

# When Can an Ethical-Dilemmas Framing Influence Policy?

*Elizabeth Collett*

Policy is rarely constant: Whether large-scale legislative reform or minor modification to guidance, governments are continually modulating policy to better fit new realities. The policy decisions themselves are based on a mix of considerations, from the values based to the empirical, cut through by political exigency and stakeholder interests. Increasingly, in our complex and interconnected world, few policy choices come with an unalloyed upside, and governments must select the downsides they can live with, and consider how best to mitigate them.

This is especially true with respect to policy decisions regarding immigration, which have become fraught with practical and moral trade-offs. Policy decisions surrounding migration frequently—if not always—have direct, visible human consequences. At best, the long-term life plans and aspirations of individuals and communities are disrupted; at worst, there may be loss of life or liberty. As such, for policymakers in the immigration and asylum space, decisions are weighty and underpinned by ethical considerations.

When making decisions, politicians and policymakers will be influenced by a range of sources, from their individual views and principles to the institutional values and legal frameworks to which their governments have committed. Political decision-makers will also be influenced by the broader moral compass of public opinion, which can be augmented (or distorted) by media and the analysis and advice from those around them. Bureaucratic decision-makers (that is, those working in positions that are by their nature apolitical) may focus more on the overall integrity and coherence of the policy area, the longer-term outcomes, and

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**Elizabeth Collett**, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., United States ([ecollett@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:ecollett@migrationpolicy.org))

*Ethics & International Affairs*, 39, no. 1 (2025), pp. 62–74.

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doi:[10.1017/S0892679425100087](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679425100087)

how to ensure effective follow-through of policy decisions. In addition, timing matters—the moment that ideas are introduced can be key.

The context and moment in which an ethical dilemma is presented can have an impact on how deeply the dilemma resonates and is acted upon. Whether policy-makers are in the right “frame” to hear a dilemma and be influenced by its conclusions depends upon a range of factors, and these do not always align in the same combination. Based on several decades of experience offering independent migration policy analysis and advice in national, EU, and UN policy domains, in this essay I will explore the factors that can influence the timing at which a dilemmas perspective might contribute to more balanced and thoughtful policy decision-making, including moments of urgency and crisis.

To that point, a “dilemma” might be more familiarly understood in policy-making circles as a trade-off, whether exploring the political feasibility or cost benefit of a particular approach, making hard decisions that balance the needs of one target group against another, or pursuing a policy objective at the expense of another, potentially very different, goal. In a modern, complex, and deeply politicized national policy-making environment, dilemmas involving political feasibility are more prevalent than the hard ethical dilemmas that view a situation in terms of competing, morally worthy outcomes such as those analyzed by the Dilemmas project, led by the European University Institute.<sup>1</sup>

## VECTORS OF INFLUENCE

The process of influencing the decisions of politicians and policymakers can often seem mystical to the casual observer. And indeed, there are a range of actors who benefit from reinforcing that perception, not least decision-makers themselves. But vectors of influence—including the openness of decision-makers to be influenced by, and invest in, particular avenues of action—are not linear and depend on a broad range of factors that themselves intersect. Timing is key, as are the diversity and depth of interests, levels of knowledge, and the nature of the policy challenge itself. These can all affect how governments absorb information that might lie beyond the usual cost-benefit assessments of day-to-day policymaking.

### *Political Salience*

For the most part, when an issue is lower on the political agenda, there is greater time and opportunity to ensure that a full range of policy options is considered, and to explore ethical dilemmas, or trade-offs.

This can be seen, for example, in the issue of protected entry procedures—which facilitate entry to a country for the purpose of claiming asylum—one element of a broader complex of ethical dilemmas related to how, and where, to protect refugees most effectively.<sup>2</sup> Requiring individuals to travel to the country of asylum before making a claim for asylum forces them to undertake an often expensive, dangerous, and difficult journey if it is not possible to secure a visa for travel in advance. From the government's perspective, significant numbers of unauthorized arrivals can be damaging to public support for migration; in addition, government failure to return asylum seekers whose claims have been unsuccessful to their country of origin reduces the credibility and public support for asylum systems, in a context where the process of return itself can be lengthy and expensive. The issuance of humanitarian visas in advance of a full asylum process based on need (and likely positive asylum decision) circumvents many of these challenges, while raising other concerns such as managing a potentially high number of applicants through consular systems not designed for scale.

In the mid-2010s, quiet diplomacy led to the limited use of humanitarian visas in several countries, including France, Ireland, and Austria, largely focused on Syrian nationals.<sup>3</sup> The success of these programs lay exactly in their limited size and public profile, given the logistical challenges involved in scaling up such programs. In Belgium, advocacy by NGOs to encourage the use of humanitarian visas was initially promising, but the government pulled away from the idea as onshore asylum applications from Syria rose, and public attention turned to the issue.<sup>4</sup> Later efforts by the European Parliament to institutionalize the use of humanitarian visas at the EU level had a contrary effect, hardening EU member state governments against their use, fearing that by enshrining humanitarian visas into EU legislation, member states would lose discretion over whether, when, and how to use them. The proposal was withdrawn in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, unusually high political salience can open new opportunities to expand the use of humanitarian admission. In the United States, humanitarian parole has a long history of responding to specific high-profile international crises; for example, Hungary in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1970s, and Afghanistan in 2022. The increased movement of people through Panama and Mexico over the past five years, coupled with the fact that large numbers of those arriving were from countries in deep crisis such as Venezuela and Haiti, gave rise to the creation of a more diverse and large-scale humanitarian parole and family reunification program in 2022 and 2023.<sup>6</sup> Here, increased political attention and sense of urgency

created a new space to evolve the use of parole programming, driven in part by framing the challenge as a regional one.<sup>7</sup>

While the timing and salience of a crisis may lead to increased or diminished opportunities, there will often be an underlying dilemma facing policymakers that cannot go unacknowledged. In this case, the “hard ethical dilemma” is whether offering specific national groups swift access to residence in the United States—reducing their vulnerability and the scale of unauthorized border crossing—creates unfairness in an asylum system intended to assess all arrivals equally. For the U.S. government, the benefit of potentially reducing the scale of movement through the Darién Gap was viewed as the greater good and was complemented with additional measures to maintain the integrity and security of the border, while streamlining asylum processes.<sup>8</sup> This example, however, also demonstrates the importance of communicating clearly to maintain social license for decision-making when an issue has high political salience. The incumbent Democrat administration lost the 2024 federal elections in part because their immigration policy approach did not resonate with voters, leading to a stark change in policy and swift end to humanitarian parole in January 2025.<sup>9</sup>

### *Moments of Crisis*

Moments of crisis can engender significant expressions of moral duty, and the acknowledgement and consideration of ethical dilemmas in policymaking. But not always.

In the EU, the impact of the crisis mindset on policy depends strongly on the level of consensus that exists across the member states, as well as the intensity of that mindset. In 2013, large-scale movements of people across the Central Mediterranean led to the establishment of Operation Mare Nostrum, an Italian government maritime search-and-rescue mission.<sup>10</sup> And initially, the exponential increase in the movement of people across the Eastern Mediterranean in 2015 elicited high levels of political sympathy, exemplified by the Austrian government’s now forgotten Save Lives initiative,<sup>11</sup> which only later descended into panic, paralysis, and finger pointing between Southern European states, Northwest European states, and Central European states.

Between July and November 2015, as the issue was elevated to high-profile political negotiations between EU heads of state, the ethical dilemma became more complex, with fears rising that the humanitarian imperative—to save lives and reduce harm—would lead to a gradual breakdown of EU solidarity, and the

eventual collapse of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). For EU policymakers, collective collaboration on asylum is a public good that plays a role in maintaining standards of refugee protection across the continent and is emblematic of the EU's liberal democratic values. For EU decision-makers, the situation was not simply a humanitarian crisis, but a threat to core functions of the European Union.

Debates were infused with moral concern, with strong, repeated calls for a compassionate humanitarian response, even while the large and unanticipated arrivals of asylum seekers were placing extreme pressure on many EU member states. However, it became clear that while the crisis mindset was helpful in mobilizing a humanitarian response toward asylum seekers in the early stages—such as triggering additional funding for Balkan states and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism—after a certain point, political urgency and rapidly narrowing options forced a more hardheaded response to the crisis.

The framing that many of the policy actors took toward the crisis was focused on maintaining the EU project, as well as (or instead of) viewing the challenge purely in terms of protection, with key leaders preoccupied with ensuring common EU approaches. This meant that the challenges of how to support and protect individuals were often crowded out in favor of discussions about interstate solidarity, responsibility, and maintaining the Schengen space. The creation of a mandatory, rather than voluntary, system of relocation for asylum seekers already present in Greece and Italy is emblematic of this focus on the integrity of the CEAS, though it proved deeply divisive politically and effectively created a protection stalemate. The resolution of this dilemma came in the form of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, through which new arrivals in Greece would be returned to Turkey, in return for increased support for Turkey's refugee population, and increased resettlement opportunities. Following this, arrivals from Turkey subsided, though the situation of those caught in Turkey and Greece did not ameliorate in the short term.<sup>12</sup> Though deeply criticized, the statement aimed to find a middle ground between offering protection (though not necessarily within the EU) and reducing pressure on the EU asylum project.

Calls for more humane responses from civil society and some media became increasingly at odds with the policy discussion. And while behind closed doors, the possibility of triggering the Temporary Protection Directive—a means to offer time-limited protection to a specific group without an asylum process—as an alternative resolution to the dilemma was briefly considered, it was eventually discarded.<sup>13</sup>

One might have expected similar dynamics to emerge regarding the large-scale arrival of displaced Ukrainians on the EU's Eastern border in early 2022. However, in this situation, the differing geography and political support for Ukraine meant that the use of temporary protection was quickly agreed to across the EU as a means to offer humanitarian support while avoiding an overload of national asylum systems. The arrival of several million Ukrainians merged with a sense of political expediency. Many reasons have been given for this disparity in response, including the fact that the 2022 arrivals were not a mixed movement, that there were preexisting contingency and crisis response mechanisms (established in 2016), that there was a strong Ukrainian diaspora and cultural connection, and that there was simply less discrimination toward arrivals from Eastern Europe. But critically, the consensus between Central and Northern European states regarding the situation allowed for a more ethically unambiguous response to the situation. While undoubtedly a displacement crisis, in 2022 it was neither a political crisis nor a situation that challenged the EU institutions at any fundamental level. In some ways, it arguably reinforced the idea of "the EU" (at least in some circles) because of solidarity among states facing Russian threats.

It should also be noted that the scarring effect of crises—particularly if they are not effectively resolved—can undermine the space for discussing the ethical dimensions of a policy challenge later. Two decades ago in Europe, the concept of externally processing asylum seekers was an occasional political proposal, quickly dismissed by the majority.<sup>14</sup> In 2018, external-processing proposals briefly proliferated with greater support; successful counterarguments focused on cost and legal complexity that, coupled with the scope for human rights violations, tipped the balance away from acting on them.<sup>15</sup> In 2024, the political discussion among the majority of EU member states is not about whether to engage in external processing, but how. The nature of the ethical dilemma has profoundly changed from one concerning whether or not externalization is aligned with providing access to asylum in Europe to a concern about the relative ethical merits of different externalization models.

### ***Public Support***

Of course, the discussion above ignores the impact that public sentiment and support can have on how a government may hear, and respond to, a migration dilemma.<sup>16</sup> Public opinion can be polarized, but there is significant nuance

according to the core values and socioeconomic security of the opinion holder, and the economic and social characteristics of the migrants under discussion. From a policy perspective, measures that balance a sense of control and equity while demonstrating generosity tend to maintain public support, though recent experiences suggest that this support becomes shaky if immigration intakes increase significantly in a short space of time. With respect to refugees, support remains solid as long as the system, and applicant pool, is viewed as credible and manageable, though compassion may wane over time.<sup>17</sup>

Public sympathy can become a powerful motivation in the face of human tragedy. The photographs of drowned children washing up on Greek and Italian shores in 2014–2015 shocked citizens into a series of interventions ranging from privately sponsored search-and-rescue initiatives to donating clothes and shelter to survivors. These, in turn, expanded the political space for government-led search-and-rescue efforts in the Mediterranean.<sup>18</sup>

Other issues are more complex. Public support can be helpful to police the parameters of immigration enforcement, even while the need for enforcement may be strongly supported. Civil society groups have had some success campaigning against the detention of irregular migrants on several fronts, notably by getting limits placed on the duration of detention, and on the detention of families and children. Indeed, in 2018, a U.S. policy to separate children from their parents was reversed following widespread public outcry.<sup>19</sup> The shift toward more restricted use of detention has been bolstered also by the development and advocacy of alternatives to detention, which meet enforcement objectives without the constraint on liberty, or cost, that custodial measures bring. Here, campaigns to promote alternatives have included enshrining principles in international documents, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), while working directly with policymakers to develop practical pilots demonstrating efficacy.<sup>20</sup>

However, for public opinion to be impactful, there needs to be an active civil society and free media that can inform public discourse, as well as transparency from government actors concerning policy and programming. Without the ability to raise issues in the public domain, there is limited opportunity for public support—or outrage—to affect the ethical dimensions of decision-making. And in turn, in countries with weak or government-controlled public media and civil society, public focus on—and support for—ethical concerns related to migration becomes weaker.

### *The Political and Policy Cycle*

For many, political and policy processes are opaque, and too often byzantine. But understanding when and how to intervene, as well as the correct tone and approach, can be critical to success.

First, the moment in the political cycle at which the intervention is made can be critical. In the months before an election, it is often difficult to communicate ethical dilemmas to a cohort of politicians who have narrowed their focus to winning over the electorate. However, this may be a fruitful time to engage with civil servants who are awaiting a new (or renewed) government and must prepare to brief and offer new ideas.

Similarly, the first months of a new government are often chaotic but liquid and ambitious; there is a brief opportunity when openness and opportunity overlap, allowing trusted voices to put forward new ideas that can serve as a point of difference. More importantly, for officeholders new to their portfolio, it is a key moment to invest a broad understanding of the dilemmas and trade-offs they face, as well as the possible solutions, while taking care not to present the issues as intractable.

Once an area of reform has been decided at a political level, there is an opportunity to engage in the decision-making process, particularly if that process involves the active engagement and consultation of stakeholders. And here, the earlier the better, before strong positions have been formed, allowing for key questions to be shaped rather than merely answered. It is harder to change minds during a policy process, particularly once “solutions” are being drafted.

Timing aside, the nature of vested interests plays a role, particularly if they are strong and/or polarizing. Strongly conflicting policy positions can serve to force a choice—and the loudest voice usually wins—which can drown out the more nuanced arguments posed by an ethical-dilemma framing. Similarly, the level of trust and respect between government and civil society and other stakeholders can be key; in countries where the relationship is tense, it can be hard to be heard.

In this regard, language is important. Just as political vocabulary that belittles and excludes migrants is alienating to balanced debate, so are expressions loaded with disapproval toward policymakers. Language that includes moral judgement, including portmanteaus such as “crimmigration” or “illegalizing” policy may estrange policymakers, just as politicians using phrases such as “illegal alien” can create prejudice toward migrant communities.<sup>21</sup> Decision-makers will switch off



when hearing particular words and phrases, hearing hostility rather than value in the points put forward.

Finally, whether a debate is deeply entrenched can affect how much space there is to hear a new framing. Some assumptions can be difficult to overturn, even in the face of clear evidence, as the parameters of a policy debate become calcified.

But a catalyzing event can be an unexpected opportunity to reframe issues from an ethical perspective. Before COVID-19, low-skilled migrant work was typically viewed as low value, and unwanted, in comparison to high-skilled migrant labor. Overnight, with the introduction of social distancing, communities became reliant on delivery drivers, supermarket workers, care assistants, and agricultural workers, and these workers became ever more valuable as closed borders led to a shortage of available supply. Low-skilled workers became “essential workers.” It is unclear how sticky this recent framing will be—it has arguably already faded—but it led to a raft of policies focused on ensuring a pipeline of low-skilled labor, and some improvements in the health, safety, and conditions of work.<sup>22</sup>

### *Alternative Policy Venues*

As with moments of crisis, there are always opportunities to reframe and create new expectations through alternative policy venues.

For example, while it may be difficult to increase protections for irregular migrants within a traditional immigration portfolio, this does not mean that those protections cannot be created elsewhere, by designing inclusive health and education policy, or by ensuring that undocumented women can access protection from violence without fear of immigration enforcement.<sup>23</sup> The ethical frames of decision-makers in adjacent portfolios may be more conducive to ensuring vulnerable groups are not denied protections, as their focus on delivering different morally worthy policy objectives means they do not perceive a stark ethical dilemma, if any at all. In 2018, the Spanish government legislated to expand access to healthcare for all residents, including undocumented migrants, which places Spain as an outlier compared to most other countries that may exclude or limit health access to emergency care.<sup>24</sup> However, during COVID-19, the broader public health imperative meant that by March 2022, the majority of European countries guaranteed access to vaccines to irregular migrants, at least on paper, though there remained a number of barriers to access in practice, including health services being firewalled from immigration enforcement.<sup>25</sup> The effects on public health of

excluding irregular migrants from accessing vaccines outweighs the moral outrage concerning the cost of healthcare access.

Similarly, ensuring that migrants are included in non-migration-specific documents can offer a hook to engage in a discussion of the ethical dimensions of an issue. Advocacy to include migrants and internally displaced persons in multilateral discussions on climate has gradually increased in pace over the past decade. In 2022, at COP27, vulnerable migrants were included as a target population in the text establishing the Loss and Damage Fund, which was established to assist countries hit hard by climate change. As the fund becomes operational, governments will hopefully be able to address human mobility needs with the financial support it provides.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the experience of adopting and implementing the GCM has shown that UN venues can be useful places to explore ethical dilemmas and seek solutions in a nonbinding context. Despite its difficult and politicized birth, the regular review processes of the GCM, culminating in the quadrennial International Migration Review Forum, ensure regular exchange on the moral parameters of the full range of issues contained in the compact text, even if there are no requirements for action. And those review processes have revealed that states compete to be, or appear, more virtuous, showcasing good practice, and learning from one another. This is not to overstate the opportunity. Efforts by UN agencies to give ethical parameters to migration issues—such as return or protection for irregular migrants—are frequently contested by its member states, which are uncomfortable with multilateral constraint.

## CONCLUSION

The space to introduce ethical perspectives and dilemmas into policy processes is highly contextual and can often be hard to identify without the benefit of hindsight. The factors outlined above can conflict with one another and limit opportunity; a crisis moment that offers the opportunity to rethink a core migration challenge along ethical lines could be stifled by the overriding politics of an upcoming election.

It is also important to note that ethical considerations alone may be valuable but insufficient to generate action unless supplemented with more political and pragmatic argumentation and coupled with constructive solutions. Practical solutions have been instrumental in several areas to encourage policymakers to adopt an

approach that is based on a greater awareness of ethical dimensions and conflicts, not least in terms of cost and complexity. The U.K.'s proposed policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda struggled to gain public support, as not only was it unclear whether the policy objective would be realized but also public, and thus political, support for it was limited by the combination of its time to implementation, cost, and high potential for harmful outcomes for those deported. Conversely, despite the high cost, complexity, political risk, and moral concerns associated with the Australian offshore processing program known as Operation Sovereign Borders, it has remained in place for several decades.

What should advocates and policy influencers take from the complex decision-making landscape of migration? There is a risk that the takeaway is that the moment for influence is fleeting and too complex to identify. But as some of the above examples demonstrate, opportunities do exist. There is also a broader benefit that can be gained by helping decision-makers embrace the full complexity and trade-offs involved in a policy issue. By introducing the concept of an ethical dilemma, researchers may also help reduce paralysis in decision-making: if a choice will always be imperfect, and one will always be criticized, then awareness of these conditions may also inspire the courage to take swift action.

But how this is approached is also important: Setting out an ethical dilemma to influence government policy can be helpful in flagging design flaws, ethical concerns, and particularly in bringing on board a new set of constituents in favor of reform. However, if policymakers already perceive themselves to be besieged by competing perspectives and trade-offs, they may withdraw from interacting outside a circle of trusted advisers. Withdrawal from ethical and policy debate is not good for policy on a number of levels: it can mean policymakers find themselves engaged in groupthink with a smaller circle of insight, reinforcing policies regardless of whether they are working; it can lead to a falsely aggressive and polarized perspective, whereby the idea that one side “wins” becomes more important than the outcomes for migrants and communities affected by the policies espoused.

Setting out difficult policy issues in the form of an ethical dilemma—highlighting that there is no perfect course of action and drawing out the trade-offs—may provide governments the courage to navigate a way out of polarized and entrenched approaches, and can help depoliticize an issue, however briefly. But in a noisy policy space, where an increasing number of political and advocacy voices offer certain or morally definitive outcomes, the opportunity to frame challenging issues as ethical dilemmas may be narrowing. Finding modes of

engagement—whether at the political or policy level—remains important to ensure a full and continuous reflection on the tension between normative commitments, political imperatives, and policy objectives.

#### NOTES

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Abstract: The openness of decision-makers to be influenced by and invest in proposals for policy reform is not constant. Timing is key, as are the diversity and depth of interests, levels of knowledge, and nature of the policy challenge itself; these can all affect how governments absorb information that might fall beyond the usual cost-benefit assessments of day-to-day policymaking. This essay explores how and when the policy environment provides opportunities to introduce a more nuanced discussion of competing moral values in migration governance and, critically, the new policy directions to which they might give rise. In doing so, it will utilize a range of examples from national, EU, and global debates of the past decade, to highlight moments when a dilemmas approach has been—or could have been—useful to effect policy change. Stressing ethical dilemmas can influence migration policymakers when the conditions are right.

Keywords: migration policy, policy reform, ethical dilemmas, refugee accommodation, diplomatic timing