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Migration Governance in Context: Asylum Policymaking in Estonia

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Declaration:

Hereby I declare that this doctoral thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the doctoral degree at Tallinn University of Technology has not been submitted for doctoral or equivalent academic degree.

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**Rände valitsemine kontekstis:
varjupaigapoliitika kujundamine ja
elluviimine Eestis**

MARILIIS TREI-MÄE



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List of Publications

The list of author's publications, on the basis of which the thesis has been prepared:

- I **Trei, M.** (2021). Immigration Policy Formation in New EU Member States: The Case of Estonia. In Chu, CP., Park, SC. (Eds.) *Immigration Policy and Crisis in the Regional Context. Asian and European Experiences* (pp. 209–227). Springer Singapore. doi:10.1007/978-981-33-6823-1_12. (ETIS 3.1.)
- II **Trei, M.**, Sarapuu, K. (2021). A Small Administration Facing a Complex Policy Challenge: Estonia and the 2015 Refugee Crisis. In Joensen, T., Taylor, I. (Eds.) *Small States and the European Migrant Crisis. Politics and Governance* (pp. 243–265). Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-66203-5_11. (ETIS 3.1)
- III **Trei, M.** (2025) The Involvement of NGOs in Asylum Policy Decision-Making: The Case of Estonia. *Halduskultuur – The Estonian Journal of Administrative Culture and Digital Governance*, 23(1-2), 107–128. doi:10.32994/hk.v23i1-2.340. (ETIS 1.1.)

Appendix:

- IV Sarapuu, K., **Trei, M.** (2025) Task Forces for Complex Policy Problems: Lessons from Estonia. In Behnke, N., Petershon, B. (Eds.). *Horizontal Intergovernmental Coordination at Local and Regional Levels. Evidence from Europe and Beyond* (pp. 377–388). Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-83567-4_19. (ETIS 3.1)
- V Sarapuu, K., **Trei, M.** (2025) Organizational Dilemmas of EU-Funded Policy Development: The Case of Estonian Government Task Forces. *Public Money and Management*, 45(5), 400–403. doi:10.1080/09540962.2023.2203870. (ETIS 1.1.)

Author's Contribution to the Publications

The author's contribution to the papers included in this thesis is outlined below:

- I The author of the thesis is the **sole author** of this publication.
- II The author of the thesis is a **co-author** of the publication. The author carried out the document analysis, conducted interviews, and wrote the sections on the development of asylum policy and the timeline of events during the 2015 European refugee crisis in Estonia. The author co-wrote the discussion and conclusion sections of the paper and contributed to reviewing and editing the final draft of the paper.
- III The author of the thesis is the **sole author** of this publication.
- IV The author of the thesis is a **co-author** of the publication. She co-developed the data collection methodology for the paper and led the empirical data collection. The overview of theoretical literature was prepared in collaboration. The author also participated in the empirical data analysis, compiled the charts, and contributed to writing the initial draft of the paper.
- V The author of the thesis is a **co-author** of the publication. She co-developed the methodology and led the empirical data collection. The author compiled all charts and figures and participated in writing the empirical analysis. The author co-wrote the section on the experience of task forces in Estonia and helped draft the section on the lessons learned. The author of the thesis also participated in revising and editing the manuscript during the review process of the paper.

Introduction

Just as the universe is constantly expanding in size, the complexity of the challenges faced by modern governments also seems to be growing. More than 50 years ago, Rittel and Webber (1973) first introduced the concept of “wicked problems” that is now a commonly used umbrella term to refer to complex policy issues that are intractable, multi-causal, unpredictable, and constantly evolving (Weber & Khademian, 2008; Head, 2008, 2022; Head & Alford, 2015; Massey, 2022). Tackling highly complex policy problems is challenging not only because of the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of the problems themselves, but also because they involve multiple interconnected actors with conflicting interests and perspectives operating within a fragmented, multi-level institutional setting (van Bueren et al., 2003; Alford & Head, 2017; Christensen et al., 2019). Consequently, complex policy problems have transformed policy formulation and implementation processes into exceedingly demanding tasks for governments. One particularly complex and dynamic policy area that the European Union (EU) member states have struggled with for decades is asylum policy (Alink et al., 2001; Larrison & Raadschelders, 2020; Cantat et al., 2025). Since the end of the Cold War, the arrival of asylum seekers in Europe has evolved into an extremely politicized and sensitive policy issue (Boswell, 2000; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019), increasing anxiety among Europeans (Kaunert et al., 2020), fuelling populist political parties (Zaun & Ripoll Servant, 2023), and threatening the integrity of the Union (Dagi, 2017). While the creation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) at the end of the 1990s aimed to promote coordinated efforts and burden-sharing among member states, the arrival of more than one million asylum seekers during the 2015 refugee crisis revealed “the inadequacy of the existing institutions and processes” (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022, p. 2; Hatton, 2017; Lavenex, 2018) and prompted attempts at re-nationalisation of asylum policy (Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Brekke & Staver, 2018; Byrne et al., 2020).

Asylum policy is an exemplary case of a highly complex policy area, where different dimensions of complexity converge (Raadschelders et al., 2019; Lawrence & Dodds, 2024). First, the institutional framework of national asylum systems spans vertically across different governance levels (international, supranational/EU, national, and local), horizontally across policy areas (border control, security, welfare, education, integration), and involves stakeholders from different sectors (state, private, and third sector), creating significant coordination challenges. Second, whereas the right to seek asylum is a fundamental human right established by the 1951 Refugee Convention, the regulation of immigration is one of the core aspects of national sovereignty (Helbling & Leblang, 2018). Therefore, policymakers and implementers must constantly balance the tensions between humanitarian obligations and state interests. Third, the problems stemming from the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees are virtually impossible to solve completely, because a receiving state can merely address the symptoms of the problem instead of eliminating the root causes of forced migration in the refugees’ home countries (Raadschelders et al., 2019). Fourth, immigration is by nature an unpredictable phenomenon (Christensen & Lægreid, 2009; Mayblin, 2017) that is hard to anticipate and in which “change is a constant” (Dahlvik, 2018), meaning that policy reactions are mostly reactive and *ad hoc* (Raadschelders et al., 2019). Swift reactions, especially in turbulent events, require not only administrative resources, robustness, and flexibility (Christensen & Lægreid, 2009; Ansell et al., 2017), but also the capacity to mobilize the “knowledge,

ideas and resources” (Ansell et al., 2024, p. 53) of actors with often diverging perspectives and values so as to formulate a coordinated policy response.

The study of asylum policy and policymaking in the European context has received increasing scholarly attention during the past decades, as immigration issues have become more politically salient and institutionally complex. Different lines of research have looked into the historical shifts in migration and asylum policy framing and agenda-setting (Boswell, 2000; Keely, 2001; Kjærsum, 2002; Boswell et al., 2011; Cantat et al., 2025), the process and consequences of the communitarization of EU asylum policymaking (see, e.g., Hatton, 2005; Guiraudon, 2000; Givens & Luedtke, 2004; Kaunert & Leonard, 2012; Ripoll Servent & Trauner, 2014), and the harmonization and transposing of EU policies at the national level (e.g., Lavenex, 2001; Menz, 2011; Thym, 2016). Another important stream in the EU asylum literature has investigated the politics of asylum policy formulation at the EU level (Kaunert & Leonard, 2012; Thielemann, 2018; Zaun, 2016, 2017; Niemann & Zaun, 2018). One common critique of the existing EU migration and asylum policy research has been its rather state-centric and intergovernmental focus (see, e.g., Bonjour et al., 2017; Silvestre, 2019). For example, Gill (2010) has argued that there has been a tendency in the asylum and refugee literature to “essentialize” the state as a monolithic entity “operating upon society from a position of exteriority”, overlooking the importance of social forces and political struggles at the national level, which often shape and condition the choices of governments (2010, pp. 639–640). Given that there has been an “increasing pluralization of the migration policy arena” ever since the end of the 1990s (Caponio et al., 2025, p. 2), research on the multi-level governance of immigration policy has emerged as an important topic of investigation (see overviews by Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018).

The scholarly interest in the multi-level governance of asylum policy has gained traction especially after the 2015 refugee crisis (Geddes, 2022, p. 317). Research on asylum policy formulation and implementation has recognised and analysed the increasing role and importance of local governments (Glorius et al., 2019; Bazurli & Kaufman, 2023; Oliver et al., 2020) and non-governmental organisations (Schrover et al., 2019; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Kersch & Mishtal, 2016; Mayblin & James, 2019). While this has been an important and relevant trend in the literature, it has been pointed out that there is still ample room to improve understanding of the complexities and policymaking dynamics at the national level by taking a more context-sensitive and nuanced approach (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018; Pettrachin, 2020; Caponio et al., 2025). For example, Pettrachin (2023, p. 364) has claimed that some scholars tend to explain asylum policy outputs without looking in detail at “the links between policy outputs and the context in which they were produced”. As empirical studies of the 2015 refugee crisis have shown, member states facing similar pressures and crises interpreted and construed the issue differently, depending on their politico-administrative context and actor configuration (Hagelund, 2020). Therefore, studying the interactions between government agencies, local authorities, and non-state actors has been identified as a crucial avenue for future research in order to improve our insights into the horizontal dimension of asylum policy in the national context and how this affects policy formulation and implementation (Pettrachin, 2020; Ambrosini, 2021; Caponio et al., 2025). To conceptualise and analyse the intricacies of asylum policymaking, the thesis draws on public administration scholarship, which is especially well-equipped to examine and advance our understanding of the challenges related to migration (Larrison & Raadschelders, 2020, p. 44).

This thesis aims to contribute to the line of research that looks into the contextual realities and complexities of asylum policymaking at the national level. The main object of study is asylum policymaking in Estonia during the 2015 European refugee crisis. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania form the Baltic states, which are the smallest countries among the former communist states in the Central and Eastern European region. After five decades of Soviet occupation, Estonia regained independence in 1991 and entered a process of post-communist transition, which culminated in its accession to the EU in 2004, together with the other Baltic states, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Cyprus, and Malta. Prior to becoming an EU member, Estonia underwent rapid political, administrative, and economic reforms during the pre-accession period. This included the establishment of a national asylum policy and integration into the Common European Asylum System. The 2015 refugee crisis marked the first major test for the Estonian asylum system, challenging its established policymaking processes.

In this thesis, the term “policymaking” is used as an umbrella term to refer to policy formulation, implementation, and governance arrangements, while maintaining an analytical distinction between the three. The term “policy formulation” is used to refer to the process of “matching, and often mis-matching, of goals, means, or policy aims and instruments,” which “occurs through the interplay of knowledge-based analytics of problems and solutions with power-based political considerations” (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2017, p. 3). Policy implementation refers to the process of translating these goals and objectives into policy action (Peters, 2014). Governance is understood as the institutional arrangements and actors’ interactions that structure policy formulation and implementation processes (Wang & Ran, 2023, p. 1189). Another clarification concerns the terms used to describe the period when asylum seekers arrived in the EU in large numbers during 2015–2016. Throughout the thesis the term “refugee crisis” is used to refer to this period, although some authors have debated the appropriateness of characterising it as a “crisis” (see, e.g., Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). It has been pointed out that in relative terms, the number of asylum seekers reaching Europe represented only a small percentage of the global refugee protection burden and, therefore, the events around 2015–2016 constituted a failure of the CEAS and signalled a governance crisis at best (Lavenex, 2018; Niemann & Zaun, 2018). However, analyses of public attitudes from that period and the temporary relocation schemes introduced by the EU Commission to alleviate the migration pressures on Greece and Italy indicate that the challenges of 2015 were perceived as a crisis by a wide range of actors (Cantat et al., 2025), and this was also the case in Estonia (II, III).

Although the EU’s and its member states’ responses to the 2015 crisis have been thoroughly studied, with some even arguing that they have been over-researched (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022, p. 3), very little is known about how the refugee crisis unfolded in the Baltic states. Researchers have focused primarily on studying member states that were most affected by the crisis in terms of receiving the most refugees or serving as transit countries (see, e.g., edited volumes by Feischmidt et al., 2019, and Stoyanova & Karageorgiou, 2023; as well as the comparative study by Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Therefore, possible blind spots exist in understanding the policy responses and governance practices of the member states that were not on the “frontline” of the crisis. Given that “even governments that are geographically adjacent, multiply interconnected and similarly subject to the allegedly homogenizing effects of the European Union (EU) membership can behave very differently when it comes to policymaking and management” (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009, p. 135), studying the Estonian case offers a new

perspective on how context can affect asylum policymaking. While there are a few studies about Estonia during the 2015 crisis (see, e.g., Veebel, 2015; Spiegel, 2020), these have either focused on either specific policy choices or on policy implementation. This thesis provides the first systematic analysis that looks at policy formulation, implementation, and governance practices, while also considering their historical development to explain these processes. Analysing the Estonian case offers an opportunity to explore and contribute to understanding two underexplored contexts in asylum policymaking, namely post-communist and small-state contexts.

First, the post-communist heritage of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states has had a significant impact on how migration as a policy issue has been perceived in these states (Gorodzeisky, 2023) and on how policies have been formulated and implemented through the interaction of different policy stakeholders (Lavenex, 1998). As the refugee crisis unfolded in 2015–2016, the reception systems of CEE countries were put to an unexpected test, revealing weaknesses and shedding light on the political stance of these countries (see, e.g., Rijavec et al., 2021; Jelínková, 2019). While there have been some studies examining the experience of this particular group of member states, they have received significantly less scholarly attention than the Western European states (Tawat, 2016). In addition, the existing literature has mostly focused on the CEE states that became transit countries (see, e.g., Stoyanova & Karageorgiu, 2023; Pevcin & Rijavec, 2021) or on the so-called Visegrád Group, which were the most vocal opponents of the European Commission (Bedeá & Osei Kwadwo, 2020; Byrne et al., 2020; Vaagland & Zaun, 2025), while much less is known about the Baltic states.

Second, small states in general – and more specifically in the context of asylum policy – have received only modest attention. While some studies exist, for example, analysing the development of migration policy in small island states (Mainwaring, 2014) or examining small states during the 2015 European refugee crisis (Jugl, 2025; Joensen & Taylor, 2021), there is still ample room for research from this perspective. The limited size and capacity of the politico-administrative systems in states with small populations create specific constraints, dilemmas, and opportunities that become especially visible in the context of crises (Högenauer et al., 2021; Sarapuu & Jugl, 2024; Wivel, 2021). Consequently, overlooking the experience of small states in Europe provides only a partial picture of the contextual realities EU member states face when implementing the CEAS, especially considering that, following the 2004 enlargement, the European Union has a higher proportion of small than large states (Panke, 2010). In addition, the few existing studies, including an edited book to which this thesis contributed (II; Joensen & Taylor, 2021), have shown that although small states have certain vulnerabilities compared to larger states, their inherent characteristics enable them to act swiftly and resiliently in the face of turbulence and crisis situations (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu, 2025; Thorhallson, 2025; Wivel, 2021). Therefore, studying the crisis governance practices of small states is important for understanding how small EU states tackle turbulence in complex policy fields such as migration.

Consequently, the main aim of this thesis is to analyse how stakeholder interactions and governance arrangements affected asylum policymaking in Estonia during the 2015 refugee crisis. The main research questions guiding the thesis are:

1. How did Estonia's asylum policy evolve from regaining independence until 2015?
2. How did the 2015 European refugee crisis affect asylum policymaking in Estonia?
3. What role did the post-communist and small state context play in shaping asylum policymaking in Estonia during the 2015 European refugee crisis?

Asylum policymaking in Estonia is examined in three original publications (I, II, III), each of which approaches the topic from a different perspective. The first publication (I) is a book chapter that outlines the historical background and development of asylum policy in Estonia prior to the 2015 refugee crisis. It analyses the political discussions and the framing of immigration in Estonia after the restoration of independence and explains the post-communist legacies shaping asylum policy. The second book chapter (II) focuses on the small-state context and examines how Estonia responded to the ramifications of the 2015 European refugee crisis at the national level. The chapter provides an in-depth account of how the Estonian politico-administrative system prepared for the arrival of refugees through the EU's temporary relocation and resettlement scheme. In addition, the stakeholder interactions at the policy implementation level are discussed. The third core paper of the thesis (III) is a journal article that focuses on asylum policy formulation in Estonia during the 2015 refugee crisis by dissecting the amendment of the main legislative act regulating the Estonian asylum system, the Estonian Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens. Together, these three papers provide insight into the complexities of asylum policymaking and the interactions among stakeholders involved in addressing the crisis in the context of a small country with post-communist legacies. The case study of Estonian asylum policymaking is complemented by an analysis of the use of temporary mandated task forces as a cross-sectoral coordination instrument to address complex policy issues in Estonia (papers IV, V). These publications provide a deeper understanding of the specifics of the Estonian institutional context and the challenges of stakeholder coordination in a fragmented administrative system. The lessons learned from the experience of using temporary task forces in Estonia during 2012–2019 provide insights into whether and how such temporal collaborative arrangements could be used in the asylum policy context to foster actor alignment and joint framing of asylum issues.

The remainder of the thesis introduction is structured as follows. First, the research strategy is presented, including the data collection, analytic approach, and research methods. Second, the analytical framework is laid out, and the relevant definitions, concepts, and theoretical discussions on the governance of complex problems and the complexities of asylum policy are provided. The analytical framework concludes with a theoretical overview of the contextual factors that influence asylum policy formulation and implementation processes at the national level. After the theoretical discussion, the main findings of the thesis are presented. The thesis introduction closes with a conclusion outlining the contribution of the thesis and offering suggestions for further research.

1 Research Strategy and Methods

This thesis seeks to understand the complexities of asylum policymaking at the national level by taking a context-sensitive approach to analysing both the dynamics of asylum policymaking and the interactions among stakeholders. To best address the research questions, the thesis employs qualitative research methods that enable an in-depth account and thick description of the case. Although this dissertation is a cumulative thesis, all five original research papers share a common epistemological foundation rooted in a constructivist and interpretive approach. For constructivists, reality is understood to be socially constructed, as social actors continuously form and transform their understandings, interests, and values through interactions with others (Priya, 2021; Ansell, Hassenteufel & Zittoun, 2025). An interpretative approach is often used by public administration researchers interested in studying policymaking processes and stakeholder interactions in real-life settings, complementing analyses of formal public policies outputs (e.g., laws, rules, strategic documents, etc.) with a focus on how actors perceive and make sense of events and policies (Van Thiel, 2022). Considering that the complexities of asylum policymaking primarily arise from the diverging interests, understandings, and perspectives of the actors involved, an interpretive approach and qualitative research methods are especially suitable for analysing the perspectives of the actors and the implications of their interaction for asylum policymaking (Pettrachin, 2023, p. 365).

The thesis adopts a case study research strategy. Case studies allow for an in-depth investigation of events and a contextual understanding of the issue, which is key to studying policy problems that are “rich in their histories, real in their interdependencies with individuals and contexts, and complex in their attributes of the problems and solutions” (Weible et al., 2012, p. 17; Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The focus is on asylum policymaking in Estonia, with a particular empirical focus on the 2015 European refugee crisis as a critical moment in the institutional development of Estonian asylum policy. The case study adopts a longitudinal perspective, analysing developments from the establishment of Estonia’s asylum system in the 1990s (I) through the events of the 2015 refugee crisis and its aftermath up to 2019 (I, II, III). A historically informed perspective made it possible to take a more nuanced view of the events of the 2015 refugee crisis by focusing not only on *whether* an external event caused a change, but also on *why* it did so and how contextual dynamics shaped the process. The main case study is complemented by an additional study (IV, V) on the use of a network-type coordination instrument in complex policy areas. The supplemental case study had an empirical focus on the use of temporary task forces as an innovative policy instrument in Estonia between 2012 and 2019. This additional case provided background information on the Estonian politico-administrative system to better understand the specific institutional context of Estonia and how this might influence stakeholder interactions in complex policymaking processes. Although none of these task forces were used to address asylum policy issues specifically, they all dealt with complex policy problems that spanned across different policy areas and involved diverse actors. For this reason, publications IV and V are included in the appendix rather than the main body of the thesis, even though the two research projects were conducted simultaneously.

Estonia was selected as a case study for several reasons. It provides a rare context for the study of asylum policy, as it is a small state on the external border of the EU. After regaining independence in 1991 after 50 years of Soviet occupation, this small state with

a population of 1.36 million entered into a period of rapid transformation aimed at becoming a well-functioning democratic state and, after its 1995 application for membership, a member of the European Union (Sarapuu, 2011). Given that Estonia had no prior experience with refugee policy or law, yet the establishment of an asylum system was a prerequisite for EU accession, Estonia had strong incentives to comply with EU conditionality by adapting international refugee law into domestic legislation (Potisepp, 2002; I). Prior to the 2015 European refugee crisis, Estonia had received around 600 asylum applications and granted international protection to fewer than 200 people (II). The decision of the Estonian government in 2015 to participate in the EU's temporary refugee relocation and resettlement scheme marked a considerable shift from its previously conservative policy line and demanded rapid capacity building. Therefore, studying the repercussions of the 2015 European refugee crisis in Estonia provides a critical empirical setting in which two contextual features – small size and post-communist legacies – become especially visible, allowing for an examination of how historical heritage, institutional constraints, and specific governance practices interacted in asylum policy under conditions of heightened uncertainty.

Studying the Estonian case contributes to understanding asylum policymaking in the Baltic region and in CEE more broadly, as the eight CEE countries that acceded to the EU in 2004 (i.e., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic) had historically similar asylum policy development trajectories (Lavenex, 2001; Byrne et al., 2020). While the policy responses of these states differed during the 2015 refugee crisis and their exposure to arriving asylum seekers varied, their asylum systems were arguably tested in a substantial way for the first time. Therefore, providing a historically informed analysis of the Estonian case illuminates the broader CEE context and how historical legacies can affect asylum policymaking in this region. This thesis also contributes to public administration scholarship more broadly by examining policy formulation and implementation processes, demonstrating how crisis conditions reshape stakeholder interactions and coordination practices in a highly sensitive policy field. By combining insights from both the case study of asylum policymaking in Estonia during the 2015 refugee crisis and the analysis of temporary coordination structures used for advancing collaboration practices in complex policy areas, the thesis provides lessons on stakeholder coordination in complex and politically contested policy fields.

The thesis employs multiple research methods, including literature review, document analysis, interviews, and a survey (see Table 1). Across all publications, the literature review was used as a research method during the preparatory research stage to integrate existing knowledge into a theoretical framework. Document analysis was also used as a research method across all publications to collect data. In the book chapter on the development of immigration policy in Estonia (I), document analysis was used as the sole research method, as the focus was on historical processes (Bowen, 2009). By relying on parliamentary plenary transcripts (91 transcripts of the Estonian Parliament plenary meetings from 1990–2019), legislative texts, government reports, and previous studies, document analysis was used to construct a chronological overview of the institutional and political development of asylum policy in Estonia. In all other publications (II, III, IV, V), document analysis was used as a secondary method of collecting information to triangulate data gathered from different sources (Cardno, 2019; Bowen, 2009).

In order to understand the perceptions and positions of key actors involved in asylum policymaking during the 2015 crisis, a total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of this thesis, involving government officials, cabinet members,

members of the Parliament, and representatives of NGOs and international organisations (UNHCR, IOM). Due to the different analytical focuses of the individual thesis publications, a subset of 20 interviews was used in publication II, and a subset of 17 interviews was used in publication III. All interviews were carried out by the author (some together with the thesis supervisor and co-author of publication II). The interviews were used to gather information about the evolution of the asylum policy field in Estonia and the role of different actors in the asylum system, as well as asylum policymaking during the 2015 refugee crisis, focusing on both policy formulation and implementation processes, perceptions of the events, and interactions with other stakeholders. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in three rounds: in the spring of 2016, in the spring of 2019, and in the autumn of 2019. Some interviewees (mainly government officials and representatives of NGOs) were interviewed twice (both in 2016 and 2019), in order to capture their perceptions of the governance of the crisis in hindsight, after the immediate pressures of the crisis had subsided. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling in order to cover actors involved in different sectors, policy areas, and ranks. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The interview transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring themes and patterns in how the actors described and interpreted the events and interactions prior to and during the 2015 refugee crisis. The analysis employed both deductive and inductive coding, with particular emphasis on inductive coding to allow themes and interpretations to emerge directly from the data.

To analyse the operation and success of temporary task forces (**IV, V**), a survey was used to gather task force participants' perceptions of the operation, results, management, and outcomes of the task forces. The survey questionnaire was compiled together with the thesis supervisor and co-author of publications IV and V after an extensive literature review. The survey consisted of Likert-scale questions, predefined option questions, and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative patterns and participants' detailed reflections. The survey was sent to all task force participants (282 in total) who were involved in at least one of the task forces between 2012 and 2019. The response rate was 41% (115). The results of the survey were analysed by using descriptive statistics, that is, the results were summarised by calculating the distribution, frequencies, and mean values of responses across different task forces. The open-ended responses were used to provide additional explanations of the survey results.

Table 1. Overview of research strategies and data collection methods of individual publications.

	Focus and research strategy	Data
I	Historical research that outlines the development of immigration policy, the establishment of the Estonian asylum system, and political debates on immigration in the Estonian Parliament's plenary sessions between 1991 and 2019. The analysis of parliament-level political debates focuses on changes in the wider framing of immigration issues.	Literature review, document analysis (parliamentary transcripts, legal documents, thematic reports, newspaper articles).
II	Case study focusing on asylum policy implementation and crisis governance in Estonia during the 2015 European refugee crisis. This publication looks at how the small-state context both constrained and supported asylum governance.	Literature review, document analysis, 20 semi-structured interviews.
III	Case study focusing on the policy formulation process during the 2015 refugee crisis. The empirical scope covers the interactions between NGOs, government officials, and Members of the Parliament during the legislative process of amending the Estonian Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens between 2014 and 2016.	Literature review, document analysis, 17 semi-structured interviews.
IV	Case study of the use of mandated temporary task forces in Estonia between 2012 and 2019 as an innovative coordination instrument. Lessons are outlined based on the comprehensive survey among task force participants which focused on both the management and outcomes of the task forces.	Literature review, document analysis, online survey.
V	Case study of the use of mandated temporary task forces in Estonia between 2012 and 2019 as an innovative coordination instrument. The publication analyses the applicability of centrally mandated coordination instruments in a fragmented institutional system.	Literature review, document analysis, online survey.

The chosen research strategy has several limitations, mainly due to its reliance on qualitative case studies. The main criticisms of qualitative research include its subjectivity and the limited transferability of findings to other contexts (Van Thiel, 2022, p. 152). First, the researchers may present findings based on their own or the interviewees' subjective interpretations, which may introduce bias. To reduce potential bias and strengthen the validity of the findings in the dissertation, the triangulation of multiple data sources was employed to verify findings. For example, information collected through interviews regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the legislative process was cross-checked against documentary evidence (the proceedings documents and official letters) wherever possible.

Second, the scope of the argumentation in this thesis is limited, as the findings of case studies are context-specific and caution needs to be taken when generalising the results of the study to other contexts. In addition, the selection of interviewees inevitably limits the range of perspectives captured in the analysis. While other authors have highlighted, for example, the importance of local governments and judicial courts as actors involved in asylum policy formulation and implementation (see, e.g., Glorius et al., 2019; Dallara & Lacchei, 2021), this thesis focuses on central government agencies and NGOs as the most prominent among the small circle of actors in the Estonian asylum system. Although volunteers, new (and short-lived) NGOs, and churches contributed to the reception of refugees in Estonia during the 2015 refugee crisis, these actors were rarely, if ever, identified by other interviewees as holding a substantial or influential role during the crisis. Nevertheless, as the purpose of the study was to consider the intricacies of stakeholder interactions and policy formulation at the national level, the qualitative interview-based approach allowed for a thick description of how contextual factors affected policy formulation and implementation.

Third, the thesis is limited in time. It covers the processes of asylum policymaking during and shortly after the 2015 refugee crisis and does not consider subsequent developments, for instance, how the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and onwards has transformed asylum policymaking in Estonia. Shortly after Russia began its full-blown military attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainians fleeing from the war started arriving in Estonia either to settle here or to transit towards other EU member states. In 2022 alone, around 40,000 applications for temporary protection were submitted in Estonia (Estonian Contact Point for the EMN, 2023) and the Estonian refugee reception system was faced with an unprecedented challenge (see, e.g., Lello, 2024). While this certainly has added new institutional and political layers to asylum policy in Estonia, it is not covered in the dissertation. However, the systematic analysis of the governance of the 2015 refugee crisis provides a valuable basis and an important point of comparison for future research into the unfolding of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Estonia.

2 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework consists of three parts. First, the definition and conceptualisation of complex policy problems is outlined. Drawing on relevant literature, theoretical approaches to the governance of complex problems are discussed, focusing on how interdependencies between stakeholders with different understandings of a policy issue could be managed. The second part of the analytical framework examines the complexities of asylum policy by looking into the nature of the policy problem, the institutional framework, and the stakeholders involved in asylum policy. Finally, drawing on migration and asylum policy literature, an overview is presented of the different factors that influence asylum policymaking at the national level.

2.1 Governance of Complex Policy Problems

The scholarship on complex policy problems dates back to the 1960s and 1970s (Head, 2022), when scholars began noting the emergence of social policy problems that, compared with most policy problems of the first half of the 20th century, were no longer easily definable and did not align with rational-comprehensive approaches to problem solving (Lindblom, 1959). Ever since Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the term “wicked problem”, a plethora of academic literature on highly complex policy problems has emerged, offering different definitions and diagnoses of such problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008; Head & Alford, 2015; Alford & Head, 2017; Massey, 2022). Complex problems are most commonly described as intractable, multi-causal, unstructured, open-ended, unpredictable, highly uncertain, relentless, and messy (see the literature overview by Head, 2022). While some authors argue that most policy problems today are “wicked”, others caution against using the term too loosely, noting that not all problems are wicked – some are just difficult (Peters, 2017).

In order to distinguish truly complex policy problems from merely difficult ones, several ways of operationalising complexity can be found in the literature. One of the most commonly used conceptualisations, proposed by Brian Head (2008, p. 103), identifies three main characteristics of complex policy problems: 1) complexity of elements, subsystems, and interdependencies; 2) uncertainty in relation to risks, consequences of action, and changing patterns; and 3) divergence and fragmentation in viewpoints, values, and strategic intentions. According to Head, if a policy issue rates highly across all of these dimensions at the same time, only then can it be considered a “wicked” policy problem (2008). Building on this, Alford and Head (2017) later developed a typology of complex problems in which the type and severity of the problem are distinguished based on two scales: the cognitive complexity of the problem and the irreconcilability of actors’ values and positions (see also Head, 2022, pp. 33–35). They argue that because complex problems can rate very differently on the continuum in different contexts and policy areas, analysing complexity should always consider these two dimensions (Alford & Head, 2017, p. 403).

A common thread running through these conceptualisations is the argument, that even more than the substance of the problem itself, the diversity of actors and the institutional setting surrounding the policy issue constitute the main sources of intractability (Bannink et al., 2024, p. 303; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; van Bueren et al., 2003). Furthermore, alongside the increasing complexity of societies, public sector reform trends from the late 1980s onwards and the subsequent institutional changes have resulted in vertical and horizontal specialisation, and the consequent dispersal of

knowledge, competence, resources, and authority (Egeberg, 1999; Cairney, 2012; Van Thiel, 2025). This means that not only have the tasks themselves, but also the contexts in which governments operate, become more complex over the past decades. As a result, many public administration researchers have shifted their focus to studying the interdependencies between various actors, what this means for policymaking, and how best to tackle complex policy problems (see overviews by, e.g., Bryson et al., 2006; Peters, 2017; Head, 2019; Wang & Ran, 2023).

Two different approaches to the study of the governance of complex policy problems can be distinguished in the literature: governance of policy networks and collaborative governance (see the literature reviews by Blanco et al., 2011; Lecy et al., 2014; Costumato, 2021; Wang & Ran, 2023). Although rooted in different academic discussions and emphasising different aspects, both approaches share a common understanding that the dispersal of power, resources, and expertise among diverse and interdependent stakeholders means that any attempt to tackle complex problems requires at least some degree of coordination or collaboration between the actors forming more or less tight networks around policy problems (Keast et al., 2007; Alcantara et al., 2016). The key difference between these streams is how networks are conceptualised. The policy network literature commonly defines a network as a “more or less stable pattern of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programmes” (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000, p. 155). Policy network researchers have mostly focused on the structure, performance, and management of policy networks (see, e.g., Börzel, 1998; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000, 2016; Besussi, 2006; Koliba et al., 2019). In the collaborative governance literature, on the other hand, networks are conceptualised as an alternative form of governance alongside hierarchy and market (see, e.g., Keast et al., 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Torfing & Ansell, 2016; Peters & Pierre, 2016; Batory & Svensson, 2019), and researchers in this stream have primarily looked into novel policymaking processes that could foster more participatory practices in decision-making and policy implementation (e.g., Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Keast et al., 2004; Ansell et al., 2017; McGann et al., 2018). In many respects, the policy network theory and collaborative governance approaches overlap, and insights from both are necessary for analysing the governance of complex policy problems.

There is no doubt that complex policy problems pose a daunting task for policymakers in terms of planning, decision-making, and policy implementation (Christensen et al., 2019). Based on the literature, three general observations stand out that help explain why the governance of complex problems has proven challenging in practice. First, the management and coordination of networks is a very complicated task in itself. Klijn and Koppenjan (2016, pp. 12–13) have explained that, quite similar to complex problems, three major types of complexities can be distinguished that make the management of networks demanding. First, substantive complexity among network members means that actors have different perceptions of the problem and interpret available information differently, therefore, simply collecting more information is not sufficient and there is a need to foster cross-frame learning and common understanding. Second, network managers need to address the strategic complexity that is caused by the different strategic choices of network actors based on their perceptions and positions. To reduce strategic complexity, managers need to (re)design the rules of actor interactions. Third, institutional complexity stems from the different operating procedures of diverse actors and can result in clashing institutional routines. To alleviate institutional complexity, it is

necessary to change the institutional rules of the network and influence actors' patterns of perception. In order to reduce the overall complexity of network governance, substantial managerial efforts are needed (Vangen & Huxham, 2003; Edelenbos et al., 2013).

Second, despite decades of research and practical experience, network-type governance approaches have not proven to be a panacea for addressing complex problems in practice (Daviter, 2017). The rationale behind the need for network-type governance and policymaking is seen in their ability to convey more knowledge, support better and more legitimate decisions (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Torfing et al., 2020; Wang & Wan Wart, 2007), and improve policy implementation (Ansell et al., 2017). Many have pointed out that while some scholars and practitioners have come to see more meaningful collaboration and participatory policymaking involving both government and non-state actors as ideals to aspire to, this might not always be feasible (e.g., Silvia, 2017; Dean, 2016; Krogh, 2020). As Peters and Torfing (2025, p. 310) have put it, interactions may be beneficial, but can also be detrimental, because "Having too many interactions with too diverse actors may confound decision-making, producing gridlock and preventing timely action." Theoretical discussions and empirical evidence have increasingly amplified the voices of those highlighting the difficulties of collaborative policymaking (Huxham et al., 2000; Huxham, 2003; Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Bryson et al., 2015; Fung, 2015). For example, studies have shown that true collaboration is resource-intensive and time-consuming (Huxham, 2003; Rüb, 2016), requires political support and commitment (Björstig et al., 2024), creates managerial challenges (Hardy, 1996; Hardy et al., 2006), and can result in clashes between new collaborative governance arrangements and existing institutions (Edelenbos, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). Therefore, it has been stated that "a gap seems to emerge between the rhetoric on the benefits of collaboration versus its actual results" (Molinengo, 2022, p. 102).

Deriving from this, several scholars have begun to advocate for a more pragmatic approach to handling complex problems (Daviter, 2017; Termeer & DeWulff, 2018; Peters, 2021; La Grouw et al., 2024; Bannink et al., 2024). These authors essentially encourage researchers not to fixate on collaborative ideals and on how to move towards them, but rather to focus on ways to move away from the complexities of policy problems (Bannink et al., 2024, p. 302). As put by Daviter (2017, p. 584), "there should be no ambiguity as to the fact that in dealing with wicked problems the choice is between approaches that offer well-known but potentially calculable deficiencies and those that offer high expectations but even more uncertain prospects". There is a shared notion to set realistic expectations, taking into account the realities of power and information asymmetry, politics, different cultures (Bannink et al., 2024) in different policy areas and contexts, and, instead of end-all solutions, aim towards "small wins" (Termeer & Dewulf, 2018; La Grouw et al., 2024) and feasible solutions (Daviter, 2017). Taking into account that historical-institutional development (Pollitt & Bouckert, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; Phillips et al., 2000), the politico-administrative system (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), and the policy area or issue (Mandell & Steelman, 2003; Cairney, 2012) all influence the way actors act and interact with other stakeholders, it is arguably more fruitful to analyse under what conditions and in which instances coordinated or collaborative interactions emerge (Ran & Qi, 2017, p. 837; Alcantara et al., 2016).

Finally, the speed of societal changes, political turmoil, and the concurrent frequency of crises, especially during the last decade, demonstrate that "problems are not standing still as we try to solve them" (Ansell & Trondal, 2018, p. 47). The pressure on governments to find solutions is mounting, as crises that challenge the functioning of public sectors

seem to have become the most recent “new normal” (Randma-Liiv & Nõmmik, 2025). A crisis could be seen as a specific type of complex policy challenge, where major, disrupting, and uncertainty-creating events suddenly threaten the *status quo* (Boin et al., 2005; Alink et al., 2001). Alink and colleagues (2001, p. 287) argue that crises reveal the inefficiencies and vulnerabilities of a policy sector’s institutional structure and problem-solving capacity, as crises develop when the existing “core policy orientations and its repertoire of existing goals, rules, policy instruments and implementation routines can no longer meet the demands placed upon it”. During crisis situations, policymakers are faced with trade-offs and are required to make hard decisions (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). Concurrently, public sector organisations affected by crisis need to adjust to the changing demands both internally, by adapting standard operating procedures, and externally, by mobilising additional resources (Eckhard et al., 2021, p. 419). Although crisis situations generate the need for pooling information and resources and, therefore, increase the demand for more coordination and collaboration (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997; Lægreid et al., 2014; Christensen et al., 2015), the urgency and pressure for quick responses, often in a politically salient context, can undermine the feasibility of implementing network-type governance approaches (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Rüb, 2016; Ansell et al., 2024).

Given that crises have become so frequent that there does not seem to be a return to normality, but rather that periods of either more or less severe crises alternate (Bouckaert, 2025, p. 386), the concept of turbulence has been used as an analytical lens. Ansell et al. (2024) claim that turbulence, which they define as a “more or less enduring situation characterized by unpredictable and unsteady dynamics arising from the interaction between highly variable, inconsistent, and unexpected flows” (Ansell et al., 2024, p. 18), has become a chronic disease for modern governance. For politicians and public sector organisations, this diagnosis indicates the need for a new type of *modus operandi*, which guarantees the stability of basic governance functions, goals, and values, while at the same time adapting to the ever-changing environment and new demands (Ansell et al., 2024; Bouckaert, 2025). Governments are faced with turbulence-induced trade-offs and often need to improvise to be resilient and agile at the same time (Ansell & Trondal, 2018). One commonly used practice in times of turbulence, but also in crisis situations, is the introduction of temporary collaborative arrangements, such as *ad hoc* teams, councils, working groups, cross-sectoral partnerships, boards, etc. (Christensen et al., 2015; Hanisch & Wald, 2014; Modig, 2007; Cohen et al., 2012; Ansell et al., 2024; Rüb, 2016). These arrangements are often introduced as “parallel” or “secondary” structures (Edelenbos, 2005; Sjöblom et al., 2013) on top of existing institutional structures, and, as a result, questions related to authority, autonomy, management, and the integration of outcomes may arise (Löfström, 2010; Hanisch & Wald, 2014). Given that high turbulence requires flexibility and both vertical and horizontal coordination (Christensen et al., 2015), often a variety of hybrid governance solutions can emerge (Randma-Liiv & Nõmmik, 2025). This temporal dimension of collaborative arrangements is arguably one of the still less-studied aspects in the governance debate (Godenhjelm et al., 2015).

2.2 The Complexities of Asylum Policy

There are only few other policy areas as complex, relentless, contentious, and politically sensitive as asylum policy (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2009). The right to seek asylum and to be granted international protection due to serious threats to one's life or freedom is a fundamental human right based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also the 1951 Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol. Created as a response to the consequences of the Second World War, the Refugee Convention defines the term "refugee", sets out the rights of individuals who are granted asylum (i.e., refugee status), the international standards of treatment for their protection, and the responsibilities of signatory states that grant asylum (UNHCR, 2025). Although the general principles of the Refugee Convention are still in effect today, the context and circumstances differ considerably compared to the post-WWII era. The end of the Cold War, changes in the global economy, and the frequency of armed conflicts have all increased the international mobility of people (Massey, 1999; Boswell, 2000) and have, at the same time, led to a trend of restrictive immigration policies in Europe that seek to deter unwanted immigration (Schultz et al., 2021). As a result, several authors have concluded that "Today, the right of asylum amounts to a paper tiger in national legal codifications" (Heuser, 2007, p. 7) and depends on the willingness of states to respect it (Hansen, 1999). The discretion that member states have in implementing asylum policy has led to significant differences in asylum policy regimes at the national level, where professed values often clash with actual interests and actions (Bagdonas, 2015; Lavenex, 2018).

Asylum policy scores high on the scale of both the complex nature of the problem and the diversity of stakeholders involved (Alford & Head, 2017). It operates at the intersection of state sovereignty to regulate migration and the intractable problem of forced migration, defined as the migratory movement of people who are forced, compelled, or coerced (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 77) to flee their homes and seek shelter in another country. Reasons for seeking shelter in another country vary and can range from fleeing armed conflicts, violence, and persecution to being forced to migrate due to natural disasters. In any case, the root cause that leads to the movement of asylum seekers is located outside of the state receiving the asylum application and is, therefore, difficult, if not impossible, to solve by the host country (Raadschelders et al., 2019). Simply put, asylum seekers are manifestations "of the problems of another country which suddenly become the problem of one's own" (Jacobsen, 1996, p. 662). While the right to seek asylum is considered an international norm and human right in democratic states, providing protection for refugees requires administrative and financial resources, and states have therefore tried to set policies that deter the arrival of asylum seekers (Böcker & Havinga, 1998; Toshkov, 2013). The inherent tension between protecting state interests and assisting people seeking protection due to serious threats to their life or freedom frames the complexity of asylum policymaking in almost every aspect (Helbling & Leblang, 2018) and makes the formulation of asylum policy a constant balancing act for policymakers (Steiner, 2000, p. 7).

To further characterise the complexity of asylum policy, it is necessary to examine the different functions of asylum policy, the multi-level institutional framework, the diverse constellation of actors, and their conflicting perspectives. Asylum policy scholars generally categorise national policy measures as those that seek to control immigration (immigration policies) and those that aim to provide integration and welfare assistance (immigrant policies) (Meyers, 2000; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2009; Boswell, 2011).

More specifically, three main functions of national asylum systems can be distinguished: 1) the admission of asylum seekers; 2) the reception of asylum seekers, who have applied for refugee status and are waiting for a response; and 3) the integration and assistance of people who have been granted refugee status or international protection on other humanitarian grounds (Alink et al., 2001; Hatton, 2004, 2017). All of these functions are performed by actors from different policy areas. The admission of asylum seekers typically falls under the jurisdiction of border control, immigration agencies, or law enforcement, and includes border crossing procedures, processing of asylum applications, and the deportation of immigrants who are not granted protection or who are determined to endanger national security. The reception of asylum seekers entails responsibilities related to accommodation, healthcare, social services, legal assistance, and the provision of translators. The integration of refugees involves agencies and organisations providing social services, language training, education, etc. Considering that refugees, along with all other resident immigrants, also have implications for the labour market and economy, it is clear that asylum policy at the national level is a cross-sectoral issue, requiring at least some degree of coordination among multiple policy domains with different institutional settings (Guiraudon, 2003; Abdou & Pettrachin, 2022).

In addition to the diversity of policy areas and actors on the horizontal scale, asylum policymaking also spans across multiple levels of governance on the vertical scale (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000). Actors involved in the formulation and implementation of asylum policy range from international organisations to local non-governmental organisations and social movements (Ambrosini, 2021). On the supranational level, the primary institution in refugee affairs is the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which is the “guardian” of the Refugee Convention and serves both to assist countries in translating international regulations into national laws and to supervise their application (UNHCR, 2025). Policy instruments at their disposal are limited and mainly include informational and (small-scale) economic measures (Raadschelders et al., 2019). In the European context, the international legal framework is complemented by the European Union’s legislation (the Common European Asylum System), which specifies the responsibilities of member states and includes common minimum standards for reception and refugee protection that complement the Refugee Convention (Hatton, 2004). Although asylum policy and refugee protection were communitarised with the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, the “incomplete sovereignty transfer” of asylum policy means that the EU has only limited capacity to exercise power centrally and mostly has a coordinative role (Zaun, 2020, p. 199). Other actors at the international level include the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and international non-governmental organisations, but their role in the national context is mainly supportive. At the national level, the main actors include the parliament, ministries, and government agencies. State actors are responsible for formulating and implementing the laws, rules, policies, and practices that govern asylum policy. In the European Union, depending on the member state, migration issues belong to the jurisdiction of either internal affairs or immigration affairs, and the reception and integration of refugees is commonly a task under the jurisdiction of social affairs (Guiraudon, 2017). In addition to government agencies, local governments also play an important role and are mainly involved in providing reception and welfare services (Raadschelders et al., 2019; Glorius et al., 2019). Non-state actors at the national level include non-profit and private organisations. These organisations can provide services for asylum seekers and refugees, advocate for their rights, and serve

as “watchdogs” to ensure that states comply with international regulations and fulfil their obligations in practice (Garkisch et al., 2017; III: pp. 108–110). At the same time, civil society organisations can also include those that represent nativist and anti-immigration movements (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015, p. 104).

Because asylum policy is both politically contentious and involves a diverse network of policy actors, different stakeholders can often put forward “fundamentally different frames of problem definitions, policy norms and policy alternatives” (Alink et al., 2001, p. 296). Using the 2015 refugee crisis as an example, Geuijen et al. (2016, p. 622) provide a clear illustration of how the crisis can be seen simultaneously as a humanitarian crisis, geopolitical conflict, a security threat caused by uncontrolled border crossings, and a failure of the CEAS. Based on how asylum issues are framed or imagined, different subsets of actors can focus on only certain aspects of asylum policy problems (Mayblin, 2017; Geuijen et al., 2016), but their discursive legitimacy depends on how power and resources are dispersed across the policy domain (Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Mosley, 2013). Because asylum as a migration issue touches the question of state sovereignty, traditionally the main authority “remains firmly entrenched in national policies with regulatory and most economic instruments and incentives controlled by territorial states” (Raadschelders et al., 2019, p. 245; Jacobsen, 1996). At the same time, because of the number of forcibly displaced people has almost doubled over the past decade (UNHCR, 2025), states have been forced to increasingly rely on the capacity and resources of a wider network of actors, including those with whom their perspectives do not necessarily align (Schrover et al., 2019). Particularly during periods of mass arrivals of asylum seekers, researchers have observed the growing presence and involvement of third sector organisations (Kersch & Mishtal, 2016; Simsa, 2017; Roth et al., 2018). The NGOs assisting refugees have acted as “gap fillers” in state responses, often reacting more quickly to crisis events. However, these contingencies have also caused the emergence of anti-immigrant and xenophobic movements, which contribute to political tensions and make collaborative interactions more difficult (Feischmidt et al., 2019; Ambrosini, 2021; Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2019). Analyses of these complex networks have led some authors to describe the constellations of asylum-policy actors and their interactions as a “battleground”, where different interests and perspectives collide (Ambrosini, 2021). A paradoxical situation emerges, where network-type governance and collaborative interactions are needed to deal with the complex policy problem, yet remain difficult to realise due to disagreements among actors (Ansell et al., 2017; Bannink et al., 2024).

The final characteristic of asylum policy, which contributes to the difficulties of asylum policymaking and has important implications for stakeholder interactions, is the high level of uncertainty in asylum issues (Head, 2008). The migratory movement of asylum seekers is hard to predict and impossible for receiving governments to control (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; Mayblin, 2017), meaning that asylum policymaking is highly dependent on and reactive to external pressures. The number of asylum seekers fluctuates from mass movements to slow periods, which is why asylum policy is prone to “focusing events” (Birkland & Warnement, 2016). An empirical analysis by Knill and Steinebach (2022) of the regulatory changes in Germany’s asylum policy has, for example, shown that asylum policymaking and policy accumulation tend to be primarily driven by crises. Sudden large-scale arrival of asylum seekers activates public debates, puts pressure on governments to find solutions, and requires mobilising the resources and capacities of non-state, private, or intergovernmental organisations (Zaun, 2017; Hatton, 2017;

Rijavec & Pevcin, 2021; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). The tensions between balancing state interests and human rights become even more evident in crisis situations, which can lead to intense conflicts on the “battleground” (Ambrosini, 2021). At the same time, as already highlighted above, in crisis situations the interdependence between policy-network actors can become even more evident and lead to states being forced to involve non-governmental organisations in asylum policymaking. This can result in hybrid, messy, and dynamic forms of policymaking between state and non-state actors, even if it might not necessarily seem likely (Alcantara et al., 2016). In fact, empirical studies of the 2015 refugee crisis reveal just that. For example, a comparative study (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2023) on stakeholder interactions in small and medium-sized localities across different EU member states revealed that while in some cases interactions between state and non-state actors were limited to low levels of cooperation in the policymaking process during the crisis, in others, forms of closer collaboration emerged (see also Caponio, Pettrachin & Ponzio, 2025). Another comparative study of the governance processes during the 2015 refugee crisis in 11 countries (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022) showed that although nation-states remained at the centre of policymaking processes, in all analysed countries non-governmental actors were involved in crisis governance. The study found that state–NGO relationships were “smoother” in organising refugee reception and more confrontational when it came to issues related to border control and refugee protection (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022, p. 9).

2.3 Factors Influencing Asylum Policymaking at the National Level

As the discussion on the complexities of asylum policy indicates, asylum regimes in EU member states can be very different depending on the national context. Three main context-specific factors that shape the asylum policymaking process and policy choices at the national level stand out in the migration policy literature.

First, the historical trajectory of migration and the institutional development of the asylum policy system need to be considered. Migration theorists argue that the state’s historical experience with immigrants – that is, the ethnic heterogeneity of the population and the tendency for immigrant streams to grow into migrant networks (Massey, 1999) – affects public attitudes towards migration, but also the institutionalisation of migration policy and politics (Meyers, 2000). According to the “national identity approach” (Meyers, 2000, pp. 1251–1257), immigration policies are not only formulated as a reaction to external pressures, but the state’s unique history determines how nationality and citizenship are defined within society, and, concurrently, how immigrants are perceived and socially accepted. These framings and ideas become institutionalised and can affect policy actors and their room for manoeuvre (Erikson, 2015; Hardy, 1994). Erikson (2015) argues that the assignment of a jurisdiction to a certain topic reflects the dominant policy frame of the issue. Therefore, whether asylum policy is under the jurisdiction of internal affairs or social affairs influences how asylum issues are perceived and which aspects are considered more important in policy formulation (Mayblin, 2017). It has been argued that historical background and initial institutionalisation processes can have a potentially long-term effect on issue framing and political preferences, even if significant reforms are introduced (Guiraudon, 2003; Byrne et al., 2020; Pries, 2019, p. 7).

Second, the administrative and economic capacity of the state can shape political choices and determine the ability to implement policies (Jacobsen, 1996; Givens & Luedtke, 2004; Zaun, 2016). The mass influx of asylum seekers puts an economic,

political, and administrative burden on the receiving state, creating tensions within society and concerns relating to national security (Cantant et al., 2025). As immigration policy is formulated from the perspective of the local population, rather than by considering what benefits the immigrant (Hatton, 2004), in difficult economic situations, states might opt for more restrictive measures. As Bagdonas (2015, p. 11) bluntly puts it, “protecting the human rights of strangers is not necessarily beneficial to the existence and the health of one’s welfare state”. Empirical research has also highlighted that EU member states with limited experience of asylum seekers, so-called “weak regulators” (Zaun, 2016), try to incentivise asylum seekers to “seek protection elsewhere by introducing policies that impede access” (Zaun, 2023, p. 215). While the formal capacity and resources of the state can condition policy choices, the administrative capacity also shapes the robustness of asylum systems and determines how well policy choices are implemented. The experience of the 2015 European refugee crisis demonstrated how the low maturity of asylum systems in some member states on the frontline of the crisis led to failures to fulfil their obligations (see, e.g., Rijavec et al., 2021; Zaun, 2020). Countries that have very limited experience with asylum seekers and refugees tend to have very little political will to establish a functioning asylum system (Thym, 2016; Zaun, 2017; Shevel, 2011) and, therefore, there is a tendency to rely on “informal structures involving certain degree of arbitrariness” (Zaun, 2017, p. 34). Considering the interconnected nature of asylum policy in terms of different policy areas and governance sectors, the ability of the politico-administrative structure to coordinate different actors also constitutes one aspect of administrative capacity (Christensen et al., 2019).

Third, the domestic preferences of political decision-makers, together with public opinion in receiving states, also affect asylum policymaking (Hatton, 2017; Larrison & Raadschelders, 2020; Hartland, 2023). In the European context, the general public perception of assisting asylum seekers has gradually become more negative (Boswell, 2000; Schultz et al., 2021). Asylum policy has become a highly politicised issue, and especially in the presence of strong right-wing populist parties, there is a tendency to adopt restrictive positions and to deter actors who argue otherwise (Zaun, 2023; Byrne et al., 2020). Therefore, the way asylum policy is framed within society and how salient the issue becomes among the electorate will influence and constrain politicians’ choices (Zaun, 2023). In situations of high salience, it is assumed to be unlikely that mainstream political parties would decide against their electorate’s preferences (Pettrachin, 2022, p. 32). At the same time, the political forces in power at the state level and their ideological position on the political spectrum have been shown to have an important impact on stakeholder interactions, including who will be involved or excluded from policy formulation and implementation processes (Zogata-Kusz, 2022; Caponio & Pettrachin, 2023).

frequent interaction and working towards a common goal transformed their relationship from confrontation to constructive collaboration (III).

On top of the newly created collaborative structures, efforts were made to include and support stakeholders for whom the arrival of refugees posed novel challenges (II). Although local governments are responsible for organising social welfare services for their residents in Estonia, the low number of refugees and the availability of support services provided by NGOs meant that local governments tended to perceive refugee issues as something outside the responsibility of the local level prior to the 2015 crisis. In order to alleviate concerns and identify municipalities open to receiving refugees, the officials from the Ministries of the Interior and Social Affairs, together with the respective Ministers, travelled across all counties in Estonia to meet with the heads of local governments (II). In addition, government officials met with and offered support for schools willing to accept refugee children. Overall, the interviewed government officials involved in preparations for the reception of refugees in Estonia described an unprecedented level of cooperation and coordination between asylum policy stakeholders, characterised by a shared sense of unity and purpose (II). Several interviewed officials pointed out that close cooperation between stakeholders who previously had different perspectives on asylum issues (e.g., the MoI and the Police and Border Guard Board versus the MoSA) had even led to a better mutual understanding of each other's positions. For example, it was noted that officials from the Police and Border Guard Board seemed to become more aware that providing social support and a sense of security for asylum seekers could increase applicants' willingness to cooperate with public institutions (III).

In March 2016, the first groups of refugees arrived from Greece and Turkey, and by the end of the year a total of 77 refugees had been relocated and resettled in Estonia. Although in 2017 the Estonian government had decided to resettle an additional 80 refugees from Turkey based on the European Council's recommendation, only 213 refugees in total (compared to the agreed 550 + 80) arrived in Estonia between 2016 and 2019 through the European relocation and resettlement schemes (The Ministry of the Interior, 2025). The reason behind the arrival of less than half of the refugee quota Estonia had agreed upon stemmed from the government's decision to favour refugees with a specific profile, which included families, children, and people who explicitly expressed their willingness to live in Estonia (II). Given that approximately 40% of the 213 refugees who arrived in Estonia left for other EU member states by the end of the crisis (BNS, 2020), Estonia was not a preferred target country for refugees, and it was difficult to find people who matched the profile and were willing to come to Estonia. Considering the swift efforts to improve the capacity of the Estonian asylum system and the arrival of fewer refugees than expected, Estonia did not experience a practical-level crisis (II). In addition, improved communication and awareness-raising efforts by the government and NGOs, combined with the fact that the fears of a mass influx of refugees did not materialise in Estonia, public opinion towards refugees improved somewhat already towards the end of 2016 (Voog, 2016) and rampant public debates gradually subsided. In 2019, all ongoing administrative activities with regard to the 2015 refugee crisis burden-sharing schemes were finalised.

combined with the post-communist legacy of asylum-system reform, contributed to asylum seekers being perceived as just another type of immigrant not as persons in need of international protection. Therefore, the EU-level calls for solidarity and the Estonian government's decision to participate in the relocation and resettlement schemes appeared puzzling for a large segment of society and fuelled widespread exclusionary attitudes towards refugees, even though the number of refugees reaching Estonia was low (I, II).

Second, the institutional configuration in which the MoI held a central coordinating role can be traced to Estonia's historical experience with immigration and its geographical position, both of which resulted in immigration being framed primarily from the perspectives of security and border control. As a result, this policy area was firmly under the auspices of the ministry in charge of internal security (I). The dominant position of the Ministry of the Interior in shaping Estonia's stance on asylum issues was further reinforced by the specific characteristics of the Estonian politico-administrative system and its post-communist development since 1991. After regaining independence, the Estonian administrative system underwent substantial de-institutionalisation and an overwhelming structural reform, resulting in a segmented system characterised by strong ministries supervising their areas of governance (Sarapuu, 2011). While such a system, built on ministerial responsibility, guaranteed clear ownership of and accountability for specific policy issues, in complex policy areas, such as migration, it created problems of coordination and horizontal collaboration (IV, V).

Third, the post-communist legacies were also observable in the power dynamics between stakeholders in the Estonian context. From the establishment of asylum policy in Estonia until the early 2010s, asylum policy remained a marginal, low-salience policy issue, and there was very little pressure or political will for politicians to engage with it beyond what was required by the EU (I, III). Given that there were very few asylum seekers and the third sector was still developing in Estonia (Randma-Liiv et al., 2008), the initial conservative policy position was largely uncontested until more refugees started to arrive, and third-sector organisations became more visible in Estonian asylum policy. Although NGOs gained valuable expertise from working with asylum seekers and refugees, they were not considered as legitimate partners in policy formulation processes prior to the 2015 crisis (III). The empirical findings of this thesis show that while the Estonian government's decision to participate in the relocation and resettlement scheme changed the relationship between NGOs and government officials at the policy implementation level, the power dynamic remained unaltered at the policy formulation level (II, III). The sensitivity of asylum policy, combined with the emotional reaction of the public and a relatively short tradition of engaging NGOs in policymaking in Estonia (Randma-Liiv et al., 2008), meant that NGOs were only formally involved in the amendment process of the AGIPA. Although the position of NGOs was to advocate for the correct application of international law in Estonian legislation, they were perceived by politicians as spokespersons for refugees who advocated for more favourable conditions for refugees (III), meaning that the framing of the problem by government actors and NGOs was different (Bannink et al., 2024). From the politicians' perspective, the need to gain (and publicly exhibit) control over asylum issues meant that after a decision to accept refugees through the relocation scheme was made, the ensuing political discussions in Parliament revolved around setting conditions for who would be accepted, rather than how to best support the arriving refugees (III).

the MoI's need for knowledge and manpower led them to take a more open stance and cooperate with NGOs, even though their relationship had previously been confrontational (II, III). As the group of actors involved in the Estonian asylum system was rather small prior to the 2015 refugee crisis and included people who had worked on these issues for years and knew each other beforehand, the exchanges between actors were often informal, allowing for quick communication (II). The extraordinary circumstances of the 2015 refugee crisis forced a small group of individuals to work strenuously in a multifunctional manner on a wide scale. For example, the small number of ministry officials with previous expertise in asylum policy were simultaneously involved in supporting Estonia's negotiations at the EU level, developing an action plan in the Coordination Committee on Asylum Policy, and exchanging information with social partners at the domestic level (II). Although Estonian ministries usually confine themselves to policy design and not policy implementation (IV, V), during the 2015 refugee crisis, ministry officials played a very hands-on role in the implementation of the action plan for relocation and resettlement of refugees (II).

4 Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research

The 2015 refugee crisis has offered ample opportunities for research into the complexities of asylum policymaking. While an increase in asylum arrivals can trigger heightened political attention and potential policy change (Zaun, 2017; Knill & Steinebach, 2022), researchers argue that asylum policymaking should not be analysed solely by focusing on short-term crisis dynamics (Triandafyllidou, 2022). Rather, the interpretation and translation of crisis events into policy responses are mediated by historical trajectories of migration, institutional arrangements, states' administrative and economic capacities, and domestic political preferences (Byrne et al., 2020; Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016; Pevcin & Rijavec, 2021; Wivel, 2021; Gorodzeisky, 2023; Zaun 2023). Consequently, scholars have argued for the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive analyses of the links between policy formulation, implementation, and stakeholder interactions (Pettrachin, 2023; Caponio et al., 2025). This thesis aims to contribute to the international academic debate on asylum policymaking as a complex problem by exploring the Estonian case and taking an in-depth look at two specific contextual aspects: the Central and Eastern European context, with its legacies of communism and post-communist transformation, and the small-state context, with its limited capacities and special social ecology. The concluding part of this thesis introduction outlines the broader implications of the study for understanding asylum policymaking.

First, the Estonian case illustrates that in the CEE context, asylum policymaking cannot be fully understood without considering the countries' **historical experience with immigration and the externally driven institutionalisation of asylum policy**, which shapes actors' perceptions of the policy issue and their relationships. In the Baltic and CEE states, which acceded to the EU in 2004, the initial establishment and reform of asylum regimes during the 1990s followed a similar trajectory, which was primarily shaped by external pressure and EU-conditionality, not domestic necessity or humanitarian concern (Lavenex, 1998, 2002; Vedsted-Hansen, 2002). Against the backdrop of immigration and asylum policies in Western and Northern European countries becoming more security-oriented and restrictive in the 1990s (Boswell, 2000; Keely, 2001; Kjærøum, 2002; Czaika & Hobolth, 2016), EU member states began establishing a common European asylum system (Hatton, 2005). Although asylum policy was a new and evolving area of EU cooperation, it was nevertheless incorporated into the EU *acquis communautaire* (Lavenex, 2002). Consequently, during the pre-accession period, the CEE candidate states were required to adopt asylum policy measures and build institutional capacities that arguably prioritised border security and immigration control over refugee protection (Guiraudon, 2003; Byrne et al., 2002). Given that the former communist states had no prior experience with refugees and lacked both humanitarian traditions and supportive institutions (e.g., third-sector organisations) (Lavenex, 1998; Shevel, 2011; Enjolras et al., 2018), scholars warned early on that the adoption of EU asylum legislation might remain formal, leading to weak implementation of reception and protection standards in the CEE states (Byrne et al., 2002; Lavenex, 2002).

The findings of the Estonian case largely confirm these concerns by showing that the establishment of asylum policy under EU conditionality, combined with the communist-era legacy of population transfers to Estonia, has had a defining and long-lasting effect on how asylum issues are perceived and organised (I, II). The perception of immigration as a threat to sovereignty and cultural survival has

been deeply embedded in the collective memory of Estonian society and this outlook is also evident in the institutional setup of the Estonian asylum system (I, II, III). Despite the introduction of EU rules and protection standards as the Common European Asylum System developed during the 2000s, asylum policy remained marginal prior to the 2015 refugee crisis due to low numbers of asylum seekers and the political sensitivity of immigration issues. As a result, the Estonian asylum system remained state-dominated and under-organised, with the few involved actors only loosely coupled (I, II, III). Although there are only a few studies that have looked into the development of asylum policy in the CEE region after EU accession, the literature indicates that the deeply embedded securitisation of immigration and under-developed asylum systems were characteristic of many other CEE countries (Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016; Jelínková, 2019; Vezovnik, 2018; Novak & Giljević, 2022). The findings of the thesis show that the complexity of asylum policy increases as the state becomes more exposed to asylum seekers, because this leads the policy network to become more diverse and differences in issue framing become more visible (Alford & Head, 2017).

Considering that the governance of migration shapes how immigration is understood and emerging challenges are interpreted (Geddes, 2022), the findings of the Estonian case indicate that one of the reasons behind the CEE region member states' comparatively more anxious reaction to the 2015 refugee crisis (Gorodzeisky, 2023; Heizmann & Ziller, 2020) and their stronger political rejection of EU-level solidarity mechanisms compared to Western and Northern European member states (Zaun, 2020) stemmed from the way asylum policy was institutionalised during the post-communist transition era. In line with what has been suggested by Byrne et al. (2020), the findings of this thesis show that the inherent tension between state interests and humanitarian concerns tends to lead even more strongly towards state-centred priorities in the CEE states because of post-communist legacies. This indicates that refugee-assisting NGOs might be perceived as less important policy actors, since the discursive legitimacy of how asylum is framed rests almost exclusively with state actors (Mayblin, 2017; III). Although political opposition to relocation and resettlement schemes and exclusionary attitudes toward asylum seekers during the 2015 refugee crisis were not unique to the CEE region, the findings of this thesis suggest that these tendencies, and the perception of the 2015 crisis as an existential threat to state survival, were more pronounced in the CEE context. This helps explain why in Estonia, but also, for example, in the Czech Republic, the 2015 refugee crisis was perceived as a crisis even when exposure to asylum seekers remained low (II, III; Jelínková, 2019).

Second, **regarding administrative and economic capacities**, the Estonian case demonstrates that administrative capacity-building driven by EU-level developments and economic support, in a context of low domestic political salience and very low numbers of asylum seekers, leads to gaps and inconsistencies between adopted norms and implementation practices (II, III). Similar tendencies have been described in larger states in the CEE region, noting that launching immigration policies in countries with relatively few migrants remains “an abstract process” and EU-driven processes can lead to piecemeal policymaking (Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016, p. 71–72). At the same time, the limited capacity of the Estonian asylum system was also influenced by the small-state context, in which scarce resources are allocated according to the acuteness of policy issues (Sarapuu & Randma-Liiv, 2020). Although the moderate growth in refugee arrivals in the early 2010s also strengthened administrative capabilities to some extent, the 2015 refugee crisis posed an unprecedented challenge for the Estonian

asylum system (I, II). The analysis of the Estonian case shows that while the small-state context had previously contributed to the limited capacity of the Estonian asylum system, during the 2015 refugee crisis, the small-state characteristics of the Estonian politico-administrative system also made it possible to adapt quickly to the changing environment (II). In order to prepare for the arrival of refugees through the relocation and resettlement scheme, resources and key stakeholders were swiftly mobilised, and temporary structures were created to coordinate policy implementation processes (II). The findings of the thesis are consistent with previous findings and arguments in the literature, suggesting that the capacity of small states to pre-emptively recognise challenges, improvise, adapt, coordinate, and foster a sense of unity in crisis situations (Jugl, 2025; Högenauer et al., 2021; Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu, 2025; Sarapuu et al., 2021; Thorhalsson 2025) makes small states “particularly suitable and fine-tuned for robust practices and responses” (Sarapuu & Jugl, 2024, p. 195). Given that small states are more exposed to crisis situations, they might also be more likely to adopt hybrid governance measures more often. While this allows for swift reactions and can give short-term results in improved horizontal coordination, if the interactive processes are not cultivated after the turbulence has passed, the benefits may evaporate (Edelenbos, 2005; IV, V).

More broadly, the analysis of the Estonian case illustrates that turbulence can also be a driver for introducing collaborative governance mechanisms (Ansell & Trondal, 2018, p. 51), even in politically sensitive policy fields like asylum policy. The Estonian government’s decision to partake in the relocation and resettlement scheme, at least in some capacity, created the need for quick capacity-building, which required new governance instruments (II). While the Ministry of the Interior had previously been the primary “owner” of asylum policy, the need to mobilise manpower and expertise during the 2015 refugee crisis forced the MoI to take a more open and collaborative stance. The crisis, therefore, decentred the policymaking process to an extent (Bryson et al., 2017), because the need to involve other actors revealed the dependence of the MoI on the input of other stakeholders for successful crisis governance. A task-force type of structure was established at the policy implementation level to include all relevant government organisations, and a separate structure was created to coordinate implementation activities with NGOs and other organisations involved in the reception of refugees (II). Although these arrangements did not substantially alter existing power dynamics, they did have a positive effect on improving mutual understanding between actors with very different perspectives on asylum issues (II, III). The study of the use of task forces (IV, V) further supports these findings, suggesting that in fragmented administrative systems, the use of temporary coordination instruments to address multifaceted policy problems can help reduce the complexity stemming from the different interpretations of the issue or the “substantive complexity” of the network (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016, pp. 12–13). By taking a complex policy issue temporarily “out” of the existing institutional structure, the experience of working together can contribute to building trust and developing the soft skills required for better coordination (IV, V).

The theoretical literature attests that in order to effectively manage or deal with diverse actors with divergent perspectives, which are characteristic of complex problems, it is necessary to reach a minimum common ground (Joldersma, 1997, p. 216; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). In the Estonian case, government officials and NGOs were able to put aside previous differences, as both perceived the crisis as a shared challenge for the Estonian asylum system. More broadly, the thesis findings suggest that network-based governance mechanisms and coordination instruments might be more effective in

decreasing the complexity of network governance at the policy implementation level than at the policy formulation level (II, III, IV, V). If a policy issue is sensitive and already has a clear owner, it is less likely that actors who do not support the dominant issue framing will be involved in political decision-making in a meaningful way. The results of using temporary task forces in Estonia showed that after the activities of the task force were completed, the responsibility for, for example, proposing and enacting legislative changes, still rested with the ministry as the dominant actor in charge of policy formulation (IV). Similarly, the legislative decision-making process at parliamentary level during the 2015 refugee crisis showed that, because of the heightened scrutiny of asylum issues, NGOs were only nominally involved in the policy formulation process, although they were considered valuable partners at the policy implementation level.

Third, regarding **domestic political preferences**, the Estonian case demonstrates that although public opinion and the high level of politicisation of asylum issues influence asylum policy formulation processes, they do not necessarily determine which decisions are eventually made or how the crisis is governed (II, III). Because small states are more exposed to crisis situations and tend to seek “shelter” from either larger states or international organisations, this has an effect on political decision-making (Thorhallson, 2018). In the Estonian case, the shelter-seeking behaviour during the 2015 refugee crisis was especially pronounced, as the anticipation of a future need for solidarity from other states led the Estonian government to support EU-level solidarity measures (II, III). Therefore, contrary to what might have been expected given the strong influence of post-communist anxiety in society, the Estonian government’s decision was shaped to an even greater extent by its sense of small-state vulnerability. While it could be argued that the EU resettlement and relocation scheme amounted to only a temporary measure and the Estonian quota was small, the government’s decision nevertheless illustrated a clear trade-off between political preferences and the perception of the crisis as a potentially existential security threat, given the previously conservative political stance, low capacity of the Estonian asylum system, and the anxious public reaction (III). As Wivel (2021, p. 278) argues, in the context of a highly politicised policy problem, like asylum policy, small states may attempt to “hedge between an increasingly nationalist domestic audience and maintaining the EU shelter, i.e. working towards a superficial Europeanization allowing for substantial national action space within the EU framework”. The findings of this thesis, therefore, support arguments by those who suggest that conclusions based only on public opinion polls or political statements at the EU level do not necessarily provide an accurate picture about the realities of asylum policymaking at the national level (Pettrachin, 2023; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). In order to understand the complexities of asylum policymaking, national contextual factors need to be considered.

To conclude, as a contribution to the international academic debate on asylum policymaking, this thesis shows how different contextual factors do not operate in isolation but interact and shape each other at the national level. In the Estonian case, historical legacies, including the securitised understanding of immigration, interacted with small-state vulnerabilities, amplifying the perceptions of the 2015 refugee crisis as a threat, even though the number of asylum seekers remained low. While the crisis exposed administrative vulnerabilities, the flexibility of the administrative system allowed for a swift reaction and the emergence of collaborative governance practices between actors with very different perceptions of the issue. Eckhard et al. (2021) have proposed that the effectiveness of administrative crisis management depends on the

administration's ability to temporarily shift towards more flexible and collaborative governance mechanisms. Small state politico-administrative systems seem to possess this ability, as also demonstrated by the Estonian response during the 2015 refugee crisis. Therefore, continued analyses of crisis governance in small states is needed and responses to different types of crises could be analysed and compared further. Furthermore, given that crisis governance solutions, especially in the asylum policy field, tend to be temporary (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022) and that small states may be more able to switch between practices in asylum policy governance, future research should explore the layering of institutional practices specifically from the perspective of small states' limited capacities and special social ecology.

Regarding the Estonian case, future studies should explore how Estonia coped with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2020. While there have been some recent studies of the Estonian context, focusing on how the reception and integration of Ukrainian refugees was governed (Jauhiainen & Erbsen, 2023) and analysing the interactions between state institutions and local governments (see, e.g., Lello, 2024), there is still little systematic research into how the Ukrainian refugee crisis has unfolded in Estonia. The findings of this thesis indicate that the experiences during the 2015 refugee crisis expanded the circle of stakeholders involved in the Estonian asylum system and influenced their interactions. Comparing stakeholder interactions during the 2015 refugee crisis and the Ukrainian refugee crisis could help to better understand the longitudinal dynamics of policy networks around complex policy problems such as asylum. While interactions between actors are shaped by the institutional setting, stakeholder interactions also affect the institutional framework itself (Hardy et al., 2003). Consequently, studying the involvement of NGOs in the Ukrainian refugee crisis governance in Estonia could help to determine whether the shift from antagonistic to constructive interactions between the MoI officials and NGOs was temporary or had a longer-term impact. Ran and Qi (2017, p. 843) have argued that previous collaborative interactions will have an effect on future interactions. A study by Christensen et al. (2019, p. 249) found that while addressing complex policy problems poses significant coordination challenges, experiencing these challenges firsthand can "foster competence and positive experiences rather than problems". Therefore, in asylum policy more broadly, crises could serve as learning experiences for network actors and lead to incremental improvements in coordination at the policy implementation level.

Asylum policy formulation and implementation continue to be an ever-evolving challenge for governments across the EU. Because of the complex and dynamic nature of asylum issues, what the existing policies intend to achieve and what is actually feasible can differ considerably, as the 2015 European refugee crisis clearly demonstrated. Although EU member states had established a common asylum system, the crisis revealed a wide gap between the normative aims of the CEAS and the political preferences, and practical capabilities of member states (Lavenex, 2018). In order to improve our understanding of the realities of asylum policymaking at the national level, future research should pay closer attention to less-studied member states, including small states, countries in the CEE region and those that are not the main destination countries for asylum seekers. Studying asylum policy making in different contextual settings can help advance knowledge on how different historical legacies, institutional factors and political preferences shape how asylum policy networks are organised and governed. Therefore, there is a need for both case studies that zoom in on asylum policy

formulation and implementation processes, but also comparative studies that help to identify patterns and explain why similar crisis situations can lead to different interpretations and policy solutions (see e.g. Hagelund, 2020). For example, for several member states in the CEE region, the 2015 refugee crisis could be regarded as the first critical engagement with asylum issues, exposing the divide between “East” and “West” within the EU asylum policy (Bedeá & Osei Kwadwo, 2020; Duszczuk et al., 2020), and prompting CEE states to take a much more active and vocal role in EU asylum policymaking (Thym, 2016; Byrne et al., 2020). Future research projects could study more closely the similarities and divergences in asylum policy preferences and governance practices across CEE states, and how these are linked to national institutional and political settings.

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Abstract

Migration Governance in Context: Asylum Policymaking in Estonia

In the contemporary policy environment, governments increasingly face highly complex policy problems that are intractable, multi-causal, unpredictable and constantly evolving. These challenges are difficult to address not only because of the complex nature of the problems, but also because the knowledge, resources and authority required to tackle these issues are dispersed among a diverse set of actors operating within multi-level institutional settings. Asylum policy has emerged as one of the most complex and politically contested policy areas in the European Union (EU). It spans vertically across governance levels and horizontally across policy areas, requiring policymakers to navigate the problem of forced migration while constantly balancing state's sovereign right to regulate immigration against the international obligation to protect people seeking refuge. Because the migratory movement of asylum seekers is difficult to predict, asylum policymaking is often activated during crises situations, when the inefficiencies and vulnerabilities of existing policies and governance arrangements are revealed.

While the complexity of asylum policymaking at the national and local government level has emerged as an important research avenue, especially after the 2015 European refugee crisis, there is still ample room to explore the interactions and links between political interests and governance practices at the national level. This thesis contributes to the international academic debate on asylum policymaking by studying the Estonian case and providing an in-depth look at two underexplored contexts in asylum policymaking, namely post-communist and small-state contexts. The main research questions guiding the thesis are: (1) How did Estonia's asylum policy evolve from regaining independence until 2015? (2) How did the 2015 European refugee crisis affect asylum policymaking in Estonia? (3) What role did the post-communist and small state context play in shaping asylum policymaking in Estonia during the 2015 European refugee crisis?

To address these questions, the thesis employs a qualitative research approach and uses case studies as a research strategy. The empirical focus is on unfolding of the 2015 refugee crisis in Estonia. In order to better understand the contextual nuances, a historically informed perspective is taken. The study of asylum policymaking is complemented by an additional case study of the use of temporary task forces as a cross-sectoral coordination instrument in complex policy areas, providing background information on the institutional context of Estonia and insights into the management of policy network stakeholder interactions in complex policy areas. The thesis draws on multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews with politicians, government officials and non-governmental organisation representatives, alongside policy documents, parliamentary plenary transcripts and a survey.

The findings of this thesis illustrate how the interpretation of crises and translation of crisis events into policy responses are mediated by historical trajectories of migration, institutional arrangements, states' administrative and economic capacities, and domestic political preferences. In the Estonian case, the historical experience with forced immigration and externally driven institutionalisation of asylum policy have had a defining and long-lasting effect on how asylum issues are perceived and organised. Prior to the 2015 refugee crisis, asylum policy remained a marginal policy issue characterised

by state-dominated policymaking and an under-organised institutional setting with few loosely coupled actors. The 2015 refugee crisis triggered an abrupt political and societal reaction in Estonia, even though the number of asylum seekers remained low. The perception of the crisis as an existential threat illustrated Estonia's collectively perceived vulnerability as a small state. Despite strong domestic opposition, the anticipation of a future need for solidarity from the other member states led the Estonian government to support EU-level solidarity measures. This decision required quick adapting from the Estonian politico-administrative system. The thesis shows that Estonia's small state characteristics, such as flexibility, more informal networks and the ability to swiftly mobilise resources, enabled a robust administrative response that prevented the emergence of a practical crisis on the ground.

The thesis concludes that different contextual factors do not operate in isolation but interact and shape each other at the national level. In Estonia, historical legacies, including the securitised understanding of immigration, interacted with small-state vulnerabilities amplifying the perceptions of the 2015 refugee crisis as a threat. However, contrary to what might have been expected based on the strong influence of post-communist anxiety in society, the political elite's decision was shaped to an even greater extent by its sense of small-state vulnerability. While the crisis exposed limited administrative capacities, the flexibility of the administrative system allowed for a swift reaction and prompted more collaborative governance practices engaging actors with very different perceptions of the issue.

The thesis provides a systematic, context-sensitive analysis of asylum policymaking in a small post-communist EU member state, integrating policy formulation, implementation, and governance perspectives. It advances understanding of how complex policy problems are managed in practice, emphasising the importance of contextual factors in shaping policy responses and stakeholder interactions. Future research could build on this analysis by conducting comparative studies across different small and post-communist states, as well as by examining how subsequent crises, such as the arrival of Ukrainian refugees after 2022, have further reshaped asylum policymaking dynamics.

Lühikokkuvõte

Rände valitsemine kontekstis: varjupaigapoliitika kujundamine ja elluviimine Eestis

Valitsused üle maailma seisavad üha enam silmitsi väga keerukate poliitikaprobleemidega, millel on erinevad juurpõhjused, mis on ettearvamatud, pidevalt muutuvad ning mida ei ole võimalik lõpuni ära lahendada. Taoliste väljakutsetega tegelemine ei ole keeruline mitte ainult probleemide olemuse tõttu, vaid ka seepärast, et nende probleemidega tegelemiseks vajalikud teadmised, ressursid ja otsustusõigus on hajutatud eri osapoolte ja valitsemistasandite vahel. Euroopa Liidus (EL) on varjupaigapoliitika hea näide eriti komplekssest ja poliitiliselt tundlikust poliitikavaldkonnast. Varjupaigapoliitika kujundamise ja elluviimisega seotud osapooled asuvad erinevatel valitsemistasanditel ja varjupaigapoliitika ulatub üle mitmete poliitikavaldkondade. Poliitikakujundajatele tähendab suundrändest tingitud probleemidega tegelemine pidevat tasakaalu otsimist riigi huvide ning autonoomia ja rahvusvaheliste kohustuste vahel, mille järgi on riigid kohustatud andma varjupaika inimestele, kes põgenevad sõja või tagakiusamise eest. Kuna varjupaigataotlejate rännet on raske prognoosida, käivitub varjupaigapoliitika kujundamine sageli kriisiolukordades, sest tihti ilmnevad just siis puudujäägid olemasolevates poliitikates ja valitsemiskorralduses.

Varjupaigapoliitika kujundamise ja elluviimise uurimine on eriti pärast 2015. aasta Euroopa rändekriisi kerkinud esile olulise uurimisvaldkonnana. Kuigi üha enam uuritakse varjupaigapoliitika osapoolte suhteid ja valitsemiskorraldust nii riikide kui ka kohalike omavalitsuste tasandil, teatakse võrdlemisi vähe, kuidas poliitilised huvid ja valitsemiskorraldus teineteist mõjutavad ning seeläbi poliitikaid ja nende elluviimist suunavad. Käesolevas doktoritöös on uuritud varjupaigapoliitika kujundamist ja elluviimist Eesti juhtumi põhjal. See võimaldab analüüsida seoseid konteksti ja varjupaigapoliitika vahel kahes seni vähem tähelepanu saanud vaates – postkommunistliku ja väikeriigi konteksti perspektiivist. Uurimistöös on käsitletud kolme peamist uurimisküsimust: (1) Kuidas arenes Eesti varjupaigapoliitika taasiseseisvumisest kuni 2015. aastani? (2) Kuidas mõjutas 2015. aasta Euroopa rändekriis varjupaigapoliitika kujundamist Eestis? (3) Milline oli postkommunistliku ja väikeriikide konteksti mõju varjupaigapoliitika kujundamisele Eestis 2015. aasta Euroopa rändekriisi ajal?

Nende küsimuste käsitlemiseks on doktoritöös kasutatud kvalitatiivset lähenemist ja uurimisstrateegiana juhtumiuuringuid. Empiirilise analüüsi fookuses on 2015. aasta rändekriisi avaldumine Eestis, kuid konteksti ja poliitikavalikute paremaks mõistmiseks on käsitletud ka varjupaigapoliitika ajaloolist arengut. Varjupaigapoliitika analüüsi täiendab juhtumiuuring ajutiste laiapõhjaliste töögruppide ehk rakkerühmade kasutamise kohta Eestis. Rakkerühmade analüüs aitab paremini mõtestada Eesti avaliku sektori institutsionaalse konteksti eripärasid ja annab ülevaate, kuidas korraldada poliitikavõrgustiku osapoolte suhtlust väga keerukate poliitikaprobleemidega tegelemiseks kasutades selleks ajutisi koordineerimisinstrumente. Uurimistöös on kasutatud mitmeid andmeallikaid, sealhulgas poolstruktureeritud intervjuusid poliitikute, ametnike ja vabaühenduste esindajatega, ning lisaks poliitikadokumente, parlamendi stenogramme ja rakkerühmade osalejate seas tehtud veebiküsitluse tulemusi.

Uurimistöö tulemused näitavad, et kriisi mõtestamist ja poliitiliste sekkumiste kujundamist mõjutavad ajaloolised rändeprotsessid, institutsionaalsed toimimistavad, riigi haldus- ja majanduslik suutlikkus ning poliitilised eelistused. Eesti juhtumianalüüs

näitab, et ajalooline sisseränne ja varjupaigapoliitika väljatöötamine kui EL-iga liitumise üks tingimus on avaldanud määramat ja pikaajalist mõju sellele, kuidas varjupaigataotlejatega seotud küsimusi tajutakse ning poliitikat kujundatakse. Enne 2015. aasta rändekriisi oli varjupaigapoliitika Eesti jaoks marginaalse tähtsusega küsimus, poliitikakujundamisel domineerisid eelkõige riigi huvid, institutsionaalsed toimimistavad ei olnud hästi paigas ning osapoolte koostöö oli vähene. 2015. aasta rändekriis põhjustas Eestis äkilise ja tugeva poliitilise ning ühiskondliku reaktsiooni, kuigi Eestisse jõudnud varjupaigataotlejate arv oluliselt ei kasvanud. Kriisi tajuti kui eksistentsiaalset ohtu, mis peegeldas Eestile kui väikeriigile omast kollektiivset haavatavuse tunnetust. Kuigi ühiskonnas oli tugev vastuseis varjupaigataotlejate vastuvõtmisele, otsustas Eesti valitsus osaleda EL-i solidaarsusmeetmes, mille eesmärk oli varjupaigataotlejaid liikmesriikide vahel ümber paigutada. See otsus tähendas, et Eesti poliitilis-administratiivne süsteem pidi kiiresti olukorraga kohanema ning varjupaigataotlejate vastuvõtmise suutlikkust parandama. Empiirilise analüüs näitab, et Eestile kui väikeriigile iseloomulikud omadused, nagu paindlikkus, mitteformaalne suhtlus ja võime kiiresti ressursse koondada, tagasid kriisi lahendamise edukuse ja vältisid selle eskaleerumist.

Doktoritöös on järeltadud, et erinevad kontekstist tulenevad tegurid ei toimi isoleeritult, vaid pigem koosmõjus. Eesti puhul põimus ajalooline pärand, sealhulgas sisserände käsitlemine eelkõige siseturvalisuse küsimusena, väikeriigile omase haavatavusega ja see kokku võimendas kriisi tajumist potentsiaalse ohuna. Vastupidi sellele, mida oleks võinud ühiskonnas tekkinud tugeva ärevuse põhjal eeldada, mõjutas poliitilisi otsustajaid eelkõige väikeriigi haavatavuse kaalutlus. Kuigi kriis tõi esile haldusvõimekuse puudujäägid, võimaldas süsteemi paindlikkus kiiresti reageerida ning ajendas uute koostöövormide tekkimist väga erinevate arusaamade ja vaadete osapoolte vahel.

Doktoritöö hõlmab endas süstemaatilist ja konteksti teguritega arvestavat analüüsi varjupaigapoliitika kujundamisest postkommunistliku taustaga väikeriigis, käsitledes ja integreerides korruga nii poliitika kujundamist, selle elluviimist kui ka osapoolte koostööd. Uurimistöõ panustab olemasolevasse teaduslikku teadmusesse, et paremini mõista, kuidas keerulisi poliitikaprobleeme praktikas hallatakse, sealjuures rõhutades kontekstist tulenevate tegurite olulisust poliitika kujundamise analüüsimisel. Tulevased teadustööd võiksid uurida ja võrrelda, kuidas toimub varjupaigapoliitika kujundamine teistes Euroopa Liidu väikeriikides ning postkommunistlikes riikides. Sealjuures tuleks uurida ja võrrelda, kuidas hilisemad kriisid, näiteks Ukraina pagulaste saabumine pärast 2022. aastat, on varjupaigapoliitika kujundamise keerukust ja dünaamikat nendes riikides muutnud.

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Appendix

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