

Processing time and the origin mix of asylum applications to European countries

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The evolution of the total number of asylum applications that are lodged in European countries reveals the occurrence of violent conflicts or of protracted conditions of insecurity in neighboring countries. This happened in the early 1990s, when the war in the Former Yugoslavia led to a surge in the arrivals of asylum seekers, and again more recently between 2014 and 2016, with large number of Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans came to Europe in search for international protection. Over this three-year period, European countries received more than three million asylum applications, with the peak reached in 2015 being more than twice as high as the one recorded back in 1991. A key feature of this unprecedented (albeit short-lived) surge in the demand for asylum was that Germany alone received 42.5 percent of the asylum seekers, so that a policy-relevant question is whether choices made by the recipient countries with respect to the processing of these applications contributed to shape the distribution of the incoming flow across European countries. A second relevant feature is the sizeable number of (mostly rejected) applications coming from countries that not experiencing a violent conflict: Albanians, Kosovars and Serbians lodged 313,505 demands for asylum between 2014 and 2016.

Lack of coordination in asylum policies

The importance of this research question is due to the heterogeneity of policies and practices across recipient countries. European countries are subject to the so-called Dublin Regulation, which establishes that the responsibility to examine an asylum application falls on the country in which the asylum seeker first entered the European Union. In 2015, 111,430 requests to transfer an asylum application to another member state were made in accordance to the Dublin Regulation, in a year in which more the demands for asylum exceeded 1.3 million. This is where coordination ends among European countries. Each country processes the applications for international protection under the Geneva Convention in its own way, and different policies and approaches are adopted by the various European countries. To get a sense of the heterogeneity in asylum policies, just consider that not a single origin is currently regarded as safe by all the EU member states that have adopted a list of safe countries of origin, which results in an expedited processing of the demands for asylum submitted by the citizens of these countries.



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Limited differences in recognition rates but major ones for processing time

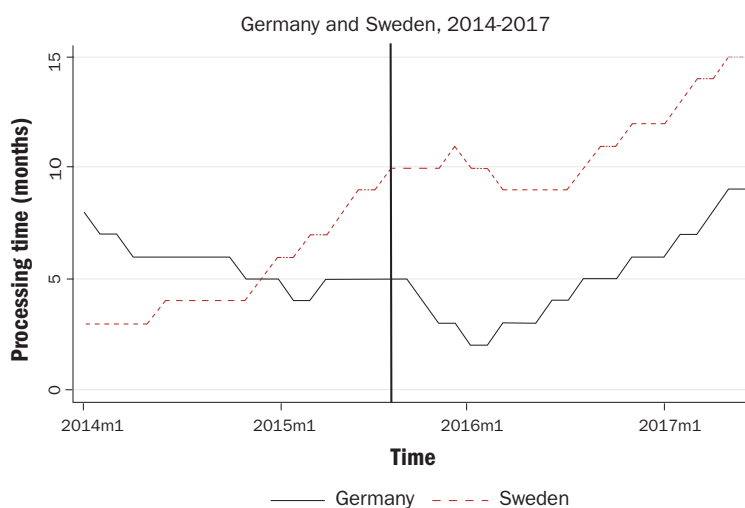
This heterogeneity can give rise to major differences across recipient countries in terms of the share of applicants from a given origin who obtain refugee status or a subsidiary form of protection, the time required to reach a final decision, and the risk of repatriation for the applicants that are denied refugee status for asylum seekers from a given origin. Data from EUROSTAT on the origin and destination-specific number of asylum applications that are lodged, pending and processed in a given month, as well as series on the enforcement of the immigration legislation, give us the opportunity to measure these three aspects of the processing of asylum applications. These three variables are specific to each origin-destination-month triplet, i.e., applicants from different origins can face a different processing time in a given destination, and this can evolve over time.

Even in the absence of an explicit coordination, most of the variability in the recognition rate is explained by origin-time specific factors. Hence, this is likely to reflect the fact that the probability to obtain refugee status is mostly driven by the evolution of security conditions in the countries of origin, with limited scope for discretionary choices by the recipient countries. The variability in the time that is required to process an asylum application is mostly due to time-varying destination-specific factors, suggesting that recipient countries can exert more discretion in this respect. Countries can decide to scale up their overall capacity to examine asylum applications, set priorities across origins in the processing of applications, and adopt a list of safe countries of origin that typically leads to an expedited processing (and rejection)

of the applications from citizens of these origin countries. For instance, the famous “Wir Schaffen Das” speech by Angela Merkel in August 2015 was accompanied by major attempts to scale up the processing capacity in Germany. The number of employees of the BAMF (the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) that recorded a three-fold increase between 2014 and 2017, with staff that was transferred to the BAMF from other ministries, the army and some formerly state-owned companies such as Deutsche Telekom or Deutsch Post. These efforts resulted in a reduction in the time needed to process the soaring number of asylum applications by Syrians from eight to just two months between January 2014 and January 2016, as shown in the figure. Over the same two-year period, the processing time for Syrians in Sweden increased from three to 10 months.

Major differences in asylum application procedures across countries

Figure 1:
Processing time for
Syrian asylum seekers



Why this matters for asylum seekers!

The expected processing time can influence the choice of an asylum seeker with respect to the country in which to seek protection. An asylum seeker with good prospects of eventually being granted refugee status can be discouraged by a long processing time. A long time of enduring uncertainty can impose a substantial psychologic cost (because of the fear of repatriation if the application is rejected), which can be coupled with important economic costs. Over and above the employment ban that can be (at least initially) imposed on asylum seekers, this initial phase of uncertainty can worsen future labor market prospects by delaying the investment in destination-specific skills such as learning the local language. Conversely, a long processing time can increase the attractiveness of a destination for an asylum seeker with limited to non-existent chances of obtaining protection. Would-be migrants who are confronted with a lack of opportunities for migrating legally could rely on asylum applications as a temporary migration scheme, as the pending asylum application allows them to remain legally at destination, possibly allowing them to sign an employment contract. Thus, a long processing time could be associated with a surge in applications from countries with a low recognition rate, especially if the risk of repatriation for applicants that are denied the refugee status is limited.

Processing time
affects the number
of applications, with
heterogeneous effects
across origins

The lack of coordination with respect to asylum policies opens up an opportunity for the econometrician for understanding the determinants of the distribution of asylum applications. We bring these predictions to the data using data from EUROSTAT from January 2008 to June 2017 for all the 32 European recipient countries, and for the 24 countries of origin that accounted for at least 1 percent of the applications over the period, with these origins covering 84 percent of all first-time asylum applications. The econometric analysis reveals that the number of asylum applications increases with the recognition rate, while the effect of the processing time is ambiguous, and it depends on the recognition rate itself. For origins with a high recognition rate, e.g., Syria, Iraq, an increase in the processing time has an unambiguously negative effect on the number of first-time asylum applications. For origins with a low recognition rate, e.g., Albania, Serbia, a longer processing time results in an increase in the number of applications. This, in turn, suggests that there are important externalities across origins in the evolution of the number of asylum applications. The substantial increase in the numbers of asylum seekers from Albania and Serbia (whose citizens had obtained a visa-free access to the Schengen area in 2010 and 2009 respectively) appears to be related to the strain on the processing capacity of recipient countries because of the surge in applications from conflict-affected countries. Several European countries were already voicing concerns during a meeting of the Ministers for Interior Affairs held in Luxemburg in October 2012 about the increase in asylum applications from Balkan countries due to the visa waiver granted to their citizens (L'afflux de migrants des Balkans préoccupe l'Union européenne, Le Monde, 24.10.2012).

Long processing times discourage applications from origins with high recognition rates

However, a major increase did not occur until Syrians and Iraqis asylum seekers started arriving in Europe in large numbers.

Diversion effects across destinations are sizeable

The estimates that we obtained can be used to simulate the evolution of (total or origin-specific) asylum applications in a counterfactual scenario in which Germany had not taken actions to cut down the processing times of asylum applications, and other European countries had also kept the processing times at the levels observed in January 2014. The policy measures concerning the processing of asylum applications explain 13.5 (7.9 percent) percent of the variation in asylum applications to Germany (other European countries). For Syrians, the actions taken by Germany resulted in a 16.1 percent increase in application, with a corresponding decline by a substantial 35.3 percent in Sweden, which was their second main recipient country in Europe between 2014 and 2016.

The importance of the externalities related to asylum policies calls for a greater coordination, as differences in processing time across destinations reflect, at least partly, the outcome of deliberate actions taken by the various European countries, and not just the reflection of the varying attractiveness of different countries for asylum seekers. Governments fearing that hosting refugees exposes them to an important cost in terms of political support might be tempted to delay the examination of asylum applications, thus inducing asylum seekers with well-grounded reasons for demanding international protection to lodge their applications elsewhere in Europe.

This policy brief is based on “Do processing times affect the distribution of asylum seekers across Europe?”, Simone Bertoli, Herbert Brücker and Jesús Fernández-Huertas Moraga. *IZA Discussion Paper No. 13018*, February 2020, available at <http://ftp.iza.org/dp13018.pdf>.