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Deciding Where to go: Policies, People and Perceptions Shaping Destination Preferences

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Abstract

There is considerable interest among European politicians and policymakers in the factors influencing the destination preferences of refugees and other migrants. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with more than 250 Syrians, Eritreans and Nigerians, this article examines the destination preferences of those crossing the Mediterranean in 2015 and the extent to which they were aware of, and/or influenced by, policies intended to control and manage their arrival. Our findings question the extent to which deterrence policies have their intended or assumed effects. Preferred destinations are rarely identified solely, or even primarily, on the basis of migration policies devised by different governments with the explicit aim of reducing the number of arrivals. Rather they reflect the “coming together” of a wide range of factors, including access to protection and family reunification, the availability/accuracy of information, the overall economic environment and social networks. Moreover perceptions of migration policies may be more significant than their content as the implications are often not known or misunderstood.

Introduction

There is considerable interest among EU policymakers in the decision-making of refugees and other migrants¹ and the factors influencing destination preferences. Historically, much of the thinking around migrant decision-making has been dominated by so-called “push-pull” models based on principles of utility maximization, rational choice and wage differentials. These models have been criticised as being overly simplistic and economically deterministic, particularly in the context of forced migration. Not only do they make assumptions about the ways in which individuals respond to different factors, but they presuppose decisions are fully informed, neglect the role of intervening variables, and ignore or downplay a wide range of social factors (King, 2012; Van Der Velde and Van Naerssen (2015); James and Mayblin, 2016).

Nonetheless, assumptions about the factors shaping the “choices” that refugees and other migrants make about where to go have implicitly and explicitly shaped European migration policy-making for nearly two decades (see e.g. EASO, 2016). These discussions have often focused on the perceived generosity of asylum and migration policies in some Member States relative to others, as reflected in the concept of “asylum shopping” (Bauloz et al. (2015). As recently as 2016, Member States were accused of exacerbating asylum shopping and irregular migration through different national approaches.² It is assumed that refugees and other migrants have a sufficiently detailed knowledge of migration policies within and between countries to make informed choices about their final destination, and that they are then able to bring financial and other resources to bear in order to achieve these objectives.

This article examines the destination preferences of refugees and other migrants who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 at the height of what was described as Europe's “migration crisis”. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with more than 250 individuals, we examine where our respondents wanted to go to and the extent to which they were aware of, and/or influenced by, policies put in place to control and manage their arrival. Given that “[m]igrants” thinking can change

markedly and sometimes rapidly in the face of political, social, economic, environmental and other changes” (McAuliffe and Jayasuriya, 2016, 57), our analysis provides new insights into the dynamic nature of migrant decision-making in the context of rapidly moving policy responses and information sources (e.g. social media). Unlike much of the existing literature, it considers not only refugees but also other migrants, situating migrant decision-making within the broader policy environment.

Our research contributes directly to a small but growing body of literature examining the decisions made by refugees and other migrants at various stages of their journeys, and the factors influencing destination preferences. Although these factors have been found to vary between groups, for example, between those categorized as “refugees and asylum seekers” and those moving primarily for economic reasons, much of the existing literature challenges assumptions that migration policies directly influence the countries to which people would prefer to go to. Three particular themes stand out.

Firstly, there is strong evidence that migrant decision-making is a dynamic process, one which is influenced and shaped by a complex interaction between macro, meso and micro level factors including historical and geographical ties between origin and destination countries and the economic, political and social resources that refugees and other migrants are able to mobilize. A number of studies highlight the consequences of colonial relationships (e.g. Jackson et al., 2013; Wiklund, 2012) which are often associated with other factors which make certain destinations more attractive, for instance by virtue of a common language and/or favourable visa requirements. Others suggest that these factors are less important: Van Wijk (2010), for example, shows that the Netherlands received more Angolan asylum seekers than any other EU country in the late 1990s, despite the absence of historical, linguistic or social ties, a fact he attributes to “reputational factors”.

Secondly, evidence on role of policy in migrant decision-making shows that the relationship between policies and destination preferences is often not as straightforward as typically assumed. A number of studies consider the role of migration (e.g. visa policies and refugee recognition rates) and/or non-migration policies (e.g. education, health and welfare) with mixed conclusions. Whilst most studies find that the possibility of securing welfare support does not influence destination preference (James and Mayblin, 2016), others (e.g. Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Jackson et al., 2013; Kuschminder and Koser, 2017) conclude that it plays a role in the destination preferences of specific sub-groups. Whilst migration policies have been the dominant focus of the existing literature, especially for refugees and asylum seekers, labour market access and the availability of work has been found to strongly influence the destination preferences of people moving primarily for economic reasons (e.g. Hanson and McIntosh, 2012; Riosmena and Massey, 2012). Whilst under-researched, these factors also seem likely to be important for those moving as a result of conflict or insecurity.

Finally, there is compelling evidence about the role played by social networks of family, friends, acquaintances and agents (including smugglers) operating at the meso level. These networks mediate the relationship between individuals and communities and shape the political and economic context within which migration decisions are made. Collyer (2005), for example, shows that with an increasingly restrictive policy environment in France making family reunification more difficult, Algerians drew on religious and other social networks to move to the UK instead. Schapendonk (2015) offers a more cautionary analysis of social networks, highlighting network failures and the high costs associated with the accumulation of social capital.

Our article proceeds as follows. We begin by situating our data in the EU migration movements and policy developments of 2015, before considering the extent to which it is possible to analyse destination preferences in terms of “choice” and presenting the evidence on where respondents told us they wanted to go. The discussion then shifts to the primary main focus of our analysis, namely the extent to which migration policies shape destination preferences, before turning to consider the role of broader contextual factors as well as subjective and intangible factors that inform migration decision-making. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our research for policies intended to shape destination preferences and limit migration to particular countries.

Situating our data in policy developments

A dynamic and fast-moving policy environment

While people from the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa have been crossing the Mediterranean since 2011 to reach Europe in growing numbers, 2015 marked the sharpest increase in total numbers of arrivals to Europe and deaths in the Mediterranean than any time before or subsequently (IOM, 2016). The arrival of more than one million refugees and other migrants, accompanied by images of over-loaded boats and thousands of desperate people landing on the beaches of Greece and struggling to make their way across Europe, triggered a multi-faceted refugee, border, humanitarian and political “crisis” (Crawley et al., 2018). This “crisis” came to be associated with a series of rapid policy responses based on broad assumptions about the factors leading people to make the journey to Europe.

Three specific EU policy responses are of particular note. First, the decision by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on 5 September 2015 to suspend the Dublin Regulation requiring refugees to seek asylum in the first EU Member State in which they arrived, was widely presented and perceived as being the primary cause of the significant increase in arrivals, particularly Syrians, in the latter part of the year. Secondly, the acceleration of border control measures both in the countries outside Europe and within the EU itself reduced the opportunities for refugees and other migrants to travel to countries in which they had existing social networks or where they believed they had the greatest opportunities for securing access to protection and/or work. Finally, the implementation of a series of measures by the EU to reassert control over its borders reflected assumptions about the legitimacy or otherwise of applications for international protection and was based, in significant part, on the nationality of respondents. These included a series of “hotspots” established in Italy and Greece to accelerate the determination process and a process of relocation, where those people who were considered to need international protection were relocated to other Member States with fewer arrivals.

Our data

Our analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 259 people undertaken as part of two separate but related research projects (see Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016 and Crawley et al., 2018). Both sets of interviews were undertaken in 2015 but were conducted at different times and in different locations. Hagen-Zanker and Mallett's (2016) fieldwork was undertaken in Germany, Spain and the UK from July-September 2015 with the Syrian interviews taking place before Merkel's intervention and before the Balkan route was closed. Most respondents were recent arrivals. Interviews were facilitated by NGOs, churches and researchers and mainly took place in public spaces (e.g. in cafés), although some were held in reception centres. For most interviews, interpreters were used, many of whom already had a relationship with respondents or others in their network, to facilitate trust. Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured and mainly followed the narrative of people's

journeys, with follow-up questions focusing on the reasons why certain decisions were made. Fieldwork for the Crawley et al. (2018) study took place somewhat later (September–December 2015), with the majority of interviews being held on the Greek island of Lesbos and in towns and cities across Italy. The majority of those interviewed on Lesbos had arrived within the proceeding few days whilst those who were interviewed in Italy had arrived earlier but still during 2015. As with the Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016) study, interviews were held in a range of different settings using an interpreter and a standard interview framework to ensure consistency in the questions asked across the different locations. Given that 2015 was a year of rapid policy change, with information filtering to different groups with varying degrees of effectiveness, the variations in arrival times of the respondents in these two studies allow us to analyse the effects of policy variations, as well as awareness and knowledge of policies, over the course of the year. In terms of the background of respondents, just over half (56%) originally came from Syria, approximately mirroring the proportion of Syrians arriving in Europe in 2015 (IOM 2016). Two other groups have also been included in our analysis: Eritreans (28%) and Nigerians (16%).³

The decision to focus on the factors shaping destination preferences for three specific nationalities has been taken for two main reasons. Firstly, it should not be assumed that decision-making processes are the same for people from different countries of origin. At the time of our research Syrians were primarily fleeing the conflict that had gripped their country since 2011, although many had initially moved to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey before deciding to travel onwards. For Eritreans, the decision to leave was often motivated by the policy of indefinite military conscription, a desire to find a place of safety but also political and social freedom and aspirations for a better future. Many Nigerians had left their countries due to a combination of security concerns in Nigeria and employment opportunities elsewhere, most notably in Libya. For this group, the decision to travel to Europe was often taken months or years after their initial departure.

Secondly, as noted above, the arrival in Europe of refugees and other migrants from different countries of origin during 2015 was met with very different policy responses. While both Syrians and Eritreans were considered to be in need of international protection and therefore eligible for services and support, including through relocation to other EU Member States, Nigerians were, and are still are, regarded as “economic migrants” for whom the policy environment is largely hostile. Examining the extent to which such policies were known about and/or considered provides new insights into decision-making processes.

Where did people want to go?

The concept of destination choice

Before turning to the data, it is important to reflect on the concept of destination “choice”. We have been careful to avoid this phrase in both the title and content of this article, instead using the concept of destination “preference” when describing the countries to which people told us they intended – or hoped – to go. The term “choice”, with all that it implies, is a contentious one, particularly in the context of forced migration. It is clear that conflict was the single biggest reason why people crossed the Mediterranean in such large numbers during 2015 (IOM, 2016) and the lives of those we interviewed were characterised by experiences of war, conflict and persecution. These situations are marked by a lack of choice with people forced to leave both their homes and their countries.

The absence of choice in the decision to leave should not, however, be assumed to mean that refugees and other migrants are passive victims propelled around the world by external forces. Like all migrants, forced migrants make choices, albeit within a narrower range of possibilities. These choices, and the destination preferences with which they are associated, are shaped by country of origin, age, gender, socio-economic status and education, as well as relationships with others who can help facilitate the journey and open up possibilities for the future. Some people are heavily constrained in their choices, for instance because of limited funds (e.g. Robinson and Segrott, 2002) and geography and available travel routes (e.g. Koser and McAuliffe, 2013). For others, destinations are determined by smugglers or agents (e.g. Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Crawley, 2010). A small number of those we spoke to, almost all young women from Nigeria, were not only unable to “choose” their destinations but did not even know where they were being taken because they had been trafficked into Europe by others. For everyone, the increasingly restrictive policy context and, in particular, the lack of safe and legal travel options, has reduced the extent to which people are able to fulfil any destination preferences they may have.

Destination preferences

With this in mind, we begin by considering the extent to which the people we spoke to had intended to travel to specific countries or places when they left their country of origin, and whether ideas about where to go changed during the course of the journey. As the interviews for both studies explicitly explored people's journeys and experiences along the way, we were able to trace changes in earlier plans and map shifts in destination preferences over time and space. Our data challenge the strongly held assumption by policymakers and politicians that refugees and other migrants have a particular, and fixed, destination preference when they leave their country of origin. Instead it demonstrates the importance of events, experiences and chance encounters in shaping and changing such decisions.

During our interviews, we asked people whether they had a specific destination in mind when they left their country of origin. There were significant differences between respondents by nationality. For example, whilst almost Nigerians had a preferred destination – Libya – at the point of departure with few mentioning specific European countries, many Syrians mentioned different European countries as potential destinations. Preferences for specific countries solidified or were undermined during their journey. For this group, Germany was by far the most frequently mentioned destination, followed by Sweden (Figure 1). The majority of Eritreans, by contrast, did not have a specific destination in mind at the point of departure or subsequently. Rather, most told of us of their intentions to go to “Europe”, with Europe being seen as a place of safety, security and hope for a better future:

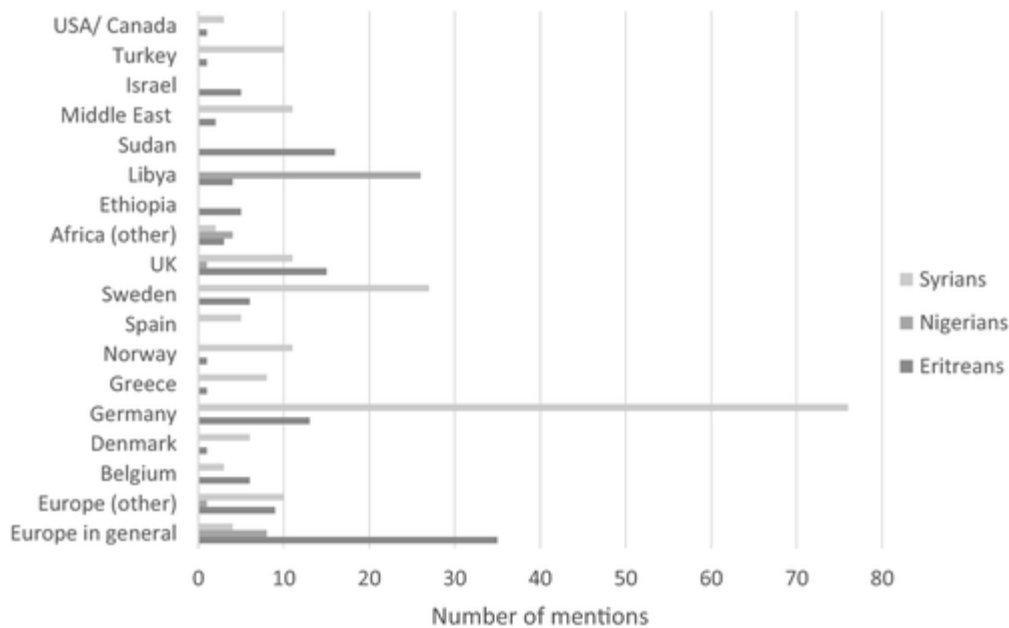


Figure 1 Destinations mentioned by nationality

Source: Interview data.

My mum decided that I should go to Europe so that I can have a better life and education there. She didn't really want me to go to a specific place, just any place in Europe where I can study and be free (Eritrean woman aged 25).

A crucial point worth highlighting is that potential destinations mentioned by respondents are not always their preferred destination, with a lack of finances, policies, other barriers or just “bad luck” preventing people from reaching their preferred destination. We elaborate on this point in our analysis below. Importantly, some respondents also mentioned destinations that they specifically intended to avoid. For example, some Syrians told us that they would avoid travelling to, or through, Hungary because they had heard about hostile policies and were fearful that they might be attacked, detained or worse.

As noted above, destination preference is, closely interlinked with the decision to leave and the conditions under which this “choice” is made (Crawley, 2010). As Havinga and Boecker (1999) show, the ability to select a particular destination can depend on whether the decision to leave is acute or anticipatory. Those leaving under acute conditions are often unable to prepare for their journey – including considering particular destinations – and may face additional constraints (e.g. financial ones). This is also reflected in our data, with those having to move quickly being less likely to have a specific country in mind. This was particularly the case for Eritreans, many of whom had decided to leave to avoid imminent arrest, or to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity that had become available. For example, one woman had to leave when her Pentecostal prayer group was raided by officials. She walked barefoot to Sudan, with no plan, money or idea where to go. In Sudan, she contacted her father-in-law, who told her to go to England.

Townsend and Oomen (2015) argue that refugees and other migrants make active choices along their journey and often recalibrate previous decisions while in transit (see also Day and White, 2002; Balcilar and Nugent, 2018). This is reflected in our research: many respondents told us that their intended destination changed between leaving their home country and arriving in Europe. This was

the case both for those that had no particular destination in mind and those with a clear destination preference at the point of departure:

This journey is like a chain. In every link of the chain you find Syrians and you gather information about what to do next (Syrian man aged 20).

There are many reasons why destination preferences change or people decide to move on (Crawley et al., 2018). For Eritreans the decision was often linked to not feeling safe in the first country of destination, with many respondents telling us about ties between Sudanese officials and the Eritrean national service, as well as a lack of livelihood opportunities.

At the beginning I only wanted to leave from Eritrea. If I had rights in Sudan I would stay there. But Sudan is not a safe place for Eritreans, so my family decided to send me to Europe (Eritrean man aged 28).

For most Nigerians, the decision to travel from Libya to Europe was due to the fact that conditions in Libya were dangerous – a situation that few seemed to be aware of when they had first left Nigeria – combined with a perception that there was “no way back”.

My initial plan was not to come to Europe, it was only after seeing the situation in Libya that I decided to leave...In Libya the situation was very tense: a lot of fighting and violence towards black people. I was attacked by a group of children, armed with knives and then early this year my wife got pregnant. And that's why we finally decided to leave....I cannot go back, so let me go front. (Nigerian man aged 24).

Syrians often wanted to move on because of limited access to rights, livelihoods and basic services as well as the high living costs in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Crawley et al., 2018). It is also clear that for many, the decision-making process remained dynamic even after their arrival in Europe. Destinations were not fixed or final but rather contingent on other factors that could, and often did, change. For example, people told us that they were intending to travel to, and experience living in, a particular country before deciding whether or not to stay there:

I am thinking of staying in Germany but I hear that the situation is terrible there. I will go first and see on my own and then I will make up my mind (Syrian man aged 39).

Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017) show that chance events, chance encounters and chance opportunities are often crucial in reaffirming or redirecting destination preferences, even if encounters are ephemeral. Furthermore, such chance events are more likely to happen and can have stronger effects during periods of uncertainty and vulnerability, which defines many current migration journeys (ibid). Since many respondents left without a clear destination country in mind, chance encounters with other travellers who shared new information or made specific opportunities available, influenced or in some cases completely changed, where people wanted to go:

In the beginning, I wanted to go to Denmark, but later I changed my mind. Now I want to go to Finland...In Athens, I met a guy who lived for 10 years in Finland and he told some things about the country. That's how I changed my mind and decided to go to Finland (Syrian man aged 25).

Migration policy and destination preferences

More than twenty of the studies we reviewed reflect on the role of migration policies in shaping destination preferences. Overall the evidence calls into question the significance of migration

policies in migrant decision-making. Around a dozen (mostly quantitative) studies find that (aspects of) migration policy influence destination preferences, although some only find this for specific policies, sub-groups or countries. For instance, Kuschminder and Koser (2017) find evidence that only favourable migration policies are influential (in some cases) with no evidence of the corollary i.e. that adverse policies deter migration. A more limited number of studies find that these factors only matter in relation to other countries: countries that make their policies more restrictive compared to neighbouring countries can deflect refugees and other migrants to these destinations (e.g. Barthel and Neumayer, 2015). These conclusions are challenged by other studies. Richardson (2010), for example, found that refugees interviewed in Australia had no or minimal knowledge of asylum policies, a finding echoed by Robinson and Segrott (2002) for the UK and Valenta and Thorshaug (2012) for Norway. With some exceptions (e.g. McAuliffe and Jayasuriya, 2016), most studies find that refugees and other migrants have, at best, patchy knowledge of asylum and migration policies in destination countries.

Our analysis of interview data with refugees and other migrants arriving in Europe in 2015, and in particular those originating from Eritrea and Nigeria, suggests that they had limited knowledge of migration policies. One Eritrean man in his thirties told us “I knew nothing about the EU immigration policies in Europe”, another in his forties that “I didn't know Greece was an EU member state. It was such a huge surprise for me”. Nonetheless migration policies – or more specifically perceptions and understandings about the possibilities and opportunities available in potential destination countries – informed the destination preferences of around a third of those we spoke to. The influence of migration policies on destination preferences can be divided into three main areas: i) migration controls which limit where people can, and cannot, travel legally; ii) perceptions regarding opportunities for securing residency, “papers” and, in turn, access to the labour market and welfare support; and iii) opportunities for family reunification.

The direct impact of migration controls

Among our Syrian respondents there were a number of people who had tried, but failed, to obtain a visa to enter specific countries legally. Most had wanted to travel to these countries because they already had a family member living there who could support them and help them settle, or because they wanted to access work or educational opportunities. In other words, migration controls prevent some people from going to their preferred destinations. For example, a 50-year-old Syrian MP who had left the country, with his wife and six children, 4 years before our interview, had been struggling to make a living for himself and his family in Jordan and had tried, but failed, to travel legally to a number of countries:

Three years ago I decided to leave Jordan legally. I applied for asylum to the embassies of the UK, Canada, France and Sweden. I applied 5 or 6 times. No country accepted my application. Maybe they didn't accept my application because I was an MP. I was interviewed twice only by Canada but Canada rejected me too. I wanted to go to the UK but the UK rejected me too... I had realised that there was no way for us to go legally to Europe (Syrian man aged 50).

Unlike the Syrian respondents, virtually none of those originating from Eritrea or Nigeria had attempted to secure a visa to enter Europe legally and several respondents commented on a lack of opportunities to do so: “We didn't apply for a visa. It is too difficult” (Eritrean woman aged 25).

In addition to controls curtailing legal entry to certain countries, two other migration policies directly impacted respondents. The first is the policy of relocation discussed above, which mainly affected

the later round of fieldwork, with both Syrian and Eritrean respondents commenting that their inclusion in the relocation programme had prevented them from travelling to countries in which family members, friends or acquaintances were already living. None appeared to be aware of relocation policies before leaving their countries of origin:

I enrolled the relocation programme, but the answer was Poland. I don't want to go to Poland. I refused to go. I don't know what I am going to do. I don't want to apply for asylum in Greece. I don't know what my plans will be but I will try to find a way to go to my relatives in Norway. (Eritrean woman in her 30s).

In addition, we interviewed one Eritrean woman and one elderly Syrian couple who were returned to their first country of entry in Europe under the Dublin Regulation, both being unable to travel to their preferred destinations as a direct consequence of EU migration policies.

Access to protection and “papers”

One of the strongest themes emerging from the interviews with Syrians (but not Eritreans or Nigerians) was a perception that it would be easier or quicker to secure protection and “papers” in some countries than in others. This was one of the main reasons given for expressing a preference for a particular country with Germany being the clearest example, followed by Sweden. However, whilst there was a strong political and media narrative around the time of our fieldwork that increased arrivals across the Mediterranean to Europe in 2015 were the result of Merkel's decision to suspend the Dublin Regulation, only a minority of respondents mentioned this specific policy change as a reason for wanting to go to Germany. Rather the preference for Germany was strongly associated with having family members living in the country who could provide information about the asylum process. This created a perception, not necessarily well founded, that it was easier to secure residency where family members were already present, without going through the formal family reunification process (discussed separately below).

Indeed an analysis of 2015 arrival data shows that “the Merkel effect”, if there was one at all, can hardly be measured (Faigle et al., 2016). The number of people arriving in Greece started to increase much earlier, in spring 2015. Increased arrivals later in the year can be attributed to the deteriorating situation in Syria and neighbouring countries, the role of family and other social networks. This is also reflected in our data, with Syrian respondents in the earlier fieldwork already expressing a strong preference for Germany, and even specific cities, prior to the Merkel announcement. Berlin, for example, was perceived as being more flexible with regard to fingerprinting, even though this was not an official policy at the time:

My friends instructed me to come to Berlin. I didn't think much of that place beforehand. They said that it's too dangerous in Munich if my fingerprints have been taken in Hungary, that the application process is faster in Berlin and that they don't care about the fingerprints. (Syrian man aged 20).

A number of Syrian respondents also expressed the view that Germany would be more “welcoming” towards them than other countries. As noted earlier, these perceptions were often formed, or altered, during the journey. It is difficult to separate out the extent to which securing the right to stay in a particular country influenced the destination preferences from the economic support with which securing legal status is associated. Whilst a few of our Syrian respondents referred to housing, welfare benefits and other forms of social provision – often framed in terms of securing a “better life” for their children – for most, the opportunity to work afforded by having the right to live in a particular country was more important.

Opportunities for family reunification

Although the opportunity to secure “papers” was important for many of our Syrian respondents because it meant they could access the labour market as well as housing and welfare support, the existence, or otherwise, of opportunities for family reunification was found to be even more significant. This factor both positively influenced preferred destinations and was associated with decisions not to go to particular countries where family reunification opportunities were perceived to be slow or non-existent. This finding, which is limited to our Syrian respondents, reflects the particular patterns of migration across the Mediterranean during 2015 by Syrians, many of whom were seeking to join family members already in Europe:

I have a brother who has been living for 13 years in Germany but I want to go to the Netherlands because family reunification doesn't take long. Some of my acquaintances have told me, who have already gone there. Family reunification there takes from 3 to 5 months. (Syrian woman aged 47).

Others were looking for ways to secure protection for family members who had been left behind due to a lack of resources or concerns about the dangers associated with the journey. They were keen to go to a country that provided with opportunities for family reunification, so that family members would not have to take the same dangerous and expensive journey they had taken.

Are migration policies the primary factor shaping destination preferences?

These findings seem to suggest that decisions about destination preferences are strongly influenced by the existence or otherwise of policies to provide protection, social support, access to the labour market and family reunification. If so this would appear to confirm the concerns of EU policymakers and politicians that migration policies act as a “pull” factor, attracting refugees and other migrants to some countries and not others. The situation is not, however, as straightforward as it might appear.

Firstly, as indicated above, the fact that respondents mentioned migration policies of one kind or another does not mean that they had a detailed knowledge or understanding of these policies, or indeed the opportunities and limitations they afford relative to other potential countries of destination. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents had only a vague or general understanding of asylum and migration policies (see also Robinson and Segrott, 2002; Richardson, 2010; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2012). In other words, people did not choose particular destinations because of generous migration policies (especially where they didn't even know what those policies were or were misinformed) but rather because they perceived that the opportunities for a successful outcome were higher. This perception was often formed through discussions with family members already living in those countries or with fellow travellers who they met along the way. Our Syrian respondents in particular were often bombarded with information from friends and family members about entry and reception policies and new policy developments in various potential destinations via social media including Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber. This information and advice was often contradictory and quickly became outdated meaning that respondents were unable to make fully informed “choices” about the country in which they would be most likely to be granted the right to stay and receive social support. Nonetheless, the fact that family members and friends were considered trusted sources of information meant that they were accepted as being factually accurate, a point to which we return below.

Secondly, our findings are heavily skewed by the fact that more than half of the respondents whose experiences were analysed for this article originated from Syria. As has been suggested elsewhere (Crawley et al., 2018), the circumstances under which Syrian refugees travelled to Europe in 2015

reflected a time-specific combination of factors including the closure of borders in Lebanon and Jordan, effectively funnelling those on the move up through Turkey towards Europe, combined with the arrival of family members in the months and years leading up to our research, as well as specific EU policies towards Syrian refugees. This is reflected in the fact that whilst a majority of Syrian respondents talked about the importance of the policy context for the decision-making process, both Eritrean and Nigerian respondents seemed largely unaware of migration policies in general or in specific countries.

Thirdly, respondents rarely talked about migration policies in relation to one place only: rather a comparison was often made between two or more places albeit that knowledge about both was usually very limited (see also Barthel and Neumayer, 2015). For example, the preference for Germany over Sweden, or vice versa, often involved juxtaposing opportunities for employment with opportunities for welfare support, revealing a somewhat polarised view of both countries rooted more in stereotypes than policy knowledge and often based on perceptions of the broader economic, social or policy context rather than specific migration policies.

I want to go to Germany. There are more jobs available there. In Sweden it might be better for refugee families, but there are not as many jobs available as in Germany. If the situation is hard in Germany, I might go to Belgium (Syrian man aged 31).

This leads to our fourth and final point, namely the importance of broader socio-economic and political contexts within which decisions about where to go are made. It is very difficult to disentangle knowledge and understanding of migration policies from what people knew – or thought they knew – about the potential opportunities that might be available to them. It is this broader context of migration decision-making to which we now turn.

Beyond migration policy: work, security and reputation

Policymakers and politicians tend to see migration policies as the main factors shaping destination preferences, without considering the broader socio-economic and political contexts within which decision-making is situated. This focus is mirrored in much of the literature, with many studies focusing specifically on one set of policies (often asylum-related). Our analysis suggests that an understanding of the broader context within which migration decisions are made is crucial. Individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics clearly have a significant role to play in shaping the destinations that are, and are not, available to people. For instance, resources, social networks, educational attainment, whether people are able to speak/read different languages, whether or not they are travelling with children and social networks play a major role in opening up, and closing down, the options available to people and, as such, shape and inform the decision-making process (see, for example, Robinson and Segrott, 2002; Collyer, 2005; Crawley, 2010; Spinks, 2013). Moreover it is clear that both wider economic opportunities and deeply personal, subjective and intangible factors shape destination preferences. It is these factors to which our analysis now turns.

Economic opportunities and the possibility of work

The factors that shape the destination preferences of refugees and other migrants cannot be separated from the factors that cause people to leave their countries of origin in the first place or that propel them onwards from the countries to which they subsequently move. Given that many of our Syrian respondents who had been forced to leave their home country found themselves living in difficult economic circumstances in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, it is not surprising that many wanted to move to a country in which they believed they would be able to work. This is

echoed in some of the interviews with Eritreans who unsuccessfully tried to make a living in Ethiopia, Sudan or Libya. Around a third of Syrians interviewed for the Crawley et al. (2018) research said that they specifically wanted to go to Germany because they felt the general economic situation was better and that they would be more likely to find employment to support themselves and their families:

Life had been hard in Lebanon the past 4 years. I was living with 6 more people in the house. The rent was expensive... I was living in the centre of Beirut, because there were more jobs there. My life didn't improve all these years there. You cannot build a life there. When I saw that many people were leaving I decided to leave too. I have a good friend in Germany. He was telling me all the time to leave (Syrian man aged 33).

Opportunities for finding work were also a strong theme in our interviews with Nigerian respondents although in the majority of cases it was Libya rather than Europe that was the preferred destination: two-thirds of Nigerians told us that they intended to go to Libya when they first left their home country because of the opportunities for work.⁴

When I ran away I wanted to go to Libya, I was told there was work there in Libya ... I thought there could not be worse places than Nigeria so it would be ok ... I didn't know anything about the fighting (Nigerian woman aged 32).

By contrast, work opportunities were not a decisive factor explaining destination preferences in the research by Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016).

Rights, freedom, and the chance to build a life

It is clear from our research that a range of subjective, deeply personal and often intangible factors also influence destination preferences. The literature has identified a country's "general reputation" as one of these factors. McAuliffe and Jayasuriya (2016), for example, find that despite an increasingly restrictive policy environment refugees still prefer Australia over other destinations because of its liberal reputation and livelihood opportunities. Our findings support this conclusion. For example, Germany's positive reputation amongst those originating from Syria clearly played a role in explaining why it was most likely to be mentioned as a preferred destination among our Syrian respondents, frequently being described as "welcoming" with no reference to specific policies or opportunities. These affinities or affections towards certain countries are not always rooted in tangible economic benefits or social networks. When pushed further, respondents sometimes talked of security and human rights, but also the weather or general impressions and knowledge they had of a country, including its football teams (Crawley et al., 2018). In many cases, these preferences for specific destinations were intertwined with feelings of hope and subjective impressions of a potential future, especially for children:

When we set off we were already planning to go to Germany because of its good reputation, 'humanity', because living is good and for our children. (Syrian woman aged 33).

Moreover, the absence of conflict and the existence of rights and the "rule of law" in general, together with the perception that countries in Europe provide opportunities to "build a life" or "make a future", were influential for some (see also Day and White, 2002). This finding was particularly evident in relation to Eritreans, many of whom had found their freedom to work and study severely curtailed by forced military conscription. The rights and freedom that were perceived to exist in Europe were framed in general terms rather than in relation to specific:

I couldn't stand living in Eritrea any longer. I was working for nothing. There are no rights, no constitution and no justice. There is poverty and endless national service. I wanted to come to Europe because Eritreans who were already in Europe had told me that it is safe to live here (Eritrean man in his 40s).

My family decided to send me to Europe. I had heard that in Europe, if you are a refugee, they take care of you. They give you rights (Eritrean man in his 20s).

Some respondents, albeit a smaller number than those mentioning opportunities for employment or welfare support, told us that educational opportunities were a primary consideration influencing destination preferences. For most people however, these opportunities were closely interwoven with the broader set of aspirational narratives noted above. Interestingly, while many Syrians wanted to live in “good places” where their children could access education, Eritrean respondents were much more likely to describe aspirations for continuing their own education. This reflects, at least in part, the fact that the Syrians who participated in both research projects were much more likely to be travelling with children or other family members than either of the other two groups and that Eritreans had been unable to access educational opportunities for themselves due to the policy of military conscription.

Conclusions and policy implications

Drawing on evidence from large-scale migrant surveys, McAuliffe and Jayasuriya (2016:57) conclude that “a more nuanced understanding of potential and actual migrants’ perspectives and considerations would allow for deeper reflection of sustainable policy responses”. Yet, as is clear from the discussion in the introduction to this article, EU policy-making in response to recent migration to Europe continues to be based on flawed assumptions regarding the impact of asylum and migration policies on destination preferences. The findings of our research, undertaken at a time when arrivals in Europe were at their highest, have three main implications for policy.

Firstly, the extent to which policies aimed at deterring refugees and other migrants from travelling to particular countries have their intended or assumed effects is challenged by the ad hoc and dynamic decision-making of those on the move. Many refugees and other migrants crossing the Mediterranean in 2015 did not originally intend to travel to Europe. Rather they went to nearby countries primarily for safety and work and only left when they felt unsafe, when they could not access work, education and healthcare or believed their prospects for securing a better future for themselves and their families was poor. Those who specifically wanted to come to Europe in general or particular countries within Europe often did so because of the general security or economic conditions these countries were perceived to offer and/or the presence of family members (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2016; Crawley et al., 2018).

Secondly, it is clear that preferred destinations are rarely identified solely, or even primarily on the basis of migration policies devised by different governments with the explicit aim of reducing the number of arrivals. Destination preferences are not the result of a rational exercise in which people have full knowledge of all the alternatives and weigh them in some conscious process designed to maximise returns (Crawley, 2010). Rather they reflect the “coming together” of a series of different factors, often more closely related to the perception that somewhere is a “good country” due to the existence of economic opportunities together with rights and freedoms. The people we spoke to had little specific knowledge about the migration policies of different European countries but rather came into contact with different information before departure and whilst on the move. Where migration policies came into play, it was the interpretation and perception of such policies, at times

inaccurate or incomplete, which was often most significant, rather than the policies themselves. As is clear from the analysis presented in this article, destination preferences – particularly among Syrian respondents arriving in Europe in 2015 – were shaped primarily by a dynamic, complex and frequently shifting inter-relationship between perceptions about the possibilities of securing a future – in particular “papers”, employment and opportunities for family reunification – and social networks providing often strong views on where (and when) an individual should travel to and information – of varying quality and accuracy – about the policy context. The fact that policies and processes relating to the asylum and migration are generally not well known and therefore rarely decisive in influencing destination preferences represents a major challenge for governments which are attempting to curb flows of refugees and other migrants through changes in such policies (see also Spinks, 2013).

Finally, policymakers need to understand that the extent, and ways, in which different factors come together to shape destination preferences, and are contingent, at least in part, on individual characteristics, previous experiences, beliefs and perception, chance, hopes and aspirations for the future. There is increasing interest among both scholars and policymakers in understanding the ways in which subjective, frequently non-economic, intangible and often deeply personal factors and characteristics shape destination preferences (Carling and Collins, 2017). Policies that fail to engage with these factors are unlikely to have their intended effects.

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Notes

¹ We use the term “refugees and other migrants” in this article to reflect the nature of “mixed flows” across the Mediterranean and the movement of people between categories across time and space (Crawley and Skleparis, 2017). This phrase avoids the implication that refugees are not also migrants (see also Carling 2015).

² In April 2016 the European migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos stated that a key aim of EU reforms was to stop “asylum-shopping”. See <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-aims-to-stop-asylum-shopping-refugee-crisis/>.

³ A total of 222 cases were drawn from the Crawley et al. (2018) database comprising 144 Syrians, 42 Nigerians and 36 Eritreans. The Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016) database included 22 Syrians and 15 Eritreans, a total of 37 cases. The combined database of 256 respondents was therefore comprised of 166 Syrians, 51 Eritreans and 42 Nigerians.

⁴ This does not mean that there were not political or conflict-related reasons why individuals believed they had to leave Nigeria in many cases but that the possibility of finding work was the primary reason for travelling to Libya.

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