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# Blaming Brussels? The Impact of (News about) the Refugee Crisis on Attitudes towards the EU and National Politics

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how the refugee crisis has affected attitudes towards the EU, as well as attitudes towards national institutions. By combining different waves of individual survey data, official records of asylum applications and a content analysis of the media, we examine the effect of the numbers of asylum applications and the amount of media coverage thereof on citizens' attitudes towards the EU and national politics. Our findings demonstrate that the number of asylum applications *in the EU* and the media attention this generates primarily affect euroscepticism, while the number of asylum applications into each individual Member State first and foremost affects attitudes towards national institutions. Our results contribute to the literature on democratic accountability, by demonstrating that, even in a complex multi-level governance structure, citizens differentiate between levels of government.

**Keywords:** euroscepticism; immigration; refugee crisis; attitudes towards EU

## Introduction

In 2015 more than 1 million people, predominantly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, tried to seek refuge in Southern Europe by crossing the Mediterranean on ramshackle boats. Most of them travelled onwards to Northern Europe, particularly to Germany and Sweden. These events, which have become known as the 'refugee crisis', became highly politicized in several European countries, with the issue rising to the top of the public, political and media agenda at the EU and the national level. It generated heated debates among politicians and citizens about the numbers of refugees that should be received and the conditions under which they should be given shelter.

Many citizens, commentators and political parties, irrespective of their ideology, seemed to blame the EU for the refugee crisis. Some emphasized the fact that the EU was not doing enough to provide basic aid to people in need, to redistribute refugees, and to speed up the asylum application process (Bauböck, 2017). Others argued that the EU was not doing enough to guard the external EU-borders, and called into question the Schengen agreement (Niemann and Zaun, 2017). Some also blamed their national governments (Zaun, 2017), particularly in Germany. Many citizens blamed Germany's Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel for allowing too many refugees to enter Germany and the radical right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) rapidly picked up support since the summer of 2015. Yet the radical right also rose in the polls in countries which welcomed much lower numbers of refugees, such as the Netherlands and France.

This paper investigates whether and how the refugee crisis fuelled discontent towards the EU and national politics. We expect the impact of the crisis to be complex, and matter

in three ways. First, we expect the crisis to play out differently at the European and at the national level, depending on the numbers of refugees entering the European Union as a whole and the numbers of refugees entering specific countries. Second, we expect these effects to be mediated by the amount of media attention to the refugee crisis. Third, we expect these effects to play out differently for different groups of people, depending upon their (ideological) predispositions.

To unravel the complex ways in which the refugee crisis fuelled discontent, we answer three research questions: 1) Is public opinion affected by (increases in) the number of refugees and media coverage thereof? 2) Is public opinion influenced by (increases in) the number of refugees and the media coverage thereof in individual countries or by developments at the European level? and 3) Which factors moderate the relationship between refugee influx and coverage on the one hand, and public opinion, on the other?

We analyze the dynamics of public opinion, media attention and asylum applications throughout the refugee crisis, from the beginning of 2014 to the spring of 2016. We track public opinion by combining data from 12 waves of the (*Special*) *Eurobarometer* and by comparing individuals interviewed at different stages of the fieldwork period of the *European Social Survey* in 2014 and 2015. We measure media attention by means of an automated content analysis of newspapers in ten EU countries, while we take information about numbers of asylum applications in EU countries from *Eurostat*.

We demonstrate that the *general* inflow of asylum seekers into the EU, and the media attention to the general inflow, has increased euroscepticism. This effect is only noticeable among citizens who were already negatively predisposed towards immigrants. The numbers of asylum seekers *per country* has an impact on support for the national parliament, but much less on evaluations of the EU. While our study includes information about aggregate level media coverage of the refugee crisis, we do not intend to contribute to the literature on media effects. Our study mainly contributes to the literature on the way in which governments are held accountable for their actions by citizens in a complex multi-level governance structure. Our findings strongly suggest that even in this complex setting, citizens hold politicians accountable at the polity level where one would expect the responsibilities to be.

## I. Theory

Our study focuses on how the refugee crisis affected attitudes towards the EU as well as to national political institutions. These effects are most likely to occur when people hold the EU and/or the national government accountable for these events. This is not an easy task, because the refugee crisis unfolded in a situation of multilevel governance, in which both the national governments and the EU have specific, and sometimes shared, responsibilities for its management (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Ripoll Servent, 2017; Solimski and Trauner, 2017). The EU, for example, attempts to control the influx of refugees at the external borders, whereas the Member States shelter the refugees who arrived. The complexity of the multilevel polity makes it difficult to assess the impact of the refugee crisis on attitudes of citizens towards the various levels of government.

However, previous research has demonstrated that citizens are able to distinguish between the responsibilities of the various levels of government and attribute blame

accordingly, especially when the issues at stake are politicized (see, for example, Arceneaux, 2006; Wilson and Hobolt, 2015). When things go wrong in salient policy fields, citizens blame the appropriate governmental institutions and, whenever possible, hold those accountable by ousting them. This logic also holds in the EU, in which responsibilities are shared by national governments, on the one hand, and European Commission and the European Parliament on the other (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a, 2014b). However, in the EU citizens have limited possibilities to ‘throw the rascals out’. In absence of this safety valve, their anger directs itself more generally towards the EU project. Policy failures that are attributed to EU institutions thus reduce support for the EU as a whole, and not only for those responsible (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a, p. 24).

The attribution of blame in the multilevel setting of the EU has first and foremost been investigated with regard to economic failures, and particularly with regard to the Euro crisis. Hobolt (2014), for example, finds that the Euro crisis has reduced support for further integration (see also Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a).<sup>1</sup> It has also affected support for and satisfaction with democracy in the EU Member States, although in bailed-out countries in a different way than in other countries (Cordero and Simón, 2016). The EU and its Member States are, however, increasingly confronted with challenges of a non-economic nature, such as the threat of terrorism, climate change, and since 2015 the refugee crisis (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, 2017). This study aims to establish whether and how the refugee crisis had an impact on the support for the EU and on support for national level institutions. We discuss both in turn.

There are various reasons to assume that the influx of refugees has affected attitudes of citizens towards the EU and its Member States. Recent research shows that support for the EU is correlated with citizens’ attitudes towards identity and immigration (De Vreese *et al.*, 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008; Lubbers and Jaspers, 2010; McLaren, 2007; Toshkov and Kortenska, 2015; Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). Moreover, concerns about immigration are the main drivers of electoral support for radical right parties, which are most strongly opposed to the EU (see, for example, Evans and Mellon, 2016; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016; Van der Brug and Fennema, 2003). This relationship turns out to be particularly strong when it comes to attitudes towards the EU that can be qualified as ‘strengthening’ or ‘affective’ (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011), and to topics such as Turkey’s accession to the EU (see De Vreese *et al.*, 2012; Kentmen, 2008). Several studies have shown that attitudes towards the EU are multidimensional, and that many citizens may generally support the European Union, despite being dissatisfied with the way the current EU is functioning (see Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011; Van Elsas *et al.*, 2016). The main part of this study focuses on attitudes about the way the EU is currently functioning which is the dimension of euroscepticism that is most likely to be affected by the refugee crisis. After all, we expect the refugee crisis to lead to more euroscepticism if citizens hold the EU (partially) responsible for the crisis and if they are critical of the way the EU handled this crisis.

It appears plausible that many citizens would hold the EU partially responsible for the numbers of immigrants entering Europe. The relationship between ‘immigration’ and

<sup>1</sup> The link between these developments can be explained by utilitarianism, which posits that citizens who mostly perceive economic advantages of European integration are more likely to support this process than citizens who mostly perceive economic disadvantages (Gabel, 1998), a logic that has become more prominent after the Euro crisis (Hobolt and Leblond, 2013; Hobolt and Wrátil, 2015).

'Europeanization' is easily made because the EU has facilitated the free movement of people, particularly within the EU. Moreover, the Schengen agreement came with a promise of the protection of the EU's external borders, a promise that became difficult to sustain during the refugee crisis (Niemann and Speyer, 2017; Thielemann, 2017). These developments make it easy for citizens to link immigration and the EU. We expect that citizens from countries that do not attract many refugees still worry about the way in which the refugee crisis affects the EU as a whole, or are dissatisfied with the way in which EU institutions and leaders have handled the crisis. As a result of these factors these citizens can become more eurosceptic, even if not many refugees enter their own country.

*H1 The higher numbers of refugees entering the EU, the lower support for the EU.*

However, it is unlikely that the effect of the influx of refugees is limited to the level of the EU. Also at the national level, the crisis is expected to have impacted on support for institutions. There are substantial differences between the migration policies of EU Member States. Clearly Denmark has more restrictive migration policies than Sweden, and it seems very plausible that many refugees decided to travel through Denmark to Sweden and apply for asylum there, rather than in Denmark. It thus seems plausible that voters will be aware of such differences and hold their governments accountable for the number of refugees entering their own country. When large numbers of refugees enter a country, we expect the general public to respond unfavourably. Each country needs to create facilities for these refugees and this obviously weighs more heavily on a country like Germany, where 441,800 people asked for asylum, than for instance Portugal, where this number was 830 (Eurostat, 2016).

*H2 The higher the number of refugees entering an EU Member State, the lower the support for national institutions.*

Thus, when thinking about the polity levels that citizens are most likely to hold accountable, we would expect the influx at the level of the EU to contribute to euroscepticism and the influx at the national level to increase dissatisfaction with national institutions.

### *Mediation: The Media's Reporting of the Crisis*

The effect of the influx of refugees will depend on people's point of reference. This point of reference is shaped by second-hand information, because most citizens do not experience societal trends first-hand. Instead, the media are the link between the public and societal and political developments. Hence, we expect that not only objective information about the influx of refugees matters, but also that the amount of attention to the crisis in the media plays a role in shaping citizens' attitudes towards the EU and its Member States. We expect media coverage at the EU level to affect attitudes towards the EU, while the coverage at the level of the Member States is expected to influence attitudes towards national institutions.

Research on blame attribution demonstrates that exposure to media coverage raises the saliency of issues and influences citizens' degree of information and knowledge (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a, 2014b; Wilson and Hobolt, 2015). Moreover, attention to immigration in the news has been shown to have a negative effect on attitudes to the EU (Azrout *et al.*, 2012; De Vreese, 2007; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003).

More generally, it has been demonstrated that the more attention an issue receives in the media, the more likely it is that the public thinks that issue is important. And when issues are deemed important the likelihood increases that citizens will be 'primed' to take this issue into account when evaluating institutions or deciding which party to vote for (see Krosnik and Kinder, 1990; Valentino *et al.*, 2002). Even though our study will not allow us to test the priming hypothesis, there are good theoretical reasons to expect priming to be the causal mechanism between media attention to the refugee crisis and changing attitudes towards Europe. Citizens may judge the EU by its socio-economic policies or by its policies on issues such as immigration. When the media pay a great deal of attention to the refugee crisis, particularly to the number of migrants entering Europe, it seems fair to expect that these images will be at 'the top of the head' of many citizens at that time (Zaller, 1992). So, many respondents will be primed to think of the refugee crisis when evaluating the EU. The longer and more prominent the refugee crisis is in the news, the more likely it is that scepticism about the government's ability to solve the problem will increase.

*H3 The more media attention is paid to the refugee crisis at the EU level, the lower the support for the EU.*

*H4 The more media attention is paid to the refugee crisis at the level of the Member State, the lower the support for national institutions.*

#### *Moderation: How Effects Differ Between Citizens*

Although it is meaningful to study the attribution of blame by people in general, we have reason to believe this is partly conditioned by citizens' pre-existing worldviews. Hobolt and Tilley (2014a, p. 21), for example, find that 'people who are negatively disposed towards the EU as a level of government will be more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when things are going badly, just like opposition partisans will be more likely to blame domestic government for a crisis'.

These types of predispositions are also likely to play a role when citizens evaluate the performance of national government and the EU in the refugee crisis. European integration and immigration have a socio-economic and a socio-cultural component in the minds of citizens (Otjes and Katsanidou, 2017) and the weight these components carry differs between left-wing and right-wing voters (Van Elsas and Van der Brug, 2015). We therefore expect that the way in which the EU is associated with the refugee influx depends on citizens' left-right orientation and, more specifically, on their attitudes towards immigration. In a recent study, Otjes and Katsanidou (2017) show that the extent to which citizens' views of the EU are affected by immigration levels indeed depends on

whether they are opposed to immigration. We therefore expect an increase in the number of asylum applications to have the largest impact on those who are already negatively predisposed towards immigration. In addition we expect the refugee crisis to resonate mostly among right-wing voters. We expect this moderating effect, because right-wing voters will more often be opposed to immigration than left-wing voters, even though both group are likely to link immigration and the EU. So, we hypothesize that:

*H5 The effects of the influx of refugees and the media coverage thereof on attitudes towards the EU are dependent on the left–right positions of citizens. The more right-leaning citizens are, the stronger the effects are expected to be.*

*H6 The effects of the influx of refugees and the media coverage thereof on attitudes towards the EU are dependent on citizens' attitudes towards immigration. The more negatively predisposed towards immigration citizens are, the stronger the effects are expected to be.*

H5 and H6 are based on the notion that people tend to evaluate new information in light of their extant worldview (Taber and Lodge, 2006). In our study, this would imply that citizens who are already negatively predisposed towards immigration will see their fear of migrants reinforced when confronted with information about the refugee crisis. This is especially likely among right-wing Europeans who are, across the board, more critical of immigration (De Vries *et al.*, 2013). As a result, these citizens would be more likely than others to take immigration into account when evaluating the EU. The refugee crisis could make these citizens more eurosceptic. Citizens on the left, on the other hand, may be less concerned about national identity and immigration levels, and would therefore respond less when these issues become more salient.

To summarize, in this study we focus on the way in which the monthly influx of the number of refugees at the EU and national level affects citizens' attitudes towards the EU as well as to their own country. We also look at the mediating role of the media and at the moderating effects of predispositions and education. Figure 1 displays graphically all the relationships that will be investigated in our paper.

## II. Data and Method

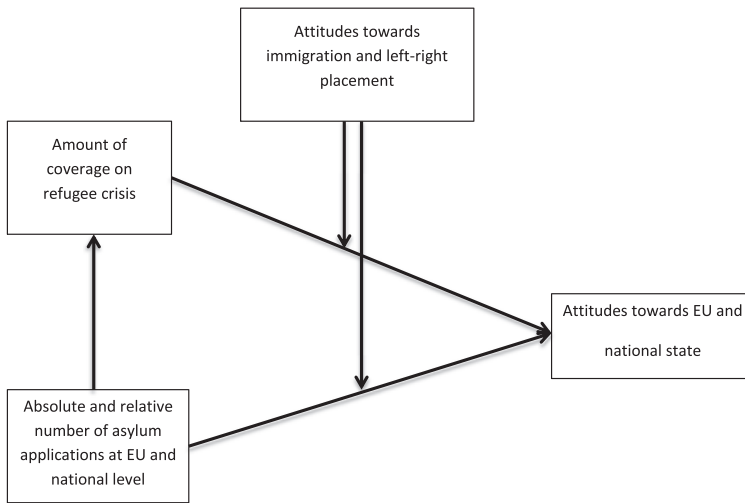
To analyze the effects of the inflow of refugees and media attention on public opinion towards the EU and national politics, we use the following data, measures and design.

### *Data*

The number of asylum applications in each European country in each month is provided by Eurostat.<sup>2</sup> This measure does not capture the extent to which refugees are crossing states without applying for asylum, which might lead to an underestimation of the visibility of refugees in countries like Greece or Hungary. Nevertheless, in these countries too,

<sup>2</sup> Descriptive statistics of this measure can be found in Table A2 of online Appendix A.

Figure 1: Theoretical model



the number of applications rose strongly at key moments. So, even though this measure underestimates the actual number of refugees in a country, it provides valid estimates of changes over time in the numbers of refugees, which is much more important for the purpose of our study. We calculated monthly measures for both each individual country and the European Union as a whole. Furthermore, we calculated a measure relative to the national population.

The salience of immigration in the national media is available for a subset of 10 countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The countries are selected on the basis of data availability. While all are net-immigration countries and (except for Ireland and the UK) part of the Schengen Agreement, they vary substantially in the number of refugees they received. This sample is currently the most extensive available for immigration-related media salience.

Per country we selected the mainstream liberal newspaper with the highest circulation available between 1 January 2016 until 31 July 2016: *Die Presse* (Austria), *Politiken* (Denmark), *Le Monde* (France), *Die Welt*<sup>3</sup> (Germany), *The Irish Times* (Ireland), *La Stampa* (Italy), *De Volkskrant* (Netherlands), *El Pais* (Spain), *Tages-Anzeiger* (Switzerland), and *The Guardian* (United Kingdom). In our study of whether and how citizens blame the EU or national political institutions for the refugee crisis, we include information about the media environment at the aggregate (national) level. Obviously, this does not allow us to analyze how individual citizens respond to media messages, because that would require individual level data on media exposure. Though not without limitations, this selection of mainstream liberal newspapers is treated as a proxy for the ‘media environment’. Preferably we would have a more balanced sample,

<sup>3</sup> We are aware *Die Welt* is not considered a ‘liberal mainstream newspaper’. Unfortunately *Die Welt* is the only national newspaper with a substantial circulation available for Germany.



including conservative and liberal mainstream newspapers in all of the countries under study, but unfortunately data inavailability does not allow us to include the former type of newspapers. However, research shows that mainstream news outlets follow roughly the same issues at the same time (Fryberg *et al.*, 2012); and even differences of framing between liberal and conservative or left-wing and right-wing outlets are relatively minor (Roggeband and Vliegenthart, 2007). This is why we are confident that data on over time fluctuations in the attention to the immigration issue can be measured by coding one quality newspaper (Peter, 2004). Yet, as a robustness check we also coded the contents of three right-wing/conservative newspapers, or tabloids: *The Daily Mail* (UK), *Le Figaro* (FR) and *De Telegraaf* (NL). The media attention on immigration correlates strongly over time between the two types of newspapers from the same country ( $r=0.70$ ). When including data on these three newspapers in the model, we find stronger effects than we report below. So, to the extent that our effects are biased as a result of our selection of media outlets, our estimates seem to be conservative.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that our measure is based on specific newspapers and does not necessarily capture attention on immigration in other types of media.

The newspaper articles were downloaded from the LexisNexis media archive and analyzed using the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit (AMCAT) (Van Atteveldt, 2008). The media salience measure consists of the number of newspaper articles that mention at least one of the words of a search string representing the concept of immigration per country per month. The search string contains words such as immigration, immigrant, refugee, illegal alien and asylum seeker.<sup>5,6</sup> For the European dimension we used a search string containing the words EU and Europe within a 15-words proximity of the immigration search string. The articles containing one of the words from the search string are all counted as one and not weighted by the place of the article in the newspaper and article length, because that information was not available across countries and time. The number of articles per month about immigration is divided by the total number of articles in the same month to measure the relative importance of the issue of immigration compared to the total news supply.

To track citizens' views of the EU throughout the refugee crisis, we use data from two cross-national survey projects. The *Eurobarometer* (EB) is most suited to estimate the relationships between asylum applications, media attention and EU attitudes, because it consists of a large number of waves at different points throughout the period under study. Combining *Standard* and *Special* EBs, we obtain 17 waves between March 2014 and May 2016, thus covering the period before and after the peak in numbers of refugees in the summer of 2015. All EB waves contain a question concerning the direction the EU is going, which allows us to map the dynamics of euroscepticism during the refugee crisis.

While the data available in the EB surveys enable us to assess whether right-wing voters were more strongly affected than left-wing voters (H5), the EB data do not

<sup>4</sup> The three right-wing newspapers report less on immigration than their mainstream liberal counterparts.

<sup>5</sup> Table A1 in online Appendix A presents the complete dictionary.

<sup>6</sup> The search strings were originally developed by Roggeband and Vliegenthart (2007), who measured a 91 per cent overlap between manual coding and automated coding. For the purpose of this study we updated their search string, translated these to the different languages in this study, and checked these by way of precision recall exercises.

contain measures of attitudes towards immigrants (which we need to test H6). We therefore supplement our analysis with the 2014 wave of the *European Social Survey* (ESS), which does include a battery of items to measure attitudes towards immigrants. A disadvantage of the ESS is that it provides fewer opportunities for analyzing the dynamic element of the processes we are interested in. However, even though we study only one wave of the ESS, there is considerable variation in the moment respondents were interviewed, with most fieldwork being conducted between late 2014 and early 2015 (in some cases until Autumn 2015). While most interviews were conducted in the period before the largest numbers of refugees arrived, there is considerable variation between individuals and countries in the number of asylum applications in the month of the interview (with numbers doubling or tripling in many countries). Because late-participating respondents differ systematically from those answering earlier, we control for as many factors as possible, but nevertheless caution is needed in interpreting these results.

### *Operationalization*

The dependent variable available in the EB data consists of the following question: 'At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction in ...', with sub-items for respondents' country and the EU. The answer options are 'going in the wrong direction' or 'going in the right direction', with the option of a spontaneous 'neither the one nor the other'. If we follow Van Elsas *et al.*'s (2016) distinction between principled opposition to the EU and discontent with the way the EU is functioning, our measure clearly captures the latter. The measure correlates positively and significantly with trust in the European Parliament ( $r=0.41$ ). To allow for logistic regression, the measure was rescaled to a dummy variable in which a 0 stands for the right direction or neither the right nor the wrong direction, and 1 stands for the wrong direction.<sup>7</sup>

In the ESS data, the key dependent variable is based on the following question: 'Now thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position?' with answer options ranging from 0 ('unification has already gone too far') to 10 ('unification should go further'). Compared to the EB indicator, this variable taps into the more principled dimension of European unification (see also Van Elsas *et al.*, 2016). Rather than an evaluation of recent developments (as in the EB), this variable measures a more general attitude towards the EU. The dependent variables thus capture related but different aspects of citizens' EU attitudes (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2011). Theoretically, this could mean the two measures generate different results, but as we will demonstrate below, this is not the case in this study.

To test whether the effect of the crisis is moderated by left/right positions (H5), we employ a measure of left/right self-placement on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (labelled 'left') to 10 (labelled 'right'). In the analyses based on the ESS, we test H6 by means of a 'nativism' scale, consisting of three questions on cultural, religious

<sup>7</sup> Replications with an ordered logit model on the original variable provided equivalent results. However, a logistic model allows for a (somewhat) better comparison of effects between models.

and economic concerns regarding immigration and immigrants ( $\alpha=0.84$ ).<sup>8</sup> As controls we employ education (in five subgroups in EB; in years in ESS), income, age (squared) and gender.

### *Design*

In order to model the process that we are interested in, we seek to explain patterns *within* countries. Therefore, we model the effect of application numbers and media attention *at different moments in time* in a given country, rather than comparing countries with different numbers of refugees and different media contexts with each other. Our design therefore consists of repeated cross-sections with fixed effects for countries and waves. This provides us with the effects of *relative* application numbers and media attention on *relative* support for the EU in each country.

Our central interest lies, first, with the effect of asylum applications and media attention at the country-month level on attitudes at the individual level, and, secondly, on cross-level interactions between the two. In such a study one always risks an ‘omitted variable bias’. An important measure taken to reduce the risk of omitted variable bias is that we include fixed effects for countries and waves. In this way we account for pre-existing differences between countries in support for European integration, and for general EU-wide trends in public opinion. So, to the extent that the financial crisis produced differences in euroscepticism *between* countries, these are taken into account by our fixed effects models.

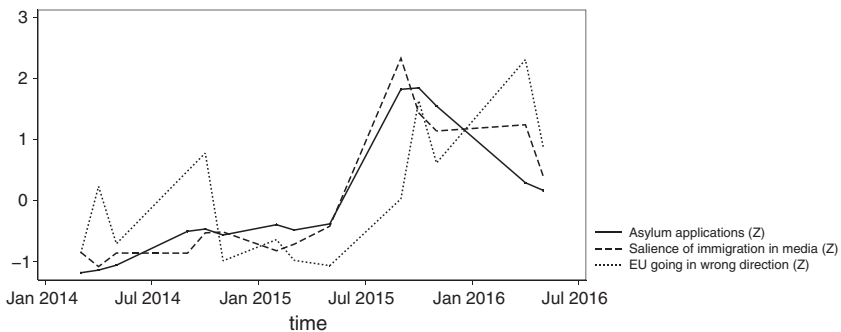
As the most dramatic events pertaining to the financial crises occurred before the refugee crisis of 2015, we do not expect the correlation between (media reporting on) asylum flows and subsequent public opinion to be affected by deteriorating economic conditions. However, in order to rule out the possibility that economic conditions, rather than numbers of asylum seekers, are the drivers of fluctuations in euroscepticism, we have also conducted analyses in which we include measures of economic growth as an additional control variable. Measures that are comparable across countries are available at the quarterly level.<sup>9</sup> Since the inclusion of these extra macro level controls do not change any of the substantial findings, we report these results in the online Appendix D. Standard errors are clustered at the country-month level. We control for standard socio-demographic and ideological characteristics to account for possible sample differences between waves.

Like all non-experimental studies, our design cannot fully rule out alternative explanations for the estimated effects. Yet, to strengthen our causal inferences, we include the lags of both key independent variables, thus predicting public opinion based on

<sup>8</sup> The question wordings are the following: ‘do you think the religious beliefs and practices in [country] are generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?’ ‘would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?’ and ‘would you say that [country]’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?’ All questions had a 0 to 10 response scale denoting the two extremes mentioned in the question wording.

<sup>9</sup> To assess how macro-economic developments might affect our analysis, we re-analyzed our main models with a control for GDP growth on a quarterly basis (as measured by the OECD; see stats.oecd.org). The three most important models can be found in online Appendix D (other specifications, including the interaction models are available on request). The main effects are unaffected by the inclusion of this variable: none of the effects change sign or significance, and none of the standardized coefficients change by more than 0.01. Furthermore, GDP growth does not predict EU evaluations. We therefore conclude that macro-economic developments are unlikely to confound the within-country patterns we observe.

Figure 2: Trends in Key Variables.



**Note:** All variables have been standardized.

applications and media coverage in the preceding month. Of course, media and public opinion are related to real-world developments in a dynamic way. To some extent, policies towards refugees are shaped as a reaction to both. However, additional models with alternative specifications consistently suggest stronger effects of application numbers and media attention on public opinion than vice versa. We therefore focus this paper on this element of the causal process. Still, we cannot fully rule out reversed causality in our study.

### III. Results

As a starting point of our analysis, Figure 2 shows the trend in three key indicators: the number of asylum applications in the EU; the saliency of immigration in the media; and concern about the direction of the EU. All variables have been averaged within each wave and subsequently standardized across these values to create trends with comparable scales.

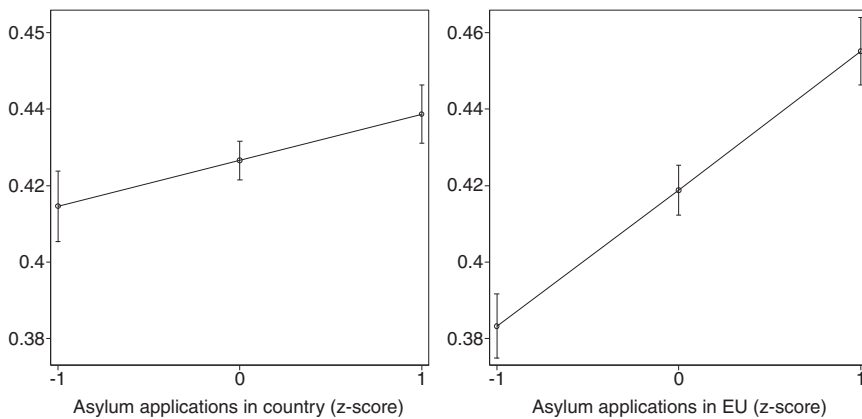
The graph confirms that the number of asylum applications rose steadily throughout 2014, with the highest peak in the summer of 2015, subsequently returning to a lower level in early 2016. The saliency of immigration in the media closely followed this pattern in 2015. Yet, it shows a second peak in early 2016 that is unrelated to the number of asylum applications. It might be due to on-going events that received media attention, such as problems experienced with (alleged) asylum seekers in various countries (for example, the New Year's Eve events in Cologne).

In 2014 two peaks in the level of concern with the direction in which the EU is going can be observed. However, these peaks seem unrelated to refugee flows or media attention. Hence, these spikes are most likely caused by other factors, perhaps the aftermath of the banking crisis. In 2015, public concern closely followed the trend of the combination of application numbers and media saliency, whereas in 2016 it closely followed the media trend. This provides some first indication that public opinion on the EU was affected by the dynamics of the refugee crisis, and the media coverage thereof.

This is supported by the bivariate correlations between the four indicators.<sup>10</sup> These correlations show, first of all, that the number of applications in individual countries is

<sup>10</sup> See Table A3 of the online Appendix.

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Being Concerned about the EU Based on Application Numbers



positively, but only weakly, related to the number of applications in the EU as a whole ( $r=0.21$ ). The weak correlation is due to the fact that different numbers of refugees apply for asylum in the different EU Member States. More importantly, it shows that the salience of immigration in national media has a relatively strong positive correlation with the actual number of applications in that country ( $r=0.49$ ), but an even stronger correlation with the total number of applications in the EU ( $r=0.54$ ). These numbers suggest that reports in national media about immigration are to an important extent a reflection of actual trends, but also that the situation in the entire EU matters more than the local situation for the media debate. Finally, agreement with the statement that things in the EU are moving in the wrong direction is positively, but weakly, related to the number of applications ( $r=0.06$ ), and somewhat more strongly to reports about immigration in the media ( $r=0.10$ ). This provides preliminary – albeit rather weak – evidence for our expectations.

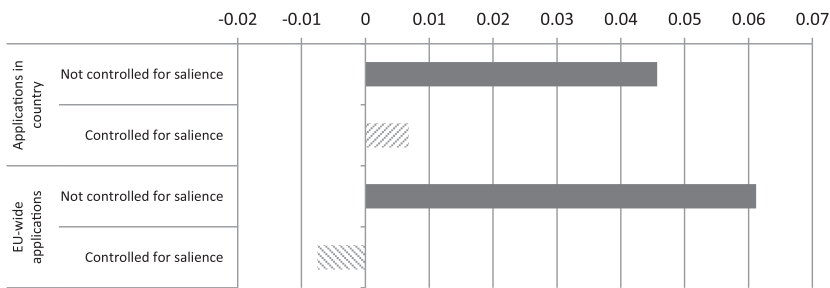
However, these bivariate correlations do not take other factors into account that might explain the relationships. We therefore turn to a multivariate analysis of these patterns. We first analyze the relationship between the refugee influx and public opinion towards the EU, and after that investigate whether and how it is mediated by media attention and by citizens' background characteristics and worldviews.

Are attitudes towards the EU correlated with the number of asylum applications in the EU and individual countries? Figure 3 shows the predicted support for the contention that things are going in the wrong direction in the EU for various (absolute) levels of asylum applications in the country and the EU. It is important to keep in mind that EU-wide applications are based on a relatively low number of data points and thus have little statistical power. To allow for some comparability of the effects between logistic models (and between numbers at the country and EU level), the number of asylum applications has been standardized.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 3 shows that – even when controlling for a range of socio-demographic factors, general EU-wide trends and differences in EU attitudes between countries – higher levels of asylum applications are associated with greater concerns about the direction of the EU.

<sup>11</sup> The figures are based on Table B1 of online Appendix B.

Figure 4: The Effect of Asylum Applications on Concern about the Direction of the EU.



**Note:** Striped bars indicate non-significance at the 1% level.

The effect is significantly positive for the number of applications at the country ( $p=0.00$ ) and EU ( $p=0.01$ ) level. To the extent that the effects are comparable, it appears that public opinion is more strongly correlated with refugee inflow on an EU-wide level, rather than in individual countries.

Interestingly, the effects of absolute application numbers are stronger than those of the number of applications relative to a country's population. So, when a large number of refugees arrive, the capacity to incorporate and house them is less central to public opinion than their immediate visibility upon arrival. Changes in application numbers are also weaker predictors than absolute numbers. We will therefore continue to use the latter variable in subsequent models.

The question remains of whether asylum applications primarily lead to concerns about just the direction of the EU, or also about the direction of the country. Our analyses show, first of all, that concerns about the direction in which the *country* is going are, like concerns about the direction of the EU, positively (and significantly) related to the number of applications.<sup>12</sup> A subsequent comparison of the effect sizes suggests a clear and plausible symmetry. While overall EU-wide applications are a stronger prediction of citizens' concerns (about both the EU and their country), applications *within individual countries* are relatively strongly associated with concerns about that country, confirming both H1 and H2. This provides some evidence that higher numbers of application lead to a general increase in socio-political concerns. However, it also suggests that citizens have – at least to some extent – coherent distinctions based on the object of this concern.

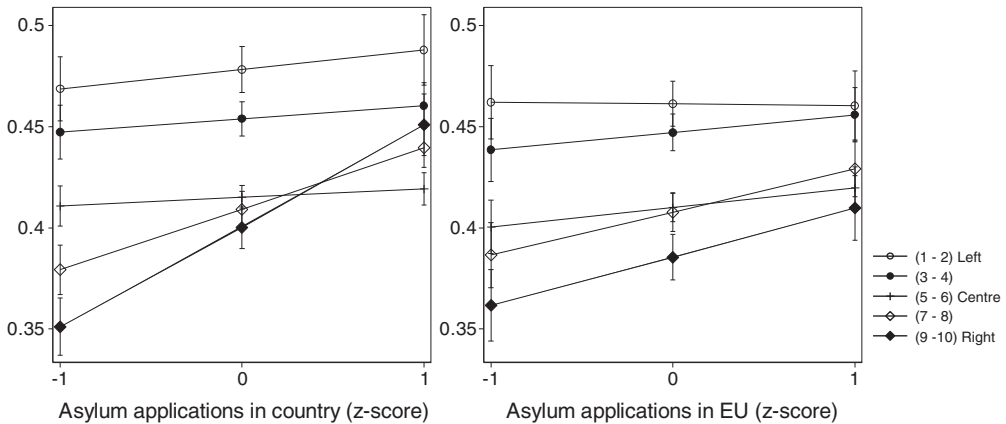
### *Mediation: the Role of the Media*

We now turn to the question of whether the effect of asylum applications on concerns about the EU are mediated by media attention on immigration. Our analysis shows that, in line with the expectations, higher levels of salience of immigration are related to greater concerns about the direction the EU is going ( $p=0.00$ ).<sup>13</sup> Figure 4 presents the effects of the number of asylum applications with and without controlling for media salience. It shows that controlling for media salience almost completely erases the effect of asylum applications, turning it insignificant ( $p=0.64$  for applications in respondents' countries

<sup>12</sup> See Table B5 of the online Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> See Table B3 of online Appendix B.

Figure 5: Predicted Probability of Being Concerned about the EU Based on Application Numbers, by Left–Right Position



and  $p=0.52$  for EU-wide applications). This suggests that salience indeed mediates the effect of asylum applications, which confirms H3 and H4.

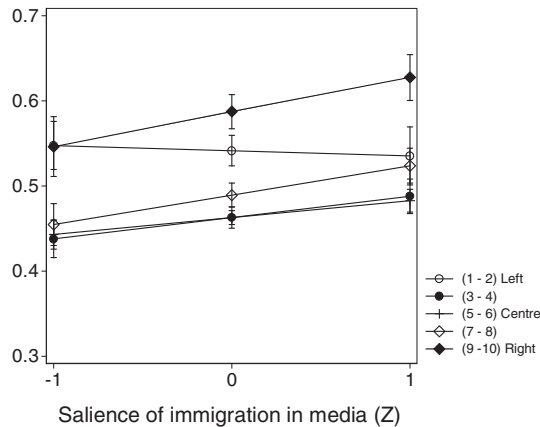
The bivariate correlations discussed in the beginning of this section showed that salience in the national media correlated more strongly with EU-wide application numbers than with national ones. Given the importance of media in channelling information about immigration patterns – established above – it is therefore no surprise that public opinion is in turn more strongly affected by EU-wide application numbers than the national situation.

### *Individual Level Moderators*

We expect that the effects differ between subgroups of voters. We therefore investigate interactions with respondents' ideology (based on their left–right position), using first asylum applications as the dependent variable, and then media salience. The predicted probability plots for the variable for which substantial moderation occurs can be seen in Figure 5, showing that the effect is clearly moderated by ideology.<sup>14</sup> Higher levels of applications only lead to more concern about the EU among those self-identifying as right-wing. Marginal effect analysis shows that the effect is only significantly positive among those scoring 7 or higher on the Left–Right scale in the case of country applications, and among those scoring 5 or higher for the EU-wide applications. So, rather than affecting citizens across the board, we see a 'galvanizing' effect among those right wing citizens where the cultural prime is most likely to increase euroscepticism. This indicates that citizens indeed interpret the inflow of refugees in light of their existing worldview: to the extent that right-wing citizens are more likely to be concerned about immigration, and they are more likely to evaluate larger numbers of refugees as a negative consequence

<sup>14</sup> See Table B2 of online Appendix B for the full regression tables.

Figure 6: Predicted Probability of Being Concerned about the EU Based on Media Saliency, by Left–Right Position



of EU integration. Alternatively, they were already more anti-European and see this aspect of their worldview further confirmed.<sup>15</sup>

In addition we analyzed whether we find the same interaction patterns between individual characteristics and media saliency, instead of asylum applications. The effects are again systematically moderated by ideology (see Figure 6).<sup>16</sup> In line with the findings of the number of asylum applications, the effects are stronger to the extent that respondents are more right-wing: the strongest effects are found among those scoring higher than 7 on the Left–Right scale. However, in this analysis the effect is significantly positive for all groups except for extremely left-wing respondents, that is those scoring a 1 or 2 on the Left–Right scale. So, the analyses clearly support H5. The fact that media saliency measures replicate the patterns found in the data on asylum applications – combined with the sizeable correlation between these two independent variables – makes it plausible that media saliency mediates the effects of the number of asylum applications.

#### IV. Robustness and Mechanisms

Having established the patterns in the EB, we now test our models on the ESS 2014 data, in order to test the robustness of our findings and to test H6. The latter is important because it provides a more direct test of the ‘galvanizing effect’ than we obtain with the more general ‘left–right’ scale. Although we analyze only one wave, we can nevertheless capture public opinion in the EU at different moments during the refugee crisis, because the fieldwork for the ESS was spread out over 2014 and 2015.

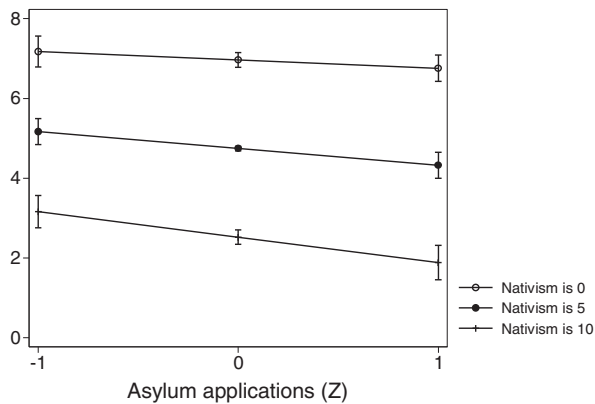
First of all, the ESS data generally replicate the core findings from EB data. Higher numbers of refugees decrease support for the EU, but only among right-wing citizens. The effect is not significant this time, but the pattern is very similar to that in the EB data.

<sup>15</sup> We also investigated whether education functions as a moderator, but there are no substantive or coherent differences between educational groups in the extent to which asylum applications affect their EU attitude.

<sup>16</sup> See Table B4 of online Appendix B for the full regression tables.



Figure 7: Predicted Support for Further European Integration Based on Application Numbers, by Nativism



Furthermore, among left-wing citizens, there is a slight (and not significant) increase in support for further European integration. This is plausible given the operationalization: for left-wing citizens, the refugee crisis might mean further European integration is needed to ward off a similar crisis in the future. This in turn suggests the refugee crisis polarizes citizens' views on the EU.

It is therefore relevant to delve further into the causal mechanisms. Based on a model with interactions with the nativism scale, Figure 7 shows that a higher number of applications particularly boosts euroscepticism among respondents who are negatively predisposed towards immigration.<sup>17</sup> The effect is strongest among those who are most nativist, but it is not significant among the 22 per cent least nativist respondents (those scoring 3 or lower). Furthermore, there is some evidence that a greater number of asylum applications leads to euroscepticism among those who think there already are a lot of immigrants in the country (though this effect is rather weak).<sup>18</sup> So, the results provide clear support for H6.

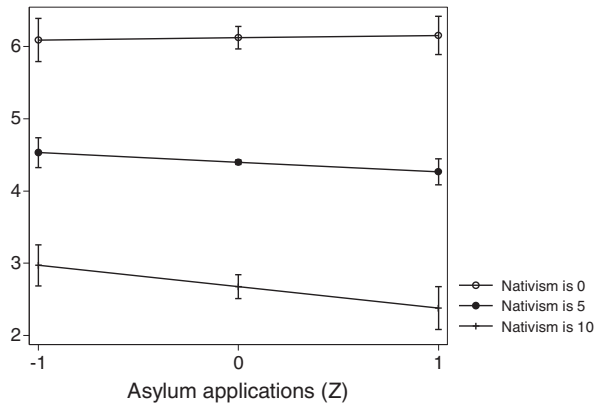
It is important to note that anti-immigration sentiments themselves do not increase when the number of applications is higher. In fact, public opinion across the board becomes slightly more pro-immigration, but this increase is completely driven by left-wing and centrist respondents. Rather than strongly affecting public opinion on immigration itself, the refugee crisis appears to lead to differential evaluation of political elites depending on citizens' views on immigration.

Furthermore, like the EB data, the ESS data support our expectation that, while levels of support for the EU depend mostly on EU-wide asylum applications, citizens' evaluation of national political elites depend more on national circumstances. Figure 8 shows predicted levels of trust in the national parliament (on a 0 to 10 scale) depending on levels of nativism and the number of asylum applications in respondents' countries. A higher

<sup>17</sup> See Table C1 and C2 of online Appendix C for the full regression table.

<sup>18</sup> This is based on a question in which the respondent is asked to assess what percentage of the population in her or his country is foreign-born.

Figure 8: Predicted Trust in the national Parliament Based on National Application Numbers, by Nativism



number of asylum applications does not affect the non-nativist respondents, while it does significantly decrease trust in the national parliament among those scoring high on nativism.

Finally, we tentatively turn to an analysis of media salience. The power of these tests are limited, because media salience is only available for a limited set of countries and within these countries the ESS data cover only three or four months. Nevertheless, these analyses replicate the patterns found based on actual refugee numbers, although the effect is not significant for any of the groups. Still, in both datasets we observe the same overall patterns: decreasing support for the EU among nativist respondents and no change or a slight increase in EU-support among left-wing respondents. That we find this pattern in both datasets, employing different operationalizations, strengthens our confidence that pre-existing ideas about immigration shaped citizens' response to the refugee crisis.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

In this paper we investigated how the refugee crisis affected public opinion about different levels of government. We examined whether the increase in the number of refugees during the refugee crisis in 2015, and the amount of media attention thereof, has made EU citizens more eurosceptic and/or more distrustful towards their national institutions. Our findings support the notion that the general inflow of refugees into the EU, as well as the media attention for this phenomenon, have increased euroscepticism. The general influx also affects discontent with national parliaments and the direction a country is going in, but these effects are much weaker than at the level of the EU. At the same time, asylum applications per country impact specifically on the support for the national

<sup>19</sup> We also analyzed whether the number of asylum applications affected support for eurosceptic parties of the left or right. The ESS data do not provide coherent support for this: there is no effect of the number of asylum applications or media salience on voting for eurosceptic parties among left- or right-wing citizens. However, this might reflect the low nominal number of respondents who indicated they would vote for such a party in individual months of fieldwork in each country (often below 20).

parliament in the country in which these applications are submitted. Again, the national influx also affects euroscepticism, but the effect is stronger at the national level than at the EU level.

Our findings show that European developments mainly affect citizens' attitudes towards the EU, while national developments mainly affect their attitudes towards national institutions. This confirms findings from related studies, which demonstrate that citizens distinguish between the responsibilities of the various levels of government and blame or reward those governance levels which bear most responsibility (for example, Arceneaux, 2006; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014b; Wilson and Hobolt, 2015). Our data do not allow us to test whether 'blame' is indeed the causal mechanism, but we believe this is most plausible. Why else would attitudes towards the EU respond to patterns at the EU-level and attitudes towards the national country follow national patterns? So, our results contribute to the literature on democratic accountability, by demonstrating that, even in a complex multi-level governance structure, citizens differentiate between levels of government.

When including our measures of media salience in the models, these predict public opinion changes, while the direct effects of refugee numbers turn insignificant. These findings suggest that the media play an important *mediating* role in the causal link between real world events and public opinion. These findings are based only on the salience of the topic in a small selection of outlets. So, our conclusions about media effects are necessarily limited. Having said that, we do think that our data on media salience produced two important findings. The first is the mediating role of media attention, which we discussed above. The second is that media attention turns out to be more strongly related to the number of immigrants entering the EU than to the numbers entering each individual country. This might explain why euroscepticism was also affected by the refugee crisis in countries that hardly received any refugees. Nevertheless, future studies should investigate the role of other outlets and delve deeper into the substance of the news about the refugee crisis.

Our study also showed that (information about) the refugee crisis did not influence all citizens in the same way. The effects were clearly moderated by citizens' *a priori* attitudes. The refugee crisis affected mainly the attitudes of right-leaning citizens, as well as those who were negatively predisposed towards immigrants. More asylum applications and more media coverage of the refugee crisis led to more concerns about the EU among right-wing citizens, because they are more concerned about immigration. However, we find only limited support for the opposite development. Those who were more favourable towards immigration and more left-leaning did not become more (or less) supportive of the EU or the national parliament as the number of refugees increased, or when the coverage of the crisis intensified.

Of course, our design does not allow us to make strong causal claims based on our observations. Public opinion might also drive, rather than merely reflect, the number of refugees and media salience. However, the fact that these correlations are only visible among right-wing citizens and nativists strengthens our interpretation that they reflect a *reaction* to the refugee crisis and its subsequent reporting.

The net result of these developments, and thus of the refugee crisis, is a *de facto* decrease in support for the EU across the population as a whole, as well as a further polarization of EU attitudes. The same patterns can be observed regarding national level political support, albeit less pronounced.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

**Table A1:** Search strings

**Table A2:** Descriptive statistics

**Table A3:** Bivariate correlations between the key indicators

**Table B1:** Effect of asylum numbers on concern about the direction of the EU

**Table B2:** Effect of asylum numbers on concern about the direction of the EU –interaction with ideology

**Table B3:** Effect of immigration salience on concern about the direction of the EU

**Table B4:** Effect of immigration salience on concern about the direction of the EU – interaction with ideology

**Table B5:** Effect of asylum numbers on concern about the direction of country

**Table C1:** Effect of application numbers on (1) concern about the direction of the EU and (2) trust in parliament – interactions with nativism

**Table C2:** Effect of application numbers on (1) concern about the direction of the EU and (2) trust in parliament – interactions with Left–Right

**Table D1:** Effect of asylum numbers on concern about the direction of the EU

**Table D2:** Effect of immigration salience on concern about the direction of the EU