To Share or Not to Share Responsibility? Finnish Refugee Policy and the Hesitant Support for a Common European Asylum System

Östen Wahlbeck


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2018.1468048

© 2018 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC © Östen Wahlbeck

Published online: 07 Jun 2018.

Article views: 1076

View Crossmark data
To Share or Not to Share Responsibility? Finnish Refugee Policy and the Hesitant Support for a Common European Asylum System

Östen Wahlbeck
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT
This article outlines the policy of the Finnish government in relation to the development of a Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Finland has traditionally displayed a strong commitment to international cooperation. Yet, during the European so-called refugee crisis, when Finland experienced a 10-fold increase in the number of asylum seekers, some politicians hesitated to support the decision to relocate asylum seekers within the European Union. The article contributes to the analysis of Europeanization by describing how a Eurosceptic opposition to EU asylum policy can also emerge in member states that have an interest in supporting common asylum policies.

KEYWORDS
Asylum policy; Europeanization; Finland; European Union; refugee crisis; relocation; resettlement; solidarity

Introduction

Finland has a long history of supporting international cooperation in the area of refugee protection. Its commitment to international agreements was tested in 2015 when the country experienced a 10-fold increase in the number of asylum seekers. Despite some challenges, the government tried to follow its international legal obligations and did not close its borders in 2015. However, the Finnish government showed some political hesitation to support the decision to relocate asylum seekers within the European Union. This hesitation was somewhat surprising since the country has usually displayed a strong commitment to both international and EU cooperation in asylum policy. Furthermore, participating in the sharing of responsibility with other EU member states would seem to be in the interest of the country with the EU’s longest external border. This article outlines the political developments in Finland that provides an explanation of the asylum policy of the Finnish government during the European so-called refugee crisis beginning in...
2015. This “crisis” was primarily a political crisis shaped by the failure of the EU to advance a common policy. A specific focus of the analysis is the Finnish position on the development of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The article argues that the wish of a member state to control migration can, paradoxically, explain both a commitment to international cooperation as well as a hesitation to support EU-wide solutions in asylum policies. The argument is based on an analysis of official documents and public statements by the Government of Finland and its Ministers.

With a population of 5.5 million, Finland is one of the smaller countries in the EU, which Finland joined in 1995. The number of asylum seekers had until the year 2015 been low in comparison to the larger numbers in neighboring Scandinavian countries. The low number can, at least partly, be explained by the northernmost geographical location of the country in Europe. Direct flight connections from conflict areas are few and the eastern border of the country tends to be tightly guarded by Russia. Thus, the arrival of 32,746 asylum seekers in 2015 was something that had not been experienced before. Although the number of refugees was small by international comparison, asylum policy became a key political issue in Finland in 2015.

As a small country, Finland has had a tendency to emphasize the role of international law and agreements in its formulation of international policies, including asylum policies. In 1968, Finland acceded to both the Refugee Convention and the Protocol, and Finland has also been a significant contributor to the budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Another aspect of the international co-operation has been the early introduction of an annual quota for refugee resettlement. The country is part of the Schengen area and has, in general, albeit with some hesitation that will be explained in this article, supported a Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The CEAS has not in itself fundamentally changed Finnish asylum policies; the changes in recent years seem to be related to other factors. As I describe later in this article, to the extent that politicians in Finland have made reference to the CEAS, it has been used a tool to defend the introduction of more restrictive asylum policies.

This article will first give a general overview of the influx of refugees to Finland and the refugee policies of the country. This will lay out a framework for the analysis of the government statements and policies in relation to the CEAS and the European refugee situation in 2015. The aim is to provide a contextualized explanation of why the Finnish government hesitated to support the EU decision on a relocation of asylum seekers, but still was one of the few member states that implemented the decision efficiently.

**The Europeanization of refugee and asylum policies**

My theoretical framework builds upon the theory of Europeanization in the context of refugee and asylum policies. Europeanization can be seen as a process whereby domestic policy areas become increasingly subject to European
policymaking (Börzel, 2002). The process may include institutions, policies, discourses, and ideas (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003). In this article the focus is on Finnish domestic policies in relation to the development of EU asylum policies. Thus, the process of Europeanization is studied as it is reflected in the policies of a member state in relation to specific political and legal changes of the European Union. Furthermore, the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 provides the background for this analysis, since in times of political crisis the strengths and limits of Europeanization have been tested (cf. Triandafyllidou, 2014).

Europeanization can be studied both in the “uploading” of policy preferences by member states to the EU level and in the “downloading” of EU regulations to the national level (Börzel, 2002; Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003). Research also commonly differentiates between “soft” and “hard” processes of Europeanization. Soft Europeanization is a slow process often supported by national politicians, while hard Europeanization, for example a top-down implementation of regulations, is more likely to meet criticism among national politicians. Thus, Europeanization has an interactive character that also may involve resistance to and a rejection of EU discourses or policies (Triandafyllidou, 2014). This article will identify diverging processes of both soft and hard Europeanization and will outline how Finnish government policies have developed over time.

An example of a reaction to Europeanization can be found in the political reactions to a sharing of responsibility among EU member states in the area of asylum. The resistance to a compulsory refugee quota system within the EU shows how populist parties and politicians may mobilize a resistance to a hard Europeanization (cf. Börzel, 2016). Although a soft Europeanization in the form of a harmonization of asylum policies has been widely supported by member states, a compulsory quota system has met strong opposition (Zaun, 2017, 2018). The politicization of refugee policy in many member states has influenced the positions taken by governments at the EU level. Explicitly building on the perspective of liberal intergovernmentalism, Natascha Zaun (2018) argues that a member state’s position on a refugee quota system is related to the number of asylum-seekers and the ability of the state to control its external borders. Furthermore, national electorates mobilized by right-wing populist parties may significantly influence positions taken by governments at the EU level (Börzel, 2016; Thielemann & Zaun, 2018; Zaun, 2018). Previous studies on government positions vis-a-vis responsibility sharing have described the explicit opposition to a refugee quota system among East European countries (e.g. Börzel, 2016; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Nancheva, 2015; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018). This article analyses a less-studied member state and shows that populist sentiments also may influence the position of a northern member state with a long history of supporting international cooperation in the area of asylum and resettlement. By doing this, the article significantly broadens the analysis of the challenges facing the development of the CEAS.
Methods

This article analyses explicit statements of the Finnish government in relation to key political questions in the development of the CEAS. I analyse the position of the government as it is expressed in the official response to the European Commission in 2007, in the official Government Programs since 2007, and in official press releases published by the Ministry of the Interior in 2015–2017. The analysis is limited to statements concerning the process of the creation of the CEAS, but I also include statements concerning two key political developments during the so-called refugee crisis, which are fundamental for the future of the CEAS. Firstly, statements concerning the proposals for an introduction of a quota system for asylum seekers in the EU, and secondly, statements concerning the Finnish national policies and legal amendments introduced by the government “to control” the increased number of asylum seekers in Finland in 2015.

Refugees and asylum seekers in Finland

Finland has developed its refugee reception policy within the framework of its traditional Nordic welfare state policies. The resettlement of what are known as quota refugees, selected in cooperation with the UNHCR, began in 1979, and a group of Chilean refugees had been resettled already in 1973–1974. Thus, the country has a relatively long history of resettlement policies, which have been largely taken care of by the extensive public sector (Martikainen, Valtonen, & Wahlbeck, 2012). Therefore, issues relating to refugee reception and resettlement are primarily perceived as welfare state issues. In practice, the refugee resettlement and immigrant integration policies are implemented by the municipalities. Rights and services in Finland generally tend to be connected to whether you are a permanent resident of the country or not. All immigrants are equally covered by the Finnish social security system if they intend to live permanently in Finland. Refugees are considered to be settling permanently when they move to Finland as quota refugees, or asylum seekers who have been granted a residence permit valid for at least 12 months. The extensive welfare system based on universalism has been argued to be one of the most important inclusion mechanisms, as the basic accessibility to benefits and services reinforces wide participation in other areas of society (Martikainen et al., 2012). Yet, membership in the welfare state has not of itself opened the doors to the labor market. The unemployment rate of immigrants tends to be three times as high as among the total population in Finland. The employment rate among nationality groups with a large proportion of refugees tends to be particularly low (Sarvimäki, 2017). Thus, the integration of refugees into the Finnish labor market has been difficult, although the resettlement programs include extensive language instruction and labor market training (Martikainen et al., 2012).

Although the number of refugees have been small by international comparison, notable numbers have arrived in Finland within the framework of the organized resettlement programs. Under its refugee quota, Finland admits persons
recognized as refugees by the UNHCR. During the past few years, the refugee
quota has been 750 and the resettlement of the most vulnerable groups has been
emphasized (Ministry of the Interior, 2017). In addition, Finland has annually had
a few thousand asylum seekers in the 2000s. In 2014, their number stood at 3,651.
The total number of quota refugees, asylum seekers who have received interna-
tional protection, and family re-unification cases has been between 1,000 and
3,000 most years in the 2000s. The year 2015 saw a sharp increase in the number
of asylum seekers when altogether 32,476 arrived in Finland (European Migration
Network [EMN], 2016). Although the increase in the number of asylum seekers
coming to Finland was dramatic, the number reflects the situation in neighboring
Sweden that received about 163,000 asylum seekers the same year. A new develop-
ment in Finland was that most asylum seekers arrived in the northern part of Fin-
land across the border with Sweden. The Finnish border town of Tornio, not far
from the Arctic Circle, was the main point of entry. The increase in the numbers
was especially rapid in the summer and autumn of 2015. Since both the ferry oper-
ators and airlines demanded travel documents, the land border in northern Fin-
land was the only possible access point for many asylum seekers.

Still, the reason why many asylum seekers passed through most of Western
Europe to seek asylum in Europe’s northernmost regions is not immediately clear.
Apparently, information on social media played a large role in the choice of desti-
nation among the asylum seekers. According to many media reports, Finland had
a reputation of providing asylum to Iraqi refugees (e.g. McCrummen, 2015). The
news that Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä offered one of his private houses to
accommodate asylum seekers was reported in international media in early Septem-
ber 2015. The relatively large and well-established community of Iraqis in Finland
probably also played a role. Correspondingly, the absence of a Syrian community
in Finland might explain why Syrians did not arrive in large numbers in Finland,
when at the same time many Syrians were seeking asylum in Sweden. According
to some information, there had been differences among the European countries in
the designation of regions of Iraq as safe, which influenced the choice of destina-
tion among asylum seekers from Iraq. To what extent this information was correct
is not known, and in any case the Finnish Immigration Service quickly declared in
September 2015 that it had updated its guidelines concerning Iraq assessing that
the security situation in many areas had improved (Ministry of the Interior,
2015c).

The arrival of mainly Iraqis and Afghans continued until Sweden introduced
border controls on November 12, 2015 at the border with Denmark. This made it
difficult for asylum seekers to travel to Finland via Sweden. All land routes to Fin-
land were now closed, except for the border with Russia. In 2016, the number of
asylum seekers decreased to 5,657 persons. The Finnish Immigration Service pub-
ishes detailed statistics on asylum applications and decisions. In 2015, most asy-
luum seekers were from Iraq (63%), Afghanistan (16%), Somalia (6%), Syria (2.7%),
Albania (2.3%) and Iran (1.9%). About 40 percent of the decisions made in 2015
were positive, excluding expired applications. This was in line with the proportion of positive decisions in previous years. However, in 2016, when many applications from 2015 were processed, this proportion of positive decisions decreased to about 32 percent (EMN, 2016, 2017).

Finland and the CEAS

Since 1999, the EU has been engaged in a process to create a Common European Asylum System (CEAS), improve the legislative framework within the EU, and harmonize the asylum legislation of the member states. This process is based on the fundamental principle of solidarity among member states, including the sharing of responsibility. Already the 1999 Tampere Council conclusions, when the presidency of the Council was held by Finland, invoked solidarity in building the CEAS. However, the process of creating the CEAS has faced many political challenges. Deficiencies in the system have been widely described in the academic literature, including descriptions of structural differences between North and South and different conceptions of solidarity between East and West (cf. Karageorgiou, 2016; Nancheva, 2015; Trauner, 2016; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018; Zaun, 2017).

In 2007, a Green Paper by the European Commission was the basis for a large public consultation. A European Commission’s Policy Plan on Asylum was presented in 2008, which brought more harmonization to standards of protection by further aligning the EU member states’ asylum legislation. In 2015, the CEAS consisted of three directives, all of which had been recently revised – the Qualification Directive (on who qualifies for asylum and the content of protection granted), the Reception Conditions Directive, and the Asylum Procedures Directive – and two regulations, namely the Dublin Regulation and the Eurodac Regulation on the use of fingerprints of asylum seekers.

During the so-called refugee crisis in the EU in 2015, many member states, for various reasons, did not fulfil all of their international agreements and legal obligations. Countries in southern Europe experienced the largest numbers of refugees, but even the northernmost countries received an unprecedented number of asylum applications. Clearly, a cooperation in asylum issues and a sharing of responsibility is needed within the EU framework. As a small member state, it has been in the interest of Finland to support common European policies and legal harmonization. A recent overview of Finnish EU policy (Raunio & Saari, 2017) showed several Finnish political scientists agreeing that Finland’s policy-making in the EU typically has been pragmatic and compromise-seeking (although the European debt crisis constituted an exception). Because the country is situated at the external border of both the European Union and the Schengen area, with the arrival of asylum seekers across the 1,340-km land border with Russia always possible, an agreed sharing of responsibility would seem to be in the interest of the country. As I explain in this article, Finland has supported a common European asylum system, but somewhat surprisingly did fully not do so in 2015.
The position of Finland in relation to the CEAS was outlined in the responses in 2007 to the questions posed in the Commission’s Green Paper on the future CEAS (Ministry of the Interior, 2007). In this response, some of the priorities that are still a key to understanding Finnish refugee policies, were explicitly laid out. According to the response, Finland supported and aimed to actively promote the CEAS and placed emphasis on cooperation with the UNHCR and other international organizations as well as academia, considering it important that the harmonization process should be as open and transparent as possible. Finland also stressed the importance of the determination of a genuinely common harmonization target, supported harmonization that would be as extensive as possible, and was prepared to reassess its national solutions to create the CEAS. Furthermore, Finland found that the harmonization must be based on the Geneva Convention and described its aims as a fair asylum system that guarantees a high level of legal certainty based on individual processing. However, Finland also had specific priorities concerning reception conditions, the aim being that “the beneficiaries of international protection and other persons are integrated in the same manner that is as uniform as possible, and the rights granted and services provided to them are mainly in line with the rights granted and services provided to other residents of the country” (Ministry of the Interior, 2007, p. 1–2). I find that this quotation aptly reflects the Nordic welfare state system of Finland, which is based on the universal provision of services by the state. This emphasis on a uniform provision of rights and services was actually repeated several times in the response, which indicates the priority this had for the Finnish government.

Interesting to note in the above mentioned response is also the strong emphasis on resettlement, which probably reflects the country’s long history of resettlement of quota refugees and a general wish to control immigration: Already in the introduction of the response this was explicitly stated: “The promotion of resettlement in the Union is Finland’s priority” (Ministry of the Interior, 2007, p. 2). Even more interesting to note is the explanation that Finland found necessary to add: “However, it is important that resettlement is not confused with situations in which the responsibility for the examination of asylum applications is shared within the EU or in which costs are distributed between Member States in the name of solidarity” (Ministry of the Interior, 2007, p. 2). The quotation highlights the reluctance to support an automatic sharing of responsibility within the EU, a question that several years later still constituted a difficult issue in Finnish domestic politics.

The position of the Finnish government in relation to the creating of the CEAS can be understood as part of a process of (soft) Europeanization. In 2007, the general process to create the CEAS was supported by Finland and was seen positively as an opportunity to upload Finnish policies and priorities to the EU level. Apparently, the country was not completely unsuccessful in this. In an analysis of the political process to create the CEAS, Zaun (2017) count Finland as one among the “medium regulating states” (with low numbers of asylum seekers, but a high level
of administrative capacity) that were able to significantly influence the directives of the CEAS.

The reply that Finland gave in 2007 refers to the first phase of the CEAS, and the system itself has gone through various legal developments and political crises since the reply was given. In any case, much suggests that Finland in general has not only implemented but also largely followed the EU directives. The Finnish national contact point of the European Migration Network (EMN) annually reports on Finnish legal developments in relation to the CEAS (EMN, 2015, 2016, 2017). The recast Qualification Directive was implemented in Finland by amendments that entered into force on July 1, 2014. According to the EMN report, most of the changes to the Directive did not require amendments to the Finnish legislation (EMN, 2015, p. 34). Legislative amendments for the implementation of the recast Asylum Procedures Directive and Reception Conditions Directive came into force on July 1, 2015. According to the EMN report, “the basic characteristics of the Finnish asylum and reception system were already in line with the requirements stipulated by the directives to begin with. Nevertheless, amendments were made to the Aliens Act to improve the clarity and transparency of the asylum system and promote the equal treatment of applicants for international protection” (EMN, 2015, p. 34; cf. 2016, p. 33). The conclusion that Finland has implemented the directives finds support in the documents of the European Commission, since Finland is seldom specifically mentioned when issues and challenges are discussed. For example, Finland did not feature among the 40 infringement decisions against 19 member states that were issued on September 23, 2015 (European Commission, 2015).

**Finnish government policy in 2015**

The Finnish asylum policy in 2015 has to be understood in light of the fact that a brand-new coalition government was formed in 2015, which includes the agrarian Centre Party, the Eurosceptic and populist (True) Finns Party and the conservative National Coalition Party. Broad coalition governments are common in Finland, and traditionally a change of government does not involve dramatic changes in policy. Still, this new political constellation in Finnish politics made it necessary for the government to internally negotiate new political compromises on immigration, refugee, and EU policy issues. The Finns Party included a vociferous so called “immigration-critical” faction and the party demanded restrictive immigration policies in general. The relatively strong electoral support of the party had already in the 2011 Parliamentary election capitalized on an explicit nationalist and Eurosceptic rhetoric. During the election campaign in early 2015, the Finns Party explicitly opposed the policy of so-called “burden sharing” within the EU. This opposition continued in the government and the party was able to include its position in the official government program that was agreed on in early 2015. The program explicitly states that the “relocation of asylum seekers within the EU should
be based on the voluntary participation of Member States” (Government of Finland, 2015, p. 36), and unlike previous government programs it did not mention a support for a common EU asylum and immigration policy. As the leader of the Finns Party, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Timo Soini declared in his blog: “Every state is responsible for the asylum seekers in its own territory. The decision-making power must be in national hands. Decision-making power in migration policy should not be moved to the Commission” (Soini, 2015, translated from Finnish by author). Although policy changes tend to happen relatively slowly in Finland, the new government represented a different line on immigration and asylum from previous Finnish governments.

In 2015, the Finnish government suggested clearly more restrictive asylum policies, which were explicitly presented as a review of asylum legislation to comply with EU decisions. The new policies may have been planned for some time by the parties of the government, but during the perceived “refugee crisis” in the autumn of 2015 it was possible to introduce the legal changes with less political opposition from other parties. The press release of the government declared that “the aim is to bring the Finnish legislation in line with the general requirements laid down in EU legislation” (Ministry of the Interior, 2015a). The number of different types of residence permits was to decrease. Residence permits given on the basis of “humanitarian protection” would be abolished, being based only on Finland’s national decision and not on the Geneva Convention or EU legislation (The Ministry explicitly made reference to the EU Qualifications Directive). Thus, the various compassionate grounds that previously had granted protection to about one percent of the applicants would no longer be valid reason for a residence permit. In the same press release, the Ministry of the Interior (2015a) also made public plans to review the family reunification criteria, “to comply with the EU Family Reunification Directive”. The criteria would now be tightened “in accordance” with the additional requirements to be applied at the national level as decided by the member states, as laid down in the Directive. Thus, the Finnish government explicitly made reference to CEAS Directives in order to promote the introduction of more restrictive asylum policies in 2015. This policy change of the Finnish government can be interpreted as a form of Europeanization supported by national politicians. However, contrary to southern Europe, where the Europeanization of refugee and asylum legislation tend to result in more rights (cf. Triandafyllidou, 2014; Zaun, 2017), the Finnish case shows that a Europeanization of legislation in northern Europe may be used to restrict rights.

When several Nordic countries introduced a range of measures in the autumn of 2015, to control immigration and restrict the right to asylum, including temporary residence permits and stricter family reunification criteria, Minister of the Interior Petteri Orpo (from the National Coalition Party) stated in a press release that “Finland’s approach to migration [is] tight by Nordic standards” (Ministry of the Interior, 2015b). It probably says something about the political climate and public
debate in Finland in 2015 that the Minister found it pertinent to emphasize that Finland was following a policy at least as strict as other Nordic countries.

**The relocation decisions in 2015**

On May 27, 2015, the European Commission made a first proposal for a Council Decision to relocate 40,000 asylum seekers for the benefit of Italy and Greece, which was followed by a decision approved by Home Affairs Ministers on September 22, 2015 to increase the relocation to 120,000 asylum seekers. In May 2015, the EU Commission also proposed a European Resettlement Scheme which was adopted by the Council in July 2015, to resettle 20,000 refugees from outside the EU.

The position of the Finnish government on these decisions reveals both support for, and an unprecedented political hesitation to support, international agreements on asylum issues. The webpage of the Ministry of the Interior (2017) listed contributions by the Finnish government to the “solution of the European refugee crisis”. The Ministry mentioned that Finland participated in operations coordinated by the EU Borders Agency (Frontex) by sending vessels and experts to be deployed in the Mediterranean. Finland also supported countries in southern Europe through the European Asylum Support Office (EASO). The Ministry of the Interior (2017) declared that “Finland [is] fulfilling its responsibility” for both the relocation of asylum seekers and the reception of quota refugees. It is also stated that Finland had accepted its relocation quota as agreed between member states, in relation to the 160,000 asylum seekers to be relocated from Greece and Italy. In addition, the Ministry mentions that “Member States have agreed to resettle 32,772 Syrian refugees from Turkey to EU territory. The procedure is voluntary for Member States. […] Finland, Germany and the Netherlands were the first EU countries to receive Syrian refugees from Turkey” (Ministry of the Interior, 2017).

Although the Ministry in the above quotation declares that Finland has been bearing its share of responsibility for the relocation of asylum seekers, the fact is that for Finland the political decision was not easy to make. The EU relocation decision in September 2015 was decided after voting, 20 member states voted yes, 4 voted no (Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), and Finland was the only member state that abstained from voting. The voting behavior reflects the Finnish government’s hesitation to support a sharing of responsibility decided by the EU. The fact that Finland abstained from voting undoubtedly reflects the domestic political situation of the government, where one of the coalition parties, the Finns Party, explicitly objected to compulsory “burden sharing”. The decision to abstain from voting in September 2015 can be explained as a pragmatic choice to find a balance between the conflicting domestic political opinions fueled by heated public debates in Finland. In a show of Finnish political pragmatism, Minister Orpo explained that Finland, in full accordance with its government program, had raised objections to obligatory relocation quotas, but had supported a
voluntary share of responsibilities (Pettersson, 2015). As this explanation indicates, the Finnish government program, and the importance of the coalition partner the Finns Party, played a role for the voting behavior. Without the Finns Party in government, Finland would probably have followed its traditional pragmatic EU policy and supported the relocation initiative of the EU. In any case, I find that the political hesitation to support the relocation initiatives of the EU was a deviation from Finland’s long-term commitment to support international cooperation in refugee issues. It might also raise the question of whether Finland’s previously mentioned priority to support resettlement still holds true, as proclaimed in the above mentioned Finnish government statements concerning the CEAS in 2007.

The relocation of asylum seekers to Finland began on October 21, 2015, when 50 Eritreans arrived from Italy. Actually, this was one of the first groups to be relocated within the EU, and Finland quickly and efficiently implemented the EU decision, despite the initial hesitation to support it. In contrast, the practical implementation of the scheme was slow among other member states, and some even refused to follow the decisions (Zaun, 2018). In August 2017, only 26,769 asylum seekers had been relocated. Finland stands out with a relocation of 1,951 asylum seekers, surpassed only by Malta and non-EU countries Norway and Liechtenstein, in terms of the proportion relocated in relation to places pledged (European Commission, 2017).

Thus, Finnish policy and its practice of relocation may seem to be contradictory. A compulsory relocation was not supported, but the country still very efficiently implemented the process and did not resist the decision after it had been made. The explanation for this can be found in the way that asylum issues had become politicized in Finland, mainly by populist politicians. Compulsory relocation had become a political issue exemplifying a hard Europeanization that was strongly resisted by Eurosceptic politicians. Before the relocation decision, the issue could be used to mobilize political support for populist and Eurosceptic politics in a domestic context. Following the decision, it was still possible to blame the EU, but no longer possible to use the issue in domestic politics. As Thielemann and Zaun (2018, p. 5) argue, a delegation of political decisions to the EU-level can de-politicize refugee policy-making in order to lower the “temperature” of the domestic debates on asylum and prevent populist parties from exploiting the issue. Following the EU decision, the efficient Finnish reception system and quick relocation of asylum seekers was presented by the Finnish government as a fulfilment of its responsibility and was used as proof of the effectiveness of the government in handling the issue. Indeed, despite some initial challenges because of the numbers involved, the bureaucratic state-led reception system of the affluent Finnish welfare state turned out to be very capable of handling the relocation of asylum seekers. To fully implement the EU relocation decision was regarded positively by politicians. Because of the implementation, the government was in a better position to defend itself against the criticism that the new restrictive asylum policies had met among
the general public, and Finland probably also gained a stronger negotiation position in the EU.

The challenges that the EU relocation scheme met reflects wider challenges faced by the EU to implement its agenda for migration (Trauner, 2016). The problems of member states in implementing EU decisions has increased the distrust of EU decisions among many politicians, and populist parties in Europe have been able to politicize this distrust (cf. Pirro & van Kessel, 2017). In Finland, politicians from all parties frequently complained in the media about the slow implementation of EU decisions and the fact that not all member states had complied with the decisions that had been made. A feeling of distrust of the abilities of the EU to handle the arrival of refugees is therefore evident in political comments, at least since the year 2015. In the populist Finns Party, which was part of the Finnish coalition government until 2017, an explicit Euroscepticism was a central component of the official party program, but a distrust of the EU can also be found among other political parties.

Prime Minister Sipilä had in 2015–2017 repeatedly indicated that an increase of Finland’s refugee quota could be considered as part of a wider international political solution involving refugee resettlement. Yet, an increase of the annual quota of resettled refugees was also a politically difficult issue for the broad coalition government. The government experienced a political crisis and effectively fell in June 2017, when the radical and so called “immigration-critical” faction of the Finns Party took over leadership of the party. The coalition government partners did not find it possible to cooperate with the new leadership. The possibility to agree on EU policy in migration issues was mentioned by all involved party leaders as a key question that led to the fall of the government. At the same time, the Finns party also split, with the old leadership and more than half of the MPs leaving the party. In the end, the Sipilä government continued to govern with the support of a narrow parliamentary majority. All in all, it can be expected that disagreements about asylum policies will continue to feature prominently in the Finnish political landscape.

**Border controls in 2015**

In 2015, the large numbers of asylum seekers in the EU put pressure on the border controls and asylum policies of many member states. In fact, key aspects of EU migration policies and the CEAS were not followed in most member states (e.g. Börzel, 2016; European Commission, 2015). Because of this partial breakdown of the system, many member states re-introduced national border controls and restricted the movement of asylum seekers in various ways. As is well known, 2015 can be characterized as the year when national border controls were re-introduced and the future of the Schengen agreement on free movement became uncertain.

In Finland, the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers across the border from Sweden also fueled the public debates about border controls. The anti-
immigration movement “Close the Borders” (Rajat kiinni) gathered vociferous anti-immigration activists and far-right radicals in small local rallies across the country, often followed by counter-demonstrations by anti-racist activists. However, closing the border between Finland and Sweden was not seriously argued by any of the political parties and never seemed to have been a realistic option in Finland in 2015. The Swedish border in Northern Finland is a political border that for historical, geographical, and cultural reasons has always been relatively open, and from a legal point of view stricter border controls were prevented by both the Schengen agreement and the much older agreement on free movement among the Nordic countries, signed by Finland in 1955.

Yet, the Government clearly wished to control the arrival of asylum seekers, and on September 17, 2015, it decided to set up a registration center in the border town of Tornio (Torniä, adjoining the Swedish town of Haparanda). This center was a brand new administrative solution to handle the initial reception of asylum seekers, to respond to the unprecedented large number of applicants arriving across the border from Sweden. According to Minister Orpo, the explicit aim of the center was to have all asylum seekers registered in a controlled manner, because the situation was “out of control” (YLE, 2015). The center was operational until March 2016. Asylum seekers were obliged to stay at the center during the registration, for a maximum of 2–7 days. After registration, they were transferred to reception centers. The registration center in Tornio eased the workload at the local police stations, which previously had taken care of registration. There had been demanding humanitarian situations outside some of the local police stations, including children and elderly people spending long periods of time in queues without suitable clothes for the Finnish climate and relying only on support from Finnish volunteers.

As outlined above, the political and administrative concern of the Finnish government in relation to the reception of asylum seekers was explicitly focused on the control of migration across the border. Humanitarian considerations are not given the same emphasis as administrative concerns in the political statements. Why did the Finnish authorities feel a strong need to strictly control the arrival of asylum seekers, and why did the Finnish politicians talk about administrative solutions rather than humanitarian considerations in 2015? To understand this, we need to keep in mind the highly bureaucratic and state-led reception and resettlement system in Finland, which is organized within the framework of the advanced welfare state policies of the country. The Finnish refugee policies have been guided by a focus on permanent resettlement rather than the short-term and temporary protection of refugees. Thus, the authorities have been accustomed to an orderly reception of small numbers of refugees.

A topical question was how the Finnish welfare state would adapt and respond to the increase and diversification of immigration. Although the initial reception could be organized, the question was how both the relatively bureaucratic integration services systems and the local municipalities would cope with the challenges
that an increase in the numbers would entail. Ultimately, resettlement and integration seemed to constitute the concerns, not reception. These concerns are mentioned in the statements and policies of the government, and can also explain why many Finnish politicians emphasized the need to control migration, and why they supported long-term solutions and wished to avoid temporary solutions in the context of EU asylum policies. The expression of these concerns was not limited to populist politicians and the emphasis on the need for national control of migration was strengthened by the failure of the EU to provide coherent and sustainable asylum policies. From this perspective, the general process of a Europeanization of refugee policy seems to have come to a halt in Finland in 2015. At least at a discursive level there are indications of a re-nationalization of policies and tightened control of the national borders. The EU was not seen as providing a solution, and some politicians considered the EU part of the problem. The Finnish situation in terms of a re-nationalization of policies may not have been much different from the situation in other European countries in 2015. Yet, considering the long-term Finnish commitment to international and supranational cooperation in asylum issues, the situation in 2015 represents a clear break in the long-term development of Finnish refugee policies. Although the politicization of migration by populist parties can explain some of the developments in EU policy-making (cf. Börzel, 2016), the Finnish political debates about national solutions indicate that the political challenges facing the CEAS may also involve a much broader political skepticism of the ability of the EU to implement its policies.

**Conclusion**

The number of asylum seekers has previously not been large in Finland, and the arrival of 32,476 asylum seekers in 2015 entailed an almost 10-fold increase in the numbers. Although this created a challenge, the initial reception was organized according to existing laws and international agreements and the country did not close its borders in 2015. To understand both the asylum policy and the resettlement policies of Finland, it is useful to notice that Finland is a Nordic welfare state with a large public sector and a developed bureaucracy. This has also made it possible to provide a range of services to both asylum seekers and refugees. The country has a relatively long history of resettlement of refugees in cooperation with the UNHCR. Still, the services and resettlement programs have been planned for a relatively small number of refugees. As a Nordic welfare state with a relatively bureaucratic system of reception and resettlement, it is not surprising to find that Finland put a priority on orderly immigration and the control of migration. As outlined in this paper, the Finnish government explicitly stressed the need to control the movement of asylum seekers, both at the borders of the EU, within the EU, and within the country. The registration center in Tornio was an administrative solution by the government explicitly motivated by a need to control the movement of people, rather than by humanitarian reasons.
Finland has strongly supported the harmonization of laws and policies of the CEAS. Major legal changes have not been necessary in Finland as part of the legal harmonization prescribed by the CEAS. The legal framework and general policies concerning refugees and asylum were already in place before the CEAS. Rather, the Finnish government made use of the CEAS directives to argue for more restrictive asylum laws in 2015. In general, the new government formed in 2015 displayed a more restrictive policy than earlier governments. The government abolished the nationally defined residence permit based on humanitarian reasons, introduced stricter criteria for family re-unification, and justified these changes with explicit references to the minimum criteria of the EU legislation. Thus, in this case, the harmonization supported a restriction of rights.

The reluctance that the government showed concerning the decision to relocate asylum seekers within the EU (although fully implementing it “voluntarily”) constituted a deviation from previous EU policy of the country. With a long history of commitment to resettlement in cooperation with the UNCHR, this political reluctance to take part in international solutions is a departure also from previous refugee policies of the country. This reluctance can be understood in relation to the domestic political situation in Finland, where the government had to navigate both conflicting political views within the government as well as heated public debates about how to react to the unprecedented large numbers of asylum seekers. As in many other member states, the politicization of refugee issues by a populist party influenced the position of the government at the EU level (cf. Börzel, 2016; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Zaun, 2018). Of course, the rationale behind the Finnish opposition to a compulsory relocation of asylum seekers can be questioned. The large number of asylum seekers in 2015 and the possibility of large numbers arriving across the Russian border, suggests that it could be in the interest of Finland to support a sharing of responsibility among EU member states. I find it plausible that the opposition to compulsory relocation quotas among some Finnish politicians can be explained by their belief that the possibility to control, and if necessary restrict, immigration will be easier if decision-making power rests with the member state and not the EU. This distrust of the EU, particularly among populist politicians, was in this case supported by a general disbelief in EU’s ability to find sustainable solutions to asylum issues as well as its relatively poor record in implementing previous decisions. Thus, an emphasis on the need to control migration and a political distrust of the EU in general together contributed to the unprecedented Finnish hesitation to support EU-wide solutions to asylum issues in 2015. My findings support the argument presented by Zaun (2018), building on liberal intergovernmentalism, that understanding dynamics at the national level is crucial to understanding EU asylum politics. Yet, the case of Finland indicates that national positions may be the outcome of political compromises and related to larger processes of Europeanization (cf. Triandafyllidou, 2014). Thus, the position taken on a refugee quota system is not necessarily directly related to the number of asylum seekers and the ability of the state to control their external borders, as
suggested by Zaun (2018, p. 45). The European so-called refugee crisis provides plenty of examples of a re-nationalization of policies of member states and of political opposition to a Europeanization of asylum policy (cf. Börzel, 2016; Nancheva, 2015; Trauner, 2016; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018; Zaun, 2018). This is a well-known development, but the case of Finland suggests that support for national policies may emerge even in situations when it would seem to be in the interest of the state to support an EU-wide sharing of responsibility. Thus, by focusing on a less studied member state, this article significantly broadens the analysis of the political challenges facing the development of the CEAS. The case of Finland suggests that political challenges may also emerge in northern welfare states that previously have strongly supported the development of common asylum and refugee policies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the members of the Migration and Diaspora Studies Research Group (MIDI) at the University of Helsinki for constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References


Soini, T. (2015). Päättövalta ei pidä antaa kommissiolle [Decision-making power should not be handed to the Commission]. Available at: http://timosoini.fi/


