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Europe's immigration divide: multidimensional responsibility-sharing as a solution?

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ABSTRACT

Immigration poses a fundamental challenge for the European Union, with deep political divisions complicating efforts to achieve effective collective governance. One proposed response is multidimensional responsibility-sharing, in which member states engage in European migration governance through different types of contributions aligned with their capacities and preferences. To what extent can such an approach overcome Europe's divide on immigration and mobilise public support? Drawing on original survey data from six EU member states, we assess the potential for multidimensional responsibility-sharing by first mapping citizens' evaluations of different contribution types and, second, analysing whether these preferences reflect countries' positions in the migration regime or individual ideological orientations. Our findings show broad support for responsibility-sharing and clear differentiation between contribution types: refugee relocation is least preferred, whereas financial contributions and joint border control are more widely accepted. Preference patterns, however, are remarkably consistent across member states and driven primarily by ideology rather than structural characteristics of national contexts. Consequently, the scope for complementary national specialisation in European migration governance is limited. While multidimensional responsibility-sharing may facilitate political adoption of a common policy, it provides limited practical leverage for overcoming Europe's divide on actual contributions to European migration governance.

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Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the deepest fault lines within the European Union (EU) – so much so that, as Josep Borrell, the EU’s top diplomat, warned in September 2023, it could become a dissolving force.¹ Central to this tension is the persistent challenge of establishing effective responsibility-sharing among member states. Against a backdrop of politicisation and radical-right electoral gains, EU institutions have faced growing pressure to demonstrate effective action. In 2024, this culminated in the adoption of the ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, a comprehensive legislative reform of European migration governance. The Pact includes a solidarity mechanism that allows member states to contribute to responsibility-sharing in various forms, including financial and logistical support, based on the principle of ‘mandatory but flexible solidarity’ (Caballero-Vélez, 2025). The success of this approach will ultimately depend on sufficient backing from both national governments and the European public to ensure effective implementation. A crucial question, therefore, is whether this approach of multidimensional responsibility-sharing can succeed in accommodating diverse public preferences and mobilising broad support for European cooperation.

This article studies this question by examining the structure of public preferences on European responsibility-sharing. Public opinion matters for three main reasons. First, it constitutes a feasibility constraint: policy-makers are wary of securing public support, especially on salient and sensitive issues like migration (Burstein, 2003; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Ruhs, 2022) – and indeed, government positions typically align with public attitudes on these policies (Wasserfallen & Woeffray, 2025). Second, in democratic systems, responsiveness to citizens is a core principle of legitimacy. Responsibility-sharing mechanisms that diverge from public opinion risk being perceived as technocratic impositions, undermining both public trust and practical policy implementation. Third, analysing public preferences reveals the structure of the political conflict, helping identify the potential support coalitions for different models of responsibility-sharing.

Scholars began only recently to examine citizens’ views and preferences on international migration governance (Basile & Olmastroni, 2020; Cappelen *et al.*, 2023; Conti *et al.*, 2019; Erisen *et al.*, 2020; Heizmann & Ziller, 2020; Jeannet *et al.*, 2021; Kriesi *et al.*, 2024; Letki *et al.*, 2024; Wasserfallen & Woeffray, 2025). These studies examined the drivers of citizens’ support for, and preferred design of, a common EU policy. In particular, they have established that the European public seems to generally support the principle of fair and equitable responsibility-sharing (Bansak *et al.*, 2017; Gerhards *et al.*, 2018). However, this approach focusing on a uniform binding agreement neglects that European migration governance is largely based on

discretionary contributions by member states – precisely the policy choices that are most sensitive to public opinion. Focusing instead on responsibility-sharing where states make different contributions not only corresponds to actual policy-making but also allows us to investigate to what extent differentiating member states' contributions might help mitigate the deep divisions surrounding the issue.

This study aims for three contributions. First, it discusses the idea of multidimensional responsibility-sharing in migration governance for advancing cooperation and solidarity between EU member states. We outline how a logic of shared but differentiated responsibilities (see Lutz *et al.*, 2021; Thielemann, 2018) may potentially bridge the political divide on immigration in Europe by offering an efficient, flexible, and targeted approach to responsibility-sharing, and identify the conditions and challenges of implementing such a model. Second, we identify different dimensions through which member states can contribute to shared responsibility based on the policy field, the level of governance, and the mode of contribution. This conceptualisation is then employed to measure public preferences on European migration governance in a population survey conducted across six member states (Denmark, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, and Hungary). Third, we present descriptive and explanatory analyses, mapping the structure of public preferences and examining the influence of structural contexts and individual ideological orientations. The article concludes by discussing the potential of multidimensional responsibility-sharing and the resulting implications for policy-making.

The problem of responsibility-sharing in the EU

The idea of responsibility-sharing is as old as the international refugee regime itself. Already, the Geneva Convention recognised that the admission of refugees 'may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries' and that refugee protection 'cannot therefore be achieved without international co-operation' (United Nations, 1951). Despite recurring calls for solidarity, international cooperation in this area has remained limited, and asylum seekers and refugees continue to be distributed highly asymmetrically across host countries.

In Europe, the abolition of internal border controls within the Schengen area to allow for free movement incentivised member states to elaborate joint rules to manage irregular migration and process asylum requests. This led to the creation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Central to this framework is the Dublin Regulation, which assigns responsibility for processing asylum claims, typically to the state of first entry. This system of responsibility-allocation has been criticised for exacerbating existing imbalances in the costs of enforcing EU migration rules, especially to the detriment of frontline states in the European south (Bauböck, 2018). As a

result, additional relocation efforts were undertaken in times of crisis to mitigate asymmetries within the EU. In parallel, financial resources were provided to member states under strain, through the European Union Asylum Agency and other European funds. In the area of migration control, we also observe a pooling of resources with the Frontex border and coast guard agency and joint efforts to establish cooperation with third countries (Vaagland & Zaun, 2025). Overall, however, the EU is conceived to have failed both in ensuring effective border protection and in establishing a fair allocation of protection duties. Compliance with existing rules remains weak, and reform efforts are frequently blocked by diverging national interests (Zaun, 2018).

For a long time, the different responsibility-sharing instruments were not used as part of a broader, multidimensional policy framework. While financial and operational support existed, EU policy debates prioritised a single dimension – relocating asylum seekers – as the core expression of solidarity. The introduction of the domestically contested mandatory relocation quotas in September 2015 led to infringement cases against Hungary, Poland and Czechia for non-compliance with the relocation decisions. The Visegrad countries were particularly vocal critics of mandatory admission quotas and have advocated for a ‘flexible solidarity’ model that would allow states to support EU migration governance without accepting relocations (Karageorgiou, 2016). Ultimately, this political impasse contributed to the emergence of new forms of flexibility in responsibility-sharing (Caballero-Vélez, 2025). In April 2024, this idea gained institutional form with the ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, which includes, instead of mandatory admission quotas, a more flexible system of multidimensional contributions. Thereby, member states are required to contribute to solidarity efforts, but are free to choose the form of their contribution – whether through relocation, financial support, personnel deployment, or capacity-building initiatives.

This turn toward flexibility and compensation marks a significant policy shift, providing the EU with the instruments and institutional rules for multidimensional responsibility-sharing. The implementation of the Pact is foreseen for mid-2026, but the extent to which member states will honour these commitments remains unclear.² This raises a critical question: Does the new model help to overcome the political divide and mobilise broad support to advance European responsibility-sharing?

Conceptualising multidimensional responsibility-sharing

Responsibility-sharing describes an effort to share the responsibility (and associated costs) for the provision of an international collective good among states. Responsibility-sharing can occur along a single dimension or multiple dimensions – the latter termed ‘multidimensional responsibility-sharing’. This concept implies that states can contribute in various ways to

the collective good of European migration governance (Thielemann & Dewan, 2006). Thereby, contributions in one dimension can compensate or be traded for contributions in another dimension. This can occur through two mechanisms: implicit recognition that states contribute in different but nevertheless equivalent ways, leading to informal trade-offs; or explicit compensation, where states receive formal benefits for disproportionate contributions in one dimension (Thielemann, 2018). The underlying logic in both mechanisms rests on the recognition that collective problems are complex and multifaceted, and that states are heterogeneous in their capacities, constraints, and normative commitments. These conditions make a one-size-fits-all approach (i.e., unidimensional responsibility-sharing) both inefficient and politically fragile.

The multidimensionality of responsibility-sharing could offer several advantages for international cooperation on migration governance. First, it may enhance efficiency and effectiveness by enabling a division of labour that reflects the differing strengths, capacities, and circumstances of states (Chalmers, 2001). Efficiency gains arise when states contribute according to their comparative advantages, allowing more cost-effective resource mobilisation. Effectiveness is enhanced when contributions are targeted to address specific governance challenges. This allows states to contribute meaningfully without exceeding their capacities.

Second, multidimensionality facilitates issue-linkage bargaining, as negotiations can take place across several dimensions simultaneously. This increases the likelihood of agreement by allowing states to trade or compensate one form of contribution for another (Thielemann, 2018). Such arrangements may appeal even to states that would otherwise be reluctant to participate in a responsibility-sharing scheme, thereby expanding the coalition of cooperating actors. It also raises the incentive for long-term commitment, as states are more likely to stay engaged in agreements from which they derive clear and reciprocal benefits (Poast, 2013).

Third, multidimensional responsibility-sharing may be normatively appealing, as it can reconcile different conceptions of distributive fairness. While some actors may prioritise equal shares, others may emphasise capacity-based or merit-based principles. A multidimensional framework can accommodate these diverging perspectives by allowing differentiated responsibilities across different policy dimensions – aligning with the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ (Lutz *et al.*, 2021). This inclusiveness may enhance the perceived legitimacy of responsibility-sharing arrangements and increase the willingness of states to contribute to the collective good and engage in cooperation.

Finally, a multidimensional approach offers states greater flexibility and control over their contributions, making participation more politically feasible. Multidimensionality allows states to contribute in ways that match

their capacities and political constraints. Rather than forcing a one-size-fits-all model, it creates space for tailored commitments, thereby fostering cooperation in a highly politicised policy area, respecting state sovereignty, and preventing negotiation deadlock. By offering different ways to contribute, it may provide a politically acceptable alternative to full differentiated integration, where some states opt out of common policies altogether.

While a multidimensional approach may offer clear advantages in terms of flexibility, efficiency, and fairness, it also entails challenges of its own. These include difficulties in measuring and comparing different types of contributions, the risk of strategic under-contribution or free-riding on other states' contributions, and political disagreements about what constitutes an equivalent or fair trade-off between dimensions. A related concern is ensuring that states provide a minimal necessary contribution in critical dimensions, such as asylum reception, which cannot be substituted without undermining the collective system. Moreover, whether states should be allowed to contribute in various ways to migration governance, and which contributions should be recognised, remains a normatively contested issue (Milazzo, 2023). Indeed, Bauböck (2018) argues that any responsibility-sharing scheme is only justified if states still fulfil their primary duties of non-refoulement and admitting asylum seekers to examine their claims. Linos and Chachko (2022) further caution that a multidimensional contribution scheme may ultimately reduce access to asylum as it could legitimise externalisation measures and other deterrence instruments on a par with refugee protection efforts. Finally, multidimensional responsibility-sharing presupposes that support for European migration governance depends on the type of contribution. As such, it offers little leverage in cases of principled opposition to a shared European responsibility, or to refugee protection as such. When states or citizens firmly favour national solutions and reject the very notion of European solidarity, differentiating the forms of contribution to collective governance is unlikely to alter their preferences.

Realising the model in practice depends on differentiating responsibilities into contributions with distinct preference structures. This requires identifying the functional dimensions along which states can contribute. For the purpose of this study, we focus on three such dimensions in European migration governance: the *policy field*, the *level of governance*, and the *mode of contribution*.³

Regarding the policy field, we distinguish refugee protection and migration control as two objectives of European migration governance. The two differ in the collective goods they provide and how responsibilities and costs are distributed among states. Following previous research, refugee protection provides several tangible public and private benefits, including legitimacy, security, development, and reputation (Lutz & Caballero-Vélez, 2024). However, the costs for providing refugee protection are not borne

equally but fall solely on the admitting countries, fostering the need to share responsibilities (Betts, 2003). Similarly, migration control has been understood as an international public good, as one state's control efforts may have positive or negative effects on other countries depending on whether cooperation or unilateral deterrence is involved (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021).

A second way of classifying state contributions to responsibility-sharing is based on the level of governance at which contributions are made. States may contribute at the European level, for example, by supporting EU-led initiatives aimed at assisting other member states through financial transfers, operational cooperation, or relocation mechanisms. Alternatively, they may act at the international level, by cooperating with third countries – for instance, through resettlement programmes, funding protection efforts abroad, or engaging in external migration control and return arrangements. The governance level thus captures the geographic scope of responsibility-sharing – whether cooperation remains within the EU or extends to third countries and international organisations.

Finally, for the provision of refugee protection, we can further distinguish between three modes of contribution: the sharing of norms, resources, and people (Noll, 2003). Norm-sharing involves national legislation and administrative practices. States with generous asylum standards and admission policies bear greater costs, as they become more attractive destinations and offer more extensive protection. Harmonising these standards redistributes the shared responsibility across states in an equal manner, creating a common normative foundation that underpins the legitimacy, coherence, and sustainability of the protection regime. Responsibility-sharing can also take place through money-sharing, that is, the reallocation of financial resources to correct material imbalances. States may contribute by funding the asylum infrastructure of more affected countries, supporting common EU instruments, or financing refugee protection in third countries. In this way, they help internalise the externalities of an unevenly distributed system and sustain its operational capacity. Finally, people-sharing entails the physical relocation of asylum seekers and refugees between states to achieve a fairer and more equitable distribution of protection responsibilities. Together, these three modes of responsibility-sharing reflect different but complementary contributions that enable states to jointly sustain the collective good of refugee protection.

The European divide on responsibility-sharing

The core promise of multidimensional responsibility-sharing lies in its potential to accommodate heterogeneous preferences and capacities across member states by allowing states to contribute in different forms and across different policy dimensions. Rather than insisting on uniform

contributions, a multidimensional approach offers a more flexible and potentially more politically viable way to distribute responsibilities. However, this potential can only be realised under specific conditions in terms of the nature and structure of the political conflict and public preferences.

First, public support for responsibility-sharing must not only reach a sufficient aggregate level, but also exhibit clear internal differentiation. Individuals should be able to recognise and meaningfully separate the distinct forms that responsibility-sharing can take – across policy fields, governance levels, and contribution modes – rather than evaluating contributions in uniform terms. Only if preferences vary across these dimensions can a multidimensional division of labour unlock additional support. Second, these preferences must be complementary across countries: if all publics share the same preference structure across dimensions, multidimensionality merely reinforces a single dominant logic rather than enabling differentiated contributions. Third, variation in preferences should not be random but align with the countries' structural position in the migration regime and their corresponding capacities and interests. Only then can a politically sustainable division of labour emerge and efficiency gains be realised. Fourth, the institutional design of multidimensional responsibility-sharing must ensure that different contributions are perceived as equivalent and fair, so that differentiation does not undermine solidarity or generate perceptions of responsibility-shirking.

To assess whether public opinion enables such a differentiated yet cohesive model of responsibility-sharing, we need to understand how preferences on different contribution types vary across individuals and countries. Public support may not be uniform across all dimensions – some contributions may garner broader backing than others. In this section, we therefore develop theoretical expectations about who supports what kind of responsibility-sharing. This allows us to identify combinations of contributions that are more or less likely to attract public support and to locate potential obstacles to realising the integrative potential of multidimensionality.

A key assumption underlying these expectations is that citizens support their own country's contributions to responsibility-sharing when they expect others to reciprocate, ensuring fairness among states (see Bansak *et al.*, 2017). Support for specific forms of contribution thus reflects not only evaluations of what one's own country should do, but also expectations about mutual solidarity within the EU. We therefore expect that preferences for one's own country's contributions align with preferences for the design of a European responsibility-sharing scheme.

In this section, we develop descriptive hypotheses about how responsibility-sharing preferences align with countries' structural contexts and individuals' political orientations. These two dimensions speak directly to the conditions under which multidimensional responsibility-sharing can fulfil its

integrative potential. For such a framework to be politically viable, public preferences must not only be differentiated across forms of contribution but also structured in meaningful ways. We therefore ask: which citizens, in which member states, support which kinds of contributions? Structural contexts based on a state's position in the EU migration regime likely shape the types of contributions that are politically feasible and normatively expected. At the same time, individuals' political ideologies may affect both the overall level of support and how different forms of responsibility-sharing are evaluated. We assess whether preferences vary systematically across countries (enabling differentiation), align with countries' structural roles (supporting a viable division of labour), and reflect ideological divides (indicating the domestic political feasibility of specific contributions). These hypotheses allow us to examine not only whether multidimensionality maps onto existing public attitudes but also whether it can serve as a legitimate and politically sustainable framework for shared responsibility in EU migration governance. We proceed in two steps: first, we identify determinants of general support for responsibility-sharing, and then we develop theoretical expectations for the relative support for its specific dimensions.

A first theoretical perspective emphasises how citizens' preferences for responsibility-sharing reflect the structural position of their country within the European migration regime. This argument builds on rationalist and collective action theories, which hold that states (and their citizens) form preferences based on a cost–benefit logic when it comes to contributing to international public goods. In the EU asylum system, not all member states are equally exposed to the costs and risks associated with immigration management and refugee protection (Noll, 2003; Suhrke, 1998). The costs and the risks that a member state faces ultimately depend, on the one hand, on its proximity to humanitarian crises and migration routes that determine the exposure to irregular immigration, and on the other hand, on its responsibilities assigned by EU law (Kaufmann, 2021; Kriesi *et al.*, 2024). We draw on a previously-used categorisation of EU member states based on their exposure and role in the European migration system (cf. Lutz & Karstens, 2021): Southern frontline, northern destination, and eastern countries. These countries with distinct structural positions are also reflected in EU political alliances (MED5, Visegrad) when negotiating supranational migration policies (Thym, 2022), and we expect that these geographic and political contexts to shape public preferences for the *extent* and *form* of responsibility-sharing.

When it comes to the overall support of responsibility-sharing, citizens in countries more exposed to the costs of processing asylum requests and controlling borders should be more supportive of responsibility-sharing. When it comes to the exposure to refugee arrivals, we observe clear regional divergences: Eurostat statistics on asylum applications in the year 2024 show that southern countries have the highest exposure with around 3.47

applicants per 1000 residents, followed by Northern Europe with 2.12 applicants and 0.58 applicants in Eastern Europe.⁴ While asylum numbers fluctuate both over time and across countries, the overall regional pattern remained largely stable over time as it results from persistent differences in states' attractiveness as asylum destinations and patterns of migration routes, with asylum-seekers' choice determined strongly by co-ethnic networks and economic prospects (e.g., Neumayer, 2004). Consequently, we believe that responsibility-sharing preferences are shaped by these structural differences. Following asylum patterns, we expect support for responsibility-sharing to be highest in southern countries as they are not only tasked with enforcing immigration control at the EU external border but also responsible for processing a large part of asylum claims under the Dublin rules. In contrast, eastern countries are typically not preferred destination countries for most asylum-seekers nor do they figure as main entry points of asylum migration, thus face comparatively low costs. Finally, northern countries are not situated at the external border, but nonetheless receive high numbers of asylum requests, as they are often the preferred destination for individuals seeking protection in Europe. We therefore expect them to show moderate support levels.

H1: Citizens in southern (eastern) countries are more (less) supportive of responsibility-sharing, with northern countries in between.

Preferences on responsibility-sharing should also vary by policy field. As revealed above, northern countries often figure as the preferred destination countries with relatively high shares of asylum applications. Those countries are not located at an external border with main entry points of refugees, limiting their involvement in border control. As such, contributing to refugee protection is more aligned with their structural position as they have an interest in sharing their high protection responsibilities, but less so in contributing to migration control efforts. Eastern countries, on the other hand, are mostly located at the EU's external border while receiving comparatively fewer asylum requests.⁵ They should therefore favour contributions on migration control where they have been more engaged, as opposed to sharing the refugee protection duties of other member states. Finally, southern frontline countries are not only strongly exposed to irregular immigration into Europe but are also responsible for a high number of asylum requests. As a result, these countries face comparatively high exposure and costs in both policy domains, suggesting that public support for responsibility-sharing should be similar.

H2: Citizens in northern (eastern) countries are more (less) supportive of responsibility-sharing on refugee protection than on migration control, while citizens in southern frontline countries support both equally.

Finally, we expect structural contexts to shape public preferences on the mode of contribution (norm-, money-, or people-sharing). Northern countries are preferred destination countries and among the wealthiest nations. Norm- and money-sharing, in particular, serve their interests: norm-sharing – understood as policy harmonisation – would level protection standards across member states and thereby reduce their relative attractiveness, while money-sharing represents a less costly instrument that allows them to maintain the current concentration of protection responsibilities in southern states of first-arrival. Eastern countries are characterised by their relatively low exposure to asylum migration for structural reasons. We therefore expect them to prefer contributing through norm- and money-sharing rather than people-sharing, which would significantly increase the number of asylum-seekers in their countries. Finally, southern countries at the EU's external border receive the highest share of asylum applications, and the Dublin rules assign them the brunt of protection responsibilities. Therefore, we expect their primary interest to lie in people-sharing, with norm- and money-sharing playing a secondary role.

H3: Citizens in northern and eastern (southern) countries are more (less) supportive of norm- and money-sharing than of people-sharing.

The second theoretical perspective focuses on how citizens' ideological predispositions shape their preferences for responsibility-sharing. We expect differences in preferences within countries to be primarily shaped by citizens' ideological orientation. Immigration and European integration have become key manifestations of the political conflict structure in European democracies, dividing citizens along a socio-cultural globalisation divide with opposing views on the desirability of openness or closure of the nation state (Akkerman, 2015; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). Reinforced by events such as terrorist attacks and surges in refugee arrivals, this divide increasingly centres on questions of national identity and supranational solidarity, resulting in a growing value polarisation between cosmopolitan and communitarian worldviews (de Wilde *et al.*, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Communitarianism emphasises the primacy of national communities, social cohesion, and the protection of national sovereignty. Cosmopolitanism, by contrast, emphasises universal values, human rights, global solidarity, and openness to international cooperation. This value divide aligns thus closely with the question of responsibility-sharing in migration governance and should be more predictive than the general left-right scale.

Ideological orientation should not only predict the extent of support of responsibility-sharing but also its form. Specifically, citizens with different ideological profiles may favour different policy fields (refugee protection vs. migration control) and modes of contributions (norm-, money-, or people-sharing). We expect cosmopolitans to express high support for

responsibility-sharing due to their general orientation toward international cooperation. In terms of contribution mode, they are likely to favour people-sharing over the other two modes, reflecting their emphasis on global solidarity and willingness to provide humanitarian protection. Communitarians, by contrast, are expected to express lower support for responsibility-sharing due to their concerns about national sovereignty. In terms of policy fields, they are likely to favour migration control, as securing borders aligns with their emphasis on protecting the national community. Refugee protection, which requires extending solidarity obligations beyond national borders, is less appealing to communitarians – yet, when endorsed, we expect them to prefer money-sharing as an indirect contribution that does not involve admitting refugees or providing generous asylum rules.

H4: Cosmopolitans are more supportive of responsibility-sharing than communitarians.

H5: Cosmopolitans (communitarians) are more supportive of responsibility-sharing in refugee protection (migration control) over the other policy field.

H6: When it comes to refugee protection, cosmopolitans (communitarians) prefer people-sharing (money-sharing) over the other modes of contribution.

Finally, in terms of governance level, we expect respondents to prefer responsibility-sharing contributions at the EU level over international ones across all contribution types.⁶ The EU constitutes a meaningful political community, characterised by mutual obligations, institutional capacity, and shared norms. This fosters a sense of collective identity, trust, and reciprocity among its citizens (Hooghe & Marks, 2005), making them more willing to share responsibilities with fellow EU member states than with third countries. What is more, the common polity and close interdependence of European countries provide ideal conditions for responsibility-sharing to work (Bauböck, 2018), whereas responsibility-sharing at the global level lacks institutionalised enforcement, involves more heterogeneous countries and is thus likely to be perceived as less effective. Finally, when responsibility is confined to Europe rather than including third countries, the scope of sharing is reduced, rendering EU-level responsibility-sharing potentially less costly. For these reasons, we expect that respondents are more willing to share responsibilities within the EU than with the world at large.

H7: Citizens are more supportive of responsibility-sharing on the EU-level than on the international level.

Data and method

To analyse the responsibility-sharing preferences of European citizens, we rely on a pre-registered population survey fielded in November and

December 2024 in six EU member states: two northern countries (Denmark, Germany), two southern countries (Italy, Greece), and two eastern countries (Poland, Hungary) (cf. Lutz & Karstens, 2021).⁷ This country selection enables us to assess how preferences vary across relevant structural contexts in European migration governance. The survey includes $N = 1,700$ respondents per country, sampled using quotas for age, gender, and education (see Appendix I for the detailed documentation).

Two complementary approaches are employed to measure responsibility-sharing preferences. First, we measure support for different contribution types using an item battery in which respondents indicate their agreement (seven-point Likert scale) with their country contributing in different policy fields (refugee protection, border control), levels of governance (EU, international), and modes of contribution (norms, money, people). As the latter can only be applied to refugee protection, we end up with seven dimensions that are used to capture preferences for differentiated, voluntary contributions by states.

Second, we embed a conjoint experiment that presents respondents with different policy packages varying along key dimensions of responsibility-sharing. Conjoint experiments are particularly suitable for studying multidimensional policy preferences, as respondents evaluate combinations of attributes, revealing how they weigh different policy dimensions and the relative importance of each dimension for policy support (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014b). We build randomised policy combinations based on three factors: (1) the mode of contribution to refugee protection (sharing norms, money, or people), (2) the level of contribution to migration control (supporting European border control or the externalisation of control to third countries), and (3) the degree of institutional obligation (voluntary or mandatory).⁸ This policy setup includes the key contribution types of EU-level migration governance in its two policy fields, combined with bindingness – whether responsibility-sharing should be based on states' discretionary choice, or creating mutual obligations and reciprocal expectations. The fully randomised design of policy pairs with two iterations allows us to assess which policy-mix of responsibility contributions is more likely to gain public support.

These two measurement approaches are conceptually distinct but complementary. The first approach reveals support for differentiated, voluntary contributions by member states. The second approach evaluates citizen preferences for a model of EU-level responsibility-sharing, in which respondents simultaneously weigh different policy dimensions through which member states contribute under a common framework. Together, these two approaches allow us to analyse both the *structure* of citizen preferences and whether these preferences translate into support for common governance based on reciprocity. Finding consistent patterns – the same dimensions favoured or opposed across both – would suggest that citizens are not merely supporting what is convenient

for their country but endorsing these contributions as legitimate elements of a shared European scheme of mutual solidarity.

The subsequent empirical analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we conduct a descriptive analysis of the variation in public support for responsibility-sharing contributions within and across countries. For each of the three dimensions – policy field, level of governance, and mode of contribution – we calculate the share of respondents supporting responsibility-sharing. This allows us to measure both the general level of support and the degree to which citizens differentiate between contribution types, as well as the pattern of cross-national variation, revealing the potential for complementary preferences across member states.

Second, to examine how responsibility-sharing preferences vary across structural contexts and ideological orientations, we estimate a series of multilevel regression models (random intercept), nesting respondents within countries.⁹ This specification accounts for the clustered data structure and captures between-country heterogeneity. As a robustness check, we estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) models with country-clustered standard errors. The dependent variables capture support for the different dimensions of responsibility-sharing. The independent variables measure structural contexts and ideological orientation. Country-level context is captured through regional dummies distinguishing northern, southern, and eastern member states. Respondents' ideology builds on two established facets of the cosmopolitan–communitarian divide (de Wilde *et al.*, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), support for immigration and for EU integration, using their sum rescaled to a range from zero to one. This is motivated by responsibility-sharing involving both European integration and immigration policy, two key facets of the value divide between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism (see theory section above).

Third, we analyse the support for different models of European responsibility-sharing by examining the combinations of preferences across the three dimensions in the conjoint experiment. For this purpose, we estimate a multilevel linear model with random intercepts for respondents and fixed effects for countries. This specification allows us to account for the repeated measures structure of the conjoint data and for systematic country differences. From this model, we compute Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) and predict support levels using marginal means. This enables us to identify policy configurations that align most closely with public preferences, and complements our analysis of multidimensionality as a viable responsibility-sharing framework.

Results

We begin by mapping public preferences for responsibility-sharing in European migration governance across three dimensions – policy field, level of

governance, and mode of contribution – to assess both general support and cross-country variation (Figure 1). Across all dimensions, average support levels range from 40% to 80%, indicating differentiated support from moderate to strong. Clear majorities in all six countries support some form of contribution to responsibility-sharing, though support for specific contributions falls below 50% in some cases. Support is strongest and most consistent for contributions to migration control, with approval levels close to 80% across all countries. This contrasts with refugee protection, where support is high in Southern Europe but drops significantly in Northern and especially Eastern Europe, where it hovers around 50%. These patterns suggest that public backing for responsibility-sharing is less contested in the field of migration control than in refugee protection, with the latter marked by lower support and greater cross-country polarisation.

Turning to the level of governance, we find a consistent preference for European over international responsibility-sharing across all six surveyed countries. This EU-preference is strongest in Germany and weakest in Hungary and might thus be correlated with overall support of European integration. Nevertheless, the differences in support levels between the two governance levels are modest, which is notable given the common assumption that the EU, with its shared political institutions and a common identity, offers particularly favourable conditions for responsibility-sharing (see Bauböck, 2018).

Finally, support also varies across different modes of contribution: norm-sharing enjoys the highest public approval, followed by money-sharing, with people-sharing receiving the least support. Again, regional variation is evident. In Southern Europe, the three modes receive similarly high levels of support, whereas in Northern and Eastern Europe, support varies more strongly – especially for people-sharing, which is opposed by majorities in

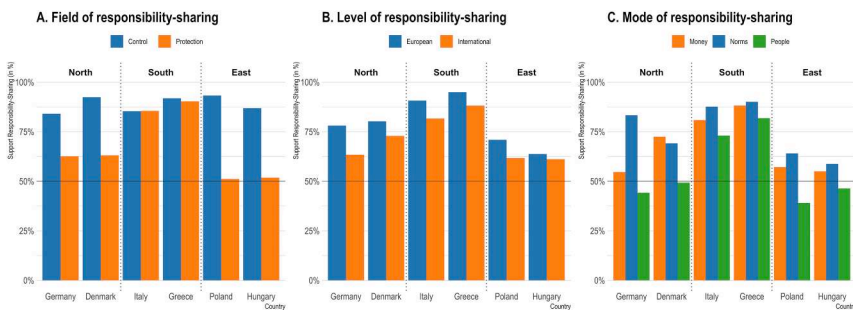


Figure 1. Public support for responsibility-sharing in migration governance. Note: The bar plots show the share of respondents in favour of their country making the respective contribution to responsibility-sharing (neutral responses are excluded, and indicators aggregated based on the field, level and mode of responsibility-sharing).

several countries. As with other dimensions, Southern Europe shows the highest overall support, while Eastern Europe exhibits the lowest. These patterns hold when taking neutral responses into account and examining mean support scores (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

Building on this overview, we next assess the specific conditions necessary for multidimensional responsibility-sharing to be effective. Are public preferences structured in a way that could be leveraged to design a differentiated contribution model? A first condition is that citizens meaningfully distinguish between different forms of contribution – evaluating them as separate options rather than as a single package to be uniformly supported or opposed.

The distribution of individual-level support across contribution types suggests this is the case (Figure 2). Only a small minority rejects all contributions, and few support all of them. The preferences of principled supporters (11–26%) and principled opponents (5–13%) are unlikely to be affected by multidimensional responsibility-sharing. The majority of respondents, however, support some contributions while opposing others – precisely the profile for which a differentiated contribution model could mobilise additional support. This pattern of conditional support persists also when focusing solely on refugee protection, the more contested policy area (Appendix: Figure A3). Public reluctance thus concerns specific forms of contribution rather than responsibility-sharing per se, underscoring the potential of a differentiated model to channel support into preferred contributions.

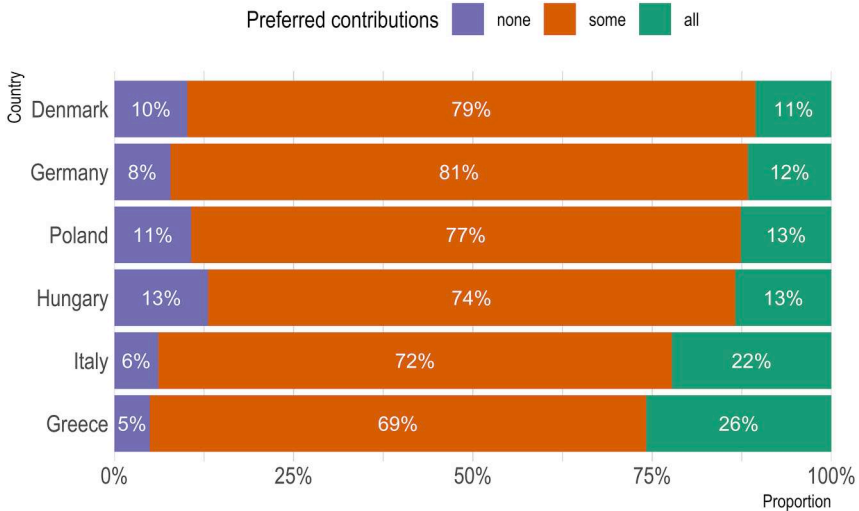


Figure 2. Principled and conditional support for responsibility-sharing contributions. Note: Stacked barplot showing the share of respondents by country that supports all types of contributions, only some types of contributions or none.

A cluster analysis confirms that these preferences are systematically structured along the theoretically expected dimensions (Appendix: Figure A2).¹⁰ The clearest division is between contributions to migration control and contributions to refugee protection, suggesting that the policy issue constitutes the most salient distinction for citizens. Within refugee protection, preferences further split into norm-sharing and material contributions (money, people). Finally, each dimension pairs contributions at the EU level and the international level. Moreover, similar patterns emerge in cluster analyses for each country (Appendix: Figure A4) and a correlation analysis (Appendix: Figure A5), further corroborating the idea that public preferences for responsibility-sharing are systematically structured across multiple dimensions. This hierarchy indicates where multidimensional responsibility-sharing has the most leverage: differentiating between policy issues offers clearer choice than differentiating between governance levels, while the relative proximity of money- and people-sharing suggests citizens view these as more substitutable.

Second, a multidimensional approach can increase overall support only if countries can adjust their contribution profiles in line with these differentiated citizen preferences. To reveal the cross-country complementarity of preferences, we analyse relative preferences at two levels: how each region deviates from the overall cross-country average, and how contributions rank within each region relative to that region's average support (Figure 3). This analysis reveals two important patterns. First, regional differences in overall support levels persist, with Southern Europe showing the highest and Eastern Europe the lowest support – except for migration control, which enjoys uniformly high approval across regions. Second, and more crucially for political feasibility, the relative ranking of contribution types is strikingly consistent across regions: migration control and norm-sharing are systematically more favoured than money-sharing and, particularly, people-sharing. In particular, the preferences of northern and eastern countries seem closely aligned, whereas southern countries stand out slightly more. Overall, this indicates a shared hierarchy of preferences among European citizens, even amid regional differences in overall support.

Although the overall pattern provides limited support for the condition of complementary cross-country preferences, it is still possible to identify country groups best suited to contribute to different responsibility-sharing dimensions based on their relative support compared to other countries. A certain specialisation could emerge if countries focus on the contributions for which they exhibit the highest public support relative to other countries – and thus face the lowest domestic political costs. Our data suggests that this would mean for eastern countries to focus on border control, southern countries to participate by people-sharing (hosting a disproportionate number of refugees), and northern countries to contribute in the norm-

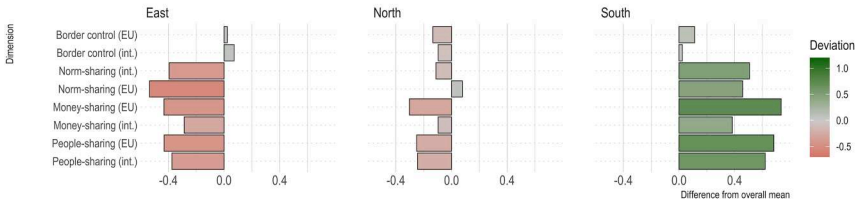
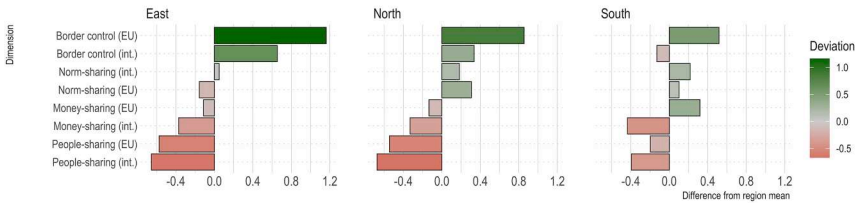
Relative support between regions**Relative support within regions**

Figure 3. Relative support for different contributions to responsibility-sharing. Note: Relative public support for different contributions to European migration governance across dimensions of responsibility-sharing. The upper figure shows the deviation to the overall average across countries, the lower figure the deviation from the regional average of support.

dimension by providing generous protection standards.¹¹ However, these patterns of relative support largely reflect countries' existing roles in the migration regime (northern countries as attractive destinations with higher recognition rates, southern countries as first-arrival states, and eastern countries focused on deterrence). As such, there is no tangible room for specialisation that would meaningfully address existing asymmetries in European migration governance.

In the next step, we go beyond descriptive statistics and employ multivariate regression models to examine the structure of the political divide – specifically, whether preferences reflect countries' structural positions (East, North, South) or individual ideology (cosmopolitanism vs. communitarianism). The coefficient plot (Figure 4) reveals clear differences between the two policy fields. For border control, the coefficients of both region and ideology are of negligible size and not statistically significant. This suggests that border control constitutes a valence issue, characterised by broad consensus within and across member states, and only limited ideological structuring. In contrast, refugee protection reveals strong divisions by both context and ideology. Support is highest in Southern Europe and among cosmopolitans, while citizens in Eastern Europe and with communitarian views most clearly oppose contributions to responsibility-sharing in this domain. Both regional and ideological differences are more pronounced for refugee protection as compared to border control, with ideology being the dominant predictor

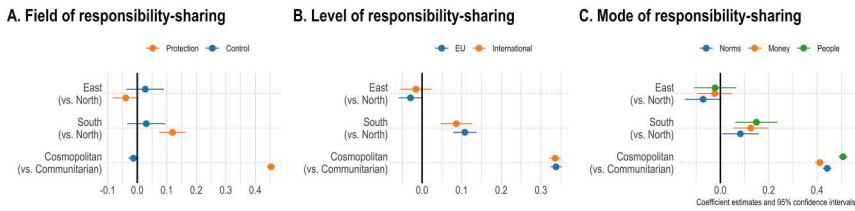


Figure 4. Determinants of responsibility-sharing preferences. Note: Coefficient plots on the support of different responsibility-sharing contributions with structural context and ideology as predictor variables. Estimates based on multilevel linear models with respondents nested in countries; 95% confidence intervals are shown. All variables have been normalised to a range from zero to one to facilitate interpretation and comparison. Appendix II provides the complete model output (Table A2) and the predicted probabilities (Figure A7).

of preferences. These results are robust to the inclusion of socio-demographic control variables of age, gender, and education (Appendix: Table A3), the use of left-right orientation as an alternative ideology measure (Appendix: Table A4), and alternative OLS estimates (Appendix: Table A6).

Regarding the level of governance, the coefficients for EU-level contributions and international-level contributions are very similar in size. This is in line with the descriptive results above. Finally, differences in public preferences across the three modes of contribution – sharing norms, money, and people – are small and follow a similar pattern. Cosmopolitanism increases support across all modes, with the largest coefficient for people-sharing. The predicted probabilities reveal that communitarians particularly dislike contributing by people-sharing, which is also the least preferred mode among cosmopolitans (Appendix: Figure A7). Regionally, support is highest in Southern Europe and lowest in Eastern Europe. Notably, Northern Europe shows relatively higher support for norm-sharing compared to the other two modes. Southern European countries stand out for their strong support for people- and money-sharing, while Eastern European countries display generally lower support for responsibility-sharing. However, their differences with Northern Europe are not statistically significant. Overall, political ideology plays a dominant role across all contribution types. This also remains the case when interacting the region with respondent ideology (Appendix: Figure A6 and Table A5), but with some noteworthy variation: the association between cosmopolitanism and support for responsibility-sharing on refugee protection is stronger in Northern Europe than in eastern and particularly southern member states. The effect of cosmopolitanism on support for migration control is negative except in Eastern Europe where it is associated with slightly higher support, while the ideological divide in the control dimension is small and support is generally high and

broadly shared. Thus, the ideological divide is dominant and most pronounced on the issue of refugee protection in northern destination countries, where immigration issues tend to be highly politicised.

For our hypotheses, this means that H1 which predicts highest support in the South and lowest in the East, is confirmed only for refugee protection but not for border control, where support appears to reflect mostly a valence issue given the high levels of support and absence of a pronounced regional or ideological divide. Evidence for H2 is mixed: while eastern countries show a preference for contributing to border control over refugee protection, this pattern is also present, albeit to a lesser extent, in the other regions. Regarding the mode of contribution (H3), the theoretical expectation finds only partial support. As predicted, people-sharing is the least supported mode in northern and eastern countries. In southern states, support levels are more similar across the three modes of contributions; nevertheless, people-sharing remains the least supported contribution, contrary to our expectations. H4 and H5 concerning individual ideology receive empirical support, with cosmopolitans displaying higher overall support and prefer refugee protection over border control, vice versa among communitarians. H6 is only partly confirmed; communitarians do prefer money-sharing over people-sharing as expected, but the same preference pattern is found for cosmopolitans. Finally, a systematic pattern of preferring European over international contributions confirms H7. Overall, the limited support for the structural hypotheses (H1–H3) and stronger confirmation of the ideological ones (H4–H6) underscores that the political divide on responsibility-sharing runs primarily within countries rather than between them. This explains why cross-country preference complementarity is limited: the similarity in preference hierarchies across member states reflects shared ideological dynamics rather than distinct national circumstances that could form the basis for differentiated contributions.

Having analysed the structure of public preferences for voluntary national contributions, we turn in the next step to citizen evaluations of European-level responsibility-sharing models. This shift allows us to examine whether the multidimensional patterns observed in national preferences are mirrored in support for a common EU-level responsibility-sharing framework. We cover both policy fields, distinguishing between three modes of contribution in refugee protection and two levels of governance in border control. The results, presented in [Figure 5](#), suggest consistency between preferred national contributions and preferred design of a European responsibility-sharing scheme. For refugee protection, norm-sharing increases support, whereas people-sharing decreases support. European border controls increase policy support compared with the alternative of externalisation of border controls to third countries. Finally, the European public clearly prefers a mandatory model of responsibility-sharing rather than one based

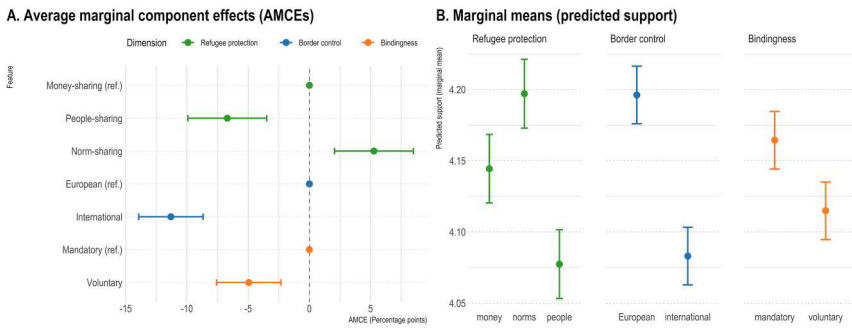


Figure 5. Coefficient plots of conjoint experiment. Note: Results from the conjoint experiment of respondents’ assessment of two pairs of responsibility-sharing models in European migration governance based on the AMCEs and the marginal means. Full model output in Table A7 in Appendix II.

on voluntary contributions. These results show that the contributions that the public supports for their country are also supported as an element of a binding common European policy of responsibility-sharing, suggesting that citizens do think about responsibility-sharing in terms of reciprocity. Separate estimates by country and political ideology further show that the patterns are fairly consistent, with the exception of bindingness, where Eastern European countries and communitarians deviate from the rest and show a clear preference for a voluntary model of responsibility-sharing (Appendix: Figures A8 and A9). Moreover, the dislike of people-sharing stems primarily from eastern countries, with the mode of contribution having a limited effect on policy support in the other countries. A mandatory model finds backing among supporters of European solidarity, while those who do not value such solidarity tend to prefer voluntary contributions – a pattern that may pose challenges for the implementation of binding responsibility-sharing, even when contribution types are flexible.

Conclusion

Since the early beginnings of European migration governance, responsibility-sharing has been a central objective. Yet even with EU-wide rules and a common asylum framework in place, responsibilities remain unevenly distributed. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, seeks to overcome this impasse by introducing mandatory but flexible contributions from member states to collective governance. In this article, we conceptualised the logic of multidimensional responsibility-sharing underpinning the Pact and examined its potential to overcome Europe’s entrenched divisions on immigration using an original population survey in six EU member states.

Our central question was whether such a multidimensional approach can accommodate diverse public preferences and mobilise broad support for European cooperation. To assess this, we evaluated whether citizens meaningfully distinguish between different contribution types and whether these preferences vary across countries in ways that could, in principle, support a viable division of labour. The results of our survey analysis show broad public support for responsibility-sharing based on their country contributing to European migration governance based on reciprocity and mutual solidarity. Importantly, citizens clearly differentiate between types of contributions. People-sharing stands out as the most contested option, while financial contributions and joint border control attract broader support, including among respondents generally sceptical of immigration. Despite this variation, the relative ranking of contribution types is strikingly similar across member states. Because national preferences resemble one another, the potential for a division of labour based on complementary priorities is very limited. This is to an important degree the result of public preferences being shaped primarily by ideological orientations, with countries' structural positions in the migration regime playing a more minor role.

Taken together, these findings indicate that multidimensional responsibility-sharing faces significant constraints in resolving Europe's divisions over migration governance. While the approach can facilitate political adoption by allowing for more flexibility and emphasising more popular contributions, it provides limited practical leverage for addressing the core challenge of refugee protection and existing asymmetries between countries. The unpopularity of people-sharing across all regions means that multidimensional flexibility cannot overcome the fundamental question of who actually hosts asylum seekers. This pattern aligns with studies on immigration attitudes showing that, despite political polarisation, the public converges on which policies it prefers (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014a; Helbling *et al.*, 2023). It contrasts, however, with previous research that suggested that the public might prefer relocations over financial solidarity (Cappelen *et al.*, 2023; Letki *et al.*, 2024). The result is instead consistent with the observation that actual refugee hosting and the prospects of mandatory relocations often sparks the strongest opposition and was the single most polarising issue in the 2024 European elections.¹² Building responsibility-sharing on more popular contributions would thus mean accepting asymmetries in the distribution of asylum seekers and correcting them primarily through financial solidarity and shared border control efforts. Given the similarity of preferences across countries and the alignment between preferences for national contributions and EU-wide policy, such a framework could gain public support through direct reciprocity, where all states contribute in similar ways, rather than through indirect reciprocity of multidimensional responsibility-sharing,

where different types of contributions are meant to compensate for one another.

These findings help explain both the adoption and the uncertain implementation of the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum. Moving away from mandatory people-sharing likely facilitated agreement by removing the most contested element and by allowing various forms of contribution. However, this same flexibility makes implementation challenging by adding complexity without addressing the underlying political conflict. The first solidarity pool, agreed upon by the Council in December 2025, has yet to be implemented.¹³ Its rollout will be a crucial test of whether the Pact delivers on its promise of solidarity or rather allows states to fulfil obligations while avoiding meaningful responsibility-sharing. Our results suggest that while multidimensional responsibility-sharing may preserve member states' sovereignty to a greater degree and facilitate political consensus on a common policy, it entails greater unpredictability, complicates perceptions of fairness, and risks enabling strategic responsibility-shirking rather than genuine solidarity.

While our analysis reveals general support structures across member states, it does not allow us to assess whether citizens' preferences are contingent on specific contributions made by other countries. Investigating how reciprocity and perceived fairness influence public support for responsibility-sharing could advance this research agenda. Additional insights on whether the flexible approach helps to advance cooperative behaviour among member states might be gained from the ongoing implementation of the EU pact and a longitudinal analysis of public preferences. This study provides theoretical concepts and an empirical method to assess responsibility-sharing preferences that may inspire future studies on migration governance and beyond.

Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/22/migration-eu-diplomat-josep-borrell-ukraine-china> (accessed 30.Nov. 2025)
2. Poland and Hungary voted against the Pact and their leaders have spoken out against its implementation citing concerns over mandatory relocation quotas (see e.g. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/07/poland-will-not-implement-migration-pact-donald-tusk-tells-ursula-von-der-leyen>, accessed 2 February 2026)
3. This list of dimensions is not exhaustive. For instance, one could also distinguish between proactive and reactive responsibility-sharing (Thielemann & Dewan, 2006): proactive measures aim to prevent forced displacement (e.g., peace-keeping or development aid), while reactive measures provide protection and assistance after displacement. We do not include this distinction, as proactive measures fall outside the core meaning of responsibility-sharing in asylum governance and are generally not considered part of migration or refugee policy.

4. Own calculation based on Eurostat (migr_asyapp1mp, first-time asylum applicants per 1,000 people, 2024)
5. Several Eastern European countries have taken a leading role in offering temporary protection to Ukrainians, largely due to geographic proximity. Public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees have been described as 'exceptional', driven by perceived closeness and low threat perceptions (Hierro & Maza, 2024; De Coninck, 2022). In addition, Ukrainians can enter the Schengen area visa-free, choose where to seek protection, and receive protection under a common EU policy outside the standard asylum procedure. This exceptional situation should therefore be seen as separate from the broader asylum and responsibility-sharing system. Respondents may not distinguish between different legal frameworks, and the Ukrainian crisis could nonetheless shape responsibility-sharing preferences. Our results, however, do not support this conclusion, given the persistent gap in preferences between Eastern countries and traditional destination countries (cf. Figure 1).
6. We do not differentiate this expectation by country group or ideology. The preference for EU-level over international-level responsibility-sharing should reflect the general advantages of the EU as a political community, which apply across member states. Moreover, both EU-level and international-level responsibility-sharing reflect cosmopolitan orientations toward international cooperation and solidarity, whereas communitarians generally oppose both in favor of national sovereignty.
7. For the anonymised version of the pre-registration see: https://osf.io/7x9nm/overview?view_only=50230b81235849889502c9799d6a66fc. It contains the measurement approaches (item battery with the different dimensions of responsibility-sharing and design of the conjoint experiment), but no specific hypotheses. The hypotheses presented above are descriptive and serve to theoretically ground relevant patterns of public preferences rather than as confirmatory tests of our central research question about the feasibility of multi-dimensional responsibility-sharing.
8. The conjoint experiment does not cover all contribution types from the survey battery on responsibility-sharing preferences as it focuses specifically on a common European responsibility-sharing arrangement. Contributions to refugee protection beyond the EU such as resettlement fall under the unilateral discretion of individual member states and thus outside the relevant policy scope. By contrast, international cooperation on migration control is relevant since the EU collectively engages in the externalisation of border control through cooperation with third countries.
9. ICCs from null models range from 0.02 to 0.11 across dependent variables (mean: 0.08), indicating that 2–11% of variance lies between countries and justifying the use of multilevel models.
10. The differentiation in preferences between different dimensions of responsibility-sharing is further revealed by a factor analysis (Appendix: Table A1).
11. The survey item measuring norm-sharing preferences asks about policy harmonisation and could thus imply different levels of generosity. A separate measure of public support of the refugee protection norm reveals that Denmark and Germany have the highest values. This supports the interpretation that, within a limited range, Northern countries are best placed to specialise on generous protection norms as a responsibility-sharing contribution.

12. <https://euandi.eu/en/blog/knowledge-bites/the-most-polarising-issues-in-the-european-union-party-system.html>, accessed 27.11.2025.
13. Council of the EU (18 December 2025). *Council implementing decision on the establishment of the Annual Solidarity Pool for 2026*, Interinstitutional File 2025/0357. Retrieved from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/08/migration-and-asylum-member-states-agree-on-solidarity-pool/>, accessed 04.02.2026.

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AI use disclosure

AI tools (GPT-5) were used to assist with language editing and statistical coding.

Data availability statement

The data and replication code underlying this article are provided in the supplementary material accompanying the online version of this article.

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