

How academia should respond to Europe's refugee crisis

What role do academics have in contributing to the debate over Europe's refugee crisis? [Abel Bojar](#) writes that the crisis comes as close to a 'natural experiment' as it gets in the social sciences and highlights the members of four particular research disciplines – economists, political economists/political scientists, scholars of electoral and party politics, and experts in international relations and EU studies – that should rise to the opportunity.



Facing what the EU's Migration Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos, called the "worst refugee crisis the world has seen since World War II", European citizens can't help reacting to daily developments with emotional outbursts of sympathy, prejudice and fears of the unknown.

Once the powerful imagery of the crisis — ranging from the tragic picture of the dead boy washed ashore in Turkey to the heart-warming video footages of German crowds greeting refugees with joy — sink in the collective memory, it will be time to make a sober assessment of the summer of 2015. In particular, once the dust settles, social scientists of all stripes will have to engage in a meaningful and constructive debate on what we have learnt and yet to learn in the future. In this post, I wish to highlight four particular research disciplines that should rise up to this opportunity that comes as close to a "natural experiment" as it gets in the social sciences.

First, *economists* studying the impact of migration will get ample material to test existing arguments on what labour mobility implies for the economy. It is important to note that today's wave of migrants is nothing radically new in some of the EU member states in terms of numbers; the UK, for instance, [receives more than a quarter of a million of citizens](#) in a year from other EU member states alone. However, the influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa may imply a supply shock afflicting several countries at the same time with an arguably different age and skill composition compared to day-to-day intra-EU migration.



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On the one hand, few dispute the benefits that migrants bring by increasing the supply of labour, creating new and arguably more efficient allocation of jobs, filling up state coffers, relieving some of the burden from creaking pay-as-you-go pension systems and adding to aggregate demand as new consumers. On the other hand, there are valid concerns over the implication of this supply shock for wages at the lower-end of the wage distribution, especially if the skill distribution of the new migrants is skewed towards the unskilled end of the scale. Moreover, the ongoing debate on the merits and flaws of minimum wage systems in the EU as well as their impact on unemployment may come under scrutiny with a renewed force.

Second, *political economists and political scientists* in the state-centred tradition may get new inspiration for debates on state capacity. Being a latent concept that is intrinsically difficult to measure, quantitative scholars often rely on very crude proxies such as government revenues/GDP or the estimated size of the grey and black economy, ignoring crucial non-monetary aspects of the concept. Some of these aspects came to the fore during this summer. EU

candidates, such as Macedonia, struggling to build strong institutions for EU accession, were always going to find it difficult to cope with this challenge of unprecedented scale.

More troubling is the fact that institutions of existing member states, such as Hungary, a country in the eye of the storm, often failed to function in the way a “strong state” is expected to function. Failures of the Hungarian state in the crisis include the breakdown of routine administrative tasks, such as processing registration and asylum applications with the required speed, the failure to deliver basic social services (temporary accommodation facilities, sanitation, food distribution etc.), the failure to employ police forces not only as instruments of the coercive apparatus but also as agents of the state to calm nerves, provide instructions and cooperate with an unexpectedly vibrant civil society in an effective way.

Cynics and opponents of the highly controversial Hungarian government may argue that all this has been intentional in order to send a strong message to potential migrants to reconsider their perilous journey ahead. This argument will not be the least plausible one ever made. That said, it is equally plausible that the optimistic and at times euphoric tone of the transition and EU accession literature needs to be seriously reconsidered when it comes to state capacity in Central and Eastern Europe.

Third, scholars of *electoral and party politics* should pay attention to developments in the party-political arena. Observers of party competition have often framed their arguments in terms of issue-ownership. The basic logic of issue-ownership is simple: due to their historically accrued reputation, parties come to own issues where they enjoy a high level of trust by the electorate in their capacity to address them more effectively than their political rivals. As much as competing along alternative proposals, parties, therefore, compete along the prioritisation of issues that they perceive to own. Immigration is a perfect example of such an issue long owned by the Right.

On the face of it, the current migration crisis is a perfect storm that the Right is ready to ride. Having been among voters’ top concerns for a while, the crisis has now rendered immigration the [single most salient issue](#) among the European electorate. When in opposition, right-wing parties are therefore likely to capitalise on their issue-ownership. This is particularly true for the extreme and new populist right that has long been a merciless advocate of a restrictive, “tough love” approach to immigration.

Where right-wing parties are in power, the picture may be more nuanced. If their professed solutions fail to achieve their abstract promise of social harmony and national self-preservation, voters may become increasingly sceptical of right-wing parties’ ability to walk the walk, rather than just talk the talk. Equally questionable is the Left’s ability to offer a credible alternative. Short of that, it is highly plausible that they will have no choice but to give in, just like a number of “third-way” left-wing parties did on the economy in the 1990s. The list of possible scenarios is of course endless. Scholars in the field will have ample opportunity to follow the changing fortune of parties with the refugee crisis, almost beyond doubt, in the centre of the debate.

Fourth, the refugee crisis is also a litmus test for scholars of *international relations* and *EU studies*. As the increasingly obvious tension between the elimination of border control (Schengen agreement) and the current asylum regime of the EU (Dublin III agreement) calls for policy innovation at the highest levels, old concepts of neo-functionalist spillovers and inter-governmental bargaining between member states in areas of high politics will come to the fore. While a more effective asylum regime than the current one is in the interest of all, the asymmetric exposure to the crisis as well as the uneven gains to be made is likely to complicate any smooth policy reform emanating from the Commission through the Council.

Joint decision traps at the EU level will have to be overcome (potentially involving side-payments and opt-outs) and two-level games between the national and supra-national levels will have to be played out before a final settlement can be reached. The current flagship proposal aiming to resettle 160,000 migrants from the three most exposed countries (Greece, Italy and Hungary) is the first, but unlikely to be the last episode of this saga. Moreover, bilateral readmission agreements with third countries may also come under strain if EU member states adopt an increasingly restrictive stance towards migrants.

This list is by no means exhaustive and different scholars, depending on their background and expertise, will draw different conclusions regarding their research priority. Students of sociology, for instance, will surely focus their attention on the social integration of refugees. Scholars of public policy will inquire about the role of education and training to prepare migrants for their new home. Researchers of security studies will surely look at the threats that hundreds of thousands of migrants traveling without documents may imply for the EU and radicalised Islamist groups residing within its borders. The avenues for research inspired by the crisis are almost limitless. One can only hope that the diversity of the research agenda will mirror the increasing diversity of the European Union itself.

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