

Deciding Which Road to Take

Insights into How Migrants and Refugees in Greece Plan

Onward Movement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2015, the European Union experienced the arrival of an unprecedented number of asylum seekers. Most arrived at the Mediterranean border states of Italy and Greece, then quickly moved on to file asylum claims in European countries further north. As Greece and Italy struggled to keep pace with the number of new arrivals—and northern European countries such as Sweden and Germany faced their own struggles receiving and processing those who had moved on—the European Union sought a solution that would distribute responsibility for asylum claims more evenly and make flows less chaotic. The result was a temporary relocation programme at the EU level that aimed to redistribute asylum seekers who had arrived in Italy or Greece, and who were deemed likely to receive protection, to other Member States.

Yet the relocation programme proved difficult to implement in practice. Some Member States were slow in pledging places, and asylum seekers themselves were not always willing to participate in a scheme that offered them little say over their final destination. Some dropped out of the scheme when they were matched with a country they felt was less desirable, and others left for other EU countries after being relocated. As the European Union searches for more sustainable ways to manage sudden influxes of asylum seekers, the failures of the relocation plan hold lessons for the future. Critically, all of the schemes proposed thus far rest on the premise that it is possible to redirect asylum seekers to destinations other than those they originally had in mind.

Drawing on a 2015 survey conducted by the author with more than 500 refugees and other migrants, this issue brief challenges that premise. Of the surveyed individuals, most came from refugee-producing countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria), and nearly half had obtained refugee or temporary protection status in Greece. Yet more than 80 per cent had arrived in Greece intending to transit to other destinations in Europe. Once in Greece, approximately one-third changed their plans, and of these, few chose to stay in Greece.

Among the migrants who changed their intended destination after reaching Greece, the survey results point to several factors as having shaped their decisions:

- **Information on destinations collected en route.** Many respondents who changed their minds while in Greece did so based on information they gathered from family and friends during the journey. Nearly half of those who chose a new destination had initially hoped to end up in Greece or ‘Europe’ (generally), but once in Greece chose other, specific destinations within Europe, including some smaller destinations such as Finland and the Netherlands.
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- ▶ **Duration of stay in Greece.** Eighty per cent of respondents who chose to stay in Greece had lived in the country for more than three years, but so too had 51 per cent of respondents who chose a new destination other than Greece. Some seem to have become more established over time and decided to stay, while others adapted their plans as it became clear that they would not be able to reach their original destination.
- ▶ **Living conditions and employment opportunities in Greece.** Respondents who decided to stay in Greece were the most likely to describe living conditions as average, good, or very good, and they were more likely to be working than those who wanted to move on (50 per cent versus 12 per cent, respectively). They were also more likely to be self-sufficient, with 80 per cent renting their own housing and just 29 per cent receiving social assistance of some kind. Among those who intended to leave Greece, 83 per cent cited work opportunities as a key reason. Legal status appears to have little effect on the decisions of either group.
- ▶ **Risks and resources.** About half of the respondents who chose to stay in Greece feared the risks of an onward journey, or lacked the needed resources. But while influential, these factors were cited less often than positive reasons for staying in Greece, such as ‘I am well adjusted’ (76 per cent of respondents).

These findings suggest several lessons for European policymakers. First, perceptions of opportunity, stability, and security—as communicated by friends and family—appear to be strong factors in migration decision-making. Second, destination preferences are relatively fixed at departure, and any changes to these preferences appear to be shaped less by enforcement measures than by migrants’ perceptions of available opportunities. Efforts to change migrants’ and refugees’ preferences en route (including relocation efforts) are thus most likely to succeed if they focus on improving integration prospects.

I. INTRODUCTION

Between 2015 and 2016, EU Member States received nearly 2.7 million applications for asylum. Most applicants arrived in Europe via the frontline states of Greece and Italy.¹ As the number of arrivals grew, the European Union sought ways to defuse the mounting humanitarian crisis on its borders. A centrepiece of the EU response was a plan to relocate up to 160,000 asylum seekers from

Greece and Italy to the rest of the European Union in order to lighten the burden on these struggling frontline countries.

Implementing the scheme proved challenging. By September 2016, a year after its launch, just 5,651 people had been relocated.² While Member States came under substantial criticism for being slow to make specific relocation pledges and process applicants,³ asylum seekers’ reluctance to participate also posed a significant challenge. The plan’s design did not allow them to choose their destination (though those with close family members in other Member States could apply for reunification). Yet most held strong beliefs about which destinations were desirable, and which were to be avoided. Those assigned to less desirable destinations were more likely to drop out and/or to take decisions about onward movement into their own hands. According to a 2016 report, of 47 asylum seekers in Greece assigned to Bulgaria, only four were relocated; 36 dropped out of the relocation programme, and seven absconded.⁴ A similar trend was observed among those assigned to Romania and Estonia.⁵ And an estimated 40 per cent of those relocated to Portugal had left for other EU Member States by September 2017.⁶

While the relocation programme formally ended in September 2017, its lessons remain relevant to current policy debates on the future of the Common European Asylum System. As the EU institutions consider potential reforms to the controversial Dublin Regulation, which assigns Member States responsibility for asylum claims and enables the return of applicants to their first country of entry into the European Union, the issue of relocation is a significant one. One proposed reform tabled by the European Commission would require Member States receiving less than their assigned share of asylum applications to accept relocated asylum seekers. Proposals for a regional disembarkation platform in the Mediterranean also rest on the creation of some sort of system to allocate those who are picked up at sea to Member States for adjudication of their asylum claims.⁷ Aside from proving unpopular with eastern European Member States such as Hungary and Poland, which have refused to accept any relocated or resettled refugees, the plan could face many of the same obstacles that hampered earlier relocation efforts. In particular, it does not take into account how applicants form and act on preferences for certain destinations over others. Meanwhile, in the absence of an EU-wide solution, it is highly likely that most asylum seekers in Greece will be legally obligated to stay there for the foreseeable future.

That migrants might refuse to move to destinations they consider undesirable is not necessarily surprising. Evidence from previous research suggests that a migrant’s choice of destination is based on deeply held beliefs and

Box I. Gauging shifts in decision-making: Methodology

The data used in this analysis were collected in Athens, Greece, between May and July 2015 using surveys with migrants from Afghanistan (167), Iraq (60), Iran (41), Pakistan (117), and Syria (144). After cleaning the data, 519 cases were used to inform this brief. In addition to the survey data, 30 qualitative interviews were conducted with questionnaire respondents to gather more detailed information on their experiences.

A peer researcher approach was used to collect the data, meaning that migrants from each country-of-origin group were selected and trained to act as enumerators for the survey. The questionnaire followed a life-cycle approach, asking migrants to describe their lives before they left their country of origin, their experiences during their migration journey, and finally their current situation in Greece and future aspirations. Respondents were asked what their intended destination country had been before they left their country of last residence (where they had lived for a minimum of one year). With regards to their current situation in Greece, respondents were asked: ‘At this moment, do you want to: (1) stay in Greece; (2) migrate to another country; (3) return to your country of origin; or (4) return to the country you were last living in’. Respondents who stated they wanted to migrate to another country were then asked why, and also how they planned to get there.

highly personal considerations⁸ that may be difficult to influence with policy. For example, a 2016 study found that for Afghan migrants, certain destinations signify social prestige.⁹ Eritrean migrants surveyed for another study named a hierarchy of destinations, with northern European countries, Canada, the United States, and Australia as the top destinations. Italy was in the middle, since its climate is moderate and the people considered friendly, while Greece and Spain were viewed as undesirable and even unsafe.¹⁰

But of the research on migrants’ destination choices, little has focused on how intentions may change during the migration journey. This issue brief contributes to filling this gap. Drawing on surveys of more than 500 migrants and refugees in Greece conducted during the summer of 2015, the brief begins by examining how respondents’ intentions changed after their arrival in the country. It then explores the factors that influenced these changes, and concludes by assessing the implications of these findings for policymakers and policy debates within the European Union.

II. MIGRANTS’ INTENDED DESTINATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER ARRIVAL IN GREECE

When asked to name the final destination they had in mind when they departed their most recent country of residence,

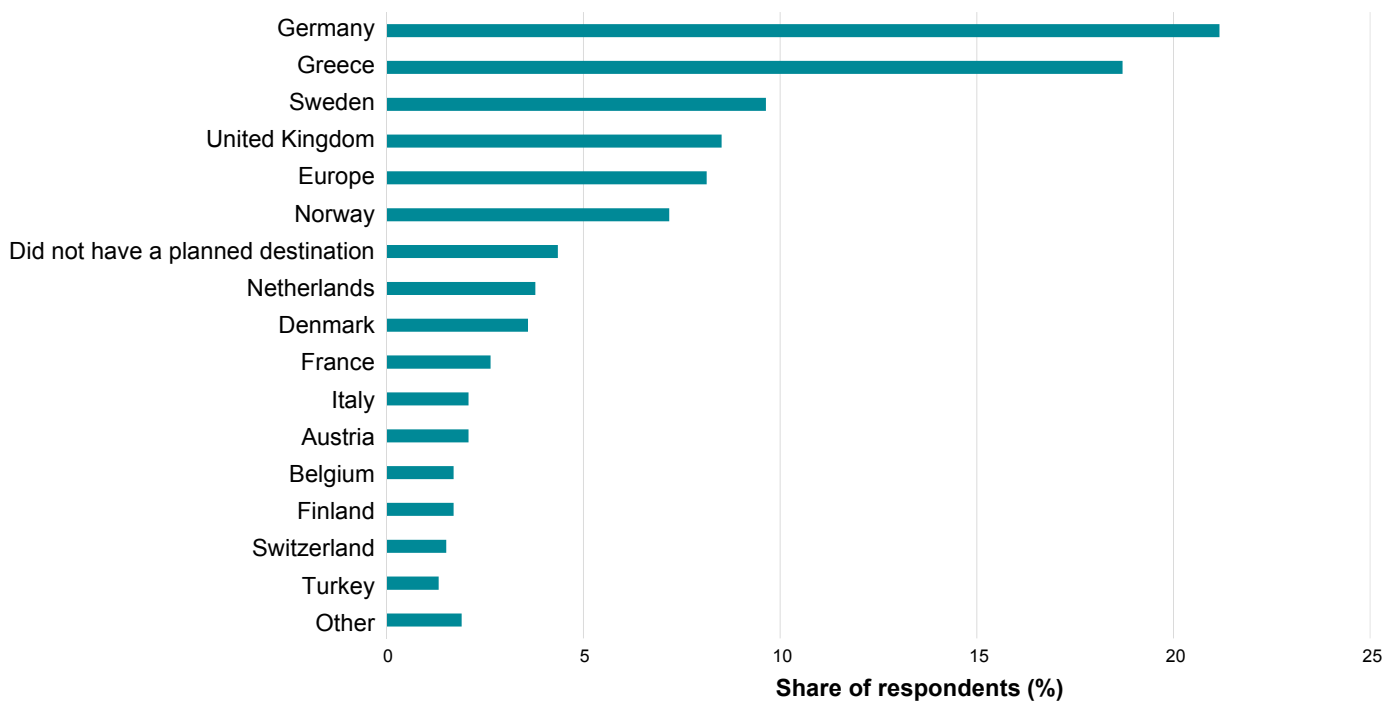
the migrants who participated in this survey gave a variety of answers—but with several pronounced trends.¹¹ Less than one-fifth of the sample named Greece. The majority had intended to transit through Greece en route to northern European destinations. Germany was the top planned destination, named by slightly more than one-fifth of all respondents (see Figure 1). Of those who intended to migrate to Greece itself, most were from Pakistan (50 per cent). This reflects a long-standing history of labour migration from Pakistan to Greece, primarily to fulfil demand in the agricultural sector. Another 19 per cent of respondents who cited Greece as their intended destination were Syrian.

Regardless of their pre-existing plans, respondents faced a choice after they arrived in Greece. They could:

- ▶ stick to their plan, either by continuing on to their intended destination or by staying in Greece, if that was their aim;
- ▶ change their minds by staying¹² in Greece, instead of migrating onwards; or
- ▶ change their minds by picking a different EU country as the destination for their onwards movement.

The majority of respondents chose to continue to their original destination (64 per cent), providing further evidence that individuals who plan to migrate choose their destinations carefully and based on strong personal preferences. Germany, Greece, and Sweden remained the top three destination choices among this group. Thirty per cent of these respondents stated they still planned to continue their journey to Germany and 13 per cent planned to continue to Sweden. Of the 19 per cent of respondents who

Figure 1. Intended destination at departure, by share of survey respondents (%), 2015



Source: Author's analysis of survey data collected in Athens, Greece, between May and July 2015.

originally chose Greece as their destination, 62 per cent chose to stay there, while the others decided to migrate onwards. Most of those who originally chose Greece *and* stuck to this plan were Pakistanis (59 per cent), followed by Syrians (25 per cent).

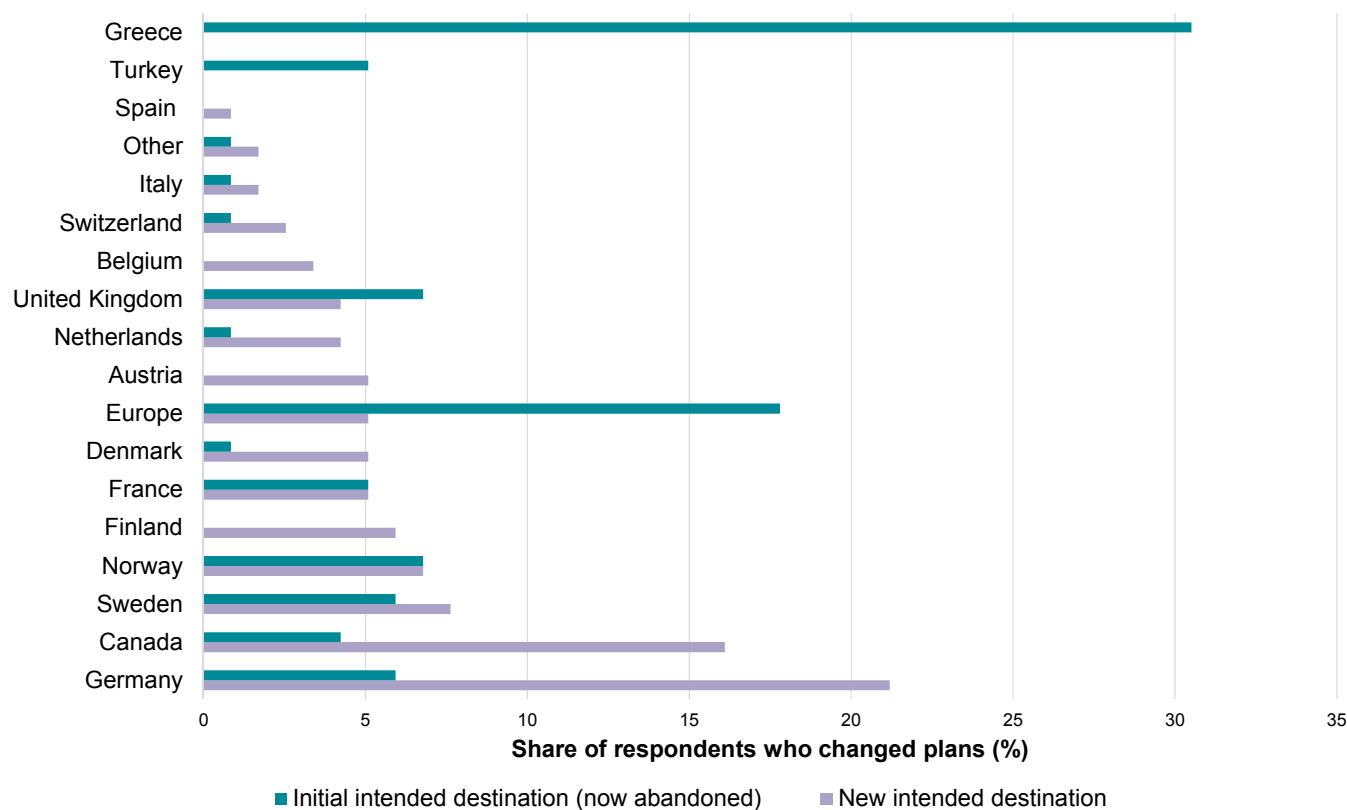
Among respondents who had initially planned to pass through Greece to reach another country, 14 per cent changed their minds and decided to stay in Greece. Of these respondents, the largest shares indicated that their original destination had been the United Kingdom or Germany (approximately 17 per cent each). The third-most common choice was Europe, with no country specified (nearly 16 per cent).

Of all respondents, 23 per cent changed their intended destination while in Greece to a country other than Greece (see Figure 2). The largest share of these (31 per cent) had originally intended to migrate to Greece but chose a new destination after they arrived.¹³ Norway and the United Kingdom were also among the top initial destinations later abandoned by respondents in favour of other preferred destinations. Smaller countries such as Austria, Belgium,

Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands were rarely chosen as initial destinations but emerged as more common destinations once migrants reached Greece. And while some respondents had broadly stated that Europe was their initial goal, many appear to have developed more concrete plans since arriving in Greece.

It appears that respondents often selected well-known destinations such as Germany, Greece, Sweden, and, simply, 'Europe', when starting their migration journeys. Once they arrived in Greece, many adjusted their goals, perhaps after having gained access to new information that encouraged them to aim for smaller European countries less well known outside Europe, such as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands. Previous research supports this hypothesis, indicating that transit countries provide new opportunities for migrants to acquire information, form networks, and make informed decisions regarding onward migration.¹⁴ The story shared by one respondent during an in-depth qualitative interview illustrates how such information can affect migration plans (see Box 2).

Figure 2. Initial and new intended destinations among respondents who reported changing their plans while in Greece, (%), 2015



Source: Author's analysis of survey data collected in Athens, Greece, between May and July 2015.

Box 2. New information, changing plans

Nabila is an Afghan woman who migrated to Greece with her two children, leaving her husband behind in Iran. She migrated to make a better life for her children, who were discriminated against in Iran, and to give them the opportunity for higher education. The family could not afford the smuggling fees for everyone, so her husband stayed behind to continue to work in Iran and send them money for their journey.

Initially, they had planned to migrate to Switzerland. They had heard from a relative it was a good country that afforded good rights to families. They hired a smuggler from Iran to take them to Greece, but he left Nabila and her children in Turkey. They lived in Turkey for six months while they gathered enough money and found another smuggler to take them to Greece. They crossed in a small boat from Turkey to the island of Lesbos, a short journey that still took them seven hours due to rough seas.

Once in Greece, Nabila tried to find another smuggler to take them to Switzerland but could not afford plane tickets for all of them. An Afghan girl they met in Greece had a brother in Norway who was taking her to that country. He offered to also take Nabila's daughter, Laila, with him. At the time of Nabila's interview in Greece, Laila had been in Norway for three months. Nabila was hoping she and her son could join Laila by applying for family reunification. Nabila and her son were living in a smuggler's house in Athens while they waited for Laila's claim to be processed. Norway had never been the family's planned destination; however, a connection to Norway provided by fellow Afghan migrants gave them an alternative opportunity when they could not make it to Switzerland.

Note: Names have been changed.

Source: Author interview with Afghan woman, Athens, Greece, May 2015.

III. FACTORS AT PLAY DURING MIGRATION DECISION-MAKING

In addition to identifying how respondents' intended destinations changed, the survey data shed light on how these changes correlate with several factors, including new information gained while in Greece. This section begins by examining what sources respondents relied on to inform their decisions, and then considers the factors that contributed to any change of plan.

A. Sources of information about destinations and opportunities

Both prior to departure and in Greece, respondents most frequently relied on information from family and friends (see Figure 3). Contrary to portrayals in the media, almost

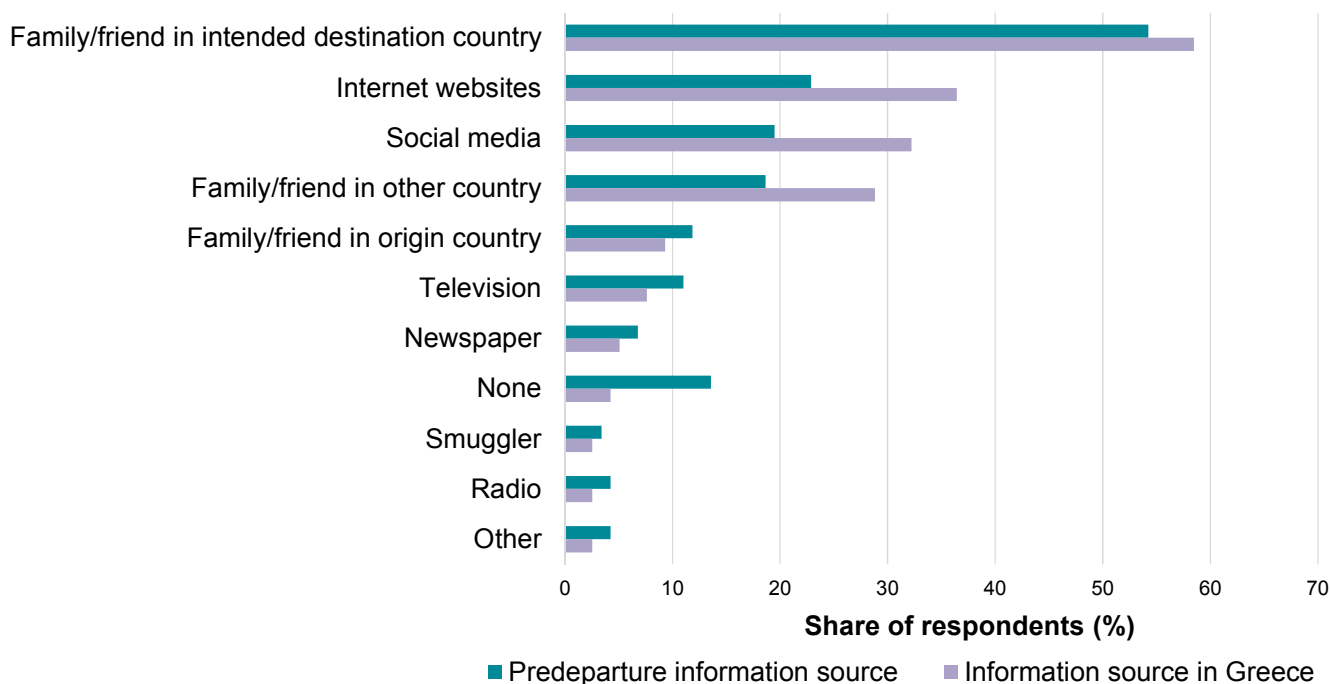
none of the respondents cited smugglers as an information source.

More respondents reported using the internet—both general websites and social media—to inform decisions made in Greece than those made before their arrival there. This difference, particularly notable among Pakistani and Afghan respondents, is most likely due to an increase in internet access. Television, radio, and newspapers were more likely to be used before their initial move (although still far less than family and friends) than after arriving in Greece.

B. Relative importance of different factors

The survey results suggest that four primary factors played a role in shaping respondents' choice of destination once in Greece: (1) the amount of time they had spent in Greece, (2) their legal status in Greece, (3) their perceptions of their living conditions in Greece, and (4) their degree of concern about the potential difficulties of an onward journey. This section considers each of these factors in turn.

Figure 3. Sources of information about destination countries before and after arriving in Greece, by share of respondents (%), 2015



Note: Respondents were asked to select all answers that applied, so some cited more than one source.
Source: Author's analysis of survey data collected in Athens, Greece, between May and July 2015.

1. Duration of stay in Greece

The amount of time respondents had spent in Greece by the time of the survey had a significant correlation with their decision to change plans (or not). The longer respondents had been in Greece, the more likely they were to change their original plans, either by choosing to stay in Greece or by selecting a new destination beyond it. Of those who chose to stay in Greece, 80 per cent had been in the country for more than three years at the time of the survey, as had 51 per cent of respondents who chose a new destination other than Greece.

These findings suggest that respondents who were not able to pursue their original plans adapted their migration strategies over time by either choosing to stay where they were or changing their target destinations. A study of migrants transiting through Morocco had similar findings.¹⁵

By contrast, respondents who kept their original target destination had been in Greece a short time; slightly more than half of this group had been in Greece for less than a year (51 per cent). One explanation for this difference is that respondents who had spent less time in Greece still viewed their original migration goals as achievable. At the same time, it is noteworthy that 34 per cent of respondents who had been in Greece for more than three years still wanted to continue on to their planned destination, indicating that they had not given up on their initial goal. For this group, the dream of onward migration was still alive, despite their long stay in Greece, reflecting what some researchers have termed the ‘transit mentality’ of many migrants in the country.¹⁶

2. Legal status in Greece

Refugee and/or protection status is often considered an important variable in migrant decisions to stay in a particular country or not. It is expected that those with the legal right to stay are more likely to do so, since by leaving they would be foregoing the protection status they had obtained. Yet, the results from this survey suggest that legal status does not necessarily predict migration choices.¹⁷

There was no clear correlation between respondents’ legal status in Greece and how their migration intentions evolved while in the country. Respondents who kept their original plans while in Greece had a range of legal statuses: 14 per cent were refugees, 21 per cent were in the midst of applying for asylum, 29 per cent had temporary protection status, and a further 35 per cent were without legal status.¹⁸ Similarly, respondents who changed their

intended destinations had a range of legal statuses: 22 per cent had refugee status, 24 per cent had temporary protection status, 24 per cent were without legal status, and 30 per cent were asylum seekers.

It is striking that 46 per cent of respondents who wanted to leave Greece (including those who aimed to reach their original destination or a new one) currently had either refugee or temporary protection status. Indeed, the majority of temporary protection holders described planning to migrate beyond Greece, most to a destination within Europe, even though they had legal status in Greece and had already completed the asylum process. This suggests that some migrants with temporary protection are either willing to give up this status in order to migrate onward or do not know that they could lose it once outside Greece.

In fact, respondent statements during qualitative interviews suggested that some considered the acquisition of temporary protection or refugee status a tool to enable their onward migration from Greece. In the summer of 2015, Greece’s northern border was closed, making migration beyond Greece a difficult endeavour for anyone without documented permission to travel. However, migrants with legal status in Greece could apply for a ‘refugee passport’ that granted them permission to travel outside Greece. With this document, several interviewees planned to fly to Germany to apply for refugee status there. It is unclear, however, how often such plans were realised.¹⁹

Of those who changed their minds and decided to stay in Greece, the largest proportions were asylum seekers awaiting the results of their application (37 per cent) and recognized refugees (31 per cent); very few had temporary protection status or no status at all (7 per cent each). Respondents who arrived in Greece and applied for asylum prior to the 2013 reforms to the Greek asylum system could still have been awaiting decisions under the old process, which suffered from extreme backlogs. And, in fact, in qualitative interviews several respondents expressed the view that the asylum procedures were lengthy in Greece and that their claims were not being efficiently processed.

Respondents who changed their choice of destination were more likely than those who did not to report receiving a negative decision on an asylum application (12 per cent compared with 4 per cent) or having an asylum application in limbo (31 per cent versus 16 per cent).

3. Living conditions in Greece

Respondents’ perceptions of their living conditions in Greece appeared to influence their decision to stay or go, as

previous research by the author has found.²⁰ Respondents were asked about both their physical living arrangements and their employment status at the time of the interview.

Those who changed their intended destination and decided to stay in Greece had the most positive views of their current situation. While the majority of this group still reported bad or very bad current living conditions (71 per cent), a significant share (29 per cent) described them as average, good, or very good. Of those who viewed their living conditions in a favourable light, 85 per cent had been in Greece for three years or more. Respondents who changed their initial plans to stay in Greece were the most likely to be working, either legally (33 per cent) or in the informal economy (18 per cent); they were also the most likely to have sent remittances home (44 per cent). This group was also the most self-sufficient, with 80 per cent living in a rented apartment (as compared to irregular hostels, where beds are rented to migrants by the night for a cost often as low as 3 euros; reception centres; or living rough) and only 29 per cent relying on some form of social assistance in Greece.

By contrast, respondents who intended to move beyond Greece—either as originally intended or as a change of plans—rated their current living conditions in Greece as bad or very bad (97 and 92 per cent, respectively). Respondents in these categories were the least likely to be employed: 3 and 9 per cent, respectively, were in legal employment, while 15 and 23 per cent were working informally.

Their perceptions of their living conditions match what was commonly reported about the state of the Greek reception service at the time. Greece had long struggled to provide basic support for asylum seekers and refugees, including access to food or housing, and in mid-2015, when the survey was conducted, there were only 1,271 asylum reception places available in the country.²¹ The closure of Greece's northern border with Macedonia in early 2016 exacerbated the situation. By the end of 2016, the Greek reception service had reported nearly 15,000 requests for accommodation that year, but accommodation facilities could only house 1,900 persons.²² Although housing initiatives launched by the United Nations High Commissioner

Box 3. Contrasting experiences in Greece and decisions about the future

Yara's story. Yara is a Syrian woman living in Greece with her husband and three children. The family first fled to Istanbul and then crossed from Turkey to Greece by boat. They stayed initially at a house provided by the smuggler who arranged their travel, but then the smuggler disappeared and the family had no money for milk or food. Yara stated that her experiences in Greece were worse than in Syria: 'This was the most difficult time of my life, even worse than Syria.' Fortunately, one of the men with whom they had travelled to Greece told them that there was a camp outside Athens where they could find help. The family went to the camp, where they were supported by other Syrian refugees and given a place to stay, milk, and food. When asked where she wanted to go in the future, Yara replied: 'I can't wait just to get my documents and leave. I just want to settle down even if in a small hut anywhere, whatever country. As I told you, I love Sweden very much and Holland; my husband wants Germany. But the country I want is any country that will take my fingerprint and I will go wherever that is. For me, it doesn't really matter. All that matters is that we get out of here and settle down, nothing else, and guarantee our children's future.' For Yara, the destination was no longer important after surviving difficult conditions in Syria, Turkey, and now Greece. She just wanted to find a place where her family could live legally, her children could go to school, and they could live in peace.

Karam's story. When Karam left Syria, he planned to go to Spain or Greece. He knew that he wanted to be in southern Europe where the weather is warm and the way of life is similar to that in Syria. He researched both countries on the internet and found that it was easier to travel to Greece, so he decided to go there. Karam had his own confectionary shop in Damascus that was very successful, but when the war started his competitors destroyed his business. He left Syria with his brother and arrived in Greece one year and nine months prior to the interview. Karam was fortunate to quickly receive refugee status, and he started to work with an uncle who lived in Greece. As soon as Karam received his legal status and had enough money, he opened his own confectionary shop. At the time of the interview, he had two stores in Athens. Karam described feeling very happy in Greece and planned never to leave. He said he no longer thinks of going to Spain and that he made the right choice in coming to Greece.

Note: Names have been changed.

Source: Author interviews with Syrian woman and man, Athens, Greece, May 2015.

for Refugees (UNHCR) and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) filled some of the need in 2016 and 2017, housing conditions in Greece remain difficult, particularly in facilities that were originally intended to be temporary.

The influential role that conditions and experiences in Greece had in shaping respondents' decisions was also evident in the stories they shared during the qualitative interviews. Box 3 presents two contrasting examples that illustrate this effect.

In addition to employment prospects and living conditions, threats of discrimination and police hostility appear to have influenced migrants' future plans once in Greece. Nearly three-quarters of respondents who changed their intended destination reported that 'the situation in Greece is hostile (i.e., more crackdowns by police)', and more than half reported they had 'experienced abuse or discrimination' in Greece. As a substantial proportion of those who changed their intended destination had initially planned to stay in Greece, this suggests that perceptions of hostility may act as an impetus for migrants to move onwards. By comparison, respondents who kept their original plans (including those intending to stay in Greece) were somewhat less likely to report hostility (62 per cent) or discrimination (46 per cent).

4. The risks of an onward journey

Fifty-one per cent of respondents cited 'fear the onward journey' as a reason for staying in Greece, suggesting they were aware of the potential risks of onward migration. And in fact, of respondents who cited this reason, 54 per cent had already made a failed attempt to leave the country. Based on this experience, they may have feared being caught by police or turned back to Greece should they try anew.

Forty-three per cent of respondents who chose to stay in Greece cited the possibility of being subject to return (under the Dublin Regulation) as a reason for their decision, even though returns to Greece were suspended at the time of the interviews.²³ Finally, 'lack of money to continue my trip' was mentioned by 44 per cent of respondents as a reason for choosing to staying in Greece.

But while the risks of moving were considerations in respondents' decisions to stay in Greece, they were cited less often than positive factors that encouraged them to stay. In fact, the four most frequently cited reasons for choosing to stay in Greece were: 'it is a peaceful country' (79 per cent), 'I am well adjusted' (76 per cent), 'friendly locals' (70 per

cent), and 'low cost of living' (60 per cent). This suggests that enabling factors did more to encourage respondents to stay than did restrictive policies that discouraged onward migration, such as the Dublin Regulation or border enforcement measures.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The survey findings discussed in this brief reveal that migrants' choice of destination may be somewhat fixed, and that inducing changes to this choice could be difficult. In fact, the majority of respondents did not change their plans while in Greece. One of the key factors underlying this choice is a migrant's perception of the conditions in the intended destination country. Most often, the respondents based their decisions on information from trusted, personal sources such as family and friends in the destination country. Very few relied on smugglers or traditional media such as newspapers, radio, or television. These findings suggest that efforts to influence migrants' decisions through information campaigns may produce limited results.

In addition to new information that might be garnered from trusted sources while in transit, new opportunities and experiences inform migrants' plans—and, for some, the trajectories of their journeys. Approximately one-third of survey respondents chose a new destination while in Greece, either switching to stay Greece itself or selecting a different destination outside the country. The survey results suggest several factors that appear to have influenced these migrants' plans after they arrived in Greece.

Very few respondents (just 14 per cent) changed their initial plans by opting to stay in Greece itself. Many of those who did:

- ▶ ***Had been in Greece for more time.*** These respondents demonstrated some level of settlement and integration. In fact, 79 per cent of this group had been in Greece for more than three years and nearly all (84 per cent) spoke Greek.
- ▶ ***Reported better living conditions.*** Those who described their living conditions in Greece as average, good, or very good were more likely to stay, although the total share of respondents who viewed their situation positively was quite low, at 29 per cent.

- ▶ **Had made a failed onward migration attempt.** Sixty per cent of respondents who chose to stay in Greece had previously failed in an onward migration attempt. Despite this, factors such as ‘fear of the onward journey’ or the Dublin Regulation were cited less frequently as reasons to stay in Greece than positive factors such as ‘it is a peaceful country’. This suggests that enabling factors are just as (or more) important to migrants’ decision-making process as deterrent factors.

Slightly less than one-quarter of respondents chose a new onward destination after reaching Greece. The plurality of these respondents (31 per cent of the total) had originally intended Greece to be their destination. Respondents who picked a new destination outside Greece:

- ▶ **Had been in Greece for various lengths of time.** Half of this group had been in Greece for less than three years and the other half for more than three. This suggests that some factors that convince migrants to change their destination come into play soon after arrival, while others emerge only later.
- ▶ **Experienced poor living conditions.** Respondents who chose a new destination beyond Greece were the most likely to report bad or very bad living conditions in Greece (92 per cent), suggesting this as a key impetus for wanting to migrate onwards.
- ▶ **Had slow or failed asylum claims.** This group was also more likely to indicate that they wished to move on because they had filed an asylum application that was rejected (12 per cent) or that had been delayed (31 per cent).

- ▶ **Sought new livelihood opportunities.** An overwhelming majority (83 per cent) of respondents in this group mentioned employment opportunities as a factor in selecting their new destination.

This suggests that poor conditions in transit and failed migration ambitions (such as not receiving refugee status) are key drivers behind migrants’ decision to change their planned destination and migrate onwards.

These findings have two primary policy implications. First, conditions in transit countries play a critical role in shaping the decisions of migrants during their journey. For EU policymakers, this means that if they expect migrants and asylum seekers to remain in Greece, reception and integration conditions in the country must be improved. Second, migrants have strong views regarding their intended destinations and carefully considered reasons for choosing them. That a country is reputed to be safe and have good employment prospects, education opportunities, and living conditions is particularly important. Attempting to send migrants to countries they do not know about or view as favourable may not be effective. Moreover, because most migrants rely on family and friends for information regarding destination countries, efforts to reshape their perceptions through informational campaigns or enforcement measures may be futile. In order for a relocation policy to be effective and meet the needs of both EU Member States and migrants, decisionmakers would do well to incorporate migrants themselves into the process of destination selection and to redouble efforts to support their long-term integration into the host society.

ENDNOTES

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- 11 That is, the most recent country where they had resided for a minimum of one year. For the majority of respondents, this was their country of origin; for slightly more than one-quarter of respondents, it was a country of transit (and of this group, 65 per cent were from Afghanistan and 22 per cent from Syria).
- 12 It is important to distinguish here between the concepts of 'staying' and 'settlement'. This study examined the decision to stay at the time of the interview, meaning that the individual might form a different long-term plan for settlement.
- 13 Among this group, Germany (22 per cent), Canada (9 per cent), and Sweden (8 per cent) were the top three new destinations.
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- 18 Legal status is self-reported in this study. Migrants with an irregular status may have never applied for asylum, or could have received a negative reply, have an expired visa, or have received a deportation order. Asylum seekers include those that have a pending asylum application. The category of 'other' includes respondents who stated they did not know their status or chose not to answer the question.

- 19 The legality of this situation with regards to the Dublin Regulation is also unclear. When these interviews were conducted in 2015, Dublin returns to Greece were suspended because the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2011 that returns to Greece violated human rights. See European Court of Human Rights, 'European Court of Human Rights Rules Returns to Greece Violate Human Rights' (press release, 21 January 2011), www.ein.org.uk/european-court-human-rights-rules-returns-greece-violate-human-rights.
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- 22 Ibid., 96-7.
- 23 The European Court of Justice suspended Dublin II returns to Greece in 2011. In early 2017, Member States such as Germany decided to reinstate returning individuals to Greece under Dublin III. While the wording of the question specifically mentioned the Dublin Regulation, interviewees reported being returned to Greece from Macedonia when trying to migrate onwards, despite the fact that Macedonia is not an EU Member State and thus not party to the Dublin Regulation. It is possible that respondents may have also considered returns from Macedonia in their response to this question.

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