

Summary: ‘Welfare Pluralism and a Policy Window in Refugee Policies: The Emergence and Proliferation of Community Sponsorship in Europe, 2013–2023’

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Welfare Pluralism and a Policy Window in Refugee Policies: The Emergence and Proliferation of Community Sponsorship in Europe, 2013–2023

Executive Summary

- Europe's rise in displaced people, surpassing one million both in 2015 and 2023, has driven interest in community sponsorship (CS) as a flexible, EU-endorsed model that partners states with private actors to support refugee admission and integration.
- Policy changes emerged when refugee crises aligned problem, policy, and political streams, opening windows for CS adoption; however, crises alone were insufficient as successful uptake required policy entrepreneurs, political decision-makers, and public support to frame CS as a viable and legitimate solution.
- CS spread through adaptive policy transfer rather than direct copying. European states emulated, hybridised, synthesised, or drew inspiration from the Canadian model, producing diverse programmes including proper CS, humanitarian admission programmes (HAPs), humanitarian corridors, and complementary pathways linked to employment and education.
- Liberal, conservative, and Southern European models of social policy proved most conducive due to their openness to welfare pluralism, while social democratic and post-social countries avoided full CS due to concerns about equality, privatisation of integration, limited capacity, or public resistance.
- Ideology is not a reliable predictor of CS adoption, as left, right, and centre-led governments, including ones led by parties with restrictive immigration policies, implemented CS. The programmes offered controlled, small-scale, politically manageable refugee admissions and began as pilots that reduced political risk and enabled capacity-building and cautious expansion.

Introduction

- Europe experienced a sharp rise in displaced people over the past decade, with first-time European Union (EU) asylum applications spiking from 250,000 in 2012 to over 1.2 million in 2015, and over 1 million in 2023.
- CS is a broad and inconsistently defined concept involving partnerships between states and private actors to support refugee admission and integration. It originated in Canada and has gained traction in Europe, actively encouraged by the EU.
- **The increased interest in the adoption of CS programmes reflects a trend towards welfare pluralism, where combined inputs from the state, commercial sector, and civil society work collectively in the creation of goods and services related to welfare and wellbeing.**
- The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) recognises the flexibility and variety of CS programmes and categorizes them through three models:
 - CS linked to state-led resettlement programmes
 - CS linked to civil society-led humanitarian admission programmes

- CS is linked to other complementary pathways such as family reunification, employment pathways, and education pathways
- The authors adopt the EUAA definition of CS, but further differentiate six types: proper CS, HAPs for extended family members, humanitarian corridors, ad hoc targeted CS for specific groups, higher education pathways, and employment pathways.

Theoretical Frames of Analysing CS in Europe

Multiple Streams Theory and Policy Windows

- John Kingdon's multiple streams theory serves as the frame for observing how policy change occurs when the three streams of problems, policies, and politics converge, creating a policy window for entrepreneurs to intervene.
- **Policy windows often arise during or after crises, which can function as focusing events that reveal problems, relax institutional constraints, heighten political attention, and make ambitious or risky reforms more acceptable.**

Policy Transfer and Policy Entrepreneurs

- **Refugee crises encourage policymakers to look abroad for proven solutions, leading to policy transfer, where policies from other contexts are borrowed and then adapted to local conditions.**
- Policy entrepreneurs such as officials, NGOs, experts, and international bodies play a central role in initiating, promoting, and implementing transferred policies. **Pilot programmes can serve as strategic tools for entrepreneurs to reduce political risk, demonstrate feasibility, and pave the way for broader policy adoption.**

Social Policy Models

- Social policy models vary in how they balance responsibilities between the state, market, and family, shaping each country's openness to welfare pluralism and to CS programmes subsequently.
- **Based on regime characteristics, social democratic states where the state dominates welfare provision are expected to be the least receptive to CS, while liberal regimes are likely to be the most open to adopting such programmes.**

Political Parties

- **Political parties, especially those in power, shape immigration and refugee policies and can influence where CS programmes are adopted. While these programmes require no new legislation, it largely depends on political will and administrative support.**

- Studies have shown both left and right governments may support restrictive policies, and both can also back resettlement initiatives; however, they are becoming less predictive as cosmopolitan and communitarian ideologies become more influential.
- **CS can act as a pragmatic middle ground in politically divided societies, as demonstrated in Japan.** It helps manage the ‘liberal-democratic’ paradox of refugee policy by reconciling tensions between citizens who want to voluntarily welcome refugees and those who oppose refugee admission altogether.

Methodology

- The authors conducted extensive desk research, compiling 182 texts on CS with 53 sources focused on Europe, and detailed matrices were constructed to analyse programme characteristics, contexts, and outcomes.
- Only CS programmes involving controlled arrival, national-level cooperation, private sponsorship, and housing support were included, resulting in 19 programmes across 13 European countries being excluded.
- Social policy models were identified using class and contemporary literature, while political party analysis relied on comparative datasets to determine ideological composition and immigration stances.

Emergence and Development of CS in Europe

Refugee Crises and Policy Windows as Facilitators

- Three major refugee crises (Syria/Arab Spring, Afghanistan, and Ukraine) **aligned the problem, policy, and politics streams, opening policy windows that enabled the rapid emergence of 20 CS programmes in Europe between 2013 and 2023.**
- **Crises alone did not guarantee policy adoption, with policy entrepreneurs and politicians needing to frame the crises as actionable problems and present viable solutions for CS to be implemented.**
- Political shifts or credibility concerns also created windows for CS adoption, alongside strong grassroots mobilisation, especially from faith-based organisations. **Public opinion in the EU was generally supportive of helping refugees in 2015, with support for Ukrainians being particularly stronger following the crisis, and research suggests that CS is viewed more positively than other refugee admission pathways.**

The Key Role of Policy Transfer and Policy Entrepreneurs

- **The transfer of CS from Canada to Europe began in earnest after 2016 through the formation of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), alongside strong promotion by the EU, UN agencies, NGOs, churches, and migrant communities acting as policy entrepreneurs. The GRSI initially aimed to expand refugee resettlement, integration, and host-community support by exporting the Canadian sponsorship model abroad, which was supported by the EU and UN.**

- “However, due to problems with managing migration in Europe and rising anti-immigration sentiments, **GRSI had to limit its actions from transferring the Canadian model to other countries to “providing training, capacity-building, and technical support” (Smith, 2020, p. 286).** It became clear that the policy transfer could not take the shape of directly copying the Canadian model.” (Stefańska et al., 2025)
- Policy transfer in Europe rarely involved direct copying of the Canadian model, and instead, countries have adopted modified versions through:
 - **Emulation:** the UK took the core idea from Canada, where community groups sponsor resettled refugees and adjusted it to fit UK institutions and existing programmes, such as by integrating it into the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme.
 - **Hybridisation:** Ireland combined features from both the Canadian and British models, with capacity-building support provided by GRSI experts. Local NGOs such as the Red Cross helped shape the programme locally, and collectively they developed the first Community Sponsorship Ireland pilot programme in 2017-2018.
 - **Synthesis:** Germany introduced the Neustart im Team (NesT) programme in 2019 as an additional solution to the resettlement programme, modelled after the Canadian and British programmes, while also drawing on local programmes and implemented in cooperation with civil society and faith-based organisations.
 - **Inspiration:** Italy’s Humanitarian Corridors scheme was partly inspired by the Canadian model but was implemented in a widely different form, led by faith-based organisations such as Sant’Egidio in response to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, and was later copied by France and Belgium through direct transfer.

Social Policy Models as Barriers and Enablers of CS Implementation

- **Countries with social democratic welfare regimes have not implemented full CS programmes due to concerns about equality, universalism, and civil society’s concern with the risk of privatising integration (leading only to small ‘buddy programme’ pilots).** Post-socialist states also have not due to weak political will, limited financial capacity, and public fears that migration strains welfare systems.
- **Liberal welfare regimes are the most conducive to CS, and have produced the most programmes,** as they emphasise non-state involvement in welfare and allow shared responsibility between sponsors and the states.
- **Conservative and Southern models align well with CS because subsidiarity and the strong roles of family, church, and civil society support mixed public-private refugee initiatives,** which have resulted in a variety of CS, HAPs, and humanitarian corridor programmes.

Ideological Diversity of Governments adopting CS

- **There is no clear ideological pattern that explains which governments adopt CS.** Programmes have been introduced by right, left, centrist, and mixed coalitions, including

governments typically expected to oppose refugee admissions. **Right and centre-led governments have been observed to outnumber left-led ones in introducing CS programmes.**

- **Some restrictive parties have supported CS because it allows controlled, state-vetted, small-scale refugee admissions, demonstrating its flexible and often non-controversial nature, and offering a politically acceptable alternative.**
- CS often gains traction through grassroots pressure and international encouragement rather than party-driven legislative debate, but **political climates can still block CS when elite or public opposition is strong.**

Conclusion

- Multiple streams theory shows that refugee crises such as the Syria/Arab Spring, Afghanistan, and Ukraine crises opened policy windows for CS adoption and implementation, but crises alone were insufficient and required policy entrepreneurs and political decision-makers to translate crisis moments into actual programme adoption.
- CS spread through policy transfer, with European countries blending elements from Canadian, the UK, and other contexts, creating diverse programme models. **The adoption of CS confirmed the central role of international organisations (GRSI, EU, UNHCR), civil society, faith-based organisations, and immigrant communities in driving implementation from both top-down and bottom-up directions.**
- CS adoption aligned more with social policy regimes than with party ideology, with social democratic and Eastern European models being least conducive due to strong state-responsibility norms or limited capacity, while conservative, Southern, and liberal regimes were more receptive. Right and centre-led governments were significantly involved during their implementation, not just left-led governments.
- **The implementation of CS programmes, initially as pilot projects or temporary measures that were adapted to local circumstances, enabled policy entrepreneurs to promote policy changes while allowing decision-makers to make less risky decisions and build capacity.** Further research is needed on how migration regimes shape CS adoption.