POLICY BRIEF

The politicisation of responsibility: a thorn in the construction of a genuine CEAS

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Introduction

In August 2015 Angela Merkel stated that "Dublin doesn't work" and that we "need a common response for Europe as a whole". One of the main criticisms to the Dublin system was that it *didn't work fairly*. Given that the most commonly-used criterion is that of the first country of arrival, the responsibility falls disproportionately (in theory at least) on the border countries. Another criticism was that *Dublin didn't work efficiently*. It is inefficient because, despite the criteria of giving responsibility to the first country of arrival, most applicants seek asylum in a different country to the one in which they arrived. This should be explained by asylum seekers having different preferences, linked to personal concerns (such as the presence of friends and acquaintances and knowledge of the language), but also to significant differences between reception systems across the EU (Garcés-Mascareñas 2015).

In this context, rethinking how to build a genuine common European asylum system means returning to two fundamental questions: how to distribute responsibility fairly and how to harmonise standards on both asylum procedures and reception conditions. Both imply more Europe instead of less Europe and, for some countries, more responsibility instead of less responsibility. The discussions around the relocation quota from Italy and Greece illustrate Member States' reluctance to accept both. First, should Member States be more solidary with other Member States facing an increasing influx of asylum seekers? As shown by Wagner, Kraler and Baumgartner (CEASEVAL WP 5/2018), solidarity is often understood as a "matter of will", thus distinguishing solidarity from the duty of cooperation. Second, should some Member States take more responsibility? Countries such as Spain considered that they were already taking a disproportionate share, referring to previous efforts on migration control and immigrant integration.

This has led to a difficult *cul-de-sac*: On the one hand, there is a need for more co-responsibility in view to ensure more "fairness", which is a condition for a truly common European asylum system; on the other, EU leaders have been more and more unwilling to collaborate. This should be explained by the high levels of public anxiety about immigration

and asylum across Europe. Public backlashes, partly fuelled by media and political discourse, represent serious obstacles for any reform that brings in more responsibility. Another reason for leaders unwillingness to collaborate has to do with the EU integration process. As noted by Raspotnik et al. (2012: 1), solidarity as a principle factor of European integration is connected to the notion of (European) legitimacy. The fewer the legitimacy, the fewer thus the willingness for more solidarity. Interestingly, Bansak et al (2017) found that most EU citizens would tolerate an increase in the number of asylum seekers allocated to their own country as long as responsibilities are fairly shared across Europe. This suggests that public opinion may not always go in line with political leaders' concerns and stances.

Focusing on research conducted in eight countries (Finland, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Spain), this policybrief addresses the issue of politicization in the context of the so called refugee crisis – for many a "crisis in solidarity" – in view of the latest discussion about the CEAS reform. So far most academic literature has focused on the politicisation of immigration, including how public opinion, political rhetoric and media coverage shape the debates, saliency and polarisation of migration and in turn how such contestations influence policy responses (CEASEVAL WP 1/2018). Taking cues from this literature, this policybrief shifts the focus from the *politicisation of immigration* to the *politicisation of responsibility*. This means a shift from questions such as how migration is covered, perceived and responded to questions on what responsibility means, to whom we should be responsible and who should be responsible both at the national and European levels. The final purpose is to identify different patterns and mechanisms of politicization and by so doing understand the relationship between politics, politicisation and policies vis-à-vis debates on responsibility both between and within Member States.

The politicisation of immigration

The existing literature on the politicisation of immigration and particularly of the so-called refugee crisis provides several important lessons (see CEASEVAL WP1/2018 for a more detailed overview). If we focus on *public opinion*, social identity and culture seem to matter more than economic and demographic conditions in informing opinions on immigration. This literature also shows that the more the contact with immigrants, the more the permissiveness towards immigration. Consistently, resistance to immigrants and asylum seekers tends to be weaker in bigger cities. In terms of individual level characteristics, there is overwhelming consensus that more educated individuals are less likely to express prejudice and negative stereotypes towards minorities and immigrants. Finally, most studies show that public attitudes seem to be differentiated depending on the type of migrant, for instance being more positive towards high-skilled immigrants, asylum seekers and migrants perceived as culturally and religiously similar.

Looking at the academic literature on *media coverage*, it is clear that media's framing of immigration (often through securitisation or threat frames) has a relevant effect on public attitudes. Less clear is the interaction between political sphere and media coverage, with

different studies providing contrasting results and reaching opposite conclusions. Regarding the 2015 refugee crisis, frames have systematically shifted from an initial humanitarian and empathetic framing towards a hostile and suspicious one. In many cases these shifts followed specific triggering events, such as the New Year's Eve 2015 event. Scholars' contributions also demonstrate large regional and country variations in media coverage with particular divergent frames between the East and West. In terms of media coverage of immigration and refugee policies, the European Union's responses tended to be seen as widely inadequate, though the EU was still acknowledged as the key institution responsible for solving the crisis.

In terms of *political discourse* on the refugee crisis, again there were important cross-national differences. Triandafyllidou (2018) distinguishes in particular two competing frames: the moralizing frame, which places the responsibility of the flows on wars, conflict and violence in the countries of origin and presents refugees as victims deprived of any agency; and the threat frame, which depicts the movement of people as an uncontrollable natural disaster and opposes an "us" versus "them", which is not only associated to migrants but also to an unresponsive Europe. According to Triandafyllidou, contrasting political discourses across European countries have to be understood in relation to: 1) the positioning of each country as "frontline or final destination", as directly or peripherally involved; 2) past experiences of seeking or offering refuge and hosting migrants (or lack thereof); and 3) current challenges including Euro-scepticism. In the light of these remarks, national – rather than European – factors seem thus to drive political discourses on the so-called refugee crisis.

The politicisation of responsibility

Our study shows that responsibility vis-à-vis refugees in Europe has also become an issue of politicisation. The very *meaning of responsibility* differs in each context due to the fact that responsibility is often framed in relation to country-specific issues related to immigration. In border countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain, responsibility is understood above all as the responsibility for arrivals. In other countries, regardless of the size of their refugee population, responsibility tends to be envisaged vis-à-vis immigration, in terms of reception but also regarding the effects of immigration on diversity and social cohesion.

Discussions on the *object of responsibility* (responsibility to whom) are often related to broader debates about the boundaries of an imagined community of people deserving rights. This explains why most discussions on "to whom we should be responsible" have shifted to the question of "whom responsibility is due in the first place". The analysis of the eight national reports points to three different frames: the *humanitarian frame*, which follows a human-rights approach and sees refugees as the first and foremost object of responsibility; the *nationalist frame*, which gives priority to the national sovereignty and consequently to security concerns; and the *third-way or bargained frame*, that holds both refugees and nationals into consideration, basically calling for the protection of "genuine" asylum seekers while asking for increasing border control vis-à-vis the arrival of economic migrants.

Though left and centre-left parties embrace a discourse closer to the humanitarian frame and right and center-right parties more in line with the nationalist one, our analysis shows that in practice these three frames are spread across the political spectrum and in some countries the same party can even change its position over time, for instance moving from a more humanitarian frame to a more bargained one. In line with the literature on the politicisation of the so-called refugee crisis, our analysis points out that the discussions on responsibility have generally changed towards more restrictive positions. In short, instances for a stricter distinction between genuine and bogus refugees, increased border control, and safeguard of national cohesion have increased both across parties and across countries. Enclosed between claims for more solidarity and claims for the safeguard of national sovereignty, the very unity and future of the European Union has been harshly called into question.

Regarding the *subject of responsibility* (who is responsible), our research highlights that both national and European institutions are considered to be responsible. Looking at public opinion polls, Glorius (CEASEVAL 5/2018) found that almost 90 per cent of all respondents share the opinion that additional measures need to be taken to fight irregular migration to Europe and, among them, around two-thirds places the responsibility at the EU level or both at the EU and national levels. In terms of political discourse, while there is no doubt that the subjects of responsibility are the European Union and its Member States, discussions on the role and legitimacy of the EU differ across countries. While in Greece, Italy, Spain and Germany the solution is praised and linked to the need for "more Europe", in Finland, Hungary and Bulgaria media and politicians call for "less Europe" while reaffirming the priority of national sovereignty.

It is worth noticing that in all countries the discussions around the question who is responsible tend to be re-framed as "who's to blame". At the EU level, debates on the relocation quota have turned into a dispute about EU's action, the efficacy of EU policies and the legitimacy of the EU project as a whole. At this level, the blame-game have also taken the shape of a binary conceptualisation between "good" (often perceived as suffering and caring) and "bad" (distant and selfish) Member States. At the national level, and this is particularly clear in Germany, Italy and Spain, the discussions on responsibility have included sub-national administrative levels, often turning into a multilevel blame-game between the central state, on the one hand, and regional and local administrations and civil society actors, on the other. Particularly in Eastern European countries, attacks towards European institutions and supranational powers are often blended with anti-immigration stances. In such discursive construction immigrants may also be represented as victims, who are not criticized *per se* but are seen as a burden "created" by supranational powers and/or by other elites placed at both national and international levels. This framing of the debate takes the shape of populist rhetoric combining both eurosceptic and xenophobic and racist stances.

If we look at the different *patterns of politicisation* across the eight countries under study, one last conclusion is worth mentioning. In countries such as Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary salience seems to be more relevant than polarisation of opinions. Referring to the spread and gradual imposition of a specific discourse in the public and political imaginaries in Bulgaria, Krasteva

(2018) speaks of *hegemonisation* or *mainstreaming*. If we understand hegemonisation as the progressive marginalisation of more pro-immigrant voices in favour of the xenophobic and nationalistic discourses of the far-right, we should conclude that some of these features can also be identified in other European countries. In this regard, our study shows the crucial role played by right wing parties and media outlets as drivers and catalyst of politicization and, in last instance, of the hegemonisation of anti-immigrant and eurosceptic discourses.

Implications and policy recommendations

1. *Increasing politicisation despite decreasing numbers*: Across parties and across countries instances for a stricter distinction between economic migrants and refugees as well as stricter border control have increased. However, these demands do not correlate with an increase in the number of arrivals. Numbers go down while worries and political concerns go up. This makes evident that discussions on immigration do not always follow facts or, put it differently, that immigration is being highly instrumentalised for other political purposes. This is problematic as policies become highly symbolic, following fears and complex logics of politicisation instead of addressing specific and well-analysed problems. In response to this trend, EU institutions, national governments, subnational administrations and stakeholders concerned with asylum should call for more responsible politics and for facts-based policies. Fair and well-informed political debates should lead to legitimate and effective policies and, in consequence, to lessen the politicisation of immigration, which in turn would lead to more facts-based policies.

2. *Blame-games in a context of inadequate responses*: There is general consensus that the European Union failed to adequately respond to the so-called refugee crisis. In this context, discussions on "who should be responsible" often turned into discussions on "who is to blame". In several countries, media and politicians have called into question not only the efficacy of EU policy responses but also the very legitimacy of the EU project. The blame-game has also taken place between Member States and, within some national contexts, among different administrative levels. This leads to the conclusion that the so-called refugee crisis was not only a crisis "of solidarity" and "in solidarity" but also an "institutional crisis". Therefore the response demands policies designed and implemented in a more fairly divided and truly multilevel institutional context, without leaving any institutional actor aside; it also demands policies that by responding adequately to the challenge of migration and asylum in Europe restore trust towards and collaboration among institutions.

3. *More Europe instead of less Europe*: The discussions on why Dublin does not work make clear that an effective and genuine Common European Asylum System requires more fairness and more harmonisation among Member States. While this calls for more solidarity and co-responsibility, thus "more Europe", national leaders seem more and more unwilling to collaborate. This is where public anxiety about immigration and asylum turns into calls for "less Europe". However, research shows that most EU citizens place the responsibility at the EU level or both at the EU and national levels and, contrary to political debates, that a great

majority would tolerate an increase in the number of asylum seekers allocated to their own country as long as responsibilities are fairly shared across Europe. This represents an important lesson to be acknowledged by European politicians and policymakers, who should also understand that a compelling response to migration and asylum demands *per se* a common approach. In this regard, political discourses should highlight that more Europe does not necessarily mean less national sovereignty. In fact, to date, it is the other way around: failing to give a common and shared response to migration and asylum leads to non-functioning migration policies which in turn question national sovereignty but also the very legitimacy of national and EU institutions.

4. *Political and media response to far right wing parties*: This research shows that discourses in favour of an alleged national sovereignty and against European institutions and supranational powers are strictly intermingled with anti-immigration stances. In such discursive construction EU institutions but also national elites are often blamed not only as inactive or incompetent but also as the real cause of "the burden". These discourses are usually brought about by far right wing parties, which often succeed not only in putting the issue on the political agenda but also in marginalising alternative voices. As observed in Bulgaria, this turns into a very specific pattern of politicisation where salience of the immigration issue is not accompanied by increasing polarisation of opinions but rather by the hegemonisation or mainstreaming – as labelled by Krasteva (2018) – of far-right stances. A valid and powerful response to such alarming trend demands going beyond the historical *cordon sanitaire* towards extreme right wing parties. Indeed, it is also fundamental to call into question the very reasoning and assumptions on which anti-immigrants and anti-European stances hinge upon. Our research also points to the crucial role played by media and social media as echo-chambers and as key drivers of anti-immigrants and anti-European attitudes. An effective political response cannot leave this aspect aside and, accordingly, should delve into a better understanding of how media and social networks feed the scope of these discourses.

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