

# Seeking asylum in Europe: Where do people go and why?

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POLICY BRIEFING

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EU countries have faced difficulties in dealing with refugee inflows since 2015. People seeking asylum have been welcomed by some, while others have been concerned about the burden and the potential cost of hosting refugees.

On a humanitarian level, images of adults and children risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea in small boats and struggling to reach their intended destinations have concerned the public. These images have led to questions about where and why people choose to seek asylum.

Policymakers need to understand the factors that drive people to go to certain destinations, and whether the strategies and policies deployed in each destination deter or attract people seeking asylum. This policy briefing shows that the strongest pull factor for people seeking asylum is existing social networks, rather than economic reasons.

## Key Points:

- *Social networks are the strongest pull factor for asylum seekers.*
- *Asylum seekers are not as attracted by the generosity of welfare states as they are by social networks.*
- *Access to the labour market and employment rights have a modest role in attracting people seeking asylum.*
- *Banning asylum seekers from employment leads people to become more dependent on public spending and could result in exploitation and/or lack of integration.*
- *Lifting employment bans for people seeking asylum could be more cost effective and better for long-term integration.*

## Introduction

A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because of war, conflict and/or risk of serious human rights violations and persecution.

Before a person is legally recognised as a refugee, they are referred to as an asylum seeker whilst they are waiting to receive a decision on their claim for asylum.

Despite the international laws protecting asylum seekers and refugees, how they are received, as well as the practical application of policies, differ even among EU countries.

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 most of them enforce a ban period that varies between two and 12 months. Some only grant access to the labour market once the asylum claim has been accepted.

Despite little evidence on the effectiveness of such policies, destination countries apply this measure as a deterrent to stop asylum seekers choosing their country as the final destination.

First-time asylum seekers are concentrated in a few EU countries as shown in Figure 1. Germany, the 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% of EU first-time asylum applications in 2016, but only 21% 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. Asylum seekers mostly originated from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Nigeria, indicating that most people seeking asylum are driven out of their home countries by war and conflict.

## The study

We examined the destination choices of first-time non-EU asylum seeker applicants to the EU, between 2008-2020. We considered what drives first-time asylum seekers to apply for asylum in particular destinations within the EU.

These reasons include:

- the economic conditions in the destination;
- the welfare system;
- the processing time of asylum applications;
- being able to work sooner rather than later and earn a living;
- availability of networks (family/friends/acquaintances) already at the destination.

These questions were motivated by the need to understand the extent to which asylum seekers' destination choice is shaped by economic incentives such as GDP per capita, unemployment rate, or welfare and social spending; all of which are shown to play a role as determinants of economic migrants. There are substantial differences between countries in the processing time of asylum applications and the success rate of first-time asylum applications, which might also influence the destination choice. Plus, in order to develop an effective response, there is a need to better understand the role of social networks in driving the destination choices of first-time asylum seekers.

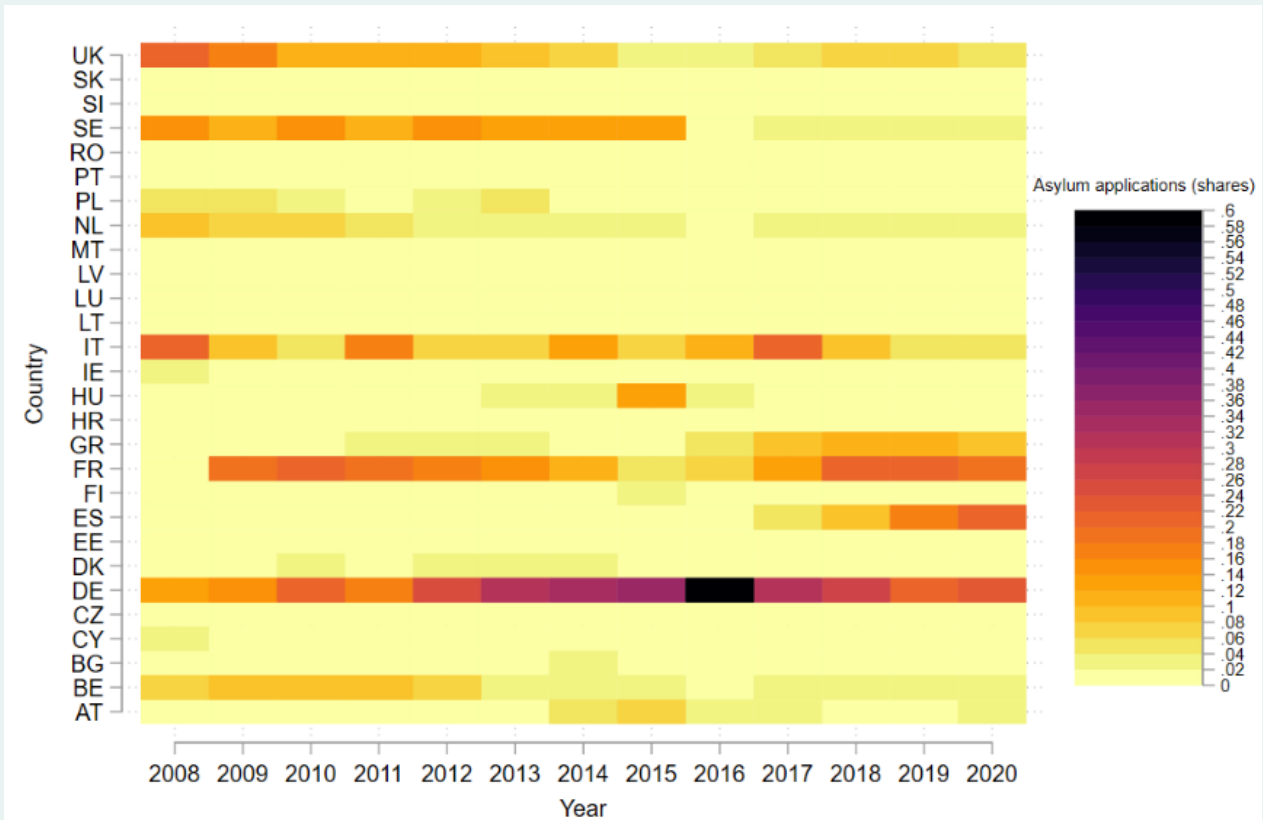
## Main findings

### Pull factors

The study shows that the strongest pull factor for asylum seekers to a destination is social networks. These networks are measured in terms of previous asylum applicants, as well as previous migrants from the same origin. Social networks are likely to provide information about the destination country as well as help on arrival. Economic factors are not as influential as social networks, and asylum seekers are not as attracted by the generosity of welfare states as they are by social networks. Access to the labour market and employment rights have a modest role in attracting asylum seekers.

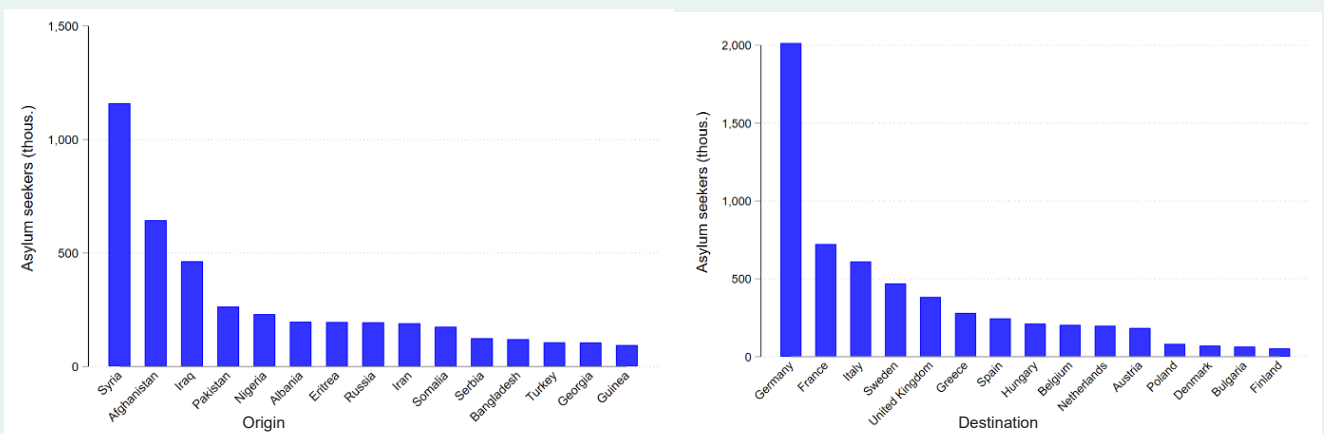
## Policy implications

These findings show that policies aiming to deter asylum seekers may not have the desired affect. For example, policies that restrict access to welfare systems or to the labour market have modest impact and are not very effective at reducing the number of asylum applicants. Banning asylum seekers from employment leads people seeking asylum to become more dependent on public spending in the short-term and could result in exploitation. This also leads to negative long-term effects with respect to integration. Lifting the employment ban could be more cost-effective and better for the integration of refugees in the long term.



Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data on asylum protection and managed migration. First time asylum applications. Years 2008-2020.

Figure 1: The annual share of first time asylum seeker applications, by destination and year.



Source: Authors' calculations based on Eurostat data on asylum protection and managed migration.

Figure 2: The total number of first time asylum seekers during the period 2008 - 2019, by origin and EU destination.

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