

2 Public attitudes to immigration and asylum policy preferences in the EU

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A key goal of MEDAM is to identify the opportunities for, and obstacles to more effective and sustainable common EU policy making in the area of asylum and migration. We argue that a better understanding of Europeans' public attitudes to immigration and asylum policies—how they vary across individuals and countries, how they have changed over time, and their causes and consequences—is of critical importance to promoting more cooperative and effective policy approaches among EU member states.

There are at least three interrelated reasons why it is important, from a policy perspective, to study public attitudes to migrants and public policy preferences vis-à-vis asylum and migration policies. First, public attitudes and policy preferences can—and often do—play an important role in the politics of migration, and in public policy making more generally. We know from existing research that migration and other public policies are not only determined by 'interests' (such as the economic interests of employers) and 'institutions' (such as national parliamentary systems and welfare states), but also by 'ideas,' including people's fundamental normative beliefs, values, and public attitudes. Understanding public attitudes is thus essential to help both explain current and past migration policies, and identify realistic opportunities for achieving more cooperative policies on migration across member states within the EU, and also between the EU and other countries.

A second and related reason stems from the political legitimacy and sustainability of public policies in liberal democracies. There can be many legal and moral reasons—such as the requirements of existing international laws or a perceived moral duty to offer protection to people in need—why public policies should not always follow public attitudes. It is also clear, however, that sustainable asylum and migration policies require at least a degree of public support. Misunderstanding the characteristics and causes of the public's support or opposition to different types of migration and migration policies, especially of their (alleged or real) changes over time, can contribute to policy responses that do not actually deal with the real issues driving public views and that, therefore, may ultimately prove unsustainable.

Many of the asylum and migration policy changes proposed or made in EU member states in recent years have been explicitly based on the argument that these new policies are needed because 'the public wants them' and 'they are necessary to win back public trust and confidence' in national governments. For example, the Austrian-Danish vision paper published in 2018 proposed to reduce radically opportunities to apply for asylum in Europe in order to restore public trust in government.² It is an important task for research to scrutinize these arguments made by politicians in different EU member states, and to provide greater clarity on what the available data on public attitudes do and do not say about public concerns related to migrants and refugees.

One specific issue that remains poorly understood, but which is particularly important for policy debates and policy making, is what people think about asylum and migration policies. All asylum and migration *policies* are multidimensional in the sense that they require multiple policy decisions, on different aspects of the overall policy package, at the same time. For example, asylum and refugee policies are not only about admitting 'fewer or more refugees' but also about other matters:

- how to regulate the assessment of asylum applications;
- what employment and welfare rights to grant to asylum seekers and recognized refugees;
- what to do with people whose applications for asylum are refused;
- whether and how to help first countries of asylum near conflict zones;
- the admission of refugees who are resettled directly from conflict zones; and
- the role of the EU in all these processes and decisions.

Most existing research focuses on public attitudes to migration rather than migration policies. As a consequence, we know very little about people's attitudes to the various different components of asylum and migration policies, which policy aspects generate the most support or opposition, or about how they would

¹ The team writing this chapter included Martin Ruhs, Esther Ademmer, Rezart Hoxhaj, Anne-Marie Jeannet, Tobias Stöhr and Carolina Zuccotti.

² See Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 'Vision for a Better Protection System in a Globalized World,' Vienna and Copenhagen, October 2018, <http://uim.dk/filer/nyheder2018/vision-for-a-better-protection-system-in-a-globalized-world.pdf>.

view trade-offs and prioritize between competing policy objectives.

A third reason why a better understanding of public attitudes and policy preferences is critical to improved policy making relates to the challenge of designing sustainable *common* migration policy approaches across the EU. Almost five years after the large inflows of asylum seekers and other migrants during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015–16, member states remain deeply divided about how to reform and rebuild Europe’s asylum, refugee, and migration policies. Some member states see the solution to the immigration challenge as lying in ‘more Europe’ (e.g., through centralization of the EU asylum system) and ‘greater solidarity’ among member states (e.g., through redistribution of refugees across countries). Other member states appear to have given up waiting on EU policy reform and instead pursued national or transnational policy responses, involving just a few ‘like-minded’ EU member states (e.g., joint measures by Austria and nine Balkan states in 2016 to help ‘close down’ the Western Balkan route,

and proposals by Austria and Denmark to limit severely the right to apply for asylum in Europe). This has further deepened divisions and raised profound questions not only about the meaning of ‘solidarity’ in Europe but also about the future of the EU and its ability to find common ground on a fundamental and, some would argue, existential policy challenge.

To find an effective and sustainable new EU policy approach to asylum and migration we need to understand how and why public attitudes to migration and migration policies differ across individuals and countries, and what role these differences play in the politics of migration across EU member states. Cross-country differences in attitudes that are due to underlying structural factors that cannot be changed in the short run can have notable implications for how to design common EU policies on asylum and migration. Arguably, policy debates in recent years have not paid enough attention to these potential variations across EU member states, or the implications for common policy making.

Figure 1 Average attitudes in EU member states included in all ESS waves, 2002–17



Source: Ademmer and Stöhr 2018a.

Notes: The sample is restricted to those states that are EU members as of 2018 and have been surveyed in each European Social Survey (ESS) wave to prevent EU averages from being skewed by the accession of new member states. Averages are calculated using ESS weights to control for the probability of being sampled for the survey within an individual country and the population size of the country. The averages are thus representative of the population distribution within the country and the population of EU countries covered here. The answer scale runs from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates the most positive assessment. Some EU countries are not covered in the graphs because the question has not been continuously asked in them.

Insight #1: Attitudes to immigration have remained fairly stable across most European countries, but the perceived importance of migration as a public policy issue has increased.

There is a common perception in policy debates that the large increase in the numbers of asylum seekers and other migrants arriving in Europe during 2015 and 2016 has led to a marked change in public attitudes to immigration across EU member states, making them more negative. This alleged change in public sentiments toward migrants and refugees has frequently been used to justify changes to asylum and refugee policies at both national and EU levels.

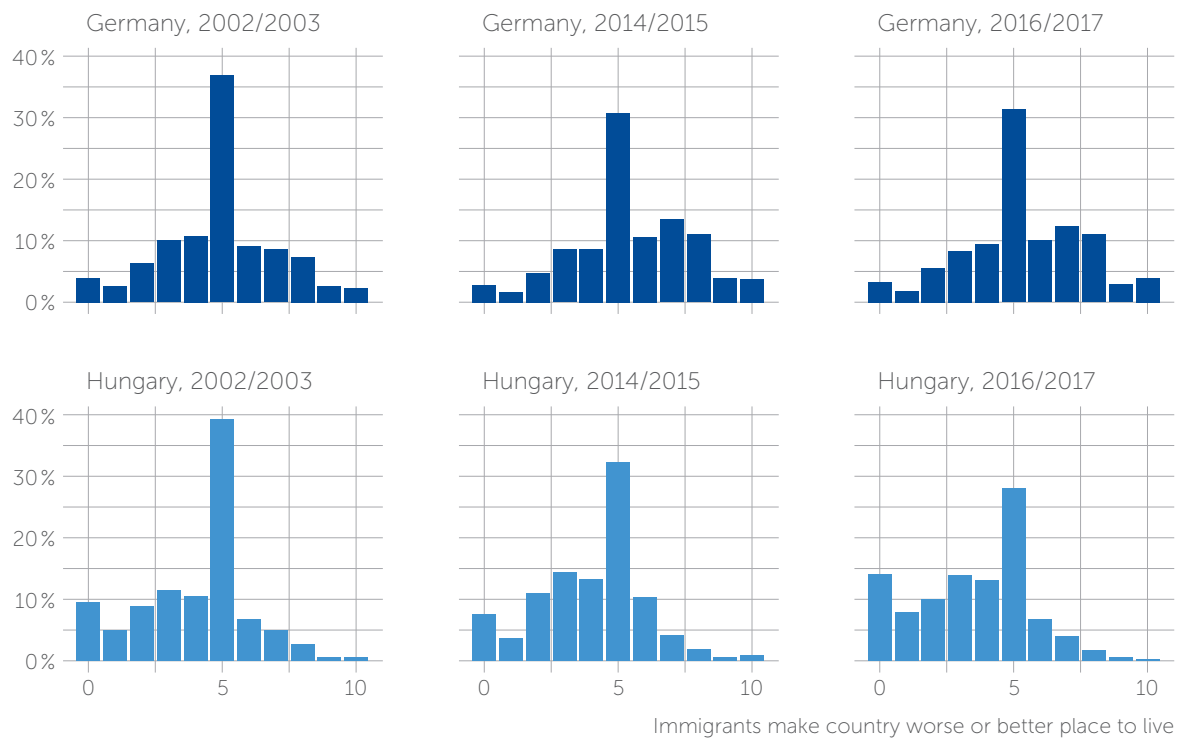
There is no evidence to support the idea that Europeans have turned against immigration in recent years. Attitudes have been surprisingly stable and turned more positive toward migrants in many EU countries, with few exceptions. As shown in figure 1, survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for 13 EU member states suggest that Europeans assess the impact of immigration on their country and its economy and culture in a more positive light than they did in 2002—even in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee inflow. Hungary is a prominent exception. Public perceptions of the impacts of immigration vary relatively little across these EU member states.

On average, people are rather agnostic about the overall impact of migrants on their economies and societies.

While there has been no widespread turn against immigration, in some EU countries public attitudes have become more polarized. In other words, many people now hold stronger views about immigration and its impacts than they did in 2002. This is the case, for example, in Germany and Hungary (see figure 2).

Another significant change in attitudes to immigration that has occurred over the past few years relates to the salience of immigration as a public policy issue. Salience is not about positive or negative views on a particular issue, but about the relative importance of the issue to respondents. Public opinion data suggest a rapid increase in the salience of immigration during 2015–16 in many European countries and research suggests that this surge has positively affected electoral support for populist right parties (Dennison 2019; Dennison and Geddes 2018). The growing salience of immigration suggested by data on public attitudes is confirmed by MEDAM analysis of how migrants and refugees are discussed in social media. Social media is ever more used as a platform for immigration debates. The so-called refugee crisis dramatically multiplied the number of people discussing migration issues online (see figure 3).

Figure 2 Polarization within Hungary and Germany over time

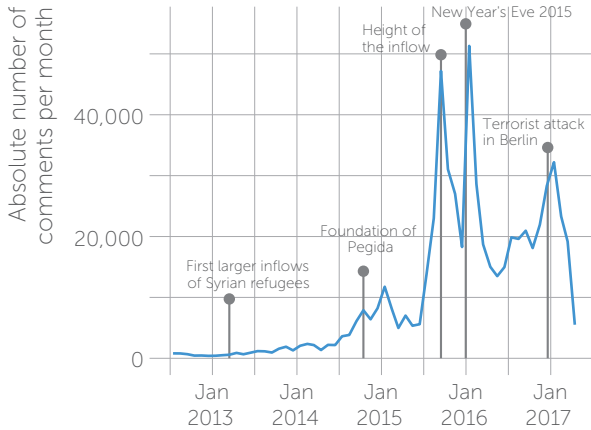


Source: Ademmer and Stöhr 2018a.

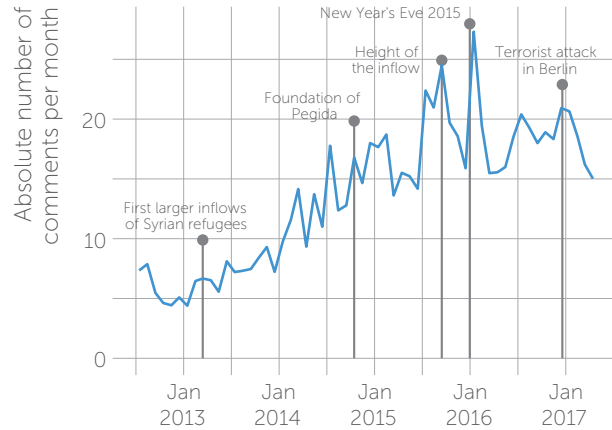
Note: Respondents were asked whether immigrants make a country a better or worse place to live in. The answer 0 indicates “much worse,” 5 “neither worse nor better,” and 10 “much better.” Survey responses adjusted for sampling probability.

Figure 3 Facebook comments on migration-related articles in German regional newspapers, 2012–2017

a. Facebook user comments under articles on migration and asylum posted by German regional newspapers on Facebook



b. Number of unique Facebook commenters under articles on migration and asylum posted by German regional newspapers on Facebook



Source: Ademmer and Stöhr 2018b.

What are the implications of these changes for national and EU policies on asylum and refugees? First, although public attitudes to immigration have not become more negative in recent years, the increasing salience of the issue and the polarization of attitudes in many countries have compounded the policy constraints for policy makers. A basic but key implication is that, to respond effectively to changes in public attitudes over the past few years, policy makers need to be focused on the actual changes that have taken place, i.e., changes in degrees of polarization and salience rather than in sentiments toward migrants. In particular, there is an urgent need to consider the causes of the increasing salience of immigration as a policy issue, especially among those parts of the population with negative views on immigration. The rising scale of immigration is likely to be a factor, but so is the perceived loss of control over borders during 2015–16. It is also important to reflect critically on various processes of politicization of migrants and refugees in domestic policy debates.

A second, related implication concerns political narratives and communication. Politicians who wish to respond to the growing salience of immigration, including among people with negative views of migrants, need to use words and language that are relevant to the values and beliefs of people holding those views (see Dennison and Geddes 2018). Increases in the salience of immigration often coincide with periods when there is a perceived loss of control over immigration. Policy narratives need to include the language of ‘control’, but without suggesting that all aspects of immigration can be controlled (which would be an unrealistic

expectation and thus constitute a counterproductive policy strategy).

Insight #2: Attitudes to immigration tend to be more positive in local areas with greater shares of migrants. However, this relationship is influenced by the socioeconomic context: as the socioeconomic conditions of local areas worsen (e.g., with higher unemployment rates and lower incomes per capita), the positive effects of the share of migrants on attitudes become smaller and they eventually disappear in the most deprived areas.

How are people’s attitudes to immigration linked to the share of migrants in the local population of a particular area? Does an increase in the physical presence of migrants—on the streets, in the neighborhoods, at work, on the bus, at school—exert a positive or a negative effect on how the majoritarian populations perceive migrants? These are important questions not only for research but also for public policy debates about, for example, whether and how asylum seekers or refugees should be distributed across different local areas within and across EU countries.

In theory, the impact of the presence of migrants on attitudes to immigration in a particular area may be shaped by two potentially competing forces. On the one hand, a higher share of migrants in the local population may promote greater contact with pre-existing residents and thus encourage mutual understanding and more positive attitudes toward immigration (‘contact theory’). On the other hand, a higher share of migrants may create feelings of increased threat asso-

ciated with the development of different types of fears, such as intensified competition for jobs and more pressures on public services ('threat theory'). Given these potentially counteracting forces, the actual relationship between the concentration of migrants and attitudes to immigration is a central question for empirical research.

Most existing studies have found that individuals who reside in neighborhoods or small areas (i.e., provinces or small regions) with a higher migrant concentration have, in general, more positive views toward immigration compared with individuals who live in areas with a lower concentration. These findings are typically explained with reference to contact theory. Yet, with few exceptions, most of these studies have disregarded the complexities of the environment in which individuals live, including the socioeconomic context in which contacts with migrants occur.

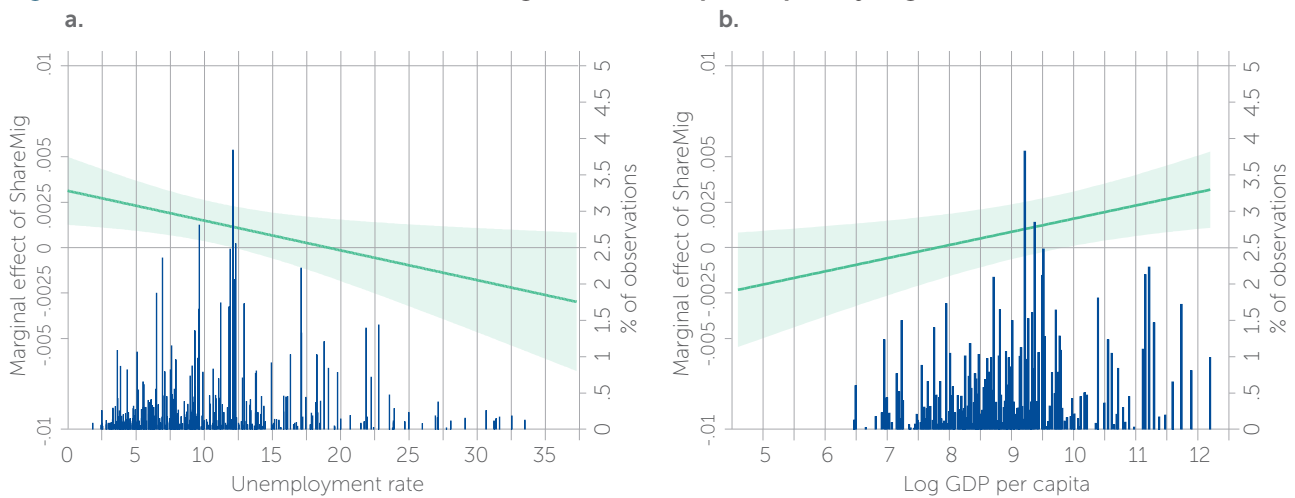
It is important to ask whether and how the socioeconomic characteristics of an area might affect the relationship between the share of migrants and attitudes to immigration. In practice, contact and threat might coexist but the extent to which one of the two theories prevails is likely to be related to the conditions under which such contact or exposure occurs. While an increase of immigrants in poor areas does not necessarily mean that attitudes toward immigration will worsen, poor socioeconomic conditions may discourage the development of positive attitudes. Conversely, contexts where social exchanges occur with less competition for resources are more likely to enhance positive attitudes to immigration.

To shed light on these crucial questions, MEDAM research (Hoxhaj and Zuccotti 2019) has investigated whether and how the relationship between the presence of migrants and individuals' attitudes toward migrants is influenced by the socioeconomic characteristics of the area (as measured by local unemployment rates and income per capita). In line with the existing research literature, this new research finds that individuals who reside in areas with a higher share of migrants have, in general, a more positive attitude towards them (figure 4 illustrates the positive estimated effect of the migrant share when unemployment is low or per capita income high). However, this estimated effect is conditioned by the socioeconomic context: The positive marginal effect of the migrant share on attitudes decreases as socioeconomic conditions worsen.

Nevertheless, even in areas where one would expect threat mechanisms to occur to the greatest extent—i.e., areas with the poorest socioeconomic conditions, where competition for public services and jobs is probably the highest—an increase in the migrant share does not significantly worsen individuals' attitudes towards migrants: When the unemployment rate is above 12.5 percent (panel a) or log GDP per capita below 9.5 (€13,360; panel b), the 'zero line' lies within the boundaries of the confidence intervals around the estimated effects, meaning that the estimated effects are not statistically different from zero.

These new research findings have implications for national and EU debates and for policy making on migration, especially related to policies that aim to distribute asylum seekers and refugees across different

Figure 4 How are attitudes toward immigrants in Europe shaped by regional contexts?



Source: Hoxhaj and Zuccotti 2019.

Notes: This figure shows how local socio-economic factors such as unemployment (Graph 1) and GDP per capita (Graph 2) influence the relationship between the share of immigrants and attitudes to immigration. The negative (positive) inclination of the bold line in Graph 1 (Graph 2) indicates that the worse the socio-economic conditions of the NUTS 3 area, the lower the positive effect of the immigrant's share on attitudes to immigration. The effect of socio-economic conditions is relevant mostly in better off areas (significance intervals presented by the dashed lines are both above the 0 line).

ShareMig = share of migrants in the local area population.

NUTS 3: Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS), are standardized geographies that are often used for the elaboration and presentation of cross-national statistics in Europe. The definition of NUTS3 includes areas with a size between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants.

local areas within countries, or among EU countries. One basic but important implication is that any policy promoting the spatial (re-)distribution of refugees should consider the socioeconomic characteristics of the areas in which they will reside. MEDAM research suggests that placing refugees in areas with better socioeconomic characteristics is more likely to promote migrants' acceptance by the local population than placing them in poorer areas (as many countries currently do).

Insight #3: Europeans are generally committed to policies that provide protection for asylum seekers and refugees but they express support for more policy controls, such as limits and conditions, in asylum and refugee policies. There is no evidence of widespread public support for highly restrictive policies that eliminate protection and assistance.

Despite the growing prominence of asylum and migration in public policy debates in Europe, we know surprisingly little about the types of asylum and refugee policies that Europeans support or oppose. While there is a lot of research literature on public attitudes to immigration and individual immigrants in Europe and other high-income countries (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014), there has been considerably less research on attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees (but see Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016), and very limited work on asylum and refugee *policies* (exceptions include Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2017). A notable limitation of the existing studies that do deal with public preferences on asylum/refugee policies is that they focus on isolated policy questions rather than taking a comprehensive approach that considers the inherent multidimensionality of the policy issue. Consequently, we have a poor understanding of the policy features and changes that would generate the most public support or opposition to the overall asylum and refugee policy.

To address this gap in existing research, and to contribute to ongoing policy debates about how to reform national and common refugee policies in Europe, MEDAM researchers conducted a new study (Jeannet et al. 2019) that involved 'conjoint survey experiments' with 12,000 people across eight European countries, including Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Sweden (1,500 online survey interviews with a nationally representative sample in each country). Conjoint experiments are particularly useful for studying public attitudes toward multidimensional (policy) issues.

Rather than asking respondents to assess and rate certain policies independent of one another, conjoint experiments require respondents to make a series of constrained choices between pairs of policy options that differ across several 'dimensions' making up the

overall policy. The methodology facilitates analysis of how specific policy features affect both support and opposition to the overall asylum and refugee policy.

The new MEDAM study defined an asylum and refugee policy in terms of six underlying policy dimensions that regulate the following aspects:

- the right to apply for asylum;
- the resettlement of already recognized refugees to the EU from non-EU countries;
- the return of asylum seekers whose applications for protection have been unsuccessful;
- family reunification for recognized refugees;
- the role of the EU in the governance of asylum and refugee issues; and
- financial assistance to non-EU countries hosting refugees.

Each of these six policy dimensions takes on two or three possible values, which are all listed in table 1 below.

The aim of the research is to establish what types of policy changes would generate the most public support or opposition. We concentrated on studying support and opposition to fundamental policy principles rather than very specific policy options. So, for example, we asked about 'annual limits' to asylum applications in order to explore support for moving away from the current status quo ('no limits'), not because we wanted to assess support for a very specific policy option. We used the idea of an annual limit as an example of a control measure in this policy dimension. The different values in the other dimensions should be considered and interpreted in a similar way, e.g., as illustrative examples of policy changes that would imply a fundamental change in the underlying policy principles.

The key results of the study are shown in figure 5. The figure shows the effects of changes within policy dimensions on the probability of accepting the overall 'asylum and refugee policy' relative to the reference category. In each policy dimension, the first value (i.e., the policy feature listed first) serves as the reference category. For example, introducing an annual limit on the number of asylum applications increases the probability that an individual would support the overall asylum and refugee policy by just over 5 percentage points, while not allowing any family reunification for recognized refugees reduces the probability of acceptance of the overall policy by just under 5 percentage points. In the context of a conjoint experiment, these effects are quite large.

Figure 5 shows that, compared with the respective reference categories within each policy dimension, introducing an annual limit on the annual applications for asylum, having a resource requirement for family reunification, and conditioning financial assistance to

Table 1 Possible values (or ‘policy features’) of the six policy dimensions that make up the overall asylum and refugee policy

Policy dimension	Randomly allocated values in experiment
Applications for asylum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anyone can apply for asylum in [YOUR COUNTRY] with no annual limits. 2. Anyone can apply for asylum in [YOUR COUNTRY] until an annual limit is reached.
Resettlement of recognized refugees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No resettlement of United Nations-recognized refugees to [YOUR COUNTRY] 2. Low resettlement of United Nations-recognized refugees to [YOUR COUNTRY] (1 person per 10000 citizens per year, i.e. [country-specific population]). 3. High resettlement of United Nations-recognized refugees to [YOUR COUNTRY] (2 or more persons per 10,000 citizens per year, i.e. [country-specific population]). <p>[country-specific population]: For Italy (60 million) in 1b) “6,000”, in 2b) “more than 12,000”</p>
Return to danger	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refused asylum seekers are never sent back to countries where they could face serious harm 2. In some cases, refused asylum seekers can be sent back to countries where they could face serious harm.
Family reunification for recognized refugees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A recognized refugee can always bring his/her spouse and children 2. A recognized refugee can bring his/her spouse and children only if the refugee can pay for their cost of living 3. A recognized refugee cannot bring his/her spouse and children
Decisions on asylum applications	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each EU country makes its own decisions on asylum applications within its territory. 2. A centralised European Union agency decides applications for asylum for all EU countries.
Financial solidarity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. [YOUR COUNTRY] provides unconditional financial assistance to non-EU countries that host refugees. 2. [YOUR COUNTRY] provides financial assistance to non-EU countries that host refugees only if they help reduce asylum seekers coming to Europe. 3. [YOUR COUNTRY] provides no financial assistance to non-EU countries that host refugees.

Source: Jeannet et al. 2019.

non-EU countries hosting refugees on their efforts to reduce migration to Europe would *increase* Europeans’ support for asylum and refugee policies.

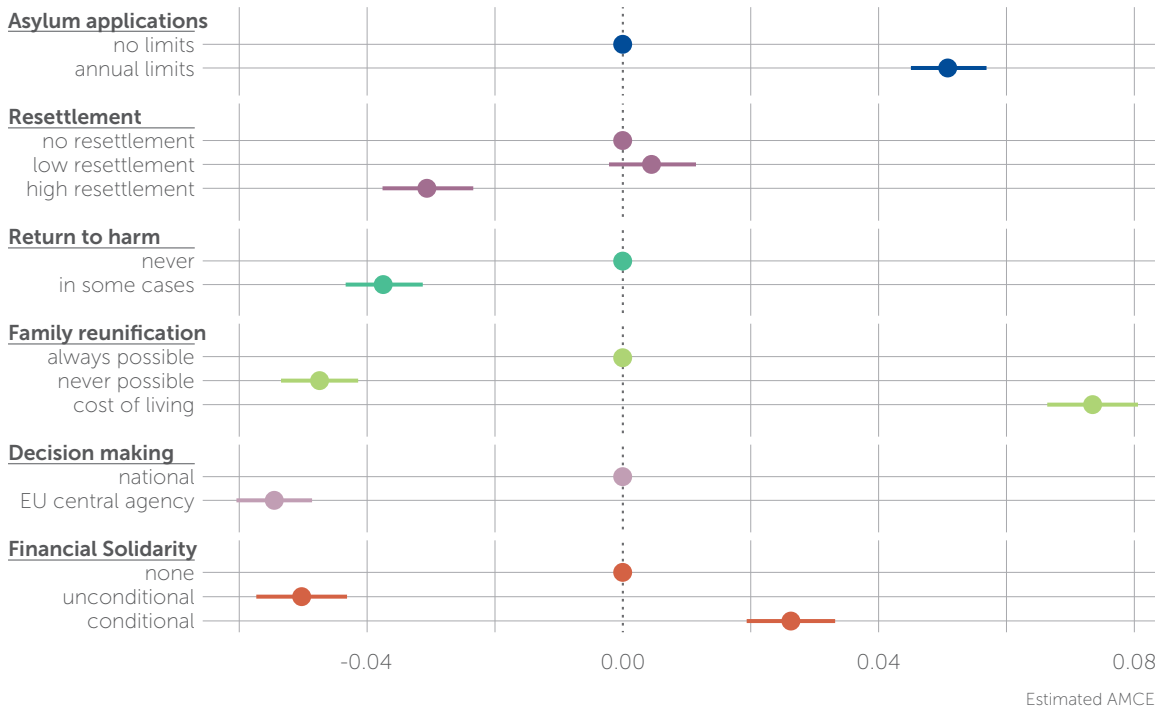
On the other hand, public support would be *reduced* by a high rate of resettlement, sometimes sending failed asylum seekers (whose applications for protection have been unsuccessful) back to dangerous places (e.g., violating the principle of non-refoulement), never allowing family reunification for refugees, having an EU agency rather than national governments assess and decide on applications for asylum in Europe, and unconditional assistance to non-EU countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

While there appears to be a widespread perception that public attitudes to immigration and immigration policies differ considerably across European countries, the new MEDAM research finds that many of the key features of the public’s preferred asylum and refugee policies are remarkably similar across countries. The

patterns of Europeans’ policy preferences are broadly similar across different countries, although there are cross-country differences when it comes to resettlement, the role of the EU, and financial assistance to non-EU countries hosting refugees. For example, in Hungary both ‘low’ and ‘high’ rates of resettlement have negative impacts, while in Spain they both increase acceptance of the overall asylum and refugee policy. Italy is the only country where having a central EU agency assess and decide on asylum applications does not decrease public support.

Overall, this research suggests that Europeans support additional controls and conditions on various aspects of asylum and refugee policies. The results also suggest, however, that highly restrictive measures that would imply moving away from fundamental principles underlying current policies, such as sending people back to dangerous places (non-refoulement) and abolishing family reunification

Figure 5 Effects of changes in policy features on the probability of accepting the overall asylum and refugee policy (percentage points)



Source: Jeannot et al. 2019.

Note: This figure shows Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). Dots indicate point estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals from linear (weighted) least squares regression. Those on the zero line without confidence intervals denote the reference category for each policy dimension. If a confidence interval cuts across the zero line, the change in the policy feature does not have a significant effect on an individual's support or opposition to the overall asylum and refugee policy.

(the right to family life), would reduce rather than increase public support.

A key implication of these three insights is that, contrary to the impression created in public debates in many European countries, it is possible to garner public support for asylum and refugee policies that provide protection and assistance, but to achieve this, policy makers need to think carefully about policy designs (e.g., when and how to use policy limits and

conditions, and how to distribute refugees across geographical areas) and about how to communicate their policy ideas and objectives to the public. The design of policy needs to take into account what we know about the likely responses from existing residents to various different policy options. The communication of public policies needs to relate to the reasons behind the increasing salience of immigration as a policy issue, including concerns about a lack of control.