

DiCE townhall meeting: ‘From differentiation to unity? Implications of the war in Ukraine for EU migration and asylum policy’

Event organized in the framework of the DiCE project by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs
in cooperation with the Trans European Policy Studies Association

Helsinki, 18 May 2022, 13.00-14.30

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DiCE

Differentiation:
Clustering Excellence



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Overview

After the Russian attack in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, more than 5 million people have left Ukraine and at least the same number is displaced within the country. The European Union was quick to react: it activated for the first time the Temporary Protection Directive, providing immediate protection for those fleeing Ukraine. At the same time, the French Council Presidency is working hard to reach an agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission in September 2020. Can the EU overcome its differentiated past in migration and asylum policy and deepen integration in this field? What are the similarities and differences between the refugee situations in 2015 and now? Is the EU able to achieve a unified migration policy and what are the challenges and opportunities of differentiated integration in this field?

The townhall meeting was organized on 18 May 2022 in the framework of the project ‘DiCE – Differentiation: Clustering Excellence’, in cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) and the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA). The townhall meeting gathered 23 on-site and 51 online attendees.

Opening Words

Saila Heinikoski – Senior Research Fellow in the European Union research programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

Moderator

Juha Jokela – Programme Director of the European Union research programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

Speakers

Minna Hulkkonen – Director General at the Migration Department of the Finnish Ministry of the Interior.

Cecilia Verkleij – Deputy Head of Unit of the Asylum Unit at the European Commission.

Kari Loukkaanhuhta – Head of Coast Guard and Law Enforcement Unit at FRONTEX.



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Jolanta Szymańska – Head of the EU programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

Anna-Kaisa Hiltunen – Special Advisor on Communications at Hybrid CoE.

Discussion

Saila Heinikoski, from FIIA, welcomed the audience to the event and briefed the listeners on the DICE project, which has the core aim of ensuring that state-of-the-art research on differentiation is being translated into solid policy advice. An illuminative example of differentiation is in the field of borders and migration, the theme of the townhall meeting. Differentiation is similarly related to topics on refugees. In 2015, EU Member States were unable to efficiently respond to the situation and are as yet to agree upon a coherent migration policy framework. Since Russia's attack on Ukraine, we have, however, witnessed an extremely united response in regard to Ukrainian refugees.

Minna Hulkkonen of the Ministry of the Interior highlighted the common interest regarding a comprehensive migration package and elaborated on Finnish views on the topic. Solidarity and commitment are key elements, even if the exact circumstances and needs may vary from crisis to crisis. A comprehensive policy framework is of crucial importance for the future: this should also include partnerships with third countries, in regard to return and readmission policies, as well as the often-neglected topic on legal pathways for migration.

Hulkkonen furthermore reflected on the manner in which migration can be instrumentalized for hybrid influencing – a topic especially pertinent in Finland. Should Member States manage a united, decisive, and fair position towards migration and asylum policy, the risk of foreign powers instrumentalizing migration would be significantly decreased. The Ukrainian situation has presented a united Europe previously unseen. Regional cooperation and close coordination remain pivotal: if we wish to hold on to a Schengen area of free movement, we need a common system where standards are equal, and people do not need to move in masses in search of fair treatment.

Cecilia Verkleij presented the audience with views from the European Commission, where Verkleij's unit has been at the forefront of working with the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. The swiftness of adoption reflects the impact of the Ukrainian situation on the EU – furthermore, activation has demanded practical support from countries such as the U.S. and Canada, implying a wave of support extending well beyond the EU. However, the Directive provides minimum requirements, some countries will opt to do more. Challenges exist in many areas; registration, provision of accommodation, and a pressing need for information and coordination are some key areas of development. The Commission's Asylum Unit has undertaken measures to mitigate these problems: they have set up a platform which aids Member States to check beneficiary statuses across borders, as well as helps with family reunification; they have launched a helpline; as well as constructed a dedicated website where accurate information can be disseminated. Financial dedication too has been vast (the Commission has already dedicated 3.5 billion euro).

Verkleij accentuated the uniqueness of the Ukrainian situation. The geographical implications extend beyond Ukraine and even the EU, as seen in the NATO discourse. Other effects include implications in regard to energy and food supplies, the latter of which is already affecting e.g. African countries. Furthermore, the war has generated a great deal of emotions: not only Ukraine is engaged in a conflict with Russia, many others are too, via different means.

Kari Loukkaanhuhta from FRONTEX offered a more operational perspective and elaborated on the differences in circumstances between the current situation and the migrant crisis of 2015. First, the geographical context is different. Today, the war is in Europe, whereas in 2015 the conflict was not directly linked to Europe. In 2015, people had been seeking protection in Turkey, with little prospects



of returning. Second, the sheer numbers of people seeking refuge are incomparable. In 2015-2016, 1.5 million sought protection, as per compared to the 6 million who have already fled Ukraine (although, a few million are estimated to have already returned). Third, the composition of the migrant flows differs from 2015 – more than 90% of the Ukrainian refugees are from vulnerable groups. Finally, a huge difference exists in the great solidarity shown by Member States today. People are now moving to Member States without registration, whereas in 2015 everyone was screened and identified.

Jolanta Szymańska, Head of the EU programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, began her comment by stating that the European Union is currently confronted with two main challenges regarding migration. The first is the problem of instrumentalization of migration and hence the attempts to destabilize the EU through flows of forced migration.

The second major challenge is the refugee crisis originating from Ukraine. EU's current open attitude, reflected by the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, is in stark contrast with the skepticism of 2015 – the question remains whether this tool can be utilized as an EU response for other future migration crises, as well. Some doubts linger, for various reasons. For example, the movement of citizens of Ukraine, being a visa-free country already previously exercising free movement, is perhaps easier for EU states to accept than for other groups. On the other hand, the Ukrainian situation has shown that any and every country can in fact be affected by migration crises, potentially facilitating for a solid basis on which to build future consensus on migration challenges.

Szymańska reflected on the situation in Poland, which she stated to perhaps be better than many would expect. It is estimated that around 1.3 million refugees entered Poland in the beginning, but by now as many as 50% have moved on or returned to Ukraine; 1.1 million have registered; 120 000 have already acquired employment in Poland. However, it should be acknowledged that as many of the arriving Ukrainians are women and children, they may not be able to adjust to the Polish market system, at least not without considerable EU aid for social spending and support for preparing the educational system to facilitate for refugee children.

Anna-Kaisa Hiltunen, Special Advisor to Hybrid CoE, weighed on the reasons why the Temporary Protection Directive was swiftly adopted now, unlike back in 2015. First, there is the question of who is on the move: Ukrainian refugees are mostly women, children, elderly, as well as white European Christians. In 2015, the profile was different: the composition of the migrants was more varied, some moved primarily for better living prospects, and most of the arrivals were male (and not white European Christians). Second, the Ukrainian situation escalated rapidly, while in 2015 the development of the situation was more gradual. Third, Ukrainians already had the option of moving in EU states visa-free, making the situation perhaps easier to accept for Member States. Finally, the nature of the conflicts was ultimately different. Today, we have a clear view of the aggressor, a threat which could extend to other EU countries, as well, whereas in 2015 the situation was more multifaceted and complex.

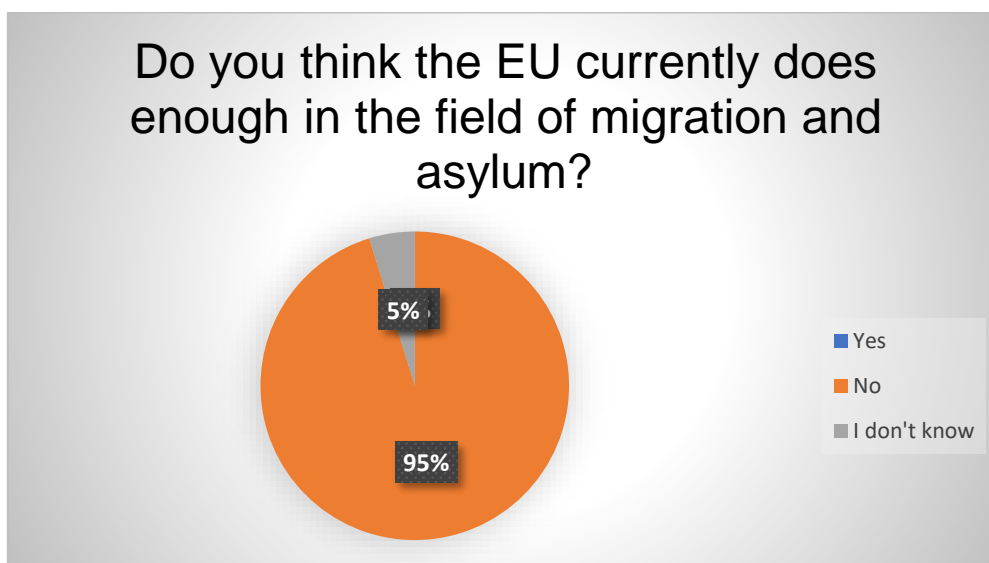
In fact, the discourse has been fundamentally different, Hiltunen stated. Today, the chain of thought is along the lines of “our European neighbors need help, and the threat is directed toward all of us”, while in 2015 the rhetoric consisted more of “why are they all the way here, and did not stay in Turkey?”. This difference in mood has contributed to a historically unified EU response in 2022; indeed, refugees from Ukraine did not even need to apply for individual protection. In 2015, the overall context was defined by border closures and polarization in EU countries. Refugees were taken in as asylum seekers and they needed to provide proof for individual persecution. Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether today's more open approach could lead to a more fundamental reform of the EU's asylum policy in the future, Hiltunen finished.



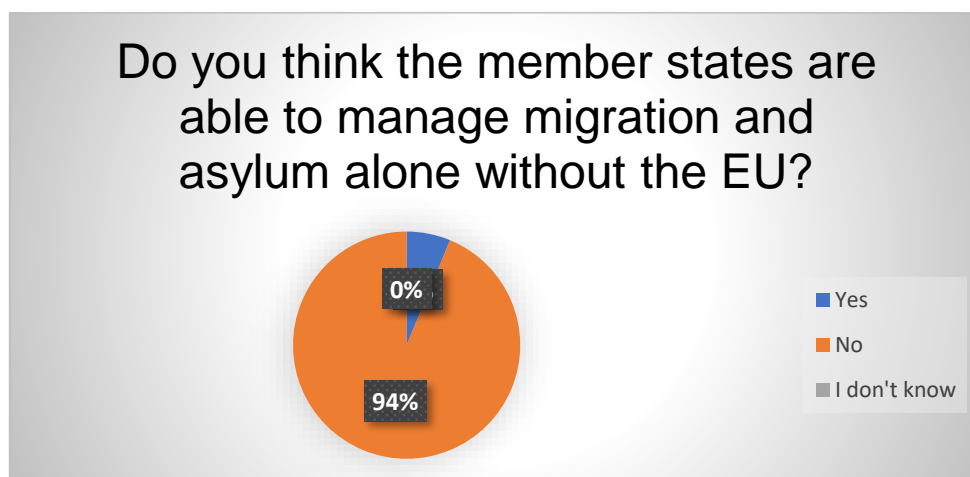
The keynote speeches and comments were followed by a Q&A session on which both on-site and online attendees could pose questions for the panelists. Questions presented by the audience covered e.g. the level of FRONTEX engagement in Moldova; assessing the possibilities and challenges of integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and Finland; the Commission's take on Poland's requests for monetary support in the face of the crisis; and how well adjusted various current migration packages are in the face of migration flows aggravated by e.g. climate change.

The participants were also asked to provide their opinion in a number of real-time polls focusing on the interplay between differentiated integration and migration policy.

Asked whether the EU does enough in the field of migration and asylum, the vast majority (95%) gave a negative answer.



At the same time, almost the same share (94%) considered that the member states are able to manage migration and asylum alone without the EU.



Half (50%) of the participants considered that the member states should have the possibility to opt out from certain EU migration and asylum policies.



Should member states have the possibility to opt out from certain EU migration and asylum policies?



Asked about the most likely scenario for the future of the EU, most participants (56%) considered that there will be more integrated core states and less integrated other states in the field of migration and asylum.

What do you consider the most likely scenario in the EU migration and asylum policy?

