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## Lessons from the past for future directions: EU's resilience to migration challenges

### *Abstract*

Migration is a continued process that causes both positive and negative effects. This study investigates the EU's resilience to migration challenges taking into consideration a comparative analysis of the European refugee crisis of 2015 and the influx of refugees from Ukraine due to the Russian invasion. On the one hand, the European refugee crisis of 2015 raised doubts about the EU's ability to manage a humanitarian crisis, highlighting the necessity for enhancing its crisis management. However, the EU learned valuable lessons from that crisis, leading to a decrease in illegal border crossings and an improvement of its ability to anticipate future immigration patterns, and its resilience against migration challenges.

**Key words:** EU resilience, migration, refugee crisis, Russian invasion, state stability, Ukraine crisis.

### Introduction

Migration is a continued process that causes both positive and negative effects. In order to describe the nature and intensity of the positive effects and consequences generated by migration, it is necessary to analyze some of the social phenomena and processes encountered between national and migrant communities. The opening of borders by states highlights different patterns of the communities' behavior, including assimilation, accommodation, competition, exclusion and extermination. The pattern of behavior between national and foreign communities brings into question whether migration endangers state stability.

The phenomenon of migration is affecting the European Union in many ways, generating a multitude of crises, and weakening the European economy. The effects felt by the European economy require good coordination between the members of the

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community to manage crises and reduce the economic, social, and political costs. Resolving these internal issues is a critical issue for the European Union in order to maintain its international credibility and influence without risking a significant decline.

This study investigates the EU's resilience to migration challenges taking into consideration a comparative analysis of the European refugee crisis of 2015 and the influx of refugees from Ukraine due to the Russian invasion.

## **Literature review**

Resilience represents the ability of a system or entity to recover after a shock or a disruption, including three main dimensions: resistance, adaptation, and transformation (Martin, 2012; Peng et al., 2017).

From an economic point of view, resilience can be applied to economic structures as regional groups, trade, and monetary unions. From this perspective, Polèse (2010) and Giacometti et al. (2018) considered resilience as the ability to face changes and continue growing in times of crises, including the capacity to anticipate further global trends. Rose and Lim (2002) expanded on the concept, seeing it as the capacity of the individual and of communities to respond and adapt to shocks, including the ability to implement strategies against negative impacts in the aftermath.

From the social perspective, resilience is seen as the community's ability to cope with pressure exerted from social, political, and environmental changes (Adger, 2000). Viewing it as a process, Paton and Hill (2006) believed that social resilience involved continuous learning through self-organization, better experience from past shocks and more efficient crisis management strategies by means of enhancing decision-making capacity to cope with different kinds of shocks. Cho et al. (2011) referred to social resilience as the institutions' ability to respond to crises from two different perspectives. The first is the ability to bounce back, including the recovery from the effects caused by the shock, and the restoration to the initial state. The second involves the bounce forward, involving the capacity to anticipate and prevent negative impacts of potential future shocks.

OECD (2014) presents several types of shocks that influence the overall resilience capacity of state or groups. The most common ones are covariate shocks, affecting nearly everyone, encompassing financial, technological, commodity price, regulatory, and demand-driven shocks. Additionally, they include accidents, wars, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. The second type refers to idiosyncratic shocks that affect individuals and families, while the third encompasses seasonal shocks such as displacement of people, annual floods, and market fluctuations. From these perspectives, migration seems to be a social shock that can affect the social resilience of states.

Migration entails massive flows of people caused by conflicts, wars, natural disasters, political changes, violence, and censorship, changes in human rights policies, or social, cultural, or religious discrimination (Malkki, 1995). Typically, migrants move seeking better economic prospects, whereas refugees flee their countries due to political reasons. One viewpoint emphasizes that migrants are people who leave their homelands to improve their economic and social status, frequently by seeking work, reuniting with family, or pursuing higher education. Although they face no significant barriers to return to their home countries, they frequently opt to stay in the host countries instead. Refugees, in contrast, are people fleeing war, persecution or religious oppression, seeking refuge in other countries. Unlike migrants, refugees are safeguarded by international laws and regulations, while returning to their home countries becomes challenging due to wartime conditions. If they leave their countries of origin, they acquire refugee status, but if they remain within their countries' borders, they are regarded as internally displaced persons (Hein, 1993).

The literature offers varied findings regarding the impacts of migration.

While the local population might initially worry about decreased wages and rising unemployment caused by immigration in the short to medium run, these effects are limited and temporary, particularly if immigrants are rapidly assimilated into the labor force. In this scenario, the fiscal costs resulting from social protection requirements for asylum seekers decrease, concomitant with better budgetary contribution from the new labor force and more efficient management of the fiscal effects resulting from ageing populations (Aiyar et al., 2016). At the same time, migration results in immigrants contributing to the national income and state budget, which helps reduce the budget deficit as they use public services and pay taxes and other duties (Wadsworth et al., 2016). Felbermayr et al. (2010) suggested another positive effect of migration in terms of income *per capita*, showing a 2.2% rise for every 10% increase in the immigrant population.

On the other hand, most concerns regarding immigrants stem from two perspectives: the impact of terrorism and extremism, considering both recent and past migration flows. Firstly, people who were born in Europe and who are descendants of those who migrated in the past perpetrate terrorist and extremist acts. Secondly, there are natives of the European host countries who have converted to Islam because of social inequalities and who are also willing to perform extremist acts. At the same time, local population is concerned about high crime rates and mutations in the cultural identity of the society (Schuurman et al., 2016). Additionally, there are concerns of the local population about the difficulty of finding jobs and accessing public services (Valdaru et al., 2017). Liebig and Mo (2013) noticed that people under social protection were not fully integrated into the labor market and that their contributions to budget revenues were lower. Despite these problems, some scholars argued that the main negative

effects of migration are related to a higher degree of social and political instability, degradation of national culture, economic and labor market tensions, terrorist threats, the burden placed on national social security systems, and the weakening of social cohesion (Huysmans, 2006; Bolt et al., 2012; Lucassen et al., 2012).

Under these conditions, economic and social security can be improved by a stronger integration of social communities and the deepening of mutual relations, reducing inequalities, and supporting the young and the economically and socially vulnerable.

## **Research methodology**

The methodology employed in this paper utilizes a traditional black letter research approach. This approach involves a descriptive and detailed examination in two stages regarding the EU's resilience to migration challenges. The first one includes the collection, systematization, and description of the existing literature regarding resilience and migration, using primary sources such as books and articles to provide a theoretical framework. The second regards comparative analysis of the European refugee crisis of 2015 and the waves of refugees coming from Ukraine because of Russian invasion. For this step, both primary (books and articles) and secondary (newspapers and reports) data is used to provide relevant case studies regarding the EU's resilience to migration challenges.

## **EU's resilience to migration challenges**

In order to understand why immigration is a challenge to the security of the European Union, it is necessary to study the migration flows of the last decade. Table 1 shows the upward trend in the number of immigrants up to 2015, which is considered the first peak of the European immigration crisis. In that year, almost 4.7 million immigrants were registered in the European Union, more than half of them from outside the EU. A second peak happened in 2019, recording almost 4.9 million immigrants and more than 2.8 non-EU immigrants. A decrease was recorded in 2020, which can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, when the mobility of people was restricted, but after 2020, it seems that another upward trend has started. Excluding 2020 and 2021, since 2015, immigrants from the European Union exceeded 4 million annually, more than half of them from outside the EU. From this perspective, we can conclude that the EU has faced multiple waves of immigrants and still needs to improve its social resilience in terms described by Paton and Hill (2006). This means that the EU still needs to improve its self-organization and adopt more efficient crisis management strategies to enhance the capacity to face and limit immigration waves, especially non-EU ones.

**Table 1.** Immigrant flows in the EU from 2013 to 2020 (millions of people)

Year	Immigrants	Non-EU immigrants
2021	3.744	2.154
2020	3.269	1.753
2019	4.897	2.861
2018	4.546	2.552
2017	4.396	2.350
2016	4.282	2.231
2015	4.687	2.571
2014	3.788	1.800
2013	3.417	1.555

Source: Eurostat (2023c).

The immigrants from outside the European Union include people who entered the EU illegally. The number of persons crossing the EU borders illegally both by sea and by land was on the rise until 2015, as shown in Table 2. Therefore, 2015 marked the highest point for illegal entries into the European Union, surpassing 1.8 million individuals, with over 1 million choosing the sea route, proving that the EU was in a severe immigration crisis. Notably, there has been a consistent inclination toward crossing borders via the sea since 2013, with more than half of those illegally entering the EU opting for sea routes.

Measures taken by the European countries reduced the number of people crossing illegally into the EU by two thirds in 2016, with a downward trend in the following years. As a result, between 2018 and 2020, fewer than 150,000 people were crossing the EU border illegally every year, but their number started to increase in 2021. From this point of view, we can observe an improvement in the EU's resilience to illegal border crossings. The EU was able to learn from the past immigration shock of 2015, enhancing its ability to confront migration challenges and better forecast future trends in illegal border crossings. This achievement aligns to some extent with the findings of Rose and Lim (2002) and Giacometti et al. (2018) about resilience. Moreover, it seems that the EU was able to improve its ability to bounce forward, as mentioned by Cho et al. (2011), in terms of social resilience, enabling anticipation and prevention of the negative impact of potential further shocks.

**Table 2.** Illegal border crossings into the EU

Year	Sea	Land	Total
2021	112,616	87,485	200,101
2020	87,390	39,033	126,423
2019	106,246	35,600	141,846
2018	113,643	35,474	149,117
2017	176,211	28,539	204,750
2016	365,295	145,851	511,146
2015*	1,033,093	789,244	1,822,337
2014*	220,194	62,768	282,962
2013*	60,173	47,192	107,365
2012*	23,254	49,183	72,437

Source: Frontex (2022a); (\*) Frontex (2016).

There have also been changes in terms of country origin of people crossing illegally into the European Union. In 2012, most people came from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, and Eritrea, as shown in Table 3, given the wars in Syria and Iraq and the instability in Afghanistan and Eritrea. However, since 2013, most people crossing illegally into the European Union have been coming from Syria, due to the war, but also because of economic reasons, which resulted in more than half a million Syrians in 2015. Alongside them, there have been individuals arriving from Afghanistan, with twice as many coming from Iraq. Furthermore, by 2015, there was an increase in the count of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Pakistan, Kosovo, and Iraq who crossed into the European Union illegally.

Since 2016, there has been a notable decline in the number of individuals illegally entering Europe, particularly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. This trend continues in 2017 and 2018. One exception was Morocco, which was the second most common country of origin, and the other was Afghanistan, which resumed its upward trend in 2018. However, the unexpected factor in 2018 was Turkey. A significant portion of individuals crossing the European Union border originated from the Middle East. In preceding years, these individuals had taken up residence in Turkey before continuing with their journey into Europe. A decrease was recorded in 2020 for people coming from Syria and Afghanistan, which can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, when movement restrictions significantly limited the mobility of people.

Table 3. Illegal border crossings into the EU by top five nationalities

Year	First place	Second place	Third place	Fourth place	Fifth place
2021	Syria (21,581)	Afghanistan (10,089)	Tunisia (13,191)	Morocco (13,498)	Algeria (7,443)
2020	Syria (21,581)	Morocco (17,121)	Algeria (13,247)	Tunisia (13,191)	Afghanistan (10,089)
2019	Afghanistan (34,154)	Syria (24,339)	Morocco (8,020)	Turkey (7,880)	Iraq (6,433)
2018	Syria (14,378)	Morocco (13,498)	Afghanistan (12,666)	Iraq (10,114)	Turkey (8,412)
2017	Syria (19,452)	Morocco (11,279)	Iraq (10,177)	Pakistan (10,015)	Algeria (7,443)
2016	Syria (88,551)	Afghanistan (54,366)	Iraq (32,068)	Pakistan (17,973)	Morocco (6,836)
2015*	Syria (594,059)	Afghanistan (267,485)	Iraq (101,275)	Pakistan (43,314)	Eritrea (40,348)
2014*	Syria (78,764)	Eritrea (34,586)	Afghanistan (22,132)	Kosovo (22,069)	Nigeria (8,715)
2013*	Syria (25,546)	Eritrea (11,298)	Afghanistan (9,494)	Kosovo (6,357)	Somalia (5,624)
2012*	Afghanistan (13,169)	Syria (7,903)	Somalia (5,038)	Pakistan (4,877)	Eritrea (2,604)

Source: Frontex (2022a); (\*) Frontex (2016).

However, immigrant flows from northern Africa continued to increase. Another surprise was Tunisia in 2020 and 2021, which became the third country according to immigrant origins in 2021. Under these conditions, there are differences regarding the top five nationalities involved in illegal border crossings between the immigration crisis of 2015 and the period following it. While Syria and Afghanistan remain primary sources, other nations previously within this top category—Eritrea, Somalia, Pakistan, and Kosovo—have been replaced by Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey.

There are eight routes to access European territory, with the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes and the Western Balkans as the primary ones. In recent years, the significance of Western Africa as a pathway has increased, while the Eastern borders have seen a rise in popularity, particularly due to the Ukrainian war.

Illegal entry of people into Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean route involves crossing the sea border via Cyprus and Greece or using Turkey's land borders with Bulgaria, which is the most common route. The second most frequently used route is from the Western Balkans, specifically its borders with the five European Union member countries: Hungary, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. In practice, as

shown in Table 4, the number of people entering Europe via these routes witnessed an explosion in 2015. The large influx of people crossing the border through this region was facilitated by the cooperation between Germany, Austria, and the Western Balkan countries, EU members such as Slovenia and Croatia, or candidate countries such as Serbia and North Macedonia. In 2015, legislative adjustments in the Balkan countries established them as transit nations for migrant flows. At the same time, Germany decided to examine asylum applications from individuals whose initial entry into the European region was not through German territory. This decision seemed like an invitation from Germany, while other Balkan states allowed asylum seekers access to German territory through the Balkan corridor, facilitating transition to other European destinations by different means of transport (Sardelic, 2017). Measures implemented by European countries—particularly Greece, Hungary, Croatia, as well as Turkey—involved restricting migrant flows, including blocking sea access for vessels carrying migrants—resulted in a decrease in the number of individuals using these routes for illegal entry. The increases continued in the following years, with the Western Balkans becoming more popular among illegal immigrants than the Eastern Mediterranean in the recent years, emerging as the most used route in 2022.

**Table 4.** Illegal border crossings into the EU by routes

Year	Eastern Mediterranean	Western Balkans	Central Mediterranean	Western Mediterranean	Circular Route (Albania-Greece)	Eastern Borders	Western Africa	Black Sea
2022**	42,831	145,600	102,529	14,582	–	6,127	15,462	–
2021	20,572	61,735	67,724	18,466	1,092	8,160	22,351	0
2020	20,283	26,969	35,673	17,228	1,365	677	23,029	0
2019	83,333	15,152	14,003	23,969	1,944	722	2,718	2
2018	56,561	5,869	23,485	56,245	4,550	1,084	1,323	0
2017	42,319	12,179	118,962	23,063	6,396	872	421	537
2016	182,277	130,325	181,376	9,990	5,121	1,384	671	1
2015*	885,386	764,038	153,946	7,164	8,932	1,927	874	68
2014*	50,834	43,357	170,664	7,272	8,841	1,275	276	433
2013*	24,798	19,951	45,298	6,838	8,728	1,316	283	148
2012*	37,224	6,391	15,151	6,397	5,502	1,597	174	1

Source: Frontex (2022a); (\*) Frontex (2016); (\*\*) Frontex (2023).



Instead, measures taken by European countries along the Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean routes led to a redirection of migrant flows toward the Central and Western Mediterranean routes.

On the one hand, the Central Mediterranean has been the main illegal crossing route to the European Union in 2013, 2014, 2017 and in the period between 2020 and 2021, targeting the maritime borders of Italy and Malta. The decrease in migrant flow during 2018 and 2019 along this route resulted from Italy's actions, which involved preventing humanitarian ships from accessing Mediterranean ports.

On the other hand, the significance of the Western Mediterranean, as observed through Spain's maritime and land borders, has expanded notably, not only because of the measures taken by Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean countries, but also because of actions initiated by Italy. Following fluctuations between 2012 and 2015, there was a notable surge in the use of this route in 2017 and 2018. Almost annually, the number of individuals using this route doubled compared to the preceding year, ultimately making it the second most frequented route after the Eastern Mediterranean by 2018-2019.

Other illegal entry routes into Europe have a comparatively lower frequency of use. For instance, the circular route, which uses Greece's land border with Albania and North Macedonia, saw a maximum of 9,000 people between 2012 and 2021, with the majority choosing this route between 2013 and 2015. At the same time, illegal crossings via the Black Sea did not surpass 600 people between 2012 and 2021. In addition, illegal crossings of the EU's eastern borders with nations like Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Russia involved a range of 700 to 2,000 individuals between 2012 and 2020, with the most substantial influxes occurring in 2012 and 2015. However, this route is increasing in significance amid the Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, the West African route, specifically through the Canary Islands, is gaining prominence, becoming the third most utilized route for illegal border crossings in 2020 and 2021.

## **EU in the face of Ukrainian war**

Beginning in February 2022, the Ukrainian war prompted massive migrations of the Ukrainian people to European countries. Within a few months, more than 9.5 million refugees fled Ukraine toward the EU, with more than 8.5 million being Ukrainian nationals. Most notably, heightened migration activity was recorded at Polish and Romanian borders, while over 4.1 million individuals registered for temporary protection within the EU (Frontex, 2022b). The peak in asylum requests occurred in March 2022, immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. EU protection of Ukrainian refugees

Asylum applicants (persons)					Temporary protection (millions of persons) *
Month	EU-27	First place	Second place	Third place	
January 23	1,055	Estonia (535)	Italy (135)	Poland (125)	0.097
December 22	970	Estonia (380)	Italy (145)	France (105)	0.105
November 22	1,140	Estonia (445)	Netherlands (145)	Italy (130)	0.135
October 22	1,145	Estonia (485)	Netherlands (150)	Italy (125)	0.159
September 22	1,065	Estonia (325)	Italy (235)	Netherlands (120)	0.178
August 22	1,155	Estonia (355)	Italy (165)	Netherlands (120)	0.215
July 22	1,140	Italy (275)	Estonia (250)	Sweden (120)	0.148
June 22	1,200	Italy (315)	Sweden (175)	France (140)	0.185
May 22	1,670	Italy (535)	Sweden (215)	Netherlands (205)	0.329
April 22	1,755	Italy (500)	France (320)	Germany (165)	0.790
March 22	12,770	Romania (3,605)	Denmark (1,935)	Finland (1,520)	1.248
February 22	2,220	Romania (715)	Poland (165)	Belgium (145)	-
January 22	425	Germany (110)	France (75)	Italy (50)	-

Source: Eurostat (2023a); (\*) Eurostat (2023b).

In this context, Romania emerged as the EU country with the most asylum applications, followed by Denmark, Finland, and Poland. In the following months, the number of asylum applications remained consistently above 1,000, with December 2022 being the sole exception. At the same time, changes in the top three countries where asylum seekers applied suggested a shift among Ukrainian refugees toward other EU nations, especially those not directly bordering Ukraine.

Regarding temporary protection, the highest number of persons was recorded in the aftermath of Russia's invasion, reaching almost 1.3 million people in March 2022 and nearly 800,000 people in April 2022. However, in the following years, the number of people under temporary protection did not surpass 330,000, marking a decline from August 2022 onwards. Throughout the entire period, Poland provided temporary protection to nearly 28,500 Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, marking the highest count, followed by Germany (28,205), Romania (nearly 9,000) and Spain

(4,250). However, the demand for temporary protection declined across 21 EU nations, notably in Poland, which saw a decrease of 3,415 individuals compared to December 2022, alongside reductions in Romania by 2,305 people, as well as Italy and Ireland, both with decreases of 2,000 individuals (Eurostat, 2023b). At the same time, almost 5.8 million Ukrainians were recorded leaving the EU and returning to Ukraine. However, future migration flows depend on the conflict's progression, with potential economic contractions and the degradation of agricultural land and infrastructure possibly encouraging more individuals to seek entry into the EU. At the same time, there is an increased likelihood of rising risks associated with fraudulent documentation use for illegal border crossings (Frontex, 2022b).

## Conclusions

The concept of mass immigration was viewed as an economic advantage capable of addressing Europe's aging population issue. Providing a young and affordable labor force through immigration was seen as beneficial for Europe, often leading to the neglect of potential challenges related to migration, including economic, cultural, and social complexities.

The European refugee crisis of 2015 called into question the EU's ability to cope with a humanitarian crisis and to make right and effective decisions. In terms of resilience, this crisis proved that the EU still needed to improve its management by adopting more efficient crisis strategies to enhance its capacity to face and reduce immigration flows, especially non-EU ones. A major step has been made in terms of illegal border crossings. From this perspective, the EU learned from the refugee crisis of 2015 and was able to improve its resilience. In the following years, the EU managed to reduce the number of illegal border crossings. However, there is still space for progress, especially in terms of routes used by illegal immigrants, such as the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, as well as Western Balkans.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine served as an opportunity to test the EU's ability to handle migration challenges and apply lessons from the 2015 European refugee crisis. Over the past year, the significance of the Eastern borders has gained more importance due to the Ukrainian conflict. There are concerns that the Russian invasion could prompt one of the largest and fastest refugee movements, potentially impacting Europe's stability in a manner similar to the effects witnessed during the 2015 European refugee crisis. Nevertheless, it seems that the EU improved its capacity to anticipate further immigration trends and was able to face this migration challenge. The EU demonstrated a better management of the situation caused by the influx of refugees from Ukraine than it did during the refugee crisis of 2015. The public was more receptive toward people fleeing Ukraine than to immigrants coming from

Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Despite this progress, migration remains an acute crisis in the European mindset, stemming from the refugee crisis of 2015. This underscores the ongoing necessity for coordination among EU members to enhance the EU's social resilience and its capability to anticipate and prevent the negative effects of potential future shocks.

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## Lekcije iz prošlosti za buduće smjerove: Otpornost EU-a na izazove migracija *Sažetak*

Migracije podrazumijevaju kontinuirani proces koji izaziva i pozitivne i negativne učinke. Ovo istraživanje ispituje otpornost EU-a na izazove migracija uzimajući u obzir komparativnu analizu europske izbjegličke krize iz 2015. godine i priljeva izbjeglica iz Ukrajine zbog ruske invazije. S jedne strane europska izbjeglička kriza iz 2015. godine dovela je u pitanje sposobnost EU-a da upravlja humanitarnom krizom i pokazala potrebu za unaprjeđenjem upravljanja krizama. Međutim EU je iz te krize izvukla vrijedne lekcije, što je rezultiralo smanjenjem ilegalnih prelazaka granica i poboljšanjem sposobnosti predviđanja budućih obrazaca imigracija te njezinom otpornosti na izazove migracija.

**Ključne riječi:** otpornost EU-a, migracije, izbjeglička kriza, ruska invazija, stabilnost države, ukrajinska kriza.