Protect

The Right to International Protection

Citizens' Attitudes to the Right to International Responsibility Sharing in Refugee Protection

Citizens' Attitudes to the Right to International Responsibility Sharing in Refugee Protection

Cornelius Cappelen, Hakan G. Sicakkan, Pierre Van Wolleghem

University of Bergen

A formalized international responsibility sharing component has been absent in the international refugee protection system, despite the need for international collaboration is briefly mentioned in the preamble of the 1951 *Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees*. The need became particularly evident when protection challenges arose during, among other events, the internal conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria and the massive Mediterranean Sea-crossings from Northern Africa to the EU costs in the second half of 2010s. To remedy this, the United Nations and the European Union have introduced new arrangements of international responsibility sharing in refugee protection – respectively, the UN *Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)* and the EU *New Pact on Migration and Asylum (New Pact)*. Although the UN arrangement is not binding, and the EU proposal only becomes binding after the EU Member States' approval of new EU directives, regulations and decisions, there is a broad consensus that the proposals are relevant, and their implementation is underway.

The UN and EU arrangements designate the states as the primary actors in implementing the new international arrangements. They extend the notion of responsibility for refugees beyond the asylum applications that countries receive at their borders. The extension happens through introduction of new, formal instruments of responsibility sharing regarding refugees and asylum seekers arriving in other countries than one's own. In this respect, the two arrangements even propose supranational arrangements to be coordinated or led by the UN and the EU. Thus, in practice, international collaboration and responsibility sharing in refugee protection has never been as big in scope as proposed in the GCR and the New Pact.

In democratic societies, citizen attitudes to international protection are a crucial part of the political factors that affect the success of the implementation of the GCR and the New Pact. As many governments have been justifying their refugee and asylum policies with reference to their citizens' policy preferences, it is crucial to assess whether these new arrangements meet support or resistance among citizens. Thus, the overall objective of this research component of PROTECT is to explore public attitudes towards the most important instruments of international responsibility sharing that are proposed in the GCR and the New Pact. We selected three important instruments of international responsibility sharing that are found in the GCR and the New Pact: The relocation arrangements, liberal v. restrictive asylum decisions, and the comprehensive refugee response framework. The research was carried out in three studies:

- Study 1 (attitudes to relocation versus paying): The trade-off between admitting asylum seekers and paying other countries to protect them.
- Study 2 (attitudes to asylum decision-making): The trade-off between false negatives (rejecting real asylum seekers) and false positives (accepting bogus asylum seekers) in asylum policies
- Study 3 (attitudes to the comprehensive global response framework): Support for supranationally coordinated international refugee protection

We conducted an original web-based survey in June–July 2021 in 26 countries.[1] The survey data was collected by a consortium of three professional survey institutes. Each national sample includes a minimum of 1,000 respondents (2,000 for the US) amounting to a total of 27,429 respondents. Below we report the main results from three studies.

Study 1: The trade-off between admitting and paying. An experimental analysis of people's attitudes toward responsibility-sharing in refugee issues.

Brief background:
The number of people fleeing wars, violence, persecution, and human rights violations in 2020 rose to nearly 82.4 million people. A substantial number of these ended up as refugees in developing countries that often lack the means to accommodate and help them. Because of this unequal burden and responsibility-sharing, concerns are increasingly being voiced that the first border crossed cannot be the exclusive principle of responsibility.

Fundamentally, there are two broad mechanisms for international responsibility-sharing in refugee issues; the provision of financial and other assistance to host countries and the admission of refugees, most commonly through resettlement. In other words, a nation country can either provide financial help to ensure that other host countries can guarantee basic rights and decent living conditions for refugees or else admit more asylum seekers from countries already hosting comparatively large numbers of them.

The objective:
In this study we explore public attitudes to burden and responsibility sharing in refugee matters. In a situation where a country handles fewer asylum application cases compared to many other countries, would citizens of that country – in the pursuit of responsibility sharing – choose that their country admits more applicants or else that their country pays a financial solidarity contribution to another country that handles these cases instead?

Findings:
An important finding in this study is that across countries, 66.6% of the respondents agree to various extent that their country should collaborate and strive to protect the world's refugees (figure 1). This is good news for those who strive for more collaboration and responsibility-sharing in refugee issues; however, it tells us nothing about which responsibility mechanism that people actually prefer. We explored this issue by using a survey experiment in all the 26 countries. The respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups and provided a hypothetical choice – either accept that their country is reallocated 100 new asylum applicants because it handles fewer cases compared to many other countries, or else pay a financial solidarity contribution to another country that accepts them. The size of the contribution varied between the treatment groups.: in group 1, the solidarity contribution was set at €5,000; in group 2, €50,000; and in group 3, €250,000.

---

[1] The countries involved are Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, and the US.

Fig. 1. Percentage of respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement: "All countries should collaborate and strive by all means to protect the world's refugees".
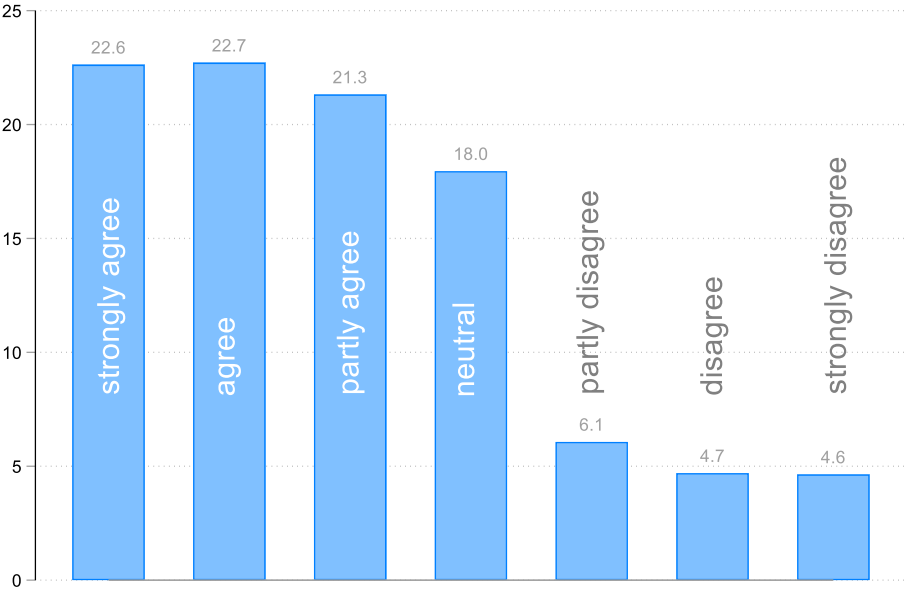
A sizable majority of the respondents would opt for accepting asylum seekers in their countries rather than paying another country to accept them, irrespective of the size of the solidarity contribution. Furthermore, we find that the size of the solidarity contribution has a substantial effect on the willingness to accept rather than to pay. To illustrate, across countries, 44.8% of the respondents would want their country to pay if the amount is €5,000; 37.7% if the amount is €50,000; and 31.9% if the amount increases to €250,000. Thus, the more costly it is to pay rather than to admit, the more people are inclined to admit rather than to pay. Interestingly, even when size of the solidarity contribution is very small (€5,000), a clear majority chose to admit rather than to pay.

Fig. 2. Percentage of respondents willing to pay another country.
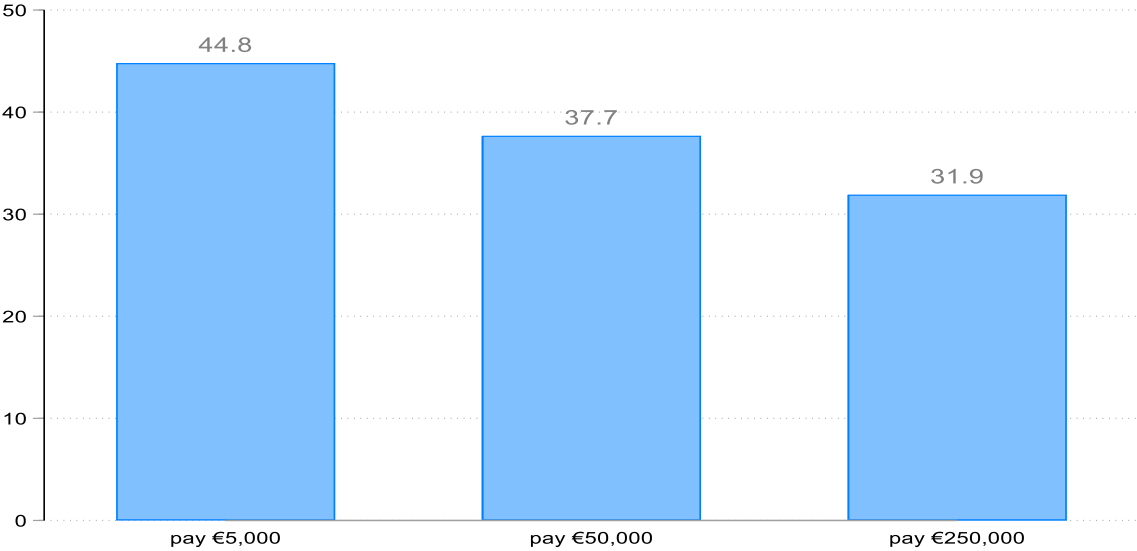
The amounts correspond to concrete policy options. The first, €5,000, comes close to the amount provided for the Union Resettlement Programme established by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, which provided a lump sum of €6,000 for each resettled person (Regulation 516/2014/EU; art. 17). The third amount replicates that of the European Commission's proposal for the reform of the Dublin system Regulation (Dublin IV; COM(2016)270 final: 19) which foresees a solidarity contribution of €250,000 for each asylum seeker that a country refuses to admit. The second amount – €50,000 – is lower than the Dublin IV reform proposal but still twice as much as the yearly cost of admitting an asylum seeker estimated for Germany (Wagner and Baumgartner, 2017).

Our study also sheds light on why some people prefer the one solidarity sharing mechanism over the other. We find that people with *nativist sentiments*, who believe that immigrants pose a threat to the cultural homogeneity and the national identity of the host society, are more inclined to pay (rather than to admit) compared to non-nativists. A particularly strong association between *welfare chauvinism* (the idea that the welfare state is for natives and only to a lesser extent for immigrants) and the willingness to pay rather than to admit, which can be explained by *sociotropic concerns* (sharing welfare benefits with refugees can be detrimental to economic performance) as well as by *cultural concerns* (it is unfair that refugees should have the same access to welfare provision as natives). Furthermore, we find that people who exhibit a restrictive stance on who is entitled to full *citizen rights* are more in favour of paying rather than accepting compared to people who endorse a more lenient notion of citizenship. *Political orientation* strongly associates with which responsibility sharing mechanism that people prefer: People on the right side of the political spectrum, much more than people on the left side of the political spectrum, prefer to pay rather than to admit.

Our findings are policy relevant. To illustrate: the failure to adopt a stable EU-wide responsibility sharing mechanism together with efforts to externalize migration controls to third countries, bears witness to states' attempt to limit inflows of asylum seekers. The findings of this study, however, provide compelling evidence of the sustainability of responsibility sharing through relocation programs. Public opinion is not only favorable to responsibility sharing in general, but furthermore, of the two responsibility sharing mechanisms, most people prefer admitting reallocated immigrants over paying. This is vital information, not least because public opinion has become increasingly important for policymakers in the EU, as illustrated by its new focus on various types of stakeholder consultations.

Study 2: The Trade-off Between False Negatives and False Positives in Asylum Policies

Brief background:

Due to the discretionary nature of decision making in asylum applications, often nurtured by a lack of relevant information, decision makers can make two mistakes: Rewarding the undeserving, which is a false positive, and failing to reward the deserving, which is a false negative. To illustrate, an applicant for political asylum qualifies for protection if he or she has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention. The determination of whether an applicant has a well-founded fear is not always obvious due to information scarcity, and decisionmakers are then forced to rely upon indirect

indicators of deservingness (eligibility), such as country of origin, which correlate only imperfectly with those characteristics that constitute the real grounds of deservingness. The likelihood of then making one of the two mistakes is clear and present.

A previous study from the US has found that there exist astounding disparities between recognition rates of asylum claims from one adjudicator to another, even within the same office, so that, in the words of the authors, "in many cases, the most important moment in an asylum case is the instant in which a clerk randomly assigns an application to a particular asylum officer or immigration judge" (Ramji-Nogales et al.; 2007: 296).[2] Such findings indicate the discretionary nature of asylum application decisions, and the likelihood that the officers' attitudes toward false negatives and false positives affect their decisions.

Objective:

The objective of this study is two-fold. First, we study how people trade off false positives against false negatives in asylum decision making. What do people think is worst; granting asylum to an "undeserving" applicant, or failing to grant asylum to a "deserving" applicant? Second, we study how people's attitudes toward these two mistakes associate with their preferences for asylum policy.

Findings:

The respondents, after being provided a brief vignette explaining the two mistakes and how they relate to asylum policy decisions, answered (on a five-point bipolar answer scale) a question about which of the two mistakes they find most serious (which they most want to avoid). First, across countries, a large minority are indifferent to the two mistakes and find them equally concerning (39.7%). Second, of those that are not indifferent, a clear majority find false negatives most concerning. Precisely, 36.5% find false negatives to be most concerning, while 23.9% finds false positives to be most concerning. Third, when people think that one mistake is more concerning than another, they most often take the extreme position: the mistake is *clearly* more serious than the other.

This study also deepens our understanding of why some find one of the mistakes more concerning than the other. Having *welfare chauvinistic sentiments* (the welfare state is for natives and only to a lesser degree for immigrants) strongly associate with being averse to false positives. Having *nativist sentiments* (immigrants pose a threat to cultural homogeneity) also associate with how people trade off the two mistakes: The more people harbor nativist sentiments, the more they are concerned about false positives. Furthermore, we can report that people who have a lenient *notion of citizenship* (foreigners/immigrants should enjoy citizenship rights) tend to have a particularly strong dislike for false negatives. *Political orientation* also strongly associates attitudes toward the two mistakes: People on the right of the political spectrum are more likely than people on the left to believe that false positives represent the most serious mistake.

---

[2] Ramji-Nogales J, Schoenholtz AI and Schrag PG (2007) Refugee Roulette: Disparities in Asylum Adjudication. Stanford Law Review 60(2): 295–412.

Fig. 3. People's attitudes to mistakes in asylum decision-making
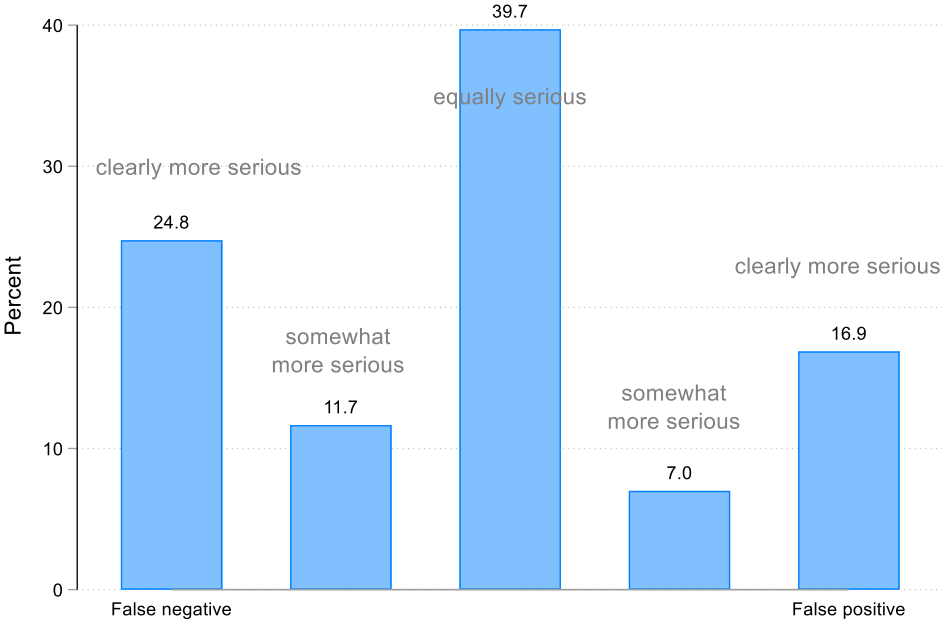
We also study how attitudes toward false positives and false negatives associate with preferences for asylum policy: Amongst other variables that have been found or theorized to affect whether people agree or not with admitting more asylum seekers, do attitudes toward the two mistakes have a separate effect? Before reporting on this issue, we want to highlight that across countries, close to 50 % of the respondents agree – to various extent – that their country should admit more asylum seekers. About 27% disagree; the rest have no opinion.

Fig. 4. Agreement or disagreement with admitting more asylum seekers

6
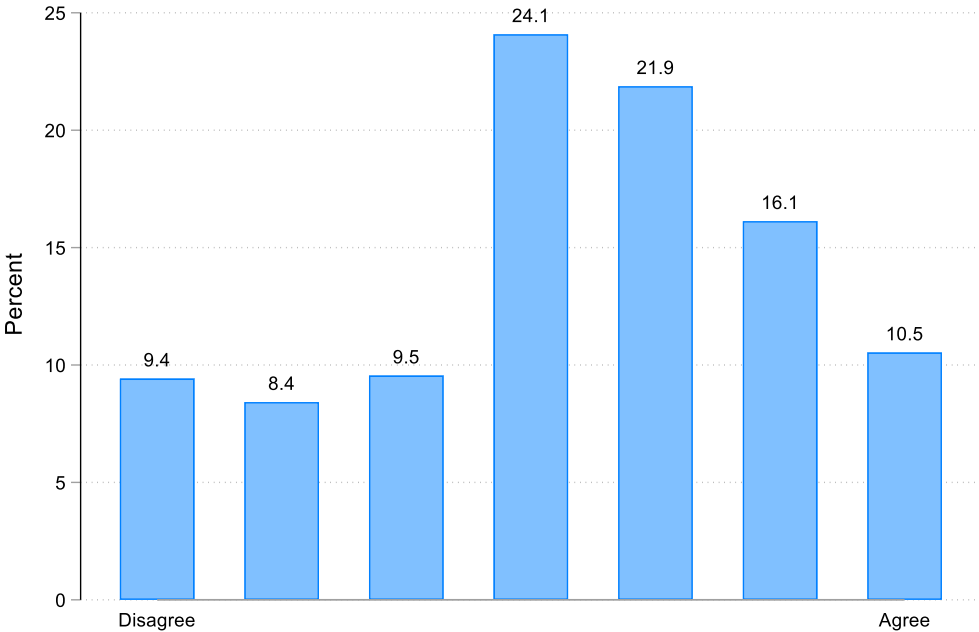
We observe a clear effect of attitudes toward the two mistakes (while controlling for a host of other explanatory variables). People who are false negative averse (who find false negatives most concerning) are substantially more in favor admitting asylum seekers than people who are false positive averse. Conversely, people, who are false positive averse, are substantially less in favor of admitting asylum seekers than the false negative averse.

Overall, this study clarifies that people have a strong preference for which of the two mistakes should be given priority in policy implementation as well as in policy design. Furthermore, it highlights the fundamental importance of peoples' preferences regarding the two mistakes: they are essential for fully understanding attitudes toward asylum policies. Taken together, our findings show that even if people agree on the actual (first-best) rules regarding who should granted asylum, they disagree on what to do in second-best situations when it is not certain whether the asylum seeker satisfy the criteria for being granted asylum. This disagreement may be quite significant because most people have strong second-best fairness preferences.

Furthermore, previous research indicates that media outlets in many western countries tend to portray asylum seekers as having "bogus" claims and therefore as "unworthy" of protection. If a substantive part of the electorate is very averse to false positives, this perception of many bogus claims can sway them to prefer stricter asylum policies, without, however, altering their support for the principles underlying international protection. In other words, citizens may simultaneously be concerned by possible abuses of national asylum systems (i.e., false positives) *and* support protection of those genuinely fearing for their lives.

Study 3: Support for supranationally coordinated international refugee protection

Brief background:
The Global Refugee Compact and the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum aim to move the implementation of the right to international protection clearly beyond the scope of nation states. They encourage states to think about international protection in terms of all available instruments: individual political asylum, relocation, resettlement of UN-recognized refugees, resettlement of refugees recognized by other states, and all other available instruments.

Objective:
The objective of this study is to explain citizens' attitudes to such a comprehensive approach to international protection, which goes beyond the current notion of responsibility sharing through resettlement of quota-refugees, admitting asylum seekers who come to one's border, and giving financial support to over-burdened countries. This makes the global political conflicts about the world order a pertinent, potential factor of people's attitudes to international protection.

Thus, we posit that the global cleavage system affects policy preferences on international protection through two mechanisms: *individuals' position* and their *countries' position* within the global cleavage system. People's vision of what the world order should be like is linked to whether they see the international framework on refugee protection as legitimate and, consequently, whether they support its existence. If the global political cleavages have diffused into the individual level, country positions should not affect policy preferences.

Findings:

Responses to the comprehensive refugee response framework is constructed by measuring support for individual asylum, relocation, resettlement, and accepting responsibility sharing for refugees beyond these categories. Each of these protection tools were measured on a 7-point Likert-scale and subsequently reduced to one dimension through a principal component analysis.

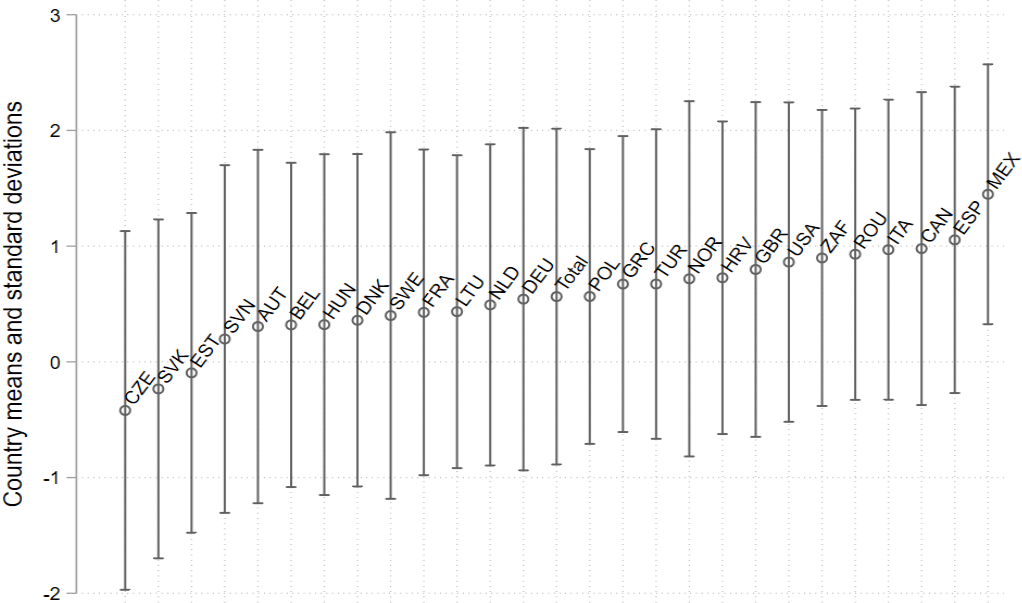**Fig. 5: Support for Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in 26 Countries**

Figure 5 illustrates the country means. The country means are in line with the other studies, where the Visegrád-4 countries reveal the lowest support while the inhabitants of the countries that are the most exposed to immigration exhibit the most support for a collaborative international protection system.

People holding *globalist* and *regionalist* (e.g., Europeanist) views of the world order are more likely to support international protection as an expression of a collective duty to protect people whose state has been unable (or unwilling) to perform its own protection obligation. Because the latter has failed to fulfil its duty, globalists and regionalists respectively consider that the responsibility is incumbent on either the international community or regional organizations (such as the European Union or the African Union). Conversely, people holding *nation-statist* (intergovernmentalist) view of the world order are more likely to deny their country's responsibility in the matter; they favour preserving control over their state's sovereignty over protecting people fleeing their country. Globalists, regionalists, nation-statists, and populists are the four main ideological groups in the global cleavage system that are competing to shape the world order. They are concerned with the territorial dimension of the world order, and they are identified with respect to how much they are willing to allow the global, regional, national, and local political actors and citizens to have a say in politics.

The same logic also applies to the economic dimension of the global cleavage system – that is, personal characteristics that indicate whether a person is a winner or loser of globalization. People's *attitude to access to welfare benefits* for others than the citizens, e.g., refugees, trump their openness towards international protection. Those who don't want to grant welfare benefits to refugees oppose the comprehensive refugee response framework. People with *migrant background* tend to give less support to the idea of a globally governed refugee protection system than others.

Individual level cultural indicators like *nativist sentiments*, *humanitarian sentiments*, and whether people have an *inclusive notion of citizenship* also affect attitudes to international protection. Nativism, humanitarianism, and inclusive versus exclusive citizenship notions constitute the cultural dimension of the global cleavage system. While people with higher degrees of humanitarianism and inclusive citizenship are more likely to support the international refugee protection system, people with nativist sentiments are less likely to do so.

Conclusively, *individuals' ideological position within the global cleavage system* is the main explanation of people's support for the UN's comprehensive refugee response framework. In addition, some individual level variables that had proven significant in earlier studies emerge as viable explanations also in our study – such as *perceived migration pressure*, *salience of the migration issue*, *trust in local authorities and aid NGOs*, *consuming traditional media rather than social media*, *position on the left-right ideological scale*, and *age*. However, the cleavage variables mentioned above explain a much larger share of the variation in people's attitudes.

The findings also have a high policy relevance. In any democratic society, the legitimacy of government policy relies on the citizens' consent. Concerning international refugee protection, governments are wedged between the public opinion and their international commitments. This is especially the case now as the legitimacy of the global institutions and international conventions on refugee protection and human rights is questioned increasingly more. It might seem reasonable to believe such controversies may be resolved through rational political debates and democratic processes within individual countries. However, this may no longer be possible to the same extent as before, due to pervasive political globalization. Those who endeavor to engage in debates about refugee protection to promote and defend certain views must now have to address and appeal to transnational ideological groups operating in global arenas. That is, the task is now more challenging and complicated than before as it requires both an in-depth knowledge of the global political landscape and a know-how of how to strategically navigate in it to achieve one's policy objectives. This concerns governments, politicians, non-state organizations alike as well as individuals who want to make a change.

Conclusion

In contrast to what many governments seem to argue, there is solid citizen support for the international refugee protection system, and particularly support for a comprehensive refugee response framework that is coordinated globally. Therefore, among our 26 countries—except for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovakia and, to some extent, Hungary—public opinion is mature to accept the different policy instruments like relocation, resettlement, individual political asylum, and globally coordinated responsibility-sharing mechanisms like a comprehensive refugee response framework, which are introduced by the UN Global Compact for Refugees and the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

It should be underlined that the determinants of these positive attitudes are a complex set of factors that are very difficult to do anything with through national policymaking: *nativist sentiments, welfare chauvinism*, *sociotropic concerns, notions of citizenship, political orientation*, and *individuals' position within the global cleavage system.* These factors are known to be results of macro-historical processes of state and nation building as well as the European integration and globalization processes. Therefore, any attempt to change attitudes to international protection in any direction requires a significantly long time-perspective. This said, the current public opinion in the majority of our 26 countries is in favour of the international refugee protection system with expanded inter-state collaboration and global responsibility sharing mechanisms. Judging from the long-term aspect of the predictors of public opinion, this pattern is not likely to change in a foreseeable future.

For a more in-depth understanding of the results presented here, please refer to the research working papers and academic articles listed below. They will be available at:

Publications - PROTECT The Right to International Protection (uib.no)

Cappelen C., Sicakkan H.G. and Van Wolleghem P.G. (2022) The trade-off between admitting and paying. An experimental analysis of people's attitudes toward responsibility-sharing in refugee issues. Protect Working Paper series. Soon to be available.

Cappelen C., Sicakkan H.G. and Van Wolleghem P.G. (2022) The Trade-off Between False Negatives and False Positives in Asylum Policies. Protect Working Paper series. Soon to be available.

Cappelen C., Sicakkan H.G. and Van Wolleghem P.G. (2023) The trade-off between admitting and paying: Experimental evidence on attitudes towards asylum responsibility sharing. European Union Politics. Soon to be available.

Sicakkan H.G. and Van Wolleghem P.G. (2022) Political globalization and citizens' support for international Refugee protection. Protect Working Paper series. Soon to be available.