Essays on the decision-making processes of irregularised migrants over the course of their migration trajectories

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Research project methodologies

The full methodologies for each of the research projects can be found in the project reports, accessible via the links below:

Fluctuations in Migration Flows to Europe

Irregular Migrants' Decision Making Factors in Transit

Rejected Afghan asylum-seekers in the Netherlands

ADMIGOV Work-Package 2: The Governance of Exit

Summary

Migrant decision-making is not simply a one-off decision to leave a country of origin in order to reach a specific destination country. Rather – and particularly when faced with border controls that severely limit opportunities for cross-border movement and settlement – migrants may revisit and revise their decision-making and plans in response to new information, experiences, opportunities and constraints. Migration trajectories may therefore evolve contingently, and may encompass multiple countries, strategies, and both periods of mobility and immobility. This thesis contributes to our understanding of migrant decision-making through an investigation of the decision-making processes of irregularised migrants over the course of their migration trajectories. Put differently, the chapters examine how irregularised migrants – people whose migration takes place outside of authorised channels in some way or for some period of time – make decisions regarding their migration once they have left a place of origin. Such decisions may include whether to stay where they are, whether and how to migrate onwards to somewhere else, or whether to return to the place of origin or another place of previous residence.

Following a review of the extant literature (Chapter 2), and in light of policymaker efforts to selectively attract, prevent, and manage different (potential) migrant groups, three aspects of migration decision-making are given particular attention in this thesis. These are: 1) family-level decision-making; 2) the role of social, psychological and emotional factors; and 3) the role of policies in migration decision-making. The empirical chapters, which draw on data collected in the framework of multiple research projects (see Chapter 3 for the methodology), examine the decision-making of different groups of irregularised migrants in the context of their migration towards, or in, the EU: Afghan, Albanian, Iraqi and Syrian nationals.

The first of the empirical chapters (Chapter 4) analyses the ways in which Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian asylum-seeking families jointly navigate mobility regimes in order to achieve their migration aspirations in the context of dynamic policy changes introduced along the Eastern Mediterranean route between 2015 and 2019. Informed by the literature on ‘social navigation’ (Vigh, 2009), this chapter provides an exploratory study of the strategies adopted by families in their efforts to overcome restrictions on their movement and find refuge together: namely, separation in the hope of later reunification, and irregularised onwards migration when the prospect of formal family reunification seems distant or impossible.
Chapter 5 examines the lived experiences and decision-making of rejected Afghan asylum-seekers in the Netherlands, who, in accordance with national policy designed to incentivise their departure, are denied access to basic protections. In this chapter, the non-provision of basic assistance is conceived of as a bordering technology whereby exclusion from the moral economy is meant to produce ‘deportable non-citizens’ (De Genova 2002, 2013) who can thereby be excluded from the national territory. The analysis draws on a feminist approach to geopolitics to firstly explore the embodied effects of state practices of dehumanisation, highlighting the degrading impacts that the denial of ‘bed, bath and bread’ have on the daily material existence, emotional lives and intimate relationships of rejected Afghan asylum-seekers. Secondly, this chapter examines the respondents’ attitudes towards return and finds that, in spite of the extreme hardship and distress they experienced in the Netherlands, the respondents refused to consider return and were instead determined to stay in the Netherlands (or another EU country).

Chapter 6 explores the motivations and decision-making of Albanian asylum-seekers and focusses in particular on how their decision-making has responded to uncertainty and (new) information over the course of their trajectories. The analysis observes differing reasons for and expectations of asylum-seeking among Albanian nationals and identifies the critical role of hope in motivating asylum-seeking in spite of the likelihood of a negative decision and forced return. Drawing on Hayenhjelm’s (2006) explanation of risk-taking, hope is understood as a response to vulnerability; and as driving decisions to ‘try one’s luck’. The analysis furthermore finds that, in response to new information and experiences in the destination country (Germany), respondents’ expectations and decision-making both did and did not adjust – with implications for their strategies regarding continued stay or return, and for their intentions regarding future migration.

Chapter 7 focusses more closely on the return decision-making of rejected Albanian asylum-seekers in Germany and explores both their instrumental and normative reasons for accepting assisted return (commonly referred to in policy terms as ‘Assisted Voluntary Return’ (AVR) programmes). The analysis finds that the threat of an EU entry ban that accompanies deportation is a primary motivation for compliance with return procedures. The perceived legitimacy that some respondents attribute to the return order also plays a clear role in encouraging their departure. This chapter argues that the significance of an EU entry ban in this case rests on the opportunities that Albanian nationals have for legal re-entry to, and labour migration in, the EU. Secondly, this chapter reflects on the need for a better understanding of perceived legitimacy in a migration context and raises questions for its further conceptualisation and empirical investigation.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 8) draws together some cross-cutting insights from the empirical chapters. Taken together, the analyses illustrate the different ways in which (potential) migrants ignore or resist policy restrictions and persevere in irregularised journeys or residence when they perceive no acceptable alternative. Across these case studies, hope emerges as a powerful source of motivation for undertaking irregularised modes of migration in spite of the uncertainty, risks and costs involved. It is therefore argued that policymakers who assume a purely instrumental rationality in the decision-making processes of vulnerable (potential) migrants fail to acknowledge that, without a reasonable alternative, hope is a non-rational but nevertheless ‘reasonable strategy’ (Zinn, 2016) for dealing with a situation experienced as intolerable and which offers little other scope for manoeuvre. Nonetheless, a comparison across these case studies also demonstrates that migrants are responsive to policies when these offer hope, or an alternative course of action which they perceive as reasonable. These findings provide evidence to support a more pragmatic and balanced approach to migration management, in which legal migration channels for vulnerable people should play a central role.