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Policy Brief: Where and Why Do Refugees Locate within the EU?

Deliverable 3.6



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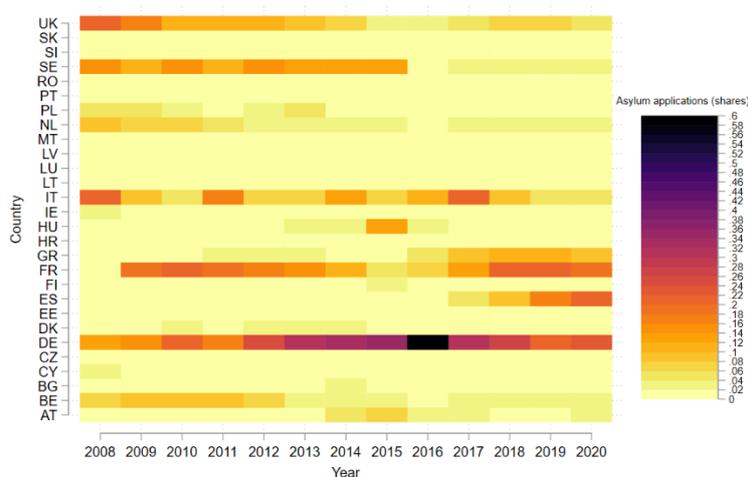
1. Introduction

The refugee inflows since 2015 have presented a serious challenge for EU countries. On one hand, the flows of asylum seekers have been welcomed by some, while others have been concerned about the burden and the potential cost of hosting those refugees. On a humanitarian level, images of families and children in boats risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea and then struggling to reach their intended destination, have haunted the public. These images beg the question of what drives the locational choice of asylum seekers. Hence, understanding the factors that drive asylum seekers to go to certain destinations within the EU and whether policies in the destinations deter or attract asylum seekers are important for policymakers.

2. Background

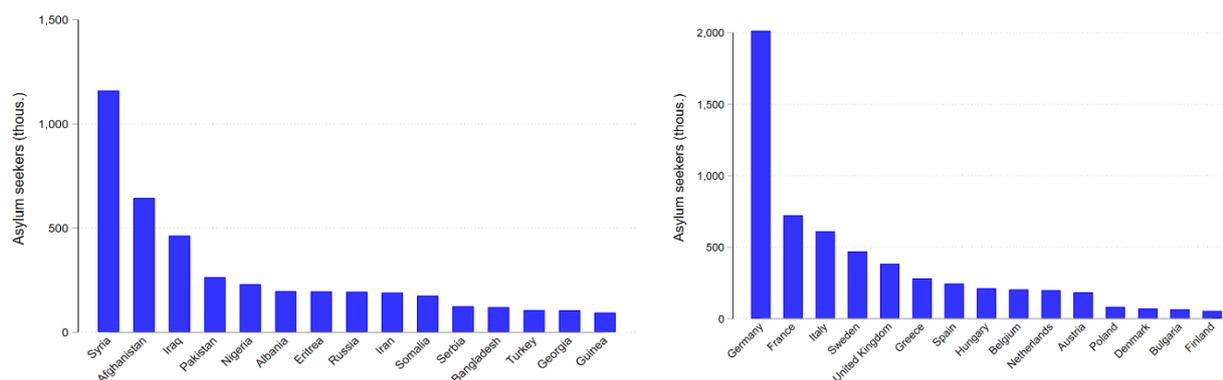
Interestingly, first time asylum seekers are concentrated in a few EU countries as shown in Figure 1. For example, Germany, UK, Sweden, Italy and France seem to be attracting the majority of first-time asylum seekers. However, there is also variation over time in terms of the share (and number) of first-time asylum seekers even amongst those countries. For example, Germany received 60 percent of EU first time asylum applications in 2016, but only 21 per cent in 2019. When looking at the cumulative total number of first-time asylum applications between 2008 and 2019, Figure 2 highlights the top EU countries receiving asylum seekers and the main countries of origin of asylum seekers who mostly originated from countries inflicted by war and conflict such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Nigeria. This suggests that the majority of asylum seekers are driven out of their home countries by war and conflict.

Figure 1: Annual share of non-EU asylum flows to EU countries, by destination, 2008-2020



Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data on asylum protection and managed migration. First time asylum applications. Years 2008-2020. Notes: Figure 1 shows the annual share of asylum applications by destination country and year.

Figure 2: Top 15 destinations and countries of origin, total 2008-2019



Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data on asylum protection and managed migration. Notes: Each Figure refers to the total value in the considered time span (2008-2019). All values are expressed in thousands.

An important issue is that even amongst EU countries there are differences in terms of reception of asylum seekers as well as in refugees' policies. Some host countries have been less welcoming and introduced more restrictive policies. For example, only a few EU host countries allow asylum seekers immediate access to the labour market, while the majority of them enforce a ban period that varies between 2 and 12 months, and some others only grant access to the labour market once the asylum claim has been accepted. Despite little evidence on the effectiveness of such policy, destination countries apply this measure as a deterrent for asylum seekers to choose their country as final destination. Also, there are substantial differences in terms of the processing time of asylum applications and the success rate of first-time asylum applications, which might also influence the destination choice. At the same time little is known on whether, and the extent to which, asylum seekers' destination choice is shaped by economic incentives such as GDP per capita or unemployment rate, or by welfare and social spending, all of which are shown to play a role as determinants of economic migrants. Furthermore, it is still not clear to what extent social networks rather than policies matter in driving the destination choices of first-time asylum seekers.

3. Our Study

Di Iasio and Wahba (2022) examine what drive first time asylum seekers to apply for asylum in particular destinations within the EU. Is it the economic conditions in the destination? Is it the generous welfare system? Is it the quick processing time of asylum applications? Is it because they can work sooner rather than later and earn a living? Or is it because their networks (family/friends/acquittances) are there? These are the questions answered by examining the determinants of the destination choice of first-time non-EU asylum seeker applicants to the EU, between 2008-2020.

4. Main pull factors

The study shows that the strongest pull factor for asylum seekers to a destination is social networks, both previous asylum applicants as well as stock of previous migrants. Also, that economic factors are not as influential as social networks, and asylum seekers are not as attracted by the generosity

of welfare state as they are by social networks. The results also highlight the positive correlation between successful asylum application rate and the number of first-time asylum applications. The findings also suggest that access to the labour market and employment rights have a modest role in attracting asylum seekers.

5. Policy recommendations

These findings are important for policymakers as some of the policies aiming to deter asylum seekers do not seem to be a real deterrence. For example, policies that restrict access to welfare system or to the labour market have modest impact and therefore are not very effective in terms of reducing the number of asylum applicants. In particular, banning asylum seekers from employment, leads asylum seekers to become more dependent on public spending in the short term, and could result in exploitation. This also leads to negative long terms effects with respect to integration. Hence, lifting the employment ban seem to be more cost effective and better for the integration of refugees in the long term.

References

Di Iasio V and Wahba J (2022) The determinants of Refugees' Destinations: Where Do Refugees Locate within the EU?. QuantMig Project Deliverable D3.4. Southampton: University of Southampton