



## OPINION PAPER

### Can the EU Overcome Another Refugee Flow?

VOCAL  
EUROPE

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**S** yrian refugee crisis has led the EU to revise its refugee policies and unveiled the EU's political vulnerabilities and incapacity to overcome it on its own. Additionally, this problem demonstrated the asymmetric strategic dependence of the EU especially on Turkey in terms of hosting refugees, which results in the fact the EU and Turkey signed a 'refugee deal' in 2016 and the EU had to give some concessions to Turkey and overlook Turkey's illiberal and undemocratic attitudes both within the country and outside the country<sup>1</sup>. This epitome pushes politicians, civil servants, and scholars to think a possibility of resulting Russia-Ukraine conflict in the same direction as the Syrian civil war in terms of refugee flow.

The proficiency of the EU countries neighbouring Ukraine to be able to provide accommodation for refugees is questionable.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the EU and, particularly, NATO should collaborate and provide specifically these neighbour countries with financial compensation to deal with the brunt of migration. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, approximately 1.5 million people fled their home<sup>3</sup>. Current escalated war between the parties will lead much more people to displace and make each EU countries a potential host country for refugees fleeing from Ukraine. In this regard, in order to prevent illegal activities and not to leave the victims of the war in a tight spot, the EU has announced the right to stay for Ukrainian refugees for up to 3 years within the EU countries.<sup>4</sup>

### **Triangular relation between the EU-Russia-Ukraine**

Ukraine is located geographically in the eastern Europe; in other words, in between the EU and Russia. Its importance derives from its labelling of the modern "iron curtain"<sup>5</sup> because it is used a kind of buffer zone by Russia against any possible encirclement and containment policy by the EU and NATO. Although the EU considered enlargement to the Eastern Europe an opportunity to stabilize relations with the regional countries and consolidate democratic principles in the region, Russia perceived it as a threat to itself because Russia is willing to maintain its domination and supremacy in the ex-Soviet countries. Therefore, Russia opposes any inclusionary agreements and unions of the West, which collide with Russian regional interests, with these countries –especially with Ukraine.

In addition, because Ukraine has a transit country position for the transfer of almost half of Russian natural gas export to Europe, any probability to lose influential power –in terms of affecting energy strategies of Ukraine in favor of Russia– on Ukraine makes Russia concerned about the decrease in revenue coming from energy trade<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the Russian government feels obligated to do whatever needed not to leave Ukraine in the hands of the West. On the other hand, the EU and NATO do not carry the same ambitions with Russia in terms of keeping Ukraine under its sphere of

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<sup>1</sup> Saatçioğlu, B. (2020) The European Union's refugee crisis and rising functionalism in EU-Turkey relations, *Turkish Studies*, 21:2, 169-187, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2019.1586542

<sup>2</sup> NBCUniversal News Group. (2022, February 16). Europe is bracing for a possible huge influx of refugees if Russia attacks Ukraine. *NBCNews.com*. Retrieved February 21, 2022, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/europe-bracing-possible-huge-influx-refugees-if-russia-attacks-ukraine-n1289234>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ardrey, T. (2022, February 27). EU nations unanimously agree to accept Ukrainian refugees for 3 years without going through asylum process: Report. Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.insider.com/eu-nations-to-accept-ukraine-refugee-for-3-years-report-2022-2>

<sup>5</sup> Fisher, M. (2014). Iron Curtain rhetoric reborn over Ukraine; Russian accusation. *National Post* (Toronto), pp. National post (Toronto), 2014-04-30.

<sup>6</sup> Rutland, P. (2015). "An unnecessary war: the geopolitical roots of the Ukraine crisis." In A. Pikulicka-Wilczewska & R. Sakwa (Eds.), *Ukraine and Russia: People, politics, propaganda and perspectives*, p. 129-137. E-International Relations Publishing.

influence. Ukraine has applied officially to be a candidate country for EU membership on 28 February 2022<sup>7</sup> but the membership process is a long process and the acceptance to the membership through fast-track might not be possible. What is needed for now is to provide ‘practical support’ against Russian invasion rather than starting long-term discussions that can take years<sup>8</sup>. The application for NATO membership is an example for this kind of application process. Although Ukraine applied for NATO membership in 2008,<sup>9</sup> it is still not a member of NATO.

The EU is aware that since the Syrian refugee crisis has already undermined some EU principles in some member countries (such as Hungary and Slovakia) through causing the increase in populist politicians and discourses and led the EU to give concessions to Turkey so that Turkey hosts the majority of those refugees, any other possible refugee flow to Europe as a result of the war between Ukraine and Russia especially during global Covid-19 pandemic crisis will be able to debilitate European values irreversibly. Hence, this situation leads the EU to ponder on the ways of how to cope with, intervene, or end the war properly because the EU still looks for ways to overcome the Syrian refugee problem.

Although, at the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, the “slogan of ‘wir schaffen es’ (‘yes, we can manage this’) was produced by Angela Merkel –who is ex-chancellor of Germany– she reversed her position to pursue her national political profits and reduce pressure on Germany.<sup>10</sup> The refugee problem was also one of the leading factors to Brexit because of the burden that will create on the UK<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the intervention strategies adopted by the EU on the escalation of war between Russia and Ukraine greatly matters because it is obvious that a new wave of refugees, which has already been indirectly used as a threat to the EU by Vladimir Putin –who is the president of Russia– for supporting far-right and anti-immigration parties to rejuvenate the turmoil within the Europe, will definitely increase the pressure on the shoulder of the Union.

While Merkel argued that military operation to the crisis cannot be solution, other voices argued that “defusing the conflict, the friendly gesture was seen as a sign of weakness, encouraging the Russian president to continue his own intervention”<sup>12</sup>. Although, especially, France and Germany attempted for the rapprochement process, since they are not parties of the war, what they have done is not credible to end the crisis. In addition, that Ukraine cannot compete with Russia in terms of military capabilities leads the EU to embark on a quest for optimum solution for the parties.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zelensky signs application for Ukraine's membership to EU. (2022, February 28). Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/zelensky-signs-application-for-ukraine-s-membership-to-eu-101646068821785.html>

<sup>8</sup> Person, & Strupczewski, J. (2022, February 28). Eu Eyes Ukrainian membership, could be bargaining chip in Russia talks. Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/eu-eyes-ukrainian-membership-could-be-bargaining-chip-russia-talks-2022-02-28/>

<sup>9</sup> Ukraine asks to join NATO Membership Action Plan. (n.d.). Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.unian.info/world/89447-ukraine-asks-to-join-nato-membership-action-plan.html>

<sup>10</sup> Mounk, Y. (2018) Angela Merkel's Vision Problem. Foreign Affairs, 2 November, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2018-11-02/angela-merkels-vision-problem](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2018-11-02/angela-merkels-vision-problem)

<sup>11</sup> Caporaso, J. (2018) Europe's Triple Crisis and the Uneven Role of Institutions: The Euro, Refugees and Brexit. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56(6), 1345–1361. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12746>.

<sup>12</sup> Auer, S. (2021). Merkel's Germany and the European Union: Between Emergency and the Rule of Rules. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 56, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.6>

<sup>13</sup> Kuzio, T. (2017) Ukraine Between a Constrained EU and Assertive Russia. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55(1), 103–120.



## The Possible Impacts of Ukrainian Refugees on the EU

Especially after current military (i.e. starting major attacks to invade Ukraine and threatening with the use of nuclear weapons), political (i.e. statement about refusal of Minsk Agreement), and economic (i.e. withdrawing money from some American banks) moves by Russia, the EU is setting available places for refugee camps and supporting registrations and security checkpoints at borders for millions because the crisis seems nothing but a deadlocked situation for now<sup>14</sup>. Ukraine's neighbor EU countries –such as Romania, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary– have already started preparing for Ukrainian refugees.<sup>15</sup>

Although the US underlined the close cooperative relations with the EU and other non-governmental organizations in terms of backing displaced people who seek and need safety and accommodation, the EU officials struggle to plan for contingencies deriving from the uncertainty and threats about whether Russia will dare to use nuclear weapon and ignite a new world war. Immoderate aggression by Russia can lead the EU plans for refugees –such as providing accommodation, distributing refugees among the EU states to share the burden, and adjusting the financial budget— not to suffice and not to work as good as it is planned. Any possible failure to deal with the refugee crisis can harm the EU reputation and the demographic structure of the EU dramatically.

Although the EU and NATO announced that they are prepared to bear threats “including refugee pressure, higher energy costs, and cyberattacks”<sup>16</sup>, Europeans are aware of that they are on the brink of fire. Refugees can cause the destabilization within the Union. Although this crisis can be a geopolitical opportunity for the EU states to turn into one state or to move closer to each other,<sup>17</sup> this situation seems unlikely to occur due to the increase in the number of populist politicians (i.e. Hungary case) and the huge economic costs of this kind of transformation. Especially, since “the region's populists could quickly turn the anti-immigration spotlight on a rapidly growing Ukrainian population”,<sup>18</sup> this kind of radical move seems to happen unlikely because the EU cannot jeopardize its democratic principles and institutions to be able transform the union into the state.

In addition, during the pandemic, it is not clear whether the EU can handle the refugee flow because “with the Covid-19 vaccination rate lagging in Ukraine at about 34 percent, EU authorities also would have to decide how they would manage refugees who would need to be tested and possibly placed in quarantine for the coronavirus”<sup>19</sup>. Even this process demonstrates that there will be huge financial

<sup>14</sup> Extraordinary justice and Home Affairs Council, 27 February 2022. (2022, February 27). Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2022/02/27/>

<sup>15</sup> Reuters. (2022, February 14). Eastern Europe braces for refugee influx amid Russia-Ukraine tensions. NDTV.com. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/eastern-europe-braces-for-refugee-influx-amid-russia-ukraine-tensions-2768010>

<sup>16</sup> Erlanger, S. (2022, February 17). After 30 years of peace, Ukraine Crisis shakes Europeans. The New York Times. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/ukraine-russia-europe-nato-security.html>

<sup>17</sup> Welle, D. “Ukraine Crisis: A Geopolitical Chance for the EU?: DW: 13.01.2022.” DW.COM. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-crisis-a-geopolitical-chance-for-the-eu/a-60411886>.

<sup>18</sup> Gosling, Tim. “Central Europe Braces for an Influx of Ukrainian Refugees.” Russia-Ukraine crisis News Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, February 22, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/central-europe-braced-for-ukrainian-refugee-crisis>.

<sup>19</sup> NBCUniversal News Group. (2022, February 16). Europe is bracing for a possible huge influx of refugees if Russia attacks Ukraine. NBCNews.com. Retrieved February 21, 2022, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/europe-bracing-possible-huge-influx-refugees-if-russia-attacks-ukraine-n1289234>

burden on the EU countries. Therefore, financial support to these refugee hosting countries has crucial importance not to cause another new wave of Covid-19 across the world.

The EU faces with a real challenge. It seems difficult to handle this crisis by itself because the conflict between parties turned into a war. As days are gone without peace, it carries the risk of evolving into a destructive world war. Hence, the situation requires international collaboration against Russian invasion. Additionally, since there is a risk that new refugee flow can stimulate the increase in the number of populist and anti-immigrant politicians and cause a new wave of Covid-19 all across Europe, the EU has taken a number of key steps –such as sanctions on financial sector, regulation on visa policy and the ban on transactions with Russian banks<sup>20</sup> to end the war as soon as possible and to dodge the crisis with the minimum damage. Although striving for finding a diplomatic solution for the parties in the war seem optimum solution for the EU, the escalation of the aggression and operations carried out by Russia decrease the possibility of this kind of solution way.

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<sup>20</sup> Timeline - EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine. (2022, February 28). Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-ukraine-crisis/history-ukraine-crisis/>