

Press release

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ETH study in 15 European countries

Favoured asylum seekers are young, female and fleeing war

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An international research group with ETH professor Dominik Hangartner has found that solidarity with refugees in Europe has remained stable, despite repeated refugee crises. While there is a tendency to view refugees from Ukraine more positively, this does not come at the expense of other groups.

Russia's attack on Ukraine has resulted in one of the largest movements of refugees since the Second World War. More than 7.4 million Ukrainians have sought asylum in Europe, almost three times the number of people who found refuge in Europe during Syria's civil war in 2015 and 2016.

To investigate whether and how the willingness of host populations to receive refugees has changed since 2016, an international research team involving ETH Zurich, the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University surveyed 33,000 people in 15 European countries. The first wave of the survey took place in February 2016 and the second from May to June 2022. The researchers showed respondents profiles of hypothetical asylum seekers, with randomly varied characteristics such as religion, gender, occupation, or reason for fleeing. The respondents then decided which asylum-seeker profiles they would accept to host in their country. The study will be published in the journal *Nature*.

Ukrainian refugees are more popular

The research confirms that attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees are more positive than they are towards refugees from countries such as Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The reason for this, however, has less to do with nationality per se, and more with the fact that Ukrainian refugees exhibit a number of characteristics favoured by the European public. "Respondents are more in favour of accepting asylum seekers who are younger, female, Christian rather than Muslim, submit consistent asylum applications, possess better language and occupational skills, and who are in particular need of protection," explains Dominik Hangartner, professor of public policy at ETH Zurich. Refugees from Ukraine are more likely to possess these attributes than asylum seekers from other countries.

In line with the Geneva Convention on Refugees, the reason for seeking refuge also plays a significant role in the willingness of European societies to accept asylum seekers. Respondents are more likely to feel a sense of solidarity with people fleeing war and political and religious persecution. Asylum

seekers leaving their home country for economic reasons are viewed with much greater scepticism (see figure 1 and 2).

Willingness to accept refugees remains stable

The researchers' analysis also reveals that people's willingness to accept refugees in Europe has remained surprisingly stable, even after the second large-scale movement of refugees in the last eight years. "We see no indication of solidarity towards refugees declining. In fact, the opposite is true: support is slightly higher now than at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis," says Hangartner. This is even more surprising since existing research suggests that scepticism towards refugees tends to increase during periods of economic pressure and high inflation (see figure 3).

Compared to the rest of Europe, Switzerland occupies a mid-table position, with respondents willing to accept 49 percent of the hypothetical asylum seekers. It ranks below countries such as Spain (60 percent) and Italy (58 percent), but above countries like the Czech Republic (38 percent) and Hungary (47 percent).

Solidarity with Ukraine doesn't come at the expense of other groups

The study's findings also refute concerns that solidarity with Ukrainian refugees would inevitably come at the expense of support for other groups. As Hangartner explains: "The number of non-Ukrainian asylum seekers whom our respondents would take in has either remained the same or increased compared to 2016."

This also holds true for Muslim refugees; while Europeans are generally more willing to accept refugees who are Christian, this has not translated into a decrease in support for Muslim asylum seekers since 2016. On the contrary, support has actually risen for Muslim asylum seekers in most countries (see figure 4).

Support for refugees also increasing among the centre right

The researchers also examined the extent to which the willingness to accept refugees correlates with the political views of the respondents. As expected, people who identify as being left-wing are more willing to accept greater numbers of refugees than those who define themselves as being more right-wing (see figure 5).

Respondents in Switzerland who identify as being more left-wing were willing to accept 65 percent of the refugee profiles presented to them by the researchers in 2022. In Germany, the figure was 66 percent, in Austria 63 percent. Respondents who define themselves as being more to the right of centre are markedly more restrictive: in Switzerland this group was willing to accept 35 percent of the refugees, in Austria 38 percent and in Germany 42 percent. Notwithstanding these differences, support for refugees increased between 2016 and 2022 among both left-wing (by 6 percent) and right-wing (by 4 percent) respondents across Europe. In fact, in Switzerland, support increased by a slightly greater margin among right-wing respondents than left-wing respondents. Based on this evidence, the researchers conclude that in terms of willingness to accept refugees, there has been no apparent increase in polarisation.

Reference

Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner. "Europeans' support for refugees of varying background is stable over time." *Nature*, August 2023.

Further information

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