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ASYLUM APPLICANTS IN THE EU – AN OVERVIEW

DANIELA WECH¹

The number of refugees that applied for asylum in the EU last year was significantly higher than in previous years. A considerable share of asylum applicants was granted permission to stay. In addition to providing information on asylum applicants as well as decisions on asylum applications, this article also presents survey findings with regard to the qualification structure of asylum applicants.

Asylum applications in the EU

Figure 1 shows the development in the number of asylum applicants per month in the top 5 EU countries with the highest number of applications since 2009.² These countries were Germany, Sweden, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. In the years from 2009 until 2012, the number of asylum applicants in these countries was below or around 5,000 per month. At the end of 2012, monthly applications in Germany exceeded the number of 10,000 for the first time. Since the beginning of 2013, the absolute number of asylum applications per month in Germany has constantly been higher than in any other EU country. It rose significantly during the years 2013 to 2015; the increase was especially pronounced in autumn 2015. This was the time at which the topic “refugee crisis” started to gain attention in the public debate in the EU. At that time, the monthly number of asylum applicants went up in all top 5 EU

Figure 1

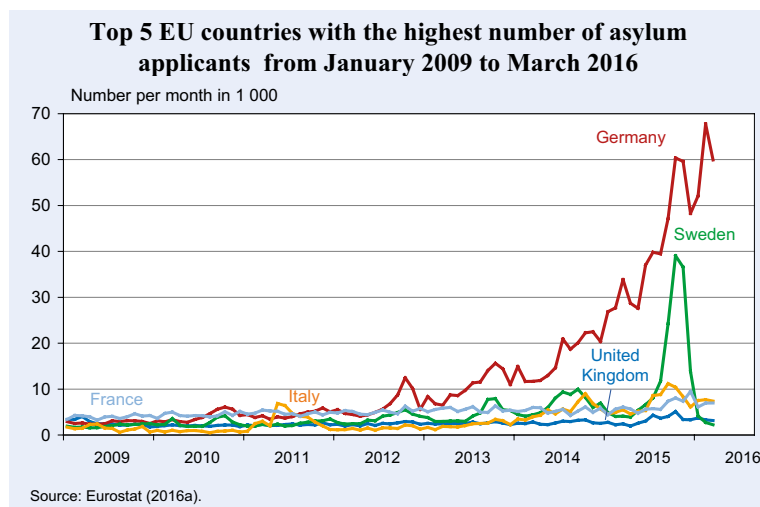
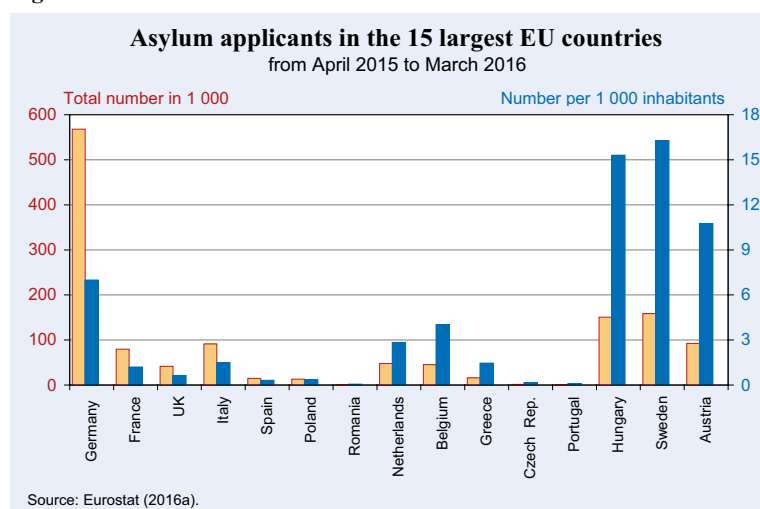


Figure 2



countries. Sweden experienced the largest increase in one single month. Since the end of 2015, the numbers have tended to decline in all countries. However, there are differences across countries. Whereas the number of asylum applicants reached the same level as prior to the peak in Sweden, it climbed to a fresh peak in Germany at the beginning of 2016.³

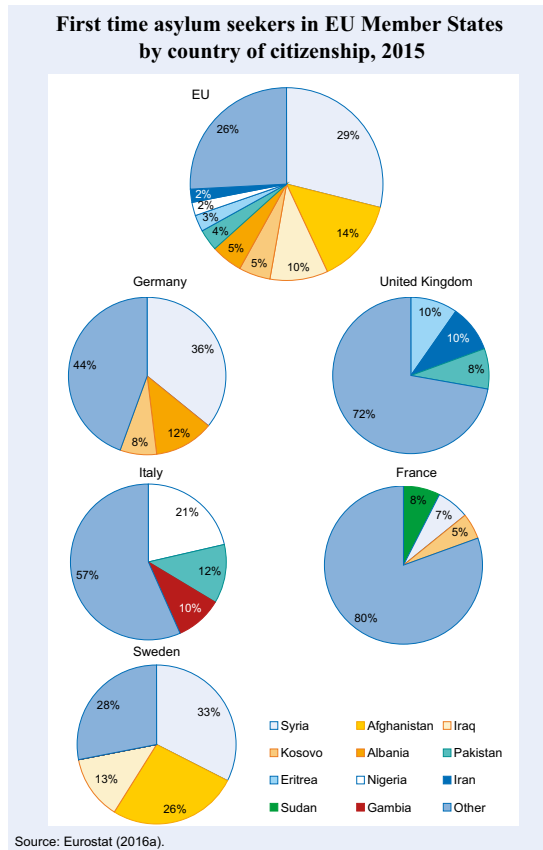
In absolute numbers, Germany was the country in which most people applied for asylum. However, when accounting for the population size, a different picture emerges. Figure 2 depicts the number of asylum applicants in the 15 largest EU countries both in total numbers, as well as relative to the population size of the respective

¹ Ifo Institute. The author would like to thank Dominik Elsner and Jan-Philipp Suchta for data research assistance.

² All figures in this article with monthly data show numbers until March 2016. This is the latest month for which data was available for all EU countries (date of reference: 14 June 2016). This is necessary to allow for cross-country comparisons.

³ Poutvaara and Wech (2015) and Wech (2016a,b) deal with the situation in Germany.

Figure 3



country. On the left axis, the accumulated numbers of applications during the 12-month period from April 2015 to March 2016 are shown in absolute numbers. On the right axis, the numbers per 1,000 inhabitants are shown. It becomes obvious that relative to its population size, Sweden, Hungary and Austria received the most asylum applications. The ratio of asylum applicants to the population was more than twice as high in Sweden and Hungary than in Germany. It was relatively low in France, the United Kingdom and Italy – three countries that were among the top 5 countries with the highest number of applicants in Figure 1. The ratio was much higher in Belgium and the Netherlands than in these three countries.

Most people who applied for asylum in the EU in 2015 came from Syria (29%). In second place were

Afghans (14%) and in third place Iraqis (10%) followed by applicants from Kosovo (5%) and Albania (5%). Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Iran were also among the main countries of origin of asylum applicants in the EU. Figure 3 reveals major differences in the main countries of origin across countries. In Germany and Sweden, Syrians accounted for a large share of applicants (36% and 33% respectively), whereas in France, only 7% of all applicants came from Syria, and in Italy and the United Kingdom, Syria was not one of the three main countries of origin. In Germany, for example, the top three countries of origin were Syria, Kosovo and Albania, while in Italy, they were Pakistan, Nigeria and Gambia. There were also cross-country differences between the share of applicants that came from the three main countries of origin; in Germany, this share accounted for 56% of applicants, whereas in France, it only accounted for 20%.

Decisions on asylum applications

National authorities are in charge of evaluating the asylum applications and deciding whether asylum is granted to a person or not. Figure 4 shows the top 5 EU countries with the highest number of pending asylum applications – this means the countries with the highest number of applications being processed. It becomes obvious that the number has been increasing steadily in Germany since 2014. In March 2016, there were over 470,000 pending asylum applications compared to fewer than 140,000 in January 2014 (a more than three-fold increase). Apart from Germany, pending asylum applications only increased remarkably in Sweden. In December 2015, the number was almost three times

Figure 4

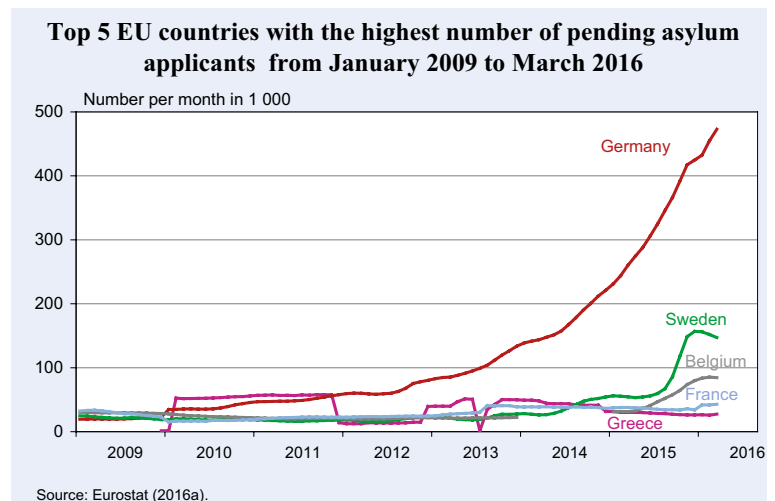
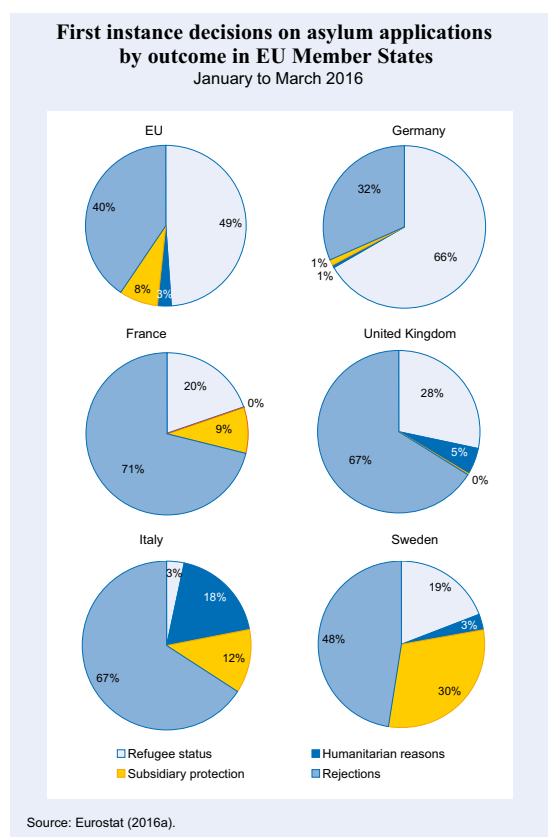


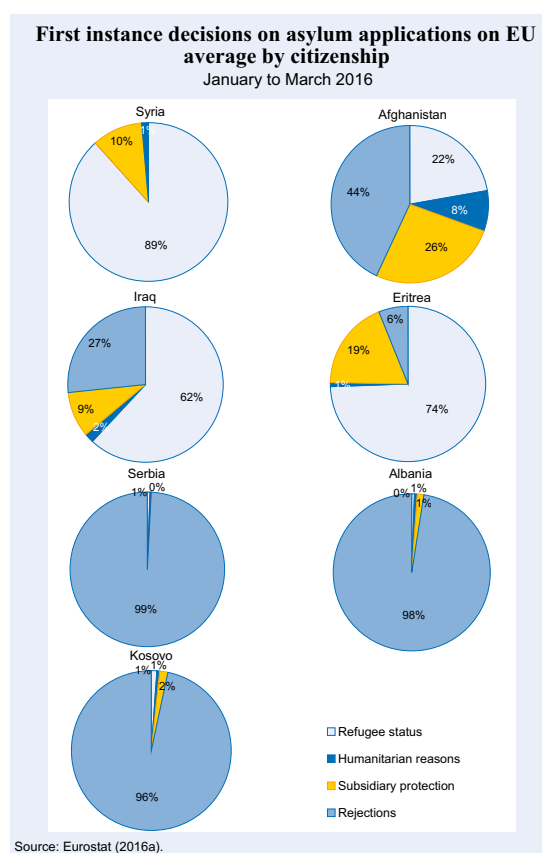
Figure 5



higher than in June 2015 (more than 150,000 compared to around 55,000).

Figure 5 illustrates first instance decisions on asylum applications by outcome in the first quarter of 2016. Refugee status is defined as protection under the Geneva Convention; authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons means a person is granted permission to stay under national law. Subsidiary protection status is granted to applicants who would face a real risk of suffering serious harm in their country of former habitual residence (Eurostat 2016b). On EU average, almost half of all applicants were granted refugee status, 3% were allowed to stay for humanitarian reasons and 8% gained subsidiary protection status. 40% of asylum applications were rejected. These shares varied substantially across countries. In Germany, over two thirds of applicants were granted refugee status, whereas in Italy, only 3% were considered as refugees. However, while 19% of applicants were granted authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons in the latter country, this share was negligibly small in the former country. The share of rejected applications was only 32% in Germany; while in France,

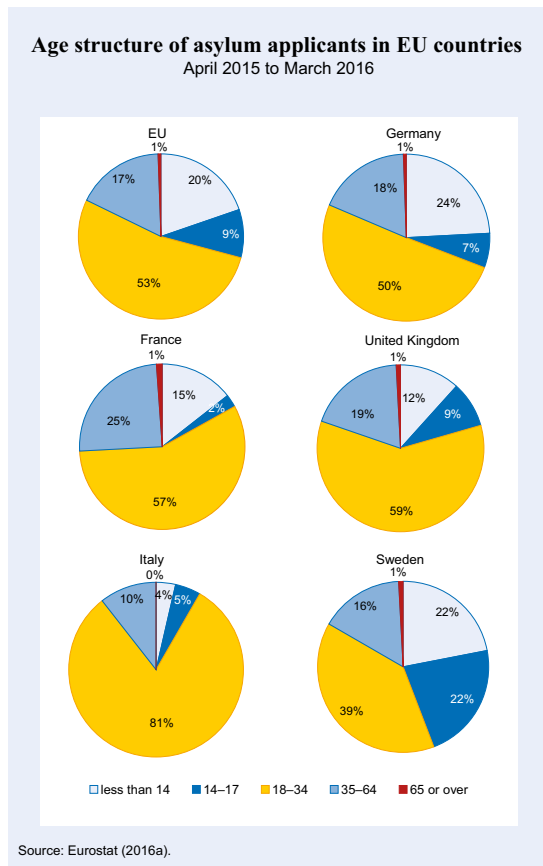
Figure 6



the United Kingdom and Italy, around two thirds of applications were rejected.

First instance decisions on asylum applications on EU average by citizenship in the first quarter of 2016 are shown in Figure 6. People from Syria were granted refugee status in 88% of all cases, whereas only 2% of applications were rejected. The shares of applicants from Iraq and Eritrea that were considered as refugees were also very high (62% and 74% respectively). Nevertheless, the applications of over one quarter of all Iraqis were rejected. Applicants from Afghanistan were granted refugee status in 22% of all cases, while 26% were given subsidiary protection status. Compared to applications from people from Syria and Eritrea, the share of rejected applications was much higher (43%). As far as applications from people from Serbia, Kosovo and Albania are concerned, a completely different picture emerges: 99% (Serbia), 96% (Kosovo) and 98% (Albania) of all applications were rejected.

Figure 7



Demographic characteristics of asylum applicants

Figure 7 illustrates the age structure of asylum applicants during the 12-month period from April 2015 to March 2016. On EU average, 53% of applicants were aged between 18 and 34 years. Children under the age of 14 accounted for 20% of all applicants; the share of those aged between 14 and 17 years was 9%. 17% of asylum applicants were between 35 and 64 years old, and only 1% were 65 years or older. There were cross-country differences in the age structure of applicants. In Italy, for example, 81% of applicants were between 18 and 34 years old, whereas this share was only 39% in Sweden. Nevertheless, the age structure showed common patterns across countries: Asylum applicants tended to be relatively young and the share of those aged 65 years or older was negligibly small in all countries. In terms of the gender structure of asylum applicants, there were also common patterns across the EU countries shown in Figure 7. During the 12-month period from April 2015 to March 2016, on EU average, 72% of applicants were male and 28% female. In most countries, men accounted for just over two thirds of applicants; while in Italy a mere 12% of applicants were women.

Qualification structure of asylum applicants

A question that is often asked with regard to the integration of asylum applicants is that of the qualification structure of those applying for asylum in the EU. As Syrians represented the highest share of all applicants (see Figure 3), preliminary findings from a survey conducted among Syrian refugees by the UNHCR (UNHCR 2015) make it possible to draw tentative conclusions about the qualification structure of a significant share of asylum applicants. UNHCR teams asked Syrians who arrived in Greece between April and September 2015 a set of questions, including one about their level of education. Although the results cannot be considered as representative of Syrian refugees in the EU, they provide interesting insights into the qualification structure of Syrian asylum applicants. 86% of interviewees reported a high education level: 43% of respondents had a university level education, 43% a secondary level education. 12% stated that they had a primary level education and only 1% reported having no education. These preliminary findings suggest that Syrians applying for asylum in the EU have a high level of education.

The third highest number of asylum applicants in the EU came from Iraq (see Figure 3). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted a survey among Iraqis who left their home country in 2015 (IOM 2016). During November and December 2015, Iraqi migrants residing in Europe were interviewed by IOM. As in the survey described above, these findings cannot be considered as representative of those Iraqis who came to Europe in 2015. 41% of interviewees reported having completed university education, 47% indicated that they have secondary level education. Only 11% of respondents stated that they had only completed primary education.

The surveys conducted by the UNHCR and IOM indicate a high level of education on the part of Syrian and Iraqi asylum applicants. According to OECD (2015), refugees are generally not among the very poorest people in their home country and also tend to have an above-average education level compared to all natives of their countries of origin. PISM (2015) also concludes that Syrians who have recently come to Europe are from the richer and more educated part of Syrian society.

In Germany and Austria, national authorities conducted surveys among asylum applicants. The findings from these studies suggest that applicants tend to have a lower education level than the native population, although

there are significant variations between citizenships (European Commission 2016). In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees interviewed asylum applicants in 2015 (BAMF 2016). The survey was conducted on a voluntary basis and its findings cannot be considered as representative. 18% of respondents reported to have attended a university and 52% stated that they had attended a secondary education institution (they were not asked if they also obtained a degree). 22% of interviewees went to a primary education institution and 7% responded that they had received no formal education. However, the answers varied significantly between respondents from different countries of origin. Applicants from Iran and Syria had a higher level of education than those from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea. 35% of Iranians and 27% of Syrians attended a university, the share of those with no formal education was below 4% among applicants from both countries (percentages below 4% were not reported). The share of asylum applicants from Afghanistan without any formal education was particularly high (27%), but it was also significantly higher than the average among applicants from Serbia (18%). With the exception of interviewees from Iran, male respondents had a higher level of education than female respondents. Asylum applicants were also asked about their language skills. 28% of all survey participants reported having English language skills, this share was highest among Syrian respondents (41%). It was much lower among applicants from Afghanistan (14%) and substantially lower among interviewees from Serbia (3%).

In a survey conducted by the Ifo Institute in October 2015, firms in Germany were asked to judge the potential of hiring asylum applicants (Battisti, Felbermayr and Poutvaara 2015). According to their responses, 59% of firms see good chances; but potential was typically seen for low-skilled jobs. A lack of language skills was considered as the most crucial obstacle to employing asylum applicants, followed by a low qualification level and a high bureaucratic burden. At the beginning of 2016, the Ifo Institute conducted a further survey in which human resource managers were asked about their plans to hire asylum applicants (Falck et al. 2016). Only 7% of respondents stated that they had employed asylum applicants during the past 24 months. 34% of all interviewees intended to do so in this year or from 2017 onwards. This share was twice as high among those who responded having already hired asylum applicants. Language skills were seen as by far the most important barrier; however, the qualification structure of asylum applicants and bureaucratic barriers were also men-

tioned as obstacles. The findings from these two surveys indicate that a lack of (language) skills poses a challenge for the integration of asylum applicants into the labour market.

The Austrian employment agency conducted a non-representative survey among asylum applicants during the time period from the end of August to mid-December 2015 (AMS 2016). Participants were asked about their highest educational degree. Respondents from Afghanistan were much lower qualified than those from Syria, Iran and Iraq (these were the only four countries that were analysed separately). 30% of interviewees from Afghanistan reported to have no formal education, whereas this share was only 1% among those from Syria and Iran and 5% among those from Iraq. 67% of Syrian asylum applicants either had a university degree, a secondary education degree or a vocational degree. This share was 90% among applicants from Iran and 73% among applicants from Iraq, however, it was only 26% among respondents from Afghanistan. In general, women tended to have a higher education level than men.

Concluding remarks

The refugee crisis in the EU is largely driven by the large number of Syrians that came to Europe due to the civil war in their home country. Syrian nationals are also those who are most likely to be granted refugee status in the EU. Preliminary findings from non-representative surveys suggest that Syrian asylum applicants are highly educated compared to applicants from other countries of origin. However, the comparability of educational and vocational degrees is not easy to verify and language difficulties also pose a challenge for the integration of asylum applicants into the labour market.

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