

# The Role of Cultural Conformity in the Syrian Migrant Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

The Syrian conflict, which began as a crackdown on peaceful protests but soon escalated to full-scale violence, led to roughly 6.3 million Syrians fleeing abroad in the immediate aftermath of the violence in 2011. This staggering influx of refugees towards nearby European nations soon became known as the Syrian Migrant Crisis, and it placed unique strains on the European Union, which had to grapple with the humanitarian and economic ramifications of those refugees. The Syrian Migrant Crisis, as well as the corresponding response from European nations, has been widely studied, with many scholars contending that concerns over economic stagnation and healthcare access led to the refusal of many European nations to accept high numbers of Syrian refugees. However, there has not been significant analysis of the response of European nations to Syrian Migrant Crisis through the lens of cultural conformity and the tightness-looseness theory, a theory proposed by Michele Gelfand, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, which states that culturally tighter groups are more ethnocentric and less tolerant of diverse groups. With the tightness-looseness theory in mind, this paper analyzes the significance of cultural conformity, and how that importance has impacted European policy making and translated into the reluctance of European nations to accept Syrian refugees. Political polarization and a rise in nationalistic political policies are identified as impacts of cultural conformity, and this paper proposes that additional government outreach, rather than strict guidelines or refugee quotas, be implemented to combat misinformation and polarization surrounding Syrian migrants.

## Introduction

Following the March 2011 uprising, in which thousands of discontent Syrians protested against perceived government corruption and a dire economic situation, the Syrian government responded through violent means, including “live ammunition” and “widespread arrests” (Davis, 2015, p. 66). To escape the oppression and violence, nearly 6.3 million Syrians became displaced, with many fleeing to nearby nations such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Sullivan & Hawkins, 2019). Furthermore, according to Denis Sullivan and Allyson Hawkins, professors in political science at Northeastern University and Colby University, respectively, this new large influx of refugees posed notable humanitarian and economic strain on the citizens and governments of the receiving countries, who already “faced unemployment, insufficient healthcare, and education shortages.” (Sullivan & Hawkins, 2019, p. 242). Consequently, Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski and Roland Benedikter, professors in geography and political science at the University of California, contend that economic fears regarding job loss and weakened social benefits were the primary influencers in establishing anti-refugee sentiment in the European Union (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2018). However, recent research suggests that cultural differences may have been a key contributor to the reluctance from EU nations to accept Syrian refugees. Michele Gelfand, professor of psychology at Stanford University, and her colleagues state that the tightness-looseness theory suggests that certain cultures have “tighter” norms than others which are characterized by “strict rules and punishments for deviance” (Gelfand et al, 2020, p. 5). Through this theory, the researchers identify a trend in which culturally tighter groups that arise out of “conditions of threat” are more cohesive, but also “[more]

ethnocentric and [less] tolerant of people from stigmatized groups” (Gelfand et al., 2020, p. 8). This concept of a trade-off extends to the Syrian migrant crisis, since tighter European countries develop increased cohesion when confronted by a perceived threat posed by Syrian migrants, but conversely build an atmosphere of cultural exclusion. To further the scope of the Tightness-Looseness theory, Kirsten Vandebelt, professor in political science at Lone Star College, attributes the reluctance of the EU to admit Syrian refugees in 2015 to a cultural fear of the perceived terrorist threat posed by predominantly Muslim Syrian refugees (Vandebelt, 2021). While Pawel and Vandebelt disagree on the relative importance of factors such as economic strain or cultural differences that contributed to a harsh European exclusion of Syrian refugees, both scholars acknowledge the presence of such discrimination. Hence, it becomes pertinent to address: To what extent has European cultural conformity in the European Union functioned as a more polarizing factor regarding the Syrian migrant crisis? Despite factors such as economic strain, cultural conformity is the main factor in contributing to a more extreme European exclusion of Syrian migrants. In order to counteract this, increased government education programs that limit the misinformation surrounding Syrian refugees should be implemented in order to prevent political polarization, ensure equal humanitarian aid, and decrease unfair discrimination against refugees.

## Background

### Cultural Conformity’s Significance

First, it is necessary to establish cultural conformity’s role in precipitating anti-refugee sentiment in policies throughout EU nations. Fabian Georgi, professor of political science at the University of Marburg, reports that nativist sentiment was “exploited by right-wing political parties” in order to build “racist perceptions of refugees” and a negative connotation surrounding Syrian migrants (Georgi, 2019, pp. 101-103). By building a cultural conformist mindset around a single European identity, outside cultures are seen as potential threats and unwelcome burdens. Yet, the strength of the correlation between a more prevalent cultural conformity and discrimination against Syrian refugees is questioned. In a case study regarding Syrian refugees in Greece, it was revealed how Syrian refugees have been denied “consistent access to healthcare” and other necessities, due to fears that constantly caring for refugees would deplete the healthcare system for Greece citizens (Ormsby, 2017, p. 1221). Moreover, research by Semih Tumen, professor of economics at TED University, illustrates how managing the large influx of refugees has led to “large-scale economic instability” for receiving nations such as Turkey and Greece, as job opportunities are limited or replaced by migrant workers (Tumen, 2016, p. 458). While Ormsby underscores how concerns regarding healthcare availability have led to a harsher response towards refugees, Tumen focuses on how fears of economic stagnation have contributed to anti-refugee sentiment. Despite these differences, both sources perpetuate the notion that cultural conformity plays a less significant role in creating anti-refugee sentiment. However, these concerns are refuted by Harad Bauder, professor in immigration at Ryerson University, who claims that during the Balkan refugee crisis, hundreds of thousands of Serbians fleeing the Yugoslav wars were warmly received by neighboring European nations (Bauder, 2016). Furthermore, Bauder asserts if fears regarding economic growth or healthcare availability were significant, widespread discrimination against Serbian refugees would have been documented (Bauder, 2016, p. 73). Eugene Michail, senior researcher at the University of Brighton, attempts to identify where this discrepancy in treatment between Serbian and Syrian refugees arises from. Michail reports that the Balkans began to be seen as the “backyard of Europe” in the 1990s, implying a close relationship and friendly connection between Western Europe and the Balkans, which led nearby European nations to accept significantly higher numbers of Serbian refugee applications (Michail, 2012, p. 221). This is significant, as it implies a widespread perception of Syrian refugees as more foreign and dangerous than those from Serbia. In summary, cultural conformity has been shown to be a key determinant of how refugees are received, more so than other factors such as concerns regarding healthcare access or economic stagnation.

## Impacts on European Nations

### Cultural Conformity's Harmful Nature

Given its significant impact on the reception of Syrian refugees, it is necessary to examine how cultural conformity has positively and adversely impacted European nations through nationalistic pride. In the Estonian Dance and Song Festival by Nikon Europe, it is reported on how singing helped build a unique Estonian cultural identity and mutual trust, which facilitated Estonia's independence from Soviet oppression (Nikon Europe, 2014). This is significant, as it demonstrates how conforming to a single Estonian culture encouraged solidarity in the face of harsh oppression. While the Estonian Dance and Song Festival reflects the benefits of the cultural unity that cultural conformity facilitates within nations, it fails to consider how cultural conformity may correlate with an exclusion of outside cultures. Research by Radka Havlova and Kristyna Tamchynova, professors in political science and international studies at the CERVO Institute, indicates that European Union countries such as "Estonia [and] Portugal declined all" refugee applications in 2015, while countries such as Hungary and Poland had "first instance rejections rates above 80%" (Havlova & Tamchynova, 2016, p. 86). This is highly significant, as it raises the question that cultural conformity and pride in European nations may lead to cultural exclusion and prevent security from reaching refugees who necessitate it. Furthermore, Fabrizio Tassinari, an Italian political scientist, states that the cultural fear of outside ethnicities, such as the primarily Muslim Syrian migrants, has led to an increased perception that admitting more Syrian refugees would cause "increased levels of terrorism" (Tassinari, 2019, p. 45). Consequently, this anti-immigrant sentiment has been adopted by several nationalistic parties within Europe, which has forced "centrist parties" to adopt "anti-immigrant regulations" into the mainstream. This has led to a "renationalization of European policy making," which has led certain countries such as France to limit the financial aid and resources for migrants, thus leading to a fragmented response and an inconsistent ability to care adequately for the migrants (Tassinari, 2019, p. 60). Farid Hafez, an Austrian political scientist at the University of Salzburg, builds upon the ideas introduced by Tassinari by stating that anti-Muslim sentiment has been exploited by far-right political parties to "build political power," which has pressured traditionally "democratic Western nations" into adopting varying levels of discriminatory policies such as "the banning of the hijab" and "surveillance programs" (Hafez, 2015, p. 21). However, Hafez then highlights how nations such as Germany have attempted to portray their countries as safe refuge for these migrants, enlarging a political split through EU nations and contributing to an inconsistent response. In short, varying levels of nationalistic pride within Europe have led to a fractured European response to Syrian migrants, which has exacerbated inequities regarding the distribution of humanitarian aid. By increasing government outreach, misinformation surrounding Syrian migrants is limited, which decreases the political polarization regarding the conflict and facilitates a more uniform distribution of humanitarian aid.

## Proposed Solutions

### Humanitarian Aid and Increased Government Outreach

Reducing political polarization through increased government advocacy may result in a more uniform willingness of EU nations and citizens to assist refugees. Alexis de Tocqueville, French diplomat and philosopher, details how democracy has led to the formation of a middle class "that owe nothing to each man" and how democracy has the inclination to "confine [man] within the solitude of his own heart" (Tocqueville, 1835, p. 2). This is highly significant, as it raises the concern that democratic nations may increasingly be self-centered and may be inherently unwilling to help outside groups such as refugees. To place this tendency within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, Elizabeth Dickinson, professor of political science and humanities at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, claims that the rising anti-foreign opinion in Northern EU states led those nations to be hesitant towards increasing government

funding for humanitarian aid, as they feared it would encourage a large influx of refugees and increase healthcare costs for their own citizens (Dickinson, 2014). Consequently, Dickinson reports that northern EU states were content to allow southern EU states “grapple with the brunt” of the humanitarian crisis, while they remained “relatively unaffected” (Dickinson, 2014, p. 40). Sarah Lischer, professor of International Affairs at Wake Forest University, agrees with such an assessment, and advocates EU action mandating quotas of migrants for each EU state to accept would alleviate the humanitarian strain for southern EU states such as Greece, and it is a valid point in that it allows a greater number of migrants to be adequately cared for (Lischer, 2017). Nevertheless, while Dickinson and Lischer stress the importance of consistent humanitarian access, they both fail to consider the possibility that forcing countries to accept refugees even when those countries are incapable of doing so may foster resentment and enlarge divisions. Stuart Gietel-Basten, professor of Public Policy and International Relations at Hong Kong University, contends that EU regulations could engender numerous political separatist movements similar to Brexit that seek to withdraw from the European Union (Gietel-Basten, 2016). This is significant, as it raises the concern that while migrant quotas for each EU state may attempt to ensure a uniform EU response to the migrant crisis, in reality, they may contribute to further division within the EU. Therefore, an effective solution that does not inflame tensions within the EU is necessary. Thus, Dickinson then proposes that a reduction of misinformation through “government advocacy” would reduce nativist sentiment in Europe and allow a more unbiased distribution of aid to all refugees requiring it, without inconsistencies across different European receiving countries (Dickinson, 2014, p. 41). By reducing misinformation surrounding Syrian migrants, a more unified Europe can consistently provide humanitarian aid to Syrian migrants needing it.

### Legal Limitations of Government Outreach

Despite the numerous positive impacts that government outreach and education produces by reducing the polarized and often threatening environment towards Syrian refugees, it is necessary to indulge in an examination of the potential legal or economic limitations associated with this. Cathryn Costello and Minos Mouzourakis, researchers with doctorates in international law and foreign relations, respectively, raise concerns regarding potential legal challenges from political parties, since attempting to reduce misinformation may be seen as “government overreach” and a suppression of “diverse perspectives” (Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016, p. 51). This is significant, as it suggests that legal shortcomings in government overreach may reduce its effectiveness or feasibility. While Costello and Mouzourakis claim that legal limitations may limit the effectiveness of governmental advocacy for Syrian refugees, other researchers question the viability of such a response due to economic concerns that implementing such programs may overburden struggling European nations. Dimitris Keridis, professor of international politics at Panteion University, Greece, asserts that heavily impacted nations such as Turkey and Greece may be unable to implement political programs regarding Syrian refugees, since these nations are grappling with healthcare shortages and high unemployment, partially due to the refugee crisis itself (Keridis, 2018). Consequently, for governments to reduce misinformation regarding Syrian refugees through increased education, these concerns should be addressed and reflected in a more balanced solution.

### The Recommendation

Given the rapidly enlarging humanitarian crisis at EU borders and European cultural fears of Syrian migrants, it is necessary to introduce and implement solutions that allow for a less extreme and forceful response to the Syrian refugee crisis. By doing so, political polarization and unfair discrimination against Syrian refugees will be limited. In addition, by reducing disinformation, humanitarian aid will be available and distributed on a much more consistent basis, ensuring that those seeking aid are granted it while not inflaming political tensions further (Karolewski & Bendikter, 2018). While these solutions are necessary for the short term alleviation of political tensions and humanitarian

problems, a long term continuity of unrest in Syria should necessitate further long term political and economic investment to implement a long term solution to the issue.

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