



A Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on Europe: A retrospective study of its political, social, and economic consequences on the European States

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Syrian refugee crisis unfolded and its impact on European countries, socially, politically, culturally, and economically. Evaluating the socio-economic impact of large-scale refugee migration on the European Union offers readers important insights into the positive impact on the EU, rather than populist ideas advanced by some European leaders. The European leaders are more worried about the dilutions of their cultural identity vis-à-vis refugees' cultural identity. The rise of far-right parties in several European countries is a perfect example of this cultural identity dilemma. The fiscal burden, security threat, and European integration are at stake with the arrival of refugees to the EU, as leaders have propagated, but the real assessment of the refugee issue must be based on facts and data rather than propaganda.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, European Countries, immigrants, populism, socio-economic impact

Introduction

Much has been written about the Syrian Refugee crisis, how it unfolded in the first place, the reasons behind it, and its impact on European countries: politically, socially, and economically. Most of the writing highlighted negative aspects of the Syrian refugees in European countries. This paper focuses on the positive aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis for European countries and on how they would benefit from it if it were well managed. Before directly jumping into the Refugee crisis and its impact. It's prudent to look into Syria's brief history, how it was created, and whether the current crisis is associated with its formation. History will guide us in understanding the facts, their rulers, and the governance structures that maintained authority over the Syrian people. After the First World War, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Levant region was divided among the victorious powers, Britain and France, under the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 (Hof, 2014).

From there onwards, France, which controlled Greater Syria, mandated the nation-state-building process, which began in the 1920s and 1930s. But the mandate power failed to build a Nation-State project and withdrew from Syria in 1943, ending the mandate system. The end of the British and French mandates led to the creation of three new Arab states—Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq—marked by conflicting nationalisms and identities (Schmierer, 2020). After that, in the 1950s and 1960s, under the wave of Arab nationalism and socialism initiated by Gamal Abdel Nasser, which spread throughout the Arab region, Syria also came under the influence of socialism and formed the Ba'ath party. The Ba'ath party followed both Arab nationalism and socialism to strengthen its political control over Syria, but due to repeated coups by the military and a lack of strong leadership, it resulted in a debilitating state (Ottaway, David and Marina, 2019) ^[1]. After the 1970 coup of the Syrian military under the strong leadership of Hafez al-Assad, the Alawite minority, which belonged to the Alawite minority, came to power and from there onwards started a new era in Syrian Politics and continued till the end of 2000 when power was transferred from father to son, Bashar al-Assad

(Hylton, 2021) ^[2]. Hafez al-Assad initiated the nation-building process through an authoritarian style and, at the same time, sought to forge Shia-Sunni bonds to stabilise the country (Ottaway, David and Marina, 2019) ^[4]. During this period, Syria achieved some success in maintaining stability and, to some extent, prospered economically.

When Bashar al-Assad took the leadership role from his father in 2000. He started modernising the economy by moving away from the socialist model toward a more liberal one, privatising state-controlled enterprises. But the privatisation concentrated in the hands of the elite class in Syrian society, and the common people did not reap the fruits of the economic transformation. He ended some welfare and subsidy measures that directly impacted common people, both in urban and rural areas. A record-setting drought from 2006 to 2010 exacerbated socioeconomic problems. Mismanaged farmland was rendered fallow, and farmers migrated to cities in ever-larger numbers, causing the unemployment rate to surge (Laub Zachary, 2021) ^[2]. At the end of 2010, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and rapidly spread to other Arab countries, including Syria. From there onwards, the Syrian political crisis turned into civil war. As a result, 7 million of the total population (22 million) are internally displaced, and another 5 million have migrated from Syria to neighbouring countries and to European countries (Pappavaselio, 2026) ^[27]. More than 1 million Syrians migrated to European countries via land and sea routes. Rapid influx of refugees in the European countries from Syria has impacted many European countries in diverse fields such as political, social, and Economical (Hudson, 2018) ^[21].

Syrian Refugee crisis and its Socio-Political impact on European countries

The influx of a large number of refugees into European countries has generated significant social and political tensions, leading to a rise in xenophobic attitudes, hate crimes, and anti-immigrant sentiments (Balla, 2023). These concerns have been exacerbated by far-right political leaders

who capitalise on public fears related to employment, welfare distribution, and cultural integration (Valenzuela, 2016) ^[23]. For instance, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has explicitly stated that Europe must keep Muslims out to "keep Europe Christian" (Onghena, 2015) ^[10]. Similarly, Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), has described the arrival of Muslim refugees as an "Islamist tsunami," warning that such an influx threatens the national identity and safety of native Europeans (Onghena, 2015) ^[5]. Such rhetoric has contributed to heightened fear and resentment, ultimately manifesting in increased hate crimes and intolerance across European societies.

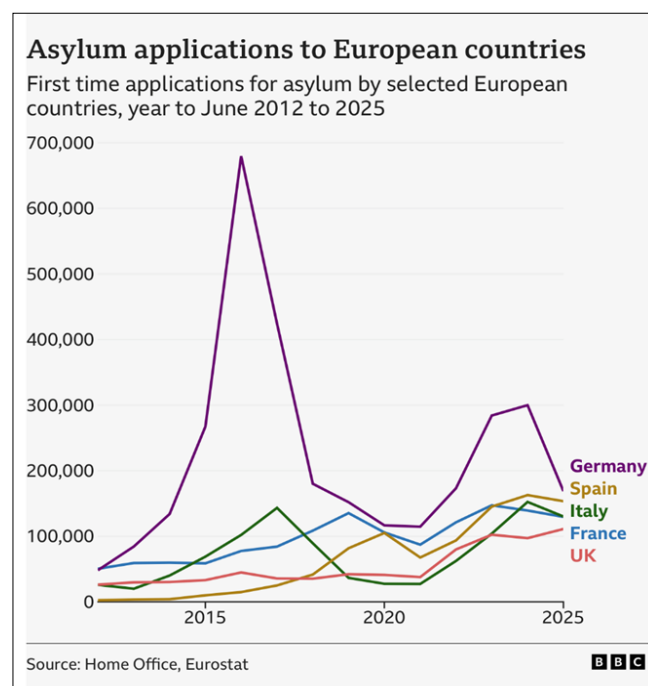
The UK Home Office report titled *Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2015/2016* ^[13, 23] highlighted that religiously motivated hate crimes constituted the third highest category, with 4,400 recorded incidents during that period (Home Office, 2016) ^[23]. Similarly, according to the Guardian, in 2015^[17] (until September), "the German interior ministry had recorded 336 assaults on refugee shelters over 100 more than in the whole of 2014. The majority of these attacks had a right-wing motive" (Brady, 2017) ^[12]. This rise in hate crimes is indicative of the growing hostility toward religious minorities, particularly Muslims, following the mass migration of Syrian refugees. According to the European Migration Council, 1.3 million Syrians requested asylum in Europe, with the peak in 2015–2016 ^[9, 23] and a significant decline since then. Germany accounts for the majority of Syrian refugees in Europe (57%), followed by Sweden (31%), Hungary (31%), Austria (31%), the Netherlands (12%), and Bulgaria (12%) in the remaining 37 European countries. Graph 2 below shows the extent of Syrian refugees registered in neighbouring countries and the number of their asylum-seeking applications in European countries. European societies, already sceptical of cultural and religious differences, often perceive these refugees as a challenge to core European values such as tolerance, democracy, the rule of law, and liberalism (Huntington, 1996). Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis provides a framework for understanding this perception, as many Europeans view the presence of Muslim refugees through the lens of Islamic fundamentalism and potential security threats. This narrative has been instrumental in strengthening far-right and anti-immigrant political parties across Europe, as they leverage public concerns to gain political influence (The Guardian, 2015) ^[17].

The rise of populism across European nations further substantiates the impact of anti-immigrant sentiments on political dynamics. Marine Le Pen, leader of France's National Front, has rallied behind anti-Islam rhetoric, advocating policies such as the "burka ban" in an effort to align national identity with secularism and security concerns (The New York Times, 2015) ^[16]. Similarly, Viktor Orbán has been a vocal critic of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's open-door policy for refugees, arguing that European identity is intrinsically tied to Christianity and must be preserved (The New York Times, 2015) ^[16]. This sentiment has been echoed in Germany, where the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has gained electoral momentum by campaigning against immigration and refugee policies (Brady, 2017) ^[3].

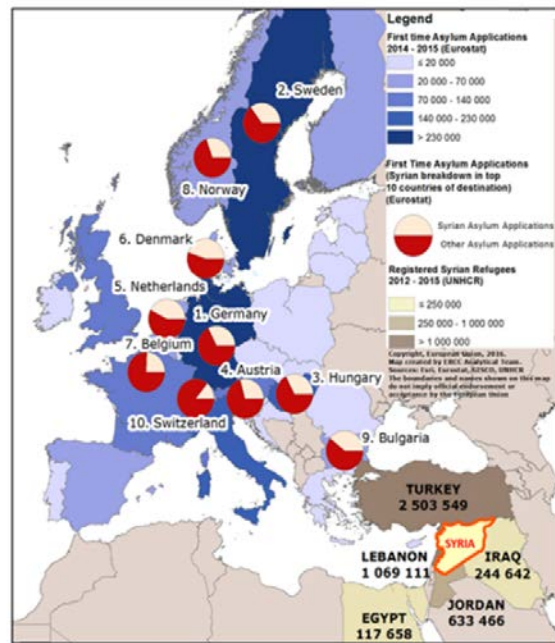
Further evidence of the increasing hostility toward Muslim refugees can be observed in Sweden, where riots erupted following an incident in which a far-right political leader publicly burned the Quran. Such acts of religious

provocation, coupled with inflammatory political rhetoric, have fueled negative public perceptions and discriminatory behaviours against immigrants and refugees (Brady, 2017) ^[3]. The correlation between anti-immigrant discourse and the rise in hate crimes underscores the pressing need for comprehensive policies that address integration challenges while countering xenophobic and extremist narratives.

Because of the refugee crisis in Europe, European countries disagree on the policy of immigration and the issues of refugee settlements and the quota system. This issue created friction among European Union countries, thereby threatening the free movement of people across the continent under the Schengen system (Associated Press, 2018) ^[24]. To understand the level of friction, consider the case of Brexit: the United Kingdom left the European Union due to issues with immigration and open-border policy. Contrasting actions in EU member states regarding the Syrian refugee crisis have caused a lack of consensus within the EU. As a result, the EU's political structure has become more fragile. Some countries, such as Austria and some of the Balkans, have refused to adopt inclusive policies towards refugees and migrants. For instance, in June 2016 ^[23], the Austrian parliament passed controversial legislation paving the way for tougher asylum measures. It includes, for example, an accelerated process for assessing potential asylum claims under which migrants could be turned away at the border. Austria also planned to build a fence at the border with Italy to keep out migrants (Karacan, 2016) ^[23]. The graph below highlights asylum applications to European countries from 2012 to 2025 ^[11]. It clearly indicates that Germany is the largest recipient of asylum seeker applications because of its liberal immigration and asylum policies as compared to other European countries. The refugee issue destabilised politics in many European countries; Brexit is one such example. And after decades on, migration fears have become one of the biggest political issues in many European countries. There are many reasons, varying from country to country, but fears about security, shaky economies and disillusionment with political parties have all contributed greatly to attitudes towards immigrants fleeing hunger, conflict and poverty (Keane, 2025).



Graph 2. Syrians in neighbouring countries and Europe



Syrian Refugee crisis and its Economic impact on European countries

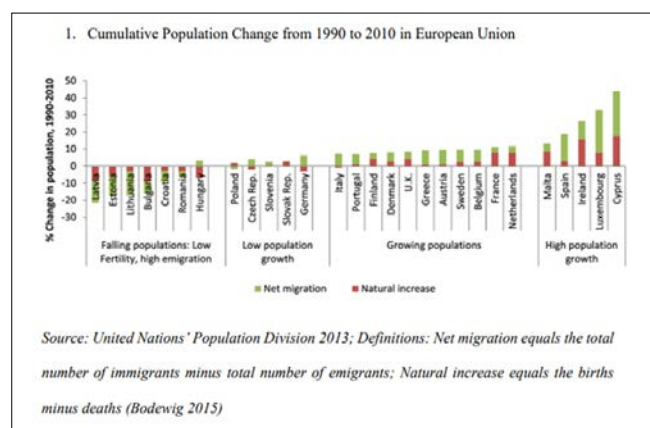
The Syrian refugee crisis and its economic impact on European countries differ from country to country. Take the case of Germany, which is the largest economy in Europe and, because of its economic clout, has the capacity to absorb refugees and issue them work permits. An interesting fact is that by the end of 2025^[11], the unemployment rate among the refugees will have been declining since 2015 (Hille *et al.*, 2025)^[5, 11]. Author Derya Buyuktanir Karacan (2019)^[4] compare Hungary and Germany to analyse the impacts of Syrian refugees on the economy of both countries. Germany is the largest economy in the Eurozone and also has liberal immigration laws. The GDP report indicates that the refugees may not pose a significant burden on the stronger German economy, while Hungary, with a relatively weaker economy, may be more concerned about housing costs, feeding, and the social and economic integration of refugees. Therefore, the Hungarian government must carefully project the costs of accepting an increasing number of migrants and refugees. On the other hand, both Germany and Hungary need these refugees due to recent demographic changes (Morillas *et al.*, 2015)^[5]. Germany has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, 1.50 live births per woman. At the same time, the population is ageing. So, in the coming decade, in that sense, Syrian refugees may benefit the country. It will increase the active labour force participation in the economy, which is essential for Germany's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth rate (Badwi, 2026)^[26]. On the other hand, Hungary also has one of the lowest fertility rates, but due to a weak economy and restrictive immigration policy, it makes it difficult to absorb the large number of Syrian refugees. They associate each and all refugees and migrants with socio-economic problems in their country. They fear that Syrian refugees, when they seek asylum in their country, will increase the fiscal burden, which may result in the rise of taxes, housing shortage, reduction of salary in the low-paid jobs, crimes

may rise and most importantly, they see these refugees as a threat to their Christian identity and culture (Zanfrini, 2022). It resulted in growing xenophobia and racism on the basis of religion against the Syrian refugees and other immigrants. Furthermore, since the 9/11 and following attacks in some countries such as Spain, the UK, and France, they have been perceived as a security issue with regard to terrorism. In this regard, refugees and migrants can be perceived as one of the agents that have changed the perception of threat and the security instruments of the member states and the EU (Alhaffar & Janos, 2021)^[6]. There is no data or statistics to support the claim that these refugees are the cause of the above-mentioned perceived problems among native Europeans. The interesting fact is that most of the crimes are committed by the natives, not by the refugees.

The most important question before us is whether these refugees turn out to be a financial burden or an opportunity for these countries. Previous case studies have shown that receiving refugees has boosted the host country's GDP because refugees' arrival increases aggregate demand for goods and services. At the same time, the government must increase public expenditure on housing, medical facilities, skills training, food, etc. All these activities will result in an expansionary fiscal policy, boosting growth. The OECD, Economic Outlook (OECD, 2015) estimates that, in 2016 and 2017^[12, 23, 28], these additional fiscal measures will provide a boost to aggregate demand of about 0.1-0.2% of GDP in European economies. Take another example of Lebanon, who host large number of refugees from the neighbouring war-torn countries. These refugees help the Lebanese economy grow by creating demand for local products, which, in turn, supports the small-scale industries that need to continue production. World Bank data estimates that a 1 per cent increase in refugees raises sales of Lebanese goods and services by 1.5 per cent. Similarly, in the 1990s, Tanzania welcomed refugees from Burundi and Rwanda fleeing war in their countries (Cali and Sekkarie, 2015)^[7].

European countries should take a cue from these case studies and start rethinking how to reintegrate these refugees, as Germany has done in its labour market, according to their abilities and skills, rather than viewing them as a security threat (Badwi, 2026)^[26]. To do that, the private sector, government agencies, and civil society must come together to provide the necessary skills to refugees who lack them and to help them integrate into the economy. According to a report by the European Commission, the incoming refugees are likely to increase GDP by 0.2-0.3 per cent above the baseline by 2020 (Chadwick and von der Burchard, 2015)^[5]. In many European countries, the ageing population is rising, and fertility rates are also low. This will impose a fiscal burden on many European countries in the coming decades, particularly for pensions, medical care, and old-age care facilities. By 2030, the working population is expected to be 28.9 million fewer and pensioners 27.9 million more (Legrain, 2015)^[9]. The following charts show cumulative population change from 1990 to 2010. Therefore, accepting refugees is beneficial for most European countries, especially those where workforce participation is declining due to an ageing population and low fertility rates. On the other hand, the local workforce is worried that unemployment could rise due to the influx of refugees because they would compete for the same jobs. Common citizens perceived that it would result in lower

wages and job losses for local citizens. But the reality is that, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the introduction of refugees in the labour market displaces the native workers with low educational backgrounds or in the agricultural sector. Consequently, more native workers hold better-paid formal jobs.



Conclusion

In conclusion, European countries should adopt a more open and transparent policy in absorbing Syrian and other refugees. As projected by the monolithic debate by the media and other far-right political parties, the negative aspects of refugees are baseless. In fact, most European countries will benefit in the long term due to demographic decline and an ageing population in the coming decades. These refugees will be an engine of growth for these European countries if provided with the necessary skills and training, and will try to reintegrate into society as soon as possible. It's a need of the hour for the European countries to stand by their own moral and legal principles, which they included while forming the European Union. Closing one's eyes when it comes to the issue of refugees will not solve the refugee problem. It's high time for Europe to follow more coherent and inclusive immigration policies towards refugees (be it respecting human rights, liberty, equality, non-discrimination, freedom of speech, and the rule of law) when it comes to refugees.

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