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**Europe's Divide on Immigration:
Making Responsibility-Sharing Work**

in a nutshell #26, August 2025



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Messages for Decision-Makers

Refugee protection and migration management require cooperation, but this cooperation is often hampered by asymmetries in countries' interests and capacities.

Switzerland is deeply integrated into the European migration regime. As an associated member of Dublin, it benefits significantly from the ability to transfer asylum seekers to other European countries.

The public supports responsibility-sharing through European governance but cares about fairness in how responsibilities and costs are distributed.

Political divides are most likely to be overcome through common European rules that recognize collective responsibility while allowing for a flexible implementation to accommodate countries' different interests and preferences.

What is meant by ...

... responsibility-sharing

The fair and equitable distribution of responsibilities and costs among states in providing collective goods of addressing transnational policy problems – here, the protection of refugees and effective management of international migration. It aims to prevent disproportionate burdens on certain countries and promote solidarity through different means such as refugee relocation, financial support, or operational cooperation.

... Common European Asylum System (CEAS)

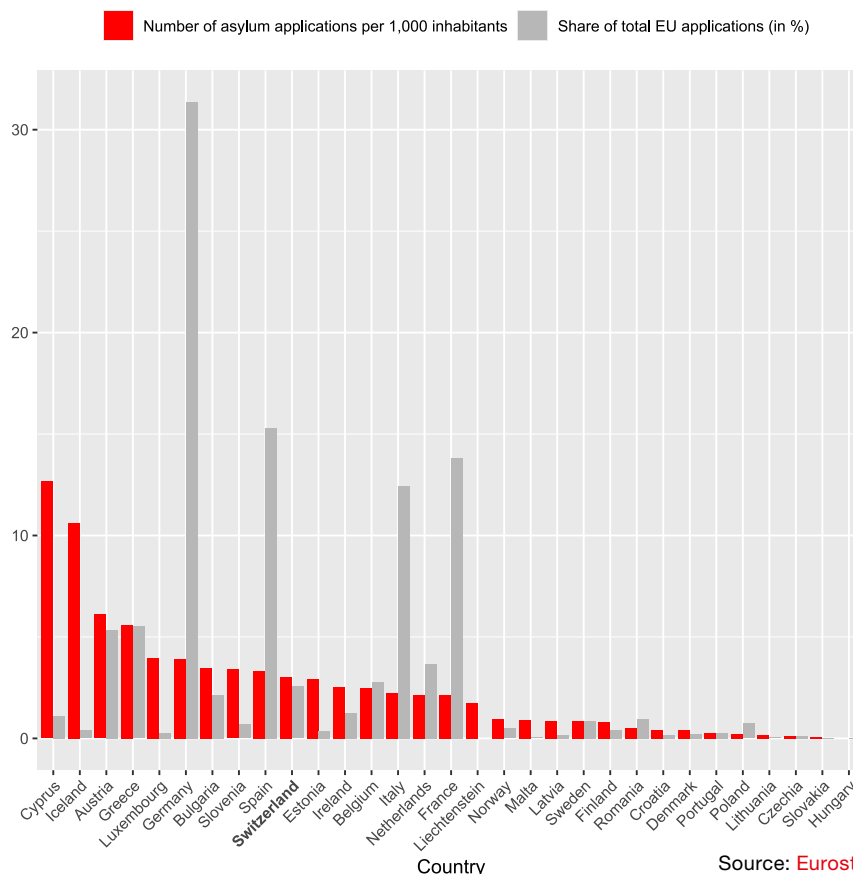
The EU's framework for managing asylum that sets common standards and procedures for the treatment of asylum seekers across member states. It includes rules on asylum procedures, reception conditions, and the allocation of responsibility for asylum applications between member states.

Immigration is a contested political issue that divides Europe. Due to the deep interdependence of European countries, a common policy approach is, however, necessary to effectively address refugee protection and ensure coherent migration management. Establishing effective responsibility-sharing remains a pressing governance challenge. This policy brief explains why this is the case – it presents a collective action problem based on asymmetric interests – and how the political deadlock could be overcome through binding fairness rules with flexible implementation.

Immigration is a divisive issue in European democracies. At the same time, it connects countries as people in Europe can largely move freely from one country to another. An effective response to immigration from outside Europe, involving the protection of refugees and border management, requires cooperation. Protecting refugees and border management are collective responsibilities of European countries, as they are both necessary to uphold human rights and preserve public order.

The interdependence of European countries and the facilitation of cross-border movements in the Schengen area (i.e. abolishing internal border checks between member states) means that effective migration governance requires cooperation among states. This led to the establishment of a common European Asylum System (CEAS), with the Dublin Regulation at its core. This system defines common rules and criteria to determine which country in Europe is responsible for an asylum application. In practice, the responsibility often falls on the state in which the asylum-seeker first entered, placing

Figure 1: Member states' absolute and relative share of asylum applications in 2023



Source: Eurostat

higher administrative and demographic costs on countries at European external borders.

However, this regime is ineffective for at least three reasons. First, the distribution of responsibilities in terms of refugee arrivals is highly asymmetrical between member states, with a few border and destination countries receiving most asylum requests. This threatens to overburden individual member states and to strain their resources while fueling perceptions of unfairness. Second, the current rules for assigning asylum seekers to member states largely disregard the interests of both states and applicants. This results in widespread non-compliance, with states “waving through” asylum seekers toward other countries, and applicants undertaking so-called secondary movements to reach their preferred destination (Lutz et al. 2020). Third, the system is not resilient to changes in the number and direction of arrivals, with countries engaging in unilateral deterrence instead of mutual solidarity.

Switzerland as a key actor in European migration governance

Although Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, it is deeply integrated with its European neighbors economically, socially, and politically, participating in key elements of the European migration regime. Most notably, Switzerland is an associated member of both the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Regulation. Thanks in part to its central geographic location, Switzerland relies heavily on the Dublin system and is one of its main beneficiaries, transferring more asylum seekers to other member states than

it receives. While the country admits a significant number of refugees, its share of European arrivals has declined in recent years.

Overcoming free-riding by binding rules and transparency

As the responsibility and costs of providing humanitarian protection often fall on the country in which an asylum-seeker first enters, countries have an incentive to minimize their own refugee intakes and free-ride on the protection efforts of other member states. This collective action problem leads to ineffective unilateralism instead of effective responsibility-sharing – a core challenge of the CEAS.

This problem can be most effectively addressed by agreeing on binding rules on how states should distribute protection responsibilities among them and in which ways states are expected to contribute. Such a model ensures that all states contribute to the collective good and thereby provides insurance that other states will not free-ride but act in solidarity. To support compliance, contributions should be systematically monitored in a way that promotes transparency and enables peer pressure to incentivize responsible behavior. In addition, a sanctioning mechanism is needed to enforce solidarity where peer pressure alone proves insufficient. As a supranational organization operating within an established policy regime and under strong cooperative pressures, the EU is well-positioned to promote the acceptance and implementation of such shared rules.

Fairness through flexibility

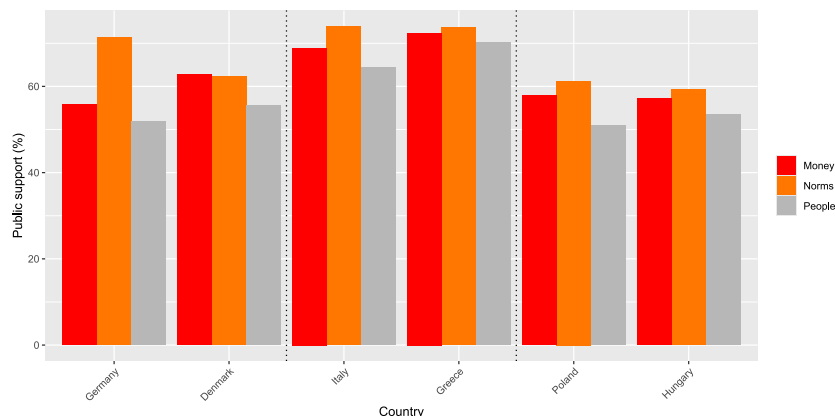
The establishment and compliance with responsibility-sharing remain key challenges in European migration governance. A crucial aspect for the success of explicit or implicit responsibility-sharing is that the system is conceived as fair. Both politicians and the public care deeply about distributional fairness and are more willing to host refugees if they believe that obligations are shared in a fair manner (Bansak et al. 2017, Fabbe et al. 2023).

A way this can be implemented in practice is to conceive of responsibility-sharing as multidimensional, thus allowing states to contribute in various ways that accommodate their different capacities and preferences. Mandatory relocation between states (or people-sharing) is the largest obstacle to finding common support in European migration governance (Lutz and Bachelet, 2025). What is more, refugee relocations have proven to be highly ineffective as they disregard the interests of refugees and face non-compliance from states. For these reasons, considering other means, such as financial solidarity or operational support and flexibility in how countries contribute to refugee protection, could not only increase resource efficiency but also broaden the support for responsibility-sharing.

Beyond quick fixes: Making solidarity work in practice

All in all, responsibility-sharing presents a complex governance challenge with no easy solutions. It involves navigating the functional pressures of international interdependence and fluctuating refugee arrivals, managing domestic political tensions, and reconciling asymmetric interests and incentives for free-riding. Still, several strategies can help make responsibility-sharing work.

Figure 2: Public support of responsibility-sharing contributions by mode (norms-, money-, or people-sharing)



Source: Lutz & Bachelet, 2025

First, states need to agree on a common understanding of the collective responsibility they are expected to share. This shared definition provides the foundation for discussing the fairness principles that should guide the distribution of obligations among countries. Second, these principles should be translated into concrete rules and binding commitments, backed by mechanisms for enforcement and transparency to ensure compliance. Third, bridging divisions among member states is more likely

to succeed if countries are granted flexibility in how they meet their obligations. This allows contributions to be tailored to national contexts and public preferences, helping to sustain perceptions of fairness and secure broad political support.

The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, currently in its implementation phase, aims to address some of the enduring challenges of responsibility-sharing. Its rollout will serve as a litmus test for the political feasibility of fostering greater solidarity among member states. In the near future, the success of European responsibility-sharing will hinge on whether states prioritize collective solutions over unilateral deterrence.

Although Switzerland is not an EU member, its close integration into the European migration policy gives it a meaningful role. By fulfilling its own

solidarity commitments and sharing its considerable expertise—particularly as a broker in international migration governance and the practices of its federal system of responsibility-sharing—Switzerland can make a constructive contribution to the functioning of the European migration regime.

Further Readings

Bansak, K., Hainmueller, J. & Hangartner, D. (2017). [Europeans support a proportional allocation of asylum seekers](#). *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1, 0133.

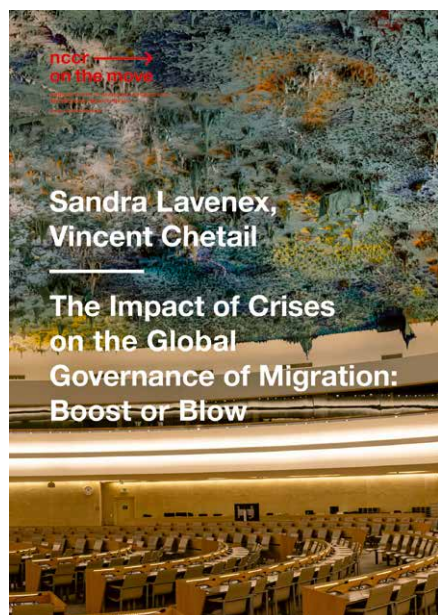
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The Impact of Crises on the Global Governance of Migration: Boost or Blow

Sandra Lavenex and Vincent Chetail

A project of the nccr – on the move

This project investigates how crises shape global and regional migration governance from the 1970s to today. Drawing on theories of policy change, it analyzes crisis narratives and their legal and political impact on cooperation processes. It distinguishes between types of crises and examines how institutional structures, migration types, and country contexts influence whether crises act as catalysts or obstacles for collective action and legal reform.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. It aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics, and law. Managed at the University of Neuchâtel, the nccr – on the move is currently in its third phase (2022–2026) for which it receives SNSF funding of 10.8 million Swiss Francs. The network comprises eleven research projects at eight universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Neuchâtel, as well as the ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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