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How the EU treats Ukrainian refugees in comparison to others, and what are the factors that led to the differences in treatment

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Abstract

This thesis researches the European Union's (EU) differential treatment of refugee populations by comparing its response to the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis with prior responses to displaced persons from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Employing a qualitative synthesis approach, the study systematically analyses fifteen peer-reviewed academic articles and key EU policy documents to explore legal instruments, institutional mechanisms, socio-economic integration outcomes, and media narratives that shaped these responses. Rather than collecting primary data, the research synthesizes secondary empirical material to provide a comparative, multi - dimensional understanding of EU asylum practices.

The findings reveal that the swift and unified activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian refugees was enabled by political consensus, geopolitical proximity, and symbolic alignment with European identity. In contrast, non-European refugee groups experienced a totally different process under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), marked by protracted procedures, race - based discrimination, securitization, and unequal access to integration services. Media portrayals and public discourse played a critical role in legitimizing this differentiated treatment, often reinforcing racial and cultural hierarchies.

It would be argued that EU asylum governance reflects a pattern of selective/arbitrary solidarity, wherein legal commitments to non-discrimination and equal protection are undermined by racialized and politicized decision-making. Policy recommendations call for stronger legal harmonization, equitable integration frameworks, and the depoliticization of refugee reception to uphold the universality of humanitarian protection. This thesis contributes to debates on migration governance by demonstrating how structural, legal, and ideological dynamics converge to produce unequal outcomes for displaced populations within the EU.

Keywords: Temporary Protection Directive, Common European Asylum System, Ukrainian refugees, EU migration policy, refugee integration, selective solidarity, media narratives, asylum governance, racialized protection, refugee law.

Table of Content

Part 1: Introduction	8
1.1. Context of the Topic and Its Importance	8
1.2. Presentation and Definition of the Initial Question.....	9
1.3. Aim, Research Question and Objectives.....	10
1.4. Description of the Existing Literature.....	10
1.5. Presentation of the Approach Chosen	12
1.6. Structure of the Thesis	13
Part 2: Context, Framework, and Literature Review	
Defining Migrants and Displaced Ukrainians	16
2.1. Classification of Migrants: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Displaced Persons, and Third-Country Nationals	16
2.2. Legal Status of Displaced Ukrainians and the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)	17
2.3. Literature Review: Refugee Crises and EU Migration Policy	20
2.3.1. Overview of Academic Debates on Refugee Policies in the EU.....	20
2.3.2. Previous Refugee Crises: Responses to Syrian, Afghan, and Other Displaced Populations.....	24
2.3.3. Comparative Analysis of Different Refugee Frameworks in Academic Literature ...	26
2.3.4. Gaps in Existing Research and How This Study Contributes	27
2.4. Historical Context: EU Responses to Refugee Crises.....	28
2.5. EU Legislative Framework on Refugees	31
2.6. Conceptual Framework	33
2.6.1. Temporary Protection and Refugee Status	34
2.6.2. Integration and Access to Rights.....	34
2.6.3. Geopolitical and Cultural Proximity	34
2.6.4. Differentiated Treatment and Legal Ambiguity	35
2.6.5. Interrelations Between Concepts.....	35
2.6.6. Relevance to the Research Questions.....	36
Part 3: Methodology	37
3.0. Overview	37
3.1. Research Design.....	37
3.1.1. Justification for the Qualitative Approach	37
3.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria.....	38
3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	39
3.4. Search Strategy and Data Management	39

3.5. Synthetic and Comparative Analysis	40
3.6. Ethical Considerations.....	42
3.7. Data Extraction.....	42
Part 4: Results and Interpretation.....	49
4.1. Part 4A: Results.....	49
4A.1. To identify the institutional mechanisms that enabled the swift and unique implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022.....	49
4A.2. To compare legal and policy frameworks applied to Ukrainian refugees with those applied to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa.....	52
4A.3. To evaluate the integration outcomes of different refugee populations in the EU, focusing on access to labor markets, education systems, and healthcare services.....	55
4A.4. To examine the role of media portrayals and public narratives in shaping political decisions and public policies regarding refugee reception and integration	57
4A.5. To analyse the broader socio-political implications of differentiated treatment of refugee groups within EU migration governance frameworks	60
4.2 Part 4B: Interpretation of Results.....	62
4B.1. Interpretation of Institutional Mechanisms Enabling the Implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive	62
4B.2. Interpretation of Legal and Policy Framework Disparities	64
4B.3. Interpretation of Socio-Economic Integration Outcomes.....	65
4B.4. Interpretation of Media and Political Narratives	67
4B.5. Interpretation of Broader Socio-Political Implications	69
4.3. Strengths and Limitations of the Study	70
Part 5: Conclusion.....	73
5.1. Summary of Findings	73
5.2. Policy Implications and Recommendations	74
5.3. Future Research Directions	74
References.....	76

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Comparison of Refugee Legal Statuses in the EU.....	18
Table 2: Data Extraction Table for 15 Selected Studies.....	44
Table 3: Institutional Factors Enabling the Activation of TPD.....	51
Table 4: Comparison of Legal and Policy Frameworks.....	54
Table 5: Comparative Integration Outcomes	57
Table 6: Dominant Media Narratives by Refugee Group	59
Table 7: Socio-Political Implications of Differentiated Treatment	61
Figure 1: Timeline Image of EU Refugee Crises.....	31
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the study	36

List of Abbreviations

CEAS – Common European Asylum System
TPD – Temporary Protection Directive
EU – European Union
TCNs – Third-Country Nationals
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
RAMM – Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management
CASP – Critical Appraisal Skills Programme
EC – European Commission
UK – United Kingdom
NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations
OUP – Oxford University Press
IPPR – Institute for Public Policy Research

Part 1: Introduction

1.1. Context of the Topic and Its Importance

The European Union (EU), consisting of 27 Member States, has long portrayed itself as a guardian of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Central to its commitments are frameworks such as the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, both designed to guarantee protection standards including non-refoulement, equality, and the right to seek asylum (Bendel & Ripoll Servent, 2017; Guild, 2017; Hatton, 2017). However, despite this comprehensive legal infrastructure, the practical implementation of asylum policies across Member States has often revealed significant inconsistencies, largely shaped by varying domestic political agendas (Thielemann, 2018; Carrera et al., 2017; Scipioni, 2017; Trauner, 2016).

A critical moment in EU asylum governance emerged in 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For the first time, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), a mechanism intended to grant immediate and collective protection to displaced populations without the delays associated with individual asylum claims (European Council, 2022; EUAA, 2023; Atipova, 2024; Aigner et al., 2024). Through this unprecedented action, millions of Ukrainians gained rapid access to residence, healthcare, education, and employment across EU territories. This swift and coordinated response was widely praised, although it simultaneously exposed longstanding inconsistencies in the EU's broader refugee policy framework (Sanjeevani, 2023; Beirens et al., 2016; Churrua Muguruza, 2022).

In contrast, the EU's reaction to the 2015 – 2016 refugee crisis, which involved large numbers of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa, was far less unified. Member States struggled to agree on relocation quotas and standardized procedures, resulting in fragmented, often restrictive national responses (Dunai & Than, 2016; Carrera et al., 2017; Niemann & Zaun, 2018). Scholars argue that these contrasting outcomes were not solely the result of logistical challenges but were also significantly influenced by perceptions of cultural, racial, and geopolitical proximity, with Ukrainian refugees viewed as more aligned with European identities compared to refugees from other regions (Achiume, 2019; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024).

This disparity in treatment raises fundamental questions about the universality and consistency of the EU's humanitarian commitments. Investigating how the EU's treatment of Ukrainian

refugees compares to its treatment of other displaced groups, and identifying the political, legal, and societal factors that have led to these differences, is essential for understanding the evolving nature of EU asylum policy and its broader implications for refugee protection in Europe (Das, 2025; Atipova, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024).

Accordingly, this study aims to critically examine the differences in the EU's treatment of Ukrainian refugees relative to other refugee groups and to explore the key factors that have contributed to these divergent approaches.

1.2. Presentation and Definition of the Initial Question

The motivation for this research originated from an observation that refugees from Ukraine received notably more comprehensive and rapid support from the European Union compared to refugees from non - European countries. The rapid manner in which the Union addressed the Ukrainian crisis, alongside strong public endorsement and favorable media representations, contrasted markedly with reactions to earlier refugee situations (Bosse, 2023; Saracino, 2024; Ineli-Ciger, 2022). For instance, during the Syrian refugee crisis, several European Union Member States reinstated stringent border controls, rejected refugee relocation quotas, and adopted political and media discourses depicting asylum seekers primarily as security threats or economic liabilities (Das, 2025; Matulić & Škokić, 2024; Brekke & Brochmann, 2014).

This evident disparity raises critical questions about the objectivity and universal applicability of the humanitarian principles promoted by the European Union. It provokes further inquiry regarding whether the protection provided to refugees by Member States is driven purely by objective humanitarian needs or if subjective considerations — such as political relationships, cultural affinities, racial identity, or religious commonalities — play a significant role. An essential question in this context is why the Temporary Protection Directive, despite meeting the necessary legal and humanitarian criteria for activation during the mass displacements caused by conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, remained inactive until the Ukrainian refugee situation arose.

These issues highlight a broader concern often referred to as selective solidarity, a phenomenon whereby protection and humanitarian aid from the European Union appear contingent less upon the severity of humanitarian need and more upon how closely a displaced population aligns with European cultural identity, geopolitical priorities, or strategic interests. Addressing this selective solidarity is crucial not only to evaluating the fairness of current EU refugee policies

but also to ensuring equity and consistency in the future governance of migration and asylum across Europe.

1.3. Aim, Research Question and Objectives

Aim:

To critically examine the differences in European Union policies and practices concerning the treatment and integration of Ukrainian refugees compared to those from other regions, and to assess the implications of these differences for the socio-economic integration of affected groups.

Research Question:

How and why do European Union policies and practices regarding the treatment and integration of refugees from Ukraine differ from those applied to refugees originating from other regions, and what implications do these differences have for the socio-economic integration of these groups?

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the institutional mechanisms that enabled the swift and unique implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022.
2. To compare legal and policy frameworks applied to Ukrainian refugees with those applied to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa.
3. To evaluate the integration outcomes of different refugee populations in the EU, focusing on access to labor markets, education systems, and healthcare services.
4. To examine the role of media portrayals and public narratives in shaping political decisions and public policies regarding refugee reception and integration.
5. To analyze the broader socio-political implications of differentiated treatment of refugee groups within EU migration governance frameworks.

1.4. Description of the Existing Literature

Several scholars have, over the last decade, subjected the EU's asylum governance approach to rigorous scrutiny, with a strong emphasis laid both on its legal underpinnings as well as its practical application (Dziedzic, 2016; Peers, 2017; Yabasun, 2019). Thym (2020) and Lavenex

(2018) note that legal harmonization efforts within Member States have often been derailed by conflicting Member State interests. Geddes and Scholten (2016), likewise, contend that European migration policies are largely driven by internal political pressures instead of rigorous compliance with common legal standards.

With regards to the Temporary Protection Directive, recent academic work has provided new insights regarding its activation in response to the Russian - Ukrainian war. Atipova (2024) and Macková et al. (2024) examined the previous inactivity of the Directive up to 2022, illustrating how particular political circumstances ensured its unprecedented activation. Their studies demonstrate a significant discrepancy between theoretical inclusive and adaptable provisions of existing laws and the political will needed for their effective mobilization amidst a state of emergency.

It could be argued that media coverage, as well as certain studies and the overall public perception, have borne to light underlying contradictions related to the way different refugee groups are portrayed and perceived across Europe. These contradictions reveal how narratives about refugees are shaped not only by political and economic interests but also by selective media framing and societal attitudes, ultimately influencing the differential treatment and reception of these groups within European societies. Moise et al. (2023) and Matulić and Škokić (2024) have shown that refugees from Ukraine were largely represented through positive, compassionate frames within political discourse as well as mass media narrative. Refugees from non-European countries, however, including Syria, Afghanistan, and countries from Sub-Saharan Africa, were represented negatively with a focus upon the threats they pose, the economic burden they impose, as well as racialized stereotypes (Sales, 2023; Dastgeer & Hill, 2024; Iberi & Saddam, 2023). These contradictions are representative of Giancaspro and Lucenti's (2024) identification of implicit hierarchical divisions within European discourse on asylum where implicit hierarchies legitimate some groups of refugees but exclude others.

Integration experiences of refugees across EU Member States reveal even starker disparities when examined in relation to the refugees' country of origin. Berveno and Moskvina (2024) and Haase et al. (2023) identify that although refugees from Ukraine are provided with expedited legal access to employment markets, they often face deskilling, insecure employment, as well as language-based difficulties. Коптыкова & Yemets (2024) corroborate these observations with the fact that educated Ukrainian women living within Austria as well

as within Poland are mostly relegated to low-paid occupations, a trend that was previously evidenced with Syrian refugee populations.

More disparities occur in the areas of healthcare and housing. Higher levels of discrimination and discontent have been reported by non-European refugees when trying to access healthcare compared to that of the Ukrainian refugees. Nonetheless, as noted by Byelikova (2024), even Ukrainian refugees are faced with significant challenges because of inadequate resources as well as overburdened social service levels within host societies.

Together, this literature highlights that even as asylum and integration policies within the European Union are legally homogeneous, their real application is greatly shaped by societal attitudes, politics of identity, as well as general international relations dynamics.

1.5. Presentation of the Approach Chosen

To explore these issues comprehensively, the current study employed a qualitative synthesis approach, focusing on comparative analysis of secondary qualitative research. More specifically, the analysis sought to synthesize insights from current qualitative research on a number of major refugee crises, i.e., the 2022 - present Ukraine refugee crisis, as well as previous refugee movements from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa from 2015 - 2024. These have been selected purposefully, as they are of similar scales of mass displacement, but with substantially varying EU policy approaches, thereby providing insight into the differences in EU treatment as well as its underlying institutional, political, and social drivers of such differences (Carrera et al., 2017; Ineli-Ciger, 2022; Niemann & Zaun, 2018).

The methodological framework focused on a systematic synthesis of qualitative information from peer-reviewed scholarly literature, policy studies, EU legislations' formal texts, as well as leading critical commentaries from authors on issues of refugee integration as well as the application of policies for asylum. Significant EU legal frameworks discussed were the TPD, directives of the Common European Asylum System, as well as the Dublin Regulation (Beirens et al., 2016; Thym, 2020). The investigation was supplemented with qualitative data from formal reports of policy application conducted by EU institutions as well as Member States, as well as leading political narratives as well as political discourses from leading EU-based political entities such as the BBC, Der Spiegel, as well as Le Monde due to their influence as drivers of mass opinion as well as political decision-making regarding refugee reception (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Zaun, 2018).

Comparative syntheses analysis was organized under a number of clearly articulated dimensions: the particular institutional mechanisms that contribute towards the swift or tardy activation of legal frameworks (temporary protection as compared to standard-asylum procedures), divergence of practical delivery of social services ranging from education to healthcare as well as housing, economic integration possibilities, with a focus on labour market access, employment status, and skill recognition, and representation of groups of refugees in the narratives of the public as well as political discourse (Lavenex, 2018; Slominski & Trauner, 2018).

To enable a thorough synthesis, thematic analysis techniques were utilized to identify systematically patterns, contradictions, as well as recurring themes within chosen qualitative studies. This analytical approach helped the study unveil structural, institutional, as well as discursive mechanisms underlying the varying treatment of refugee populations from Ukraine as against Syria, Afghanistan, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa, hence addressing the research aims fully.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout synthesis, focusing on representing accurately and interpreting qualitatively from current research. Analysis steered away from making generalizations about heterogeneous refugee groups, with a focus instead placed on structural and institutional drivers of change, avoiding ascribing results to individual-level or group-level attributes. Respect for the experiences of the refugees, particularly around disparities and structural exclusion, shaped all levels of interpretation and reporting (Achiume, 2019).

1.6. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into five distinct parts to provide a structured and systematic synthesis of the Union's responses to refugee crises, with an emphasis on the differentiated treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The structure aligns with academic standards for synthesis analyses in qualitative research, guided by existing scholarly frameworks on refugee governance, legal harmonization, and socio-political integration (Lavenex, 2018; Thym, 2020).

Part 1: Introduction

The introductory chapter establishes the broader context and significance of the study. It clearly identifies and defines the primary research question, which examines how and why the

European Union's policies and practices towards Ukrainian refugees differ substantially from those applied to other displaced groups. The chapter highlights the importance of this investigation within ongoing debates about European migration and asylum governance. Additionally, it introduces the conceptual underpinnings and outlines the synthesis-based methodological approach employed to answer the research question (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

Part 2: Context, Framework, and Literature Review

This chapter offers an extensive synthesis of the theoretical and empirical background necessary to understand and interpret EU refugee policy and practices. It begins with precise definitions and clarifications of key concepts such as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons, and third-country nationals within the context of international and European Union law. The chapter then provides a synthesized review of scholarly literature on critical aspects of refugee governance, including the Common European Asylum System, the Temporary Protection Directive, legal harmonization efforts, integration frameworks, the principle of solidarity, and the politicization of refugee narratives. Particular attention is devoted to the unique circumstances surrounding the unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, contrasted with its non-activation during earlier refugee crises (Beirens et al., 2016; Carrera et al., 2017; Zaun, 2018; Achiume, 2019).

Part 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative synthesis approach adopted in this research. The study synthesizes qualitative secondary research sourced from peer-reviewed academic studies accessed through scholarly databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The selected studies specifically explore themes related to refugee integration, asylum governance, institutional responses, socio-economic outcomes, and public discourse. The synthesis focuses on systematically comparing and contrasting European Union responses to refugee groups from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa across institutional mechanisms, integration outcomes (education, labor market participation, healthcare, housing), and media narratives. Ethical considerations are carefully addressed, emphasizing the respectful representation of refugee experiences and ensuring sensitivity to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or generalizations (Slominski & Trauner, 2018).

Part 4: Result and Interpretation of the Results

This chapter represents the central analytical portion of the thesis. Utilizing the thematic synthesis approach, this chapter systematically presents comparative findings on legal and institutional frameworks, integration outcomes, media narratives, and discriminatory practices affecting different refugee groups. It interprets the synthesized data to uncover significant disparities and similarities in treatment, identifying institutional, political, social, and discursive factors responsible for shaping EU responses. The analysis specifically evaluates how the rapid and cohesive EU response to Ukrainian refugees contrasts sharply with the fragmented and restrictive policies applied to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Ineli-Ciger, 2023).

Part 5: Conclusion

The concluding chapter synthesizes and summarizes the principal findings of the research, discussing their broader implications for European Union asylum and migration governance. It critically assesses whether the preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees indicates a substantial shift in EU asylum policies or represents a singular, exceptional instance motivated by selective solidarity and geopolitical considerations. The conclusion also identifies key gaps revealed in the synthesis analysis, suggests pathways for future research, and outlines potential policy reforms within the framework of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission, 2024; Mantu & Zwaan, 2023).

This comprehensive thesis structure enables a thorough, synthesized evaluation of the complex interplay between legal frameworks, institutional practices, political interests, and socio-cultural narratives influencing the European Union's varied responses to mass refugee displacement.

Part 2: Context, Framework, and Literature Review Defining Migrants and Displaced Ukrainians

2.1. Classification of Migrants: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Displaced Persons, and Third-Country Nationals

Migration is a complex phenomenon with multiple categories of mobility and legal statuses. Under international and EU law, migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, displaced person, and third-country nationals (TCN) are distinguished from one another so that they can be allocated respective legal rights, protections, as well as responsibilities (FRA, 2020; Atipova, 2024). Each of these categories is placed within a particular legal framework, which prescribes qualification for protection, availability of resources, as well as integration processes.

A *refugee*, under international law, is a person who has had to depart from their home country because they have a well-founded fear of persecution for race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a specific social group (UNHCR, 1951. Article 1). Refugees are protected under the 1951 Convention as well as its 1967 Protocol. Within the EU, these protections are translated into practice through the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU), which provides minimum standards for the granting of refugee status (Homonai, 2022). Refugees have equal access to education, healthcare, housing, and the labour market of the host country. Procedural requirements for getting permanent residence and acquiring citizenship are extremely diverse between Member States (Bauböck et al., 2006; OECD, 2011; Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007).

By contrast, *asylum seekers* are people who have sought protection under international law but whose claims have not yet been determined (Betts & Collier, 2017). During the period they are seeking asylum, they enjoy basic rights such as shelter, medical attention, and non-refoulement, the rule against returning people to a country where they can be persecuted (Macková et al., 2024). Treatment of asylum seekers is generally uneven throughout the European Union (EU), a reflection of the varying immigration and refugee policies of Member States (Jeannet et al., 2021; Bauböck, 2018). Hungary and Poland, for example, have enacted tight controls over their politics of immigration, which have been fiercely criticized for being at variance with accepted EU legal practices as well as humanitarian rights (Nagy, 2016; Babická, 2022; Tsourdi, 2021). They have been criticized by a number of humanitarian agencies and have generated controversy regarding whether Member States are respecting EU precepts (Macková et al.,

2024). Other countries, such as France and Germany, have taken more open attitudes, offering wider rights to people seeking asylum, including early access to employment. This difference does more than speak to varying national practices; it raises questions about the efficacy of EU regulation to impose a common standard of practice within Member States (Moise et al., 2023).

Displaced persons are those compelled to escape war, natural disasters, or other calamities but who do not necessarily traverse international frontiers or qualify for the status of a refugee. They can gain from ad hoc or secondary mechanisms of protection according to the legal standards of the host country or the EU as a whole (Mickelsson, 2024). This legal category is represented by the 2022 activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the displaced Ukrainians, which is elaborated on at length under section 2.2.

Third-country nationals (TCNs) are persons who are neither nationals of the EU Member States. Practically, TCNs encompass international students, qualified workers as well as unskilled workers, illegal migrants, as well as persons who are displaced but without the status of a refugee. TCNs are compelled to overcome hurdles to access legal migratory routes while they are exposed to intricate bureaucratic processes. Although legal frameworks like the EU Blue Card Directive enable legal mobility of qualified TCNs, several especially those coming from conflict areas end up being left in legal limbo (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

Since these categories are often not mutually exclusive, legal acknowledgment and administrative status of migrants notably determine their access to protections and resources. This differentiation notably becomes relevant in disaster contexts like the war of Ukraine where displaced people are a combination of Ukrainian citizens and foreign residents who need distinct types of legal assistance (Homonai, 2022).

2.2. Legal Status of Displaced Ukrainians and the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)

The status of displaced Ukrainians under Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was regulated under the TPD, a legal tool that the European Union had approved in 2001 but never invoked (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). TPD is a framework aimed at offering rapid and harmonized protection to people who have fled mass influx conditions without overburdening individual applications for asylum (Atipova, 2024). Just a matter of days into the conflict, the European Council voted with a consensus to invoke the TPD, offering immediate protection to the nationals of Ukraine as well as legal residents of Ukraine (Council of the EU, 2022). This was the first time the TPD had been invoked, leading to a shift in the EU's migration

governance. Its beneficiaries were offered residence permits, access to the labour market, housing, healthcare, as well as education for children (Macková et al., 2024). Displaced Ukrainians were exempted from having to demonstrate personal persecution, a factor that streamlined the administrative processes as well as lightened the burden of national asylum schemes (van Tubergen et al., 2024). To place the volume of people involved into perspective, with the refugee crisis of 2015, around 1 to 1.3 million people sought asylum in Europe over the course of the year, something that tested the asylum schemes of the EU to the breaking point (Homonai, 2022).

Table 1: Comparison of Forced Migrants' Statuses in the EU

Legal Status	Basis in EU Law	Eligibility Criteria	Type of Protection	Access to Rights	Duration & Stability
Temporary Protection	Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC)	Mass influx; group-based eligibility (e.g., Ukrainian nationals)	Immediate & collective	Residency, labour market, healthcare, education	Initially temporary; extended to 2026
Refugee Status	Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU)	Individual fear of persecution (race, religion, etc.)	Individual; long-term	Similar rights, but granted after lengthy procedures	More stable legal status
Subsidiary Protection	Qualification Directive	Risk of serious harm (e.g., war) but not meeting refugee definition	Individual; limited scope	Basic protections, limited in some Member States	Renewable but less secure
Asylum Seeker (Pending)	CEAS Framework	Applicant undergoing evaluation	No official status yet	Basic shelter, healthcare, non-refoulement	Uncertain; can face deportation
Third-Country Nationals (TCNs)	TPD (limited), national laws	Non-EU nationals residing in conflict zones (e.g., foreign students in Ukraine)	Varies; often unclear	Uneven treatment; subject to administrative barriers	Often excluded or given lower priority

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the main forced migrants' legal statuses in the EU, including their legal bases, eligibility criteria, and practical implications.

As indicated by Ivasechko et al. (2023), the Directive was particularly effective in reducing humanitarian risks through the provision of legal clarity, social support, as well as inter-Member State institutional collaboration. Implementation has, however, never been uniform. Centralized support as well as registration facilities existed within some Member States like the Polish, German, as well as the Czech Republic, while others had delays in documentation as well as accommodation deficiencies (Londar et al., 2024).

Even with formal rights provided by the TPD, there are practical issues. Access to work is restricted by non-recognition of foreign qualifications, red tape, and language issues in a number of EU member states. Kopyrkova & Yemets (2024) note that foreign qualified Ukrainians, particularly high-skilled women, have often had to take work unrelated to their qualifications in Austria and Poland. Underemployment of such high-level human capital calls into question the success of integration policies as well as the long-term socio-economic experiences of displaced Ukrainians.

Additionally, the temporary status of the Directive creates legal ambiguities for extended integration (de Brouwer, 2023; van Harten, 2023). Originally scheduled for a year, the protection was extended to March 2026. However, its end with no evident path for permanent residency or refugee status may put millions of people into legal as well as economic limbo (Homonai, 2022). This is exacerbated by reports such as Berveno and Moskvina (2024), which observe that displaced persons staying under adverse conditions might have difficulty moving from temporary to long-term legal status.

The provision of housing is becoming one of the most urgent issues (Eurofound, 2024). Displaced Ukrainians have been told to move from sponsored housing in certain areas of France because of the seeming fall short of integration milestones (Berveno & Moskvina, 2024). Municipal governments within the Netherlands have had to resort to unusual tactics including placing refugees upon converted cruise liners because of strict shortages (But et al., 2023).

In addition, even with labour market entry provided for under the TPD, meaningful employment is never assured (Kortukova, 2025). Refugees are first required to overcome requirements of a kind to acquire local identification, open a bank account, as well as find housing, in order to qualify for work. Cumulative constraints have translated to labour market

participation levels ranging from more than 60% within some of the Member States to less than 10% within others (Londar et al., 2024).

The situation of third-country citizens who were legally settled within Ukraine when the war broke out creates legal challenges as well. Although the TPD provides for non-Ukrainians (for example, migrant workers and international students), some were hindered from crossing borders and were subject to differential reception within EU countries (Mickelsson, 2024). Racial profiling and administrative exclusion have evoked issues of compliance with EU anti-discrimination norms (Levin & Yatsenko, 2022).

Overall, the TPD offered a practical short-term response to mass displacements. Nonetheless, uneven execution, poor long-term preparation, and integration issues demonstrate the necessity of structural reforms. If the EU will institutionalize such a mechanism for repeated crises is a debatable question, especially because the criticism that the preferential approach satisfies geopolitical as well as racial hierarchies instead of a humanitarian principle-based commitment (Moise et al., 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

2.3. Literature Review: Refugee Crises and EU Migration Policy

2.3.1. Overview of Academic Debates on Refugee Policies in the EU

The EU's refugee governance model has been a focus of scholarly debate for a long time, notably with regards to finding a balance between political discretion and legal obligations. (Wendel, 2016; Byrne et al., 2020; Deleixhe, 2023). The EU operates a sophisticated legal framework, comprising the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which is intended to provide for a uniform application of standards of asylum and protection within its Member States (Fitzgerald, 2019). Nonetheless, researchers have extensively noted that although these policies are harmonized in theory, their practical application creates significant variations within Member States that have produced disparities and a differential treatment of applicants for asylum (Ivasechko et al., 2023; Atipova, 2024).

These discrepancies have instead encouraged scholars to pay closer attention to the EU's disjointed practice of refugee governance. While the CEAS was intended to standardize procedures for dealing with refugees, there are still considerable disparities at the level of national application that derogate from the very principle of uniformity and equality (Thym, 2020; Bendel & Ripoll Servent, 2017; Guild, 2017).

One of the major themes that pervades the literature is the conflict between solidarity and sovereignty. While the CEAS encourages burden-sharing amongst Member States, as a matter of fact, it is countries placed at the EU's external borders, e.g., Greece, Italy, and Spain, that bear the disproportionate brunt of migration pressures (Thielemann, 2018). This disproportionate division of responsibility is particularly highlighted through refugee crises, where attempts to introduce compulsory quotas for asylum seekers have been strongly resisted, notably from Central and Eastern Europe. This resistance serves to highlight the persistent pitfalls of supranational coordination against strong state interests (Karakır & Durakçay, 2024).

Equally, there is a substantial academic debate with regards to the application of the Dublin Regulation, which amplifies the disproportionate burden borne by frontline countries. Under this regulation, the first country of entry is to be responsible for handling applications for asylum, which puts additional strain upon countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain (Betts & Collier, 2017; Carrera et al., 2017). While initially designed to simplify the handling of asylum, the Dublin system has been faulted for its incapacity to promote even responsibility-sharing, ultimately leading to political clashes as well as fueling both nationalist as well as anti-immigrant politics within several EU member states (Zaun, 2018; Esses et al., 2013).

Piling on these internal tensions, the EU's external migration strategy itself has attracted academic scrutiny. More and more, the EU outsourced border control as well as the handling of asylum seekers to third-party countries such as Türkiye, Albania, and Libya. Its partnerships with these countries, as expressed in the 2016 EU - Türkiye Statement, represent a wider approach of migration externalization (Cassarino, 2018; Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019). While they are intended to manage migration flows, these have seriously threatened human rights issues because of unsafe circumstances as well as sometimes inhumane conditions within transit countries (Fitzgerald, 2019; Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016; Achiume, 2019).

In addition to institutional and geopolitical concerns, public opinion has also significantly shaped EU refugee policy. As Moise et al. (2023) argue, societal perceptions of refugees vary depending on cultural and geopolitical proximity. Their findings suggest that Ukrainian refugees were viewed more positively than those from Syria or Afghanistan, likely influencing the EU's rapid decision to activate the Directive in 2022. This conclusion is echoed by Giancaspro and Lucenti (2024), who found that European Parliament debates often portrayed Ukrainian refugees as "deserving" and inherently "European," while non-European refugees

were depicted as security threats. These implicit hierarchies in discourse further reveal how public and political sentiment shaped institutional responses.

The activation of the TPD in 2022 represented a dramatic shift from past responses to mass displacement (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). It was issued within days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leaving many wondering why this mechanism was not employed at the time of the 2015 refugee crisis. Academics posit that it is not only a transformation of political will that has occurred but a demonstration of the visibility of perceived solidarity and cultural closeness (Aigner et al., 2024; Atipova, 2024). Meanwhile, the variable treatment of Ukrainian citizens generated suspicion regarding racial and geographic discrimination within EU refugee governance (Atipova, 2024; Karakır & Durakçay, 2024; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Achiume, 2019).

Dr. Meltem Ineli-Ciger (2022; 2023) has provided most of the literature for the debate regarding this topic. She contends that the exceptional size and closeness of the Ukraine refugee crisis were principal drivers of the rapid activation of the TPD. All five stages of the decision-making process—from the proposal to its publication in the Official Journal of the EU—took place within five days, with a level of urgency and EU institution consensus that was exceptional (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Previous crises were responded to with political indecisiveness. Prior to this, Jánošová, (2024). explained several structural hurdles to the activation of the TPD for previous years, namely the ambiguity of "mass influx," the procedural complexity, as well as conflicting perspectives towards solidarity and redistribution, which were mostly compounded through populist scare-mongering. Also, Arenas-Hidalgo (2023) addressed the question of mass influx. To support the analysis, Beirens et al. (2016) examined the application of the TPD within the EU asylum regime. They noted that the vagueness surrounding the definition of "mass influx" provides a degree of flexibility but also potentially becomes a hindrance to application. Remarkably, in 2011, a year when there was the Arab Spring, it was Italy and Malta who officially triggered the activation of the TPD. Nonetheless, requests for activation were non-binding because only the European Commission may activate the mechanism. As noted by Beirens et al. (2016), power centralization leads to bureaucratic delays and political holdups, which are antithetical to the TPD's original intention of providing a swift and concerted response to a flight of people.

Echoing a wider change of direction in EU policy, the New Pact proposal of 2020 had provisions for repealing the TPD and substituting it with a regulation dealing with the situation of crisis and force majeure. Mantu and Zwaan (2023) contend that the fact that the TPD had

been inactive up to 2022 goes to show that the Commission as well as Member States had perceived it as a non-working legal tool.

The Pact was finally agreed upon back in 2024 and will enter into application in 2026. Regulation 2024/1359, within this architecture, builds upon and develops the structure provided by the TPD (Preamble (3), Regulation 2024/1359). Whereas the TPD addressed mass influxes (Directive 2001/55/EC, Article 2), Regulation 2024/1359 presents a more extensive set of crisis triggers, such as force majeure, as well as the weaponization of flows of migration (Article 1(4), (5)). In contrast to the TPD's voluntary solidarity measures (Article 26), Regulation 2024/1359 provides for a binding solidarity mechanism (Article 8(1)), where Member States must share responsibilities through relocations, financial commitments, or other assistance measures. It introduces the notion of offsets of responsibilities, where countries hosting higher number of applicants can set off their obligations for the future (Article 8(1)(a)(ii), 8(1)(c)).

This transition from a voluntary to a mandatory solidarity system marks a significant evolution in the EU's migration policy (Aigner et al., 2024; Atipova, 2024). It addresses previous shortcomings where frontline states bore the brunt of migration flows without sufficient support from their counterparts (Carrera et al., 2017; Bendel & Ripoll Servent, 2017). Through its legally binding mechanisms and built-in incentives, the regulation seeks to prevent political stalemates and encourage broader participation in asylum responsibilities (Mantu & Zwaan, 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). These changes represent a fundamental transformation in how the EU responds to mass displacement and will likely influence future policy debates (Aigner et al., 2024; Karakır & Durakçay, 2024).

Nevertheless, the New Pact has not escaped criticism. Human rights groups and civil society organizations have expressed concern that the emphasis on border control and returns may erode asylum protections and violate the principle of non-refoulement (Achiume, 2019; Carrera & Cortinovia, 2019). Other scholars argue that the reforms do not go far enough in creating a genuinely equitable and rights-based asylum system, especially regarding protection standards and solidarity (Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016; Ineli-Ciger, 2023).

Ultimately, the success of the New Pact will depend on sustained political will from all EU Member States, as well as meaningful partnerships with third countries to manage migration flows effectively (Betts & Collier, 2017; Carrera et al., 2017). As these reforms are implemented, the EU will continue to grapple with the challenge of balancing national interests

with collective responsibility and humanitarian values (Bendel & Ripoll Servent, 2017; Guild, 2017).

2.3.2. Previous Refugee Crises: Responses to Syrian, Afghan, and Other Displaced Populations

The EU's handling of previous refugee crises is of key importance for understanding its current response to Ukrainian displacement¹. Patterns of migration into, within, and from Europe have been subject to profound changes since the early 1990s (Balch & Geddes, 2011). European migration was previously largely determined by labor needs and colonial experiences. This was transformed with the end of the Iron Curtain and the opening of Eastern Europe's frontiers (Mickelsson, 2024). The break-down of the Soviet Union, as well as conflict within former Yugoslavia, significantly triggered major refugee movements towards Western Europe. Between 1989 and 1992 alone, a huge number of applications for asylum came from Yugoslavia, Romania, Türkiye, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Aigner et al., 2024).

The EU was confronted with several major refugee crises throughout the following decades, each affecting the development of its policies towards migration. During the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1999) and Kosovo Crisis (1998–1999), mass influxes of refugees from Bosnia, Croatia, and subsequently Kosovo led to stop-gap protection measures, such as ad hoc humanitarian aid and relocation programs (Beirens et al., 2016). Still, with no unified EU asylum policy, the dispersal of refugees from one Member State to another remained uneven, highlighting the necessity for harmonized action. The Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) implemented in 2001 was a direct reaction to such lessons, with the goal of more organized refugee management (Ineli-Ciger, 2023).

The 2003–2011 Iraq War refugee crisis again proved the EU's piecemeal approach. Although countries such as Sweden and Germany took substantial intakes of Iraqi refugees, the EU had no unified framework, leading to diverse national approaches with restricted efficacy despite funding through the European Refugee Fund (Carrera et al., 2017). Political instability of the Arab Spring, especially from Libya and Syria in 2011–2012, again placed added migration pressures upon southern European governments. EU actions encompassed search-and-rescue missions such as Italy's Operation Mare Nostrum (subsequently replaced by Frontex's

¹ For more context, see figure 1 at page 31, which represents a timeline of major refugee influxes to the EU.

Operation Triton) and spurred reform efforts within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (Slominski & Trauner, 2018).

The Syrian Civil War significantly triggered the largest post-World War II refugee exodus, with more than a million refugees settling in Europe alone in 2015 (Karakır & Durakçay, 2024). Paradoxically, despite the sheer volume of displaced persons, the EU chose initially to forgo activating the Temporary Protection, missing a chance for legal and ethical consistency within EU asylum politics (Atipova, 2024). Rather, the EU reaction was piecemeal, with Germany's open-door approach set against opposition from Eastern bloc countries such as Hungary and Poland (Moise et al., 2023). The 2016 EU - Türkiye agreement set out to stem the flow of irregular migrants by returning refugees to Türkiye for a trade of funds for resettlement promises (Carrera et al., 2017).

The Afghan crisis of 2021, as a result of the Taliban's capture of Kabul, again revealed discrepancies within the EU's refugee management. Just as with the Syrian crisis, Afghan refugees were left without a common EU-wide protection scheme. Rather, the governments dealt with it nationally, with France and Germany starting narrowly targeted evacuation initiatives while others kept their hardline asylum policies intact (Aigner, Baglioni, & Moschetti, 2024). The 2021 Belarus border crisis, where the government of Belarus was charged with directing thousands of asylum seekers, mostly from Africa and the Middle East, towards the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, again highlighted the delicate interplay between humanitarian responsibility and national security considerations. This was generally understood as a case of "hybrid warfare," as flows of migration were purposely weaponized as a form of retaliation for EU sanctions imposed due to Belarus's controversial 2020 presidential election as well as its repeated human rights abuse (Berzins, 2022; Ancite-Jepifánova, 2024). EU Member States responded with a strongly securitized approach, resorting to emergency measures, installing physical barriers, and deploying soldiers to augment border control. Such actions were criticized by scholars as well as by human rights groups for risking the violation of the principle of non-refoulement as well as compromising the foundational right of seeking asylum (Berzins, 2022). While doing so, the EU escalated sanctions against the government of Belarus as well as pursued restriction of future unauthorized migration by promoting increased collaboration with countries of transit as well as source countries (Forti, 2023).

Contrastingly, with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, the EU quickly invoked the TPD for the first time to provide immediate residence status, employment

opportunities, and social benefits to more than eight million displaced Ukrainians (Aigner, Baglioni, & Moschetti, 2024). This rapid action emphasized profound differences in EU actions based on geopolitical as well as socio-cultural factors, with Ukrainians enjoying institutionalized assistance as well as fast-tracked processes compared to Syrian as well as Afghan refugees, who were subjected to long-drawn-out asylum processes as well as negative discourses (Atipova, L., 2024; Mickelsson, 2024).

The media played a strong role in these policymaking results by representing Ukrainian refugees as culturally similar to host populations compared to Middle Eastern refugees who were represented as being a matter of concern regarding security (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). Sokar et al. (2022) also show how privileged treatment was experienced throughout Western countries, shaped by systemic discrimination against non-European refugees. These differentiated treatments, relying on geopolitical agenda and socio-cultural concern, highlight persistent disparities in EU practices of granting asylum (Aigner et al., 2024).

The EU's policy towards African and Middle Eastern migrants always leans towards restrictive border policies. Externalized procedures for asylum, particularly within Libya, have been criticized for breaching humanitarian rights as well as subjecting migrants to detention mistreatment (Carrera et al., 2017). Every such crisis has increasingly influenced EU asylum policy as well as border management practices, with emergent but discriminatory protection measures as well as persistent contradictions of humanitarian governance.

2.3.3. Comparative Analysis of Different Refugee Frameworks in Academic Literature

Giancaspro and Lucenti (2024), through content analysis of parliamentary discourses, contend that even institutional discourse is charged with racialized as well as cultural hierarchies. Such hierarchies determine the content of legislations as well as the application of policies, favoring European refugees in most cases.

Berveno and Moskvina (2024) explore the economic integration of Ukrainian refugees and observe that while the TPD had provided for formal access to labour markets, structural barriers (language proficiency, childcare duties, and non-recognition of foreign qualifications) remain a hindrance to full labour market integration. Likewise, Коптыкова & Yemets (2024) demonstrate that skilled Ukrainian women employed in Austria and Poland are often deskilled, laboring in occupations that are of lesser skill than they are qualified for. From these results,

we can infer that while legal mechanisms are important, they are inadequate for maximizing integration effects.

The literature furthermore considers the scope of current directives. Atipova (2024) describes how despite its deliberate construction as a response designed to offer rapid, interim protection for cases of mass displacement, the TPD had never previously been invoked before 2022. This leaves important questions surrounding its political feasibility and whether its application in the example of Ukraine constitutes a one-time deviation or a new trend of EU refugee governance.

2.3.4. Gaps in Existing Research and How This Study Contributes

There are still some gaps remaining despite the increased scholarship regarding EU migration and asylum policy. Firstly, as noted by Mickelsson (2024), there are hardly any studies that compare systematically the legal treatment of the Ukrainian refugees to those of non-European groups under a single analytical framework. All of the comparative studies are piecemeal or country-specific, as compared to a comprehensive pan-EU approach.

Secondly, little empirical research is available as to how the TPD was implemented in various Member States. While a number of studies present national case studies (e.g., Macková et al., 2024, for Poland and the Czech Republic), there is a need for a wider comparative evaluation to determine whether the Directive's ambitions of harmonization and solidarity have been translated into practice.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the normative consequences of selectivity have remained largely unaddressed. The activation of the TPD for Ukrainians but not for Syrians or for Afghans raises concerns regarding the universality of EU humanitarian obligations. This thesis aims to fill this void by exploring the legal, political, and social drivers of the varying treatment of refugee groups.

Utilizing the current literature and a comparative legal-political model, this study hopes to cast light on whether the EU's response to Ukrainian refugees constitutes a new model of asylum policy—or whether it continues traditional patterns of selective inclusion according to race, religious belief, and geopolitical consideration.

2.4. Historical Context: EU Responses to Refugee Crises

The history of the European Union's handling of refugee and asylum governance has been directly influenced by a succession of large-scale humanitarian crises over the course of the last three decades (Balch & Geddes, 2011). Not only did these past experiences identify shortcomings in the EU's legal as well as its practical frameworks, but they also directly shaped the development as well as subsequent modification of measures such as the CEAS as well as the TPD. Knowing the history of the EU's handling is central to understanding the uniqueness of its response to the Ukrainian refugees compared with other displaced peoples (Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016).

During the early 1990s, the violent collapse of Yugoslavia gave rise to one of the first significant refugee flows into Europe after the World War II (van Selm-Thorburn, 1998). At that time, the EU had no coordinated framework of asylum, resulting in extremely disparate and uneven national approaches (Barutciski, 1994). While individual Member States were providing humanitarian assistance and temporary admission, the fact that there was no collective EU tool highlighted the necessity of a more systematic framework for mass displacement. This directly influenced the establishment of the TPD of 2001 aimed at making provisions for a harmonized, swift EU-wide reaction to prospective mass influxes of refugees (Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

Even with the TPD available, it was left dormant for over two decades (Zaun, 2018). During the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, when more than a million asylum seekers came to Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, as well as from parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the temporary protection was not implemented. Member States instead depended upon the pre-existence of asylum mechanisms under the CEAS, notably the Dublin Regulation, by which the responsibility for handling asylum applications was allocated to the front-line country of entry (Carrera et al., 2017; Zaun, 2018). This mechanism imposed a disproportionate burden upon front-line countries like Greece and Italy, resulting in enormous pressures for national systems as well as extensive humanitarian issues.

The EU reaction at this time was one of political divisions, a breakdown of solidarity, as well as post hoc measures (Byrne et al., 2020). Attempts to introduce a quota-based relocation scheme were resisted by a number of Central and Eastern countries, again testifying to the conflict between collective action at a European level and Member State sovereignty (Thielemann, 2018; Bendel & Ripoll Servent, 2017). While short-term financial assistance

measures, such as the 2016 EU - Türkiye Statement, were put in place to control the flow of migration, critics have claimed that these were conducted at the expense of protecting the rights of the asylum seekers (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019; Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016).

The political motivations for non-activation of the TPD for the Syrian refugee crisis have been extensively discussed. Researchers highlight that political considerations, as opposed to legal insufficiencies, kept it from being activated. Activating the TPD would have represented a pan-European commitment to fairly distribute responsibilities, a result that several Member States were averse to accepting due to the growing anti-immigrant discourses and the concern of spurring additional migration (Ineli-Ciger, 2023; Mickelsson, 2024). Public narratives tended to cast Syrian as well as Afghan refugees as security risks as well as economic burdens, hence reinforcing exclusionary migration policies (Esses et al., 2013; KhosraviNik, 2010).

By contrast, the EU reaction to the Ukrainian refugee crisis of 2022 was prompt, cohesive, and extensive (Ineli-Ciger, 2023). Within a matter of days of the start of the Russian invasion, the Council of the EU voted by consensus to invoke the TPD (Aigner et al., 2024; Atipova, 2024). This facilitated millions of displaced people from Ukraine to access residency rights, the labour market, education, healthcare, and social benefits from all of the Member States. Administrative hurdles linked with conventional asylum processes were largely dispensed with, precluding delays.

A range of factors underpinned this rapid and unified response. Unlike with past crises, Ukrainians were widely understood to be culturally and geographically close to the societies of Europe. Populist narratives presented them as having been the victims of a blatant act of aggression by Russia, with a strong appeal to a moral duty to provide protection (Moise et al., 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). This image was a stark contrast to what happened with refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa, who were generally linked to cultural difference, insecurity, or economics (Achiume, 2019; Mickelsson, 2024; Sales, 2023).

Institutional learning was also at work. Failures in the 2015–2016 refugee response revealed the deficiencies of being dependent solely on the Dublin Regulation and emphasized the necessity of quicker, better coordinated action. Activation of the TPD proved that the EU was capable of acting conclusively when political will coincided with popular opinion (Beirens et al., 2016; Carrera et al., 2017). Additionally, States like Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic quickly introduced centralized registration and assistance mechanisms for Ukrainian

refugees, with enhanced administrative coordination (Macková et al., 2024; Londar et al., 2024).

Even within this comparatively successful paradigm, disparities existed. Third-country nationals who were settled in Ukraine, for example, students, migrant workers from Asia, and the Middle East, were often treated differentially at EU borders and confronted other legal hurdles when seeking protection (Levin & Yatsenko, 2022; Mickelsson, 2024). Evidence of racial profiling as well as bureaucratic exclusion indicated that racial and national biases were still present despite being under the formal umbrella of the TPD.

The Ukrainian crisis had the added effect of shedding light on more profound structural instability within EU asylum governance. While the TPD delivered a short-term fix, it did not provide decent avenues to permanent residence or citizenship. Beneficiaries were still left with a tenuous legal status, subject to the successive prolongation of their protection status (Byelikova, 2024; Berveno & Moskvina, 2024). Additionally, issues regarding labour market integration, qualification recognition, and access to decent housing were reported throughout Member States (Aigner et al., 2024; But et al., 2023). They reiterated previous patterns for Syrian and Afghan refugees, suggesting that systemic barriers to full socio-economic inclusion are still there despite legal status.

More broadly, the comparative evaluation of the EU's past responses to various refugee crises discloses a habit of selective solidarity. Legal frameworks like the CEAS and the TPD offered means of coordinated action, but political will, popular attitudes, as well as perceived cultural proximity, ultimately decided the reach as well as efficacy of protection measures (Atipova, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024). Preferential treatment of the refugees from Ukraine provokes significant normative issues regarding the consistency of European humanitarian commitments as well as the role of identity politics in the governance of asylum.

With the EU still dealing with intricate migration issues, lessons from these experiences will prove valuable. Future reforms, such as those set out under the New Pact for Migration and Asylum, need to tackle these inconsistencies to provide a more equitable, rights-based strategy of refugee protection for all displaced groups, irrespective of place of origin (Mantu & Zwaan, 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

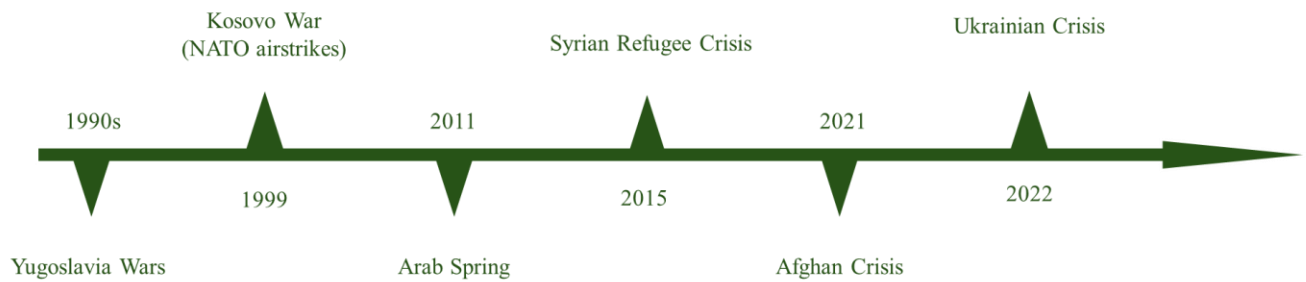


Figure 1: Timeline Image of EU Refugee Crises

2.5. EU Legislative Framework on Refugees

The EU has built a sophisticated legal and institutional structure for handling migration and asylum throughout its Member States. This structure centers around the CEAS, which was designed to standardize asylum proceedings and provide equal treatment of asylum seekers throughout the Union. Still, the application of these policies was always characterized by wide discrepancies, with legal requirements often secondary to political ambitions as well as popular attitudes (Ivasechko et al., 2023).

The CEAS consists of a number of important instruments: the Qualification Directive, the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Reception Conditions Directive, the Dublin Regulation, and the TPD. All of these instruments have the goal of providing minimum standards for the determination of refugee status asylum claims, as well as for the provision of decent living conditions for refugees (Atipova, 2024). While the CEAS is said to have enhanced some of the procedural elements of asylum within the EU, it has similarly exposed structural flaws, particularly under conditions of crisis.

The Dublin Regulation (initially adopted in 1990 but amended several times thereafter) attributes responsibility for assessing applications for asylum to the first EU country of entry. While intended to block multiple claims for asylum while avoiding duplication of work, the regulation disproportionately burdened frontline countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain. This was a principal source of friction within Member States as well as a main impediment to solidarity for the burden-sharing of refugees (Karakır & Durakçay, 2024).

Another significant legal tool — the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) — was established following the Yugoslav wars. It was designed to address mass influx cases by extending immediate and temporary protection to displaced persons without individualized

asylum evaluations. Its rapid, unanimous adoption as a result of the war in Ukraine was a turning point for EU asylum policy (Atipova, 2024; Macková et al., 2024).

As noted by Ivasechko et al. (2023), the activation of the TPD permitted the EU to grant displaced Ukrainians residence rights, healthcare, education, and employment within days of entry. Nonetheless, as Berveno and Moskvina (2024) observe, application throughout the Member States differed considerably. While some Member States rapidly adapted domestic procedures to receive the influx, other Member States struggled with bureaucratic backlogs and uneven provision of services.

The TPD deviates considerably from standard mechanisms of asylum under the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU). While individual consideration with a degree of detail and length is necessitated for claims of asylum, collective protection is offered where there is a mass influx. This is a difference that is legally important but is equally so for its integration implications. Immediate access to the labour market as well as to social services is facilitated by the TPD, with the potential to speed up refugees settling and making economic contributions (But et al., 2023).

However the TPD is no guarantee of permanent residence or naturalization. Its temporary status creates uncertainties regarding the long-term legal status of recipients. As Koptrykova & Yemets (2024) demonstrate, displaced Ukrainian women in Austria and Poland, enjoying legal access to work, are still confronted with persistent barriers to professional integration and long-term career progress. This is compounded by the fact that there are no well-defined routes from temporary protection towards permanent status.

To tackle some of the contradictions and shortcomings of the CEAS, the EC signed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum back in 2020, with a full rollout due by 2026. Among its myriad of reforms are the Regulation of Asylum and Migration Management (RAMM), which is designed to supplant the Dublin Regulation and set up a more flexible solidarity framework of Member States (De Bruycker, 2022; Pliszka, 2025). New mechanisms have been provided, such as obligatory solidarity contributions where the state can either take charge of the asylum seekers themselves or assist other Member States with funding and logistical support.

Giancaspro and Lucenti (2024) contend that while the New Pact is a move in the direction of more balanced responsibility-sharing, it is unknown if it will prove effective. Continued political divisions, especially between Eastern and Western Member States, continue to put to the test the application of cohesive asylum policies. Additionally, the focus of the pact on

procedures for returning people and external control of the external borders gave rise to concerns from civil society actors regarding the EU's commitment to upholding the rights of people.

The experiences of refugees from Ukraine have already started to influence the interpretation of new legal mechanisms. Macková et al. (2024) identify some of the lessons from the application of the TPD, for example, the need for swift coordination, online infrastructures, as well as decentralized assistance systems, which are currently implemented in subsequent migration preparedness. Still, it is unsure whether the privileged status for Ukrainians will set a precedent for subsequent crises or constitute a peculiar case due to geopolitics as well as cultural affinity (Mickelsson, 2024).

In summary, the EU legal framework constitutes a full set of tools for managing migration and asylum. Nonetheless, the success of the tools relies not only upon their legal construction but also upon political commitment and attitudes within society. While activating the TDP for Ukrainians was a positive indication of swift and coordinated action by the EU, the differential application of similar measures highlights persistent inconsistencies within refugee protection. In preparation for coming challenges, the main challenge will be making legal consistency compatible with political feasibility—and guaranteeing that all persons who have been displaced have their rights respected, irrespective of country of birth, race, or religiosity.

2.6. Conceptual Framework

The study is framed by a conceptual framework aimed at exploring the legal, political, and social contexts of refugee protection within the Union, specifically the status of displaced Ukrainians under the TPD. The conceptual framework serves as a framework for structuring the research by determining the key variables — such as legal status, integration results, and geopolitics) — and how they concurrently interact to create diverse experiences for diverse groups of refugees².

At the core of this research is the juxtaposition of legal categories with practical effects. Featured concepts are temporary protection, refugee status, integration, differentiated treatment, and geopolitical as well as cultural proximity. All of these elements form the framework of how refugee policies are conceived, enacted, and lived.

² See figure 2 at page 36. It consists of a small diagram illustrating the conceptual framework of this thesis

2.6.1. Temporary Protection and Refugee Status

The distinction between temporary protection and formal refugee status is fundamental. Temporary protection, as defined by the TPD, offers immediate and collective protection to people fleeing a mass influx situation, bypassing the often lengthy and bureaucratic asylum process (Atipova, 2024). Beneficiaries are granted rights to residence, employment, education, and healthcare without the need for individual asylum determination procedures (Ivasechko et al., 2023).

In contrast, refugee status under the Qualification Directive requires individual assessment based on a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (Homonai, 2022). Although it provides more stable legal protection, the process to acquire refugee status is typically slower and more restrictive in terms of access to services in the early stages. This distinction plays a significant role in shaping the experiences and opportunities available to different displaced groups.

2.6.2. Integration and Access to Rights

Integration is defined in this study as the process through which refugees and displaced persons gain access to and participate in the economic, social, and civic life of host societies. The TPD, by granting immediate access to employment and services, is designed to facilitate rapid integration. However, Berveno and Moskvina (2024) point out that legal access does not always translate into practical outcomes. Language barriers, lack of recognition of professional qualifications, and structural discrimination continue to hinder the full integration of displaced persons.

Коптыкова & Yemets (2024) highlight the issue of deskilling, particularly among Ukrainian refugee women, who, despite their qualifications, are often employed in low-skilled jobs. This underutilization of human capital illustrates that access to employment is not enough; meaningful integration requires addressing the structural barriers that prevent individuals from contributing fully to society in line with their experience and education.

2.6.3. Geopolitical and Cultural Proximity

The concept of geopolitical and cultural proximity is critical for understanding why displaced Ukrainians received a faster and more favorable response from the EU than refugees from

previous crises. According to Moise et al. (2023), European publics and policymakers perceived Ukrainians as culturally and geographically close, which led to higher levels of public support and political consensus.

Giancaspro and Lucenti (2024) show that parliamentary language during the Ukrainian crisis framed Ukrainian refugees as “European” and deserving of protection, in contrast to earlier discourses around Syrians and Afghans, who were often framed in terms of risk and burden. These perceptions have a profound impact on the political feasibility of policy responses and the extent of solidarity shown across Member States.

2.6.4. Differentiated Treatment and Legal Ambiguity

The notion of differentiated treatment — defined as the unequal application of legal protections and social services based on origin, race, or religion—is central to this thesis. Mickelsson (2024) argues that the EU’s asylum regime, while legally grounded in principles of universality and non-discrimination, frequently produces outcomes that reflect political and racial biases.

This is especially evident in the treatment of TCNs who were legally residing in Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion. Many of these individuals, including students and migrant workers from Africa and Asia, faced administrative hurdles and discriminatory treatment at EU borders (Mickelsson, 2024). Despite being technically eligible for protection under the TPD, their experiences diverged significantly from those of Ukrainian nationals, highlighting inconsistencies in the application of EU law.

2.6.5. Interrelations Between Concepts

These concepts are interrelated in ways that influence both policy design and implementation. The legal category assigned to a displaced person (e.g., temporary protection versus refugee status) shapes their access to rights and services, which in turn affects their ability to integrate (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). At the same time, cultural perceptions and geopolitical interests can influence which legal categories are applied in the first place, leading to differentiated treatment.

In the case of Ukrainian refugees, the TPD provided a streamlined path to protection and services. However, this response was shaped not only by legal obligations but also by the

political context and public attitudes. The conceptual framework thus illustrates how structural, legal, and ideological factors combine to produce unequal outcomes in the EU’s asylum regime.

2.6.6. Relevance to the Research Questions

This conceptual framework directly informs the central research question: How and why do EU policies and practices regarding the treatment and integration of Ukrainian refugees differ from those applied to refugees from other regions? It also supports the subsidiary questions, particularly those focused on the legal basis for protection, the impact of public narratives, and the consequences for long-term integration.

By organizing the analysis around the key concepts of legal status, integration, proximity, and differential treatment, this framework enables a systematic examination of EU refugee policy. It helps explain why similar legal mechanisms can yield vastly different outcomes and why certain refugee groups are perceived and treated as more “deserving” than others.

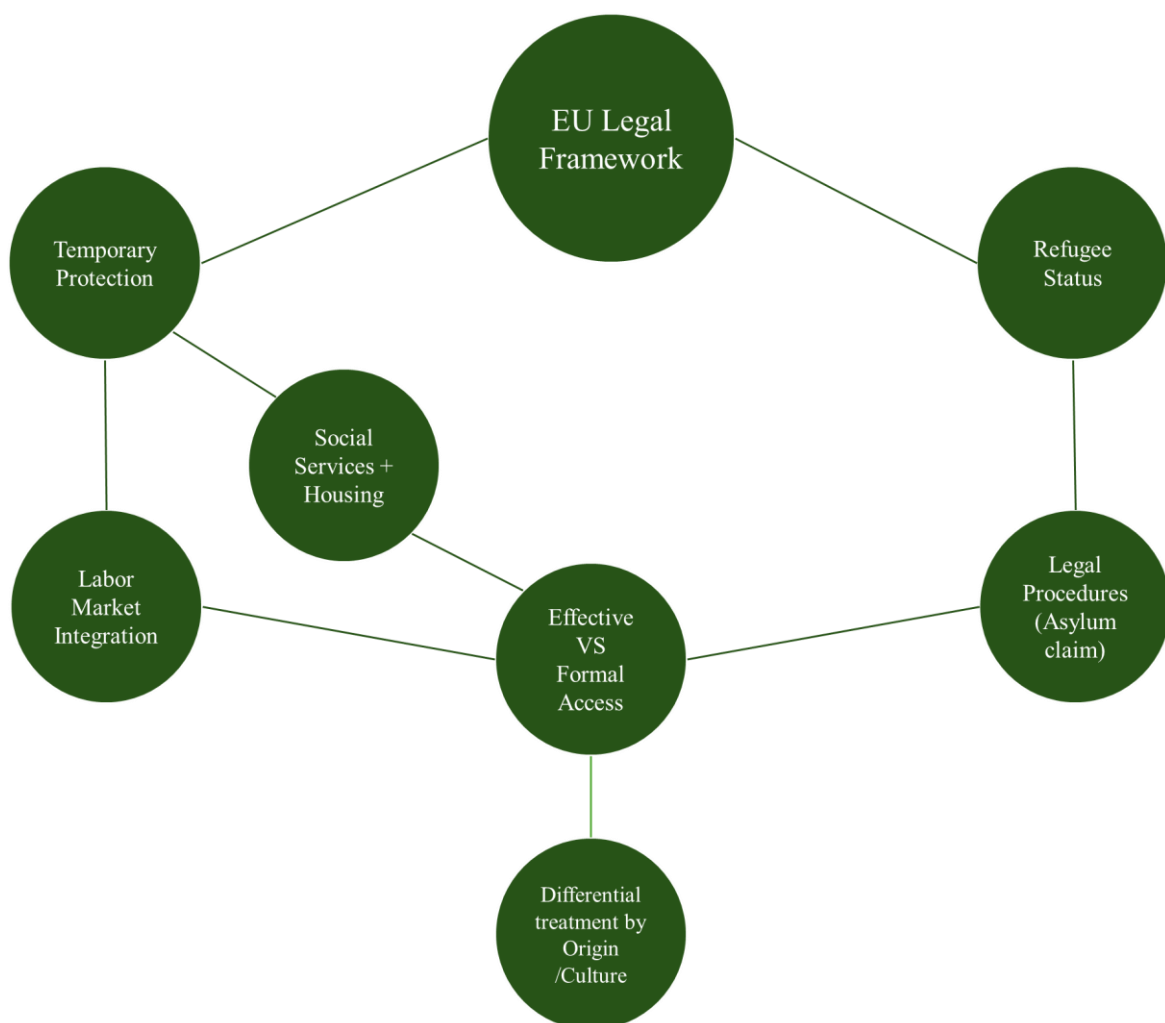


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the study

Part 3: Methodology

3.0. Overview

This research uses a qualitative comparative case study method to examine differences in the way the European Union (EU) handled the influx of Ukrainian refugees as compared to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This method is ideal for researching legal frameworks as well as policy approaches, attitudes of a socio-political nature, as well as integration results while addressing the broader implications for social inclusion and refugee governance within the EU (Atipova, 2024; Karakır & Durakçay, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024).

3.1. Research Design

This research is conceptualized as a qualitative comparative case study. Two focal cases are the EU's reaction to the Ukrainian refugee crisis (2022–present) and the Syrian/Afghan refugee crises (2015–2021). The cases were chosen as they offer contrast in both legal instruments employed as well as the political and public reaction, although they are similar if smaller in size (Atipova, 2024; Macková et al., 2024). The qualitative design facilitates a rich, context-sensitive exploration of asylum and migration practices, which allows the research to assess both the outcomes of policies as well as the legal, cultural, and political foundations of EU actions.

The comparative framework also allows for the research to control for structural, institutional, and discursive variables that explain differential refugee treatment, notably regarding legal classification, access to the labour market, housing, healthcare, and educational facilities (Londar et al., 2024; Aigner et al., 2024).

3.1.1. Justification for the Qualitative Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach because it is intended to investigate the underlying political, legal, and social mechanisms through which differential treatment of groups of refugees occurs within the EU. Instead of quantifying results, the understanding sought is an exploration of why and how policies such as the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) were quickly implemented for Ukrainians, while comparable policies were denied to Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan refugees. Qualitative research is especially apt for the interpretation of legal texts, policy reports, media discourse, as well as scholarly analyses, making it possible to have

a sophisticated understanding of institutional actions as well as narrative construction (Atipova, 2024; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024). Through comparative case examination and the use of legal and narrative content analysis, this research critically evaluates not only policy outcomes but also the structural motivations and biases within the EU's framework for asylum and migration governance.

3.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

This research utilized two main categories of material: (1) peer-reviewed academic literature, and (2) secondary empirical sources such as EU legal texts, policy documents, NGO reports, and mass media outputs. These sources were selected based on their analytical relevance, empirical richness, and alignment with the study's objectives.

Academic Literature:

Fifteen peer-reviewed journal articles served as analytical tools to guide comparative assessment and thematic interpretation. These included works by Ineli-Ciger (2022, 2023), Carrera et al. (2017), Macková et al. (2024), Niemann and Zaun (2018), Mickelsson (2024), Atipova (2024), and others. These studies provided theoretical and policy-oriented insights into the functioning of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), and patterns of socio-political inclusion or exclusion across EU states.

Empirical Material:

The empirical foundation of this study was built on a range of official EU documents such as Directive 2001/55/EC on Temporary Protection, the Dublin III Regulation, and the European Commission's communications under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission, 2020). Reports from the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and national implementation updates were also analysed for their contribution to understanding procedural and integration disparities across Member States.

Media Discourse Component:

To address the influence of public discourse and media representation (Objective 4), a small - scale media discourse analysis was conducted. Prominent European outlets were selected — BBC News (UK), Le Monde (France), and Der Spiegel (Germany)— due to their influence on national opinion and agenda-setting. From these sources, over 30 news articles published

between 2022 and 2024 were systematically reviewed using discourse-sensitive reading. The focus was on framing devices, lexical choices, visual elements, and underlying assumptions in the portrayal of Ukrainian refugees compared to Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan refugees. This empirical component enabled triangulation of academic insights with media-driven public narratives, providing additional context on how asylum practices are socially legitimized or contested.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain relevance and methodological consistency, the following criteria were applied:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024
- Official EU asylum and migration policy documents
- Studies focusing on Ukrainian, Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees
- Articles examining integration outcomes in employment, education, and healthcare
- Sources analyzing legal frameworks such as the TPD, Qualification Directive, and the Dublin Regulation

Exclusion Criteria:

- Opinion articles, media blogs, and grey literature without peer review
- Studies outside the EU context
- Documents focusing solely on internal displacement or unrelated migration typologies
- Literature published before 2015 (except where legally foundational)

This methodological filter ensured that the final corpus of 15 papers provided balanced, reliable, and thematically aligned insights to answer the central research question.

3.4. Search Strategy and Data Management

Sources for this study were systematically retrieved through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Boolean search terms were applied to enhance relevance and precision, including: "Temporary Protection Directive" AND "Ukrainian refugees", "EU asylum policy" AND "Syrian refugees", "Refugee integration Europe" AND "labour market", and "Comparative refugee policy" AND "EU".

In addition to academic literature, legal texts such as Directive 2001/55/EC and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020/2024) were obtained through EUR-Lex and the official European Commission portal.

All selected sources were catalogued and annotated using Zotero reference management software to streamline organization and analysis (Ivasechko et al., 2023; Macková, Blažek, & Horváth, 2024).

A structured data extraction matrix was used to systematically log the key themes, focus, legal frameworks discussed, and findings of each study. This ensured analytical coherence and traceability throughout the synthesis process.

3.5. Synthetic and Comparative Analysis

This dissertation employed a qualitative synthesis and comparative analysis method to examine how and why European Union (EU) asylum policies and integration practices differ in response to refugees from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than generating primary data, the study systematically reviewed and synthesized findings from fifteen peer-reviewed academic studies and official EU policy documents, which served as the core empirical material for this synthesis-type dissertation. The aim was not to evaluate individual studies in isolation but to draw out broader patterns, contradictions, and thematic insights across diverse sources.

The synthesis approach focused on comparing convergent and divergent evidence across legal, institutional, and socio-political dimensions. Rather than thematic coding, the method relied on interpretive cross-case comparison and narrative synthesis to draw relationships between findings and contextual factors. Each of the five research objectives was addressed through this analytical lens, ensuring that insights were not only thematically organized but also critically examined within the broader governance structures of EU asylum policy.

To address the first research objective, the analysis identified key institutional mechanisms—such as legal instruments, decision-making speed, and geopolitical alignment—that enabled the rapid implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in 2022 for Ukrainian refugees. Studies by Ineli-Ciger (2022, 2023), Carrera et al. (2017), and Macková et al. (2024) were synthesized to demonstrate how political consensus, geographical proximity, and symbolic affinity between Ukraine and the EU facilitated the unprecedented activation of this Directive.

For the second objective, a comparative examination of EU legal and policy frameworks revealed significant inconsistencies in protection mechanisms. While Ukrainian refugees benefited from a harmonized legal response via the TPD, Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees were subjected to fragmented national-level policies under the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), often marked by securitization and exclusionary procedures (Karakır & Durakçay, 2024; Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Slominski & Trauner, 2018). Variations in eligibility criteria, processing timelines, and recognition rates highlighted systemic disparities across Member States (Atipova, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024).

The third objective focused on socio-economic integration outcomes, including access to employment, education, and healthcare. Synthesized findings showed that Ukrainian refugees generally experienced expedited access to these services due to streamlined procedures and fewer bureaucratic constraints (Ivasechko et al., 2023; Londar et al., 2024). In contrast, non-European refugees encountered prolonged asylum procedures, limited mobility, and structural discrimination, resulting in lower integration outcomes and greater vulnerability (Aigner et al., 2024; Moise et al., 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

To fulfil the fourth objective, addressing the role of media representations, the study combined academic analyses (Mickelsson, 2024; Atipova, 2024) with an original review of media outputs from BBC (UK), Le Monde (France), and Der Spiegel (Germany) between 2022 and 2024. These outlets were examined for headline framing, lexical choice, and imagery. Ukrainian refugees were often portrayed using humanizing, familial, and victim-based narratives such as “war victims” or “mothers fleeing violence,” generating public empathy and political will. Conversely, Syrian, Afghan, and African refugees were frequently depicted as “migrants,” “threats,” or “waves,” invoking securitization, racialized fear, and policy reluctance (Slominski & Trauner, 2018; Moise et al., 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). This discourse analysis reinforced findings that asylum policies are shaped not only by law but by how refugee identities are socially constructed.

Finally, for the fifth objective, the synthesis integrated critical perspectives from postcolonial studies, race scholarship, and migration governance literature to evaluate the broader implications of the differentiated treatment. These include the erosion of universal asylum norms, reinforcement of racial and cultural hierarchies, and the undermining of the EU’s stated principles of fairness, solidarity, and legal equality (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Mickelsson, 2024; Carrera et al., 2017).

Through this five-dimensional comparative synthesis, the research provides a holistic understanding of how legal frameworks, institutional choices, media narratives, and political ideologies collectively shape the EU's unequal treatment of refugee populations. This method allowed for a robust examination of the underlying structures and discourses that produce selective solidarity and racialized asylum practices within the EU context.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Though direct interactions with humans were never a part of this dissertation, ethical integrity was always a concern during the research. All data examined were sourced from peer-reviewed academic papers, EU policymaking reports, and open-access academic reports. Reference and citation were done according to APA (7th edition) style to preserve academic integrity as a form of avoiding plagiarism (Mickelsson, 2024).

Every precaution was observed to handle the experiences of the refugees with dignity as well as to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. This was of particular relevance while interpreting studies dealing with marginalization or exclusion of particular groups of refugees along race, nationality, or religion. Under these circumstances, the terminology employed for this dissertation accounts for the structural as well as institutional nature of the disparities, as against imposing the blame upon people or particular groups (Levin & Yatsenko, 2022; Mickelsson, 2024).

Additionally, the research does not generalize for all populations but rather examines the systemic determinants of refugee policy. The research follows the dictates of fairness and justice in academic work such that the voices and circumstances of the vulnerable are heard and represented respectfully and analytically. No private data were gathered or employed during the conduct of this study.

3.7. Data Extraction

The data extraction was a crucial step towards synthesizing evidence from the 15 peer-reviewed academic studies chosen for this dissertation. It was intended to gather systematically, classify, and examine pertinent information consistent with the research aims and themes as noted within the conceptual framework.

All of the 15 studies were published within the range of 2015 through 2024 and, satisfied the inclusion criteria of peer-reviewed EU refugee governance and featured empirical or theoretical commentary regarding the handling and inclusion of refugees from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. All of the papers were read in their entirety to reveal the main information on legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, integration results, representation through the mass media, and socio-political implications.

To provide consistency, a structured data extraction table was employed. The data extraction was organized using a spreadsheet-based matrix for comparing key points from studies.

Table 2: Data Extraction Table for 15 Selected Studies

Study	Purpose Of The Study	Study Population	Study Design	Methods of Data Collection and Analysis	Key Findings
Кортукова & Yemets (2024)	Temporary protection in the European Union: a legal analysis	Ukrainian refugees in the EU.	Qualitative case study	Policy analysis, legal review, and stakeholder interviews.	The Ukrainian case showcases how temporary protection can streamline short-term integration but lacks long-term clarity.
Atipova (2024)	To examine the European temporary protection Directive and the Ukrainian refugee crisis.	Ukrainian in EU.	Theoretical and legal analysis	Content analysis of legal texts and political speeches.	The report offers a comparative analysis of the transposition practices of the Council Directive 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for the granting of temporary protection, activated for the first time since its adoption.
Beirens et al. (2016)	To assess the relevance, application, and barriers to the activation of the	EU institutions and historical	Policy evaluation	Document analysis and expert interviews.	Despite being legally viable, political hesitancy blocked TPD activation until Ukraine.

	Temporary Protection Directive.	refugee flows.			
Carrera et al. (2017)	The EU's response to the refugee crisis: Taking stock and setting policy priorities	Refugees in the 2015-2016 crisis, especially Syrians.	Policy analysis	Institutional and legal review with recommendations.	Lack of solidarity and legal harmonization weakened the CEAS response to past crises.
Giancaspro & Lucenti (2024)	Implicit hierarchies in the EU representation of refugees: a comparative text-analysis of the European Parliament's framing of Syrian and Ukrainian diasporas	Ukrainian refugees in Europe.	Qualitative study	Computational Text-Analysis tools, such as Word - and Bigram-Frequency Analysis, Term Frequency - Inverse Document Frequency test and Structural Topic Modelling.	There is a gender - based victimization of Ukrainian refugees, which contributes leading to protective measures being enacted by the EU
Ineli-Ciger (2022)	To advocate for the activation of the TPD in response to migration crises.	General EU refugee context	Normative legal study	Review of EU legal framework and TPD criteria.	TPD offers a rapid solution but has been politically sidelined.

		pre-Ukraine.			
Jánošová, (2024)	To evaluate the Legal framework for the temporary protection of refugees.	EU asylum framework users.	Legal critique	Comparative legal analysis of implementation practices.	Legal inconsistencies and lack of clear pathways limit TPD's long-term value.
Ivasechko et al. (2023)	Mechanisms for the Protection of Ukrainian Refugees in the EU Member States	Ukrainian refugees in EU Member state	Qualitative study	The paper primarily uses analysis of official data, legal documents, and secondary sources to examine the mechanisms for the protection of Ukrainian refugees in EU member states.	The key difference between temporary protection and refugee status is defined. The key problems faced by European countries are highlighted; concurrently, the obstacles experienced by Ukrainian refugees are presented, namely, obtaining housing and employment
Karakır & Durakçay (2024)	Discrepancies in the European Union's Responses: Syrian versus Ukrainian Refugee Crises.	Syrian and Ukrainian refugees.	Comparative policy study	Cross-country policy analysis.	Ukrainians received more rights and recognition due to EU identity proximity.

Haase et al. (2023)	Housing refugees from Ukraine: preliminary insights and learnings from the local response in five European cities	Ukrainian refugees across several EU countries.	Multi-country case study	Field reports, interviews, and policy review.	Implementation is uneven; some states struggle with housing shortages.
Macková et al. (2024)	Temporary Protection for Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland	Ukrainian refugees in Czech and Poland	Case study	Policy analysis and implementation review.	Flexible implementation facilitated quicker registration and access.
Mickelsson (2024)	Ukrainian Refugees' Differentiated Treatment	Ukrainian refugees.	Qualitative study	Critical review of policy and discourse.	Racial and cultural proximity influences EU asylum policy outcomes.
Moise et al. (2023)	European attitudes to refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.	Refugees hosted by various EU states.	Comparative political study	Policy comparison and political speech analysis.	Solidarity is driven more by strategy than shared humanitarian values.
Niemann & Zaun (2018)	To theorize EU asylum responses during crises using empirical evidence.	Refugees during	Theoretical framework and empirical study	Mixed methods; data analysis and case study.	Fragmentation in EU asylum policy is deep-rooted and politically driven.

		2015–2016 crisis.			
Slominski & Trauner (2018)	How do Member States Return Unwanted Migrants? The Strategic (non-)use of ‘Europe’ during the Migration Crisis	Member States' asylum systems.	Implementation analysis	Policy tracking and legal document review.	EU rules are selectively applied; domestic politics shape compliance.

Part 4: Results and Interpretation

This chapter presents the empirical and analytical findings from the synthesis and comparative review of 15 peer-reviewed academic studies and EU legal documents. The findings are structured into two parts:

Part 4A: Results – a structured presentation of the results in alignment with the research objectives.

Part 4B: Interpretation of Results – a critical interpretation of these results, framed within the conceptual and theoretical framework developed in earlier chapters.

4.1. Part 4A: Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from a synthesis of fifteen peer-reviewed academic studies and key EU legal documents. The results are organized based on the five research objectives, each focused on understanding the European Union's differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Data have been synthesized to capture both the shared trends and the divergences across these refugee groups, highlighting key themes in legal frameworks, institutional practices, socio-economic integration, media discourse, and political dynamics.

4A.1. To identify the institutional mechanisms that enabled the swift and unique implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022

The unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022 represented a landmark shift in the European Union's asylum governance. Adopted over two decades earlier in the aftermath of the Balkan conflicts, the TPD (Council of the European Union, 2001) had never been used despite multiple large-scale refugee crises, including those involving Syrians (2015), Afghans (2021), and Sub-Saharan Africans (ongoing). However, the case of Ukraine catalyzed a unique convergence of institutional, political, administrative, and socio-cultural factors that enabled its swift implementation.

First, political consensus across the EU was a decisive enabler. All 27 Member States agreed on the activation of the TPD just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This political unity sharply contrasted with the deep divisions that characterized the EU's response to the Syrian

crisis in 2015, when Member States failed to reach agreement on burden-sharing and relocation (Niemann & Zaun, 2018). According to Ineli-Ciger (2022), the framing of the Ukrainian crisis as a direct attack on European territorial integrity, democracy, and values helped depoliticize the protection response and promote cohesion among Member States. Unlike earlier refugee groups, Ukrainians were perceived not as outsiders but as victims of an external aggressor with whom the EU shared historical, geographical, and cultural affinities.

Second, legal preparedness was central to this response. The TPD had existed in the EU's legislative toolkit since 2001 and was designed to provide immediate, collective protection in the event of a "mass influx" of displaced persons (Council of the European Union, 2001). However, the lack of political will had previously prevented its activation. The Ukrainian crisis presented a politically acceptable opportunity to use the Directive for the first time. Carrera et al. (2017) and Jánošová (2024) argue that the availability of such an instrument allowed for bypassing the often slow and fragmented procedures of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), enabling Ukrainians to receive protection without undergoing individual refugee status determinations.

Third, administrative capacity and preparedness among frontline states were critical to implementing the Directive effectively. Countries such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Germany rapidly established systems to register arrivals, issue residence permits, and connect displaced persons to housing, employment, healthcare, and education (Ivasechko et al., 2023). Poland alone received over one million refugees within weeks, made possible by pre-investment in digital infrastructure and crisis coordination mechanisms. In Germany, digital platforms and municipal coordination ensured that displaced Ukrainians were swiftly integrated into local services (Londar & Petrenko, 2024).

Fourth, geopolitical and cultural affinity with Ukraine played a key role in mobilizing public and political support. The country's geographical proximity and shared borders with several EU Member States fostered a sense of regional solidarity. In the summer of 2022, Ukraine was granted candidate status for EU membership, further reinforcing perceptions of closeness. Media and political discourse frequently described Ukrainians as "European" and "civilized," reinforcing a moral obligation to protect them (Matulić & Škokić, 2024; Atipova, 2024). The cultural and religious similarity between Ukrainians and host populations, many of whom are Christian and ethnically alike, also helped reduce public resistance and promote empathy. As Коптыкова and Yemets (2024) observe, this cultural closeness shaped a discursive environment

in which displaced Ukrainians were seen more as war-displaced neighbors than foreign asylum seekers.

These four factors — political unity, legal readiness, administrative infrastructure, and cultural affinity — combined to produce an extraordinary policy response. Importantly, this convergence did not occur during prior refugee emergencies. The legal instrument of the TPD was available during the Syrian and Afghan displacements but remained unused. This highlights the fact that institutional tools are only effective when supported by political will and a favorable socio-political context. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE, 2023) notes that the Ukrainian response demonstrates the EU's capacity for coordinated action when the moral and political climate allows.

In conclusion, the Ukrainian case illustrates the conditional nature of EU asylum instruments. While the activation of the TPD demonstrated the EU's ability to respond quickly and humanely, it also exposed the selective nature of such responses. This raises critical concerns about fairness, consistency, and racialized humanitarianism in EU asylum policy.

Table 3: Institutional Factors Enabling the Activation of TPD

Institutional Mechanism	Description	Supporting Sources
Political consensus	Unanimous agreement among EU Member States framed the Ukrainian crisis as a European security issue, enabling swift collective action.	Ineli-Ciger (2022); Macková et al. (2024); European Commission (2020)
Pre-existing legal framework	The TPD (Directive 2001/55/EC) provided a legally binding structure for immediate, group-based protection during mass influxes.	Council of the European Union (2001); Carrera et al. (2017); Jánošová (2024)
Administrative preparedness	National and municipal systems enabled rapid digital registration, residence permits, and	Ivasechko et al. (2023); Londar, Petrenko, & Schultz (2024); Haase et al. (2023)

	access to services like housing and healthcare.	
Cultural/geopolitical affinity	Ukrainians were perceived as ethnically, culturally, and geographically closer to EU populations, which fostered solidarity and moral obligation.	Atipova (2024); Matulić & Škokić (2024); Коптыкова & Yemets (2024); Le Monde (2023); Der Spiegel (2023)

This analysis confirms that while institutional instruments such as the TPD may exist on paper, their activation depends heavily on a combination of political alignment, administrative infrastructure, and strategic interest. The Ukrainian case thus demonstrates the EU’s capacity for rapid and humane refugee response, but also reveals the conditions under which such capacities are activated or withheld.

4A.2. To compare legal and policy frameworks applied to Ukrainian refugees with those applied to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa

The comparative analysis of legal and policy frameworks across refugee groups in the European Union (EU) reveals a stark dualism in how protection is distributed based on origin, identity, and political context. While Ukrainian refugees were granted access to protection under the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa were subjected to the more burdensome, individualized Common European Asylum System (CEAS), resulting in divergent experiences in access to rights, procedures, and outcomes.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU unanimously activated Council Directive 2001/55/EC, also known as the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). This legal instrument, designed in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars but never before used, allowed for the immediate granting of temporary residence, access to housing, healthcare, education, and employment without requiring individual asylum procedures (Council of the European Union, 2001; European Commission, 2020). The swift and uniform transposition of the TPD across Member States led to a coherent legal framework that offered rapid protection to millions of displaced Ukrainians.

In contrast, asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan African nations were processed under the CEAS, a fragmented system based on individual status determination through instruments such as the Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU), the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU), and the Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU). These instruments aim to standardize minimum standards but are unevenly implemented across Member States, leading to a wide variation in recognition rates, waiting times, and conditions of reception (Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Ineli-Ciger, 2023).

One of the most critical disparities is the speed of access to protection. Under the TPD, Ukrainian nationals were granted legal status within days, bypassing the lengthy asylum processing timeline. In comparison, applicants under CEAS often experience delays ranging from several months to years before their claims are adjudicated, during which access to full rights is limited or conditional (Carrera et al., 2017). This has profound implications for their wellbeing, legal certainty, and ability to integrate.

Moreover, the mode of eligibility also differs significantly. The TPD relies on group-based eligibility—Ukrainians fleeing the war automatically qualified. CEAS, on the other hand, is based on individualized evaluations that require the applicant to prove a “well-founded fear” of persecution or serious harm, placing a higher burden on the applicant and creating inconsistency across Member States (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Beirens et al., 2016).

The Dublin III Regulation (Regulation 604/2013) compounds the inequality by assigning responsibility for processing asylum applications to the first EU country of entry. This mechanism disproportionately affects frontline states such as Italy, Greece, and Hungary and limits asylum seekers’ autonomy in choosing their country of protection (European Parliament & Council, 2013). Ukrainians under the TPD faced no such restrictions, and were free to reside and seek protection in any Member State, promoting a sense of agency and fairness.

Furthermore, access to public services differed widely. Beneficiaries of the TPD gained prompt access to healthcare, schooling, and employment services upon registration (Ivasechko et al., 2023). CEAS applicants, however, often had to wait until a positive decision was reached before receiving full access, leading to periods of legal limbo and increased vulnerability (Londar, Petrenko & Schultz, 2024; Biddle, Marchitto & Zinn, 2024).

Finally, the implementation consistency of the TPD was relatively high due to the Directive’s binding nature and the shared political will to assist Ukrainians. In contrast, CEAS implementation remains plagued by variability and lack of harmonization, contributing to

structural inequality within the EU’s asylum regime (Slominski & Trauner, 2018; Macková et al., 2024).

This duality not only undermines the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights but also perpetuates perceptions of racial and regional bias. While the TPD illustrates the EU’s capacity for a humane and efficient refugee response, its selective application suggests that humanitarian protection remains politically conditional rather than universally guaranteed.

These divergences are summarized in the table below:

Table 4: Comparison of Legal and Policy Frameworks

Legal Element	Ukrainian Refugees (TPD)	Syrian, Afghan, Sub-Saharan Refugees (CEAS)
Legal pathway	Temporary Protection Directive	Asylum procedures under CEAS directives
Assessment type	Group-based eligibility	Individual case-by-case evaluation
Time to protection	Immediate (within days)	Often months to years
Freedom of movement	Across EU Member States	Restricted to country of first entry (Dublin Regulation)
Access to work, healthcare	Granted upon registration	Often delayed until status is granted
Consistency across countries	High (harmonized by EU Directive)	Low (varies by national implementation)

This legal and policy dualism suggests that access to protection in the EU is not universally applied, but instead shaped by a combination of geopolitical alignment, perceived cultural affinity, and institutional readiness. The case of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates the capacity of the EU to deliver harmonized and swift protection when political consensus is present. However, the exclusionary experiences of Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan refugees reveal the conditional nature of EU asylum governance, reinforcing critiques of racial and regional bias within the system (Mickelsson, 2024; Guild, 2017).

In sum, the comparison underscores a critical tension within EU law: while foundational instruments such as the CEAS and the Charter of Fundamental Rights assert principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment, their implementation reveals a hierarchization of refugee rights in practice. Addressing these disparities will require both structural legal reforms and a shift in political will toward truly inclusive and equitable refugee governance.

4A.3. To evaluate the integration outcomes of different refugee populations in the EU, focusing on access to labor markets, education systems, and healthcare services

The evaluation of integration outcomes across refugee populations in the EU reveals significant disparities in access to employment, education, and healthcare services. These differences stem largely from the legal pathways used, namely the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian refugees and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) for Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees. While the TPD facilitated expedited legal inclusion, structural and institutional barriers persisted, limiting effective integration. For those processed through CEAS, access was often delayed and uneven, resulting in lower integration rates and more prolonged vulnerability.

Labour Market Access

Ukrainian refugees benefitted from immediate access to labour markets upon registration under the TPD, which eliminated waiting periods and provided legal certainty to employers (Ivasechko et al., 2023). Despite this formal access, integration into the workforce was far from seamless. Many Ukrainian refugees, particularly highly educated women, encountered deskilling, precarious contracts, and limited recognition of foreign qualifications (Aigner et al., 2024; Bervenno and Moskvina, 2024). Sectors such as cleaning, caregiving, and agriculture saw disproportionate Ukrainian participation regardless of their academic or professional backgrounds.

On the other hand, Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan refugees often faced prolonged asylum procedures that restricted their ability to work until legal status was confirmed. This delay resulted in a loss of human capital, as skills atrophied during extended periods of inactivity in reception centers (Moise, Demirtaş and Sezen, 2023). Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles and labour market discrimination further compounded their marginalization. Giancaspro and Lucenti (2024) report that non-European refugees consistently experience higher rates of

unemployment and job insecurity, largely due to inconsistent national labour policies and host society perceptions.

Education Systems

In terms of education, Ukrainian children were rapidly integrated into school systems in several EU countries, benefiting from simplified enrolment procedures, free language classes, and community support services (Londar, Petrenko and Schultz, 2024). Host governments prioritized school inclusion to mitigate trauma and support family stability. However, barriers such as language proficiency, availability of educational counselling, and limited teacher training on refugee inclusion sometimes hindered long-term academic progress (Byelikova, 2024).

By contrast, children from Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds frequently faced delays in school enrolment due to legal limbo during asylum processing. Furthermore, disparities in national education policies and limited investment in refugee-specific resources led to uneven educational outcomes. According to Cherti and McNeil (2012), older refugee children often struggled with academic gaps, cultural adjustment, and lack of psychosocial support, while girls in particular faced lower enrolment rates due to intersecting cultural and economic pressures.

Healthcare Access

Access to healthcare showed similar inequalities. Under the TPD, Ukrainian refugees were entitled to full access to national healthcare systems upon arrival. In practice, this meant legal access to general practitioners, mental health services, and emergency care. However, shortages in local healthcare capacity, unfamiliarity with host-country systems, and linguistic challenges restricted effective utilization (Ivasechko et al., 2023; Biddle et al., 2024). Mental health services were particularly underutilized, despite high levels of displacement-related trauma reported among the Ukrainian population.

In contrast, refugees under CEAS often had only limited or delayed access to healthcare until their asylum claims were resolved. In many cases, access was restricted to emergency services, with primary and mental healthcare unavailable or dependent on the discretion of regional authorities (Moise et al., 2023). Studies such as Biddle, Marchitto and Zinn (2024) have documented systemic discrimination, administrative exclusion, and lack of translation services as key barriers affecting non-European refugees' access to adequate medical care.

Table 5: Comparative Integration Outcomes

Integration Domain	Ukrainian Refugees (TPD)	Syrian/Afghan/Sub-Saharan Refugees (CEAS)	Key Issues Identified
Labour market access	Immediate access; high deskilling and gendered job segregation	Delayed access; higher unemployment and job insecurity	Credential recognition, language barriers, labour discrimination
Education	Fast-tracked school enrolment with moderate support	Often delayed by asylum status and limited education infrastructure	Language instruction, psycho-social services, teacher training
Healthcare	Legal access under TPD; low utilization due to capacity gaps	Emergency-only access in many cases; delayed during asylum process	Discrimination, poor service coverage, lack of mental health resources

While legal access was considerably better for Ukrainians due to the activation of the TPD, actual integration outcomes remained uneven and depended heavily on host-country infrastructure, public attitudes, and refugee-specific support systems. Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa faced more systemic exclusion, both in policy and practice, due to prolonged legal uncertainty and fewer institutional supports. In both cases, integration remained a multi-dimensional challenge, underscoring the need for robust, inclusive policies that go beyond legal access to ensure effective and sustainable integration for all refugee populations.

4A.4. To examine the role of media portrayals and public narratives in shaping political decisions and public policies regarding refugee reception and integration

Media narratives and public discourse play a crucial role in shaping political decisions and asylum policies within the European Union (EU). The way refugee groups are portrayed by

influential media outlets and interpreted by policymakers often determines the degree of political will and public support for their reception and integration. A comparative discourse analysis of leading European media, namely BBC News (UK), Le Monde (France), and Der Spiegel (Germany), between 2022 and 2024 reveals stark differences in how Ukrainian refugees were framed compared to those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ukrainian refugees were consistently depicted in humanitarian terms, often as innocent civilians fleeing a brutal and unjust war. BBC News (2023) highlighted the solidarity shown by Polish citizens and local governments in welcoming Ukrainian families, emphasizing emotional appeals and shared European values. Le Monde (2023) published several articles portraying the French government's generous financial support for hosting Ukrainians, reinforcing the narrative of moral obligation and cultural proximity. Der Spiegel (2023) similarly framed Ukrainian refugees in Germany as victims of aggression who deserved protection and integration, focusing on their resilience and family-oriented struggles.

This sympathetic framing was amplified by consistent political messaging. EU leaders described Ukrainians as “our neighbors,” “like us,” and “part of the European family,” thereby reinforcing a narrative of cultural familiarity and moral deservingness (Matulić and Škokić, 2024). These portrayals helped facilitate the unprecedented activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), with high levels of public approval and cross-national coordination (Giancaspro and Lucenti, 2024). The moral clarity and uniformity in media narratives contributed significantly to the policy cohesion and administrative efficiency that followed.

In stark contrast, Syrian refugees during the 2015 to 2016 crisis were frequently portrayed in the media as part of a chaotic, uncontrolled influx. Headlines focused on border breaches, overcrowded camps, and fears of terrorism, fueling public anxiety and political fragmentation. Media narratives emphasized images of young men in boats or at fences, which contributed to a securitized and racialized discourse. This narrative environment allowed populist leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Austria to justify restrictive asylum policies, including border fences, pushbacks, and resistance to EU relocation quotas (Mickelsson, 2024; Moise et al., 2023).

Afghan refugees, especially after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, were portrayed through the lens of geopolitical instability and religious extremism. News coverage often linked Afghan arrivals with potential radicalization risks and state collapse, creating a sense of uncertainty about their integration prospects. As a result, political leaders were hesitant to commit to

meaningful resettlement efforts, and relocation schemes received minimal public support across most Member States (Giancaspro and Lucenti, 2024).

Sub-Saharan African refugees were the most negatively portrayed among the groups analyzed. Media framing often depicted them as economic migrants, undocumented border crossers, or individuals engaged in criminal behavior. These dehumanizing portrayals stripped away refugee legitimacy and facilitated punitive policy responses such as detention, deportation, and limited access to asylum procedures. The focus on illegal entry and irregular migration routes overshadowed any discussion of persecution or humanitarian need, reinforcing a perception that these individuals were not genuine refugees (FRA, 2019; Mickelsson, 2024).

The media discourse thus served as a powerful legitimizing or delegitimizing tool. It shaped who was perceived as worthy of protection and who was seen as a threat. In doing so, it influenced not only public sentiment but also policymaking at the national and EU levels. The vastly different portrayals contributed to a stratified refugee regime in which legal and humanitarian responses were mediated by identity, perceived cultural affinity, and moral framing. This reinforces the argument that asylum policy in the EU is not only shaped by legal instruments but also deeply embedded in symbolic politics and mediated narratives.

These findings are summarized in the following comparative table:

Table 6: Dominant Media Narratives by Refugee Group

Refugee Group	Media Framing	Public/Political Impact
Ukrainian Refugees	Framed as innocent, European, family-oriented victims of war	Broad public empathy; rapid and coordinated policy responses under the TPD
Syrian Refugees	Associated with disorder, mass influx, and potential security threats	Politicized and divided response; restrictive asylum policies and border controls
Afghan Refugees	Linked with Taliban resurgence, instability, and religious extremism	Low public support; limited resettlement offers and securitized discourse
Sub-Saharan African Refugees	Portrayed as irregular migrants, economic	High rejection rates; reliance on detention, deportation, and border enforcement

	opportunists, or security risks	
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4A.5. To analyze the broader socio-political implications of differentiated treatment of refugee groups within EU migration governance frameworks

The findings from previous sections reveal a stark contrast in how the European Union (EU) has responded to refugee populations depending on their origin, perceived cultural affinity, and political context. These differences have far-reaching socio-political implications for the EU's credibility, legal coherence, and normative identity in global migration governance.

One of the most profound implications is the emergence of what scholars call selective solidarity. This is a pattern in which humanitarian protection is not uniformly applied based on need, but rather on perceived deservingness—often shaped by racial, cultural, or geopolitical proximity (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). The Ukrainian case is the clearest manifestation of this trend. The swift activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in 2022 reflected a high degree of political consensus, media support, and administrative readiness. In contrast, similar or even more severe crises involving Syrians, Afghans, or Sub-Saharan Africans did not receive equal institutional commitment. This raises critical questions about the underlying values guiding EU refugee policies.

Legally, this discrepancy poses challenges to the foundational principles of the EU itself. Article 18 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union guarantees the right to asylum and the principle of equal treatment. However, the implementation of these rights has been shown to depend heavily on political feasibility rather than legal obligation. When Member States choose to activate or ignore protection mechanisms based on who the refugees are, the credibility of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is undermined. As Carrera and Cortinovis (2019) note, this conditional application of refugee law contributes to a fragmentation of EU governance and weakens the normative force of EU directives and regulations.

The media's role in shaping public perception and political narratives further compounds this issue. As demonstrated earlier, Ukrainian refugees have been widely portrayed as European, Christian, and culturally familiar. This favorable portrayal facilitated a supportive political environment. Conversely, refugees from Africa and the Middle East were often associated with

illegality, threat, or cultural otherness. These negative discourses not only diminished public support for asylum policies but also gave legitimacy to restrictive measures, such as border fortification and prolonged detention. This framing reinforces what Fassin (2011) describes as a moral hierarchy of refugees, where only certain groups are seen as worthy of protection.

Politically, these patterns of differentiation have implications for EU unity and solidarity. Countries that were previously reluctant to accept refugees during the Syrian crisis willingly received Ukrainians. This selective cooperation reveals that political will exists but is contingent upon narrative framing and perceived national interest. Such inconsistency risks deepening divisions within the EU and eroding public trust in the objectivity of its institutions.

Finally, on the international stage, the EU's legitimacy as a global human rights actor is at stake. By exhibiting preferential treatment and failing to uphold uniform standards, the EU risks being perceived as hypocritical, weakening its diplomatic influence in global migration discussions. Long-term, this may affect the Union's ability to lead by example or to call out other countries on human rights abuses.

In summary, the differentiated treatment of refugees within the EU is not merely a technical issue of policy implementation; it is a deeply political phenomenon with legal, ethical, and strategic consequences. Addressing these disparities requires structural reform, renewed political commitment, and a reinvestment in the foundational principles of fairness, equality, and universality that underpin international refugee law.

These key insights are summarized in the table below:

Table 7: Socio-Political Implications of Differentiated Treatment

Dimension	Observation	Implication
Legal consistency	Unequal application of existing asylum frameworks	Undermines CEAS coherence and violates Article 18 of EU Charter
Perceived deservingness	Inclusion based on racial, cultural, or geopolitical proximity	Fosters implicit hierarchies and refugee stratification
Political feasibility	Media framing and public opinion influence protection decisions	Leads to selective activation of humanitarian tools

Long-term legitimacy	Perception of bias and inequality among refugee groups	Threatens institutional credibility, solidarity, and EU moral authority
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In conclusion, the differentiated treatment of refugee populations within the EU reflects a deeper ideological crisis in the Union's commitment to universal human rights. Without structural reforms and a renewed emphasis on equity and legal consistency, the EU risks institutionalizing a tiered asylum system that privileges some refugees while marginalizing others.

The interpretation and theoretical discussion of these findings is presented in Part 4B, following this section.

4.2 Part 4B: Interpretation of Results

This chapter provides a critical interpretation of the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4A. It synthesizes the results across the five objectives, connecting them to the study's theoretical framework and broader discourses in EU refugee governance. The interpretation draws attention to the structural, legal, political, and discursive factors that collectively explain the EU's differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees and those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

4B.1. Interpretation of Institutional Mechanisms Enabling the Implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive

The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in 2022 for Ukrainians serves as a case demonstrating that regardless of how well-designed the institutional mechanisms are, there must exist political alignment, administrative capabilities, and geopolitical closeness for effective utilization. Originally set up under Directive 2001/55/EC, the TPD had never previously been activated despite several mass-scale displacement episodes amidst the EU, such as the 2015–2016 Syrian refugee flow. The legal basis for activation—a mass influx of displaced people, had arguably been exceeded with those previous incidents. However, political polarization surrounding migration issues, combined with a general lack of burden-sharing agreement within the EU Member States, precluded activation.

This discrepancy of application is reflective of what Bendel and Ripoll Servent (2017) identify as the intergovernmental complexity of EU migration governance under which political preferences and national interests take precedence over standard legal measures. Within the Syrian framework, a number of countries, especially from Central Europe and Eastern Europe, were against compulsory relocation quotas and harmonized procedures for granting asylum, referencing national sovereignty, cultural disparities, as well as economic limitations. The conflicting responses were reflective of a sense of distrust of common governance frameworks as well as avoidance of collective burden-sharing.

By contrast, the Ukraine crisis palpably stimulated unique solidarity within EU countries, mostly as a result of geopolitics, history, and cultural affinity. Ukrainians were regarded as fellow Europeans who were political victims of aggression from Russia, making a common moral as well as strategic rationale for action. This supports the view of Scholten and Penninx (2016), who contend that political framing, as well as symbolic boundaries, shape institutional action considerably. Those perceptions of Ukrainians as "worthy" and familiar strengthened a common identity as Europeans, and were sufficient to trigger quickly, without dissent, the TPD.

Zaun (2018) elaborates this phenomenon even further, arguing that the disagreement regarding the distribution of asylum in previous crises was due to conflicting priorities of the different countries, as well as a shortage of mechanisms of solidarity. The success of TPD activation within the Ukrainian example, as a result, demonstrates not so much the development of EU asylum mechanisms but differentiated institutional responsiveness according to the displaced group's composition. This selectivity is controversial because it makes access to legal protection mechanisms transcend humanitarian needs alone, as it becomes contingent upon political and cultural acceptability.

Additionally, the organizational infrastructures required for swift TPD application, including computerized registration frameworks, avenues for employment authorization, and access to welfare, were readily mobilized within countries such as Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. This readiness for action was a consequence of pre-existent lessons from previous crises as well as a reflection of state motivations to demonstrate leadership within a politically congenial context. This confluence of humanitarian action with strategic interests only amplifies the criticism that refugee management within the EU is conducted within a politics of selective solidarity.

Thus, while action under the TPD proved the feasibility of effective, collective action by the EU, it revealed as well the conditional nature of such measures. Even the most robust legal measures are subject to the politics of belonging as well as the geopolitics of closeness. The Ukrainian case must be understood as a test of the strength of EU asylum governance as well as a lesson regarding its inherent inconsistency and susceptibility to politicization.

4B.2. Interpretation of Legal and Policy Framework Disparities

The findings in Section 4A.2 point to substantial legal and policy discrepancies in the treatment of Ukrainian versus non-European refugees under the EU's asylum system. These differences are rooted not only in national discretion but also in the interpretive flexibility embedded in EU legal instruments, which enables selective implementation based on political, cultural, and racialized perceptions.

The use of Directive 2001/55/EC for Ukrainians highlighted the potential for harmonized asylum action when political consensus exists. In contrast, for Syrians, Afghans, and Sub-Saharan Africans, the response was fragmented and dominated by security concerns. Instead of offering collective protection, Member States frequently resorted to slow individual procedures under the Qualification Directive (Directive 2011/95/EU), which requires applicants to prove their eligibility for refugee or subsidiary protection status.

Further inconsistencies were evident in the application of the Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU), where procedural guarantees such as the right to legal assistance, appeal, and non-discrimination were variably interpreted and sometimes ignored. Moreover, the Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU), which mandates minimum standards for housing, food, and healthcare during the asylum process, was unevenly implemented, with reports of overcrowded, under-resourced facilities for non-European applicants.

Legal interpretation was also politically influenced. For Ukrainians, swift protection was framed as both a moral and geopolitical imperative. For others, particularly from Muslim-majority or Sub-Saharan countries, asylum policy was shaped by securitization, public fear, and cultural distancing. The European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020) aimed to address these structural disparities by proposing a more balanced burden-sharing model. However, its proposals have yet to be fully implemented or embraced uniformly across the bloc.

As argued by Carrera et al. (2017) and Niemann and Zaun (2018), these instruments have enabled a “flexible harmonization” that undermines the EU’s legal obligation to treat all asylum seekers equally. While Ukrainian refugees benefited from rapid status recognition and integration mechanisms, others were subjected to restrictive interpretations of the same legal texts, reflecting a form of legal stratification.

In summary, the legal documents that form the core of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) allow for significant discretion in implementation. When coupled with geopolitical and racialized narratives, these instruments contribute to a tiered asylum regime. The selective enforcement of Directive 2001/55/EC, in contrast to the burdensome application of the Dublin III Regulation and the Qualification and Procedures Directives for others, reveals a politicization of legal tools. This calls into question the consistency, fairness, and universal applicability of EU asylum law.

4B.3. Interpretation of Socio-Economic Integration Outcomes

While Ukrainian refugees had quicker access to work, education, and healthcare thanks to the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), integration within host societies remained uneven and conditional. Non-recognition of professional qualifications was one of the most obvious issues faced by Ukrainian refugees. Highly qualified professionals, especially women, were forced into insecure, low-paid work despite possessing degrees or having a long work history within areas such as healthcare, education, and engineering. This is a widely documented phenomenon of 'deskilling' in the broader literature of refugees. It is noted by Коптыкова & Yemets (2024) and Berveno and Moskvina (2024) that professional Ukrainians in Austria and Poland are often employed in cleaning services, farms, or childcare positions due to bureaucratic hurdles, language issues, and host-country licensing.

These results support Phillimore (2011), who underscored that effective refugee integration depends not just upon legal access but upon legal access combined with access to support infrastructures such as language instruction, recognition of qualifications, and vocational training. Without such assistance, swift legal access alone is inadequate to achieve genuine socio-economic incorporation. Bakker et al. (2016) similarly caution that early entry into insecure or informal economies of work without structural support typically leads to persistent exclusion or chronic underemployment.

Ager & Strang's (2008) integration model provides context for these results by differentiating 'means' from 'markers' of integration. People can be provided with access to employment and education through legal means such as the TPD, but if the issues of social connectedness, knowledge of the host society's customs, as well as feelings of safety are not addressed, the rights are underutilized. This assertion is compounded by Byelikova (2024), who ascertained that despite having legal rights, Ukrainian women living in Germany are subject to high levels of isolation and emotional stress, pointing towards a *de jure* vs. *de facto* integration disconnect.

By contrast, Afghan, Syrian, and Sub-Saharan refugees tended to have much longer waiting spans prior to receiving permission to work or access formal educational systems. Hundreds of them spent substantial periods housed in reception centers under mobility restrictions, under curfew, and with poor access to language courses and training. According to Moise et al. (2023), these prolonged waits translated into wasted years of capital - building for these people, inhibiting individual empowerment as well as community integration. On top of all this, systemic discrimination combined with xenophobic attitudes still blocked access to social services as well as job opportunities for these populations, creating a cycle of marginalization as well as dependence.

Cherti and McNeil (2012) warn that European refugee policies tend to focus on immediate economic self-reliance at the expense of the long-term needs of social integration, including psychological health, community incorporation, and civic participation. This criticism can be extended to both non-European and Ukrainian refugee populations. Although Ukrainians have received more comprehensive support initially, full inclusion for the long term is doubtful, especially as TPD protections are due to end by March 2026, with no assurance of a direct pathway to permanent residence.

The results indicate that legal facilitation should be supported by integrative, inclusive policy making addressing both the structural and interpersonal levels of integration. What legal entitlement creates comes into conflict with practical reality, making us aware of the deficiencies of refugee policy making frameworks that prioritize fast activation at the expense of long-term viability. Betts and Collier (2017) are right to insist that successful refugee integration mandates host societies to build adaptive, inclusive systems that break from a crisis mentality to create stable, fair chances for all displaced persons.

In short, while admission was speeded up for Ukrainian refugees, structural disparities of credential recognition deficiencies, housing shortages, and linguistic discrimination remain to

block complete integration into the social economy. Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees, all the while, are excluded both procedurally as well as socially from the point of entry. This cumulative nature of structural exclusion requires that we re-conceptualize integration as a dynamic, long-term, context-sensitive process underpinned by rights, recognition, and reciprocity.

4B.4. Interpretation of Media and Political Narratives

The representation of refugee groups in influential European media outlets such as BBC News (UK), Le Monde (France), and Der Spiegel (Germany) has had a substantial impact on shaping both public understanding and political responses to asylum seekers in the European Union. These media sources did not simply report facts but actively framed narratives that influenced societal perceptions, political rhetoric, and policy decisions.

The coverage of Ukrainian refugees in these outlets was predominantly humanitarian, constructing a moral consensus around their victimhood and cultural compatibility with Europe. BBC News frequently emphasized stories of family separation, civilian suffering, and community support in host countries like Poland, thereby invoking strong emotional appeals. Le Monde focused on France's logistical and financial commitments to assisting displaced Ukrainians, framing the country's response as both a moral duty and a political necessity. Similarly, Der Spiegel highlighted the broader geopolitical context of Russia's invasion, portraying Ukrainian refugees as victims of aggression and symbols of European resilience. Together, these portrayals supported a collective European identity, reinforcing the idea that Ukrainians were part of the European moral and cultural community.

Political leaders mirrored these narratives by describing Ukrainians as "our neighbors" and "part of the European family," which helped to foster an environment where exceptional policy measures such as the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) could be implemented quickly and with minimal opposition. Research by Esses et al. (2013) supports the view that positive media framing significantly enhances public support for humanitarian policies. This alignment between media and political messaging created a favorable environment for generous integration policies, streamlined legal protections, and widespread administrative coordination.

In contrast, refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa were consistently framed in ways that emphasized threat, disorder, and cultural difference. BBC News and Le Monde often focused on issues such as irregular border crossings, overcrowded refugee camps,

and tensions between local populations and asylum seekers. Der Spiegel frequently included references to concerns over extremism, particularly in relation to Afghan refugees following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. These portrayals reinforced a securitized narrative that linked non-European refugees with instability, risk, and unassailability.

Scholars such as KhosraviNik (2010) and Parker (2015) have demonstrated how such portrayals contribute to the dehumanization and securitization of migration. These findings are reflected in the current analysis, where media-driven fears translated into political reluctance, stricter asylum measures, and fragmented EU policy responses. As a result, while Ukrainian refugees benefited from humanitarian corridors and swift legal recognition, others were subjected to prolonged vetting, detention, and deportation under highly bureaucratic and punitive frameworks.

This discrepancy in treatment reveals the operation of what Fassin (2011) refers to as "humanitarian reason," where assistance is allocated not purely on the basis of need but rather through symbolic constructions of moral deservingness. The media narratives examined in this study reinforced this mechanism by portraying Ukrainians as just and innocent victims while casting others as economic opportunists or potential threats. Mickelsson (2024) describes this phenomenon as a "hierarchy of victimhood," whereby only certain groups are recognized as legitimate recipients of asylum rights and protections.

Additionally, EU political leaders used the Ukrainian crisis to signal geopolitical unity against Russia, thereby reinforcing the perception of Ukrainian refugees as strategic allies rather than burdens. This observation aligns with the work of Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), who argue that media representations of suffering are often shaped by foreign policy objectives. In this case, humanitarianism was closely tied to political utility, resulting in differentiated treatment based not on vulnerability but on symbolic value.

In conclusion, the narratives presented in BBC News, Le Monde, and Der Spiegel played a decisive role in shaping refugee governance in the EU. These portrayals not only influenced public opinion but also structured the legal and institutional responses toward different refugee groups. The framing of Ukrainians as ideal victims facilitated swift and coordinated policy action, whereas the portrayal of non-European refugees as culturally distant or threatening contributed to restrictive and exclusionary practices. This reinforces the understanding that EU asylum policy is shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by the symbolic politics of media and public discourse.

4B.5. Interpretation of Broader Socio-Political Implications

The general implications of these results show a systematic weakening of the universality underpinning international refugee protection. Whereas the EU retains a discursive commitment towards human rights, equality, as well as solidarity, the differential activation of and application of legal protection regimes demonstrates a new norm of differential inclusion. Preferential inclusion of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates how refugee protection within the EU is now becoming more race-, religion-, as well as geopolitics-conditioned, compromising the universality of asylum rights.

This trend continues with Carrera and Cortinovis's (2019) observation that the governance of EU asylum is moving towards informalized, ad hoc approaches as well as political agreements bilaterally, to the detriment of formal legal obligations as well as fair policy application. Consequently, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is no longer a single mechanism of protection but instead a fragmented, politicized collection of electoralists interests.

Achiume (2019) contends that migration control in liberal democracies, including liberal democracies within the EU, is inherently racialized. Using the conceptual framework of 'racial borders,' Achiume demonstrates how protection is selectively extended according to the host societies' perceived cultural and racial closeness to displaced peoples. Exclusion from similar legal frameworks, as well as integration assistance for Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees, is a case in point.

Betts and Collier (2017) note similarly that international refugee responses are now increasingly driven by political expediency rather than humanitarian necessity. Refugees are now of value because of their strategic usefulness — either economic, demographic, or geopolitical. This was vividly evident in Ukraine's case, where there was heightened popular and political backing helped by the discourse of opposition to Russian aggression and upholding of European values.

This ideological selectivity poses substantial long-term risks. It undermines the EU's normative power status as a global leader of refugee governance, risking its credibility as a champion of international protection standards. It also puts the internal unity of the Union at risk. Member States which are disproportionately burdened by current practices of asylum — particularly those from the southern and eastern borders — are bound to become increasingly averse to collective action, deepening divisions and undermining solidarity.

The institutionalization of hierarchies of refugees is ethically dubious. It sends a message to the global community that refugee rights are conditional and can be negotiated instead of being inviolable. This taints the underlying principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, specifically Article 18, which provides for the right of asylum.

Additionally, said solidarity operates selectively, leading to the normalization of discrimination within host societies. With some groups of refugees deemed more worthy than others, a hierarchy of value is established that dictates access to housing, work, healthcare, and recognition. These internalized disparities reinforce themselves over time, perpetuating xenophobic and racialized policy norms throughout the continent.

To overcome these challenges, the EU will have to take structural reforms beyond legal harmonization to ideological realignment. Legal frameworks such as the Temporary Protection Directive and the Qualification Directive need to be complemented with measures that provide equal access to all refugee groups. More significantly, political leadership must confront the racialized and culturalized biases underpinning current popular and political discourse.

Finally, securing the future of refugee protection in Europe will depend on retrieving the normative commitments to equality, non-discrimination, and universal human dignity. This means not merely closing legal loopholes but a relentless political and cultural accounting for the underlying values of asylum governance.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths:

A key strength of this study lies in its synthesis-based qualitative methodology, which allowed for a comprehensive and critical comparison of EU asylum and integration policies concerning different refugee groups. By systematically analyzing fifteen peer-reviewed academic studies alongside official EU legal instruments and policy documents, the research achieved a nuanced understanding of how institutional structures, legal provisions, and political narratives contribute to differential refugee treatment. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and thematic contrasts in the responses toward Ukrainian, Syrian, Afghan, and Sub-Saharan African refugees (Ineli-Ciger, 2022; Carrera et al., 2017; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

Another notable strength is the robust conceptual framework employed throughout the research. The integration of postcolonial theory, legal pluralism, and Ager and Strang's (2008) indicators of refugee integration offered a solid basis for interpreting legal gaps, social exclusion, and disparities in public perception. Grounding the analysis in recent and policy-relevant literature from 2015 to 2024 ensured the study's alignment with contemporary academic discourse and political developments, including the historic use of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian refugees in 2022 (Macková et al., 2024; Atipova, 2024).

Ethical consideration was also observed in the conduct of the study. Efforts were made to represent all refugee groups with dignity, avoiding essentialist or reductive narratives. This was particularly important when addressing racialization, religious bias, and media representations that often fuel exclusionary and securitized framings (KhosraviNik, 2010; Mickelsson, 2024). The study's critical engagement with such framings contributes to both academic rigor and social relevance.

Limitations:

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, it relies exclusively on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy briefs, and legal documents. While this approach allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, it excludes primary data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observation. As a result, the study may not capture the lived experiences of refugees or the practical realities faced by frontline workers. These micro-level insights would have enriched understanding of policy implementation and its everyday implications (Phillimore, 2011; Cherti & McNeil, 2012).

Second, the breadth of the synthesis is bounded by the availability, scope, and methodological rigor of existing literature. There remains a limited body of comparative work focusing specifically on Sub-Saharan African refugees in Southern and Eastern Europe, which may lead to underrepresentation of their experiences and policy challenges. Furthermore, the interpretive power of the synthesis is inherently linked to the quality and contextual diversity of the studies included.

A further limitation relates to generalizability. While the study aims to analyze the collective EU approach to asylum, significant policymaking power still resides at the national level. Differences in political orientation, legal interpretation, and administrative capacity across Member States introduce heterogeneity that can be obscured in comparative analysis. Thus, the

study risks simplifying the complexity of national asylum practices for the sake of EU-wide comparison (Guild, 2017; Thielemann, 2018).

Lastly, the findings must be interpreted within the context of rapidly evolving global and regional refugee dynamics. Shifts in geopolitical alliances, new conflict zones, or leadership changes may significantly alter asylum priorities and governance structures. As Zaun (2018) notes, EU asylum policy tends to be crisis-driven, and future developments may deviate from current trends. For this reason, longitudinal and mixed-method research approaches are recommended to track ongoing changes and better understand the dynamic nature of EU migration governance.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into legal and political asymmetries in EU refugee treatment, it also highlights areas requiring further empirical investigation and methodological expansion. These limitations do not undermine the study's contributions but rather signal the need for continuous scholarly engagement in a field marked by volatility and high political stakes.

Part 5: Conclusion

This study aimed to explore why, as well as how, the policies and practices of the European Union (EU) towards refugees from Ukraine differ from the ones applied towards refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, as well as from Sub-Saharan Africa. Based on a synthesized review of fifteen peer-reviewed publications, research revealed structural, institutional, as well as discursive drivers of the noted differences. EU activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) towards Ukrainians for 2022 was a central case for learning about the EU's diverse approach to the governance of refugees.

5.1. Summary of Findings

My findings demonstrate a distinct pattern of selective solidarity in EU refugee practices. TPD, which had been in place since 2001, was quickly invoked for Ukrainians as a result of political unity, bureaucratic preparedness, as well as cultural and geographical closeness (Macková et al., 2024; Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Contrasting with that, identical mass displacements within the Syrian and Afghan crises failed to invoke similar legal coordination despite having crossed the humanitarian thresholds noted within EU regulation (Zaun, 2018; Carrera et al., 2017).

The study also indicated equally striking legal and policy differences. Ukrainian refugees were immediately granted residency, education, healthcare, and work permits under the regular application procedures of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Syrians, Afghan refugees, and those from Sub-Saharan Africa were, in contrast, confronted with bureaucratic difficulties, long waiting lists, as well as increased chances of detention and refusal (Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016; Thielemann, 2018).

Integration results also uncovered disparities between legal access and real inclusion. Although Ukrainian refugees had early access to services, they were subject to deskilling and economic insecurity because their qualifications were not recognized and they lacked a common language (Aigner et al., 2024; Bervenno & Moskvina, 2024). This aligns with the existing research identifying structural support systems as having a crucial role in achieving long-term inclusion (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, 2011).

Last but not least, the research emphasized how political narratives and the mass media influenced both narrative constructions around, as well as the orientation of, policymaking. Non-European refugees were often presented as securitized or racialized refugees, while Ukrainian refugees were largely represented as innocent, war-torn European refugees

(KhosraviNik, 2010; Mickelsson, 2024). Such representations had real effects, justifying differential treatment as well as institutional bias.

5.2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The evidence put forward is that EU asylum policy, legally organized around the grounds of fairness as well as non-discrimination, is typically unevenly applied. One of the main recommendations for policy is increased consistency of application of the asylum protection means. Instruments such as the TPD and CEAS need to be restructured to activate and apply according to objective foundations, as opposed to political affiliation or cultural similarity (Guild, 2017; Carrera & Cortinovia, 2019).

With regard to integration, there should be more emphasis put on holistic support frameworks beyond legal access. This involves increased investment in language training, vocational education, recognition of qualifications, and mental health services (Bakker et al., 2016; Cherti & McNeil, 2012). Integration frameworks at a country level need to tackle structural discrimination as well as provide long-term residence routes for all refugees, all independent of their place of origin.

Media literacy and public education need to be woven into EU migration policies. Because of the power of the discourse of the mass media, there is a need for balanced, inclusive reporting to offset xenophobic discourse (Parker, 2015; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). EU institutions need to work with the media regulators and with civil society to advance positive, dignified representations of all displaced populations.

Ultimately, burden-sharing must be institutionalized within EU Member States through legally binding mechanisms. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum presents a venue for enhancing solidarity but requires legal assurance and funding commitments to avoid burdening frontline countries (Slominski & Trauner, 2018; Moise et al., 2023).

5.3. Future Research Directions

While the current research did offer strong secondary source syntheses, there is a need for future research to integrate primary empirical data such as interviews with service providers, government officials, as well as refugees. This can provide insights into lived experiences as well as frontline implementation dynamics (Phillimore, 2011). Longitudinal studies,

furthermore, can trace integration processes over a long period, capturing changes in socio-political contexts as well as refugee agencies.

More research is also called for into under-studied groups, particularly Sub-Saharan African refugees within Eastern and Southern Europe, where literature is still limited. Comparative country-level studies would provide insight into country-level differences in terms of refugee treatment as well as enable targeted recommendations for policy.

Finally, future research must evaluate how new technologies and online infrastructures affect refugee registration, service delivery, and inclusion within the EU. Because digital governance is increasingly integral to migration control, there needs to be rigorous examination to guarantee that it advances, rather than undermines, refugee rights.

Overall, the EU's handling of the Ukrainian refugee crisis proved that effective, compassionate, and coordinated refugee policy can be achieved. At the same time, the differential application of such mechanisms mirrors lingering disparities and biases. Suppose the EU is to fulfil its obligations under the Charter of Fundamental Rights as well as international refugee law. In that case, it must transition towards a more inclusive rights-based model of asylum governance that treats all displaced persons with equal dignity and with equal justice.

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