

## Refugee and asylum seeker flows

#### Introduction

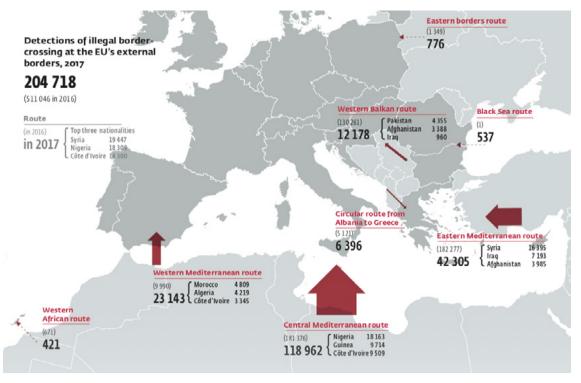
This transnational observation reveals evidence gathered by ESPON research on asylum flows in the EU and best practice in the integration of refugees at a local level, with a focus on southern European Member States. The first section, 'Territorial dimensions of migration flows', brings together data on migration routes, the distribution of refugees across European regions and the perception of asylum seekers and refugees in hosting societies. The second section, 'Response policies and practices successfully implemented in Member States', reports on solutions and presents case studies in four key policy dimensions: inclusion in the labour market, housing, empowerment and cultural dialogue.

### **Territorial dimensions of migration flows**

#### Migration routes and destination countries

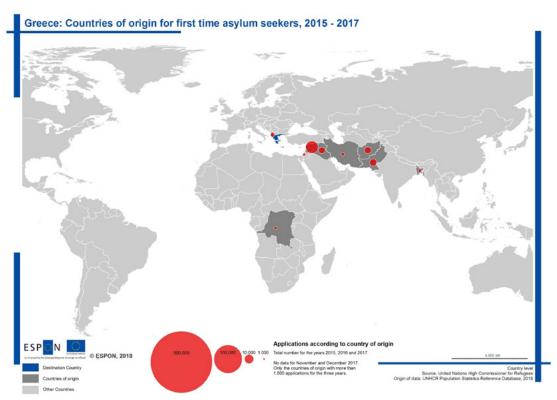
The inflow of third-country nationals seeking refugee status in the EU has peaked in recent years (especially in 2015/16): 1.3 million asylum applications were filed in the 28 Member States in 2015, mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This number declined sharply in 2016, mostly due to the EU-Turkey agreement which contained migration flows through the eastern Mediterranean and western Balkans. However, southern European Member States are now the most common entry points for refugees who usually transit through the Balkans and then try to settle in wealthy countries such as Austria, Germany, Sweden or France.

The eastern Mediterranean route, the western Balkan route and the central Mediterranean route are proving to be the most significant (Map 1) of all the main routes for border crossings into the EU by land or sea at the present time. However, entry at each of these has peaked at different points in time. The eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey to Greece was the most popular migratory route in 2015; it was mainly used by asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The western Balkan route also experienced its highest level of undocumented migration in 2015, notably from Syria and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the central Mediterranean route from Libya to Malta and Italy has remained an important entry point to the EU for refugees from western Africa or the Indian subcontinent.

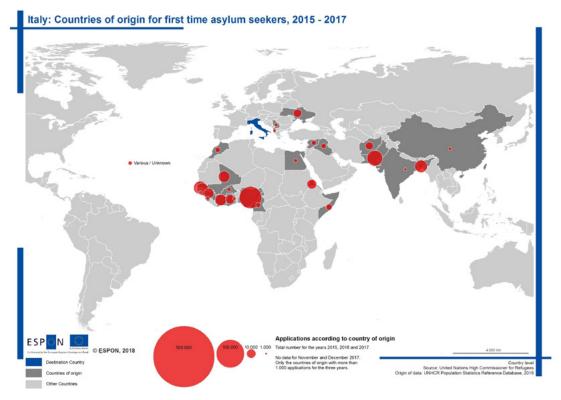


Map 1 Detections of irregular border crossings and the nationalities of the largest numbers of irregular border crossers Source: Frontex, Risk Analysis (2018)

The origins of asylum seekers in different countries vary greatly. Most of the first-time asylum seekers in Greece in the recent period have come from four countries: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Map 2). Of these four countries, Syria is the most represented nationality, making up 28% of first-time asylum seekers in 2017. The origin of asylum seekers is more diversified in Italy (Map 3), where the main country of origin is Nigeria at 20% of first-time asylum seekers in 2017, followed by Bangladesh (9.8%) and Pakistan (7.5%), as well as several western African countries (e.g. Gambia, Senegal and Mali). In Italy, numbers of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq are relatively far down the list.



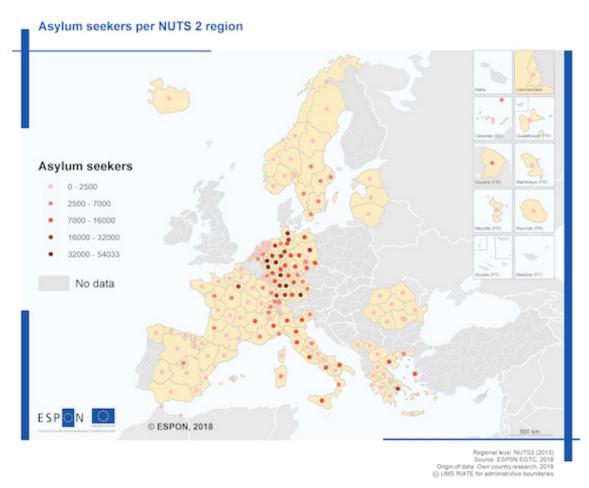
Map 2 - Greece Countries of origin for first time asylum seekers, 2015-2017



Map 3 - Italy Countries of origin for first time asylum seekers, 2015-2017

#### The distribution of asylum seekers across European regions

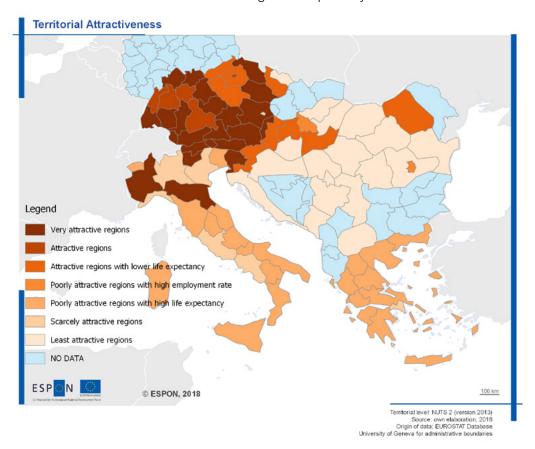
Border areas and transit regions, such as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, inevitably tend to host a higher-than-average number of asylum seekers. But the distribution of asylum seekers across European regions is also shaped by each host country's degree of socio-economic attractiveness. Asylum seekers tend to settle in prosperous urban areas; this phenomenon can be observed in southern Member States as well as in northern destination countries. Among the regions that attract the most applicants in arrival countries are Lombardy and Lazio in Italy, along with Attica and Voreio Aigaio in Greece (Map 4). While most regions in Italy seem to host a relatively high number of asylum seekers, Greece, France and Spain each show a strong concentration only in a limited number of dynamic areas, especially capital cities.



Map 4 - Asylum seekers per NUTS 2 region

The complex set of reasons explaining why refugees choose a specific place to settle can be interpreted in terms of "push-pull" factors. The "push" factors are the reasons leading people to leave their own countries and seek refuge elsewhere and they may be linked to insecurity, war, political repression, drought and famine. The "pull" factors explain why individuals seek asylum in specific countries and include both objective and subjective components. The capacity of the labour market to assimilate refugees (notably through the availability of many unskilled positions) and to offer decent wages and living conditions are some of the objective factors. This capacity can be assessed thanks to indicators such as the unemployment rate, the percentage of low-wage earners, GDP or, perhaps more effectively, by the Human Development Index, health and education systems. Those objective variables also influence migrants' perceptions of a territory, in terms of whether they consider it to be more or less welcoming or to offer more or less opportunities. However, refugees appear to find other subjective factors even more valuable, such as the presence of an established native or compatriot community, with its hospitality and subsistence networks, the existence of legislation on family reunification, and the role women may play in the new society.

ESPON research classifies regions on the basis of three main indicators: life expectancy, employment of the active population (20-64), and population density. These data are available for eight south eastern European countries. This study then gave each NUTS 2 region, within these eight countries, a score for level of attractiveness for asylum seekers. This level of attractiveness was primarily based on the assumption that, if faced with the choice between higher life expectancy and high availability of employment, most people would choose job opportunities; people tend to believe that job opportunities could impact positively on access to assets and services connected with higher life expectancy.



Map 5 - Territorial attractiveness

The representation of the typology, in Map 5, reveals that the most attractive NUTS 2 regions are located, as could be expected, in destination countries such as Austria and Germany. Parts of the Czech Republic and the north of Italy can also be considered "very attractive regions". Other regions in Italy and Greece are in the middle of the scale, while the "least attractive regions" are located in Romania, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Data are not available for other parts of Europe, but the results of the attractiveness analysis match general assumptions about the factors that pull asylum seekers towards certain areas.

#### Asylum seekers and refugees in the labour market

It is challenging for asylum seekers to attain the same level of employment as locals or other migrants who arrive in the same country with a job contract or a student residency permit. They have higher unemployment and long-term unemployment rates (Figure 1) and are often denied access to the labour market before they are recognised as refugees. Factors that contribute to this low employment level are the regulations surrounding the assessment of their asylum request and the length of time they have to wait for assessment, as well as poor knowledge of the language of the hosting country. It should, however, be noted that unemployment rates for refugees differ significantly between Member States, ranging from 15% in the UK to more than 50% in Spain.

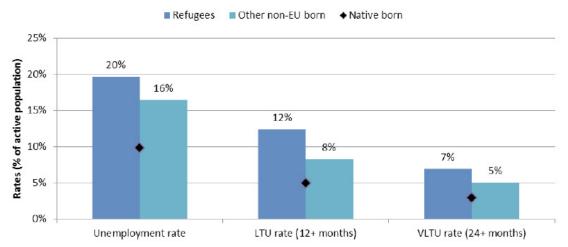
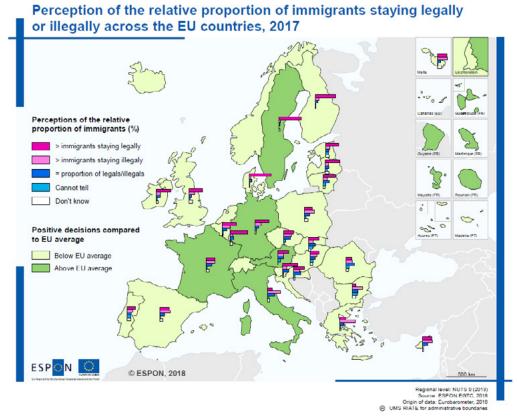


Figure 1 - Unemployment rates in EU Member States for refugees and others (short-term, long-term and very long-term), 2014

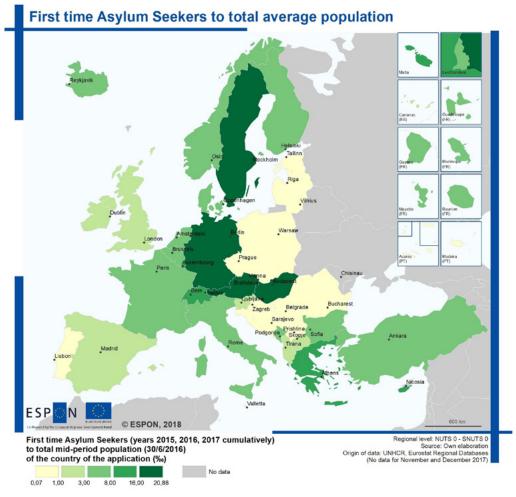
Asylum seekers and refugees – as well as their respective families – typically improve their employment outcomes over time, as they integrate more into the labour market and society, but it takes them up to 20 years to catch up with individuals who are native-born. Moreover, once they have been unemployed, refugees face difficulties returning to employment, a factor that increases their vulnerability. There is a real risk that asylum seekers and refugees who are not adequately supported may be captured by criminal networks or used as cheap labour within the shadow economy.

#### Perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees in hosting countries

The negative perception of the contribution of asylum seekers and refugees among some segments of the population strengthens barriers to integration. Available data suggest that a major factor contributing to stigma may be the presence (or the perception of the presence) of irregular migrants in a country. However, countries where asylum seekers and economic immigrants are perceived as irregular are not necessarily those with the highest volume or proportion of asylum seekers and refugees; they are generally the countries located at the EU border (notably in southern Europe) and areas where a high percentage of asylum seekers are those who are apprehended while making irregular border crossings. It is perceived, by citizens, that there are many more immigrants residing illegally in Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Spain or Bulgaria, compared to the numbers perceived to be there legally. The perceptions are exactly opposite in the countries actually hosting the most asylum seekers, such as Germany, Austria and Sweden (Map 6).



Map 6 Perception of the relative proportion of immigrants staying legally or illegally across the EU countries, 2017



Map 7 First time asylum seekers total average population

# Response policies and practices successfully implemented in southern cities and regions

In most Member States, migration policy is considered to be a national matter and asylum applications are managed in a centralised manner. However, the issues raised by the presence of refugees cannot be tackled top-down by national administrations alone. Multi-level approaches involving regions, cities and local stakeholders (civil society organisations, businesses and citizens) are indispensable for an effective and successful integration policy.



In Italy, the Network of Welcome Municipalities Project managed by the CARITAS branch of Benevento has been set up to support small municipalities (with a population of less than 70,000 inhabitants). It networks to manage the 'Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees' (SPRAR) programmes (funded by the Ministry of Interior) together and to create a new welfare system in which migrants and native residents collaborate. Local authorities which participate in the initiative, in cooperation with voluntary sector organisations, undertake what they refer to as 'integrated reception' interventions; these go beyond the simple distribution of food and housing in order to provide complementary services such as legal and social guidance and support, and to develop individual programmes to promote socioeconomic inclusion and integration.

Relevant strategies relate to inclusion in the labour market and ensuring housing accessibility, but also the individual empowerment of refugees within local communities and fighting negative perceptions of asylum seekers.

#### Fostering the inclusion of refugees in the labour market

Refugees represent an opportunity for regions in need of a large labour force, especially countries that are experiencing increased ageing amongst the resident population; these include most of the regions in northern Italy and some regions in Romania. In particular, tourism and agriculture are sectors in which even low-skilled refugees can integrate relatively easily, though exploitation remains a concern. Targeted training can be carried out in two main directions. One the one hand, refugees can be empowered in the labour market through the provision of information on procedures and opportunities, language courses, advice on how to express varied work experiences on their CVs, etc. On the other hand, professional training in specific sectors such as tourism and the agro-forestry industry can be offered to refugees and locals as a way to both strengthen social cohesion and respond to specific territorial needs. Cities and small villages can contribute to this effort to build resilience and promote integration.



The Social Garden project, which is managed by the Municipalities of Aidone and Villarosa (Sicily, Italy) has been set up with the support and involvement of private companies and local associations, refugees and asylum seekers, together with local school students, elderly persons and people with disabilities. The individuals benefiting follow training courses in cultivation techniques according to principles of organic farming. Once trained, they are able to work for their host communities, contributing to the production of food products that serve to support local families and those in need and in economic difficulty.

Well-educated and highly-skilled refugees encounter additional obstacles; they are often overqualified for their jobs. Easier and more accessible recognition procedures, course equivalence and European cooperation could facilitate the recognition of qualifications and experiences. Enhancing the understanding of each migrant's profile would be a good starting point for better matching skills with professional opportunities which are available. It would also prevent some of the long-lasting loss of human capital.

#### **Housing accessibility**

Housing and accommodation are among the most critical policies that characterise the refugee issue. The two main alternatives for refugees are housing in reception centres and private accommodation. Once individuals become refugee status holders, they often experience extremely precarious living situations, in spite of their protected status as reception centres are generally reserved for asylum seekers. Access to housing remains a deeply challenging issue due to a range of factors, including high rental prices and onerous advance payment requirements from owners. The competition in local housing markets between recognised refugees and native individuals all looking for affordable (social) housing is also an issue for consideration: the rising numbers of refugees and the shortage of housing could bolster segregation and hinder their integration into local society.

Various solutions to improve accommodation opportunities for asylum seekers must be identified at a local level, and support should be given to refugees who have to build a new life in their hosting country.



In the city of Thessaloniki (Greece), after the border was closed in March 2016, the UNHCR launched a housing programme proposing a wide range of solutions: hotel rooms, hosting by Greek families, rental of individual apartments in the city and collective apartment buildings. In addition to being provided with housing solutions, refugees are supported with close follow-up and service provision, either in the form of individual assistance or through dedicated centres (day-centres, drop-in centres, etc.).

#### Promoting the empowerment of refugees in local communities

Asylum seekers and refugees are at risk of being perceived as a burden by local populations as long as they appear to be the beneficiaries of costly inclusion policies and not as actors in their own integration. Allowing them to participate in the public life of the communities which host them and giving them the opportunity to demonstrate that they can be an asset is also a way to counter segregation.



The Portuguese "Começar de Novo: Apoio à Autonomização dos Refugiados" project aims to foster the individual empowerment of asylum seekers and refugees in order to reduce their risk of poverty and social exclusion in the medium and long term. The project enables them to exercise autonomous citizenship after 18 months of National Replacement Programme support. The project is also plans to create and test an online tool (Operational Support Network for Refugees) to support technicians at the Portuguese Council for Refugees and other host entities, as well as local technicians from municipalities, to enable them to promote networking. Finally, it is developing sustainable models for multilevel local partnerships leading to the integration of target groups in the labour market.

#### Fighting negative perceptions of asylum seekers

The obstacles mentioned so far, relating to labour, housing and empowerment, can all, potentially, be aggravated by misunderstandings that can occur between the receiving societies and groups with different cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Local initiatives can promote people's knowledge of migrants' cultures to improve understanding and acceptance.



The Timisoara Refugee Art Festival (Romania), funded through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, is dedicated to promoting understanding between cultures and supporting common values. The festival promotes social integration between public and private actors at different levels (from national to international) through art and cooperation. For the first festival, in 2017, 15 young refugees, aged from 9 to 26, based in Timisoara, and 15 young Romanians attended weekly workshops in theatre, music, film and art installation over four months. The artistic output of the young amateur artists was then exhibited publically in an arts centre. The festival also included screenings of a selection of international short-films on the subject of migration.



## Find out more about ESPON evidence on migration at:

www.espon.eu/refugee www.espon.eu/migration





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