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# External borders and internal freedoms: how the refugee crisis shaped the bordering preferences of European citizens

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## ABSTRACT


The idea that internal inclusion requires external exclusion features prominently in many theoretical accounts of modern statehood and citizenship. In a similar vein, it has been argued that internal freedom of movement in the European Union requires strict immigration control at its external borders. This article sheds light on the relationship between internal de-bordering and external re-bordering, making two main contributions. First, we theorise the idea of an integration-demarcation conditionality based on the European Union's symbolic legitimacy and functional needs. Second, we test the common belief that public support for free movement within Europe depends on a restrictive border regime for non-European immigration. For this purpose, we assess how the external shock of the 2015 refugee crisis shaped the bordering preferences of European citizens. We find that the crisis primarily increased citizens' support for external re-bordering, and did not substantially undermine their support for internal free movement. Thus, the large-scale arrival of refugees has not led to a general backlash against open borders and immigration but has, rather, increased public support for the European model of combining internal freedoms with external controls.

**KEYWORDS** Free movement; European Union; immigration; border control; public opinion

## Introduction

European integration is based on the vision of a continent without frontiers. Its essence lies in the elimination of barriers between the member states of the European Union and the creation of a single market where goods, services and people can move freely. This negative integration is achieved by abolishing internal border controls and granting EU citizens the right to

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travel, work and live in other member states. These internal freedoms are directly linked to the attainment of the EU's core economic objectives (Favell & Hansen, 2002) as well as the creation of a European citizenship (Witte et al., 2016). The right to freely move within Europe is also what EU citizens most frequently identify as the meaning of the European Union (Recchi, 2015). This internal de-bordering was coupled with a promise of external re-bordering to compensate for the loss of national control (Schimmelfennig, 2021). The completion of the European area of free movement in the 1990s went hand-in-hand with collaborative efforts to restrict and control immigration from outside Europe (De Haas et al., 2019; Guiraudon & Lahav, 2007). These efforts have increased since European integration and immigration have become increasingly politicised and political elites face growing legitimisation demands. Their underlying assumption is the idea that an integrated Europe with internal freedoms rests on demarcation at its external borders. In other words, a 'borderless Europe' and a 'fortress Europe' are seen as two sides of the same coin.

This public narrative is the starting point of our article. The Brexit campaign of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) constitutes a prominent example in this respect. Only weeks prior to the referendum, UKIP's leader Nigel Farage presented a poster which depicted refugees crossing the EU border between Croatia and Slovenia. It read 'BREAKING POINT: We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'.<sup>1</sup> The German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) demands the re-introduction of national border controls deemed justified by the presumably insufficient controls at the EU's external borders.<sup>2</sup> The underlying idea that integration requires demarcation is also widely shared among EU politicians. The EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs, and Citizenship stated that 'an internal area without border controls is only possible if we have a strong protection of our external borders' (European Commission, 2016). The Austrian head of the EU-Council at the time Sebastian Kurz argued that 'a Europe without internal borders can only exist if there are functional external borders'.<sup>3</sup> The German governing party CDU campaigned with the slogan 'open borders to the inside and secure borders to the outside'.<sup>4</sup> While the EU's opponents hope that the failure of external border controls will erode public support for a borderless Europe, its advocates seek to consolidate support for internal freedoms by strengthening external re-bordering. They share the belief that external re-bordering is essential to sustain internal de-bordering.

The narrative of such an integration-demarcation conditionality is not only ubiquitous in the public discourse, it is also an important rationale guiding EU policy-making. Still, surprisingly, it has not yet gained the attention of scholars studying support for the EU. A large body of literature informs us that people draw a link between European integration and undesired immigration (Lubbers & Jaspers, 2011; Meltzer et al., 2018; Van Der Brug & Van Spanje,

2009). Previous studies suggest that immigration provokes xenophobic responses among natives (Hangartner et al., 2019) and may undermine support for European integration (Toshkov & Kortenska, 2015). Hartevelde et al. (2018) find that a higher salience of non-European immigration generates Euroscepticism and Lutz (2021) shows that EU citizens withdraw their support for free movement when they associate it with undesired immigration. None of these studies, however, explores the idea that public support for internal freedoms is conditional on external exclusion.

In this article, we shed light on this common but untested assumption in two ways. First, we develop a comprehensive theoretical account of the integration-demarcation conditionality based on the EU's symbolic legitimacy and functional needs. Second, we assess the relationship between internal freedoms and external controls by investigating how the shock of the 2015 refugee crisis affected the bordering preferences of European citizens.

In 2015 and 2016, more than three million irregular migrants crossed the EU's external borders.<sup>5</sup> This constituted a previously unseen surge in irregular entries and has intensified criticisms that the EU had lost control of its external borders. Several member states suspended the Dublin Regulation that allocates responsibilities for asylum requests among European countries. Most important among them was Germany, which announced that it would not send asylum-seekers back to the member state of their first entry.<sup>6</sup> Various European countries decided to re-introduce internal border controls to regain control of non-EU immigration (Niemann & Zaun, 2018). The crisis has amplified the insufficiency of the EU's border regime and the common European asylum policy as institutional guarantees to uphold the internal area of free movement. This shock event of an immigration control failure is an ideal case to test whether the public support for internal freedoms indeed depends on the protection of external borders. We take advantage of the timing of the crisis' peak in Autumn 2015 and of countries' unequal exposure to the crisis to estimate the crisis effect on citizens' bordering preferences. If public support for internal de-bordering depends on external re-bordering, then the surge in irregular migration to Europe, should have undermined citizens' support for free movement within Europe. The remainder of this article assesses this argument.

### **An integration-demarcation conditionality?**

The process of European integration is a combination of sequential de-bordering and re-bordering, a duality that has not yet prominently featured in integration theories (Schimmelfennig, 2021). In this section, we provide a theoretical account of an integration-demarcation conditionality in the European Union. Based on existing literature on modern statehood and European integration, we identify political legitimacy and functional needs as the main

drivers of the conditional relationship between internal inclusion and external exclusion. In a second step, we derive theoretical expectations about how the refugee crisis, understood as a failure of external exclusion, shaped European citizens' bordering preferences.

The first perspective on the integration-demarcation conditionality builds on considerations about citizenship and political legitimacy. The literature on the legitimacy of modern states emphasises the social closure of citizenship (Brubaker, 1992; Rawls, 1993). In this view, collective identities of modern nation states build on the inclusion of nationals and the exclusion of non-nationals. The distinction is seen as a necessary condition to establishing legitimate state rule. In his famous dictum, Walzer (1983, p. 39) argued that immigration restrictions are necessary to keep neighbourhoods open, that 'to tear down the walls of the state is not [...] to create a world without walls, but rather to create thousands petty fortresses'. This argument follows social identity theory, which argues that an in-group's demarcation from out-groups is a necessary condition for stable social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The logic of internal inclusion and external exclusion can also be applied to the EU's legitimacy and the creation of internal freedoms, such as the free movement of persons and the Schengen area (Favell & Hansen, 2002, p. 596). Generating political legitimacy for the deepening of the integration process requires viewing Europeans as a common citizenry that transcends nation states. As a result, cross-border movements between member states are portrayed as internal mobility, whereas the concept of immigration is reserved for non-EU citizens' movement into the EU (Recchi, 2015). The boundary around European citizenship constructs new insiders (EU nationals) and new outsiders (non-EU nationals). In these accounts, the EU is understood as a 'gated community' that allows insiders to move freely, while it keeps outsiders out. This perspective finds the exclusionist stance against non-EU immigration both a necessary condition for and a direct result of the creation of free movement rights within the Union (Ugur, 1995). The EU's legitimacy in exercising political authority and granting internal freedoms to citizens therefore builds upon external re-bordering as a symbolic demarcation.

The second perspective builds on the theory of neo-functionalism focusing on the functional needs of European integration (Schmitter, 1969). Abolishing internal border controls and introducing the free movement of people threaten to undermine member states' ability to effectively defend themselves against organised crime and terrorist attacks as well as to prevent economic shocks induced by uncontrolled migration (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2020; Semyonov et al., 2008). These internal freedoms leave individual member states vulnerable to other member states' migration policy choices and enforcement regimes. Undesired immigration that takes place against states' will becomes a threat to the functioning of the institutions

establishing Europe's internal freedoms. Therefore, the EU needs to ensure that non-European immigration does not undermine the structural integrity of its free movement area. The creation of the internal freedoms has increased the technical requirements of managing non-EU immigration and the control regime at the EU's external border. In this functionalist view, it is necessary to employ stricter external controls to compensate for the creation of internal freedoms that have constrained member states' capacity to control non-European immigration.

The 2015 refugee crisis caused a severe strain on the legitimacy and the functionality of the EU institutions guaranteeing internal freedoms. The shock event of a surge in irregular immigration from outside of Europe led to a stronger domestic politicisation of European integration and mobilised public discontent with immigration. National governments have partly suspended the rules of the Schengen and the Dublin agreement that regulate internal freedoms. While the refugee crisis created political pressures for internal re-bordering, how it affected European citizens' bordering preferences remains an open question. Based on the theoretical framework of an integration-demarcation conditionality, we proceed to derive two theoretical mechanisms driving the effect of the refugee crisis on public support for internal freedoms.

The first mechanism is based on symbolic threats that undermine support for internal freedoms at the level of state legitimacy. A rapid surge in immigration typically triggers native citizens' threat perceptions. The social identity literature indicates that the perceived threat from immigration is larger the more immigrants differ from the native population in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, or other prominent cultural markers (Sniderman et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of the European refugee crisis, this association implies that the surge in immigrants with a higher perceived cultural distance, such as Muslim refugees, should have created high levels of symbolic threat and activated in-group favouritism (Marx & Naumann, 2018). The relevant in-group of most European citizens is their national community. European citizens primarily identify as citizens of their nation states and view both EU-immigrants and non-EU immigrants as outsiders (Blinder & Markaki, 2019; McLaren, 2001). The external threat should therefore activate national identity and strengthen the preference for boundary-drawing between the in-group of co-nationals and EU-immigrants perceived as an out-group. The post-functionalist view that citizens become more sceptical of integration in times of crises, especially in areas of core state powers, such as migration, supports this argument (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). The refugee crisis constitutes an ideal opportunity to mobilise voters around anti-immigration sentiments and nationalist identity politics, which should trigger dis-integrative dynamics. For these reasons, we expect that citizens became less supportive of internal de-bordering during the refugee crisis.

The second mechanism is based on control signals and emphasises the signalling capacity of national governments with respect to immigration control. This argument builds on the functionalist view that public support for internal de-bordering depends on whether the EU can ensure the functional needs of upholding social and economic order in an area of free movement. Wright (2014) has argued that if a government is able to signal to its constituents that it is capable of controlling undesired immigration, citizens are more willing to accept liberal migration policies. In a similar vein, Solodoch (2020) suggests that Europeans become less hostile to immigration if governments are able to demonstrate control capacity. Accordingly, citizens' support for liberal migration policies within Europe should partially depend on whether the EU is able to credibly signal that it is in control of non-European immigration. During the refugee crisis, such control signals most likely lost credibility. As a result, Europeans can be expected to have questioned the EU's ability to control non-European immigration and to guarantee the integrity of Europe's internal freedoms. By implication, we should observe that the refugee crisis led to a withdrawal of public support for internal de-bordering.

A corollary to our theoretical framework on bordering preferences is a second type of response to the refugee crisis, namely, that citizens instead increased their support for external re-bordering. This argument builds, as the previous one, upon the two mechanisms of symbolic threat and functional needs. First, the refugee crisis may be perceived as a symbolic threat that activates citizens' common European identity. The external threat might make citizens more hostile to non-Europeans and increase their demand for respective demarcation. Second, the refugee crisis may be perceived as a functional threat to internal freedoms. The surge in refugee arrivals signals that the EU's current border regime is not capable of preventing irregular immigration and that no European country can address migration control by itself. In response, citizens may increase their demand for a more restrictive border regime at the European level to ensure the internal freedoms they enjoy within Europe. This argument builds on the findings of Conti et al. (2019) and Isernia and Cotta (2016) who demonstrate that many citizens view the EU as a rescuer in the face of unresolved transnational problems and global threats. Following these considerations, the refugee crisis should have increased citizens' support for external re-bordering.

This theoretical discussion shows that the 2015 refugee crisis appears to be a particularly well-suited case to test the empirical implications of an integration-demarcation conditionality for citizens' bordering preferences. We expect that the failure of external border controls undermined citizens' support for internal de-bordering and/or strengthened their support for external re-bordering. The refugee crisis can be conceived as a common shock that caused distress for the European border regime of internal freedoms and external exclusion. Alternatively, the effects of the refugee crisis

can result from countries' direct exposure to the mass arrival of refugees. The remainder of this article tests both causal chains and estimates their effects on citizens' bordering preferences.

## Data and method

We test our theoretical expectations with survey data from a representative sample of EU citizens obtained by the Eurobarometer (EB). The survey includes questions about respondents' bordering preferences and covers 28 EU member states.<sup>7</sup> Pooling thirteen survey waves which took place between Spring 2012 and Spring 2018 allows us to track the evolution of citizens' preferences before and after the refugee crisis. Removing non-EU citizens yields a sample of  $N = 362,001$  respondents.

We select four different outcome variables that measure individuals' bordering preferences (for question wording and descriptive statistics, see Tables A1 and A3 in the Appendix). Support for internal de-bordering is captured with a dummy variable that measures whether citizens consider the free movement of people, goods and services as one of the most positive results of European integration.<sup>8</sup> This operationalisation is likely to measure the lower bounds of support for free movement as it is relative to the other achievements of European integration and is thus most likely to capture a crisis-related erosion. Support for external re-bordering is measured both as problem perception and as policy preference. We measure the problem perception with a dummy variable based on whether citizens associate the EU with insufficient controls at its external borders.<sup>9</sup> The policy preference is operationalised by a dummy variable based on whether citizens support additional measures to fight illegal immigration from outside of Europe.

Additionally, we measure insider-favourability as the degree to which citizens prefer European immigrants to their non-European counterparts. This is operationalised by the differential between feelings towards immigrants from inside and outside the EU, with each thermometer measured on a four-value scale.<sup>10</sup> This measure allows us to assess how the refugee crisis has shaped citizens' bordering preferences. If the crisis has undermined support for internal de-bordering through activating national identity, we should observe more negative feelings toward both non-European and European immigrants. If the crisis has strengthened support for external re-bordering through activating a common European identity, we should observe a higher insider-favourability with more negative feelings towards non-European immigrants and more positive feelings towards European immigrants.

Our empirical design treats the 2015 surge in refugee arrivals as an exogenous shock that has been mainly caused by the war in Syria (cf. Marx & Naumann, 2018). Refugee arrivals and immigration salience reached a



peak in 2015, with numbers being significantly lower before and after then (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). The EU member states registered more than 2 millions irregular migrants in 2015. The share of citizens who considered immigration as a salient political issue almost tripled between 2014 and 2015. Therefore, the number of refugee arrivals and the public's perception of immigration as an important problem qualify the 2015 refugee crisis as a shock event.

We conduct a controlled comparison of citizens' bordering preferences before and after the refugee crisis. A first series of estimates tests the effect of the crisis on the entire EU, assuming that the surge in refugee arrivals is a common shock to a shared regime based on internal freedoms and external controls. To identify the crisis effect, we take advantage of the timing of the peak of the crisis in Autumn 2015 (right between the two survey waves of that year) and estimate the following model:

$$Y_{its} = \beta_0 + \gamma_1 \text{CRISIS}_t + \beta_1 X_{its} + \alpha_s * t + \varepsilon_{its}$$

We estimate the crisis effect with a dummy that switches from zero to one at the moment of the refugee crisis (Autumn 2015). In order to ensure that we capture the effect of the refugee crisis and to decrease the variance of the coefficient estimates, we include control variables,  $X_{its}$ , that capture countries' economic contexts and citizens' socio-demographics. We use countries' unemployment rates and per capita GDP as contextual factors. At the individual level, we include age, sex, social class (working class, middle class, higher class) and type of community (village, small town, large town).<sup>11</sup> Our models also include interaction terms between time (survey waves) and the country dummies to adjust for time-invariant factors and country-specific time trends ( $\alpha_s * t$ ). All model estimates are based on country-clustered standard errors. The binary nature of our dependent variables would suggest a non-linear functional form. However, logistic models have been found to depend on additional strong and often unrealistic assumptions to yield reliable estimates (Blundell & Costa Dias, 2009). Moreover, not only do linear probability models often produce very similar estimates (Angrist & Pischke, 2014); they are also more intuitive in their interpretation. For these reasons, we employ linear models and report logistic models only as a robustness check to test the stability of our results.<sup>12</sup>

A second series of estimates is based on countries' direct crisis exposure. Most member states did not see a substantial change in the number of irregular immigrants and asylum applications, whereas a few states experienced a historic number of arrivals. If citizens' preferences were affected by their countries' direct exposure, we may assume that the crisis had a highly unequal impact on the different member states. This asymmetric pattern of the refugee crisis allows us to classify countries as affected (treatment) and unaffected (control). Based on the number of refugee arrivals, five countries

can be identified as affected (Austria, Germany, Sweden, Finland and Hungary) and sixteen others as unaffected (Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and the United Kingdom).<sup>13</sup>

To estimate the effect of direct crisis exposure on bordering preferences, we employ *difference-in-differences* (DiD) estimations. We compare citizens' bordering preferences in affected and unaffected countries before and after the refugee crisis. By assuming otherwise parallel trends and a potentially similar response to immigration in both groups of countries, we can compute the counter-factual public attitudes for the member states strongly affected by the crisis. A visual inspection of the pre-treatment trends suggests largely parallel development prior to the crisis (see Figure A2 in the Appendix).<sup>14</sup> To make our estimates more robust against a potential violation of the parallel trend assumption, we follow the recommendation of Angrist and Pischke (2014) to include country-specific time trends and a series of contextual and individual confounders as (time-varying) controls. This allows us to introduce a degree of nonparallel evolution among countries in the outcome variable in the absence of a treatment effect. The resulting model specification takes the following form:

$$Y_{its} = \beta_0 + \gamma_1 \text{EXPOSURE}_s + \gamma_2 \text{CRISIS}_t + \delta_{dd}(\text{EXPOSURE}_s * \text{CRISIS}_t) \\ + \beta_1 X_{its} + \alpha_{0t} + \alpha_{1s} * t + \varepsilon_{its}$$

The DiD estimate is based on an interaction term between a crisis dummy (pre/post crisis) and an exposure dummy (affected/unaffected countries). Inference is estimated based on country-clustered standard errors (Bertrand et al., 2004). We run linear probability models for the reasons described above.

We conclude the empirical analysis with a series of alternative model specifications that serve as robustness tests. We assess the regional variations of the crisis effect and evaluate the effect stability using a more homogeneous country sample. Additionally, we run estimates based on alternative operationalisations of crisis exposure (linear treatment variables) and support for free movement. Finally, we estimate our models based on aggregated data instead of individual-level observations.

## Results

This section presents the findings from our analysis of public opinion data. We assess whether the refugee crisis influenced citizens' preferences on internal de-bordering and external re-bordering. First, we estimate the overall crisis effect on bordering preferences (see Table 1). All four outcomes are significantly affected by the refugee crisis. While support for free movement decreased, support for external re-bordering and the insider-favourability have increased. The effects vary in size: While support for free movement

**Table 1.** Support for de-bordering (overall crisis effect).

	Free movement (1)	Insufficient controls (2)	More controls (3)	Insider favorability (4)
Crisis	-0.021*** (0.003)	0.075*** (0.003)	0.060*** (0.002)	0.093*** (0.004)
Constant	0.626*** (0.052)	0.264*** (0.041)	0.737*** (0.043)	0.502*** (0.076)
Observations	347,388	347,388	207,684	197,642
Adjusted $R^2$	0.047	0.064	0.034	0.067

Note: Linear regression models with country-FE's, country-specific time-trends, controls (unemployment, GDP, sex, age, social class, type of community) and country-clustered SE's. Full model output in the Appendix. Level of statistical significance: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

dropped about two percentage points, the increase in support for external re-bordering increased by almost three times that size. These results provide evidence that the refugee crisis did affect citizens' preferences and led to lower support for internal de-bordering and higher support for external re-bordering. These findings are in line with our theoretical expectations.

We proceed to estimate the effect of direct crisis exposure on citizens' bordering preferences (see Table 2). While the overall pattern of crisis effects is confirmed, we find significant variation depending on whether citizens live in a directly exposed country or not. The negative effect on support for free movement mainly appears to be an effect of direct exposure. The estimated effect on support for external re-bordering is mixed. The perception that external border controls are insufficient is observed in both affected and unaffected countries. Direct exposure only slightly increased citizens' perceptions of loss of control. The effects of direct exposure on the support for more controls and insider-favourability are negative. Unaffected countries have seen a slightly stronger increase in public support for re-bordering. These results provide evidence that the refugee crisis shaped citizens' bordering preferences through the effect of a common shock and through countries' direct exposure.

**Table 2.** Support for de-bordering and re-bordering (direct exposure).

	Free movement (1)	Insufficient controls (2)	More controls (3)	Insider favourability (4)
Crisis	-0.057 (0.054)	0.331*** (0.042)	0.093*** (0.019)	0.235*** (0.032)
Exposure	0.284*** (0.016)	0.113*** (0.012)	-0.031 (0.020)	0.109** (0.034)
Crisis*Exposure (DiD)	-0.031*** (0.008)	0.030*** (0.007)	-0.034*** (0.006)	-0.026** (0.010)
Constant	0.327*** (0.048)	0.290*** (0.038)	0.806*** (0.046)	0.422*** (0.079)
Observations	271,444	271,444	161,504	153,628
Adjusted $R^2$	0.049	0.070	0.037	0.074

Note: Linear regression models with country-FE's, country-specific time-trends, controls (unemployment, GDP, sex, age, social class, type of community) and country-clustered SE's. Full model output in the Appendix. Level of statistical significance: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

To grasp the substantive importance of these results, we compare the predicted probabilities of citizens' bordering preferences (see Figure A6 in the Appendix). A clear majority of around 60 per cent of citizens considers internal de-bordering in the form of free movement as one of the most positive results of European integration. Between 2012 and 2018, the public support for free movement increased and reached its highest values in the last survey wave. The negative effect of the refugee crisis is of limited substance. Only in the directly affected countries do we observe a small dive in support for free movement at the peak of the crisis, whereas a few months later, the value reached again its pre-crisis level. Overall, we find a pattern of stability over time and high overall support for internal de-bordering, and no enduring negative effect of the refugee crisis.

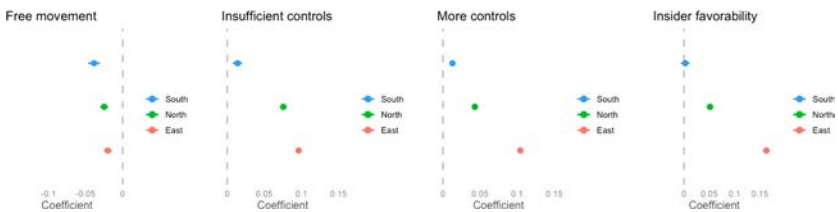
The insider-favourability increased as a result of the crisis and remained at a significantly higher level. This significant shift in sympathies was more or less equal in both affected and unaffected countries. The crisis effect is driven by a significant increase in both positive feelings towards EU-immigrants and negative feelings towards non-EU immigrants.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that after the short-term crisis effect, feelings towards both immigrant groups have continued to turn more positive (see Figure A3 in the Appendix). Hence, the refugee crisis did not lead to a general backlash against immigration, but rather activated citizens' European identity that draws a clearer distinction between EU and non-EU immigration.

The predicted probabilities suggest that citizens' support for external re-bordering has increased: The share of citizens who link the EU with insufficient controls at its external borders almost doubled during the refugee crisis and remained at its new level in the aftermath of the crisis. The crisis has hence clearly undermined the EU's capacity to signal that it is in control of irregular immigration from outside of Europe. This is further confirmed by the significant increase in people who support more controls to prevent non-EU immigration: During the crisis, up to 95 per cent of citizens supported such measures. This astounding level of support makes the significant effect of the crisis even more meaningful. If we compare the crisis effect on support for immigration control at the external borders relative to control at the internal borders, we find no clear crisis effect and, rather, a shift of preferences towards a more European approach over time (see Figure A7 in the Appendix). These results suggest that the effect of the refugee crisis has been twofold: a short-term decrease in support for internal de-bordering in directly exposed countries and a general and enduring increase in support for external re-bordering.

We employ a series of alternative model specifications to test the robustness of these effects. First, the EU member states vary greatly in their immigration history and in their geographical exposure to the refugee crisis. In other words, countries' direct crisis exposure is non-random and likely to

be a function of their attractiveness as refugee destinations. As a result, the overall crisis estimates might conceal heterogeneous treatment effects. We remedy this concern by estimating three different regional models (south, north, east) that represent different structural contexts. Southern countries were exposed to the crisis due to their peripheral location and to established migration routes. These frontline countries register most irregular entries to the territory of the EU. Since these countries are situated at the EU's external border, the immigration threat cannot be addressed by internal re-bordering towards other EU countries. Hence, these countries' bordering preferences should have experienced the lowest effects of the refugee crisis. Northern countries were exposed to the crisis in their capacity as main destination countries and might have sought internal re-bordering in response to an external migration threat. Eastern countries that do not have experience with large-scale immigration might be more fearful of immigration and therefore show a stronger crisis response in their bordering preferences. To assess whether these regional characteristics shape our results, we ran our models on regional samples for Northern, Eastern and Southern Europe (see [Figure 1](#)). No substantial difference is found in support for free movement: a slight negative effect is present in all three regions. We found more substantial regional divergence for external re-bordering preferences: in the European South, where the estimated crisis effects are close to zero; in the European North, the results are moderate, and in the East, the effects are strong. The Eastern countries have adopted the view that the EU requires more restrictive border controls and they increasingly favour European over non-European immigration. This pattern reflects the fierce opposition of many governments in Eastern Europe to admitting refugees and suggests that support for external re-bordering increased the most in less affected countries.

Second, one might argue that the threshold chosen to distinguish between affected and unaffected countries is arbitrary and thereby distorts the estimates. We address this concern in two ways. We rerun our models



**Figure 1.** The crisis effect on bordering preferences by region.

Note: Model estimates for the overall crisis effect (see Table 1), but separated by region. North (Austria, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden, Finland), South (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Malta, Cyprus), East (Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia). Point estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals.

based on the two different classification formulas (see Table A6 in the Appendix for details on the threshold calculation). The different country classifications yield largely similar results. Alternatively, we estimate models replacing the crisis exposure dummy (treatment variable) with continuous measures. We first use the number of asylum requests (weighted by population size) and then the relative crisis surge (asylum requests in 2015/2016 in comparison to those in 2013/2014 as a share of population). These models confirm the previous results (see Tables A12 and A13 in the Appendix). A higher number of asylum requests leads to lower support for internal de-bordering and higher support for external re-bordering.

Third, we employ an alternative operationalisation of support for free movement to assess whether the estimated crisis effect depends on the particularly strong (or weak) supporters of free movement. Thereby, we re-estimate the effects using a dummy of whether someone is a strong supporter of free movement as the dependent variable (see Table A14 in the Appendix for the model output). The weak negative coefficient of the overall crisis effect is confirmed, whereas the effect of direct exposure disappears. This suggests that the short-term negative effect in directly exposed countries stems from the weak supporters of free movement rather than from their more enthusiastic counterparts.

Fourth, we estimate the effect of the crisis on the aggregate support levels by using the share of respondents supporting internal de-bordering and of those supporting external re-bordering as our dependent variables. The linear models using these country-wave aggregates as continuous variables are estimated on  $N = 364$  observations and reveal the same results with significant effects for all bordering preferences (Table A15 in the Appendix).

Fifth, we assess the validity of our estimates by reducing the sample to a more homogeneous group of countries. For that purpose, we use a subsample of Northern destination countries that include both affected and unaffected countries. These countries share similar features but were not equally affected by the crisis. We estimate the effect of direct crisis exposure using the linear treatment variable. The results of these models show that direct exposure leads to lower support for free movement but increases support for external re-bordering (Table A16 in the Appendix). While the crisis effects are confirmed, the effects of direct exposure are more pronounced in the more homogeneous sample.

## Conclusions

In this article, we provide a systematic theoretical elaboration on the idea that the process of European integration with the creation of internal freedoms requires external exclusion. Does support for an integrated Europe without internal border controls and free movement of citizens depend on restrictive

controls at the EU's external borders? We tested this widely shared assumption of an integration-demarcation conditionality in the case of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, during which Europe experienced a historic surge in refugee arrivals. We analysed whether and how the crisis has shaped public support for internal de-bordering and external re-bordering.

The results provide little evidence that the crisis has undermined public support for internal de-bordering. Citizens' support for free movement experienced a small and short-term drop at the peak of the crisis in the countries that were directly exposed to refugee arrivals. Only in the very moment of large-scale refugee arrivals to their own countries did some citizens become more uncomfortable with open borders within Europe. Europeans' long-term support for free movement has been unaffected by the refugee crisis. On the contrary, we observe that after the crisis citizens became more positive about internal migration and increasingly preferred border controls at the European, rather than at their national, borders. Hence, unlike the predictions of an integration-demarcation conditionality, we do not find that the shock event of the refugee crisis substantially undermined the public's support for the internal freedoms. However, citizens have become more supportive of external re-bordering. The crisis had an enduring effect on individuals' perceptions of insufficient controls at the external border and on their preference for European over non-European immigrants. In the aftermath of the crisis, the European public did express strong support for internal de-bordering as well as external re-bordering.

These findings have a series of important implications that contribute to the literature on the political repercussions of large-scale immigration. First, we confirm the results by Dennison and Geddes (2019) and Stockemer et al. (2020) that the refugee crisis did not cause a general backlash against immigration or against the EU. In addition, our analysis provides novel insights into how this external shock event affected citizens' political views on bordering practices. The crisis has undermined the credibility of the EU's efforts of external re-bordering, but despite negative views of non-European immigration, it has not lead to a systematic retreat behind national borders. Our analysis complements empirical studies assessing the influence of local exposure to refugee arrivals (e.g., Hangartner et al., 2019). We demonstrate that the effect of refugee arrivals should not only be assessed based on direct exposure at the local level but it should also be understood as a shock event to an entire region that shapes citizens' socio-tropic concerns.

Second, even in this most likely case of public backlash against open borders and free mobility within Europe, we do not find any meaningful effect on citizens' support for these internal freedoms. Public support for free movement as a main pillar of European integration is largely crisis-resistant. The widening gap in sympathies between EU and non-EU immigrants

suggests that the external threat of refugee migration did not spill-over into the public support for a Europe without internal borders. Thus, the common assumption that public support for internal inclusion depends on external exclusion cannot be confirmed. On the contrary, the external threat has spurred a stronger differentiation between European and non-European immigration rather than an overall backlash against open borders in the European public. This implies that citizens strongly support the European model of internal freedoms combined with restrictive external controls even in the presence of external threats. However, we demonstrate that there is no strict integration-demarkation conditionality in the public opinion. Since we have only tested a specific implication of the conditionality argument for public opinion formation, our results should not be read as a general rejection of such a conditional relationship. More research is warranted to test the wider implications of the proposed conditionality argument for policy-making and public preferences.

Third, our results shed light on the different effects that the refugee crisis has had on public opinion across different European regions. Not only is there large variation in member states' exposure to the refugee crisis, but the crisis effect on citizens' bordering preferences is also strongly asymmetric. The citizens of the peripheral countries in the South that registered the most irregular entries hardly shifted their bordering preferences as a result of the crisis. With the exception of Hungary, Eastern European member states remained largely unaffected by the crisis, but their citizens strongly increased their support for external re-bordering. The shock of the refugee crisis was therefore strongest in those countries that were not a destination for the majority of the asylum seekers reaching Europe. It is therefore likely that the crisis contributed to opinion-polarisation between Western and Eastern Europe on the matter of immigration.

The crisis did not undermine but rather increased the support for effective integration on matters of migration. Political elites' fears (or hopes) that the failure to limit irregular border crossing undermines public support for internal inclusion do not find empirical confirmation. We can think of different reasons why this is the case. Europeans might indeed have distinct and independent preferences for European and non-European immigrants (see Blinder & Markaki, 2019; McLaren, 2001) and distinguish between different levels of governance (see Hartevelde et al., 2018) when it comes to their preferences for internal and external bordering. Another reason might be that internal freedoms are more likely to be viewed in terms of self-centred benefits than others-centered threats (Lutz, 2021).

In light of the sparse supporting evidence, European politicians' common belief that they have to become more restrictive on non-European immigration to sustain public support for internal freedoms seems puzzling. The electoral success of anti-immigration parties could foster the impression that



European citizens turn against free movement. In a context of increasing domestic contestation, politicians might use the conditionality narrative to shore up political legitimacy and to signal to their constituents that they are willing to and capable of managing desired and undesired immigration. These reflections remain speculative and suggest that the link between de-bordering and re-bordering, which has evolved into a conflictive issue in many Western democracies, needs further research.

## Notes

1. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants), retrieved 27.03.2019.
2. [https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2019/03/AfD\\_Europawahlprogramm\\_A5-hoch\\_web\\_150319.pdf](https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2019/03/AfD_Europawahlprogramm_A5-hoch_web_150319.pdf), retrieved 27.03.2019.
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/world/europe/migrants-merkel-kurz-austria.html>, retrieved 27.03.2019.
4. <https://www.cdu.de/artikel/vorstellung-der-ersten-europaplakate>, retrieved 27.03.2019.
5. The number of immigrants who have been reported to have illegally entered the EU, e.g. by failing to register properly or by overstaying their permission to remain ([http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_eipre&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_eipre&lang=en), retrieved 27.03.2019).
6. The most common principle of the Dublin Regulation is the first-entry rule that assigns the protection responsibility to the country in which an asylum seekers first enters EU territory.
7. The countries included are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.
8. Respondents could select two out of eight categories that the question of what the most positive result of the EU was offered to them. For an alternative measure, we only select strong supporters who choose free movement as their first choice.
9. Respondents could select multiple options out of the fourteen categories offered by the question what the EU meant to them.
10. The variables are only available from 2014 onward. Therefore, we rely on a reduced time-series.
11. See Table A1 in the Appendix for the specific operationalisation.
12. The substantive results remain the same in the logistic models (Table A8 and A10 in the Appendix).
13. The Appendix explains the threshold calculations in detail.
14. We estimate models with group-specific linear time trends (affected/unaffected countries). The difference between the two groups' time trends is not statistically significant and therefore does not reveal a problematic violation of the common trend assumption.
15. We find a significant crisis effect on citizens' feelings toward EU and non-EU immigrants, whereas the negative effect for non-EU immigrants is larger than the positive effect for EU immigrants (see Table A11 in the Appendix).

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