

## Preface

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This study presents key findings of our research on how the EU and its member states managed the refugee crisis of 2015–16. This was not the first refugee crisis in Europe, nor has it been the last such crisis. The most important previous crisis was linked to the Balkan wars in the early 1990s, when the break-up of former Yugoslavia led to the inflow of roughly 1.5 million refugees into the EU, and into Germany in particular. The refugee crisis we study here peaked in 2015–16, when Europe received no less than 2.5 million asylum applications, mainly from Syrian refugees who had fled the civil war in their country, but it lingered on at least until spring 2020, when the focus of attention abruptly turned to the Covid-19 pandemic. More recently, the Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered the greatest inflow of refugees into Europe ever. At the end of May 2023, more than 8 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe. Although the number of refugees who needed to be accommodated far exceeded that of the crisis that we focus upon, this new crisis proved to be much less contentious in the EU and its member states. As a matter of fact, the 2015–16 refugee crisis posed a greater threat to the EU than the inflow of refugees that resulted from the Ukraine war has.

During the last two crisis-ridden decades, the EU has had to face other crises as well. Thus, the 2015–16 refugee crisis was preceded in fall 2008 by the great financial crisis, which, in Europe, mutated into the Eurozone or sovereign debt crisis – a crisis that lasted until the third Greek bailout in summer 2015. It was followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which exploded in spring 2020, and partially overlapped with the Brexit crisis, which was precipitated by the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and ended provisionally with the adoption of the agreement on the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU at the end of 2020. In addition, more “slow-burning” crises, like the climate crisis and the social crisis, loomed in the background – latent crises with a constantly increasing potential political fallout. In this period of the European “polycrisis,” when the sum of the interdependent challenges

has been creating a compound effect that is expected to exceed that of its individual parts, the 2015–16 refugee crisis was a crucible that, for a moment, brought out the underlying tensions of the EU polity and tested its resilience to the core. This was not a “good” crisis for the EU, and our study of how the EU polity managed it shows in detail what has gone wrong. The way the EU and its member states have come to terms with this crisis relied on short-term expedients, which exacerbated internal tensions, compromised the polity’s humanitarian values, exposed it to blackmail by authoritarian third countries, and prevented it from reforming its dysfunctional Common European Asylum System.

To empirically analyze questions related to the EU polity’s crisis management, we use an innovative method that we have developed for the study of political processes, policy process analysis, a method that builds on related methods such as protest event analysis (Tilly 2008; Hutter 2014), political claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999), and contentious episode analysis (CEA; Bojar et al. 2021). This method focuses on the analysis of the public debate on policymaking episodes, and we apply it to key episodes of policymaking during the 2015–16 refugee crisis at both levels of the EU polity. While requiring a great coding effort, this methodological approach has the advantage of combining quantitative analyses with the reconstruction of qualitative narratives. In this volume, we try to systematically illustrate our quantitative results with detailed accounts of specific episodes that put some flesh on the bare quantitative bones. The downside of this approach is that it requires some effort from the reader as well, since it is not possible to do justice to the qualitative details of the episodes in just a few words.

Our theoretical approach is inspired by the polity approach that is being elaborated in the SOLID project into which our team has been embedded. This project is an ERC synergy project that brings together scholars of different orientations and disciplinary backgrounds and that relies on generous financial support from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 810356). The polity approach is still a work in progress, but a paper by the three principal investigators of the project provides a first outline (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). We have benefited enormously from debates within the SOLID project to elaborate our theoretical framework for the present study. Even if our colleagues might not be entirely convinced by our way of adapting the common framework for our own purposes in this study, we are heavily indebted to them and would not have been able to come up with the framework we use here without having been constantly exposed to their constructive critique in the context of the project. For us, this has been a synergistic experience, and we are very grateful to our colleagues in

the SOLID project, which is composed of the team of Maurizio Ferrera (including Niccolò Donati, Anna Kyriazi, Joao Mirò Artigas, Marcello Natili, Alessandro Pellegata, and Stefano Ronchi) at the University of Milan and the team of Waltraud Schelkle (including Kate Alexander-Shaw, Federico Ferrara, Joe Ganderson, Daniel Kovarek, and Zbig Truchlewski) at the London School of Economics and Political Science/European University Institute (EUI), in addition to our team at the EUI (which also includes Alex Moise and Chendi Wang).

We have also received detailed feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript from Andrew Geddes, Ruud Koopmans, Frank Schimmelfennig, and an anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press – for which we would like to express our gratitude. We would also like to thank Maureen Lechleitner, our administrative assistant at the EUI; Eleonora Scigliano, the project manager of the entire SOLID project at the Feltrinelli Foundation; and Manuela Corsini, our project manager at the EUI, without whose daily support our study would not have been possible. We are also grateful to the coders involved in the data collection process for this part of the project: Maria Adamopoulou, Claudia Badulescu, Viola Dreikhausen, Marcus Immonen Hagley, Afroditi-Maria Koulaxi, Eleonora Milazzo, Fred Paxton, Adrian Steinert, Zsófia Victória Suba, and Mikaella Yiatrou. Together with us, they went through thousands of newspaper articles and for countless hours coded what is now condensed in a few dozen figures and tables.

