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FRENCH IMMIGRATION POLICY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *Following the start of the European refugee crisis in 2015, France had to modify its immigration and asylum policies. However, France faced two main issues resulting from the pandemic: pandemic control and refugee management. This article examined the reform and adjustment of France's immigration and refugee asylum policies before and after the pandemic outbreak. It concluded that the pandemic had aggravated the problems of refugee management in France. At the same time, refugees in France were in a difficult situation. The French government had imposed restrictions on entry and exit, leaving many refugees stranded in France, unable to return home. Moreover, the high sanitary conditions of accommodation due to the pandemic led to the fact that the health of many refugees could not be guaranteed. Therefore, the French government should enhance the guarantee of a healthy environment for refugees, which is also beneficial to the social management of France.*

Keywords: *France; Immigration; Asylum; Policy; Covid-19*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic began ravaging the planet in early 2020, wreaking havoc on the healthcare systems of several countries. As a result, the pandemic has placed higher demands on governments' social management abilities, and many nations are scrambling to devise Covid-19 containment policies. Many countries implemented border closure measures in the early stages of the pandemic, which resulted in a dramatic drop in migration and international movement of people in 2020. Early in the pandemic, European nations closed their internal borders and restricted the movement of their citizens. As a result, one of the methods used by the French government to combat the pandemic was to modify immigration and refugee policies.

Since Macron's presidency, tackling the integration of immigrants in France has been a top priority for him. According to Macron's government, the primary strategy to enhance immigrants' integration is to build their value identity. However, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 will surely make managing French society more difficult.

The focus of France's immigration and asylum policy change is now on balancing the pandemic and immigration management, and it is also a negotiating chip for each contender in the 2022 French presidential election to win the presidency.

THE DOMESTIC PANDEMIC SITUATION IS NOT OPTIMISTIC

The situation in France did not improve significantly over the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, and President Macron declared a national lockdown on 17 March 2020 due to the rapid spread of the pandemic in France. Schools were closed indefinitely, and public activities were limited to basic services. During this time, France closed the European Union's external borders to non-EU nationals, while the French government likewise limited people's mobility beyond its borders. The French government relaxed the lockdown measures on 11 May after the national lockdown had lasted nearly two months. The lockdown was gradually lifted for businesses and schools, as the pandemic and the national lockdown had hit France hard socioeconomically. The public was growing dissatisfied with the nationwide lockdown.

Despite strong entrance and exit controls, the pandemic's lax internal control resulted in a dramatic surge in infection rates in France in October 2020, making it the country with the most illnesses in Europe within 24 hours. On 28 October 2020, Macron ordered a second nationwide lockdown to combat the virus's widespread spread. The lockdown was less severe than in March, and some schools and businesses remained open, but France's external borders with non-EU countries remained closed. As Christmas neared in 2020, the French government began to let up on its lockdown plans, announcing a countrywide lockdown with a curfew on 15 December. In March 2021, Europe witnessed the third pandemic of illness, prompting Macron to announce a third national lockdown, which would begin on 3 April and last for a month, with schools remaining open.

The pandemic situation in France remained bleak until this year. Because of the extremely transmissible nature of Covid-19, France has been amid a large pandemic since December 2021, with an average of about 500,000 new infections each day, much exceeding the previous three national lockdowns. However, in February 2022, France announced the gradual easing of restrictions, declaring that the country will shift to the pandemic era because of improving health circumstances, besides the impending presidential election and mounting anti-lockdown rallies. Following that, the French government eased limitations on the size of forced telework and public meetings and stopped mandating masks to be worn in outdoor public spaces.

During these three national lockdowns, the French government collaborated with local governments to implement regionalized measures to restore trust and avoid charges (Greer SL 2022). However, the recurring breakouts of the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed the French health system's structural flaws, and the bureaucracy of French health decision-making has resulted in inadequate policy implementation (Or *et al.* 2022). France's public health capabilities must be strengthened to handle the outbreak properly.

REBOUNDING OF THE ASYLUM APPLICATION

Europe is a crucial destination for Middle Eastern and Latin American immigrants seeking asylum, owing to its excellent economy. According to Eurostat, the number of first-time asylum applicants in France has increased every year, reaching a high of 138,000 overall applications in 2019. However, in 2020, this number decreased, and France ranked third with 81,800 general asylum applicants or 20% of the total number of first-time applications in the EU (Eurostat 2022). Following the Covid-19, there has been a marked decrease in asylum applications in Europe, down from 530,000 in 2014.

However, this cannot simply be attributed to a decreased willingness to request asylum; rather, it is due to the EU Member States' restoration of internal border management during the pandemic, which severely limited the admission of citizens from other countries. However, such border restrictions do not prohibit a person from claiming international protection under the principle of non-refoulment. Instead, the reduction in refugee applications is due to the nearly complete stoppage of commercial flights, resulting in a sharp drop in asylum applications as one of the few legal routes to Europe becomes abruptly unavailable (Marguerite 2020). Even though the pandemic situation has not greatly improved by 2021, the number of migrants arriving in Europe is on the rise again, owing to ongoing wars in the Middle East and the US exit from Afghanistan, among other things. According to Eurostat, 60,800 first-time asylum applicants requested protection in the EU Member States in September 2021, up 58% from September 2020. (38,600 first-time applicants). It is the first time since the pandemic that the number of first-time applications had surpassed the level seen before the previous pandemic, which occurred in February 2020 (55,700) (Eurostat 2022). This demonstrates that the pandemic's spread has not negatively affected migrants' desire to request asylum and that a recovery in applications is unavoidable if border restrictions are relaxed across Europe. In September 2019, Germany had the greatest number of first-time asylum applications (13,800), accounting for over a quarter of all first-time applicants in the EU. On the other hand, France is a close second with 12,800 applicants, accounting for almost 21% of all applications. The strain on France to manage asylum and immigration has not lessened against the backdrop of continued global turmoil, and this scenario is likely to persist for some time.

ADJUSTMENT OF FRENCH IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICY IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC

Marking the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe, France has seen numerous terrorist incidents, resulting in a spike in anti-immigrant sentiment. France's extreme nationalism and xenophobia have exacerbated social divisions; on the other hand, refugees and immigrants of two or three generations, if they genuinely integrate into French society, have emerged as the most pressing social issues for the French government to address. Macron declared bridging the chasm between French immigrants and society one of his top social priorities during his presidency, vowing to strive for reform of the country's immigration and asylum policy.

Before the Covid-19: Enactment of the New Asylum and Immigration Law

Macron has emphasized the importance of values identity in terms of social integration. Macron has placed religious restrictions in important public educational settings, such as the headscarves ban in public locations such as French schools. Furthermore, fostering the social integration of immigrants and refugees in France includes addressing how to deal with the naturalization of French refugees.

Since the acquisition of French citizenship is the first step for immigrants to become French citizens and thus integrate into French society formally, the Macron government has focused its immigration policy on modifying the nationality law to highlight the importance of identifying with the values of the Republic. The contemporary French nationality legislation was drafted between 1790 and 1791, marking the first time the constitution incorporated a definition of French citizenship. Between 1790 and 1795, there were two options for acquiring French citizenship: honorary citizenship and automatic naturalization (Maillard 2010). Following World War II, the French government changed its constitution to promote the naturalization and assimilation of second-generation immigrants into France to crush the Algerian colonists' independence rising and secure the legality of their French citizenship. Today, *jus soli* governs French nationality law, stating that anybody who respects French national principles can become a French citizen. This approach also stresses that globally shared ideals preserve national citizenship rather than racial or ethnic identity (Webster 2007). As a result, Macron's administration has increased the standards for immigrants' language skills while also reinforcing immigrants' affiliation with republican values.

In response to the rising problem of immigrant integration, the Macron government introduced another change to the nationality legislation in 2018 to make it easier for new immigrants to integrate into French society. After getting a residence permit, immigrants must travel to the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) to sign a Republican Integration Contract (CIR). Signing this contract signifies a promise to respect French society and the French Republic's principles and values. The French citizenship material stressed the French state's symbols and mottos: the French flag, Marianne, freedom, equality, and fraternity. This was notably evident in the increased focus on themes such as secularism (Suvarierol 2021). In 2018, France passed the new Asylum and Immigration Law to combat illegal immigration, reform the asylum process, and promote refugee assimilation. As a result of unprecedented immigration pressure in 2017, the French government wants to accomplish effective immigration control and exercise the right to asylum through better asylum application processing and countermeasures against illegal immigration. However, at the same time, this bill significantly shortens the period of asylum applications, doubles the detention time of illegal immigrants, and imposes a one-year prison sentence for illegal entry into France, so harsh provisions also make the bill controversial.

After the Covid-19 Outbreak: Closing the External Borders

Signing the Schengen Agreement entails a certain cession of sovereignty for Schengen nations, and Schengen countries do not, in general, perform internal border controls. At the

same time, the EU created the Schengen Borders Code, which permits the Member States to temporarily regain control of internal borders in circumstances of major risks to public policy or internal security. However, this is the last option that must adhere to the proportionality principle. Furthermore, the European Commission will consider a member state's request to reestablish internal border restrictions, but it will not be able to veto a member state's choice to do so. Some EU Member States implemented border controls in the pandemics' early days to prevent home situations from escalating. After the pandemic outbreak, Macron has called on the EU Member States to cooperate in strengthening restrictions on the EU's external borders. The European Commission suggested to the Schengen Member States and the Schengen UN on 8 April 2020 that the temporary limitations on non-essential travel to the EU be extended until 15 May 2020. Since then, all EU Member States (excluding Ireland) have decided to apply and expand the travel restrictions. Nevertheless, the travel limitations do not apply to EU citizens, non-EU Schengen citizens, their families, or non-EU nationals who permanently reside in the EU to return to their native country (Doliwa-Klepacka 2021).

While border controls impeded EU integration during the pandemic, travel restrictions were critical for the pandemic response. They were thus approved by the EU and the individual EU Member States. The main point of disagreement is that the measures are inconsistent across Europe, resulting in just a few European nations applying uniform criteria for passengers from third countries entering the Schengen region through airports but allowing free movement across their internal borders (Schade 2021).

Most crucially, France's border restrictions prevent non-EU people from entering the country and leave many refugees trapped in the country. Three significant lockdowns occurred in France, each accompanied by limitations on internal cross-border travel. During the first national lockdown, many refugees were trapped in France and needed local assistance to return to their countries of origin. While some destination nations in the EU first banned forcible repatriation, others increased pressure on countries of origin. Hosting these returning refugees offers a significant issue for countries of origin in the context of the pandemic (Le Coz 2021).

THE CHALLENGES OF THE PANDEMIC FOR FRENCH IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICY

For Macron, ignoring internal opposition in the run-up to the election will not help him gain support for the presidential race. As a result, even though France's infection rate remains high, Macron's administration has chosen deregulation. There are still major issues with immigration and asylum policy.

The Difficulty of Controlling the Pandemic Has Increased

France is more forceful than other European countries regarding pandemic prevention and control. France is a highly centralized country where the government carries out the main public tasks through a central ministry (Wollmann 2004). Because of this, the French authorities can respond with a rapid shift in policy interventions to prevent the pandemic from worsening across the country. As a result, some academics believe that the French reaction strategy is a more aggressive, legalistic strategy that influences citizens' behavior (Yan 2020). Because of this,

the French authorities can respond with a rapid shift in policy interventions to prevent the pandemic from worsening across the country. Therefore, in the view of some scholars, the French response strategy is a more coercive, legalistic strategy aimed at changing the behavior of citizens (Kuhlmann 2021). The French people are unwilling to tolerate such severe regulations. While certain German central administrations have moved quicker and bolder in lifting the lockdown further than France, France has been more cautious, delayed, and reluctant to loosen and contain measures (Peretti-Watel 2021). This is because the emergency health system in France is not as well developed compared in Germany.

According to a poll on the French national lockdown, most respondents backed the policy as a temporary measure to contain the pandemic's spread. The French Ministry of Health, on the other hand, has been heavily chastised for its lack of testing capability and failure to renew its mask stock (Malliet 2020). In addition to dissatisfaction with health services, the lockdown would exacerbate the economic recession and contribute to France's hesitancy in decision-making.

Covid-19 wrecked the world economy, highlighting France's socioeconomic issues before the pandemic. First, the blockade had a considerable short-term negative impact on economic activity, with GDP in France decreasing by 5% in 2020 compared to the baseline trend (Esses 2021). The economic slump led to xenophobia and rejection of immigrants and refugees among the population. Immigrants and refugees are seen by some French citizens as not just a huge danger to the security of French society but also as rivals in the job market. Furthermore, some media regards refugees as the communication medium for Covid-19. While institutional racism contributes to these inequalities, it can also perpetuate racism and xenophobia on an individual level by instilling illness concerns (Roederer 2021). In short, the Covid-19 and the French government's strict policies led to enormous pressure on the French economy and increased French society's resistance to immigrant refugees.

The Health of Refugees Cannot Be Guaranteed

According to research, those living in vulnerable situations in Paris have a significant risk of infection, owing to their congested living circumstances. So homeless persons and people living in insecure housing should be provided with sufficient accommodation that eliminates overcrowding (Fassin 2020). As a result, French migrants spend lengthy periods in congested housing, increasing their chance of catching new infections. Furthermore, only 40% of migrants detained in detention facilities get deported (Armocida 2021). Therefore, many detained immigrants are not properly repatriated to their home countries.

Access to vaccines for migrants and refugees is one of the methods to defend refugees' basic rights and living circumstances. In a paper titled 'EU/Continental Europe Covid-19 Vaccination and Prioritization Strategy', the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) highlights migrants and refugees as prospective target populations for vaccination programs. However, EU Member States' perspectives and attitudes differ on this subject (May 2021). Migrants are highlighted explicitly in immunization campaigns in several EU nations, and migrants are just a priority category in a few others. Because Covid-19 is extremely contagious, it is critical to protect citizens' right to health. As a result, citizens, immigrants, and refugees

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should be entitled to vaccinations. The French government actively pushes basic health care coverage for immigrants and refugees to encourage their social integration in France. The French government declared in May 2021 that anyone in an illegal position, regardless of whether or not they get public medical support, can be vaccinated. In addition, the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) is giving Covid-19 immunization to all persons who come to file asylum petitions at its locations around the country. This is also a chance for these migratory groups to analyze their overall health state.

The implementation of healthcare benefits for asylum applicants, on the other hand, has not gone smoothly. On the one hand, due to French government laws, paperwork for asylum applicants seeking health treatment is difficult and takes a long time to obtain, discouraging potential candidates. However, when engaging with government employees or medical staff, some asylum applicants feel prejudiced against them (Carillon 2020). These two factors combine to explain why refugees are not as active as they should be when it comes to seeking medical help.

CONCLUSION

Macron's government's efforts to emerge from the instability of 2015 have generated some successes, and now French immigration and refugee management have. However, the pandemic has surely enhanced France's problems in managing immigration and refugees. Following the outbreak in March 2020, France closed its external borders and prohibited non-EU people from entering the country to prevent the pandemic from spreading further. However, due to tight limits on population mobility, some refugees could not return to their home countries and ended up in France. Furthermore, refugees live in overcrowded conditions, increasing their risk of infection and denying them access to essential health treatments. This makes it more difficult to handle refugees in France, and it also has an impact on the country's social security.

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Statement on the welfare of animals:
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