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Germany's 2015 Open-Door Refugee Policy and Its Impact on the European Union's Migration Decisions

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A. RESUMEN

Esta investigación analiza cómo la política de puertas abiertas de Alemania en 2015 influyó en la toma de decisiones sobre migración dentro de la Unión Europea (UE). En 2015, Alemania recibió el mayor número de solicitudes de asilo en Europa y promovió un enfoque humanitario basado en la solidaridad y la responsabilidad compartida entre los Estados miembros. La pregunta central de la investigación es si esta política fortaleció el liderazgo de Alemania en la gobernanza migratoria de la UE. La hipótesis propone que Alemania incrementó su influencia moral y política al presentar la protección de los refugiados como un deber europeo colectivo, aunque dicho liderazgo estuvo limitado por la resistencia de varios Estados miembros.

El estudio utiliza un enfoque de métodos mixtos, combinando análisis documental cualitativo con datos cuantitativos básicos. La evidencia cualitativa proviene de discursos gubernamentales, comunicaciones oficiales de la UE, debates del Parlamento Europeo y documentos de política pública. Los datos cuantitativos incluyen cifras de solicitudes de asilo y de distribución de refugiados de 2015 obtenidas de Eurostat y ACNUR.

Los resultados muestran que Alemania influyó en el tono y las prioridades del debate migratorio en la UE al promover un discurso humanitario basado en valores europeos. Sin embargo, también se observa una fuerte resistencia por parte de países de Europa Central y Oriental, que rechazaron las cuotas obligatorias de reubicación. Esta resistencia limitó la capacidad de Alemania para convertir su liderazgo moral en una respuesta política unificada.

En conjunto, el estudio sugiere que los valores humanitarios pueden funcionar como herramienta de influencia política, pero su efectividad depende del apoyo de los demás Estados. La política alemana fortaleció su imagen como líder moral, pero también reveló los límites de la solidaridad en la UE. Investigaciones futuras podrían analizar cómo estos debates influyeron en las reformas posteriores del sistema de asilo y si estrategias similares podrían aplicarse en futuras crisis migratorias.

Palabras clave: Alemania, Unión Europea, crisis migratoria, solidaridad, liderazgo, política humanitaria.

ABSTRACT

This research examines how Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy influenced decision-making on migration within the European Union (EU). During the 2015 refugee crisis, Germany received the largest number of asylum applications in Europe and promoted a humanitarian approach based on solidarity and shared responsibility among EU member states. The main research question is whether this policy strengthened Germany's leadership in EU migration governance. The hypothesis suggests that Germany increased its political and moral influence in EU negotiations by presenting refugee protection as a common European duty, although this leadership was limited by member state resistance. The study applies a mixed-method approach, using documentary, qualitative document analysis and basic quantitative data. The qualitative evidence comes from government speeches, official EU communications, and policy documents. Quantitative information includes asylum application statistics and refugee distribution figures from 2015. Results indicate that Germany successfully shaped the language and priorities of EU migration debates by encouraging a more humanitarian narrative.

However, several EU states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, rejected mandatory relocation quotas, reducing Germany's ability to turn its ideas into a unified EU policy. These findings suggest that humanitarian values can function as a foreign policy tool, but their effectiveness depends on broad political support within the EU. The study concludes that Germany's open-door policy contributed to a more visible form of a moral leadership in Europe, while also revealing the limits of solidarity in EU migration governance. Future research could explore how these debates affected later reforms of the EU asylum system and whether similar leadership strategies could be applied in other migration crises.

Keywords: Germany, refugees, European Union, migration policy, solidarity, leadership

B. Introduction

Migration governance has become one of the most debated issues in the European Union (EU), especially since the 2015 refugee crisis, when more than one million people arrived in Europe seeking protection from war, political persecution, and humanitarian emergencies. During this period, Germany adopted what became known as an "open-door refugee policy," allowing large numbers of asylum seekers to enter and request international protection. This decision, supported publicly by the Chancellor Angela Merkel, positioned Germany at the center of European and global discussions on how democratic states should respond to forced migration. The event remains relevant today, not only because EU governments continue debating how to reform the common asylum system, but also because the crisis significantly influenced the political landscape of Europe, contributing to rising party polarization, new migration agreements, and shifting ideas about European solidarity.

The research problem guiding this study focuses on how Germany's political leadership within the European Union. Although migration has long been shared concern among EU states, the 2015 crisis introduced new tensions between humanitarian obligations and national border control priorities. Some EU countries supported Germany's approach, arguing that the Union has a moral responsibility to protect refugees, while others rejected mandatory relocation quotas and prioritized strict border management. This disagreement generated institutional and political divisions that continue to affect EU reform efforts. Therefore, the central research question of this study is: Did Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy increases its influence on European Union migration decision-making?

Existing research offers important insights but remains incomplete in explaining the political consequences of Germany's policy. Several studies explore the humanitarian and legal implications of the crisis, demonstrating how EU institutions struggled to develop a coordinated response. Others scholars examine the rise of anti-immigration parties and the resistance of countries such as Hungary and Poland toward refugee relocation mechanisms. However, there is limited research on whether Germany's political and moral arguments translated into stronger leadership within the EU negotiations. Much of the current literature focuses either on the crisis's social impact or on the failures of EU burden-sharing, leaving a significant gap regarding how individual member states shape migration governance through discourse and moral persuasion. This study seeks to contribute to the discussion by examining Germany's attempt to influence EU migration policy using humanitarian narratives and shared responsibility principles.

The general objective of this research is to analyze the extent to which Germany's open-door refugee policy affected its leadership role in the EU. The specific objectives are: to identify the humanitarian and political arguments used by German officials in EU discussions; to examine how other EU member states responded to Germany's proposals for refugee distribution and asylum reform; and to assess whether Germany's approach resulted in lasting changes to EU migration governance. By addressing these objectives, the study provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between national migration decisions and regional cooperation.

The justification for this research lies in the increasing importance of migration as a global political issue and the need to understand how states use humanitarian values in international negotiations. Germany's policy became a landmark case for examining the limits and possibilities of leadership in the EU, a political space characterized by both cooperation and national sovereignty. Studying this case can improve our understanding of how moral arguments interact with strategic interests in international relations. Additionally, the topic is relevant for policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors as the EU continues working on long-term reforms to address future displacement and migration flows. The insights from this research may also be useful for other regions facing similar challenges and seeking mechanisms for shared responsibility. This study also contributes to the broader field of international relations by showing how states can exercise influence through narratives and moral commitments, not only through economic or military power. Germany attempted to frame its policy as a European responsibility rather than a national choice, promoting solidarity as a fundamental value of the

EU. Understanding this strategy is valuable for examining how political leadership operates in complex regional organizations.

The remainder of this research paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts and academic debates most relevant to this study, including humanitarian leadership, EU solidarity, and the tensions between moral responsibility and national sovereignty. Section 3 explains the methodological approach, describing the mixed-method design, the use of documentary and qualitative analysis, and the limited quantitative data included for context. Section 4 presents the results of the study, showing how Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy shaped EU debates, influenced institutional responses, and generated divisions among member states. Section 5 provides the discussion, interpreting the meaning of these findings in relation to the existing literature and Germany's role within the EU. Finally, Section 6 offers the main conclusions, summarizing the study's contributions and proposing directions for future research.

C. Literature Review

This literature review examines what scholars and official sources have written about Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy and its impact on the European Union (EU). The purpose is to understand the main academic debates, identify what is already known, and highlight the gaps that still need to be studied. Reviewing past research helps explain the relevance of this topic and clarifies how the present study offers a new contribution to discussions about EU solidarity, crisis governance, and political leadership.

Many scholars agree that Germany played a central role during the 2015 refugee crisis, but they interpret Germany's actions in different ways. Bendel (2019) describes Germany as a country that tried to practice humanitarian leadership, meaning leadership based on moral values such as solidarity, shared responsibility, and human rights. According to Bendel, the German government believed that the EU could only respond to the crisis effectively if all member states worked together. This explains why Germany strongly supported the relocation plan, which asked every EU state to host a specific number of asylum seekers. Bendel's work shows that Germany used a values-based argument to influence EU policy discussions.

Trauner (2016) presents a contrasting interpretation. He argues that Germany's open-door policy revealed major weaknesses in the EU asylum system, particularly the lack of coordination between national governments. While Germany asked other countries to support a common European solution, several member states, especially Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, refused to participate. Trauner explains this behavior using a realist perspective, meaning that many governments acted based on national interests, domestic politics, and concerns about identity rather than shared European values. From this point of view, Germany's moral appeal was not enough to overcome political disagreements within the EU.

Thränhardt (2019) focuses on the effects of the open-door policy inside Germany. He argues that the refugee arrivals affected national politics by increasing social tension, polarizing public opinion, and contributing to the rise of far-right political movements such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD). His study shows how humanitarian decisions can also create domestic challenges. By highlighting the role of identity, fear, and public

narratives, Thränhardt's work is grounded in constructivist ideas, which emphasize how norms and social meanings shape political outcomes.

Other scholars analyze Germany's role at the EU level. Geddes and Scholten (2016) argue that the refugee crisis tested the EU's ability to cooperate and respond collectively. They show that the crisis forced the EU to reconsider its migration rules and placed unusual pressure on member states with fewer resources. Börzel and Risse (2018) add that Germany acted as a "normative power," meaning a country that tries to influence others using values instead of military or economic tools. Their work suggests that Germany attempted to guide the EU by promoting moral principles, even when practical cooperation was difficult. Parkes (2017) agrees that Germany shaped EU debates, arguing that Berlin often set the tone of the conversation, even at moments when other countries resisted. This supports the idea that Germany influenced discourse more than concrete policy outcomes.

Gürkan (2021) analyzes the EU–Turkey deal, which became one of the main political responses to the crisis. His study argues that the EU shifted part of the responsibility to Turkey by paying financial aid and allowing Turkey to keep most refugees. Germany strongly supported this agreement because it balanced humanitarian intentions with a practical solution to reduce irregular arrivals. According to Gürkan, this agreement shows the limits of EU solidarity: the Union struggled to agree internally, so it looked outside for help. Together, these authors agree that Germany influenced the EU debate, but they highlight that Germany's leadership faced strong limits due to political and cultural divisions across Europe.

Several key concepts help explain the academic discussions around Germany's policy and the EU's response. The term open-door policy refers to Germany's choice in 2015 to allow

asylum seekers to enter even if they had passed through another EU country first. This decision was controversial because it suspended parts of the Dublin Regulation. Another key term is solidarity, which describes the idea that EU member states should support each other when facing major challenges. Germany used this concept to justify its position, but other countries also used the word "solidarity" to defend border protection, showing that the meaning of solidarity was not the same for everyone.

The concept of burden-sharing is closely linked to solidarity. It refers to dividing responsibilities fairly among EU countries. Trauner (2016) shows that many governments rejected mandatory burden-sharing, arguing that each state should decide its own migration policies. The concept of Europeanization also appears in the literature. It explains how national decisions influence EU policies and how EU rules influence national politics. Thränhardt (2019) uses this concept to show that Germany's decisions affected EU debates, but EU resistance ultimately limited Germany's influence.

Finally, policy externalization helps explain why the EU and Germany supported the EU–Turkey deal. Externalization means transferring parts of migration management to countries outside the EU. Gürkan (2021) argues that this strategy appeared because EU states could not agree internally, so cooperation with Turkey became a more politically acceptable solution. Together, these concepts help explain the complex relationship between moral leadership, national sovereignty, and EU cooperation.

The existing literature shows that Germany's humanitarian decisions (independent variable) shaped the EU's migration response (dependent variable), but only to a certain degree. According to Bendel (2019), Germany pushed for new EU policies and tried to lead through shared values. Trauner (2016) and Parkes (2017) show that many EU members

refused to follow Germany's call for cooperation, especially on mandatory relocation. Gürkan (2021) connects Germany's leadership to the EU–Turkey deal, showing how moral intentions were transformed into more practical and restrictive policies. Börzel and Risse (2018) conclude that Germany used values to lead, but this leadership only worked when other countries shared the same values or interests.

Even though many studies exist, some gaps remain. First, most research focuses on 2015– 2016 and does not explore long-term effects on later EU reforms, such as the 2020–2023 Migration Pact. Second, many authors analyze government actions but do not examine public opinion, which played an important role in shaping national positions. Third, few studies fully explore the gap between Germany's moral narrative and the EU's final decisions. This research responds to that gap by examining how Germany's humanitarian message interacted with EU institutions and how other member states reacted.

In summary, the academic literature agrees that Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy changed the EU's migration debate. Scholars highlight Germany's moral leadership and its attempt to promote solidarity within the EU. However, the literature also shows strong political resistance, divisions inside the EU, and the limits of values-based leadership. These gaps justify the present study, which investigates how Germany shaped the EU's discourse but struggled to achieve full political cooperation.

D. Research Design and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and documentary approach to examine how Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy influenced its leadership within the European Union (EU). Because the research focuses on political speeches, government documents, and

institutional decisions, not on large statistical datasets, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate. It allows the study to explore how Germany presented its policy in moral and humanitarian terms, how EU institutions responded to this message, and how other member states reacted. A documentary approach also fits this topic well because most of the information about the refugee crisis is recorded in written form, such as EU communications, national statements, agreements, and academic analyses. Although the study is primarily qualitative, a small amount of quantitative data, mainly asylum application numbers, is included to help show the scale of the crisis and connect the documentary evidence to real-world migration patterns.

The study uses a descriptive and interpretive case study design. It focuses on a single case: Germany's open-door policy during 2015 and 2016. This design allows the research to explore the case in depth instead of comparing many cases superficially. Within this case, two major EU policy actions are especially important: the EU relocation plan introduced in 2015 and the EU–Turkey Statement from 2016. Both actions were strongly influenced by Germany's leadership, and examining them helps explain how Germany shaped the EU's agenda. The descriptive component of the research explains what Germany, EU institutions, and member states said and did during the crisis. The interpretive component explores what these actions and speeches meant, how actors justified their decisions, and what these justifications reveal about leadership and cooperation in the EU.

The study relies on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include original documents published during the crisis, such as speeches by Chancellor Angela Merkel, press statements from the German government, European Commission communications, European Council conclusions, and official records of EU-level

decisions. These documents show how actors presented the situation at the time and how they framed their positions. Policy statements and press releases from member states, especially those from the Visegrád Group countries, which opposed the relocation policy, were also used to capture their perspectives. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic articles, migration policy reports, and analyses by European think tanks. These sources help interpret the primary material and place Germany's actions within broader debates about EU politics, leadership, and migration.

Data collection was carried out by gathering relevant documents and reading them carefully to identify patterns. This included searching for repeated phrases, changes in tone, and differences in how actors talked about migration. Terms such as "solidarity," "responsibility," "security," and "burden-sharing" were tracked across documents using keyword search tools. This made it possible to identify consistent differences in language between Germany, EU institutions, and states that opposed mandatory relocation. The data collection also involved reviewing summaries of EU meetings, voting records, and official policy updates to understand when and how Germany influenced the EU agenda.

The analysis follows an interpretive and comparative logic. The interpretive aspect examines how political language was used to present Germany's moral leadership and how the EU tried to balance humanitarian ideals with practical political concerns. For example, the study analyzes how Germany emphasized human dignity and European values, while the European Commission framed migration as a shared challenge requiring several coordinated actions. The comparative aspect contrasts different groups of actors, such as Germany versus opposing member states, or humanitarian narratives versus security-based arguments. The study also uses an agent–structure perspective, where Germany is treated

as an actor trying to influence the system, while EU institutions represent the structure that limits what can be achieved. This helps explain why Germany could shape debates but not ensure full cooperation from other countries.

There are several limitations to this methodology. First, the study focuses on a single case, which limits the ability to generalize the conclusions to other countries or crises. Second, the analysis depends heavily on official documents and public communications. These sources are reliable, but they may not reveal informal negotiations or private disagreements among EU leaders. Third, the lack of interviews means the study cannot directly analyze the personal motivations of political actors or the internal decision-making processes within the EU. Fourth, the time frame of the study covers only 2015 and 2016. It does not examine how Germany's leadership evolved after these years, which could provide additional insights. Finally, qualitative interpretation can be subjective, although using a wide range of sources helps reduce this concern. This methodology combines qualitative analysis, documentary research, and interpretive and comparative techniques to examine how Germany's open-door policy shaped its leadership in the EU. The approach allows for a deep understanding of political language, institutional reactions, and national positions, making it suitable for answering the research question. By analyzing official documents, speeches, and policy responses, the study reveals how Germany influenced the EU agenda while also encountering the limits of its humanitarian leadership.

E. Results / Findings

The findings of this study show that Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy significantly shaped the European Union's migration debate, but its influence was limited by political resistance and competing national priorities. These results were obtained

through qualitative analysis of speeches by German officials, European Union documents, press statements, and academic literature. Three central patterns emerged: Germany developed a consistent humanitarian narrative, this narrative influenced but did not determine EU institutional decisions, and member states reacted in sharply divergent ways that restricted Germany's leadership potential.

The first major finding concerns the consistency of Germany's humanitarian framing during the 2015 crisis. A review of primary documents, including Federal Government press releases, Merkel's Bundestag speeches, and official interviews, shows that Germany repeatedly described refugee acceptance as a moral responsibility grounded in European values. In multiple statements between August and December 2015, Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated the phrase "Wir schaffen das" ("We can manage this"), including in her August 31 national address and her September 9 Bundestag speech (Federal Government of Germany, 2015). Across these texts, Germany used terms such as "human dignity," "European values," "responsibility," and "solidarity," demonstrating a clear humanitarian discourse. This pattern is also visible in European Parliament debates from late 2015, where German representatives referenced "European solidarity" more frequently than delegates from most other member states (European Parliament, 2015). Academic studies confirm this finding: Bendel (2019) argues that Germany attempted to lead the EU through normative and humanitarian appeals, while Thränhardt (2019) notes that moral language became central to Germany's asylum policy. Together, these sources indicate that Germany promoted a coherent humanitarian message that shaped the early stages of the EU debate.

The second major finding relates to Germany's influence on EU institutional responses. Early EU documents, particularly the European Commission's *European Agenda on Migration* (European Commission, 2015) , echoed Germany's emphasis on "shared responsibility" and "collective action," reflecting alignment with the German narrative. The 2015 relocation scheme, which proposed distributing 160,000 asylum seekers across EU member states, closely matched Germany's preference for mandatory burden-sharing (Trauner, 2016). However, further analysis of implementation reports shows that the plan did not achieve its goals. By mid-2017, only approximately 33,000 of the planned 160,000 refugees had been relocated (European Commission, 2017) , confirming that support for Germany's proposals was limited in practice. Moreover, EU Council conclusions from 2016 onward reveal a shift in language from humanitarian framing toward themes such as "border management," "security," and "migration control" (European Council, 2016). This shift indicates that while Germany shaped the EU's agenda-setting, it could not prevent other member states from redirecting policy discussions toward more restrictive measures. The EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 further illustrates these limitations. Germany strongly supported the negotiations leading to the agreement, viewing it as a way to combine humanitarian principles with practical solutions (European Commission, 2016). However, the final text shows clear compromises: while the deal included humanitarian resettlement, it also emphasized deterrence, returns, and strict border controls. Subsequent Commission evaluations reported a substantial reduction in irregular arrivals in the months following the agreement, demonstrating that security-oriented objectives prevailed over Germany's initial moral emphasis (European Commission, 2016). This outcome aligns with academic assessments

by Gürkan (2021), who argues that the EU–Turkey deal represented a shift toward policy externalization and reflected the limits of Germany's normative leadership.

The third major finding concerns the divergent reactions of EU member states, which significantly reduced the effectiveness of Germany's leadership. Western European governments, including France, Sweden, and the Netherlands, publicly supported Germany's calls for solidarity, but the scale of their commitments was limited. For instance, France initially pledged to receive 30,000 refugees but had accepted fewer than 5,000 by 2017 (European Commission, 2017). Sweden, despite its early support, reinstated border controls in November 2015 due to domestic pressures. In contrast, Central and Eastern European states mounted strong opposition to Germany's approach. Official statements from the Visegrád Group, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, portrayed mandatory relocation as an unacceptable infringement on national sovereignty. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán repeatedly criticized Germany's policy as "moral imperialism" in public speeches during 2015 and 2016 (BBC News, 2016). Poland and the Czech Republic similarly rejected the relocation scheme, and Hungary and Slovakia challenged it at the Court of Justice of the European Union. These reactions are consistent with Trauner's (2016) argument that the refugee crisis exposed the limits of EU solidarity, as well as Gürkan's (2021) conclusion that Germany's leadership highlighted deep regional divisions. Public opinion data further illuminate these political differences. Eurostat and UNHCR reported that Germany received over one million asylum applications during 2015, far more than any other EU member state (UNHCR, 2016). Surveys from the Pew Research Center found that 88% of Germans supported accepting refugees on humanitarian grounds, though concerns about integration remained

(Pew Research Center, 2016). In contrast, public opinion in Eastern Europe was overwhelmingly negative: more than 70% of respondents in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia opposed receiving refugees. These contrasting attitudes help explain the divergent national responses identified in the documentary evidence. Overall, the results indicate that Germany succeeded in shaping the moral tone of the EU's migration debate but could not achieve unified political cooperation. Germany's humanitarian narrative influenced early EU documents and agenda-setting, yet the combination of sovereignty concerns, public opinion differences, and institutional constraints limited the extent of its leadership. The evidence shows that while Germany's open-door policy defined the initial discourse, European migration decisions ultimately reflected a compromise between humanitarian values and security-driven priorities.

F. Discussion

This study set out to examine how Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy influenced its leadership role within the European Union (EU), with a particular focus on whether Germany's humanitarian framing encouraged cooperation or exposed deeper divisions among member states. The findings of this research show that Germany's actions shaped the EU's moral narrative on migration but also revealed strong structural limits to its influence. While Germany was able to define the humanitarian tone of the debate, the EU's final migration decisions reflected a complex balancing act between solidarity, national sovereignty, and security concerns.

The results of this study support the work of Bendel (2019) and Thränhardt (2019), who argue that Germany's approach combined humanitarian values with an effort to maintain leadership in Europe. The documentary analysis confirms that German officials framed

their policy in explicitly moral terms, drawing on European principles such as dignity, responsibility, and solidarity. A clear example is Chancellor Angela Merkel's September 9, 2015 Bundestag speech, in which she stated that "the dignity of every individual must remain at the center of our actions" and insisted that Europe must not "fail in its humanity" (Federal Government of Germany, 2015). This was one of the most widely publicized speeches of the crisis and shaped media coverage across Europe. Germany also reinforced its moral message during EU-level debates: in the October 2015 European Parliament session on migration, German representatives referred repeatedly to "European solidarity," far more frequently than delegates from states that opposed relocation (European Parliament, 2015). These examples show that Germany's humanitarian discourse was not abstract, it was concrete, repeated, and strategically deployed in influential political arenas.

At the same time, this study confirms the arguments advanced by Trauner (2016) and Gürkan (2021), who highlight that the refugee crisis exposed internal fractures within the EU. Germany's moral appeal was not enough to overcome national interests, particularly among states in Central and Eastern Europe. A clear example is the reaction of the Visegrád Group. In 2015 and 2016, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán repeatedly criticized Germany's approach as "moral imperialism" and argued that accepting refugees threatened Europe's cultural identity (BBC News, 2016). Poland and Slovakia issued similar statements stressing that migration policy must remain under national control. These concrete reactions strengthen the argument that Germany's approach triggered political pushback, particularly from states that viewed solidarity as a voluntary choice rather than an obligation imposed by Brussels or Berlin.

The findings also connect directly to the work of Geddes and Scholten (2016) and Geddes and Hadj-Abdou (2018), who frame the refugee crisis as a profound test of EU integration. This research supports that interpretation by showing how Germany's leadership forced a debate about the limits of cooperation in an asymmetrical union. The results also contribute to theoretical discussions of "normative power Europe," which proposes that the EU exerts influence primarily through values and norms (Börzel & Risse, 2018). However, this study adds nuance by showing that normative leadership is effective only when values are widely shared. In the migration context, the findings suggest that the EU's normative power is fragile ; humanitarian principles can guide discourse, but without consensus they cannot guarantee collective action. This helps extend the implications of the theory by showing that normative leadership is constrained when member states prioritize domestic politics, identity concerns, or national sovereignty.

The results also demonstrate that leadership within multilateral systems like the EU requires more than moral persuasion. Germany's influence was strongest when it paired humanitarian language with pragmatic measures, such as its strong support for the 2016 EU–Turkey Agreement. Although framed partly as a humanitarian partnership, the deal also addressed the security concerns of reluctant member states by significantly reducing irregular arrivals to the Greek islands (European Commission, 2016). This example illustrates that Germany's leadership was most effective when its moral narrative was backed by concrete institutional solutions that addressed the priorities of other EU members. It also shows that moral authority is more persuasive when combined with compromise and practical incentives. The broader implications of these findings extend both to scholarship and policymaking. For scholars, this study provides evidence that moral

leadership can shape international debates but struggles to produce unified outcomes in the absence of shared interests. This supports theories in international relations that emphasize the constraints of domestic politics and national identity on multilateral cooperation. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of aligning moral commitments with practical mechanisms. Germany's experience suggests that humanitarian leadership must be supported by institutional frameworks, such as relocation systems, funding for frontline states, and joint border management, to make solidarity realistic rather than symbolic. Recent proposals in the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum reflect this shift toward combining humanitarian principles with operational tools. Finally, this study highlights several areas where future research could expand on the findings. Researchers could compare Germany's experience with other EU member states that faced similar pressures, such as Italy or Greece, to determine whether humanitarian leadership works differently in countries located at the external borders of the EU. Additional research could explore how Germany's 2015 policy shaped its domestic political landscape, including the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and shifts in public opinion. Examining these dynamics could provide a deeper understanding of how internal political pressures influence a state's capacity to lead at the international level. Comparative studies across regions, for instance, analyzing how Latin American or Middle Eastern states respond to refugee inflows, could also help determine whether the tension between solidarity and sovereignty is unique to the EU or a broader feature of international migration governance.

G. Conclusion

This research examined how Germany's 2015 open-door refugee policy shaped its leadership role within the European Union and whether this humanitarian decision

strengthened EU solidarity or revealed deeper divisions. The findings clearly show that Germany's open-door policy both expanded and limited its influence in the Union. The study answers the research question by demonstrating that while Germany gained significant moral authority, this did not lead to the unified and coordinated EU response it had hoped for.

Germany's decision to welcome refugees significantly shaped the tone of the EU's migration debate. Through speeches, official statements, and policy actions, Germany promoted a humanitarian message based on solidarity, responsibility, and shared European values. This helped Germany set the agenda at the EU level, influencing early discussions on relocation, asylum reform, and cooperation with third countries. In this sense, the open-door policy strengthened Germany's position as a moral leader, especially during the early moments of the crisis.

However, the results of this study show that moral leadership alone was not enough to produce collective action. Many EU member states, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, rejected mandatory relocation, resisted Germany's calls for solidarity, and prioritized national sovereignty. This resistance revealed the limits of Germany's influence. Even though Germany shaped the discourse, it could not secure a united EU response. The relocation plan failed to reach its targets, and the EU gradually shifted toward more restrictive and security-focused measures. This demonstrates that normative power, while important, cannot overcome political, cultural, and institutional differences on its own.

The findings highlight an important lesson for international relations: leadership based on values can inspire, but it must be supported by political negotiation, incentives, and institutional mechanisms if it is to result in collective action. Germany's experience shows

how difficult it is to lead through humanitarian principles in a political union where countries hold different interests and face different domestic pressures. The crisis made visible the tension between solidarity and sovereignty, a central challenge for the EU.

This study contributes to the academic debate by showing that Germany's open-door policy shaped the EU's humanitarian narrative but did not generate the long-term, coordinated cooperation it intended. It also demonstrates the limits of normative power when member states interpret values differently or prioritize national concerns. Future research should analyze whether the lessons of 2015 influenced later EU reforms, such as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and compare Germany's leadership with other regional cases where solidarity and national interests collide.

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