

# The COVID-19 pandemic and refugees. A scoping review

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## ABSTRACT

Refugees increasingly become part of the European societies. Afghans, Syrians, Ukrainians fled their countries due to war, conflicts, persecution, and settled, temporary or not, in more stable countries. During pandemics, with openness towards foreigners shrinking, and borders closing, the situation of refugees might become uncertain. Our scoping review explores what academics considered relevant about refugees to Europe in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal increasing resentment against immigrants, a need for redesigning European migration policies, preparing welfare systems, asylum protection mechanisms, and societies as a whole, in order to prevent disruptions in the eventuality of large-scale crises. Such implications are to also be considered for the consequences of the current Russian aggression on Ukraine.

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## Introduction

Academic communities reacted promptly to the COVID-19 pandemic. Publishers witnessed an increase of submitted manuscripts to all types of outlets, sometimes being quickly published at the cost of lower quality assessment (Horbach 2021). The pandemic influenced life in all its aspects, but some life-domains were more obviously impacted. For instance, in Europe, closing borders was a major symbolic challenge to the European

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Union itself (Opilowska 2021). The practice, encountered in other parts of the world too, had immediate consequences on international migration flows, and on the life of immigrants affected in their transnational behaviours (Bissonnette and Vallet 2021). This leads directly to the core question of this paper: which aspects of everyday life were inspected by academic literature in relation to the effects of COVID-19 on international migrants?

More precisely, we are interested to understand what subjects were considered worthy to be studied in relation to the intersection between the pandemic and international migration. Within the large number of topics related to international migration, we single out the studies on refugees to Europe. The interest derives from two other global events that directly point to refugees: a few years before the pandemic, a refugee crisis occurred in the European countries, related to the Syrian civil wars, and, immediately after the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine reintroduced the problematic of refugees in the forefront of European public agenda.

In other words, within less than a decade, three salient negative events were likely to determine how refugee issues are dealt with by public opinion and decision makers. Two of these events were generating refugees. COVID-19 affected everyone, and it is likely to have put a strain on migrants in general and on refugees in particular. The positioning of European societies with respect to the new refugee flow probably depended on the experiences they had during COVID-19. Therefore, we consider the academic research on refugees during the pandemic to draw potential lessons for reactions during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. To do so, we run a scoping review of papers on immigration and COVID-19 included in the Web of Science database (WoS). Among them we focus on the ones referring refugees to Europe, we stress the main themes, and we consider the mix provided by attitudes of the receiving societies, observed behaviours with respect to refugees, refugee needs, and policy changes. They build up into the societal reaction to the refugee flow and allow us to discuss, in the conclusive part, the expected reactions of European societies towards refugees, during societal crises. Such an event is the Ukrainian war, that comes along with high economic stress on European societies due to the energy crisis and also brings considerable numbers of incoming refugees. The question is

particularly relevant, knowing that under societal stress, people tend to retreat to more traditional stances (Inglehart and Baker 2000), which also encompass less benevolence towards those in need. They trigger representations upon legitimacy of redistributive actions and feelings of deservingness that are in turn directing policy and helping behaviours (Petersen et al. 2011; Holmes et al. 2021), in particular in a contemporary welfare state where 'the social protection of citizens has become more conditional and selective' (Oorschot and Politics 2000).

The novelty of this paper is to provide a review of the literature devoted to refugees to Europe during COVID-19, placing the depicted facts in the broader context of international migration during pandemics.

The remaining of this paper inspects first the literature devoted to refugees to Europe, then depicts the methodological details of our endeavour. The section of findings starts with statistics related to key concepts vehiculated in the study of international migration during COVID, shows how they are grouped among the 846 considered papers. Then, we focus on refugees to Europe, showing how the 88 considered papers are related to the literature on international migration during COVID-19, and then we explain in detail the main topics related to refugee situation during pandemic. The discussion wraps up everything and indicates policy recommendations and potential future research directions.

## **On international migration and refugees to Europe**

International migration is about crossing borders (Hollifield and Wong 2022) and attracted a lot of attention from social sciences in recent decades, being seen as driver for progress, shaping the structure of society, as factor for trouble, as needed for demographic replacement and increasing labour force, as strain on policy for integration, bringing challenges to citizenship and human rights, etc. (Fitzgerald 2022; Hollifield and Wong 2022; Abraham 2022). The interest towards migration paid by social sciences in their early days, and even more recently, was low in Europe, and stronger in the US, reflecting the composition of societies, and the existing migration flows (Fitzgerald 2022; Hollifield and Wong 2022). However, starting the mid-twentieth century, its ubiquity brought migration to the top of the research

agenda. Scholars from Europe and other parts of the world followed their societies in the interest towards depicting migration flows, integration and assimilation processes, attitudinal stances, fluidity and liquidity of migration. Even more recently, continuous flows of refugees reshaped the type of interest towards the phenomena (Abraham 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic came in the middle of increasing societal debate about immigration (Kousis, Chatzidaki, and Kafetsios 2022), with salient examples in Western societies provided by political campaigns. Iconic figures such as Donald Trump (and his Mexican wall) in the US, Brexiters in the UK, or Viktor Orban (and his Southern barber-wire fence) in the Central Europe build part of their discourses by stressing the ‘perils’ brought by immigrants and refugees. Countries that were traditionally built based on waves of immigrants, such as the US, Canada, or Australia, societies that more recently experienced increasing incoming migration such as Southern Europe or Arabic countries, older societies of emigration (African ones) or more recent sources of outgoing migration (former communist block) were globalized by the phenomenon. The societal debates were discussing in a way the globalization itself, the new global melting pot.

For instance, freedom of movement was essential in the European Union, and the Schengen agreement was already a defining feature of the Union. Overnight, all the daily commuting and within EU migrations were (temporary) stopped by COVID-19 restriction, which included closure of borders, and relaxation meant infinitely more strict border control as before pandemics, which lasted at least two years. Fears that travellers would boost risk for transmitting the virus justified the closing of borders, but exceptions were made for nationals, and the border closure affected mainly migrants, to a different extent depending on whether they moved within the EU or they were outsiders (Triandafyllidou 2022b).

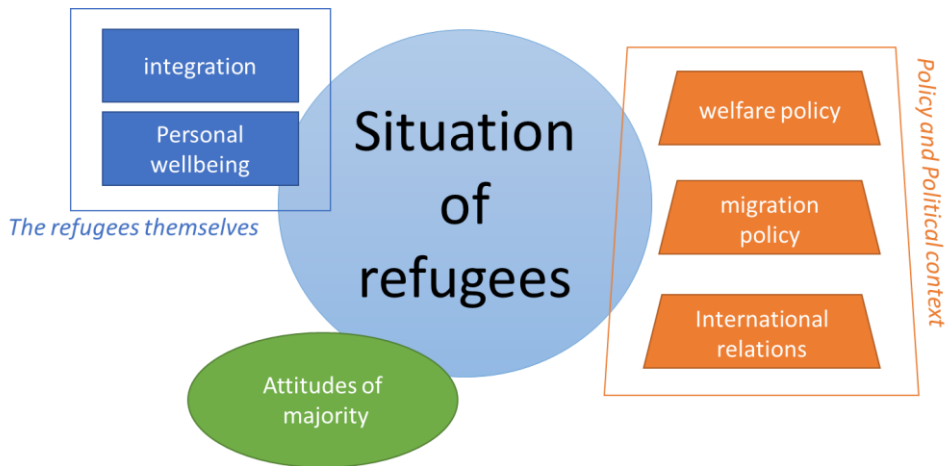
Just before the pandemic, the agitated climate with respect to immigrants, became even more tensed, due to incoming refugees as results of wars or dictatorial regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, and culminating with the Syrian refugee flow. The latter triggered a variety of reactions at individual level, depending on personal and societal conditions (De Coninck, Ogan, and d’Haenens 2021), also shaking the inter-state agreements. The Mediterranean constituted the first

route to be followed from Syrian to Western Europe, and it was complemented quickly by the terrestrial Balkan route, connecting Greece and Turkey to Austria and Italy through the Western Balkans (Triandafyllidou 2018). The route was repeatedly severed, for instance by closing the border between the Austria and Slovenia or through the EU-Turkey agreement to control the flow.

Also considering the recession in the end of 2000s, COVID-19 added as a third global major crisis in a decade, challenging again the balance of international migration (Kousis, Chatzidaki, and Kafetsios 2022). With such repeated threats relevant for international migration, in the context of the already mentioned fast publication of manuscripts during COVID-19, we expected from the very beginning a flourishing literature related to pandemics and international migration. Therefore, beyond exploring the main themes defining the academic interest towards international migration, we have chosen an in-depth reading of a narrower field and focused on refugees to Europe. The choice was natural in the above-depicted context, and we decided to direct it a priori towards a set of themes that we expected to be important during pandemics.

Recent books on refugees (Billings 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh ; Marino 2021; Triandafyllidou 2022a) reveal main topics of interest for refugee studies, and direct our choice of themes: integration, as pervasive topic in migration studies; access to welfare provision, essential for such vulnerable group that leaves everything behind running from wars and dictatorship; psychological impacts, as consequence for refuge itself; relation to families, which might be scattered around the globe; gender issues; attitudes of the host society, in particular within the context of repeated crises, and political debates around the immigration processes; the migration policy itself, as expression of such debates; the inter-state relations, deriving mainly from border control; implication of NGOs in the (tailored) services provided to refugees. The selected themes build up to depict the plot that defines the situation of refugees. As Figure 1 suggest, refugees depend on how they feel (the rectangular area in the figure), how policy is constructed, and how society feels about them. The latter is also likely to be reflected in policy responses, but some delay may be noticeable.

**Figure 1.** *Rationale for selecting the themes of interest: factors that determine the situation of refugees*



Our endeavour is based on depicting changes in these fields based on academic publications. Academic literature naturally reflects academic interests and competencies. They depend, in turn, on long-term research agenda setting, which is the result of an interplay between individual professional interests of scholars as agents of this agenda, the difficulties related to the research topic, and the constraints brought by environmental characteristics (Santos and Horta 2018). The latter constraints include the themes that grant-funding bodies defined as relevant to be researched. In a nutshell, academic literature has the advantage to reflect what scholars and societies consider relevant for a certain topic at a certain point in time. Thus, the scoping review of the literature enables the understanding of major processes and events that were noticeable in studying international migration during COVID-19 and serves our goal to understand how crisis affects the situation of refugees.

In addition, we decided to consider whether the selected studies exhibit important methodological innovations, considering the constraints brought by pandemic conditions.

## Methodology

Scoping review is a proper method for exploring a field of knowledge, and it has become more and more popular (Pham et al. 2014), although not always employed in a very transparent way (Tricco et al. 2016). It consists of investigating what has been produced/studied within a certain theme or topic, allowing for broad pictures of a certain field to be formed. This type of review is particularly suited when working with emerging subjects or developments (Munn et al. 2018), making it possible for the researchers to address heterogeneity in the scientific production under review.

Our interest was on how issues related to migration were studied at the intersection with the pandemic, we used the following search string on Clarivate's Web of Science (WoS) in order to obtain a thematically relevant selection: ("international migration" OR emigrant\* OR immigrant\* OR migra\* OR refug\* OR asylum\*) AND (covid\* OR pandemic\* OR sars-cov-2 OR coronavirus), at the same time making a selection of the fields of study, as presented in the appendix. The selection was intended to avoid including health studies discussing the migration of the virus. The timeframe for the search was March 2020 – April 2022. 1562 records were retrieved, out of which 1474 were excluded, either for not being related to migration at all (716), or for not being related to refugees in Europe (758). 88 entries remained, 2 of them were unreachable and the remaining 86 were subject to in-depth reading. Out of the 86 studies read extensively, 21 were excluded from the present analysis because they were found not to treat the theme of refugees in Europe during the pandemic, and a final total of 65 are discussed here. All of them are briefly depicted in the online appendix.

The 846 studies (=1562-716) referring to migration and the pandemic, were firstly subjected to network analysis, in order to depict the entire context constructed by these papers. The method is borrowed from scientometrics, which searches patterns and trends within the publications. To a certain extent, keywords, abstracts, titles, etc. can summarize the content of the material, overcoming the limitations of qualitative analysis of scientific knowledge (Bar-Ilan 2008), including the "preferential effect" (Barabási and Albert 1999) or the distortions induced by citation metrics (Aksnes, Langfeldt, and Wouters 2019).

Our approach is based on keywords. Authors can specify keywords, to ascertain the research focus, most publishers asking for a number of words or syntagms that depict the fields of interest of the paper. Some journals add keywords to increase visibility and relevance for searches in libraries of any kind. Despite the keywords are not standardized, and their relation to the title does not follow strict rules (Lu et al. 2020), they have the advantage to synthetically define the main topics in the corpus of literature that we have selected.

Among the 846 studies included in our database<sup>†</sup>, WoS provides only the authors' keywords for 301 entries, only supplementary keywords for 58 entries, both types of keywords for 412 entries, and no keyword at all for the remaining 86 entries. For the latter, we have derived keywords from the titles of the articles, using NPL (Natural Language Programming) techniques. 5288 unique keywords resulted. They were re-coded by the first two authors based on conceptual similarity, and further reduced by the third author using various Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, to a final list of 1921 keywords. For network analysis we have removed 'COVID-19', 'pandemic', 'Coronavirus', 'SARS', and related forms, since they were the contextual selection criteria. However, we have kept as anchors the terms that constituted the substance for the selection: immigrant, migration, and their semantic families.

What and how was published in response to COVID-19 varied as time passed, and thus the timelapse between submission and publication and indexation is one of the limitations of this paper, as it means the involuntary exclusion of a corpus of studies that were written in March 2020 – April 2022 but published and indexed after April 2022 when we did our search. Books and book chapters are also under-represented, due to the longer publishing timeframe that they suppose.

Nevertheless, the authors of this review had personal feelings related to the quality of the corpus of literature, some papers being of different quality as compared to others. However, assessing the value of one or another publication is beyond the scope of this research, and, on the other hand, does not affect the conclusions related to the direction towards academic literature points in its effort to understand immigration during

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<sup>†</sup> Available online at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/N5MCMB>.



COVID-19, which was our actual target. In addition, WoS is a more restrictive database, therefore choosing it to select the corpus for analysis prevents at least partly from using highly unreliable publications as input in our research.

In the following, main findings are introduced, starting with the network analysis, and then with a structured qualitative description of what the literature considered relevant in relation to refugees to Europe and COVID-19 pandemics. The online appendix provides additional data on network analysis, along with full bibliographical information that otherwise could not fit the space limitation of a journal article.

## **Findings**

The 846 studies included in the original selection of papers related to both migration and COVID-19 cover a range of research areas, depicted in detail in the online appendix. Four fifths are from social sciences. 5% can be broadly classified as science & technology, while 8% were in health. The presence of papers related to health studies in the sample shows that the domain-constraint as selection criteria did not exclude relevant papers, which could enter our selection when displaying an interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, 11% of the studies are labelled as economics, 13% behavioural science, 11% humanities, and a few in architecture. The sum exceeds 100% since the categories are not exclusive and some studies belong to several domains. Among the 88 entries that deal with refugees, 77 are from social sciences, 15 from behavioural sciences, 9 from health studies, 5 from humanities, 3 from economics, and 2 from science & technology.

Within the whole sample of selected papers, after trimming the COVID-related terms, the most frequent keywords relate to concepts such as migration (293 papers), refugee (157), immigrant (121), health and health systems (71), race and racialization (70), labour migration (66), mental health (65), (im)mobility (57), crisis (49), border (44).

## Network analysis of keywords

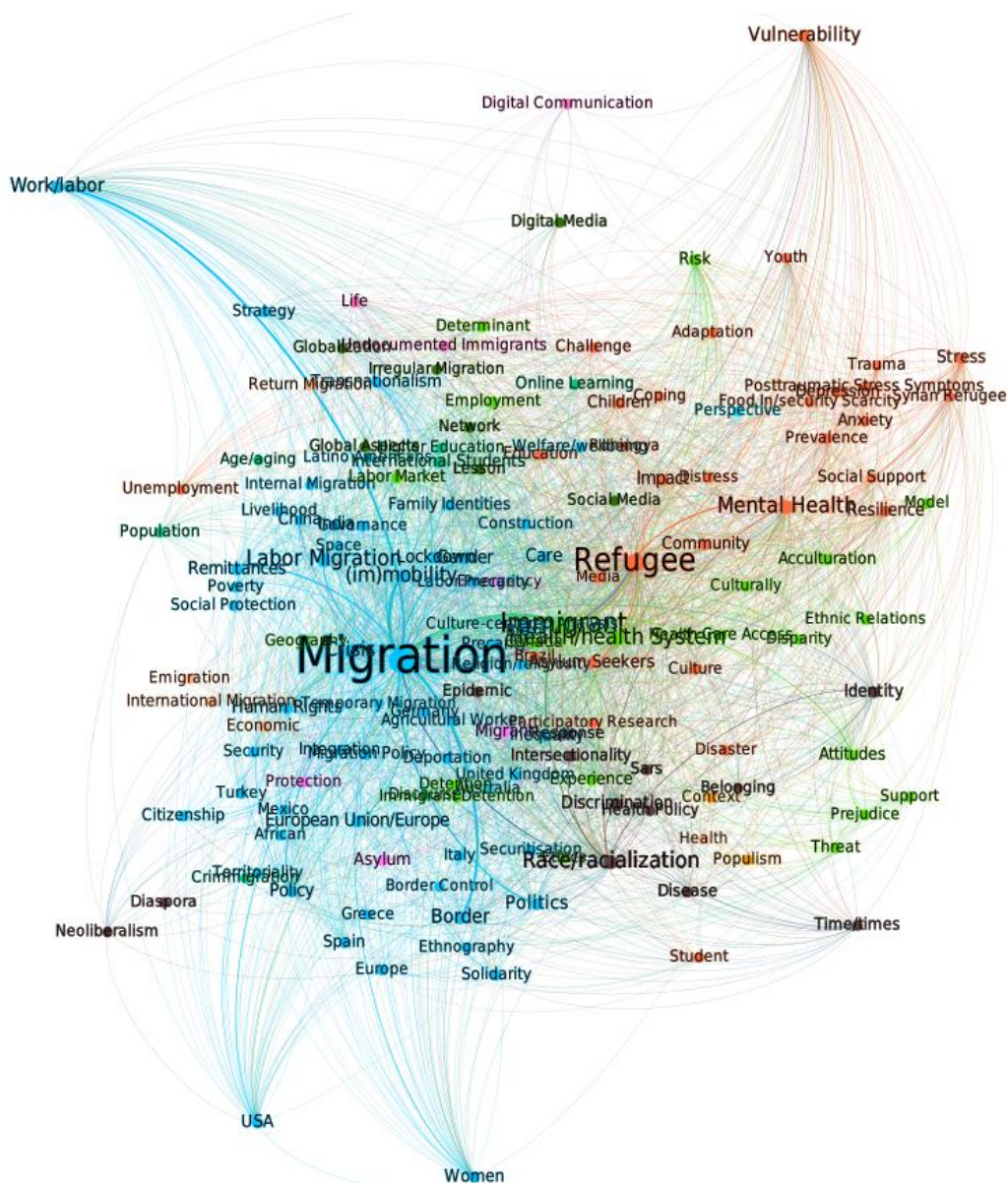
Figure 2 depicts the resulting network in simplified form, by including only recoded keywords that appeared at least 8 times in the database. Details are provided in the online appendix. The network diameter is 5, meaning that the two farthest nodes are separated by 5 connections, which is similar to the natural distance between individuals (Backstrom et al. 2012), showing a quite large heterogeneity in the corpus that we analyse. The graph density of 0.01 indicates that only 1% of the possible edges were observed. We conclude that keywords are quite well isolated, and their co-occurrences are rare enough to become meaningful when observed. The average path length of 2.65 indicate a quite dispersed network, within which one can identify meaningful communities. Contrasting the average path length to the average cluster coefficient of 0.79, we observe once more a quite high variation within the data, indicating that we can proceed with analysing the communities of keywords.

A modularity of .349 indicates moderate strength of the connections within the 22 communities. Top 20 most frequent keywords are included in four communities. The most extended community fluctuates around 'Migration' (closeness centrality=.62; eigenvector=1.0), and includes 'crisis', 'work/labour', 'mobility', several country/area names (the EU, USA, Spain, India, China, the UK, etc.), but also 'border', 'care', 'precarity', 'integration', 'gender', 'women', 'human rights', 'policy', 'politics'. This is a community of multiple themes related to migration, not very specific, but comprehensive through its inclusiveness of terms.

The second community has 'refugee' as salient term (closeness centrality=.58), and brings into focus 'vulnerability', 'mental health', 'Impact', 'education', 'unemployment', 'resilience', 'stress', 'social support', 'youth', 'children', etc. Again, we observe a community that includes welfare provision, but as compared to the first community, the favour is given by the attention to vulnerability, young ages, and psychological impacts. These themes overlap to a great extent with the topics that we have selected based on reading literature existing before COVID-19, but attitudes of the host society, policy, and international relations, that is the aspects that are related

to the host as structure with less direct connection to refugees as agents, are to be found in different communities.

**Figure 2.** *Filtered network (keywords with frequency larger than 7)*



A third community includes 'Immigrant' which comes along with 'detention', 'risk', 'attitude', 'threat', and, saliently, 'health'. It depicts immigrants as a threat, with a particular reference to health, but keeps the generality of the other communities, and continues to include keywords from various other domains.

The fourth community that includes keywords that are among the most frequent gravitates around 'Discrimination'- 'Identity'- 'Race/racialization', the latter being the salient term. The community also stresses 'inequality', 'disease', 'blame', 'intersectionality', 'social relations', etc.

Apart from these four communities, only one more includes over 100 keywords as members. It is quite heterogeneous, with no keyword having a closeness centrality larger than .5. The community includes 'world', 'global', 'protection', 'violence', 'state repression', 'integrity', 'mobility', 'restriction', 'camp', etc., suggesting a slight tendency to group terms that refer to movement of immigrants within

### **Qualitative reading of themes related to refugees**

Most of the papers in our selection provide an empirical or philosophical part focused on refugees in Europe. A few do not fulfil this requirement, but treat the problematic at global level, with examples and assertions devoted to European countries or to the continent as a whole. In the following, we do not distinguish between the two approaches, but we focus on the presence of the themes from our reading grid.

### ***Integration***

Overall, the integration issues were not core to the studies in our corpus of literature. Most of the papers addressed them as implicit consequences, or simply do not address them at all. The exceptions stress either the labour market, the typical playground in integration studies, which was heavily affected by pandemic, or approach cultural integration.

Focusing on Austria and Sweden, Bešić, Diedrich, and Aigner (2021) suggest that the pandemic had three major consequences on reshaping the provision for **labour market integration**: it leads to the redirection of funds, measures and policies from refugees to the population as a whole, especially to those who lost their jobs in the COVID-19 turmoil; it determined fast developments in digitalisation; and it generated a high level of volatility on the labour market, which poses difficulties not only directly to refugees, but also to how support policy is designed. Moreover, refugees and asylum seekers constituted an already vulnerable group, often integrated into the informal labour market, a sector that has been greatly affected by the pandemic, exacerbating difficulties to integrate (Elçi, Kirişcioglu, and Üstübcü 2021).

Falkenhain et al. (2021) reach convergent conclusions for Germany. Instead of looking at policy, they consider refugees' work-related experiences and draw attention to how pandemic led to increased (perceptions of) vulnerability for refugees. While acknowledging variation in refugees' experiences, they notice disruptions in the labour market and uncertainty generated by the pandemic. Both phenomena interfere with the integration process, making it more difficult.

Wisso and Back-Wiklund (2021) focus on cultural differences and **cultural integration** in the case of Syrian refugees to Sweden and their fathering practices and show how the restrictions in place during the pandemic challenged traditional child-rearing models. Feelings of belonging to the host community were enhanced by access to digital communication resources (Mancini, Imperato, Vesco, and Rossi 2022).

### *Psychological impacts*

Mental health dominates the discussion on psychological impacts, being a recurring theme, often addressed marginally, as part of the negative impacts brought by the pandemic situation (Allouche and J.H. Te Lintelo 2022), but also as main focus of the research (Alimi et al. 2020; Alpay et al. 2021; Hodes 2022; Kira et al. 2021; Kurt et al. 2021). For instance, Ünver and Perdahlı Fış (2022) observe a decrease in the number of refugee children who applied for a mental health outpatient unit in Turkey during the pandemics, and

estimate that such a decrease would lead to negative effects on the long run. In turn, Peprah (2020) considers potential effects in the case of older refugees, that face a “double vulnerability”: they are both old and refugees.

### *Attitudes of the host community/society*

The presence or absence of **discrimination** is addressed in most papers, either directly (Holle, Rast, and Ghorashi 2021; Nimer and Rottmann 2022), or indirectly (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2021). The divide between citizens and non-citizens is seen in terms of access to protection and of equal rights (Aitchison 2021; Garcés Mascareñas and López-Sala 2021; Nimer and Rottmann, 2022). Nimer and Rottmann (2022) claim that Syrian refugees in Istanbul were losing their (precarious) jobs in the first phases of pandemics, to be employed in even more precarious jobs at later stages. Consequently, they were used as buffer for macro-level economic distress, in a silent societal strategy.

Bohnet and Ruegger (2021) stress that faulty access to information and severe lockdowns have the effect to catalysing **tensions** between refugees and local communities. Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić (2021, 75) note a fracture between reports on disparities in accessing health care and a public discourse that defines migrants as carriers of the virus and agents of contagion and a **health threat** (Avraamidou and Eftychiou 2022; Lenzerini 2021).

Some studies identify **mixed feelings towards immigrants**. In their focus on the Syrian refugee flow at the Greek-Turkish border, Avraamidou and Eftychiou (2022) identify a first period during lockdown when messages on Twitter were overwhelmingly negative, followed by an increasing salience of positive tweets. From a different perspective, but within the same geography, a difficult situation was reported for refugees with small unregistered businesses, which remained unprotected by governments, as illustrated by examples from Istanbul, but there are also accounts of employers offering loans to their (former) employees in order to compensate for pandemic distress (Nimer and Rottmann 2022).

Adam-Troian and Bagci (2021) also show that the pandemic can be associated with both negative and positive feelings/attitudes towards

immigrants, in this case Syrian refugees. An external threat can lead to the formation of ingroups, including natives and immigrants as well, as they are both affected by the pandemic. At the same time, the perception of a threat is likely to strengthen the existing social boundaries and ingroups/outgroups, and thus to anti-immigrant feelings/attitudes.

Switching the perspective, the **attitudes of refugees towards the host society** are rarely addressed in the selected papers. One such example can be found in Barn, Di Rosa, and Kallinikaki (2021), who explore the reactions of unaccompanied minors to COVID restrictions, and briefly observe their history of distrust in institutions, and recallings of imprisonment in the home countries.

### *Access to welfare services and housing conditions*

Considering **welfare provision and social protection**, the papers in our selection tend to converge upon the idea that shrinking access during COVID-19 crisis was particularly affecting migrants (Alimi et al. 2020; Barn, Di Rosa, and Kallinikaki 2021; Byrne 2021; Nimer and Rottmann 2022), combined with improper living conditions and pre-existing lack of access to social services in case of refugees (Garcés Mascareñas and López-Sala 2021; Tsiganou, Chalkia, and Lempesi 2021), and contributed to further traumatizing them (Kira et al. 2021; Schestag et al. 2021). Cumulative effects are also visible, such as those of pre-existing vulnerabilities (sex and gender-based violence, for example) and being cut off from social protection services, resulting in enhanced feelings of abandonment and uncertainty in their new country (Philimore et al. 2022). Refugees' access to resources, such as information or sanitary equipment was scarce, especially in centres, rendering them unable to protect themselves against COVID (Budak, Özer, and Özkan 2021; Lentin 2022; Murphy 2021; Subbaraman 2020). In addition, the pandemic triggered a high reliance on telework and limited social contacts, which heavily challenged professionals working with refugees (Nisanci et al. 2020; Schestag et al. 2021).

**Access to education** repeatedly comes into focus. In the absence of physical interactions, non-verbal communication is basically impossible, which is that much important in cases in which there is a language barrier

that needs to be surpassed, such as for newly arrived adolescent immigrants and refugees (Primdahl et al. 2021). Kutscher et al. (2022) look at dimensions of educational inequalities in participation and in outcomes of digital education, concluding that they deepened during pandemic times, in the sense that young refugees were even more disadvantaged as compared to native youth. In their case, disruptions in education often trigger disruptions in access to other services they would normally be referred to by their teachers (Primdahl et al. 2021). Barn et al. (2021) referred to educational access for unaccompanied minors and observed a plethora of barriers and bottlenecks. Fersch, Schneider-Kamp, and Breidahl (2022) show that parental behaviours during the pandemic, related to children's school activities, are influenced by parents' access to resources and local knowledge, also problematic in the case of asylum seekers.

**Housing conditions** and **access to healthcare** are often characterized by precarity. Byrne (2021) enlists concerns expressed by Médecins sans frontières with higher risks to become infected with COVID-19 in case of homeless people. The author stresses that among those 'sleeping on the streets of Paris' there are 'migrants and refugees' (p.8), and follows the campaign of Médecins sans frontière, arguing that unhoused migrants face high inequalities to access medical care and are likely to experience a quickly deterring health.

Access to healthcare is a recurring theme, appearing in conjunction with refugee children (Ünver and Perdahlı Fiş 2022), unaccompanied minors (Barn et al. 2021), or with refugees in general (Budak et al. 2021; Tsiganou et al. 2021; Jacobi & Rich, 2022; Nimer and Rottmann, 2022; Waterman et al. 2022). Aragona et al. (2022), using data from a telephone survey on 81 immigrant patients with mental disorders, argue that access to proper medical services, while crucial for one's state of health, is difficult in the case of vulnerable groups. They show that the pandemic impacted on access to medical facilities and admissions, treatment adherence, due to the problematic accessibility of treatment itself, but also due to the inability of patients with precarious socio-economic status of using online tools and resources (for online therapy). Inaccessibility of various medical services, including those aimed at offering protection from COVID-19, is also studied by Tsiganou et al. (2021), in the Greek context, the authors showing that



undocumented migrants and asylum seekers constituted invisible populations in Greek public policies during the pandemic.

A special attention is paid to refugees living in **refugee camps**. Ligety (2021) depicts a technical solution to connect producers of container-shelters and administrators of refugee camps. However, most of the literature is concerned with living conditions in such overcrowded facilities (Bohnet and Ruegger 2021; Subbaraman 2020). In their case, due to social distancing restrictions, the pandemic was coined to produce effects on health (overcrowding makes it impossible to contain the spread of the virus; refugees' access to health services), economy (most refugees have informal jobs, and the informal economy was severely affected by the pandemic/lockdown), legal issues (given the mobility restrictions), informational aspects (emphasizing the importance of information regarding the virus and the lockdown, in connection with the faulty access of refugees to information).

The observed cumulative negative impact becomes an overall security challenge for refugees, visible for instance in the Balkans (Libal et al. 2021; Zavrtnik and Cukut Krilić 2021). Instances in which state-driven marginalisation is alleviated/resisted through individual and community caring practices are described (Tsavdaroglou and Kaika 2021), and the importance and effectiveness of localising assistance and of refugee-led organisations is mentioned (Easton-Calabria 2022). Proposed policy implications include the evacuation of severely overcrowded refugee camps, in order to have access to utilities, such as water, provide access to medical services such as vaccination and early diagnosis, as well as to information. The solution is coined as leading to a "more sustainable planning of refugee settlement" (Bohnet and Ruegger 2021, 362), and to function in normal times as well, as the 'natural experiment' provided by COVID exposed as being possible (Waterman, Pillay, and Katona 2022)

### *Migration policy and immigrant rights*

**Numbers** are generally invoked by most considered papers when it comes to use the size of the refugee influx as justification for the need to research the problem. Several papers also consider the general trends in refugee flows

(Barn et al. 2021; Palattiyil et al. 2021), stressing for instance the importance of 2020 as the year with the lowest resettlement rate due to barriers raised by social distancing policy and border closures (Barnes and Makinda 2021).

Beyond such barriers, the general view is that the **protection system needs to be strengthened**, as its weaknesses were exposed by the current pandemic (Allouche and J.H. Te Lintelo 2022; La Spina 2021). When commenting the policies implemented by European states towards refugees and migrants, Comte (2021) indicates a more coercive asylum policy at the level of the entire European Union. Focusing on actional details, Barn, Di Rosa, and Kallinikaki (2021) discuss how COVID-19 restrictions impacted on the reception and guardianship systems in Southern Europe. The theme of pandemic-driven disruptions in human rights of forced migrants and of deterring international migrations (Barnes and Makinda 2021; Crawley 2021; Čučković 2021) is also accompanied by an emphasis on the need for a revised migration policy, precisely focused on guaranteeing these rights (Barnes and Makinda 2021; Braithwaite et al. 2022; Lenzerini 2021; Libal et al. 2021) and improving the current conditions in asylum seekers and refugee centres, which do not allow for implementing pandemic related recommendations (Bhimji 2021; Murphy 2021).

**Financing policy** appears as concern with lower levels of available funding due to pandemic distress (Subbaraman 2020; Bešić, Diedrich, and Aigner 2021), or as discussion upon alternative funding schemes (Mahomed, Unal, and Mohamad 2021). Changes in regional level policy are the focus of Ferraresi (2022), who noticed that, in the case of Italy, the allocation of refugees by region changed during the pandemic, favouring the regions less exposed to the virus. According to Pumares, Ríos-Marín, and López-Mora (2021), the pandemic brought a series of disturbances in how the Spanish system for the reception of refugees works and it impacted heavily on the process of reaching/gaining personal autonomy. Administrative issues associated with the sanitary crisis are related mainly to communication and the need to rely heavily on digital resources, which is hindered by the digital divide. Furthermore, as the sanitary/COVID-19 crisis began to unfold, the attention and the resources allocated to asylum seekers/refugees and their integration and safety have been diminished (Garcés Mascareñas and López-Sala 2021).

The **fear that nationalists** will use the pandemic as pretext to tighten border control and repel migration flows is repeated in a couple of papers (Aitchison 2021; Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip 2020). Other studies link the policy responses to racism (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2021) or identify xenophobic and racist stances in the messages on Twitter referring to Syrian refugees at the Turkey-Greece border (Avraamidou and Eftychiou 2022).

References to the 2015 refugee crisis stress the fact that this pandemic merely accentuated the existing divides, and the use of extreme actions such as fences and other barriers meant to block migration flows (degli Uberti and Altin 2021). Blocking the route to Italy from Slovenia is the typical example for how migration policy and inter-state relations were reshaped during COVID-19. The example is extracted from Altin and degli Uberti (2021), a paper focused on the evolution in time of the 'Balkan route', a path for irregular migrants and refugees from Southern Greece to Italy, through the former Yugoslavia. The argument is that the pandemic served as pretext to rebuild wired-fences and reinstate the border control removed by the Schengen Agreement (that allows unrestricted movement from any EU-country to another except for Cyprus, Romanian, Bulgaria, and Croatia, but including Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Lichtenstein). The action is claimed to be almost explicitly aimed against flows of immigrants.

For Čučković (2021), the unpreparedness or inability to cope with the pandemic is the one that leads to using COVID-19 as pretext to deter immigration to EU. Barnes and Makinda (2021) also claim that COVID-19 was just a pretext, express worries since pandemics may become regular, and stress the violations of human rights that were tacitly instilled by states. Reports also indicate that the pandemic accelerated some changes towards **conservative stances in migration and protection/asylum policies**, centred on multiplying restrictions on mobility and strengthening borders, leaning towards state-centrism (Garcés Mascareñas and López-Sala 2021; Ikotun, Akhigbe, and Okunade 2021).

In the same line, Meer, Hill, Peace, and Villegas (2020) present vocabularies of exclusion and identify new discursive resources for the (racial) states in defining/referring to refugees brought by the pandemic, centred on the 'disease metaphor', a powerful othering tool that reinforces social borders. The authors draw attention to the fact that the pandemic

affected asylum seekers especially hard, as it brought limitations to mobility, including through the withdrawal of international protection. It also multiplied their exposure to social threats, while bringing specific health risks.

Poland's bordering practices during the pandemic are discussed by Klaus (2021), with a focus on how these practices are dependent on migrants' status, economic migrants or refugees, or personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, religious orientation or nationality. While the pandemic was associated with immobility and the closure of borders, these measures were directed towards the unwanted migrants, often breaching the non-refoulement principle – asylum seekers, especially Muslims or from distant countries. Economic migrants were allowed entry, deemed as essential workers, whereas, in the case of asylum seekers, Belarusians constituted an exception, as there were lax admission procedures concerning them.

### *International relations*

Relations between European states shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic are mentioned solely in the context of reception policies (Altin and degli Uberti 2021; Comte 2021; degli Uberti and Altin 2021; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020). They typically refer to the attempts to stabilize the refuge flows, to repel refugees blocking their access to a specific country or to the entire European Union, and to ensure redistribution of refugees between EU countries. In other words, the findings in this area confirm the reluctance to receive new migrants, including refugees, that was already stressed in the previous section.

### *Other themes*

A few themes that we have considered relevant before inspecting the corpus of selected papers, prove to be rarely addressed. Gender appears in constructivist approaches to identity, when non-binary persons also are in the focus (Holle, Rast, and Ghorashi 2021; Tschalaer, 2022), or in explorations of structural violence against refugees who are survivors of sex

and gender-based violence, connected to a higher vulnerability for women (Phillimore et al. 2022). Family reunification is discussed solely in the context of unaccompanied minors (Barn, Di Rosa, and Kallinikaki 2021). The activity of NGOs is marginal in some studies (Mahomed et al. 2021), and becomes central in Kim (2022), who focuses on advocacy communication on Twitter.

### *Adapting research methodologies*

The overall perspective related to research methodologies creates an extensive repertoire of methods, some quite innovative and flexible, developed in reaction to challenges posed by social distancing measures. An intense usage of online resources is noticeable, and videoconferencing as channel for data collection.

Byrne (2021) brings media reports as empirical proof for her argumentation. Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić (2021) exploit interviews with experts and refugees that were already posted online, in a specific media: blogosphere. Different communication channels, namely Zoom, Viber, Messenger, phone calls are mentioned as solutions to carry out other interviews, adapted to the constraints imposed by social distancing (Nimer and Rottmann 2022; Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2021). Within the rich information recorded in the webinars flourishing across the world, one may also find its sources for content analysis (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2021)

Adam-Troian and Bagci (2021) test whether the threat of COVID-19 is related to anti-immigrant or pro-immigrant feelings in Turkey, using various types of data, including online searches, available through Google Trends, aggregated at province level. They used the number of COVID-19 cases as a measure of the objective threat, and computed an index for subjective threat, retrieving corona-related searches/keywords in Google searches. Reports by Google Trends on searches for the far-right parties in Turkey, combined with vote shares in the 2018 elections are used to construct a proxy for anti-immigrant attitudes.

Holle Rast, and Ghorashi (2021) propose a participative approach centred on personal experiences with the pandemic phenomena, collected through videoconferences as art narratives (music, poetry, graphic designs, etc.) and biographical interviews.

A reflexive essay (Tzoraki et al. 2021) discusses the position of refugee researchers and their risk while doing their job in pandemic times. Nevertheless, such concern is not unique, being also expressed with respect to humanitarian workers involved in reception and sheltering procedures related to refugees (Barn et al. 2021; Lenzerini 2021).

## Discussion

The network analysis of the 846 studies extracted from WoS reveals, beyond a general an interdisciplinary interest for the effects of COVID-19 on international migration, four specific thematic directions. They stress the problematic of refugees, the one of migrants seen as health risk, discrimination and racialization, and respectively internationalization and globalization. Among the 65 articles on refugees to Europe used in the in-depth reading, we noticed heterogeneity in following methodological standards, which is in line with Horbach (2021). As mentioned previously, it was beside our scope to assess their quality, and they provide useful information beyond the robustness of the findings.

The reviewed articles discussing the theme of refugees in/to Europe seem to converge on the idea that the pandemic had a greater influence on refugees and asylum seekers, as already vulnerable groups, compared to natives. The multiple vulnerability is emphasized in its various dimensions, from access to welfare services and living conditions, to cumulative traumas that further complicate the situation of refugees and asylum seekers, who faced discrimination and rejection. Besides this broad perspective, implicitly or explicitly centred on individuals and on how they experienced the pandemic, a more structural one is also identified, focused on the relation between states and individuals in the logic of granting/receiving international protection.

The themes that we have selected a priori as potentially important covered all the important topics observed in the list of papers. The core interest expressed towards integration is almost absent in itself, but it is reflected through defining the pandemic as a structural change or a specific structural condition and, consequently, as having ample effects on integration. Not only the routes or strategies of accessing resources for

integration processes were affected by the pandemic, but also the means and the possibilities and infrastructures of providing such services. Thus, the activity of service providers during the pandemic was also into focus. Access to welfare services and housing conditions is the recurrent theme with the highest number of associated articles. Subthemes, such as education, healthcare, living arrangements and conditions especially in refugee centres/camps, proved to be crucial in the unfolding of the structural responses meant to stop COVID-19 from spreading. For each domain, the pandemic worsened an already difficult situation in terms of access. The psychological effects also come into attention, often mediated by the complicated access to services.

The pandemic also triggered the reshaping of attitudes of the host community towards a broad category of otherness, specifically towards the invisible and undocumented. Nevertheless, studies also mention positive feelings triggered by facing this crisis together, but negative stances are prevalent. What seems to be rather absent in the data that we analysed is the perspective of refugees themselves, which can suggest particular distributions/displays of power/assertiveness skewed towards host societies. Including the voices of refugees as raw data more consistently in the production of knowledge would allow for more comprehensive discussions on the broad theme of forced migration and its stakes. In what concerns migration policy and immigrants' rights, the articles under review are convergent in stressing that the pandemic generated a shift in an already problematic balance between states and displaced populations, in terms of security concerns (states) and issues related to human rights and individual safety. Attention is paid to exclusionary processes, vocabularies of exclusion and operational definitions of otherness, in which the dividing line between citizens and non-citizens, natives and foreigners is deepened.

Themes such as family reunification, NGOs' activity or gender make up for minor appearances. However, the issue of intersectionality, often implicit in studies on gender, is highly relevant for research on refugees and asylum seekers, as they constitute a prime group that can facilitate understandings of how different variables/individual characteristics intersect and generate distances, discrimination, othering.

From a methodological perspective, a high reliance on online surveys and digitally mediated interactions is noticeable, as a natural consequence of social distancing rules in place in most countries. However, it is difficult to assess whether such tendencies, along with employing texts that are available on the Internet as primary raw data, are due to the pandemic or are independent developments.

As we have argued, with COVID being consequent to the Syrian refugee crisis, and partly overlapping with the Russian invasion in Ukraine, our findings become useable for feeding in policy and action related to the Ukrainian refugee flow, or other undesirable but potentially forthcoming global-level negative events. It becomes salient that tailored welfare provision to refugees is key to addressing their needs, along with (pre-emptive) communication campaigns designed to address increasing negative stances towards asylum seekers. At European level, refurbishing the migration policy and adding clearer provisions for inter-state relations within and outside the Union are necessary to prepare intervention in case of hazard occurrences.

Our research revealed the main themes that were present in relation to COVID-19 and international migration in the first years of the pandemic. The ex-post analysis allowed understanding what *was* relevant in the field (Lu et al. 2021). Further research is needed for *ex-ante* identification of future trends in this area.

A positioning exercise is possible given the current events in Ukraine.

Let us recapitulate. The overall pandemic situation shows worsening in the situation of refugees., none of the analysed papers suggesting otherwise. The individual position of refugees themselves is under siege. Reviewed analyses observed less integration, in particular in the labour markets, where discriminatory practices are noticed. There are also continuous challenges to psychological wellbeing. Institutional instruments also suffered, and welfare provisions were diminished. In migration policy, reports show the persistent tendency towards reiterating conservative stances, including more entry barriers. Last but not the least, attitudes towards refugees deterred, announcing potential deterioration of friendliness of migration policy.



In this set up, with the pandemic just about to get to an end, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought a new strain. The deterioration of economic conditions in virtually all European countries is likely to lead to increasing resentment across regular publics, which adds to the already decreasing favourability to provide support to refugees and redistribute wealth towards those in need. The additional increase in the refugee flow is not helping in this respect. Sympathy towards those in need was shown to fluctuate during pandemics (Voicu et al. 2021), and reached lower levels when the threat was perceived as stronger. In addition, the already decreased willingness to help, observed during pandemics, is likely to produce effects into the institutional framework, preventing refugees to enter European countries, and limiting the support. Nevertheless, this might be less applicable to the Ukrainian flow, which is comprised mainly of European people, more similar to the host societies than the ones coming from non-European countries. European countries, which also experience the increasing of conservative and nationalistic stances, would be tempted to develop individual migration policy, being less prone to common EU- or cross-European approaches.

To sum up, we expect this new global challenge to worsen the potential help that refugees receive. In addition, with the slower economic growth and with the increasing military expenses, less money will be allocated to welfare provision. This is likely to be reflected in fewer tailored policy actions, which are more expensive, less money for awareness campaigns.

In other words, we expect the during- and post-war developments to go in the exactly opposite direction that we have recommended as being the most suitable in the light of looking of the findings of academic research of refugees during COVID-19. This adds supplementary weight to our findings, and raising awareness upon the unfortunate consequences of the current situation becomes necessary.

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