

# *Analysis of European Refugee Crisis from the Perspective of Intergovernmentalism Theory——with Refugee Quota System as an Example*

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**Abstract:** Although supranational institutions of EU are playing an increasingly important role, intergovernmentalism still dominates many issues. This paper takes refugee quota system as the entry point of European refugee crisis research and explores the causes of European integration difficulty through the intergovernmentalism theory. Since the refugee crisis destroyed CEAS and European integration process, EU formulated the refugee quota system under the leadership of Germany and other supportive countries. However, the Visegrad Group voted against refugee quota system for the sake of national interest and refused to implement the plan assigned by EU. Refugee quota system encountered trouble during the two-year implementation, which resulted in irreconcilable conflicts between the EU and its members, ending up in the final compromise of the supranational institutions.

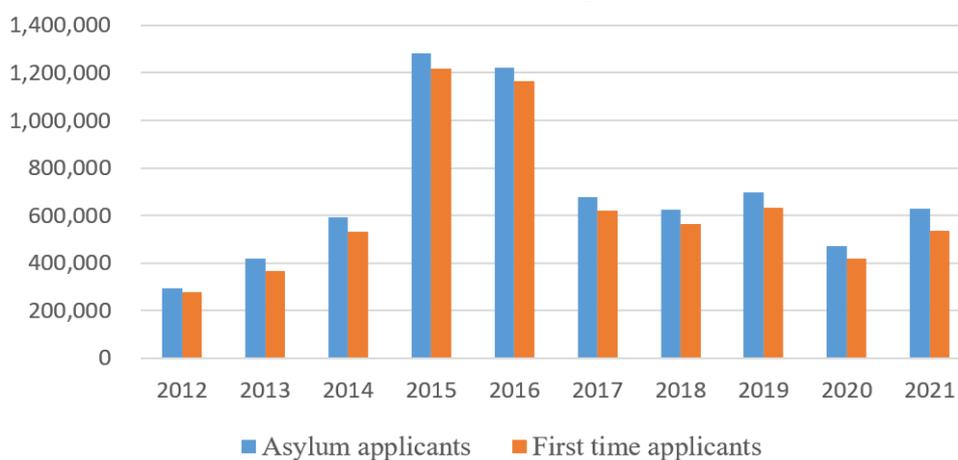
## 1. Introduction

The refugee issue is closely associated with the 2030 Agenda, which promises to leave no one behind is pivotal for the inclusion of refugees, IDPs and stateless persons in regular development planning. Refugees and IDP are specifically mentioned in the 2030 Declaration, which forms part of the overall 2030 Agenda. It is important to underline that the new SDG indicator on refugees was set under Target 10.7 (facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies) in 2019, which demonstrated the broader policy recognition of the need for developmental intervention to solve refugee crises.

As the refugee was included under the goals, regional mechanisms and frameworks that are coordinating national positions are important avenues to advocate for the inclusion of displaced and stateless persons' needs. to ensure the advocacy workable, country offices should ensure that regional platforms, like EU, engage in the development of national action plans.

The European refugee crisis in 2015 brought the largest scale of population mobility since World War II. According to the data of Eurostat, the number of asylum applicants in EU has been on the rise since 2012 and reached the top in 2015, with around 1.25 million first asylum applicants alone. The

number began to fall back in 2016 due to relatively strict refugee policies, but the influx of asylum-seekers since 2015 was still at a huge scale. The "Country of First Arrival" and the "Safe Third Country" are institutional innovations developed by EU unifying its own actual situation and constitute the cornerstone of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) based on the Dublin System. However, CEAS operating in the EU system for more than 20 years unfortunately failed in this crisis, and EU members chose not to abide by the two principles one after another. Therefore, EU urgently needed to establish an alternative of CEAS to cope with the crisis, as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Asylum and first time asylum applicants of EU—annual aggregated data (rounded)*

In 2015, European Commission announced official refugee quota plans, which not only clarified the role that EU supranational institutions should play during the policy implementation, but distributed asylum-seekers to EU countries. However, refugee quota system involved too many actors to coordinate the interests of all parties. When the document was due in September, 2017, only 27,695 asylum-seekers have been resettled, just 17.3% of the target within two years, showing the policy's failure to deal with refugee crisis.

As one of the most important products of refugee crisis, the deep study on refugee quota system could provide a reference for other international institutions to deal with members relations. Therefore, this paper will take the refugee quota system as the entry point of refugee crisis research, explore the causes of European integration problem from the perspective of intergovernmentalism, and analyse the decision-making of international actors under the crisis, from two angles of the divided opinions before and fragmented action after the policy implementation.

## 2. Intergovernmentalism Theory

From 1960s, intergovernmentalism has inherited a great deal of realistic tradition and gradually emerged as the main rival of neo-functionalism in European integration theories. Intergovernmentalism generally explains a political dynamic in which key decisions are made as a result of negotiations among representatives of the member states of an IGO. As for Europe, it considers the EU primarily as a forum within which EU countries negotiate in an attempt to achieve a consensus, and where all decisions are taken by representatives of member states.

The main purpose of member states is to protect their national interests during the negotiation process, such as security and sovereignty. Then, if without consensus, deep integration will be limited by the reluctance of countries to provide the measures needed for integration for central institutions. These are key points to explain the difficulties in implementing refugee quota system in the context of European refugee crisis. As it was difficult for member states to reach an agreement on this policy, the development of European integration was quite restricted.

### 3. Casting a Vote: Divided Opinions

In fact, the trouble of refugee quota system began even in the voting and negotiation period in EU level, not just in the final failure in 2017. In May 2015, European Migration Agenda led by the European Commission stressed the necessity for all member states to corporately accept asylum-seekers and formed a temporary plan to resettle 40,000 asylum-seekers in Italy and Greece.

In September, 2015, the EU adjusted the target number of the agenda and made more specific demands on member states: EU members were bound to resettle about 120,000 asylum seekers from Italy, Greece and Hungary over two years. Countries would be given €6,000 for each refugee taken in, while Italy, Greece and Hungary would receive €500 per person to cover the cost of transfer.

This policy was adopted at EU conference of home affairs ministers. Considering EU solidarity, it was voted on by qualified majority voting (QMV): 55% of member states vote in favour and the proposal is supported by member states representing at least 65% of the total EU population. Finally, despite of resistance of the Visegrad Group: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania against it and Poland also opposing it later, the overwhelming majority of EU countries voted in favour of the allocation pushed by Germany and France shown below.

Quota allocation indicators involved population number and GDP to reflect the absolute wealth and population size of a country. With UK, Denmark and Ireland opt-out and Italy, Greece and Hungary responsible for refugee transfer, the whole quota of other 22 countries added up to 100%. Although the quota system was approved in the end, opposition from any country could cast a shadow over the policy that required all member states to act together, as shown in Figure 2.

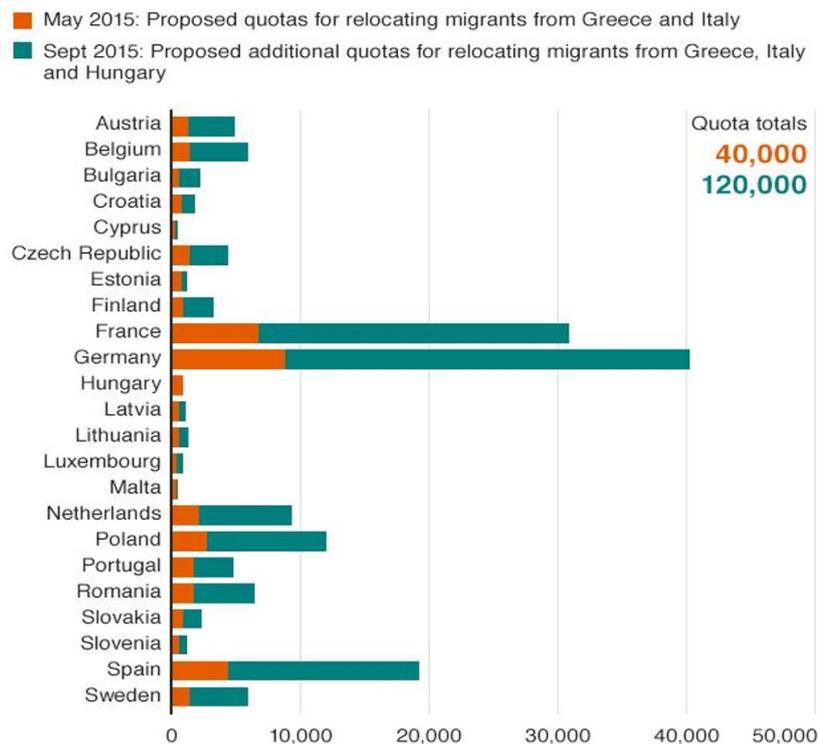


Figure 2: Number of migrants EU countries are being asked to take

It could be seen from the voting that member states split into two groups over the issue. On one side were supranational institution supporting the policy, led by Germany and France, and on the other were countries opposing it, led by the Visegrad Group. On the one hand, Germany and most countries were strongholds of refugee quota system. When the refugee quota plan was announced on September 9, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said it was an important step for integration.

Actually, the quota system was very similar to German domestic refugee resettlement policy, Konischstein resolution, to deal with negative population growth and make up the labour gap. In addition to Germany, countries including France in favour of European integration, Sweden with more than 10 years of refugee reception and Spain under the pressure of domestic opposition party have expressed support for quota system as well.

On the other hand, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania voted against the system, which was reflected in their domestic policies. It was obvious that countries accepting the larger proportion of the quota needed to sacrifice more sovereignty. However, Hungary as the beneficiary country didn't need to settle down refugees by losing sovereignty but only to transfer them abroad, so its opposition was more about domestic situation, which could also be reflected in other countries of the Visegrad Group. Hungary was the country affected most by crisis and its domestic policy was extremely radical among the Visegrad Group. In fact, Hungary was the first European country for asylum-seekers to enter by land and undertook great pressure from the large number across the border, although it was usually not the final destination. Under the Dublin Regulations, as the first entry country, Hungarian government was responsible for the registration, food and shelter of refugees during their stay. These jobs requiring a lot of human and material resources were a great burden for this relatively poor country. In order to reduce the impact of crisis, Hungarian government took strict control measures and was echoed and followed by other countries of Visegrad Group with similar situation, which contributed to their unified opposition at the EU level, as shown in Figure 3.

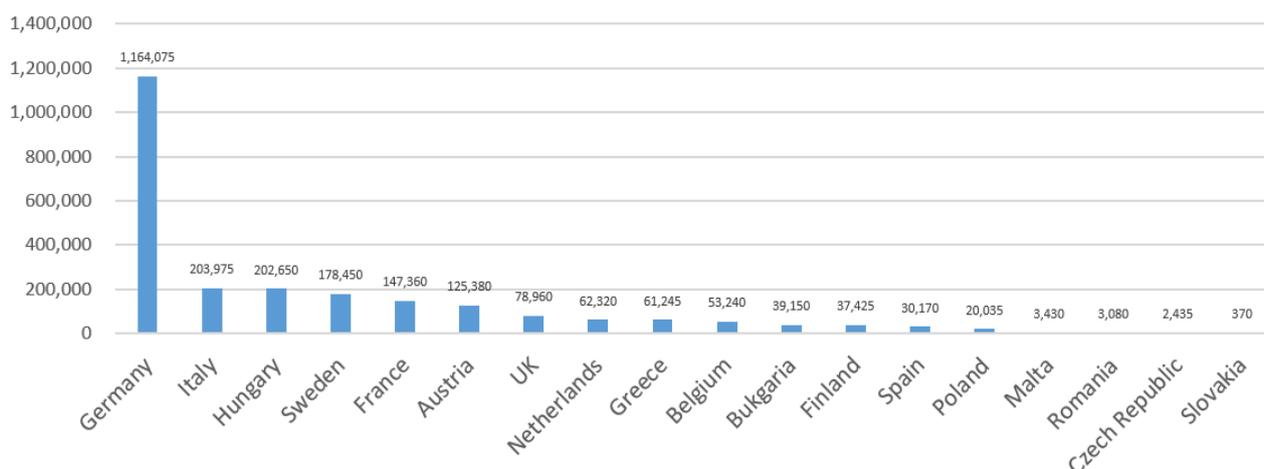


Figure 3: First time asylum applicants of some EU members in 2015 and 2016

#### 4. Implementing the Policy: Fragmented Actions

Intergovernmentalism revealing the attitudes of various countries was embodied in the policy implementation. The Lisbon Treaty stipulated that member states had absolute autonomy on asylum issues, and European integration rules were more about supplement. It was obvious that what EU could do on asylum was limited to policy formulation, and member states could act independently and separately in the implementation process. Refugee quota system required member states to actively transfer and settle refugees, which was contrary to the negative refugee policy pursued by opposing countries. And due to the important role of opposing countries in the policy implementation, their refusal to act led the quota system into difficulties.

First, the opposing countries refused to open border to asylum-seekers. These countries were on the route heading toward north Europe and their border closing and checks not only prevented refugees returning, but also blocked the north passage. Due to Hungary border control, many refugees chose to move around Italy and Greece and increased the pressure of the two countries. As a result,

it greatly reduced the efficiency of refugee acceptance in Western European and Scandinavian countries and the whole refugee resettlement couldn't be completed in time.

Second, despite accepting some refugees, the opposing countries took a negative attitude on registering them. 54,000 of those in need of resettlement were stranded in Hungary for a long time. According to regulations mentioned above, these refugees needed to be registered and vetted by local government before leaving for other countries. However, Hungarian government seriously delayed the process of refugee registration and departure. As a result, the refugees in Hungary could not legally enter other countries and the overall process was seriously influenced.

Finally, due to Visegrad Group's resistance to implement, only 17.3% refugees of the total quota were resettled by September, 2017. From 2015 to 2017, Slovakia and the Czech Republic respectively took in only 16 and 12 refugees, far from their allocation of 1,502 and 2,978, with Poland settling none of the 9,287 refugees. Whereas, Italy and Greece, as the border countries neither big nor powerful, were under extreme pressure far more than their capacity and accommodated a total of 200,000 refugees in 2017 alone. This contrast testified to the EU's failure to tackle the refugee crisis as a whole.

It can be seen that the opposing countries were important parts of the policy implementation, but the contradiction between the EU and member states has contributed to the final failure. In front of the strong opposition and difficulties in implementation, EU announced in 2018 that it would stop implementing the mandatory refugee quota system and member states could resettle refugees according to their actual conditions and willingness. In the EU asylum system reform negotiations in January 2018, the establishment of a long-term mechanism for resettlement was still difficult, as there was disagreement over the refugee distribution system. Refugee resettlement was still a major problem for the EU to manage the refugee issue even today with the Ukraine refugee influx in 2022.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the refugee crisis has destroyed CEAS, and European integration process has suffered a setback in the face of the raging difficulties. In order to ease the pressure of the front-line countries, EU developed the refugee quota system with support of Germany and other members. However, central and eastern European countries showed opposition to the policy: before the policy implementation, Visegrad Group voted against the system; during the policy implementation, Visegrad countries practiced negative refugee policies based on their actual situations. There was an irreconcilable contradiction between the national interests and the arrangement of the EU, so they refused the refugee quota assigned to them and put national interests first. The final decision in 2018 in effect marked a concession of EU to the member states led by the Visegrad group. By exploring the intergovernmental elements of the refugee quota difficulties, this paper provides us with a better understanding of the key issues in European refugee crisis and a reference for practicable solutions.

For a long time, supranationalism and intergovernmentalism have been engaged in a fierce confrontation during European integration. As an important theory of European integration, intergovernmentalism emphasizes that the EU should take national interests as the key factor to understand the integration. Although theoretical considerations attest supranationalism to be more inclusive and responsive to global governance, the analysis of this article shows that crisis management is still performed as the main responsibility of states, as proclaimed by realists, and that the supranationalism has not managed to produce collective, cooperative and integration effects. Considering various interests, all member states have taken a more cautious view of the refugee issue. EU seems to act less as leaders in crisis management and more as mediators who facilitate the information exchange, expertise and resource supplies.

In this context, it is difficult to ask member states to make policy arrangements from an integral

European perspective, which makes the EU refugee policy face the lack of legitimacy and weakens the EU cohesion. For EU, the severity of the crisis and the urgent needs of member states have pushed for more practical policy adjustments and deeper institutional reforms. Certainly, the refugee crisis has brought many security and social problems to Europe, showing divided opinions and fragmented actions among member states on refugee issue. However, as history shows, crisis management is a valuable opportunity for deepening and reforming integration, it is especially true for today's European situation with constant refugee influx from various places.

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