in every single country. However, some member states still saw the benefits of the EU and after a period of time saw that the EU gained a coherent plan and increased funding to support refugees. We can also see that the media played a very big role in both the refugee crisis and for European integration in general. Although the economic effects were prevalent, the humanitarian aspect of this crisis took precedent with member states except for the United Kingdom. From this paper we can conclude that the migration crisis played a definitive role in European integration and if the EU does not manage to maintain its leadership role, more countries will follow the path of the UK.

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