Article

Merkel Government's Refugee Policy: Under Bounded Rationality

Zhongqi Niu, Wenlong Song *, Yantong Lu and Xingyu Bao

School of International Relations, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing 100024, China
* Correspondence: songwenlong@bisu.edu.cn

Abstract: As the country hosting the most significant number of refugees in Europe, Germany's Merkel government's refugee policy has been repeatedly adjusted and plagued by inconsistencies and management failures. What factors have influenced the formation of the Merkel government's refugee policy and its two shifts? The traditional rational decision-making model does not effectively explain government decisions' motivation in complex challenges. This article develops a framework for analyzing "bounded rational decision-making". It identifies the three factors that influenced the Merkel government's refugee policy: (a) strict border controls, (b) welcome culture, and (c) welcome culture under restrained policies. It explains the process and logic of their development. Based on the theory of "bounded rational decision making", the article examines the "key events and problem identification", "goal selection", "national interests", and "political psychology". We found that in the early stages of the refugee crisis, (a) public opinions and pressure, (b) the pursuit of a positive national image, and (c) a shift in the leader's psychology led Merkel to shift away from a pragmatic and rational course. These factors led to the first shift in German refugee policy from "hesitation" to a "welcoming culture". At the end of 2015, however, the shortcomings of the irrational policy were quickly revealed, and the frequency of refugee-related social problems reversed German public opinion, forcing Merkel's government to seek a balance between humanitarianism and national interests. As a result, refugee policy was adjusted for the second time, returning to a strict refugee examination system. The development of the Merkel government's refugee policy exposed the shortcomings of the traditional crisis decision-making model. Moreover, it provided a new perspective for rethinking the governance of the refugee crisis.

Keywords: bounded rational decision-making; Merkel government; refugee governance; German refugee policy; international refugee crises

1. Introduction

A person who has to flee away from their original homeland due to the fear of persecution or violence is defined as a refugee, according to the UN Refugee Agency. For these reasons, refugees cannot return home and have to seek protection in another country by applying for asylum. Then, they become asylum seekers after the hosting country's government officially accepts them and offers them legal protection and financial aid.

Nowadays, the refugee issue has become an essential topic in the study of international migration. Factors such as refugee identification, refugee resettlement, and a country's refugee policy all affect the domestic and foreign affairs of both refugees receiving and sending countries. The number of refugees worldwide has increased due to regional wars, economic crises, natural disasters, and other influences. In 2020, the number of total international migrants was 281 million, including about 89.4 million displaced persons (International Organization for Migration 2021). As the World Migration Report–2022 reported, the refugee population in 2020 was around 26.4 million globally, while the asylum seekers occupied 4.1 million. Moreover, due to the conflict, violence, and disasters, there were 55 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide. Thus, the refugee issue

has become one of the global issues of great concern in global governance. It involves multiple dimensions of national policy, foreign relations, national governance, and global governance. The refugee issue can affect the stability and finances of a country. As the impact of refugees expands, it can even affect security and the economy on a global scale.

As for research methodology, the rational actor model is considered to be a valid research method for policy research. This model assumes that the state is a single rational actor and that all policymakers go through the same process of rational analysis in order to make policy choices that maximize the state's interests. Neoclassical realism also states that the state acts in both domestic and international dimensions and can react to international events through domestic behavior or solve domestic problems through international behavior. We argue that, however, because policy decisions are ultimately made and adjusted by the core leadership of the state and because "humans" are the subject of decisions, it is unrealistic to make perfectly rational decisions. Therefore, state policy decisions are "bounded rational". In studying governmental decision-making in international events, the introduction of the theory of "bounded rational decision-making" can help us understand governmental behavior more intuitively and thus provide a feasible basis for relevant policy formulation and policy analysis.

As the country hosting the most significant number of refugees in Europe, Germany's refugee population reached around 1.2 million in the middle of 2021 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2021). According to a public opinion survey in Germany, people hold different views on the refugee issue. Some believe that a large number of newly arrived refugees, notably Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi refugees (IOM 2016), will stay in Germany for a long time or even forever, which may present an opportunity to improve the social and labor structure in Germany, which is facing an aging population and a growing labor shortage (Vocal Europe 2020). However, on the other hand, the influx of refugees will also pose significant challenges to mainstream German society, such as cultural clashes, conflicting values, and social dislocation. Furthermore, for the German government, the influx of refugees poses a major international political challenge and a domestic social governance challenge.

Since the Arab Spring in 2010 resulted in at least one million deaths in the Middle East and the expansion of ISIS, the number of refugees in the Middle East has experienced a sudden increase (Pries 2019). As a result, the number of refugee applicants to Germany increased dramatically, especially in 2014. When the Merkel government shifted its refugee policy to a welcome culture in 2015, the aftermath of the policy brought the number of refugees accepted in Germany to a climax. As the refugee problem deepened, the refugee policy of Germany's Merkel government shifted accordingly. This phenomenon raises questions as to why Germany has suddenly seen a surge in refugee claims in response to the refugee issue. What are the motivations for the dynamic shift in the Merkel government's policy on refugees? As an influential country in Europe, Germany's strategy for dealing with the refugee issue and its experience in the governance of the country after hosting refugees are of relevance to other countries in dealing with the refugee issue. The case from Germany leads us to consider the reasons for the state's refugee policy and its possible social consequences.

In this paper, we will first define the relevant concepts and review existing research. Then, we will develop our analytical framework based on the theory of bounded rationality and explain the relevant elements of the framework. In Section 3, we will first review the evolution of the Merkel government's policies in response to the refugee crisis that emerged in 2015 and then attempt to analyze the reasons for its policy adjustments based on our analytical framework. Finally, we will conclude and discuss the relevant topics.

2. Materials and Methods

We applied a qualitative methodology in this article, including analysis of relevant research articles, German government publications, official statistics, and press statements. We try to understand the direction of policy change by recalling and understanding the

policy and its context; through an analytical framework based on "bounded rationality", we mainly analyzed the factors that influence policy-making and tried to explain what caused the policy change and its effects.

Firstly, we read the legal documents, governmental documents, and media reports related to the refugee issue in Germany to define the relevant concepts and to form a preliminary understanding of the evolution of the refugee policy in Germany in response to the refugee crisis under Angela Merkel's[1] administration. Secondly, by reading the relevant literature and compiling the official data published by Eurostat, we have finalized the evolution of refugee policy and formed the part of the thesis on "Refugee Policy Evolution". Finally, we have analyzed the secondary literature, including papers on relevant subjects, as well as articles on "bounded rationality". Based on the pre-research work, we have developed an analytical framework, which will be applied in the following discussion.

2.1. Defining Refugees

The discussion of refugees dates back to the 20th century. During this period, there was no uniform standard of refugee status. During the Second World War, fascism was rampant, and people had to leave their countries in search of a relatively secure existence, notably the persecuted Jewish refugees. After the war, in 1951, the United Nations adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (later referred to as the Convention), which provided the initial criteria for the recognition of refugees. The Convention (OHCHR 1951) defined a refugee as a person who, before the time of its promulgation (1951), had a well-founded fear of remaining outside of his own country for reasons of race, religion, et cetera, in the European area and who, owing to such fear, was unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and remaining outside the country of his former habitual residence because of the matters as mentioned above, was unable or, owing to the fear mentioned above, unwilling to return to it (OHCHR 1951).

Nevertheless, the Convention's determination of refugee status was restrained to what had happened in the European region prior to 1951 that led to the development of refugees. As new waves of refugees occurred in the world after the conclusion of the Convention, the 1951 Convention no longer applied to these new refugee situations. In 1967, the United Nations amended the Convention to remove the temporal and geographical restrictions and promulgated the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

The definition of refugee continues to be expanded as we enter the 21st century. As non-traditional security, such as climate security and economic security, has become increasingly evident, the identification of refugees has shifted from the initial traditional factors to non-traditional factors, which is reflected in the distinction between types of migrants—voluntary and forcible displacement. Voluntary migration is usually in pursuit of a better place to live or improve their living conditions, while forced migration is usually due to war or political changes in the country (Koser 2017). For example, climate refugees are caused by climate problems such as land desertification and drought; natural disaster refugees are caused by natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and mudslides; economic refugees are caused by economic crises in their countries and voluntarily uproot in search of a better life. However, we are going to focus our spotlight, in this paper, on the forcible one.

In Germany, the government takes the definition in the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1966) promulgated by the United Nations as a principle for recognizing refugee status. Article 16a of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (2022) states that "Persons persecuted on political grounds shall have the right of asylum". From this article, Germany considers the "right to political asylum" a fundamental right. However, the asylum seeker has to fulfil the prerequisite of "not coming from a safe country" and must be examined by the German government before being granted refugee status in Germany. In another word, refugee status can only be granted if the applicant has been assessed by the German government.

2.2. Literature Review: Refugee Crises Relate to Internal and External Governance

Refugee crises are all about the "crisis". Crises are characterized by their potential, severity, rapidity, and sensitivity. Once an initial refugee wave has taken place in a country, a large number of refugees will form an uncontrollable refugee crisis in a short period, which poses multiple challenges for the neighboring countries of the country of origin. Consequently, the refugee crisis could challenge a nation's internal and external governance.

As we have mentioned above, refugees in today's world are often formed due to war, environmental, economic, and other factors in their own countries. A refugee crisis for relevant host countries is formed when a refugee influx occurs. Whether to open borders or turn them away, whether to give moral or domestic priority, is a dilemma for national decision-makers. Therefore, we believe that the refugee crisis is no longer a national crisis but a common global problem in the 21st century and that no country can survive it alone. Thus, scholars both at home and abroad have different views and perspectives on the refugee crisis.

The essence of the refugee problem is political (Gilbert and Loescher 1994). Homeless people have always existed, but only in the mid to late 20th century did they become an important part of international politics. Marrus (1985) has collated the refugee problem in Europe since the late 19th century. He argued that the impact of refugee movements on the diplomacy of great powers is severe and that refugee crises will seriously affect relations between states. Similarly, Gilbert and Loescher (1994) concluded that the refugee problem, as an important international political issue, will pose certain challenges to the governance of state relations, especially between refugee-sending and receiving countries.

With the deepening of globalization, the decision-making environment has become more complex, thus leading to more complicated measures to deal with the refugee problem. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has witnessed several new waves of refugees. At the end of the 20th century, scholars often conducted case studies on the refugee problem during the Second World War and the refugee problem in the countries concerned after the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe. An increase in the number of refugees and the complexity of refugee issues has been considered as the trait of several refugee crises in the 21st century. Taking the EU's response to the refugee crisis for instance, Yang and Wan (2019) argued that the reason why the refugee problem has not been appropriately resolved at present is that the decision makers of refugee policies have become more diverse, including not only sovereign states but also other non-state actors, thus making the overall decision-making process more cumbersome. Song (2015) analyzed the international political factors in the European refugee crisis and the German refugee problem and analyzed the causes of the refugee crisis in terms of the US factor, the European factor, the world powers factor, and the internal factors of the EU member states. In addition, Song (2015) further pointed out that the refugee crisis has brought about more serious social problems, including challenges to the European social welfare system, populist tendencies, and increased social exclusion. Those former studies inspired us to look at the social problems caused by the refugee crisis and deepen our analysis of the factors that policymakers consider when making decisions.

The refugee crisis has also caused many social problems. At a state level, a country's response to a refugee crisis caused by an influx of refugees can be seen as a country's domestic social governance capacity to deal with global issues. In addition, the influx of refugees inevitably affects a country's economy and society. These impacts are mainly on labor markets, social stability, and cultural shock.

Concerning the impact of the refugee crisis on labor markets in importing countries, scholars have analyzed the relationship between refugees and labor markets. They have found that the influx of refugees has not seriously impacted labor markets in importing countries (Bonin 2005). For example, Jean and Jiménez (2011), in a study on unemployment due to immigration in OECD countries, pointed out that immigration may impact the employment of natives. However, in the long run, it does not seriously influence the local job market. Other scholars have used economic models to theorize the socio-economics of refugee-sending and importing countries in refugee crises and found that the influx of

refugees does increase the financial burden on importing countries. However, the impact on the local labor market is small.

More often than now, with the deepening of the relevant studies, scholars have found other perspectives regarding refugees' effects on the domestic labor market. Entrepreneurship, which has recently become a remedy to create jobs and reduce unemployment in order to improve the national economy and development, has been seen as an approach for the refugee population to integrate into the mainstream society of the host country (Almohammad et al. 2021b). It is believed that stable and continuous employment can ease the government's financial burden on the welfare system for the refugee and facilitates the integration of the forcibly displaced population into mainstream society. An investigation of the cash flow of migrants indicated that remittances sent by migrants could make contributions to both sending and hosting countries (Ahsan and Haque 2020). Moreover, this can also help cultivate several qualifications and reduce the refugee burden in the hosting country (Pernice and Brook 1996; Zacher 2019; Almohammad et al. 2021b). However, the case in Turkey has shown that obstacles to refugees' start-ups are evident. It is due to the language barrier and different cultural backgrounds that only a small portion of the refugee population can start their entrepreneurial activities successfully (Almohammad et al. 2021b). Despite the detrimental effects the refugee crisis may cause, it still has its positive side. Thus, it is significant for the government to evaluate the pros and cons before implementing relevant policies.

In terms of the interaction of roles, the influx of refugees causes the traditional values and culture of mainstream society to be impacted by another group. As society takes time to adapt to this change and the policy is adjusted to solve the problem, social dislocation is caused in the short term. Social dislocation can, in turn, challenge the stability of society and the prevailing values. So, the government must be able to identify the problem, define it, and then respond quickly to it to find a relatively reasonable policy.

Zheng Chunrong's team has conducted a systematic analysis of Germany's refugee policy. First, she composes the history of the changes in Germany's refugee policy and analyzes the reasons for the changes in terms of moral, market, and public opinion factors. Finally, she analyzes the multi-dimensional impact of the refugee policy implemented in Germany from various aspects (Zheng and Zhou 2015). Since then, Germany has developed a relatively well-developed policy system for dealing with the refugee problem through the differentiation of refugee types, language integration, and labor training, with the Integration Act as the core (Zheng and Ni 2016). However, this system continues to be criticized by some groups. In addition, factors such as financial allocation, social culture, and social stability have put pressure on the German government's refugee policy development (Tang 2015).

In conclusion, the challenges posed by the refugee crisis to a country are comprehensive. Scholars have discussed the impact of refugee crises from the perspective of historical review, the socio-economic and cultural impact of refugees on both sending and hosting countries, quantitative analysis from an economic perspective, or policy analysis of the social effects of refugees. Their studies have focused on how refugees are resettled, how they integrate into mainstream society, and the adverse effects of the crisis. However, there needs to be more discussion on what responses policymakers chose, why they chose them, and how to assess the effectiveness of policies. Hence, we decided to focus on the policymaker level when researching refugee issues and to analyze the reasons for policy changes and their impact by analyzing the policy choices of policymakers.

2.3. Policy Making: From Rational Actor to Bounded Rationality

The Rational Actor Model (RAM) has been identified as the most widely cited method of analyzing the behavior of policymakers when analyzing the behavior and attitudes of a state when concerning itself with international events. This approach is derived from microeconomics, where actors make rational calculations of benefits and costs in order to maximize returns and choose the most satisfactory option based on possible outcomes.

In terms of state policy, the rational actor model treats the state as a unified, independent entity, and all policymakers go through the same rational analysis process to make policy choices that maximize the national interest (Wittkopf et al. 2008). Scholars who study decision-making behavior analyzed the rational decision-making process and gave the elements of a model of rational decision-making by the following steps:

Problem recognition and identification: Policy choices made by decision-makers begin with an effective identification of the problems they face. An objective understanding of the problem requires a comprehensive analysis of the motivation of the event, the external environment, the country's affordability, and the problem's future trends. So, a large and reliable information base is required to support this understanding.

Goals selection: Once the problem has been understood and analyzed, the decision-maker and the team must clearly understand the national interest and objectives. This seemingly simple step is the most difficult one for policymakers because it requires the decision-maker to prioritize national security, national interests, diplomacy, economics, and social norms to make the appropriate choice.

Identify alternatives: Rational decision-making usually requires the decision-maker to list and evaluate all possible options. In this process, the decision-maker considers the costs of each option and the policy objectives and benefits that can be achieved.

Implementation: The decision-maker will eventually select the optimal option from the alternatives analyzed in the above steps. To do so, the decision maker must conduct a rigorous analysis of costs and benefits, objectives, and outcomes.

The rational actor model helps to understand the goals and intentions behind foreign policy actions. However, critics of this model argue that it does not consider situations where complete information may not be available, nor does it consider the relatively subjective concept of foreign policy. Although the rational actor model is considered to be the best approach that decision-makers can take when responding to a crisis, the decision-making process mentioned in this model could be more realistic compared to reality. In the real world, we cannot put all government members through the same rational analysis process, nor can we respond to a crisis with a rational analysis that follows the exact sequence of the model (Cashman 1993). As in the case of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the US policymakers' response to the crisis showed confusion over the steps to be taken in analyzing the problem, the conflict between different response policies, and ambiguity over the goals of the national interest (Sorensen 1963).

Herbert Simon (1985) proposed the Bounded Rationality model, a more realistic behavioral decision-making model. Herbert Simon argues that human rationality is a bounded rationality that lies between perfect rationality and perfect irrationality.

Scholars such as Simon added that bounded rationality still remains rational. Therefore, the traditional rational actor model can be applied to simpler decisions, which often have an obvious single goal. On the other hand, a perfect rational decision-making process can become deficient when responding to crises (Mintz and DeRouen 2014). Therefore, we can analyze it in the following aspects:

Tardy problem identification: It is often the case that people are not able to be sensitive to small probability events with foresight. That is, decision-makers may miss a precipitating event or a series of precipitating events before a crisis occurs, thus missing the perfect time to respond.

Inadequate information base: The information used for problem recognition and identification is often inadequate, sometimes outdated, and inaccessible. It is worth noting from the research that even when decision-makers have access to sufficient, or even more, information, this "massive" information resource does not allow them to be entirely rational in their decision-making process and sometimes makes it more complicated.

Ambiguous national interests and goals: A policy must be designed to meet national interests and be considered in the long term. Every policy has its costs and possible long-term effects. It is, therefore, difficult to identify which policy objectives best serve the national interest. Under bounded rationality, when policymakers choose policy objectives

and options, they simply choose the one that is the "lesser of two evils" so that the costs and aftermath on national institutions and systems are lessened to an acceptable level.

The emergence of crisis: As we have mentioned above, the "rapidity" of crises means that policymakers are facing a tight time frame and an overloaded analytical work when formulating foreign policy. As a result, policymakers need more time to analyze all possible policies. Moreover, policymakers do not develop alternative responses to things they have never imagined. Since a crisis is often a case of a potential and unpredictable nature, policymakers begin to respond only when they occur.

Psychological restraints: Ultimately, policy-making is determined by people, and the political psychology of policymakers has a significant impact on policy making. According to James Barber's (2009) analysis of the personalities of US presidents and the "internal" factor of bounded rationality, we found that subjective factors such as early life experience, personality, habits of mind, and political inclination of decision-makers all influence policy-making.

In conclusion, by combining both "externalities" (e.g., information elements, national interests, etc.) and "internalities" (factors such as the political psychology of the decision-maker), the decision-making model should be bounded rationality rather than perfect rationality.

2.4. An Analytical Framework Based on the Theory of Bounded Rationality

Above, we have discussed the change in decision theory from rationality to bounded rationality. Scholars, represented by Hebert Simon, have explained the factors in decision-making that lead to "bounded rationality" among decision-makers. Furthermore, the process of government policy-making can be thought of as a "flow chart" that shows us the process of a policy, from the identification of a problem to its implementation. As in public policy research, the researcher understands and analyses the underlying governmental motivations for a policy by examining its development process (Sato 1999).

In our analytical framework, we have developed a "flow chart" for analyzing the Merkel government's policy-making on the refugee issue by combining traditional policy-making processes with factors of bounded rationality (Figure 1). In the first stage, problem cognition, the decision-maker realizes that a key event has occurred in relation to a crisis and takes action; in the second stage, the decision-maker considers issues such as national interest and national image and makes a choice of objectives; in the third stage, the decision-maker evaluates possible policy proposals; and finally, the decision-maker makes a choice and implements a policy.
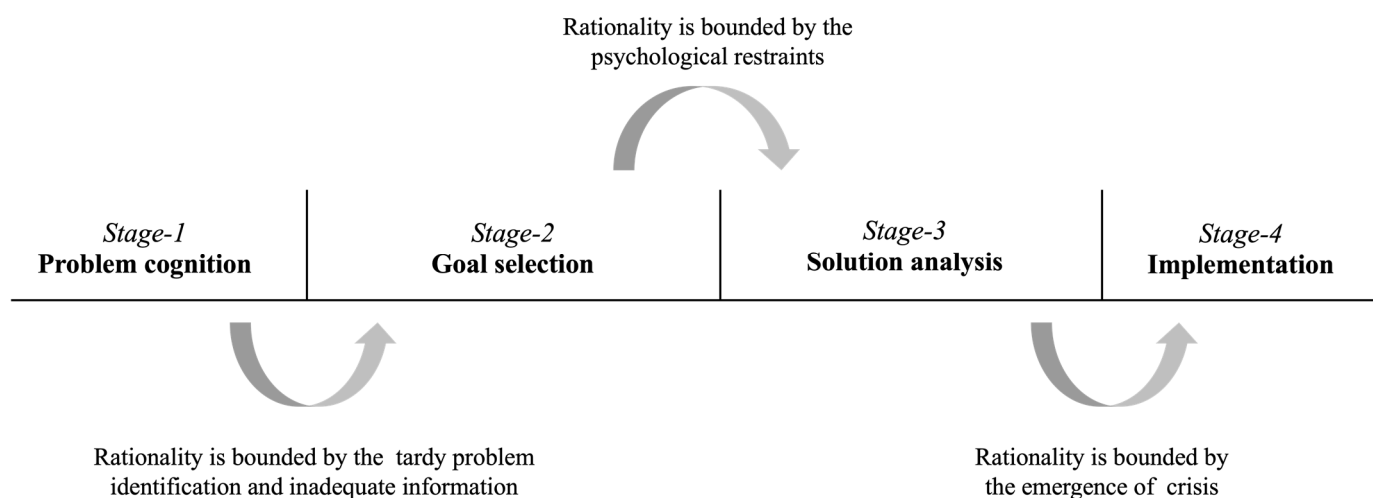

Figure 1. Diagram of the bounded rationality. Flow chart made by authors.

It is worth noting that among the factors linking the decision-makers at each stage, the factor of bounded rationality influences the decision-makers in making their decisions.

Decision-makers are constrained by information, political psychology, and the emergence of a quick response to the problem and thus exhibit "bounded rationality".

In this paper, we take bounded rationality into the analytical framework of the policy-making process and try to understand how the Merkel government's refugee policy is formulated and evolves within a decision-making model of "bounded rationality". We will explain our analytical results in the next section.

3. Results

3.1. The Evolution of Refugee Policies in Germany (2005–2015)

Since 2015, Germany has been the main target country for refugees seeking asylum applications. For quite some time now, Germany has been receiving refugees from countries such as Africa and the Middle East, but this has not been a widespread concern due to the small numbers. In 2015, the number of refugees grew as political instability in the Middle East increased (Figure 2). Notably, refugees and asylum-seekers from countries and regions such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq are the main group of refugees received by Germany (IOM 2016).

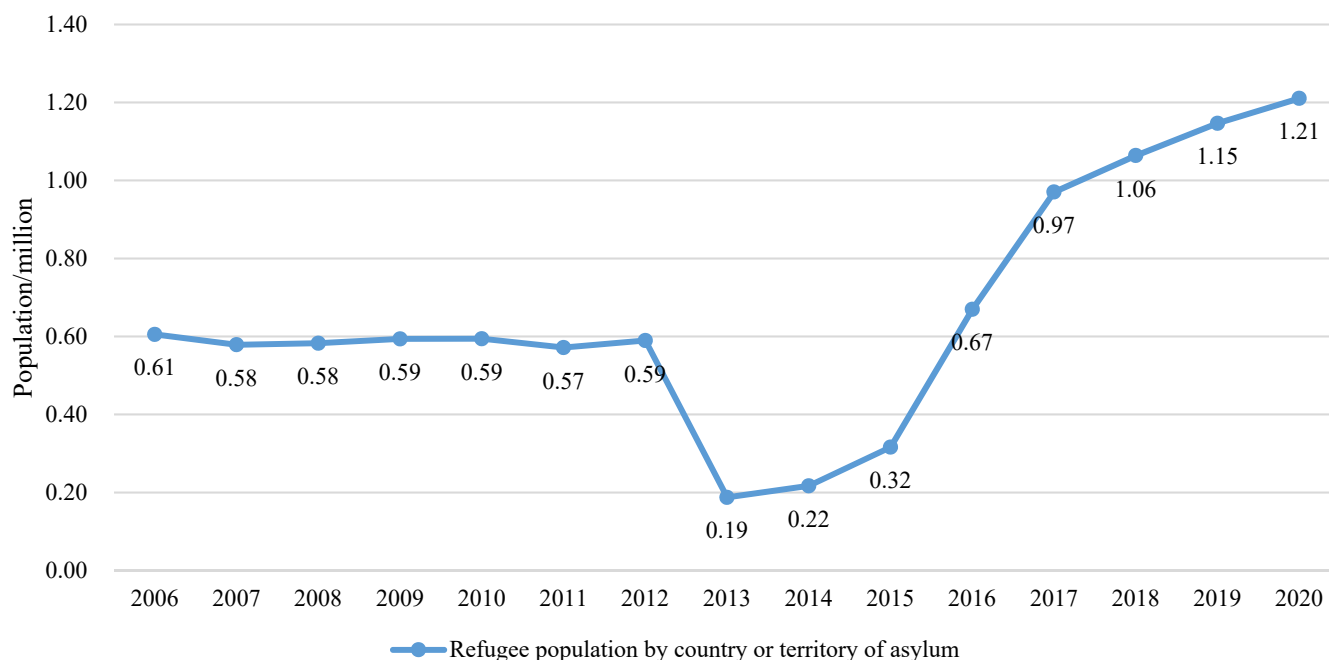### Refugee population in Germany (2006-2020)

Figure 2. Refugee population in Germany (2006–2020). Source from Our World in Data, line graph made by authors.

We have outlined the evolution of refugee policy in Germany with the "key events", "refugee situations", and "governmental attitudes" that have influenced the policy based on the factors of bounded rational decision theory (Table 1) and in this way we have developed an understanding of the evolution of the Merkel government's refugee policy.

3.1.1. Phase 1: Strict Border Controls (2005–2015)

Since 2005, when Angela Merkel took power, Germany's refugee policy has been characterized by strict border controls. At the end of the 20th century, the number of refugees in Germany remained stable at around 20,000 per year. However, this number began to rise steadily since 2007 (Tao and Xia 2018).

The Arab Spring in 2010 resulted in at least one million deaths in the Middle East. Combined with the expansion of ISIS, the number of refugees in the Middle East has experienced a sudden increase. As a result, the number of refugee applicants to Germany

exceeded 40,000 in 2010. In order to prevent the influx of refugees from hitting German society, Merkel has shown her usual cautious approach to stability. Between 2005 and 2007, the number of refugee applications was relatively stable. The Merkel government took the Asylum Procedures Act and the Convention on the Status of Refugees as the basis for its refugee policy. After 2010, however, the number of refugees increased dramatically, especially in 2014. At that time, this number reached around 202,800. The Schengen Treaty and the Dublin Convention, which define the concepts of "first country of entry" and "safe third country", provide the basis for the EU's response to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, Merkel promulgated the New Migration Act, which followed Gerhard Schröder's Migration Act, based on the EU's treaties.

Table 1. Refugee Policy Evolution in Germany, table made by authors.

Phase	Strict Border Controls	Welcome Culture	Welcome Culture under Restrained Policies
Period	2005–2015	September 2015-October 2015	October 2015–2021
Key events	The Arab Spring in the Middle East.	Mass drownings at Mediterranean Sea. The death of Aylan.	Terrorist attack in Paris in 2015. The New Year's Eve incident in Cologne in 2015.
Refugee situation	The number of refugee claims exceeded 40,000 in 2010 and increased to 202,800 in 2014.	Number of officially registered refugees reaches 1 million in last three months of 2015.	German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees receives around 400,000 asylum applications in first half of 2016.
Governmental attitudes	Strict border controls and restriction.	From hesitation to welcome culture.	Re-tightening the refugee policy.

The law extends the definition of a refugee with stricter rules on refugee eligibility, limitation of rights and treatments, making it difficult for refugees to apply and enter the country, and with certain restrictions on status and time, increasing the difficulty of obtaining refugee status, which to some extent prevents the influx of refugees with strict policies.

3.1.2. Phase 2: Welcome Culture (September–October 2015)

Between January and August 2015, the Merkel government was in a phase of hesitation regarding the refugee issue. During this time, the refugee crisis was exploding, the number of refugees in Germany continued to surge, and the number of refugee applications reached a new record. Despite the introduction of documents such as the EU Agenda for Migration, more is needed. Nevertheless, the Merkel government remained cautious on the refugee issue. In a German talk show in July 2015, Merkel's rejection of a question about a young girl from Pakistan as a refugee caused public criticism in Germany, and people could not accept Merkel's "cold-blooded" attitude towards refugees.

The incident of the death of Aylan in the Mediterranean Sea at the beginning of September 2015 drove the fundamental shift in Merkel's refugee policy. The incident gradually changed the attitude of the hesitant and cautious Merkel government. Even though the upward trend in the number of refugees has not eased at all, Germany has started to open its borders to refugees, notably by adopting novel models to speed up the refugee approval process and by increasing financial investment to resettle refugees, which is mainly evident in the policy towards refugees from Syria (Tao and Xia 2018). Furthermore, in mid-August, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees stated that asylum-seekers from Syria would no longer be required to comply with the Dublin Convention. In other words, they will no longer be examined in Germany in accordance with the requirements of the Convention (Dernbach 2015). This is the beginning of the "Welcome Culture" of Germany's active refugee policy.

As the refugee crisis continued to develop, Merkel's government actively accepted refugees and opposed border restrictions, spreading her active refugee policy with the

slogan "We can do it" (Wir schaffen das!). However, it is evident that Merkel underestimated the challenge, and her policy line had gradually been taken over with moralistic enthusiasm. This policy of accepting an unlimited number of refugees has led to pressure to respond to the refugee crisis at home, demonstrating the bounded rationality of her policy.

According to national news reports, the number of refugees in Germany exploded in 2015, with one million officially registered in Germany at the end of 2015, including 200,000 in November (Welt 2015). Refugee shelters in Germany are overcrowded, and the government is struggling to meet the needs of the various settlements. Infrastructure, housing, and health care are not guaranteed, and some settlements cannot even meet the minimum standards set by the WHO. Moreover, according to the German Language Association, "refugee" was the most popular word in Germany in 2015.

3.1.3. Phase 3: Welcome Culture under Restrained Policies (October 2015–2021)

While the "open-door" policy to refugees was of humanism, the huge increase in the number of refugees in a short time dealt a heavy blow to Germany from several perspectives. Merkel's refugee policy has led to an increase in social conflict, and the spread of populism caused extreme right-wing forces. With the increasing number of refugees, there has been a surge in conflict incidents, disruptions to refugee settlements, and violence in many places (Yang 2016). The sexual harassment in Cologne and the terrorist attacks in Paris at the end of 2015 caused widespread fear among the residents. Dwellers were strongly opposed to the admission of refugees and even resented them. In fact, most of the German political parties were also strongly opposed to the policy of no ceilings on the number of refugees. As a result, the divergence of opinion and conflicts between the various parties in Germany were deepened. Merkel was experiencing the biggest crisis in her eleven-year political life. Her public support had plummeted due to the refugee policy, which seriously affected the 2017 general election. With pressure from all sides, the German government had to change its attitude towards refugees, shifting from an "open-door policy" to a restrained policy.

Since January 2016, Germany has been controlling the number of refugees entering the country by examining the identity of people entering the German-Austrian border. As a result, Merkel has introduced new and stricter measures regarding refugees. These new measures carried out by the Merkel government aimed to quickly resolve the problem of refugees who are not easily approved in Germany by setting up an administrative center for refugee issues, which dealt with these difficult refugee approval issues quickly while also increasing the time refugees spend with their families when waiting for refugee approval. However, some refugees were banned from bringing their families to Germany. The German government also set up policies on deportations of refugees who have committed crimes, including violence and sexual assault (Zhang 2017). According to data published by Eurostat in June 2016, Germany has received almost 175,000 asylum applications in the first quarter of 2016, accounting for 61% of all EU asylum applications (Der Tagesspiegel 2016). In addition, according to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMR), the BAMR has received around 400,000 asylum applications in the first half of 2016, an increase of 121.7% year-on-year (BAMF 2016b).

In summary, the Merkel government's refugee policy has undergone three phases: strict border controls—an "open-door" policy—welcome culture under restrained policies. Merkel's "refugee welcome" policy in the summer of 2015 has shifted the perception of refugees. This shift was reflected in the change from "refugees are unwelcome" to "migration of certain groups of refugees is necessary". Under the Merkel government, Germany has become a country of immigration genuinely (Laubenthal 2019).

The refugee crisis in Europe is arguably the most significant crisis Germany has ever experienced, and the most prominent political crisis Merkel has faced during her administration. Yet, despite the Merkel government reintroducing a stricter border control policy, the reception of refugees continues. This also reflects the contradictions and dilemmas of the Merkel government between realpolitik and humanitarian action.

3.2. An Analysis Based on the Analytical Framework

In the above section, we have analyzed why the rationality of policymakers is "bounded". In order to analyze the reasons for the changes in German refugee policy during the Merkel administration and their impact on German society, we have reviewed the evolution of refugee policy before. In this section, we will analyze the evolution of this policy using an analytical framework based on "bounded rationality".

3.2.1. The First Shift in the Refugee Policy of Germany

The first shift in the Merkel government's refugee policy occurred in September 2015, when it moved from a hesitant to a welcoming phase. The reasons for this shift will be analyzed in terms of "problem identification", "goal selection", and "political psychology" (Figure 3).

**Rationality is bounded by the
psychological restraints**
• Angela Merkel

Stage-1 **Problem cognition**	*Stage-2* **Goal selection**	*Stage-3* **Solution analysis**	*Stage-4* **Implementation**
• Mass drownings at sea of refugees in April 2015 • The death of Aylan • Public opinion	• Being a political power • Reconstruct a positive national image	• Wir Schaffen das! (We will manage it)	• To break the *Dublin Regulation* • Welcome culture

**Rationality is bounded by the tardy
problem identification and
inadequate information**
• Defense and Safety
• Diplomacy

**Rationality is bounded by the
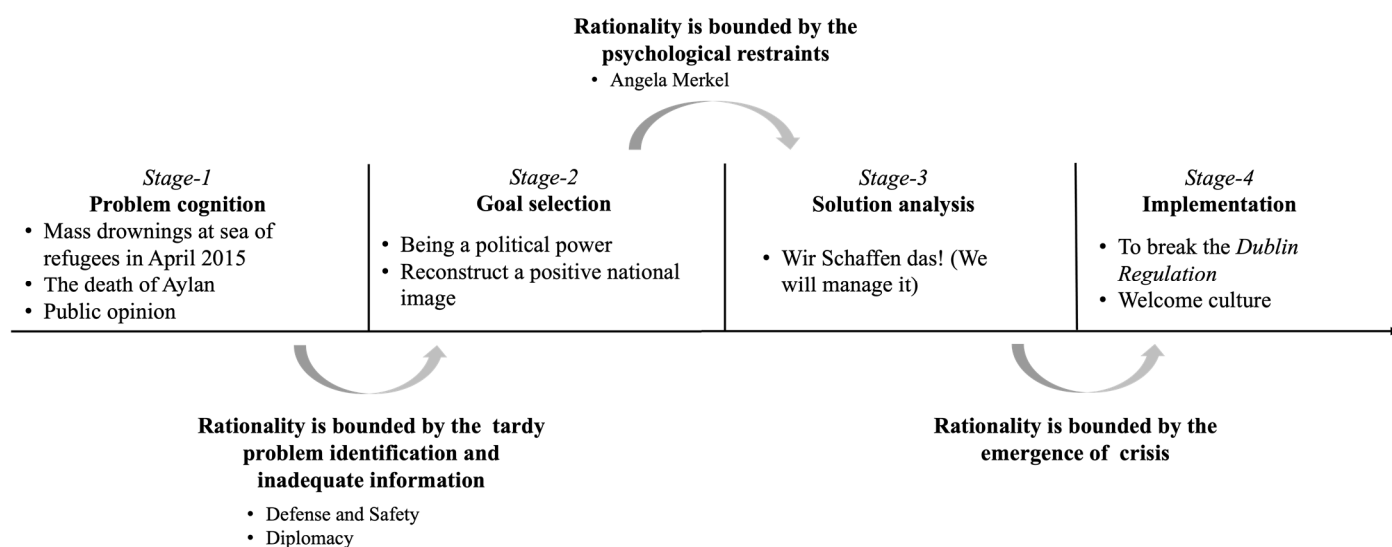emergence of crisis**

Figure 3. Diagram of the first shift in the refugee policy of Germany. Flow chart made by authors.

Key Events and Problem Identification

In April 2015, a series of shipwrecks involving refugees in the Mediterranean led to a heated debate on the refugee issue among EU countries. As a result, the European Commission proposed a defense against these successive incidents and suggested that member states should accept a binding "refugee quota" policy and share responsibility for them. However, the member states held different opinions on this. Finally, at the EU summit in June, the member states agreed on a defense policy based on strengthening border control and expanding the scope of search and rescue. Yet, the issue of "refugee quotas" is still under debate, and Germany has not shown any positive action during this period and was hesitant to accept refugees.

Although there was no consensus among the EU member states on the "refugee quota" policy, the influx of refugees to European countries was increasing. The German government only reacted passively and eased the Dublin Convention. In August and September of the same year, following the death of smuggled refugees at the Mediterranean Sea and the death of Aylan, and in the light of the international public opinion, the Merkel government made a radical change in its position on refugee policy. This change from "hesitant" to "welcoming" was based on the German government's national security and diplomatic concerns. However, in the context of a crisis, effective identification of the problem lags behind the events themselves, and rational "cost-benefit" analysis is often limited.

In an anarchic system, security is the primary objective of a state in the pursuit of its own interests. Germany's national security strategy is to maintain European order and a balance of power while ensuring its own security. Since a series of terrorist attacks

occurred in New York on 11 September 2001, the German Ministry of Defense (Safeguarding National Interests–Assuming International 2011) has defined security threats to Germany as events from failed states, acts of international terrorism, crime, natural climatic disasters, migration, etc. that could pose a threat to the country's critical infrastructure (Safeguarding National Interests–Assuming International 2011). In addition, the European refugee crisis of 2015 has created regional security instability for both the EU and European countries and threatens the development of European integration.

From a geopolitical perspective, Germany can be seen as the hub of Western European countries with many neighbors. The security of Germany's neighboring countries, therefore, has a direct impact on Germany's national security. At the beginning of the 21st century, the push from the United States for democratization and reform in the Middle East had led to a change in the international political landscape. As a result, the Middle East has become more unstable. Furthermore, with the growth and spread of ISIS, the EU countries have lost their "natural barrier" between Europe and the Middle East. Thus, the influx of refugees was threatening the borders of Europe.

The mobility of people within the Schengen states, an outcome of European integration, poses a challenge to the governance of the refugee crisis in European countries. Once refugees from the Middle East enter European countries, they can move freely within the Schengen area, making refugee control more difficult for European countries to operate, thus threatening the sovereign security of EU countries.

Diplomatically, Germany's diplomatic practice in response to the refugee crisis has mainly taken place between the EU and the main refugee transit countries such as Greece and Turkey. The diplomatic activities with the EU are mainly aimed at forming a unified goal and solution to the EU's policy on the refugee issue, attempting to bring the EU together and resolve differences in order to deal with the crisis together; in its interactions with the refugee transit countries, Germany's main diplomatic activity is to call on other countries to strengthen their border controls and try to reduce the scale of refugee movements northwards, in order to reduce its burden to a certain extent.

In terms of public opinion, it was also clear to Merkel that the German public supported this policy when she made this decision. According to the results of the poll, the majority of those who took part in the survey (around 69%) were welcoming towards refugees, with the view that refugees for reasons of human rights, religion, etc. should be accepted, taking up the majority of the percentages, around 74% and 61.5%, respectively (Table 2). However, differences in views on religion were also evident, with almost 3/4 (approx. 72%) of respondents favoring the granting of residency to persecuted Christians but much lower on the Muslim status of refugees. Furthermore, the German public was more inclined to take in refugees on a temporary basis rather than granting them permanent residency or nationality in Germany. The general opinion of the German public interviewed was that the refugees should be repatriated once the situation in their countries of origin has improved (Gerhards et al. 2016). It is clear that the Merkel government's decision to shift to an open-door policy on refugees has been influenced to some extent by incomplete information. Despite the mainstream society's positive and tolerant attitude and the states' favorable policy to assist refugees, there is still skepticism at home regarding the issue of refugees.

For Germany, as we have mentioned, its security interests derive from maintaining its own security through the strength of the Alliance and working to preserve the Alliance's security. From this perspective, Germany's initial hesitation phase was an assessment of its own security and that of the Alliance. The shift to an "open-door policy" was also a remedy for Germany to maintain order at Europe's borders and to play a leading role in the EU's response to the refugee crisis.

However, the number of refugees and the consequences of the "open-door policy" have exceeded the expectations of the German government. The influx of refugees has, to some extent, increased the financial burden on the government (Figure 4). Furthermore, the difficulty of accommodating all the refugees in refugee settlements and the frequent

terrorist incidents have created governance challenges for the German government. Despite strict and relatively comprehensive integration legislation, the social integration of refugees has caused a degree of social dislocation in mainstream society. These problems revealed a need for more information in the government's crisis decision-making.

Table 2. Public opinion on the admission of different groups of refugees (%). Source from Jürgen Gerhards et al., *German public opinion on admitting refugees*, 25 May 2016, table made by authors.

| Reason for Seeking Asylum	Disapproval	Ambivalence	Approval	Mean Value
Subsidiary Protection (EU-Law)	10	8	81	8.9
Political Persecution because of . . . (Geneva Convention)	20	16	63	7.4
Human rights activities	14	12	74	8.3
Labor union activities	31	20	49	6.5
Religion (Christian)	14	14	72	8.2
Religion (Muslims)	31	18	51	6.7
Ethnic Minority	21	15	64	7.6
Homosexuality	27	16	57	7.1
Overall assessment of all reasons for seeking asylum	19	13	69	7.4
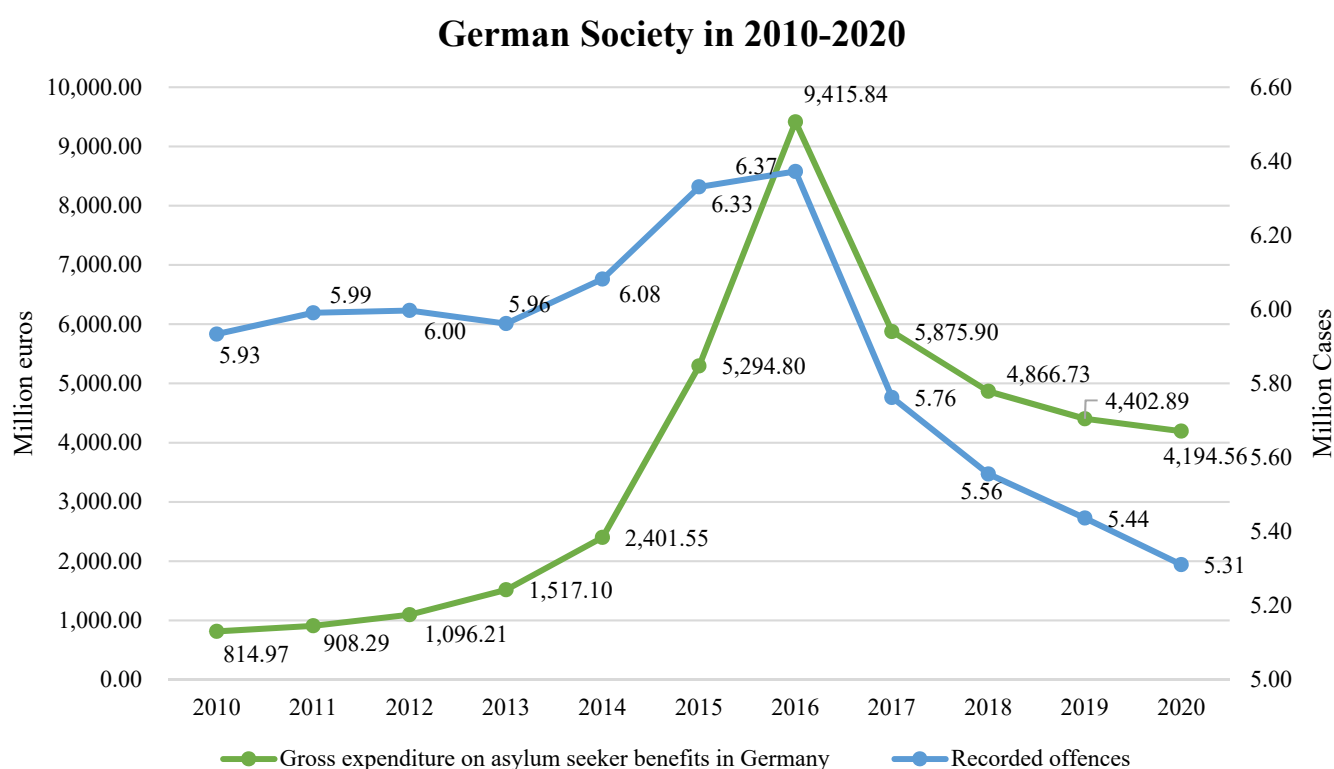
Figure 4. Refugee population in Germany (2006–2020). Source from Our World in Data, line graph made by authors.

Goal Selections of Merkel Government

The Merkel government's choice of goals on the refugee issue primarily reflects Germany's choice of national goals in the international community and the corresponding shaping of its national image.

A country's national image reflects a country's culture, politics, and other appearances. In contrast, the choice of goals reflects the macro-level influence, such as international status and prestige sought by a country (Wood 2018). Germany's choice of national goals and the international image was influenced to some extent by historical and moral factors, mainly

reflected in the pursuit of an international image as a "political power" and trying to escape the negative image of the Second World War through positive diplomatic practices. After the reunification in 1990, the then Chancellor Helmut Kohl assured Europe that a united Germany would consolidate the stability of Europe. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty was signed, and the then Chancellor renounced the Deutsche Mark and adopted the European single currency in Germany (Kornelius 2013). In this period, Germany's foreign policy was characterized by a desire to play a relatively vital role in Europe and to portray itself as a country that would maintain world and regional peace and assume more responsibility as a great power.

The performance of Merkel government's decisions in the refugee crisis also followed such a choice of national goals. Historically, the massacre of Jews in Nazi Germany resulted in the displacement of large numbers of Jews around the world and the death of a significant number of them. However, the West was not active in accepting and resettling Jewish refugees at that time. As a result, the Jewish people suffered from an existential hardship, which indirectly contributed to Hitler's misdeeds against the Jewish people. So, in light of the rather negative history of the Second World War, Germany was particularly cautious in dealing with refugees from the politically turbulent period in the Middle East.

The choice to open its borders to refugees and to simplify the application process is, therefore, a reflection of Germany's wish to act as a "leader" in European affairs on the one hand and to enhance its international image through this policy on the other, from a general moral and human rights perspective. The political instability in the Middle East and the impact of Islamic State terror on civilians are, to some extent, similar to the persecution of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany during World War II. Combining the lessons of history with a moral perspective, the German government believes that refugees should not be treated with indifference in order to prevent them from contributing to the power of terrorist organizations. From a moral standpoint, the German government believes that there is a duty to help those who have been displaced, and in this way, calls for European solidarity to address the challenges posed by the refugee crisis.

Psychological Restraints on Decision-Making

All countries' foreign policies are ultimately made by their leaders and decision-makers. Therefore, the political psychology factors of leaders have an important impact on the formulation of foreign policy.

In his book *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, James D. Barber (2009) proposes a way of analyzing the reasons for leaders' decisions, namely by analyzing their character, style of action, world view, and power situation in order to obtain a relatively complete picture of them and to explain their decision-making behavior in terms of their political psychology. The so-called character is, in fact, the inseparable and integral issue of the leader as a "rational person" and an "emotional person", reflecting the tendencies of the leader; the style of acting reflects how the leader carries out his duties; the worldview reflects the way the leader sees the problem; the power situation reflects how the leader responds to the political reality, whether it is a positive change or a status quo. All of these analyses of leaders require us to revisit their childhood and upbringing environment, as these abstract concepts are often shaped as they grow up. In this section, we will first review Merkel's childhood and analyze the reasons for her "welcome policy" during the refugee crisis in light of her personality, style, and worldview.

Angela Merkel spent her childhood in the GDR. Born in a Lutheran pastor's family, she had a relatively open family environment and a "carefree" childhood (Kornelius 2013). As a teenager, she witnessed the establishment of the Berlin Wall, the displacement of people from East Germany to West Germany, and the loss of life and death. Her love of travel, interacting with people from different countries, and forming friendships also resulted from her relatively open family environment. Growing up in this environment, Merkel developed her own way of looking at problems and solving them—by comparison (Kornelius 2013). This is a predominantly "rational" character. When Merkel first entered

politics, she presented herself as a person of unparalleled rationality. This rational character has led Merkel to develop her distinctive planning style—identifying and qualifying issues before making any decisions and never acting rashly. Stylistically, Merkel has a "facilitator" style, actively seeking a balance in her approach to issues. In her view, appropriate compromises within the sphere of interest can help to move things in the expected direction.

Merkel's attempts to transform Germany from a non-immigrant country to an immigrant country (Mushaben 2017) and to introduce active policies to facilitate the integration of immigrants are largely influenced by her former GDR citizenship and her personal style that influences her attitudes and policies when dealing with international issues. Having experienced the establishment and fall of the Berlin Wall, she knew that a strict border control policy would not prevent the development of refugee flows, and it was likely to lead to a more serious international humanitarian crisis with more severe consequences. Therefore, the German government has weighed the pros and cons and opted for an open-door policy, with Angela Merkel taking up the responsibility of receiving and settling refugees under the slogan "Wir schaffen das!"[2]

To sum up, Germany's foreign policy has evident "humanitarian" values. Under Merkel's leadership, Germany has developed a particular style of international relations based on the style of Merkel. This can be seen as one of the reasons why Germany has chosen a "welcoming culture" during the refugee crisis.

3.2.2. The Second Shift in the Refugee Policy of Germany

After a brief period of "welcoming culture", the Merkel government's refugee policy underwent a second shift in October of the same year from an "open-door" policy to a relatively strict admission policy. The reasons for this shift are examined in the framework of the same analytical model through an analysis of social conditions at home, national interests, humanitarianism, and realpolitik factors (Figure 5).
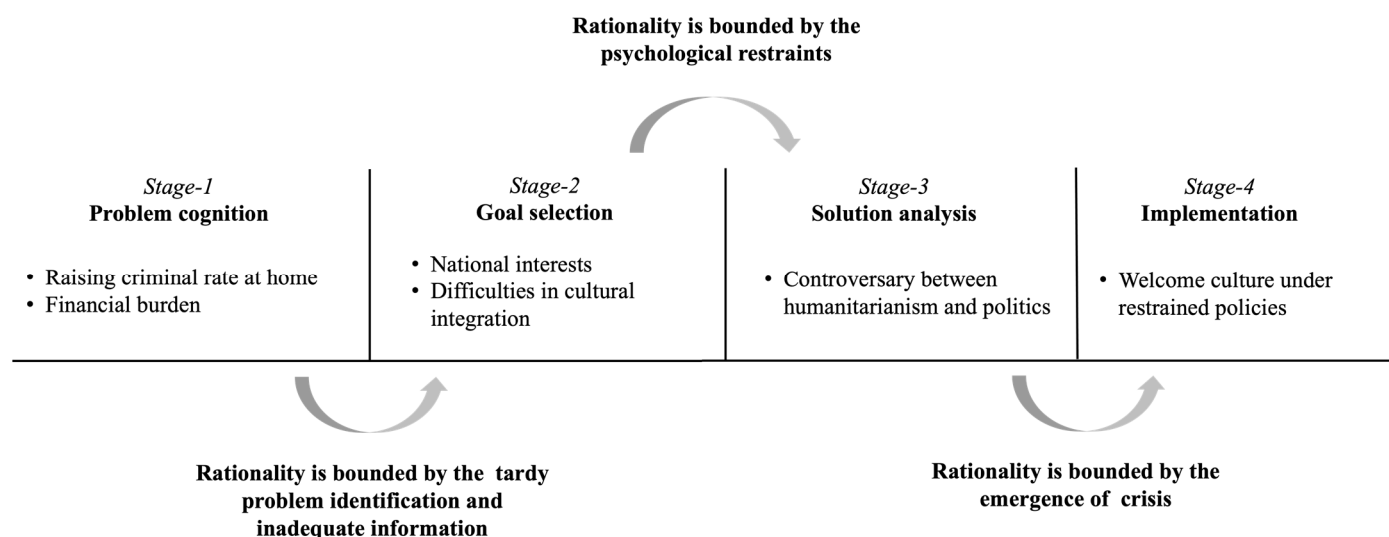
Rationality is bounded by the psychological restraints

Stage-1 **Problem cognition**	*Stage-2* **Goal selection**	*Stage-3* **Solution analysis**	*Stage-4* **Implementation**
• Raising criminal rate at home • Financial burden	• National interests • Difficulties in cultural integration	• Controversary between humanitarianism and politics	• Welcome culture under restrained policies

Rationality is bounded by the tardy problem identification and inadequate information

Rationality is bounded by the emergence of crisis

Figure 5. Diagram of the second shift in the refugee policy of Germany. Flow chart made by authors.

Key Events and Problem Identification

Terrorist attacks, high crime rates in society, the economic crisis, and the influx of refugees in 2015 were decisive factors in the adjustments made to refugee policy by the Merkel government.

In its published report, the German Federal Police (BKA) stated that 6.3 million crimes were registered by the German police in 2015, which was 4.1% higher than in 2014; the violent crime rate in Germany increased by approximately 10% in both 2015 and 2016 (Table 3, Figure 4). Since 2015, the German Federal Police has included a statistical module

on "crimes and suspects caused by immigrant groups" in its annual Police Crime Statistics (PCS). The data in this section show that the number of crimes committed by immigrant groups (including refugees) has increased since the introduction of the "welcome policy" and has remained at a high rate since the government reoriented the refugee policy (Table 4). In addition, we also noticed that there has been an upward trend of violent crimes, which were related to refugees. Those incidents were ranged from right-wing populism and extreme right-wing attacks on refugees to crimes committed by the refugees, which were likely to develop into terrorist attacks. We can, therefore, assume that the surge in crime in Germany is inevitably linked to the influx of refugees into Europe.

Table 3. Recorded cases by BKA (2010–2020). Source from BKA, *Police Crime Statistics* (Police Crime Statistics n.d.), table made by authors.

		Recorded Cases	
Year	**Suspects Total**	**Non-German Suspects**	
		Number	**Percentage**
2010	2,152,803	471,812	21.9
2011	2,112,843	484,529	22.9
2012	2,094,118	502,390	24.0
2013	2,094,160	538,449	25.7
2014	2,149,504	617,392	28.7
2015	2,369,036	911,864	38.5
2016	2,360,806	953,744	40.4
2017	2,112,715	736,265	34.8
2018	2,051,266	708,380	34.5
2019	2,019,211	699,261	34.6
2020	1,969,617	663,199	33.7

Table 4. Suspected immigrants (2015–2020). Source from BKA, *Police Crime Statistics* (Police Crime Statistics n.d.), table made by authors.

Year	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Suspected immigrants—total	136,588	151,009	165,769	167,268	174,438	114,238
Suspected immigrants by nationalities						
Syria	27,561	30,759	33,488	33,387	30,699	10,348
Afghanistan	14,750	16,815	19,040	18,632	8266	5927
Iraq	9835	11,119	11,956	12,921	5039	3625
Iran	5353	6130	5940	5915	-	-
Nigeria	5329	6237	-	-	-	-
Turkey	4319	4404	-	-	-	-
Somalia	3961	4471	4944	4844	4595	3371
Algeria	3641	-	4927	6108	9882	8430
Eritrea	3521	4325	4689	4989	-	-
Morocco	3320	3837	5094	6580	7684	5547
Serbia	-	3621	4197	5158	12,202	8710
Albania	-	-	4051	5692	17,466	9769
Kosovo	-	-	-	-	8332	6852
Georgia	-	-	-	-	7251	4575

In November 2015, a series of terrorist attacks (including bombings and shootings, etc.) took place in Paris, France. This terrorist attack was primarily the result of the recent influx of refugees into Europe in a short period, which brought social policing in France, as well as other European countries, to a near standstill. On New Year's Eve 2016, sexual harassment occurred in Cologne, Germany, where thousands of drunken men sexually assaulted and harassed women at the Cologne train station, seriously disrupting the social

order. Most of the suspects in this incident were from the refugee community who had entered Germany to apply for asylum.

These sudden threats to social security quickly caused social unrest. Not only did they allow right-wing parties within Germany to take advantage of the situation and put further pressure on the Merkel government, but the anger of the German public also spread throughout the country. Merkel's policy of open borders and bottomless admission of refugees gradually lost trust in the public, and her popularity rating plummeted. People have gone from confident "We can manage it!" to "Maybe we can manage it".

Social problems occurred continuously, and the population's mood has changed from optimistic to pessimistic. The Merkel government's desperate open-door policy for refugees was identified as an irrational one, and its effectiveness in tackling the refugee crisis was poor. The Assessment of the social consequences of refugee migration is a public opinion survey. The survey was carried out on public opinion in five areas: economy, cultural life, core values of society, the impact of the influx of refugees in the short term, and expected changes in German society. According to the statistics in the report, the proportion of pessimists outweighs supporters in all five areas (Table 5). The German public was very dissatisfied with the government's solutions to the refugee problem. It has become increasingly pessimistic in its perception of refugees, which has led to a growing polarization of opinion within the German public. The changing public opinion in Germany has also led to the development of the Patriots for Europe Against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) movement in Germany, which has undoubtedly contributed to the division of German society (Yin 2021). During the refugee crisis, Merkel's refugee policy has affected a large part of her popularity. Her initial public image gradually declined with the intractable refugee problem. This resulted in the fall of her approval ratings, seriously risking her subsequent re-election.

Table 5. Assessment of the consequences of refugee migration (%). Source from Jürgen Gerhards et al., *German public opinion on admitting refugees*, 25 May 2016, table made by authors.

	Consequences Are . . .		
	Rather Negative	**Ambivalent**	**Rather Positive**
Social consequences of refugee migration			
Is good or bad for the economy	39	23	39
Cultural life is undermined or enriched by refugees	44	21	35
Germany becomes a worse or better place to live because of the refugees	47	30	23
The core values of our society are undermined or enriched by refugees	51	30	18
The influx of refugees bears more risks or opportunities in the short term	74	11	15
The influx of refugees bears more risks or opportunities in the long term	48	15	37

In terms of economic development, the Merkel government's refugee policy was also necessarily linked to the economic situation at home. Due to the fact that most refugees came from volatile countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and most do not speak German and lack the qualifications needed to find a job, the German government, under the Integration Act, was required to spend significant amounts of money and related financial outlays to secure basic accommodation for refugees, as well as to give them the necessary training in language, culture, and work to help them integrate quickly into German society. According to figures released by Deutsche Bank and the German Institute for Economic Research in late 2015, each unemployed refugee costs the German government €12,000 per year, and only around 8% of refugees are able to find work in Germany within the year of their arrival. Moreover, Germany's 2017 economic growth rate has been decreasing since 2018, with a GDP growth rate of 2.5% in 2017 and 1.5% in 2018, a 1% decrease compared to

2017. As a result, Germany's economic development continues to deteriorate, which will further limit public expenditure in Germany (Yin 2021).

Accordingly, taking into account factors such as domestic social order, terrorist attacks, public opinion, and the economic crisis, the Merkel government, using the principle of government satisfaction, has had to make adjustments to its refugee policy and implement a stricter refugee policy in order to reduce the economic burden on the government and prevent Germany from losing more money in all areas.

National Interests

The fundamental basis for the implementation of national policies is the national interest. In this study, Germany is the interest-led state in responding to the refugee crisis, and the national interests of Germany determine the direction of the policy in refugee governance. The Merkel government's refugee policy is intertwined with multiple stakeholders, and the dynamic evolution of the government's policy on the refugee issue is a process of contestation between different stakeholders (Tao 2018). As a result, policymakers must constantly adapt their policies to the interests of different stakeholders at different periods.

On an international level, the response to the refugee crisis is not a matter for one country but for all EU member states. In this wave of the refugee crisis, Germany is acting as a leader in response to the refugee problem. By being open and promoting cooperation between the EU member states through diplomatic means, Germany has established itself as a significant power and has demonstrated its leadership in dealing with the refugee problem. However, as the refugee crisis gradually lost its way, the population of refugees increased dramatically in a short period, causing a series of social problems. As a result, the initial policy implemented by Germany began to be condemned and questioned by EU countries and, to a certain extent, affected the influence of Germany in the EU.

The nature of the refugee problem in Europe is a result of the divergent interests of the EU member states. Yet, the collective action and refugee quota programs pursued at the European level do not take the interests of all countries into account.

On a domestic level, the German government, represented by Angela Merkel, is the dominant stakeholder, while other political parties and the German public are the stakeholders. In the beginning, Germany's "welcome policy" was implemented thanks to the general concept of "European responsibility" and "humanitarianism", which enjoyed the support and trust of certain political parties and the public in Germany. However, due to various problems that threatened the public interest and even the national interest, public support plummeted, and Merkel's support in the general election was also negatively affected. As the core interests of stakeholders were compromised, refugee policy had to be re-tightened, taking into account the interests of all parties.

From a cultural perspective, the implementation of the refugee reception policy has led to significant challenges of cultural conflict and integration, and the differences in cultures have led to difficulties in social governance for the government.

As Huntington (1996) argued in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, the most widespread and vital danger and conflict in the post-Cold War world is the conflict between people belonging to different cultural entities. The arrival of refugees in host countries, while allowing for the integration of different national cultures and the intersection of different living customs, cannot avoid the numerous unresolvable problems of cultural conflict, which have even become a key factor affecting refugee policy.

One of the most severe cultural integration problems is religious disputes. According to data on refugee asylum seekers provided by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF 2016a), the main countries of origin of refugee asylum seekers in 2015 were Syria, Albania, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Serbia, where the country had been invaded and where there had been political interference in the country. The population of refugees from Syria ranked a high level, with a total of around 150,000 people, of whom 86.2% are of the Muslim faith. However, the total number of Muslim refugee asylum seekers was approximately 322,800, representing 73.05% of the total refugee asylum seekers

(approximately 441,900). Almost all of these refugees come from Islamic countries where Islam is practiced. Their arrival in Western countries has led to a certain degree of religious conflict between Western Christian civilization and Eastern Islamic civilization. Therefore, considering that Muslims are also involved in terrorism and radicalization, the unequal forces of intercultural confrontation, and the emergence of German cultural interests, the Merkel government is acting cautiously, and the refugee policy is changing in accordance with the situation.

Contradictory Humanitarianism and Realpolitik

There is an irreconcilable contradiction between humanitarianism (centered on humanity) and realpolitik (centered on material power). The refugee problem is not only a humanitarian problem but a political one within a country or even a region. In itself, the refugee problem results from political games between actors in the international landscape and internal political instability within states. Thus, a global humanitarian refugee problem of displaced populations seeking refuge (asylum) is caused.

The solution to the refugee problem involves global governance, which requires the participation of the international community. However, each actor's participation in the governance process also involves policy-making, with politics at its core. As a result, there is a contradiction between humanitarianism and realpolitik. Thus, a nation's policy in response to the refugee issue also has a dilemma between humanitarian and realpolitik. This complex relationship has also led to a lack of timely and practical solutions to the refugee problem, which has long plagued the international community.

Germany's refugee policy and its evolution reflects the contradictions and conflicts between humanitarianism and politics. As we have mentioned above, Merkel's personality determines her style and influences Germany's performance in international affairs. Merkel has a predominantly "rational" personality, which compares different solutions to problems and actively seeks a balance. Merkel has a yardstick in her mind, and this is no exception when it comes to refugees. Therefore, the German government's reorientation of its "welcome policy" to a relatively strict refugee examination system in a short period is a balance between humanitarianism and realpolitik (i.e., national interest).

The economic, political, and social costs of this humanitarian aid after Germany's active "welcome policy" and the social dislocation of the refugee issue in the country's social governance have increasingly required policymakers to review and adjust the refugee policy, reflecting the fact that the country's refugee policy has always revolved around national interests. The initial "welcome policy" was based on the German government's desire to be a leader and a responsible power in the international community, particularly in the EU. However, when refugees began to threaten the domestic order, national security became the overriding national interest. So, when national interests were compromised during the refugee policy, policymakers had to review the policy and make adjustments.

We would like to point out in particular, however, that after the tightening of the refugee policy, Germany still has a humanitarian component in its policy and has been taking in refugees. However, it is a policy of compromise between humanitarian realpolitik. Germany has not refused to accept refugees under the tightened refugee policy but has been stricter in its examination of refugee status for reasons of national interest, and the current policy is more political than the humanitarian considerations of the initial "welcome policy", which is the result of the games and pressure exerted by many parties.

4. Discussion

The paper aims to explore how the Merkel government made decisions at different phases in response to the refugee crisis in Europe, as well as to discuss what factors influenced the development of the Merkel government's refugee policy and its transformation in the short term. We argue that the traditional rational decision-making model is ineffective in explaining governments' motivations in complex decision-making environments. We, therefore, developed a framework for analyzing bounded rational decision-making. We

concluded from the theoretical concept of bounded rationality and the case study regarding the European refugee crisis in 2015 that the Merkel government's decisions in the process of responding to the refugee were influenced by a combination of four factors: (a) problem identification, (b) goal selection, (c) national interests, and (d) political psychology. At different phases of the response to the crisis, each decision was made in the context of a particular rationality, i.e., rationality is bounded.

The complexity of the refugee problem itself is compounded by the intertwined contradictory nature of a country's refugee policy as a balance between humanitarianism and realpolitik. This makes it difficult for decision-making teams to achieve a fully rational policy. For example, the Merkel government also faced the same dilemma in 2015 when responding to the refugee crisis—how to find a balance between refugee resettlement and national interests and where to make the appropriate compromises so that the policy could move the issue in a positive direction.

In this article, we have developed an analytical framework based on bounded rational decision-making to explore the evolution of Merkel's government's refugee policy and its causes. The results reveal that in the first phase, the Merkel government underestimated the potential influx of refugees and, under pressure from international public opinion, formulated a hasty "welcome policy" by breaking the Dublin Convention and opening its borders to refugees. However, the reality is that the Merkel government's tardy identification of the problem and a certain ambiguity about the relevant information led to an uncontrollable development of the "welcome policy" in a short time, leading to a series of problems such as social stability, economic development, and cultural conflicts. The consequent adjustment was a return to a policy based on the primacy of national interest and security and introduced a more rigorous refugee examination system.

Undoubtedly, Merkel's refugee policy has transformed Germany into a "nation of immigrants". From a socio-cultural perspective, the multicultural character of German society will become more visible. However, as one of the most important groups of migrants, refugees, with their diverse cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs, will pose a more lasting and far-reaching challenge to German society, particularly in terms of their interaction with and integration into mainstream society. In terms of social governance, it is also necessary to prevent social dislocation, to protect the legitimate rights and interests of different groups while at the same time taking into account the sentiments of the local communities, and to avoid the use of extreme right-wing forces to incite xenophobia and lead to social conflicts.

The refugee policy implemented by Angela Merkel's government has increased the size of the refugee population and, to a certain extent, has also improved the size of the German population. It is suggested that mobility people should adapt to any labor market with proper education and training (Ullah et al. 2019). In this context, the influx of the refugee population in Germany could fill certain labor gaps and bring development opportunities if they received proper training, or the competitiveness of a country may be threatened.

The results of our study have some relevance for policymakers in the country where potential refugee issues may occur. The regions along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, these regions include Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and Europe, where many potential refugee-exporting countries are in existence. Therefore, improving cooperation on refugee governance among member states within the Belt and Road Initiative is integral to responding to potential crises. In addition, through economic aid and technical support, the development of related industries could improve the regional economy and pay attention to regional environmental protection, thus improving living conditions and reducing the number of refugees through international cooperation to achieve mutual development.

For policymakers, it is of great significance for them to weigh the pros and cons before implementing relevant policies. Introducing a guidance to help the refugee population to integrate the mainstream society and help them to join the labor market, such as en-

couraging them to start up small businesses, could be a way out for maintaining a good social order (Almohammad et al. 2021a, 2021b) and facilitate the integration. In addition, these remedies can also ease the burden on the hosting country's government. Since the decision-making environments are becoming more complicated, and the factors that cause displacement are becoming variable, the evaluation of the consequences of refugee influx and the ability of the refugee population should be developed accordingly.

According to our research findings, a country's refugee policy cannot be analyzed as an isolated foreign policy. On the contrary, it is an interaction between different parts of society, both domestically and globally. As a critical issue in global governance, countries are adjusting their refugee policies in response to the development of the potential crisis while also intensifying international cooperation on refugee governance in the hope of resolving the underlying problems of refugees and creating a peaceful and stable international environment for global development.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study takes Germany, a typical case of refugee crisis management in Europe, as the subject of the study and develops an analytical framework for "bounded rational decision-making". As the refugee crisis is distinguished from other traditional crises, the governmental decision-making process is, to some extent, accordingly different. Thus, the result of this study can have several implications for the policy study regarding the non-traditional crisis, especially the refugee crisis. Since the traditional rational actor model does not consider situations where complete information may not be available or the relatively subjective concept of foreign policy, there could be a more realistic approach when analyzing a country's foreign policy toward a non-traditional crisis. Consequently, the result of the study can provide us with a new perspective on analyzing foreign policy.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Studies

Despite the fact that we have formed an analytical framework to analyze the reason why a country amended its refugee policy and how the government makes decisions during the refugee crisis, the study still needs to be completed. Countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq also suffer from severe refugee problems. The specificity of the refugee problem in these countries and how the refugee policies of different countries internationally may affect these potential asylum seekers needs to be further compared and studied. Therefore, a broader case study related to the refugee issue is needed, and the evaluation of the policy's validity and effect should be considered in future studies.

For the first time in history, the number of people forced to leave their homes due to war, organized violence, fear of persecution, and human rights violations has exceeded 100 million since 2022. It is argued that forced migration affects a growing number of people while the internationally agreed institutional mechanisms for management are weakening. Research in related fields has focused on specific theoretical and empirical perspectives, thus contributing to the ideological debate on migration and integration policies and governance. Thus, we would like to take the country's policy design, the interaction between different roles (e.g., refugees, local dwellers, officials, etc.), and how ideological or religious perceptions influence the integration process into account.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1]   Angela Merkel is the then Chancellor of Germany, who served from 2005 to 2021. She was the first woman chancellor and the second longest-serving chancellor in German history. Under her leadership, Germany has experienced a remarkable development. In response to internal and external challenges, Merkel maintains a political "middle way", which will be discussed in the third part of the article.

[2]   Researchers have different views on the impact of the slogan. Some researchers argue that Merkel's slogan has exacerbated the refugee problem, while others argue that it has had little impact, that there were already a large number of refugees applying for asylum beforehand, and that the signal it sends gives refugees some hope. The slogan was neither the origin of the refugee crisis nor did it deepen it (Pries 2019; Mushaben 2017; Spijkerboer 2016).

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