

Internal Migration of Asylum Seekers: Navigating through Reception Network and Administrative Procedures in Belgium

1. Context

Administrative procedures, reception policies and residence permits shape the integration processes of immigrants in destination countries, particularly among asylum-seeking migrants. In Belgium and other countries, research has already shown that the administrative pathways of immigrants are often complex, with a succession of precarious residence permits and recurrent periods of irregularity (Schoumaker et al., 2020; Schuster, 2005). These elements impact the life course in the host country as they create insecurity and place individuals in “permanent temporariness” (Bertrand, 2019; Schoumaker et al., 2020).

In Belgium, asylum procedures are lengthy: from several months to more than a year before receiving a final decision on the application for international protection. The average duration in 2016 was 312 days according to an official report from the Court of Auditors (Cour des comptes, 2017). Around 70% of applicants are accommodated in the reception network during their procedure and therefore do not choose where they initially live. Between 2012 and 2020, 35% to 45% of the places available in these reception centres were located in rural municipalities (Zimmer, 2023).

During the asylum procedure, migrants are entitled to temporary residence permits, renewable until the end of the procedure (Schoumaker et al., 2020). If granted international protection, the residence permit obtained is relatively stable; if the protection is rejected, migrants who stay in Belgium often fall into irregularity. Otherwise, they may also obtain a residence permit through other regularisation procedures (such as family reunification). In addition to long and complex administrative trajectories, the migration policies have undergone many changes, leading towards more restrictive measures. For instance, before 2016, the refugee status gave the right to unlimited residence in Belgium. Refugee statuses delivered after 2016 only give a limited right of residence of five years (renewable). The subsidiary protection grants the right to a limited residence permit (one year, renewable).

Some authors demonstrate the negative outcomes of precarious legal trajectories on various aspects of the life course and integration in destination countries. Through a quantitative study using population register data from Switzerland, Bertrand (2019) emphasizes the connection between residence permits and labour market integration: having stable residence

permits enhances the likelihood of economic integration. Still in Switzerland, Hainmueller and colleagues (2016) further add that the longer the procedures, the lower the odds of successful employment integration. In Belgium, the qualitative research of Merla and Smit (2023) explores “the frictions between institutional timescales and migrants’ everyday and biographical timescales” (Merla & Smit, 2023, p. 378). Their analyses conclude that complex administrative trajectories and the temporariness of residence permits constrain migrants’ family plans. Events such as having a child, getting married, or changing homes are put on hold because of legal statuses obtained by the household members (Merla & Smit, 2023).

Other studies link the administrative pathways of immigrants with their geographical mobility (de Hoon et al., 2020; Schuster, 2005). Having stable residence permits is often considered as a way to improve “the mobility capital” (de Hoon et al., 2020). In other words, having papers induces the ability to project in the future more easily and to become “geographically mobile again” (Schuster, 2005, p. 766). De Hoon and colleagues study subsequent migrations among refugees who obtained citizenship in the Netherlands using register data. Although acquiring citizenship comes with facilitated mobility across EU countries, they found that refugees with Dutch citizenship are less likely to leave the country (de Hoon et al., 2020).

Existing research on the connection between geographical mobility and administrative pathways mostly concentrates on the transnational mobility of immigrants. In this paper, we explore the impact of precarious residence permits and fragmented administrative pathways on the settlement in the host country and the internal mobility of asylum seeking-migrants.

2. Questions and hypotheses

From the case of Belgium, this work addresses the following question: what is the relationship between residential mobility of asylum-seeking migrants, their asylum procedure and the residence status obtained? The complexity of the reception network, administrative procedures, and multiple legal statuses give rise to several hypotheses. During the asylum procedure, we expect applicants to have little or no mobility due to their accommodation in reception centres (H1). Secondly, the lengths of stay granted by the different permits vary. The shorter the permit, the greater the uncertainty for migrants, which would reduce their mobility (H2). Finally, at the end of the procedure, when protection is granted, internal migration would be more frequent and directed towards urban municipalities, as they can choose their place of residence (H3).

3. Data and Methods

To capture the long-term consequences of the complex administrative pathways, this paper considers a quantitative and longitudinal perspective as previously done in other studies (Bertrand, 2019; Schoumaker et al., 2020). The statistical analyses will be carried out on a cohort of asylum seekers who arrived in Belgium between 2012 and 2016 (more than 76,500 individuals), whose pathways will be followed until 2020. Data from the Belgian National Register provides precise, dated information on places of residence, the course of asylum procedures, and the succession of various residence permits. This data is exhaustive but present the disadvantage of considering only formal situations of legal residence and right of residence. People remaining on the territory despite the final rejection of their asylum application are generally lost to observation as they are removed from the administrative registers. Register data is also not able to capture the difference between legal residence and *de facto* residence.

An important advantage of this data is however their suitability for longitudinal analysis. Event history analysis will examine the influence of the evolution of the procedure and of obtaining residence permits of varying lengths on internal migrations. This longitudinal approach makes it possible to consider competitive events (migration to urban or rural areas, or immobility) while taking account of explanatory factors that change over time (such as residence permits).

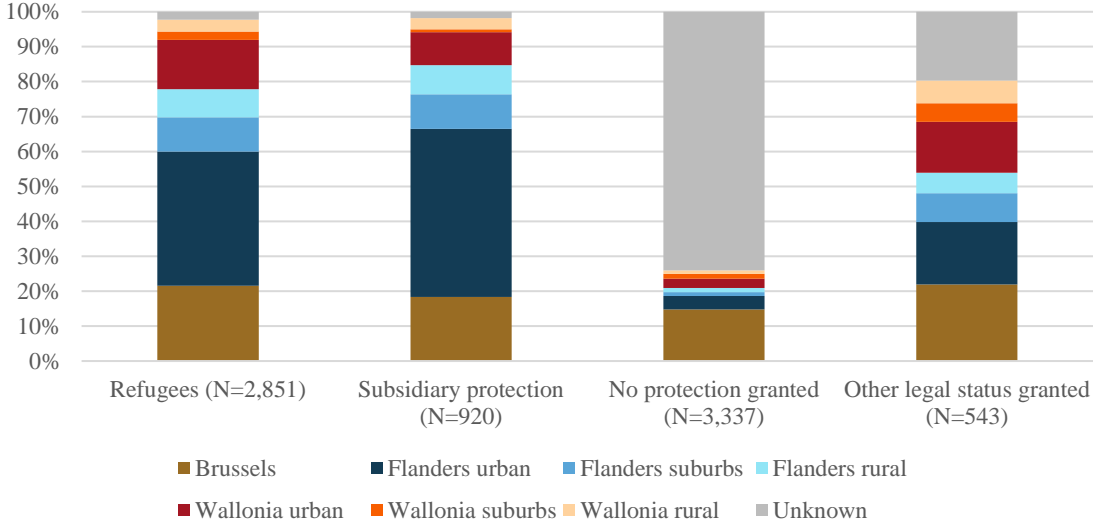
4. Preliminary results

The preliminary descriptive results underline the differences in settlement choices across groups of asylum seekers obtaining different types of residence permits. Among applicants who arrived between 2012 and 2016 and were granted refugee status, 60% were living in Brussels or Flemish urban municipalities, four years after their arrival (Figure 1). A similar result is observed for beneficiaries of the subsidiary protection. Even though asylum seekers are dispersed across all types of municipalities on the territory of Belgium at arrival (Zimmer, to be published), those who obtain an international protection tend to later reside in urban areas, preferably in Brussels or Flanders (the northern region of Belgium). Having a secure residence permit allows to project in the future in the host country (Bertrand, 2019; Merla & Smit, 2023). Moving to Brussels or Flemish urban municipalities could reflect strategies to settle closer to existing immigrants or co-ethnic communities and to support the integration process. Among those who were not (yet) granted a protection, it is more common to reside in Brussels four years after arrival (57% of this group reside in Brussels, if we exclude those who are deregistered). In this group, many individuals are lost to observation but might still live in

Belgium, without papers. For asylum seekers who obtained another type of residence permit, the attractiveness to urban municipalities is also observed but residing in Flemish urban areas is less common than for recognised refugees.

These preliminary findings already support our third hypothesis: beneficiaries of international protection prefer to settle in urban municipalities. These results however remain descriptive and only give a snapshot of the spatial dispersal four years after arrival. Further analysis will consider the evolution of the internal mobility in function of the evolution of the asylum procedures and the change in residence permits.

Figure 1. Spatial distribution 4 years after arrival in Belgium, by type of status obtained before the end of December 2020 (N = 7,651)



Note: Author's calculations, based on a 10% sample of the cohort of asylum seekers who arrived in Belgium between 2012 and 2016.

Source: Belgian National Register

5. References

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