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Comparing Refugee Dispersal Policies: Varieties of Responsibility-Sharing in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Many European countries are concerned about the asymmetric distribution of refugees within their territory. In response, they have developed policies to spatially disperse asylum seekers. Yet, we lack a comprehensive understanding of such refugee dispersal policies (RDPs). This article fills that gap with two contributions. First, we conceptualize RDPs as systems of sub-national responsibility-sharing in asylum governance, defined along five policy attributes and three ideal types. Second, we introduce a novel dataset covering the dispersal policies of 32 European countries and develop an index of policy restrictiveness. We show that dispersal is widespread but varies in formality and design. Most countries adopt a negotiated model combining binding spatial allocation, material incentives, and discretionary dispersal criteria. Restrictiveness is higher in states with high past arrivals and strong local autonomy. Our findings offer new insights into the spatial governance of asylum and the institutional design of responsibility-sharing mechanisms.

1 | Introduction

By 2023, the global number of forcibly displaced individuals surpassed 117 million, with approximately 75% of refugees hosted in developing countries and only limited access to humanitarian protection available in Western nations (UNHCR 2024a, 2). The uneven distribution of refugees across countries and its potential to overburden host communities was already acknowledged in the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2011, 11, 13). Despite this foundational framework, achieving a fair and equitable distribution of refugees remains one of the most pressing challenges in asylum governance. Efforts to implement more balanced responsibility-sharing have been highly contested and have largely failed to translate into effective international policy (Lutz et al. 2021). At the same time, the question of responsibility-

sharing in terms of refugees' spatial distribution arises not only at the international level - concerning the distribution of refugees between states - but also on the national level, regarding their distribution within states.¹ Although international responsibility-sharing has been extensively studied, with attention given to its policy parameters and political dynamics, the question of how the settlement of refugees is governed within states is often treated as secondary and received far less scholarly attention. This is despite the fact that many receiving countries experience pronounced spatial asymmetries in refugee settlement. While some states attempt to address these disparities through *refugee dispersal policies* (RDPs), others do not. To enhance our understanding of such refugee dispersal, this article pursues the following research question: How do refugee-receiving countries seek to influence the spatial distribution of refugees within their borders?

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The study of RDPs merits our attention for several reasons. First, these policies have become increasingly common over recent decades as policy-makers have thought to address concerns about refugee settlement patterns and actively shape their spatial distribution (Boswell 2003; Pfohman and Amrute 2004; Robinson et al. 2003; Schmidt and Liebig 2016). With rising numbers of refugee arrivals and associated organizational and political challenges, receiving countries have developed increasingly complex asylum policies aimed at regulating the reception and settlement of those seeking humanitarian protection.

Second, dispersal policies significantly influence refugees' social and economic rights by shaping the opportunity structures they encounter in the host country. This, in turn, has lasting implications for their prospects of successful integration into host societies (Åslund and Rooth 2007; Damm and Rosholm 2010; Edin et al. 2004; Fasani et al. 2022; Kuhn and Maxwell 2025; Phillimore 2021). These policies are, therefore, a critical dimension of immigrant policies, with profound consequences for both refugees and host communities.

Third, dispersal policies are often contentious, as their legitimacy and efficiency are frequently questioned by not-in-my-backyard policy-makers, affected constituencies, refugee advocates and scholars alike (e.g., Bartl 2021; Thielemann et al. 2010, 19; Wren 2003). What is more, the spatial distribution of the migrant population is widely regarded as a key factor shaping migration politics more generally (e.g., Alonso and Andrews 2021; Ferwerda and Riaz 2023; Lidén and Nyhlén 2022; Money 1999).

Fourth, RDPs resemble the broader policy challenge of physical responsibility-sharing between states. This makes them a valuable case for multilevel comparisons, offering lessons on the potential and limitations of responsibility-sharing at an international scale (cf. Boswell 2003). Notably, states with domestic dispersal systems, such as Germany, have actively advocated for similar mechanisms in international forums, particularly within the European Union (Pfohman and Amrute 2004, 20, 27; Suhrke 1998, 408).² This suggests that national experiences with refugee dispersal may shape states' preferences and bargaining positions in international responsibility-sharing debates, thereby highlighting the broader relevance of studying RDPs for understanding multilevel asylum governance.

With the rising numbers of refugee arrivals in the past five decades, the spatial allocation of refugees has become an important political issue in many Western democracies. Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden were among the first countries to implement explicit dispersal policies for asylum seekers in the 1980s (Andersson 1998; Arnoldus et al. 2003, 39; Bartl 2021; Borevi and Bengtsson 2015, 2608). Scholarly interest in these policies has primarily focused on their effects on settlement patterns and integration outcomes (e.g., Auer 2018; Edin et al. 2004). More recently, a growing body of quasi-experimental studies has leveraged the random allocation of refugees in certain countries to estimate the causal effect of refugee arrivals on local political outcomes (Campo et al. 2024; Dustmann et al. 2019; Finseraas and Strøm 2021).

Other research highlights the potential of dispersal policies to mitigate local opposition to refugees by promoting a fairer

distribution of reception burdens, thereby positioning these policies as effective tools for reducing the political costs of refugee admission (Fabbe et al. 2023; Letki et al. 2024). As RDPs tend to disperse refugees into rural areas, this effect is likely amplified by the greater visibility of economic and demographic benefits of new residents in these regions (Lahdelma 2023). Despite growing scholarly attention to RDPs, a comprehensive conceptualization and systematic empirical comparison of such policies remain absent. Existing studies are either limited to dated qualitative case studies in specific countries or more recent quantitative analyses on RDPs' effects on refugees' integration outcome, with limited attention to the policies themselves or the diversity in their design.

This article makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it offers a comprehensive conceptualization of RDPs. By identifying five policy attributes, two dimensions of dispersal restrictiveness and three ideal types of dispersal policy, we provide the foundation for systematic empirical comparison of the institutional design of refugee dispersal. Second, it employs this conceptual framework to build an original policy index across 32 European countries, measuring the dispersal of asylum-seekers during their application phase.³ This cross-sectional data collection allows us to map the diversity of dispersal policies across national contexts. The article concludes by discussing the findings, their limitations and broader implications for responsibility-sharing and the governance of asylum systems.

2 | Conceptualizing Refugee Dispersal Policies

We conceptualize RDPs through a four-step-approach. First, we review the existing literature, highlighting earlier comparative studies of RDPs and identifying their limitations. Second, we propose a definition of RDPs, delineating them from other types of asylum policies. Third, we identify the key attributes that constitute these policies. Finally, we systematize these attributes into two dimensions of policy restrictiveness and develop a typology distinguishing three ideal-typical forms of RDPs.

2.1 | Earlier Comparative Studies of Refugee Settlement Policies

In one of the first comparative studies of national dispersal systems, Boswell (2003) compared the cases of the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Germany. Another comparative study examined dispersal policies in the Netherlands, Sweden and the U.K. (Robinson et al. 2003). While both studies provided detailed case descriptions, they did not explicitly formulate their criteria for comparison. A subsequent analysis of dispersal policies in the then 15 EU member states distinguished between three types of dispersal policies: no dispersal, soft dispersal, and rigid dispersal (Pfohman and Amrute 2004, 46–47). In countries with no dispersal, refugee mobility is unrestricted. Soft dispersal regimes allow refugees free mobility if they can secure their own accommodation; otherwise, welfare payments and services are restricted to specific locations. Within the soft dispersal regime, two subtypes are identified: one where dispersal is guided by the availability of places rather than centrally set quotas, and another

where dispersal is determined by regional rather than national criteria. The third type, rigid dispersal, is characterized by binding national quotas and centrally enforced dispersal decisions. This typology, however, focuses solely on the relationship between states and refugees, turning a blind eye on the dynamics between central governments and subnational territories.

A different approach has been adopted by Borevi and Bengtsson (2015) who examined how three Scandinavian countries addressed the tension between the refugees' legitimate right to choose where to live and the state's legitimate concern for integration and spatial equity. In their analysis, Sweden positioned the individual refugee as the predominant choice agent, Denmark vested this authority in the state, and Norway delegated it to municipalities. Their identification of these three different patterns of policy design shows that RDPs can also differ in terms of decision-making responsibilities for the spatial allocation of housing. However, like earlier case studies, this comparison lacked a standardized description of policy attributes, making an extension to other cases very difficult. Overall, comparative studies of RDPs remain rare, with only a few empirical studies attempting to explain policy variation across countries (e.g., Hernes 2017; Hernes et al. 2023).

Some comparative policy studies have collected data on a wider range of policy attributes, but these efforts lacked a strictly systematic approach and, as a result, failed to produce coherent descriptive findings (EMN 2014; Schmidt and Liebig 2016). While quantitative datasets on national migration and asylum policy have become increasingly common (Blair et al. 2024; De Haas et al. 2015; Helbling et al. 2017), they do not include measures of dispersal policies that would allow for systematic analysis of their drivers and effects.⁴ For instance, these datasets do not distinguish between dispersal policies targeting asylum seekers and recognized refugees nor do they include attributes related to the relationship between central governments and subnational authorities. Consequently, the key steps of index-building - conceptualization, measurement, and aggregation - have not been systematically pursued. This omission has hindered the use of large-N methods and limited the ability to draw generalizations, as we lack evidence on how RDPs have been implemented and to what extent they have achieved their objectives. To address this gap and mitigate existing shortcomings, we investigate how refugee-receiving countries organize national responsibility-sharing aiming to shed light on the design of their dispersal policies that allocate asylum-seekers across their national territory.

2.2 | Dispersal as Territorial Responsibility-Sharing

We conceptualize RDPs as a distinct form of responsibility-sharing in asylum governance. Responsibility-sharing exists at both international and national levels, exhibiting distinct similarities and differences. At the international level, the normative call for cooperation in asylum policy among states is articulated in the Preamble of the Geneva Convention (UNHCR 2011, 11, 13). In contrast, the normative basis for responsibility-sharing within states is less explicitly defined. It could be argued that

this principle is embedded in the modern concept of the state itself, which derives its political power and legitimacy from its capacity to coordinate and govern society across its territory (Mann 1984). However, states express a normative aspiration to territorial equity to varying extents (Harbers and Steele 2020).

International responsibility-sharing requires cooperation among sovereign states, often hindered by asymmetric interests and incentives for free-riding, which present collective action problems. These challenges are less pronounced within states, where hierarchical policy-making can resolve coordination problems and foster cooperation (Boswell 2003). Moreover, states can typically rely on a sense of solidarity among subnational political entities, which enhances their willingness to share responsibilities. Nonetheless, whether decisions are imposed hierarchically or reached through negotiation, their legitimacy remains critical for effective implementation.

Similar to the international level, responsibility-sharing within states can be understood along three dimensions: sharing norms, sharing money, and sharing people (cf. Noll 2003, 243). This article focuses on the dimension of sharing people for three reasons. First, reception conditions are typically governed by national asylum legislation, resulting in less variation in formal refugee regulations among subnational territorial units compared to the heterogeneity observed internationally. Second, financial responsibility-sharing at the national level exists only in combination with physical responsibility-sharing (Pfohman and Amrute 2004, 45) and is comparatively less politically salient, particularly when reception costs are borne by the national government. Third, it is the sharing of people that most frequently evokes public controversy, as the arrival of refugees in local communities often raises concerns among residents about potential negative impacts. For these reasons, dispersal policies that allocate refugees among subnational territories represent arguably the most significant and contentious form of responsibility-sharing within states.

Refugee dispersal within countries involves three key actors: central states, sub-state entities and refugees. We define RDPs as national-level policy measures that assign refugees to specific places or territories. The primary regulatory aim of these policies is to modify the "natural" spatial distribution of refugees within a country.⁵ In the absence of such interventions, refugees tend to self-select into preferred settlement locations. Central to these policies are two expectations: first, the expectation placed on individuals to reside in a designated location or region rather than choosing freely; and second, the expectation placed on subnational territories to accommodate refugees.

The impetus for dispersal arises from the "natural" spatial settlement patterns of refugees, which are typically based on self-selection. The self-chosen locations are typically cities and urban regions where refugees can connect with co-ethnic communities and access economic opportunities. When such settlement patterns are deemed politically undesirable, states may intervene to redistribute refugees across their territories. The justifications for dispersal policies often reflect a plurality of policy objectives, such as balancing reception responsibilities among regions and communities to ensure distributional fairness and mitigate local NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) resistance (Fabbe et al. 2023;

Solodoch 2024); preventing the over-burdening of individual communities (Boswell 2003); increasing cost effectiveness through efficient resource use; addressing population decline in peripheral regions (Andersson 2003; Galera 2018); reducing social tensions and ethnic clustering to facilitate integration; and deterring potential asylum-seekers by restricting their autonomy in the host country (Boswell 2003; Darling 2022a; Robinson et al. 2003; Thielemann 2004, 55–56).

These diverse motivations have given rise to varied terms used to describe RDPs, such as population policies (Andersson 2003), settlement and housing policies (Borevi and Bengtsson 2015), public good allocation policies (Alonso and Andrews 2021), and regional development policies (Flamant et al. 2021). Despite this diversity, a common thread runs through dispersal policies: they reflect a distinct approach by the state to managing its territory (cf. Harbers and Steele 2020; Mann 1984). Whereas public policies typically focus on allocating infrastructure to places where people live, dispersal policies invert this relationship by allocating people to specific places.

2.3 | Attributes of RDPs and Their Ideal Typical Combination

In the next step, we identify the core *attributes* that define and characterize RDPs. We understand attributes as the constitutive elements of these policies, which subsequently enable their measurement and empirical analysis.

To analyze the variety of organizational designs of dispersal policies, we draw on the concept of “partial organization” (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011) referring to the modular utilization of organizational elements outside of fully formalized organizations. The originality of this concept lies in the proposal to think of “organization” not as confined to formal entities but as a process of assembling discrete organizational elements into a governance structure. These elements then allow for a variety of combinations. Ahrne and Brunsson (2011, 86) distinguish between five organizational elements: rules, sanctions, membership, hierarchy and monitoring. Rules specify formal expectations for particular target groups (members). The concept of hierarchy is used in the general sense to denote governance structures that assign decision-making authority to members. Both sanctions and monitoring presuppose the existence of rules, as they serve to enforce and oversee compliance with them. In the following, we apply this organizational concept to RDPs to identify their constitutive policy attributes.

We define the first element of dispersal policies as the rules that determine the *bindingness* of dispersal, specifically the extent to which states limit refugees' choices regarding their location of residence. The second policy attribute is the *sanctions* that may be imposed in cases of refugees' non-compliance. The third attribute concerns the *governance mode*, which refers to the primary decision-making process regarding the spatial allocation of reception facilities within the national territory. Furthermore, we consider important the *criteria* applied to the dispersal decision, reflecting states' expectations toward subnational authorities. *Monitoring* refers to publicly available statistics that provide

shared knowledge and transparency about the spatial distribution of refugees on a regular basis. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on these attributes in more detail.

2.3.1 | Bindingness

Any dispersal policy limits refugees' autonomy in choosing their place of residence by requiring them to move to specific locations or areas. In contrast, a non-dispersal policy leaves the spatial distribution of refugees to the refugees themselves, their informal networks, and local market forces, particularly those related to housing and employment (cf. Borevi and Bengtsson 2015). Dispersal policies represent a specific restriction of refugees' rights and freedoms, which can be contingent on their legal status (e.g., asylum seeker, refugee, citizen). The closer refugees are to the legal status of citizens, the less legitimate it becomes to restrict their social rights (Borevi and Bengtsson 2015, 2603–2604). Dispersal policies therefore define the spatial conditions under which asylum seekers and refugees are granted social rights. The bindingness of a dispersal policy varies with the degree to which refugees can opt out of a formal dispersal scheme and arrange their own housing.

2.3.2 | Sanctions

To mitigate non-compliance of refugees with the dispersal rules, states implement sanctions. We distinguish between mild sanctions, such as economic incentives and behavioral requirements, and more severe sanctions that affect the asylum procedure. For refugees, access to welfare services is a crucial incentive for participating in a dispersal scheme. Particularly in the case of obligatory dispersal, sanctions such as fines for leaving the assigned territory, are often employed (e.g., Boswell 2003, 200). In comparison, sanctions that could lead to the suspension of an individual's formal legal status, such as halting the asylum procedure, are far more consequential. Sanctions may depend on strict reporting requirements that prevent refugees from leaving the reception facility or assigned locality for extended periods. A situation of no sanctions arises when individual housing is officially considered the standard form of accommodation and no spatial restrictions are imposed.

2.3.3 | Governance Mode

We distinguish three governance modes. First, as discussed above, national dispersal policies have the advantage that states can engage in hierarchical decision-making (unlike responsibility-sharing at the international level), enabling them to legislate where refugees should be allocated and who is responsible for their reception. Hierarchical governance is evident when subnational governments (regional or local, depending on the state structure) are mandated to receive refugees without the possibility to opt out (e.g., Bartl 2021; Müller et al. 2023). Hierarchical governance can also take the form of reception facilities owned and operated by the central state or contracted to private companies. The use of private contracts allows for a discretionary policy, constrained only by prices and

vacancies on local housing markets (e.g., Darling 2022b). Second, besides hierarchical governance, states may alternatively use softer approaches, such as negotiated agreements with subnational political authorities regarding refugee accommodation. These agreements are often the result of persuasion and financial incentives, allowing subnational actors to decline cooperation (Hernes 2017). In some states, central governments have even formal schemes for involving local governments in decisions about local asylum reception (Emilsson and Öberg 2022; Hernes 2017). We refer to such models as negotiated governance.⁶ Finally, the third mode, market governance, occurs when refugee settlement is entirely determined by individual self-selection and market forces.

2.3.4 | Dispersal Criteria

RDPs seek to realize a particular spatial distribution of refugees, which requires operationalizing criteria that guide the determination and implementation of the desired distribution. In this regard, Pfohman and Amrute (2004, 46–47) distinguish between quota systems and systems based on the availability of local capacities in reception centers. Similarly, a recent study distinguished a proportionality criterion, the availability of places in existing reception centers, and more complex dispersal mechanisms that match refugees with the locations where they will be hosted (Piccinni et al. 2018). While abstract quantitative criteria strive to implement a universal principle of justice across the national territory, informal criteria, such as the availability of places, prioritize the practicality of allocation processes (Elster 1992, 4). However, these informal criteria are still likely to result in settlement patterns that diverge from the “natural” urban concentration that results from individual free choice. We consider informal dispersal criteria to be in place, when more than one reception facility exists for asylum seekers in the regular procedure. No criteria are considered to be in place when only one reception facility is available and when no dispersal scheme exists.

2.3.5 | Monitoring

The practical implementation of refugee dispersal, in particular when based on quantified proportionality criteria, requires

detailed administrative statistics. When these statistics are publicly available, they enhance the transparency of responsibility-sharing and enable reciprocal monitoring among subnational governments. Information about other actors' behaviors is crucial for establishing and maintaining cooperation (Axelrod 1984). However, when dispersal relies on capacities or other informal criteria, implementation may depend to a larger extent - or even entirely - on expert judgment and administrative discretion. Thus, the degree of standardization in spatial monitoring instruments is a critical attribute of dispersal policies that warrants consideration, although it is rarely addressed in the comparative literature. The extent of spatial monitoring is significant because it facilitates the assessment of refugee settlement patterns at different spatial scales (e.g., regional or local) and enhances public debate about territorial justice (Schmid 2024). Observers noted a “general lack of standardized approaches to collect and use statistics to monitor and report on” national asylum reception systems (EMN 2014, 33). Countries vary to a considerable degree in the complexity of the monitoring that they apply.

The next step in conceptualizing dispersal policies involves an elaboration on the relationship and complementarity of policy attributes. We have identified five such attributes, each capturing how the state restricts the spatial autonomy of refugees and imposes obligations on subnational governments to participate in reception. Dispersal policy restrictiveness thus operates along two dimensions: the degree to which states constrain the freedom of asylum seekers and refugees to choose where to live, and the extent to which local authorities are mandated to host them. While analytically distinct, these dimensions are functionally interdependent. Dispersal policies are instruments of spatial ordering that rely on compliance at both the individual and subnational administrative level—states cannot restrict individual choice without also regulating local discretion. Together, these dimensions reflect the degree of centralized control over refugee settlement. The restrictiveness of national policy therefore serves as a common dimension, allowing us to aggregate the attributes into a composite index.

Assuming that policies constitute more or less integrated sets of rules, we develop analytic combinations of the attributes that define specific ideal types of dispersal policies (see Table 1). The baseline situation of a *market-driven* refugee settlement is one in which refugees' location choices are unrestricted by government

TABLE 1 | Typology of national regimes of physical responsibility-sharing in asylum policy.

Attribute	Type of dispersal policy		
	Market	Negotiated	Mandatory
Bindingness	No	Private accommodation possible under certain conditions	Forced allocation
Sanctions	No	Financial incentives, reporting requirements	Negative consequences for asylum procedure
Governance mode	Market forces	Pledging, negotiation	Legislation, decree
Dispersal criteria	No, only one reception center	Informal criteria (e.g., capacities), few reception centers	Defined quota
Monitoring	No	Settlement statistics at the subnational level	Settlement statistics down to the local level

policy, and subnational governments are under no obligation to host refugees. In this liberal settlement regime, decision-making is predominantly left to market actors, the refugees and landlords. A second type of scenario, *negotiated* dispersal, arises when some policy attributes are formally assembled to organize the dispersal of refugees, but the involved actors - refugees and subnational governments - retain the possibility to opt out. In this soft dispersal regime, subnational governments and/or refugees remain the predominant decision-makers. Finally, *mandatory* dispersal is the most integrated, hierarchical, and binding form of dispersal. This regime type, typically based on quotas, emerges from formal political decisions and often includes both formal sanctions for refugees in case of non-compliance and statistical monitoring of refugee settlement patterns. In such a restrictive dispersal regime, the central state is the predominant decision maker. This ideal type comes closest to Weber's (1980) image of an "iron cage" of bureaucracy.

This threefold analytical framework corresponds to earlier, albeit less systematic research (Borevi and Bengtsson 2015; Pfohman and Amrute 2004, 46–47) and is compatible with more general governance typologies (e.g., Bouckaert et al. 2010, 34–66). Ideal types as employed here are a heuristic tool for theory development. They do not depict reality as it is, nor do they reflect normative ideals. Instead, they are analytical constructs designed to clarify empirical patterns and highlight deviations from them (Weber 1980). In the subsequent empirical section, we will compare these ideal types with the empirical types that may emerge from our analysis (Aspalter 2021).

3 | Measuring Refugee Dispersal Policies

We develop a novel policy index that captures the design of refugee dispersal in 32 European countries in 2020.⁷ Building on our conceptual framework, we operationalize five core policy attributes using country-level indicators (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix I for the detailed codebook).⁸ These are then aggregated into a linear index to assess and compare the restrictiveness and design of national RDPs.

Before outlining the measurement approach, two scope delimitations of our analysis must be noted. First, our empirical focus is cross-sectional by design. The goal is to identify and map national-level policy architectures at a meaningful moment in time, rather than to trace short-term changes or fluctuations. While RDPs can evolve, most year-to-year variation is operational in nature—affecting implementation and capacity rather than the underlying governance structure (Hernes et al. 2023, cf. 11, 95). A cross-sectional approach is therefore well suited to capturing structural variation in policy design and provides a foundation for future longitudinal research.

Second, we delimit our empirical focus to dispersal policies targeting asylum seekers, not recognized refugees. This distinction is important because asylum seekers—individuals who have applied for protection but not yet received a decision—typically hold a more precarious legal status and their residence rights are easier to restrict, making refugee dispersal more likely at this stage of the asylum process (see Borevi and Bengtsson 2015, 2603–

2604). In 2015, among OECD countries, the dispersal of asylum seekers was slightly more common than the dispersal of refugees (16 vs. 14 out of 30 countries; own evaluation based on Schmidt and Liebig 2016, 22–29). Five countries applied dispersal policies before and after the decision about protection; five countries did not apply it at all. For this reason, we focus on the dispersal of asylum seekers, as it occurs at the beginning of their trajectory in the host country and is important for understanding the impact of dispersal policies from the outset of this trajectory.⁹

The measurement follows a two-step approach. First, we assign values to the five policy attributes: bindingness, sanctions, governance mode, dispersal criteria, and monitoring. Each attribute is assigned a value ranging from zero (most liberal) to two (most restrictive). A value of zero corresponds to an ideal-typical market model with no dispersal, the value of one represents a model of negotiated dispersal, and the value of two represents a model of mandatory dispersal (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix I for a more detailed description of the coding rules). Second, we build a linear policy index as the summary score of all five indicators. Creating an index as a numerical representation of qualitative distinctions requires solid theoretical reasoning (Rohwer and Pötter 2002). We argue that the policy attributes we identified are exhaustive in representing relevant elements of dispersal policies. These attributes vary in the form of regulation that they impose on the affected actor groups, and we classified them to represent a linear order of restrictiveness. The possible combination of these attributes can be brought into a linear order implying that a combination of more policy attributes will constitute a higher degree of organization than a combination of fewer elements. For instance, establishing a strict rule of compulsory dispersal without enforcement mechanisms in the form of sanctions is likely to be relatively ineffective. These properties allow us to aggregate the five indicators into a policy-index where higher values represent a more restrictive form of dispersal.

Depending on the main actor group targeted by each policy attribute, we distinguish two dimensions of dispersal policies: Restrictiveness toward refugees (bindingness, sanctions) and restrictiveness toward subnational governments (governance, criteria, monitoring). We construct two corresponding indices capturing RDP restrictiveness, weighting each attribute according to its theoretically derived contribution to the restrictiveness within each respective dimension. For refugee restrictiveness, we assign *bindingness* a weight of 0.6 and *sanctions* a weight of 0.4. Bindingness constitutes the formal rule restricting refugees' freedom to choose their place of residence, which is the primary mechanism of individual-level restrictiveness. Sanctions play a key supporting role by enforcing compliance and deterring non-adherence, justifying their substantial but lower weight. The second index captures restrictiveness toward *subnational authorities*, based on three attributes: the *governance* mode (0.5), the *dispersal criteria* used to allocate responsibilities (0.3), and *monitoring* for intergovernmental oversight (0.2). This reflects the dimension of state control exercised over territorial units through administrative hierarchies and formalized governance structures. Governance mode receives the highest weight, as it defines whether and how subnational governments are mandated to participate in refugee reception and the degree of local discretion. Dispersal criteria

are also important, as they determine how responsibilities are distributed across territories—e.g., through quota or administrative discretion—but do so within the governance framework. Monitoring supports transparency and compliance, and is therefore weighted lower. These two policy indices are then summed up to an overall restrictiveness index of RDPs.

4 | The Comparative Mapping of Refugee Dispersal Policies

In the next step, we present the overall RDP index that captures the restrictiveness of these policies in terms of how much they intervene into the spatial settlement of asylum seekers (Figure 1). The weighted index values range from zero in the case of Cyprus to two in the case of Germany. Cyprus, a small country with only one reception center for asylum seekers and no dispersal measures, is an exception, as all other countries have at least some elements of a dispersal policy in place. Notably, even countries that have not been major destinations for asylum seekers implement factual dispersal measures - often based on implicit criteria.

At the other end of the spectrum, Germany stands out as the only country that fully embodies the mandatory model of refugee dispersal, achieving the theoretical maximum. It is followed by a handful of states scoring slightly below. The majority of countries fall closer to the midrange of the scale, representing a negotiated model of RDP (see also Supporting Information S1: Figure A1 in Supporting Information S1: Appendix II). In terms of geography, we see that the most restrictive dispersal policies can be found in central Europe and Scandinavia whereas peripheral countries in the East, South and West of Europe tend to adopt less restrictive policies. Yet, Turkey scores relatively high on the index, as asylum seekers are confined to the assigned province and face strict sanctions for non-compliance, while a quota limits local governments' reception obligations (ECRE 2023b, 81–84).

Our RDP index is a composite measure based on five attributes across two dimensions of policy restrictiveness. Figure 2 shows the distribution of values within these attributes. The lowest category dominates in monitoring, while the middle category appears most frequently in sanctions and criteria. In contrast, the highest category is prevalent in bindingness and governance. These patterns provide insight into the overall design of refugee dispersal in European countries (see Supporting Information S1: Figure A2 in Supporting Information S1: Appendix II for the detailed country profiles). Across the board, policies significantly constrain the spatial residence choices of asylum seekers while sanctions more often take the form of material incentives. Governance typically operates in a top-down manner applying rather ad hoc, discretionary dispersal criteria and relying less on fixed allocation quota. Meanwhile, territorial monitoring remains poorly established; most states only implement asylum statistics at the national level.

4.1 | Validity Checks on the Policy Index

We assess the internal validity of the RDP index based on its empirical dimensionality and associations among its five constitutive indicators. The correlation matrix (Figure 3) shows a moderate positive correlation among most attributes with few exceptions. Nine out of ten correlations are positive, six are statistically significant.¹⁰ This suggests that although organizational policy attributes can be combined in various ways, their coherence matters. At the same time, monitoring correlates negatively with sanctions and governance is independent of bindingness and monitoring. The first pattern may reflect that monitoring and sanctions function as substitutes rather than complements: while monitoring aims to foster transparency and coordination, sanctions signal coercive enforcement. Central states, which incentivize refugee dispersal through sanctioning, often rely on administrative practices for information on spatial settlement

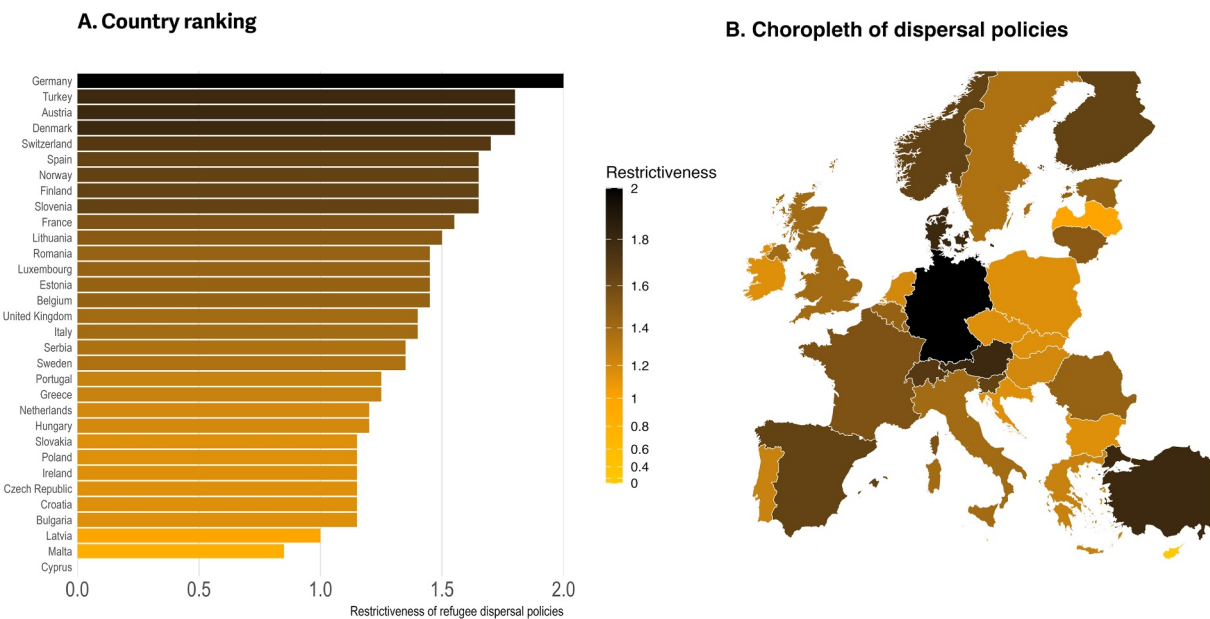


FIGURE 1 | Restrictiveness of refugee dispersal policy by country.

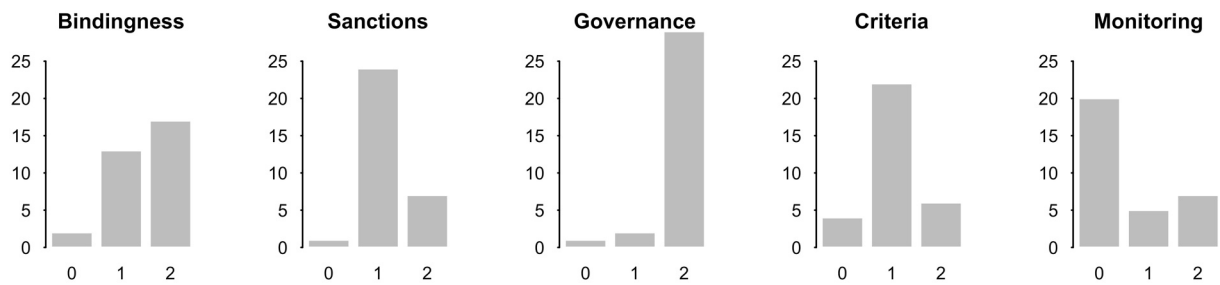


FIGURE 2 | Distribution of RDPs by policy attributes. Bar plots of dispersal policy attributes (0 = most liberal, 2, most restrictive) across 32 countries.

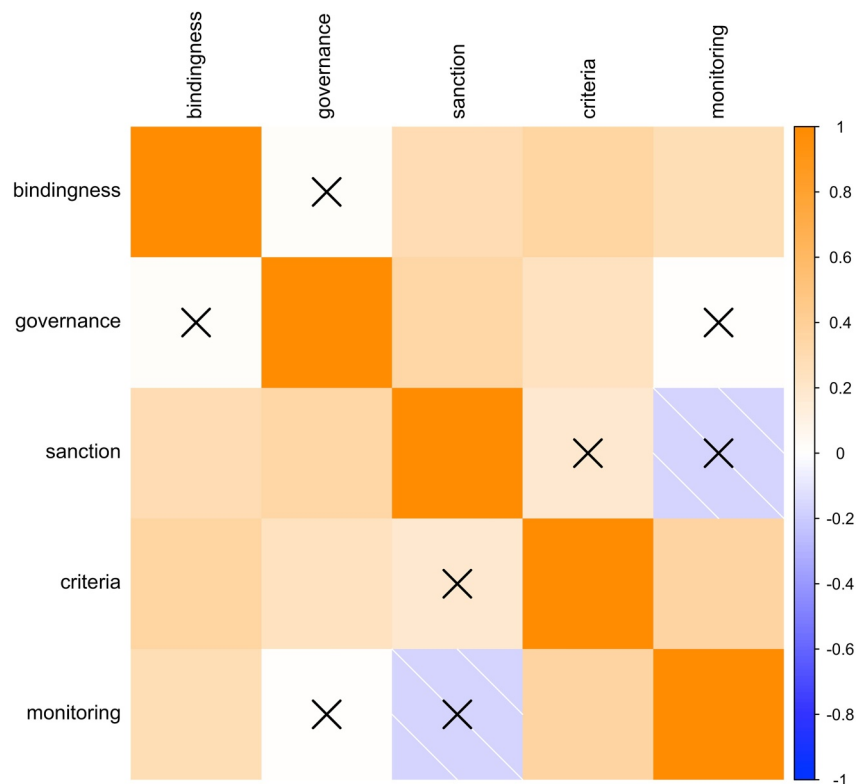


FIGURE 3 | Correlation plot of the RDP attributes. The visual correlation matrix illustrates the strength of correlations using the Spearman correlation coefficient, which is appropriate for ordinal data. The intensity of the color represents the strength of the correlation, and color the direction (orange = positive, blue = negative). Cross symbols mark correlations that are not statistically significant at the 10% level.

patterns and therefore do not see a need to invest in additional statistical monitoring. This is particularly likely in smaller states or states with recently established refugee reception systems, where a limited number of reception centers exists and oversight is more easily maintained. The more subnational actors (regions, municipalities) are involved in decisions about the location of reception facilities, the more spatially differentiated are official statistics on refugee settlement.

The non-correlation between governance and bindingness indicates that some states with a central responsibility for the location of reception facilities (i.e., the modal category) do not implement a mandatory dispersal policy. Instead, refugees have the possibility to opt out, sometimes at the price of losing financial benefits. Likewise, the lack of association between the governance and monitoring indicates that certain states with a centralized responsibility for assigning reception facilities do not monitor the

spatial settlement of refugees, but rather rely on internal administrative information. Overall, the lack of positive inter-attribute correlations occurs only across dimensions—between attributes targeting refugees and those targeting subnational governments—suggesting that these instruments reflect distinct and potentially substitutive logics of control, reinforcing RDPs' multidimensional nature.

In order to assess whether our theoretically derived weights of the five attributes for the index aggregation are justified, we compare them with two alternative procedures. First, we construct an index measuring the restrictiveness of refugee dispersal based on equal weights for all five attributes. This agnostic approach yields substantively similar results with very high correlation ($\rho = 0.95$; $r = 0.97$) of the two indices (Supporting Information S1: Figure A4). Second, we employ “item response theory” (IRT) as a robustness check by using factor

scores to combine the items into a policy index. The index generated by the IRT model is highly correlated with the linear index ($\rho = 0.98$; $r = 0.98$).

To further examine the internal validity of the RDP index, we performed a principal component analysis (PCA) for ordinal-scaled data. The results are consistent across different methods, revealing two distinct dimensions. The first dimension includes bindingness, sanctions and governance, while the second consists of monitoring and criteria, with criteria showing a weaker loading on the second dimension compared to monitoring (Supporting Information S1: Figure A1). Theoretically, the first dimension can be interpreted as representing the restrictiveness of the state toward refugees, whereas the second reflects the restrictiveness of the central state toward subnational governments. In other words, the second dimension expresses the concern of the state for territorial distributional justice in refugee responsibility-sharing. However, governance deviates from this pattern as it targets subnational governments while aligning with the attributes targeting refugees. This might be due to the attribute's highly skewed distribution: very few countries care for territorial justice during the asylum application procedure by implementing formal procedures of voluntary pledging by subnational governments or by relying on market governance - a pattern that might be different in the case of recognized refugees (cf. Hernes et al. 2023).

We further tested the external validity of our RDP index by comparing it to related indicators from other sources. Specifically, we used indicators from the IMPIC dataset (Helbling et al. 2017) and from the DWRAP dataset (Blair et al. 2024) that capture whether there is an individual right to free movement within the host country.¹¹ The IMPIC indicator is available for

21 European countries and the year, with 2018 as the most recent year of data. Despite the mere partial conceptual overlap and country coverage, we find a clear positive association ($r = 0.48$) between the two measurements. The DWRAP indicator, which covers all countries in our sample except Serbia and offers values for 2020, also shows a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.45$) with the RDP index. These results further strengthen our confidence that the RDP index is a valid measurement of dispersal policies.

To gain insights into how the two components identified by the PCA are distributed across cases, we performed a non-metric multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis (Borg et al. 2018). MDS visualizes the similarities and differences between cases by translating the distances between each pair of objects in a dataset into a configuration of points mapped into an abstract Cartesian space. This technique reduces the original dimensions through non-linear but monotonic transformations, preserving the between-object distances as much as possible. MDS identifies a relationship between the dissimilarities in the item-item matrix, the distances between items, and their positions in the low-dimensional space. We calculated a MDS retaining two dimensions, as suggested by the PCA, using the Canberra distance metric, which is appropriate for ordinal data.¹²

The results of the MDS are visualized in Figure 4. Following the results from the PCA, we considered cases with formally set quotas (criteria = 2) and/or any spatial statistics on refugee settlement (monitoring = 1 or 2) as cases representing the restrictive regulation of subnational governments in the reception of asylum seekers most clearly. This results in a visual distinction between countries that regulate primarily asylum

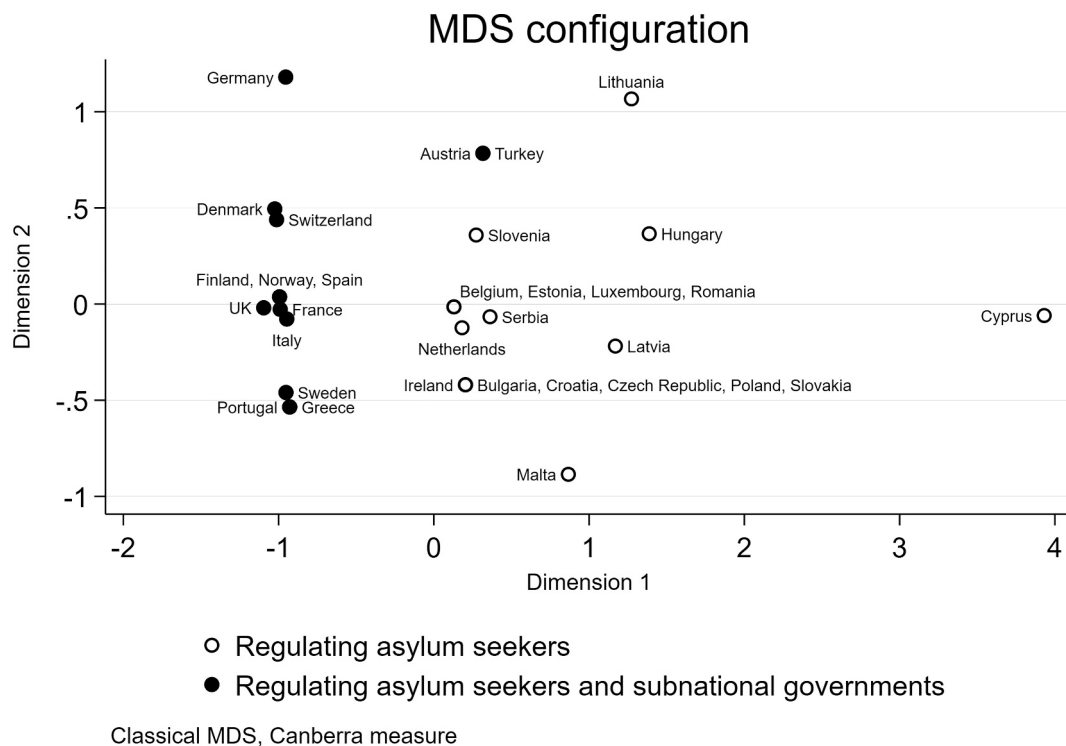


FIGURE 4 | MDS configuration of the RDP index on a two-dimensional space. The Canberra measure “is the weighted version of the Manhattan distance, as it calculates the absolute difference between two vectors and normalizes it by dividing it by the absolute sum of their values” (Blanco-Mallo et al. 2023, 5).

seekers and countries that care more for distributional territorial justice through a regulation of subnational governments.¹³ Using our ideal types for interpreting the country patterns, we see that only Cyprus comes close to a market model of receiving asylum seekers. In Cyprus there is only one reception center for the accommodation of asylum seekers in the regular procedure, which falls short of meeting actual housing needs (ECRE 2023a, 94). Since the state's default expectation is that asylum seekers find their own accommodation, formal dispersal decisions are not required. Furthermore, there are no formal criteria on the location of asylum seekers, nor is there statistical monitoring of their spatial distribution. This absence of dispersal may reflect Cyprus' self-image as a small transit country, one that neither expects nor desires asylum seekers to settle permanently.

However, most countries in our data take a middle ground with central states being responsible for more than one reception center and applying informal criteria in dispersal decisions. Interestingly, most of these countries are either located in Eastern Europe or are relatively small. Using the ideal type of negotiated dispersal for their interpretation, it becomes clear that in most cases the possibility to opt out of dispersal applies to asylum seekers (if they fulfill certain conditions, such as disposing of financial means) but not to subnational governments. Only two countries, the Netherlands and the U.K., dispose of a formal mechanism for municipalities to avoid the reception of refugees.¹⁴ This regulation can be conceived of as a form of procedural territorial justice because responsibility-sharing among subnational governments is voluntary. Notably, the voluntary participation of local governments in dispersal has been perceived as highly uneven, which - after our focal period - led to the recent introduction of a "full dispersal model" with a quota system as an upper cap on reception in the U.K. (Mort and Morris 2024, 14–19) and the "Spreidingswet" in the Netherlands with stricter mandates for municipalities to host asylum-seekers.¹⁵

Yet another form of concern for territorial justice is more oriented to an equitable distribution across the territory and operates with either quota or statistical monitoring, or both. These cases come closest to the ideal type of a mandatory dispersal regime. Among the six countries that operate quotas (Germany, Denmark,

Switzerland, Italy, Austria, and Turkey), only Austria and Turkey do not monitor the spatial settlement of asylum seekers through publicly available statistics. Twelve countries do so on a regional (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland) or a local level (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Spain, Sweden, U.K.). The U.K. combines voluntary responsibility-sharing with spatial monitoring at the local level. This seems to indicate that some states try to balance their concern about achieving an equitable distribution of refugees across the territory with maintaining a cooperative spirit among the involved regional and local governments. Negotiated dispersal might be challenged during times of (perceived) crisis. For example in Italy, negotiated governance of asylum seeker dispersal was replaced by central governance structures following the 2014/2015 surge of refugee arrivals (Campo et al. 2024).

4.2 | Mapping Refugee Dispersal Policies Across National Contexts

The analysis above shows that European countries vary considerably in their RDP restrictiveness. In this section, we offer a comparative mapping of this variation, examining how policy design relates to three broad contextual factors: refugee exposure, state organization, and domestic political landscape. This mapping is intended to highlight patterns and differences in the design of refugee dispersal. For this purpose, we identify the bivariate association of countries' RDPs with their functional, institutional and political contexts (Figure 5).

The *functional* context of refugee exposure reveals a positive association with the number of asylum requests a country received in the past.¹⁸ Restrictiveness increases primarily from a mid-level exposure suggesting that those countries that lacked significant functional pressure such as countries in Eastern Europe have not implemented restrictive dispersal policies and rely more on reception models that are voluntary for refugees, often with less formalized oversight for subnational governments. In countries that experienced significant inflows over extended periods (e.g., Germany or Switzerland) the implementation of restrictive dispersal policies allowed governments

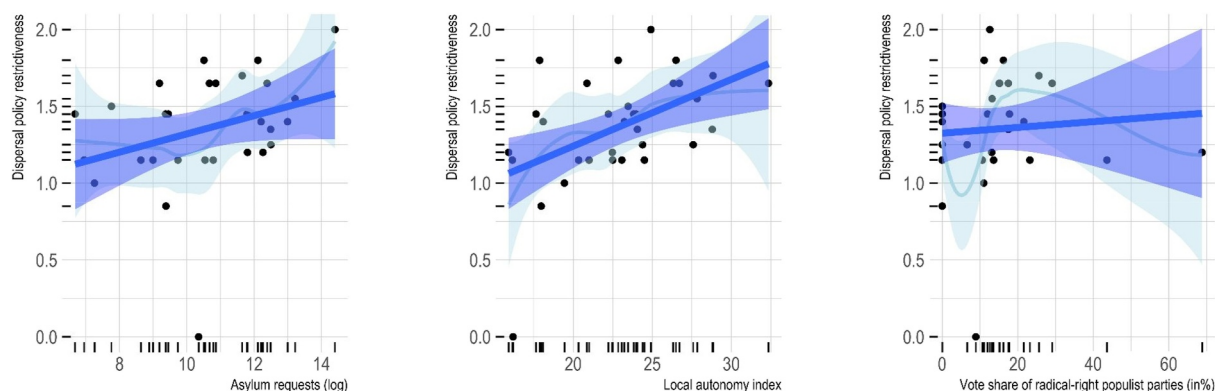


FIGURE 5 | Scatter plots between countries' refugee dispersal restrictiveness and three explanatory factors (refugee arrivals measured by countries' log-transformed sum of asylum applications between 1993 and 2019 (data from Eurostat, Eurostat 2022, 2024; UNHCR 2024b),¹⁶ the local autonomy of political institutions using an indicator by Ladner et al. 2021, and the radical-right vote share in 2019 provided by Armingeon et al. 2023).¹⁷ The plots show linear regression estimates (dark blue) and a non-parametric smoothed line (light blue); 95% confidence intervals are shown. At the axes, rug plots display the univariate distribution of the two variables. Sample size is $N = 30$.

to distribute reception responsibilities across the national territory to alleviate overburdening pressures on urban centers and border zones, and to ensure an efficient use of resources (Bartl 2021; Boswell 2003; Robinson 2003, 8).

RDPs furthermore vary across countries' *institutional* context of state governance: The greater the subnational autonomy the more restrictive refugee dispersal. In federal or highly decentralized countries with a political culture centered on multilevel policy negotiations and cooperation, dispersal tends to be more rule-bound and monitored. Countries featuring a mandatory dispersal policy through a quota system to distribute responsibilities among regions and municipalities include federal states (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) as well as unitary states with a strong local government tradition (Denmark, Italy). An exception to this pattern is the highly centralized state of Turkey where local governments are expected to receive asylum seekers up to 25% of the local population; however, no publicly available statistics track the spatial pattern of asylum seekers' settlement (ECRE 2023b, 81–84). The pattern of quota systems is not surprising as states with federal structures grant subnational governments more leverage to advocate for principles of distributional fairness during periods of mounting reception challenges (e.g., Bartl 2021). Few decentralized unitary states have developed formal negotiation mechanisms for subnational governments to participate in the reception of asylum seekers (Netherlands, U.K.). In contrast, in unitary states with centralized executive control, dispersal policies are often based on implicit criteria, with weaker and informal local consultation. Monitoring tools exist in 12 out of 32 countries and are more common in federal and decentralized unitary states, reflecting a softer response to the need of institutionalizing burden-sharing across levels of government. Monitoring at the first subnational level is also present in several centralized states (e.g., France, Greece, Portugal). This suggests that state organization influences the governance mode of dispersal: greater local autonomy tends to co-exist with higher formalization and monitoring, whereas centralized systems may concentrate decision-making but exhibit less procedural transparency. While we focus on the first subnational level of dispersal, subsequent steps of spatial allocation - be they formalized or not - also matter for settlement patterns at a smaller scale of analysis, such as within counties or municipalities (e.g., Damm et al. 2025).

Finally, we look at countries' *political* context as the immigration issue has become highly politicized in many European countries. Governments are typically concerned about the political costs of accepting refugees and seek to avoid the perception that they are overburdening local communities and have lost control over refugee arrivals - concerns that can be addressed by refugee dispersal. We map the political context based on whether countries have established radical-right populist parties that mobilize anti-immigration sentiments. The empirical association here is only weakly positive and marked by considerable variation and estimation uncertainty. In Hungary for instance, restrictive dispersal measures are part of broader anti-immigration strategies, featuring centralized governance, low transparency of dispersal criteria, and punitive features for refugees. Similarly, in countries such as Sweden or Denmark, the rise of anti-immigration sentiments has coincided with more restrictive rules, reflecting states' attempt to minimize perceived local

burden and signal firm immigration control to skeptical electorates. However, this pattern is not universal. Countries like Italy and the Netherlands have strong far-right parties mobilizing against immigration but maintain less restrictive regimes, with the Dutch far-right fiercely opposing proposals to make municipal reception obligations more binding. These cases illustrate that the domestic politicization of immigration can both facilitate and hinder the development of restrictive RDPs.

To further explore these patterns, we repeat this contextual mapping through regression models with the five policy attributes as outcomes (Supporting Information S1: Table A2). Refugee arrivals are mainly associated with greater use of dispersal criteria and monitoring. Local autonomy is the strongest predictor for overall restrictiveness, but primarily for more restrictiveness toward subnational governments. Radical-right support shows little association with dispersal attributes, except for a tendency toward stricter sanctions on non-compliant asylum-seekers.

Taken together, the mapping of dispersal policies across European countries highlights substantial cross-national variation that relates in complex ways to functional pressures, institutional structures, and political power relations. Countries with high asylum inflows and federal governance structures tend to develop more formalized and monitored dispersal policies, whereas political contestation may shape policy design in different ways. This analysis provides a comparative foundation for understanding how dispersal restrictiveness emerges and clusters across countries. Crucially, the distinction between restrictiveness toward refugees and toward subnational authorities proves analytically valuable, as these dimensions respond to distinct pressures and follow different political and institutional logics. This conceptual lens not only sharpens the descriptive analysis but also lays the groundwork for future research into the determinants and consequences of RDPs.

5 | Conclusion

While international responsibility-sharing for refugee protection remains a largely unresolved governance challenge with ineffective policy implementation, we find a wide range of national policies aimed at within-country refugee dispersal. In this article, we systematized RDPs as regulations that seek to alter the spatial distribution and settlement patterns of refugees in receiving countries. To this end, we identified five key attributes - bindingness, sanctions, governance, criteria, and monitoring - that characterize dispersal policies as variable configurations of organizational elements representing two dimensions: restrictiveness toward asylum seekers and restrictiveness toward subnational authorities. While analytically distinct, these dimensions are interdependent in practice, which allows for their aggregation into a single index. Based on this conceptual framework, we developed the first systematic policy index to quantify RDPs and collected original data for 32 European countries.

The novel policy dataset provides important insights on the design of policies dispersing asylum seekers across the national territory. First, our data show that dispersal is a widespread,

though unevenly formalized, component of national asylum systems. With one exception, all 32 countries have some form of factual dispersal mechanism in place—even in the absence of official policy. Most countries have adopted a negotiated model positioned mid-scale in terms of restrictiveness. Typically, this involves a combination of more or less binding spatial rules for refugees, material incentives, hierarchical reception governance, discretionary dispersal criteria, and limited subnational monitoring.

Second, several West European countries have institutionalized highly formalized dispersal regimes. These include fixed quota systems or official negotiation procedures between levels of government. Our findings suggest that quota-based systems are generally more restrictive than those relying on voluntary pledges by subnational governments. In both models, systematic statistical monitoring of subnational settlement patterns is common, suggesting that transparency facilitates effective implementation and subnational responsibility-sharing.

Third, the restrictiveness of refugee dispersal varies significantly across different country contexts. Dispersal tends to be more restrictive in countries that have received high numbers of asylum seekers in the past and in states with high levels of local autonomy. In contrast, the presence of established radical-right parties is not systematically associated with a particular RDP design. These results are indicative of RDPs being shaped by specific country contexts of how functionalist needs, political institutions and domestic politics interact.

Finally, understanding the politics of refugee dispersal not only adds an important spatial dimension to immigration policy-making but also offers valuable insights to policy-makers on how to enhance responsibility-sharing at the international level. The policy attributes that we identified, could inform the design of responsibility-sharing mechanisms between states. Our analysis suggests that negotiated models are the most realistic approach to refugee dispersal and that responsibility-sharing must address two target groups, the refugees that are to be distributed and the states that are to host them. The combination of negotiated dispersal criteria and monitoring could enhance transparency and perceptions of fairness, thereby increasing the prospects for effective solidarity.

While our study provides a novel conceptual and empirical understanding of refugee dispersal, there are several limitations to this work. The empirical analysis relies on a small sample, which limits the power of inferential statistics. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the analysis does not capture temporal dynamics in refugee dispersal. Deeper insights into the processes shaping RDPs can be gained from studying changes over time. Given our focus on dispersal during the application stage of asylum procedures, we did not investigate potential links between dispersal policies before and after the protection decision.

Our comparative work may therefore inform further data collection efforts and studies to systematize scholarly understanding of refugee dispersal. First, an important aspect could be further expanding comparable data on dispersal policies across national contexts to other periods and the dispersal of recognized refugees (cf. Tvedt and Tronstad 2023). Second, case studies could

investigate, for example, the actual practice of particular constellations of policy attributes. Third, we provide the base for comparative work on the outcomes of particular RDPs. For instance, are restrictive RDPs effective in achieving a more evenly distributed settlement structure of refugees or are their short-term effects reversed by secondary movements? How does refugee dispersal shape public attitudes and preferences on international responsibility-sharing? For these reasons, we see significant potential for future research. Our new conceptualization and policy index will enable further investigation into the drivers and consequences of RDPs.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The Refugee Dispersal Policy (RDP) Data Set as well as the replication materials (code and documentation) are available on the SADAR repository at <http://dx.doi.org/10.25673/1914118-10>.

AI Use Disclosure

Generative AI tools (GPT-4) were used for language editing, to tidy and debug statistical code, and as a translation aid for selected policy documents. All outputs were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Endnotes

¹ The observation that the spatial distribution of refugees takes place not only between states but also within states points towards multi-level asylum governance. Indeed, dispersal regimes are often multi-layered, involving successive allocations: refugees in Europe may be relocated among EU member states, then distributed among subnational regions, which in turn allocate them to municipalities.

² The first proposal for responsibility-sharing presented to the European Parliament came in 1987 from Heinz Vetter, the German rapporteur of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Citizen's Rights (Vetter, 1987).

³ Henceforth, we will use the term “refugees” to denote both individuals in the process of seeking asylum as well as recognized refugees unless the legal distinction by states requires a more specific vocabulary. While our analysis focuses on dispersal policies for asylum seekers, the analytical scope of the article covers refugees at all stages of the asylum procedure in the host country.

- ⁴ What comes closest to a measurement of dispersal policies in existing policy datasets are indicators provided by the Immigration Policies in Comparison (IMPIC) dataset (Helbling et al. 2017) and the World Refugee and Asylum Policies (DWRAP) dataset (Blair et al. 2024) measuring the freedom of movement of refugees. However, this information is missing in three-quarters of the observations in the IMPIC data. Furthermore, measuring freedom of movement is not equivalent to measuring dispersal policies. Another relevant dataset is Hatton's (2009) index on asylum policy toughness, which includes "dispersal to non-metropolitan reception centers" as one element of access to benefits for asylum-seekers. Nevertheless, dispersal is not identifiable as a separate item in the dataset, and the index therefore does not allow for a distinct measurement of RDPs.
- ⁵ We focus exclusively on institutionalized dispersal policies and do not consider ad hoc measures.
- ⁶ Negotiated governance differs from Tiziana Caponio's definition of multilevel governance in asylum reception policy. Her definition would require cooperation between the state and subnational governments (vertical dimension) as well as non-governmental organizations (horizontal dimension) beyond legal obligations (Caponio 2022, 6). In contrast, negotiated governance, as we define it, considers cooperative relations between the state and subnational governments sufficient to constitute this governance type.
- ⁷ The countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the U.K.
- ⁸ The Refugee Dispersal Policy (RDP) Data Set and the replication files associated with this article can be found on the SADAR repository (<http://dx.doi.org/10.25673/1914118-10>).
- ⁹ In recent years, some states have introduced admissibility procedures to assess whether individuals are eligible to lodge an asylum application on their territory. Such procedures are often applied when an application is deemed likely to be unfounded (EUAA 2022, 121–122).
- ¹⁰ Given the small sample size of $N = 32$, the bar for statistical significance is relatively high.
- ¹¹ The exact wordings of the coding question in the IMPIC dataset are "did asylum seekers, recognized refugees and persons with subsidiary/humanitarian protection, respectively, have the right to move freely within the country? (i.e., the right to settle down and to change place of residence unrestrictedly)" (see Berger et al. 2024).
- ¹² An alternative approach would be to use the Manhattan measure that is calculated based on absolute values. We have opted for the Canberra measure due to its better fit, as indicated by Kruskal's stress value that assesses how well the reduced dimensions represent the distances between the original data. Lower values indicate a better fit and a value below 0.2 is considered acceptable. In our analysis, the MDS using Manhattan distances resulted in a stress value of 0.1711, whereas the Canberra-based MDS achieved a lower stress value of 0.1425, indicating a better fit.
- ¹³ Had we extended the visualization of the MDS to include an explicit concern for procedural territorial justice (governance = 1), the countries Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the U.K. would have been included. While the U.K. relies on a formal procedure for voluntary participation of municipalities in asylum reception, this is accompanied by monitoring of the spatial pattern of asylum seeker accommodations.
- ¹⁴ The SPRAR system in Italy, which is run by municipalities on a voluntary basis, comes close to such a regulation. However, after 2015 the obligatory CAS system became the dominant form of reception.
- ¹⁵ While formal regulations on the voluntary participation of subnational governments in the reception of asylum seekers are quite rare, they are slightly more common for recognized refugees, especially in Nordic countries (Hernes et al. 2023).
- ¹⁶ This measure captures the long-term functional need for refugee dispersal since the early 1990s when refugee arrivals in Europe increased significantly. We use countries' absolute number of asylum requests because this figure captures the effective need for accommodation and other reception services that pose a logistical challenge for states. A logarithmic transformation is applied to reduce skewness. From a methodological point of view it has similarly been argued that controlling for population size with a ratio should not be done when there is no linear relation between the numerator and the denominator (Rohr and Martin 2024).
- ¹⁷ Due to missing data, Turkey and Serbia are excluded from the regressions, reducing the sample to $N = 30$.
- ¹⁸ For robustness, we also use alternative operationalization such as the mean number of asylum applications for the period from 1993 to 2019 and the aftermath of the refugee crisis (2015–2019). The results remain the same in substance.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information S1: gove70072-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.