

# Asylum policies and resettlement. Insights and lessons from Canada's experience

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## Abstract

The resettlement of refugees is an important contemporary issue and several countries responded to the global resettlement needs by implementing national programs. This article aims to analyze current developments about refugee protection by focusing on Canada's experience in resettling and integrating refugees through the support of private sponsors. It elaborates on the outcomes and challenges of Canada's private sponsorship program implemented since the late 1970s and explores its transferability in Europe. The authors affirm that, despite the program's vulnerabilities, it can be a model for European countries dealing with the resettlement of refugees.

Keywords: Sponsorship; Refugee; Resettlement; Asylum; Canada, Transferability

# Politiche di asilo e reinsediamento. Approfondimenti e lezioni dall'esperienza del Canada

## Riassunto

Il reinsediamento dei rifugiati rappresenta un'importante questione contemporanea e diversi paesi hanno risposto al bisogno globale di reinsediamento adottando programmi nazionali. Questo articolo intende analizzare gli sviluppi attuali riguardanti la protezione dei rifugiati concentrandosi sull'esperienza canadese di reinsediamento e integrazione

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dei rifugiati attraverso il supporto dei sponsor privati. L'articolo descrive i risultati e le sfide del programma canadese di sponsorizzazione privata attuato dalla fine degli anni '70 ed esplora la sua trasferibilità in Europa. Gli autori affermano che, nonostante le sue vulnerabilità, il programma canadese potrebbe essere un modello per i paesi europei impegnati nel reinsediamento dei rifugiati.

Parole chiave: Sponsorizzazione; Rifugiati; Reinsediamento; Asilo, Canada; Trasferibilità

## **1. Introduction<sup>3</sup>**

There are currently over 70.8 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, including the 25.9 million refugees (UNHCR, 2019a), and about 3.5 million of them are awaiting a decision on their application for asylum (UNHCR, 2018). Moreover, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that about 6.7 million Syrians have fled the country (UNHCR, 2018) and more than one million have requested asylum in different countries of the European Union. This situation obliges countries to establish long-term strategies to help integrate refugees into their societies. Among the policies for refugee integration, Canada's private sponsorship program has proven to be one of the most effective worldwide, having offered protection to more than 327,000 refugees since its creation in the late 1970s. Starting from a brief review of asylum policies and resettlement in Europe and Canada, this article aims to analyze Canada's program, its achievements, challenges, and transferability in Europe.

## **2. Asylum policies and resettlement**

Migration classic theories generally disregard the refugee question (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018: 2). The discourse on people's mobility omits the forced displacement of those who flee, often as a last resort, genocides, and dictatorships (---). While systematic studies on refugees started only in the 1980s – with the publication of specialized volumes (the International

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Migration Review in 1981, the Journal of Refugee Studies in 1988), and the creation of centers focused on refugee issues (Black, 2001: 58) – the contemporary refugee protection system dates back after the World War II with the proclamation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), and the signing of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), known as Refugee Convention. The former proclaims the right to seek asylum from persecution (art. 14), whereas the latter establishes the obligation for signatories to offer protection from persecution and it represents the main legal and institutional framework for the protection of refugees. UNHCR, entitled to supervise the Convention (Kalin, 2003: 661), plays an important role in protecting refugees and producing knowledge in this field, insisting that refugees are not migrants and they are not subject to mobility restrictions. This difference lies in the definition of a refugee, in his legal rights and the push factors he suffers (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018: 2-7). There is still no unanimous definition of the migrant, often it is supposed to be a person moving away from his/her place of usual residence in order to improve her/his living. Whereas, the Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol, defines as a refugee, a person who:

“owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (art 1A, 1951 Refugee Convention).

The difference between migrants and refugees is highlighted also by the legal obligations established by the Refugee Convention, and other international binding documents, such as the principle of non-refoulement which prevents states to return refugees to a country where their life or freedom is seriously threatened (UNHCR, 2016).

In the European Union, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) represents the legal framework for the asylum process. It was established in the late 1990s, and since then different Regulations and Directives have enhanced and harmonised the minimum asylum standards (i.e. the revised Asylum Procedures Directive; the revised Reception Conditions Directive; the revised Qualification Directive; the revised Dublin Regulation; the revised EURODAC Regulation). The CEAS has been criticized for encompassing structural weaknesses that threaten the system. Beirens (2018) identified deficiencies in all stages of asylum system: the registration of arrivals in the territories of member states; the failure of

national reception capacity; the divergences on asylum procedures and protection rates.

Canada signed the Refugee Convention in 1969; however, the history of refugee protection in Canada dates earlier (i.e., between 1923 and 1930 more than 20,000 Mennonite refugees immigrated from Ukraine to seek refuge in Canada, fearing persecution in the Soviet Union). Current Canada's asylum system is regulated by the 2002 *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*. A recent independent review highlighted the system's inability to deal with the increase of asylum claims, identifying inadequacy of funding and poor sharing of information among overseeing agencies as the main shortcomings of the system (Yeates, 2018). Atak, Hudson and Nakache (2019) argue that the involvement of Canada Border Services Agency in determining the eligibility of claims through conducting security checks and intervening in the hearings has turned the Canadian system in an unfair process for some asylum seekers.

After World War II, along with the creation of the International protection system there was also developed and consolidated an important form of protection, the resettlement of refugees. Resettlement, defined as the "selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection, to a third State which offers them a permanent residence status", represents an important tool encompassing three essential elements: first it represents a safe and legal way for refugees to seek protection; secondly, it is a durable solution; and thirdly it is a clear expression of international solidarity through sharing responsibility regarding refugee protection (UNHCR, 2011). Some examples to highlight its importance. In 1956-1957, 170,000 Hungarian refugees were resettled from Austria to 37 countries; in 1972, 40,000 Ugandan Asians were resettled from Uganda to 25 countries; from 1975 to 1995, 1,300,000 Indochinese refugees were resettled to 15 countries; from 1992 to 1999, more than 15,000 Bosnian Refugees from the Former Republic of Yugoslavia were resettled in other countries (UNHCR, 2019b). During the 2000s, while the resettlement needs constantly increased, a resettlement solution was offered only to 1% of the refugees. In the period 2003-2018, UNHCR submitted 1,449,361 refugees for resettlement but only 1,015,644 refugees were accessed. The destination countries were primarily the US, Canada, Australia, Sweden and the UK, and the country of origin were in most of the cases Myanmar, Syria, Iraq, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia (UNHCR, 2019b).

In Europe, Sweden introduced its resettlement program in 1950, followed by several other European countries implementing such a program in late 1970, the Netherland (1977), Denmark (1979), and Finland (1985).

Europe has been initially criticised for not contributing to the resettlement of refugees. It was only after the 2000s that most European countries start implementing resettlement programs. Before 2003 only five countries (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, and Sweden) had such a program, and currently more than 20 European countries (EU and non-EU) have implemented national resettlement programs. Today, European countries have an important role in resettlement. In 2010, only some 8% of refugees resettled through UNHCR were admitted in Europe, nowadays this share is about 40% (Fratzke & Beirens, 2020).

The EU resettlement scheme was launched at the European Union level in 2005 and renewed in 2017. Since then, more than 65,000 refugees have been resettled in the EU. For 2020, EU member states committed to providing 30,000 places (European Commission, 2019). However, the contribution of the EU countries in the resettlement of refugees so far seems to be not sufficient, acknowledging the leading role in the protection of human rights that the Union claims to have. Furthermore, 30,000 resettlement places pledged for 2020 are few, compared to 1,440,408 persons in need of resettlement in the same year. EU member states must increase resettlement efforts significantly, also because they have the capacity to do so.

Although there was a significant increase in resettlement commitments during the last decade, yet, after the '90s, there has been an expansion of border control and the building of both mental and physical walls in the European Union. Ten (10) out of 28 member states have built walls to prevent immigration: Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom (Benedicto & Brunet 2018: 6-9). The European Union's current approach towards migrants and refugees is very emblematic. Even though the Commission of the European Union in 2015 reproached Hungary's decision to build a fence on its southern border, the same institution, in 2020, thanked Greece for being the shield of the Union through the brutal rejection of migrants trying to access Europe (The Economist, 2020: 9). The European Convention on Human Rights (1950), in exceptional circumstances, allows the use of force to protect borders, however, it must be proportionate and justified: any excessive use of force could violate some provisions of the convention such as the right to life and the prohibition of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (FRA, 2020).

Canada experienced resettlement well before the introduction of its asylum policy. Indeed, as mention above, Canada resettled thousands of refugees right after World War II, although the 1951 Refugee Convention was signed only in 1969. During the period from 1945 to 1951, more than

157,000 refugees (displaced persons) resettled in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016). Later on, Canada resettled about 37,000 Hungarians (1956-1957), about 11,000 Czechs (1968-1969), and more than 7,000 Ugandan Asians in 1972 (CCR, 2009). These resettlement operations were permitted on the basis of ad hoc decisions and orders-in-council that derogated immigration dispositions. Whereas, the 1976 *Immigration Act* recognized refugees as a distinct class from migrants, admissible for resettlement, and it institutionalized Canada's resettlement program through provisions on government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees. The later began officially in 1978 and since then Canada became a pioneer on the resettlement of refugees through the engagement of citizens and permanent residents. The lobbying of religious groups to institutionalize private sponsorship and the will of citizens to help refugees have been essential. The support of politicians (Labman, 2016) was also facilitated by the country's social and political background. Canada's history is characterized as being a country of refuge. Not surprisingly, the story of the first non-profit organization (Mennonite Central Committee of Canada) to sign a private sponsorship agreement with the federal government to assist large numbers of refugees, is rooted in stories of refugees who fled the Soviet Union (Gingrich and Enns, 2019). Yet, it is important to stress that Canada's attitude towards refugees has been both positive and negative. Between 1776 and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, about 50,000 loyalists to the British monarchy fled the USA fearing persecution and they were admitted to Canada (Epp, 2017). But afterward, the refuge has been denied to some groups, namely non-Europeans. In 1923, indeed the government excluded immigrants "of any Asiatic race" (CCR, 2009). During 1930-1948 Canada's immigration policy was characterized by anti-Semitism, refusing the admissions of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazis persecution (Abella and Troper, 2012). Out of 100,000 refugees admitted to Canada during the war, only 5,000 of them were Jewish (Epp, 2017). This attitude towards non-Europeans changed only in the early 1970s (1971-1872), with the admission of 228 Tibetan refugees.

Another domestic circumstance influencing the creation of the private sponsorship program was Canada's general approach to immigration after World War II. Epp (2017) argues that economic and labour-related reasons have driven the admission of 186,154 displaced persons to Canada between 1947 and 1953. The increase in the number of resettled refugees through the support of private sponsors might have been intended to contributing to the country's economic growth, in addition to the fulfillment of Canada's humanitarian obligations. Therefore, private sponsorship meets both the needs of refugees and the needs of the country. The creation of the program

was facilitated also by the general non-divisive debate around the issue of immigration in the country. The day after the creation of the program by the 1976 *Immigration Act*, the country's newspaper did not debate this novelty. Finally, the establishment of the program and its success were driven also by the will of Canadians to help refugees. In the early years (1979-1980) of the implementation of the program, 34,000 out of 60,000 Indochinese refugees resettled in Canada, were privately sponsored by about 7,000 sponsoring groups (Government of Canada, 2019a).

The establishment of the Private Sponsorship program was accompanied by some critics, as well. Bangarth (2015: 4) argues that Canada's response to the Indochinese crisis fostered the "perception that the federal government was far more willing to accommodate refugees fleeing communist regimes on the left than those escaping fascist regimes on the right".

### 3. Insights from Canada's experience on refugee's integration

The current Canadian protection system has two main components: the *In-Canada Asylum Program* and the *Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program*. The former was designed for people claiming protection from within Canada, i.e. a port of entry or at an inland Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) office. The latter was designed for people outside Canada in need of protection, who are screened abroad and undergo different checks before coming to Canada.

During the last decade, there was a significant increase in the asylum claims from within Canada, as showed in the figures below:

*Asylum Claimants in Canada 2011-2019*

	2011-2016	2017	2018	2019
Asylum Claimants processed by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA)	11,335	21,775	29,435	29,365
Asylum Claimants processed by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)	12,535	28,615	25,605	34,460
Total	23,870	50,390	55,040	63,830

*Source: Government of Canada (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims.html>)*

This increase could be explained by the recent US anti-refugees measures, pushing a considerable number of people without permanent status in the

United States towards Canada. Moreover, the travel ban imposed by the Trump Administration to people from specifically targeted countries encouraged individuals to ask protection in Canada, fearing of not being able to reunite with their family members (CCR, 2017).

The refugee determination system for people seeking protection at Canada's point of entry (POE) or inland contemplates a complex process for the recognition of refugee status, likewise the traditional refugee protection in European countries. Thus, once asylum-seekers gain access to Canada, that is when CBSA or IRCC officials consider an individual eligible to make a claim, he or she receives a hearing at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) and the decision is grounded on evidence and arguments presented by the claimant. The IRB decides if the claimant is a Convention refugee, as defined by the United Nations (art 1A, 1951 Refugee Convention), or a person in need of protection, i.e. a person in Canada who cannot return to her/his home country because s/he may face the danger of torture, the risk to life, risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment (art. 97, Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2001). While waiting for the hearing and the decision of the IRB, the claimants have access to services provided mostly by the provinces (such as education, housing, social assistance, legal aid or federal health support). After a medical examination they can apply for a work permit, yet the federal settlement services are available only after receiving the positive decision of the IRB and the status of protected person. In case of a negative decision, and after exhausting the appeal avenues, the failed claimants must leave Canada or they are removed by the CBSA (Government of Canada, 2019b).

The case of resettlement policy under the *Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program* is different. As specified above, it concerns people who need protection from outside Canada, and it is administered by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and in Quebec by the ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion. The In-Canada Asylum program shares some similarities with the traditional refugee protection in Europe (try to gain access, then we will see whether or not you are entitled to protection), whereas the resettlement program shows a structural difference compared to the previous. In fact, as abovementioned, people who need protection are outside Canada. If selected for resettlement, the refugee status is recognized and they arrive in Canada normally as permanent residents. The recent national resettlement programs adopted in some European countries select refugees based on the dossiers submitted by the UNHCR or through the selection missions abroad, however, the status of resettled refugees varies upon arrival, representing a challenging



aspect of European private sponsorship schemes. After entering the EU through visas on humanitarian grounds, the sponsored refugees must apply after his/her arrival for a protection status (European Commission, 2018). Countries such as Belgium, France, Ireland, Czech Republic, Finland, Portugal, UK, and Sweden grant permanent residence. Other countries such as Italy, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain grant a temporary residence. In these countries, a resettled refugee can apply for permanent residence after a period of residency, and only if she/he fulfills several criteria such as language, civic knowledge, economic independence, etc.

The Canadian resettlement policy has three main programs. The Government-Assisted Refugees program (GAR) is for refugees referred by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) or other designated referral agencies. Individuals cannot apply directly to the government of Canada. Resettlement services and financial support up to 12 months are provided by the Government of Canada under the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). In order to be eligible for resettlement, individuals must fulfill the criteria of the Convention Refugee Abroad Class or Country of Asylum Class, and they have to pass medical and background checks (both the security and criminal records). Although the applicants are referred by UNHCR or other referral agencies, they are interviewed by an officer to evaluate if eligibility criteria are fulfilled.

Until 2002, the main selection criteria for the GARs was the ability for a refugee to successfully settle in Canada within five years (ability to establish). The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (2002) through the two specific categories, such as “vulnerable” persons and persons “in urgent need for protections”, emphasized the importance of selecting GARs based on their compelling protection needs, rather than on the potential to become self-sufficient and successfully establish in Canada. This led to the resettlement of GARs with higher needs compared to the other groups (IRCC, 2016b: 1). It is important to stress that according to the agreement on immigration with the Government of Canada (1991), the province of Québec has its own resettlement program. After the confirmation of the admissibility by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the applicants to be resettled in Quebec must also obtain Quebec selection (CSQ – Certificat de sélection du Québec).

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees’ program (PSR) is reserved for refugees and persons in similar circumstances identified by sponsors who support them (financially or a combination of financial and in-kind support) for one year after arrival, or until they can be self-sufficient. Within this

program, refugees could be sponsored through four ways: 1. The Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), 2. The Constituent Group, i.e. a local community group authorized by a SAH to provide support to refugees. 3. The Group of Five (G5), i.e. five or more Canadian citizens (or permanent residents) ensuring the necessary support to one or more refugees for the up to 12 months. 4. The Community Sponsor (CS), i.e. an organization located in the community where the refugees are expected to resettle, but that does not have a formal agreement with IRCC (accordingly, an assessment of the financial and settlement plan is done each time it decides to sponsor). The refugees destined to Québec must meet the Québec's selection criteria. Therefore, Québec government must first agree to settle a sponsored refugee before any application is sent to the federal government for the administrative process, which is the same as for any other refugee sponsorship in the country. Similarly to the GARs selection, individuals must fulfill the criteria of Convention Refugee Abroad Class or Country of Asylum Class, and pass the medical and background checks as to be eligible for resettlement. Unlike GARs, PSRs are assessed on their ability to successfully establish themselves in Canada (relatives or a sponsor in Canada Knowledge of English or French, employment potential).

The third program, Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR), introduced in 2013, matches the refugees referred by the UNHCR or other identified referral agencies with the private sponsors (Government of Canada, 2018: 12). Under this program, the resettlement costs are shared between the government and the sponsor. While the former provides initial start-up expenses and income support up to 6 months under the Resettlement Assistance Program, the latter provides the remaining 6 months of income support and provides social and emotional support during the first year. BVOR refugees are not entitled to resettlement services under the Resettlement Assistance Program (IRCC, 2016b: 2).

From January 2015 until February 2020, 153,255 refugees were admitted through these three programs: 83,880 PSRs; 60,705 GARs; and 8,670 BVOR; the main country of origin was Syria, followed by Eritrea and Iraq (IRCC, 2020).

Admissions of Resettled Refugees by Country of Citizenship and Immigration Category, January 2015 - February 2020

	<i>Syria</i>	<i>Eritrea</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Afghanistan</i>	<i>DR Congo</i>	<i>Somalia</i>	<i>Ethiopia</i>	<i>Other</i>
GARs	33,235	2,660	5,375	710	5,110	2,795	845	9,975
PSRs	34,250	17,035	10,550	8,280	895	3,390	3,460	6,020

BVOR	5,585	560	420	15	520	150	135	1,285
Total	73,070	20,255	16,345	9,005	6,525	6,335	4,440	17,280

Source: IRCC, 2020

If referring to the admission of refugees for each resettlement program, the number of refugees settled through private sponsorship surpassed the number of government-assisted refugees.

*Admitted refugees by resettlement program 2014-2019 and targets for 2020-2022*

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
GARs	7,625	9,488	23,624	8,823	8,080	9,940	10,700	10,950	11,450
PSRs	5,071	9,747	18,646	16,874	18,560	19,130	20,000	20,000	20,000
BVOR	177	811	4,435	1,284	1,155	990	1,000	1,000	1,000

Source: IRCC (2019), Permanent Residents – monthly IRCC updates, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/f7e5498e-0ad8-4417-85c9-9b8aff9b9eda>

This surpass has been criticized by scholars and community organizations as an “aberration” of the principle of *additionality*, which represents a fundamental principle of the program<sup>4</sup> (Labman, 2016: 73; Hyndman, Payne, & Jimenez, 2016: 3).

The resettlement policy is completed by two other important programs, the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS), and the IRCC Minister’s authority. Through the JAS program, designed for government-assisted refugees with settlement needs higher than normal (due to trauma from violence or torture, medical disabilities, the effects of systemic discrimination, or a large number of family members), the private sponsors and the government share responsibilities. The sponsorship period may be extended up to two years (or three years in few exceptional cases), and the financial responsibility is assumed by the Government, while the integration, social and emotional support is provided by the private sponsors (Government of Canada, 2018: 11). Finally, according to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the IRCC Minister has the authority to exempt foreigners from established criteria in case of exceptional situations and if this is justified by humanitarian and compassionate motivations (Government of Canada, 2018: 6).

*Private sponsorship outcomes: a brief literature review*

<sup>4</sup> Naming – the possibility for the private sponsors to identify and propose the refugees they wish to resettle – is the other fundamental principle of the program.

The research on the Canadian model for the integration of refugees is continuously growing, outlining its development, outcomes, and success. Neuwirth and Clark (1981: 132-135) found that private sponsors tend to expose refugees to a broader range of services than the government settlement was able to do. Beiser (2003: 211-214), in a study on the integration of 1300 Southeast Asians admitted during the 1979-1981 “boat people” crisis<sup>5</sup>, concluded that ten years after their arrival the refugees privately sponsored were integrated more successfully than government-assisted refugees, according to their employment, language skills, and health situations. Lanphier (2003: 245) shows that through their commitment the sponsors create strong links with refugees, thus facilitating their access to the wider community. Carter *et al.* (2008) explained the more successful integration of privately sponsored refugees through the fact that refugees often develop long-term friendships with their sponsors. Dhital (2015: 21) found that during the early years after arrival the privately sponsored refugees earned on average more than other refugee groups. Lenard (2016: 304) described the private sponsorship as a win-win situation where, the financial, cultural, and emotional support offered by the private sponsorship groups “translate into economic benefits for the welcoming society as a whole”. Hyndman, Payne, and Jimenez (2016: 18) suggested that the direct participation of civil society in the resettlement process represents an important driver for the success of the program. Uglund (2018) discussed the potential of the program for policy learning in Scandinavian countries. Agrawal (2019) documented the first year settlement experiences of Syrian refugees in Alberta and compared it across the government and private sponsorship programs. Hynie *et al.* (2019) discussed the role of the type of sponsorship in the early integration outcomes, by analysing the resettlement of Syrian refugees in six Canadian cities. They find that PSRs found their jobs mostly by co-ethnic friends, and not through their sponsors. According to Kaida, Hou and Stick (2020: 6), the employment rates and earnings were higher for privately sponsored refugees than for the government-assisted refugees in the first years but the gap diminished over time.

Overall, the Canadian private sponsorship program is considered more suitable than the government sponsorship for the long-term integration of refugees (Kaida, Hou and Stick, 2020; Dhital, 2015; Beiser, 2003). Besides this success, the private sponsorship and the public-private partnerships are

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<sup>5</sup> Canada agreed to admit 60,000 Southeast Asian refugees between 1979 and 1981.

looked favorably because they reduce both short and long-term government costs, as the cost is either borne entirely or shared by private citizens during the sponsorship period (Lenard, 2016: 304). Moreover, aid can be available to a greater number of refugees. Private sponsorships add to the government-assisted projects and increase the number of resettlements. In conclusion, the main positive outcomes of the private sponsorship of refugees are a faster and easier social and economic integration of refugees, the reduced government costs, the enhancement of the resettlement capacity, an easier compliance with international humanitarian obligations, a direct channel for action by citizens, and the regionalization of refugees settlement (Ugland, 2018: 23). Yet, the positive outcomes are accompanied by some shortcomings, i.e. the privatization of the resettlement, housing affordability, high costs of managing the program, and long waiting times.

### *Structural and conceptual challenges of the program*

Although the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program is the “longest-running and most successful in the world” (Lenard, 2016: 301) and it has offered protection to more than 327,000 refugees since its beginning in 1978 (Government of Canada, 2019a), there are still challenges due to both the inadequacy of some services offered and the government priorities. Regarding *language*, several challenges were identified, such as the long waiting times to access trainings, the trainings are not job-specific and not suitable for people who have low levels of education or are totally illiterate (CCR, 2011: 12); “one size fits all” approach is not the best one (Beiser and Hou, 2000: 327); higher risks of social exclusion for women and people with low language competencies (Hynie et al. 2019: 46); difficulties for mothers of young children to access language classes (ISSBC, 2018: 53). Refugees experience significant *employment* challenges in their early years after arrival because of low language skills, lack of Canadian work experience, difficulties regarding the recognition of foreign educational credentials (Beiser & Hou, 2001: 1328; AAISA 2017: 35; Agrawal, 2019: 954). The government-assisted refugees showed lower employment rates (Hynie et al. 2019: 43) and poorer economic integration than the privately sponsored, at least during the early years, and the latter earned on average more than other refugee groups (Dhital, 2015: 20-22). However, it is not always clear a direct link between better employment achievements of privately sponsored refugees and the care of their sponsors (Agrawal, 2019; Hynie et al. 2019: 47). Other research suggests that the resettlement outcomes reflect more the different socio-demographic background of two

groups than the role of private sponsors (Houle, 2019: 7; Jedwab, 2018: 43).

*Housing.* The vast majority of refugee newcomers having to settle in private sector rental housing, such as most low-income households, since social housing availability is limited to refugees with extreme needs (Rose, 2019: 12). Refugees experienced difficulties in finding an acceptable permanent house, *i.e.* suitable in size and of affordable price especially in high-cost cities (Rose & Charette, 2020; IRCC, 2016a: 13-14). Studies confirmed unequivocally that housing affordability is a primary challenge both for government-assisted Syrian refugees (Rose & Charette, 2017: 200) and for private sponsored ones (IRCC, 2016a; 13). Consequently, refugees very often lived in over-crowded apartments (Francis and Hiebert, 2014: 74) and it was noticed a growing number of refugees to find themselves homeless, and using emergency shelters (ESDC, 2019).

*Health.* Refugees underlined barriers in accessing the *healthcare system*, due to the difficulties to find family doctors and long waitlists (IRCC, 2019: 10). The literature identified the lack of mental health services available for all refugees, by underlining the mental health issues as a potential challenge for the Syrian refugee population (IRCC, 2016a: 28).

*Schooling.* The high number of children and youth was a characteristic of the Syrian refugees arrived in Canada, with 46 percent of them under 15 years old. A large percentage of children are enrolled in school, however, parents were concerned about their roles in the children's education, mainly because they did not have sufficient information about the Canadian school system (IRCC, 2019: 13). The research highlights the need for teachers to foster intercultural competencies and the knowledge on the anti-discriminatory education (Gagné et al. 2018: 61).

*Sponsors responsibility.* Refugees expressed serious concern when some sponsors were unable to financially support them, few of them revealing that they were not getting the monthly allowance to which they were entitled under the sponsorship agreement (Agrawal, 2019: 953). Rose and Charette (2017: 27) reported that due to insufficient support from sponsors, a higher number of refugees than expected were seeking help from community organizations for housing and other basic needs, while Klingbeil (2016) reported that some privately sponsored Syrian refugees were "suffering tremendously" because of a complete lack of financial and emotional support from their sponsors.

*Government objectives.* The support of private individuals is additional to the government's commitment to sponsor refugees. According to the principle of *additionality*, PSR refugees are to be resettled in addition to those resettled through the GAR program (IRCC, 2016b: 2). However for

several years, the number of privately sponsored refugees exceeded those assisted by the government raising the question of whether the government plan to privatize more and more the refugee resettlement (Hyndman, Payne & Jimenez, 2016: 3). According to the government objectives, this trend will continue the next three years, with a small increase of the resettlement admission target for GARs in 2021 and 2022, respectively 10,950 and 11,450, and PSRs levels fixed at 20,000 PSRs per year for 2020, 2021 and 2022 (Government of Canada, 2020).

*Long waiting time* represents a concern for both refugees and sponsors because, during 18 to 36 months, the changes in family size and composition can affect the funds and plans required for sponsoring refugees, and cause an increased delay considering the need to amend applications.

#### **4. Transferability of the Canadian private sponsorship program**

Recently, during the World Refugee Forum hosted by UNHCR in Geneva from 17 to 18 December 2019, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, Marco Mendicino confirmed that Canada is serving as a model for other countries who are now implementing community sponsorship initiatives looking to Canada as a leader (Harris, 2019).

Different countries have already shown an increasing interest in Canada's model: in 2013 Australia launched a private sponsorship program based mainly on the Canadian experience, and several EU member states experimented short-term private sponsorship schemes in response to the increased refugee flows (European Commission, 2018). Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the European Union institutions had appealed for the establishment of private sponsorship arrangements identifying it as one of the ways for accessing Europe legally and safely (Kumin 2015: 15). For example, in 2017 the European Commission persuaded EU countries to "explore ways to establish private sponsorship schemes where the settlement and integration support for persons in need of protection, including its related costs, can be provided by private groups of civil society organisations" (European Commission, 2017: 19).

As aforementioned, Canada's immigration and integration policy model is a product of unique and favourable domestic circumstances, which make it inappropriate for other countries lacking such conditions. Discussing multiculturalism and migration policy, --- (---) and Kymlicka (2004: 851)

argued that the geographical and historical factors favorable in the Canadian context make them not exportable to other countries. Similarly, Canada's refugee resettlement policies may not be easily transferable to other contexts. However, the literature on the policy transfer shows that policy-makers can learn from the observations of policies and programs in foreign systems. In such a case, as argued by Rose (1991), every foreign policy or program could be assessed by two standards: Is it desirable? Is it practical?

Regarding the first question, some aspects of Canadian private sponsorship may be potentially desirable for European countries. Firstly, private sponsorship schemes provide ordinary people with a direct channel for proactive engagement in the resettlement process (Kumin, 2015: 15; Ugland, 2018: 23). Though the mobilization of civil society organizations and citizens for supporting asylum seekers is widespread in Europe (Rea *et al.* 2019), in Canada this mobilization has reached extraordinary levels. Indeed, more than 2 million Canadians declare to have been personally involved in the resettlement of Syrian refugees (Government of Canada, 2019). The direct involvement of private citizens is essential as they can act as agents of change and generate, or push forward, the political will to enhance the existing resettlement programs in European countries. As argued before, the engagement of private citizens represented, and still represents, an important driver in the design of resettlement policies in Canada. Moreover, the direct involvement of private individuals in resettlement, with the consequent engagement in intercultural relations, can potentially help to counter discrimination and hate speech in Europe because the interaction among people from different backgrounds supports intercultural and interreligious dialogue as an important tool in the efforts for fostering peace, social stability, and social cohesion.

Secondly, private sponsorship schemes could allow refugees to reach the European Union through "safe and legal" ways (EC, 2015). Private sponsorship schemes may represent such a safe and legal alternative to irregular migration and to dangerous journeys. Unlike Canada, whose geographic isolation makes impossible the irregular refugee flows, in the European Union, the countries can be reached through by land and by sea and the flows in the last decade show that the European borders are porous. Of course, in order to be an alternative to the irregular movement, the existence of sufficient available places is a *sine qua non* premise that at present it is missing.

Thirdly, private sponsorship schemes promote the faster and easier social and economic integration of refugees. In the Canadian experience, the private sponsorship is generally considered as more suitable for the long-



term integration of refugees (Beiser, 2003; Dhital, 2015; Kaida, Hou & Stick, 2020) because sponsors expose refugees to a broader range of services (Neuwirth & Clark, 1981: 132-135), facilitate their access to the wider community (Lanphier, 2003: 245). Furthermore, privately sponsored refugees earn, at least during the early years, more than government-sponsored refugees (Dhital, 2015: 21; Kaida, Hou & Stick, 2020: 6). The Canadian private sponsorship program has its specific features, however, the research found that similarly to Canada, PSRs became self-sufficient sooner than GARs also in the United States (Hohm, Sargent and Moser, 1999: 761-762). These outcomes may also occur in the European countries, at least there is no evidence to contradict such estimate. Fourthly, as aforementioned, the engagement of private individuals in the resettlement of refugees reduce the government costs and consequently, being the private sponsorship additional to government efforts, enhance the resettlement capacity (Lenard, 2016: 304; Ugland, 2018: 23). However, as argued by Kumin (2015: 17), research regarding the government costs associated with private sponsorship schemes is still in an early stage, therefore further research is needed in order to carefully evaluate immediate, medium, and long term costs. In this article, we underlined how during the last years in Canada, the PSRs has largely exceeded GARs breaching a core principle such as *additionality*. The European countries can expand their resettlement capacities through the implementation of private sponsorship schemes only if the principle in question is correctly applied, therefore private engagement must be intended as an additional measure to the general resettlement policy. In that case, such programs can significantly increase resettlement capacities and ensure safe and legal ways for reaching Europe (ICMC Europe, 2017: 37 and 38)

Fifthly, private sponsorship schemes promote the regionalization of immigrant settlement (Ugland, 2018: 23). Denton (2003: 263) stresses that PSR contributes to sustain the population base of rural communities. Private sponsorship schemes may result vital for European countries dealing with aging and continuous population decrease (Kumin, 2015: 20). However, Rose (2019: 15) argues that settling PSRs in small communities poses the problems of accessibility to essential settlement services. Therefore, an adequate balance between regionalization and services offered is essential.

Regarding practicality, in 2018 the European Commission published a detailed report on the feasibility and added-value of private sponsorship schemes as a possible pathway for admission to the EU. The report found that soft measures and financing are feasible and have the highest added value, but the legislative action represents certain risks (European

Commission, 2018: 11). Moreover, the outcomes of sponsorship schemes implemented in certain European countries seem to support the hypothesis that private sponsorship is practical and can represent a step forward in the refugee resettlement in Europe. Indeed, between 2013 and 2018 more than 30,000 refugees were resettled in EU through private sponsorship schemes such as Community-based sponsorship in the UK and Portugal, Family reunification in Germany and Ireland, ad hoc programmes for certain religious groups in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, and Humanitarian Corridors in Italy, France and Belgium.

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