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Article

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EconPol Forum

Provided in Cooperation with:

Ifo Institute – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich

Suggested Citation: Bartholomae, Florian W.; Nam, Chang-woon; Schoenberg, Alina M. (2025) : From burden to balance: The role of age and education level in the distribution of refugees in Europe, EconPol Forum, ISSN 2752-1184, CESifo GmbH, Munich, Vol. 26, Iss. 1, pp. 26-31

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/310935>

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Florian Bartholomae, Chang Woon Nam and Alina Schoenberg

From Burden to Balance: The Role of Age and Education Level in the Distribution of Refugees in Europe

KEY MESSAGES

- Migration poses both an opportunity and a challenge for the EU, as it offers a solution to labor shortages and demographic imbalances, but also creates social and economic pressure
- A fairer distribution of refugees among EU member states, considering age and education level, can optimize labor markets, promote social cohesion, and reduce populist sentiment
- Current models for refugee distribution often fail to align with host countries' needs, and incorporating nuanced indicators like age, education level, and social resistance can improve fairness and efficiency
- Tailored policies that address integration barriers, such as skill recognition and language training, can maximize refugees' contributions to host economies and counter negative public perceptions
- While giving preference to younger and educated refugees can improve integration outcomes, this approach must be reconciled with humanitarian principles to uphold ethical standards in refugee policy

Migration continues to be a pressing and complex issue in the EU, as its member states are simultaneously confronted with an acute labor shortage and the challenges of a massive influx of refugees. At its core, migration offers both opportunities and obstacles: skilled migrants can offset demographic imbalances

and stimulate labor markets, while unskilled migrants and refugees fleeing humanitarian crises are often seen as a burden on welfare systems and social cohesion. The ongoing influx of refugees from conflict areas has exacerbated these challenges, leading to significant differences in the distribution of migrants in the EU and triggering debates on a fair distribution of responsibility and sustainable migration policy.

The current situation shows that migration pressure is very unevenly distributed across EU member states, with some countries disproportionately affected while others face relatively lighter burdens. These inequalities not only increase public resentment towards migration, but also fuel the rise of populist movements across Europe (Nam 2024; Bartholomae et al. 2023). Furthermore, the lack of a coherent European migration policy exacerbates the fragmentation of efforts and increases tensions and inefficiencies in dealing with the issue (Straubhaar 2000). This dispute underscores the urgent need for a coordinated policy that reconciles national interests with collective responsibility in the EU.

To overcome these challenges, efforts to distribute refugees should pursue three objectives: optimizing the labor market, social cohesion, and reducing populist sentiment. Optimizing the labor market aims to match the skills of migrants with the economic needs of host countries, thus counteracting skills shortages and demographic decline. Social cohesion focuses on promoting harmonious integration by leveraging the (financial and welfare) capacities and expertise of countries that are experienced in supporting migrants. Finally, to reduce populist sen-



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Table 1

Number and Education Level of Persons with International Protection Status/Asylum Seekers per 1,000 Persons in the Respective Age Group, 2023

	From 15 to 24 years			From 25 to 54 years			From 55 to 74 years		
	Education levels			Education levels			Education levels		
	0–2	3–4	5–8	0–2	3–4	5–8	0–2	3–4	5–8
EU27	10.2	3.4	-	7.2	5.1	4.5	4.1	3.0	2.7
Austria	27.2	12.1	-	16.4	18.3	10.7	4.9	7.6	7.3
Belgium	10.1	5.2	-	12.1	7.3	8.3	4.9	4.9	3.4
Croatia	-	-	-	3.5	15.2	5.7	12.7	15.2	1.6
Cyprus	16.8	9.3	-	7.7	6.7	6.7	-	-	-
Denmark	5.9	-	-	10.1	6.2	4.4	5.4	5.4	2.9
Finland	9.0	-	-	5.2	8.4	1.7	-	-	-
France	-	-	-	3.8	3.1	2.8	6.5	4.6	4.6
Germany	36.0	8.0	-	23.8	13.8	10.7	9.7	6.1	5.2
Italy	0.3	-	-	0.7	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.2	-
Luxembourg	31.4	-	-	12.3	13.6	21.6	-	-	-
Netherlands	15.5	6.6	1.1	12.8	7.8	9.6	6.3	3.1	5.1
Portugal	-	-	-	1.2	1.9	2.6	5.3	3.1	4.7
Spain	2.4	-	-	1.3	1.0	3.1	0.6	0.5	0.6
Sweden	38.8	20.3	4.0	28.4	17.1	21.3	15.2	11.7	13.3

Note: (1) Education levels according to International Standard Classification of Education: Levels 0–2: Less than primary, primary, and lower secondary education; 3–4: Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education; 5–8: Tertiary education. (2) Country selection is determined by data availability.
Source: Own calculations based on data from Eurostat.

timent, migration pressure must be evenly distributed to reduce resentment and promote EU-wide solidarity. To achieve these goals, the age and education level of refugees must be taken into account. In this context, we discuss existing approaches to refugee distribution to determine how the inclusion of these factors can better address skills shortages, facilitate integration, and ensure fair burden-sharing between EU member states and for the future design of the common migration policy.

AGE AND EDUCATION LEVEL OF REFUGEES ACROSS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AND THEIR POSSIBLE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL IMPACT

A fair distribution of refugees across EU countries – including young and old, skilled and unskilled migrants – ensures a balanced approach that maximizes collective benefits while minimizing social and economic costs. In this context, it is argued that while younger and better educated refugees often integrate faster, older and less educated refugees can also make an important contribution to optimizing the labor market, social cohesion, and reducing populist sentiment, especially if inclusive policies address their integration problems.

As shown in Table 1, there were significant differences in refugee demographics among European countries in 2023. In general, the EU average shows a gradual decrease in asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants with increasing age, with the highest concentration in the younger cohort (15–24 years). This

is to be expected as younger refugees often make up a significant proportion of asylum flows due to their greater mobility and adaptability. However, the educational distribution within the individual age groups reveals strong inequalities. For example, those with lower levels of education (0–2) are consistently over-represented compared to those with higher levels of education (5–8), particularly in countries such as Germany and Sweden. In both countries, the number of refugees is significantly higher across most age groups and education levels, reflecting their more open asylum policies.

In countries such as Italy and Spain, on the other hand, the numbers are extremely low across all cohorts and education levels. The low numbers in Italy, despite being a major country of entry for refugees into Europe and receiving a high number of first arrivals, are mostly because many asylum seekers see the country as a transit country on their way to Northern or Western Europe. This movement is facilitated by the difficulties in enforcing the Dublin Regulation, which requires asylum applications to be made in the first EU country of entry. This is compounded by Italy's national reception system, which focuses more on border management than long-term integration. Croatia and Sweden are home to a relatively older migrant population, which could put a strain on pension and healthcare systems. Sweden, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands stand out as having some of the best educational profiles in their refugee populations, showing that countries with strong integration strategies and economic opportunities are more successful in attracting and retaining highly educated refugees.

The data in Table 1 highlights the mismatch between the demographic needs of countries and the age and education profiles of incoming refugees, which calls into question the fairness and effectiveness of current distribution mechanisms. However, they also highlight the potential for successful integration of refugees by harnessing their adaptability and capacity to address skills gaps and meet the demands of the labor market. Younger and educated refugees are often given preference because they can adapt quickly to economic needs (Hashimoto 2018). However, older and less educated migrants also play a crucial role in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, construction, and care, which are also important for economic stability, especially in ageing societies. While these roles are undervalued, they are essential in addressing labor shortages that go beyond high-skilled sectors (Fasani and Mazza 2024). Tailored training programs can also improve the productivity and self-reliance of refugees with lower levels of education, reduce dependence on welfare systems, and increase their economic contribution. In addition, host countries can benefit from the diverse informal skills and entrepreneurial potential of older refugees (Kirkwood 2009).

Reducing bureaucracy and speeding up the process of recognizing formal educational qualifications have become crucial factors in optimizing the labor market in host countries. The slow assessment of foreign qualifications delays access to suitable jobs and creates a discrepancy that wastes human capital and reduces the economic benefits that immigrants can bring to host countries (Friedberg 2000; Brücker et al. 2019). Inconsistent recognition systems in EU countries further exacerbate these problems, as decentralized frameworks often lead to unequal treatment of refugees' qualifications. Harmonization of recognition standards, particularly at the EU level, has been proposed as a solution to streamline these processes and reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies (Liebig and Tronstad 2018). In addition, innovative approaches such as the validation of informal skills or work experience, which allow refugees to demonstrate their skills through workplace assessments while undergoing further training or certification (Desiderio 2016), can help refugees to close formal education gaps.

Older and less educated refugees often face greater integration challenges, particularly in language acquisition and cultural adaptation. However, programs that provide targeted support for these groups – such as community engagement initiatives, vocational training, and accessible language courses – promote social cohesion by reducing their marginalization. The inclusion of these groups can also strengthen public perceptions of fairness and allay fears that only “ideal,” i.e., young and well educated, migrants will be supported. The presence of diverse refugee demographics, including families with older members, helps to humanize migration, break ste-

reotypes, and foster empathy among the local population (Mewes and Mau 2013). This helps to reduce social polarization and create inclusive communities.

Refugees and migrants are often perceived more negatively than empirical reality warrants, which contributes significantly to the rise of populism in host countries. A major reason for this perception is the fear that refugees pose an economic and cultural threat, although there is ample evidence that these fears are often exaggerated or misplaced (Schubert et al. 2023; Jaschke et al. 2021). Fear of competition in the labor market, especially among low-skilled natives, is a key concern. Refugees are often perceived as depressing wages and displacing workers in low-skilled sectors, although research suggests that their overall impact on employment and wages of natives is minimal (Dustmann et al. 2008). Economic theory suggests that the skills of refugees, if they complement the existing workforce, can increase productivity and lead to wage increases for locals. However, this is often overshadowed by populist rhetoric that simplifies and reinforces fears of economic displacement (Edo et al. 2019).

The disproportionately high visibility of refugees in the social welfare systems also contributes to the negative perception. Refugees are mainly perceived as net recipients of public benefits, which contributes to the impression that they are a burden on taxpayers, regardless of their education, skills, or age. This perception persists despite long-term studies showing that well-integrated refugees often transition from welfare dependency to net contributors to the economy through taxes and consumption (Alesina et al. 2018).

These economic fears are compounded by cultural fears, as refugees are seen as a challenge to national identity and social cohesion, particularly in communities that have little experience of diversity (Dustmann and Preston 2007). Populist leaders exploit these fears by portraying migration as a zero-sum game in which natives must compete with refugees for scarce resources, fostering resentment and polarization. Targeted measures that connect refugees with jobs that match their skills not only improve their self-sufficiency, but also show the public the mutual economic benefits of integration (Brücker et al. 2019). Furthermore, interaction between refugees and host communities promotes mutual understanding, reducing the “us versus them” dynamic exploited by populists (Putnam 2007).

Populist sentiment also feeds on the perception that migration imposes unequal burdens on individual countries or disproportionately benefits selected groups such as political elites, globalists, etc. (Bolet 2020). A fair distribution that includes a balanced mix of young and old, skilled and unskilled migrants ensures that no single country or community bears an excessive share of the responsibility. Such fairness can reduce resentment among the native population and reduce the appeal of populist narratives.

Table 2

Refugee Distribution Models

Model	Labor market optimization	Social cohesion	Reduction of populist sentiment
Aggregated indicator model	Allows for some adjustment to labor needs if the unemployment rate is sufficiently weighted, but lacks flexibility in matching skills.	Offers only limited opportunities to take social cohesion into account, as social resistance is generally not included in the metric.	Low impact; may unintentionally reinforce populist sentiment if perceived as unfair or overly simplistic.
Partial ordering model	Maintains granularity and allows detailed adjustment of the labor market by unemployment rate and demographic factors such as age or education level.	Supports social cohesion by incorporating the migration preferences of the population while considering social resistance.	The transparent consideration of several indicators counteracts populist sentiment and reduces the impression of unfairness. Explicit consideration of social resistance ensures that countries with a strong rejection of refugees are not overburdened.
Normalized population model	Ensures equitable distribution based on the size of the country's population, which indirectly balances the impact on the labor market.	Focuses on equity but can neglect direct metrics of social cohesion without additional indicators.	Reduces populist sentiment by ensuring proportionality and fairness in allocations. However, the limited consideration of social attitudes or resistance may still leave gaps for exploitation of the population in areas with strong rejection of refugees, especially if large numbers of refugees are allocated to relatively hostile regions.
College admissions (CA) model	Promotes mutual matching of preferences, which could optimize labor market outcomes but risks favoring selective refugees.	Limits social cohesion, as countries may prioritize economically desirable refugees over social compatibility.	Reduces populist sentiment in countries that achieve good agreement. However, there is a risk that populism and Euroscepticism will be stoked in countries that feel that their preferences are being overlooked or perceive unfairness, reinforcing the narrative of lost sovereignty or inequity.
School choice (SC) model	Favors the benefits of refugees and thus indirectly supports the adjustment to the labor market for those who have qualifications and education.	Promotes social cohesion by emphasizing the needs of refugees and minimizing the bias of the host country.	Reduces populist sentiment by limiting discriminatory privileges of the host country and focusing on the vulnerability of refugees, but leads to allocations that are not in line with societal expectations. Populists may exploit the fact that refugees are perceived as incompatible with local culture, labor market needs, or social norms.

Source: Authors' compilation.

REFUGEE DISTRIBUTION MODELS

The allocation of refugees across countries is a serious policy challenge that has led to the development of various models to achieve fairness and efficiency. The European Commission's "aggregate indicators model" uses weighted metrics, including population size, GDP, unemployment rate, and historical asylum intake, to create a composite score for ranking countries. While straightforward, this approach suffers from oversimplification due to the compensation effect, where the strengths of one indicator can offset the weaknesses of another. This leads to potentially sub-optimal distributions. In addition, fixed weightings limit flexibility and adaptability to different refugee needs or evolving conditions in host countries (Carlsen 2016).

An alternative is the "partial ordering model," which avoids the aggregation of indicators and thus preserves the relevance of each individual aspect. This

approach uses multiple combinations of indicators, such as adjusted net national income (ANNI), population size, unemployment rate (UeR), and social resilience as measured by the Fragile States Index (FSI), which measures the vulnerability of states to collapse or conflict based on social, economic, and political indicators. The model offers flexibility as countries are ranked based on different combinations of indicators. For example, an approach that emphasizes ANNI and population size highlights economic and demographic capacity, while more comprehensive approaches integrate UeR and FSI to account for labor market readiness and social attitudes. By preserving the diversity of each indicator, the partial ordering provides a detailed and nuanced perspective on each country's capacity, but the increased complexity can lead to challenges in comparability and decision-making (Bruggemann and Carlsen 2011; van Basshuysen 2017).

The “normalized population model” refines these approaches by proportionally adjusting the distribution of refugees based on population size. This ensures a fair allocation in relation to the countries’ absorptive capacity, while considering economic, social, and demographic indicators. For example, countries with a larger population and a stronger economy are assigned a greater responsibility for taking in refugees. This normalization provides a balance between fairness and practicality, ensuring that allocations align with each country’s relative capacity to host refugees (Carlsen 2016).

The “college admissions” (CA) and “school choice” (SC) models provide an additional framework for the allocation of refugees. The CA model takes into account the preferences of both refugees and host countries and aims for stable matches through a deferred acceptance algorithm. While this model fosters mutual preferences, it carries the risk of favoring wealthier or more desirable countries and enabling discriminatory practices by host nations. Conversely, the SC model prioritizes refugees’ preferences and needs, assigning countries based on objective criteria such as vulnerability or family ties. This approach emphasizes fairness and humanitarian principles, reducing opportunities for host countries to cherry-pick refugees but potentially sacrificing efficiency (van Basshuysen 2017).

As shown in Table 2, each model reflects different trade-offs between simplicity, equity, and operational feasibility that affect how the goals of fair distribution of refugees are achieved. Aggregated models offer simplicity but risk oversights, partial ordering models preserve the distinction of different factors but increase complexity, and the normalization type provides proportionate fairness while retaining key insights. Incorporating the CA and SC models adds further flexibility in aligning refugee preferences and needs with host country capacities, ensuring that both integration potential and humanitarian principles are addressed. The partial order model seems best suited to reconcile all objectives, as it is able to take into account differentiated criteria while maintaining fairness and transparency. However, practical and ethical considerations vary from context to context, so a tailored approach to specific integration objectives is required.

Recent research and discussions, including our article, highlight the potential of including refugee characteristics such as age and education level to improve distribution models. It has been repeatedly shown that younger and better educated refugees integrate more easily and meet the needs of the labor market in host countries. However, prioritizing these factors raises ethical concerns in the EU, as it could disadvantage vulnerable groups such as older or less educated refugees, whose integration and protection needs may be greater and more urgent. The balance between these demographic considerations and humanitarian priorities remains a critical

area for ongoing research and policy refinement (van Basshuysen 2017).

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

The unequal distribution of responsibility for refugees and asylum seekers among EU member states under the “Dublin system,” coupled with frequent non-compliance with its rules, has long been a contentious issue within the Common European Asylum System. This imbalance has put disproportionate pressure on member states at the EU’s external borders, stoking political tensions and undermining solidarity across the bloc. The new Pact on Migration and Asylum seeks to address these shortcomings by introducing a binding but flexible solidarity mechanism. Under this system, member states are required to contribute through resettlement, financial support, or in-kind assistance.

Although this mechanism represents significant progress, it is still controversial. The retention of the “first country of entry” criterion continues to place a greater burden on border states and raises the question of whether the new system will really result in a fairer distribution of responsibility. In addition, the Pact introduces an annual cycle for the management of migration flows, setting out specific steps to identify member states under pressure and assess their support needs. This approach includes a comprehensive assessment of migration trends, reception capacities, and asylum infrastructure, and provides a more structured basis for solidarity.

Nevertheless, these measures alone may not be sufficient to tackle the deeper socio-economic challenges or promote greater cohesion within the EU. Coordinated action at the EU level to improve access to education, language courses, and employment opportunities for migrants is crucial. Such initiatives would not only enhance their integration into the host society, but also help to reduce public resistance to migration by demonstrating tangible benefits to host communities.

A particularly promising approach is to take age and education levels into account when deciding on the distribution of refugees as part of a future common EU refugee and asylum policy. This strategy could match the profiles of refugees with the demographic and labor market needs of host countries, creating a more effective integration process that benefits both refugees and their new communities. However, this approach also brings with it ethical and practical challenges. Prioritizing refugees based on these criteria risks sidelining those with greater humanitarian needs and creating a hierarchy that favors those deemed “economically viable” over those in urgent need of protection. Such a system could undermine the humanitarian principles underpinning asylum policy and promote inequality among refugees.

Balancing these competing priorities requires careful consideration. Policymakers must ensure that

the inclusion of age and education level in distribution mechanisms improves integration outcomes without compromising humanitarian values. To achieve this, a refugee distribution model must be perceived as fair both in individual member states and across the EU. Overcoming social resistance will be crucial, and transparent public communication strategies must accompany this policy. Highlighting the contribution of refugees to society can help counter populist narratives and encourage support for policies that uphold both humanitarian principles and practical benefits for host communities

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