

The Drivers of Mixed Migration from the MENA region

Policy Brief

Key Takeaways:

- First time asylum applications are driven strongly by conflict in origin countries and, in some cases, bordering countries that might have, otherwise, been traditional destinations for displaced persons. More so, it is specific spikes in conflict that drive movements, not accumulated violent history. Countries seeking to reduce asylum applications should, therefore, attempt to reduce and mitigate spikes in violence.
- General macro-economic variables are not significant in terms of driving asylum applications, suggesting minimal concerns that economic migrants seek to abuse the asylum system.
- Network and information distribution effects are the most important factors in terms of selecting into destination countries. This has important policy implications – not least that distributions of migrations in the first stages of a crisis will determine future distributions.
- Development expenditure in either origin countries or so-called transit countries does not deter movements. In general, given the vast economic differences between origin and destination countries, this is perhaps unsurprising. ODI should, therefore, not be used as a policy to reduce or deter asylum applications.
- Should conflict be brought to an end in call origin countries tomorrow, within one year, we expect a reduction in applications by some 60%. The same network effects discussed above suggest that reducing applications to zero will take significantly longer.

Executive Summary

Whilst spikes in asylum applications are often described as “crises” in the media, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the drivers of forced migration - both in terms on the decision to leave and which destinations to seek. In this project, we overcome these limitations by creating a novel dataset that tracks bilateral movements between each pair of particularly relevant origin and destination countries in two particular episodes of mixed migration – the Balkans Crisis from the mid-1990s and the current “European Migrant Crisis”. We find that conflict in the origin country is the main determinant of forced migration but that movements respond to specific short-term spikes, rather than accumulated violence. The analysis also shows that network effects drive selection into destination countries, while economic variables, apart from employment opportunities, play no role. Development expenditures, in origin and transit countries, do not influence

migration patterns. The findings suggest that policy should be focused on preventing spikes in violence in the first instance, while development aid is an ineffective tool to mitigate migration flows. More so, they suggest that European governments seeking more equitable distribution of refugees should seek cross-national commitments only for the first wave of migration, rather than on-going commitments, which are likely more difficult to negotiate. The network effects we expose suggest this initial distribution will be naturally reinforced in subsequent periods, as people prefer to move to countries where they have larger networks, rather than richer economies.

Introduction

Economic research on migration has traditionally focused on “push-pull” models, where individuals make the decisions to migrate based on the net present value of migrating. The costs of migration are weighted against the benefits. The factors that play into the decisions to migrate are divided into “push factors” in the country of origin and “pull factors” in the destination countries. In the context of forced migration, “push-factors” have been a key focus of research, with conflict and repression shown to be robust correlates. Conversely, the decision of which country to migrate to has been increasingly discussed in the European Union in the context of the current migration crisis. This point is amplified by the fact that most individuals do not migrate directly to one of the EU member states but also spend some in so-called “transit” countries.

In the context of these complexities, there is little evidence on the “pull-factors” of forced migration that underlie the decision to migrate to a particular destination. In light of these findings, our research focuses on several aspects of forced migration. First, it discusses the specific nature of the push factors that are relevant, particularly the precise aspects of violence that cause force migration. Second, the underpinning factors that might drive the decision to move (or stay) in a transition country are analyzed. Third, preferences of forced migrants towards certain European countries over others are considered. Finally, we wish to establish whether or not forced migration flows interact with other forms of migration.

Methods and Results:

We construct data using a “3D-Panel” which looks at movements between country-pairs. We create dyads of origin and destination countries for which we know the number of first time asylum applications and the number of accepted asylum applications, i.e. number of successful movements. This allows us to understand selection into destinations. We are focusing on two migration crises: that related to conflict in the Balkans in the early- to mid-1990s and the current crisis that has emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Data is collected from UNHCR and EUROSTAT, economic variables from the World Bank’s series, aid expenditures from the OECD-DAC series and conflict event count data from ACLED and the UCDP/PRIO database. We focus on the EU-28, Iceland, Switzerland and Turkey as destination countries. For the post-Arab Spring crisis, nine important origins were considered,

including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Turkey. For the Balkans series, we focus on all former countries of Yugoslavia. In both series, our selected origins and destinations account for the overwhelming majority of asylum applications in the periods of study.

Figure 1 shows the pattern of violence and first-asylum application for the post- Arab Spring crisis. It can be seen that after 2012 violence started to increase dramatically, and spiked in 2014, after which it remained high. This suggests that the crisis is still ongoing. The trend is reflected in the first-asylum applications, which have been increasing exponentially.

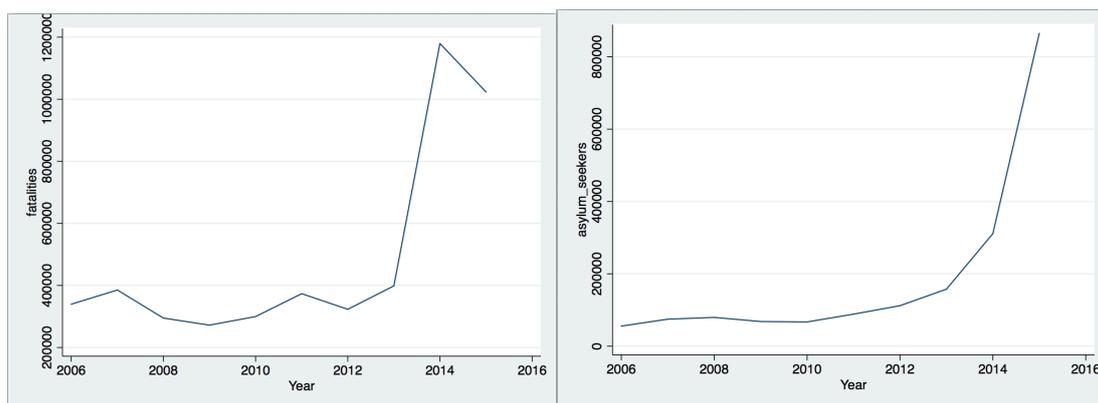


Figure 1: Temporal distribution of violence (left) and first-asylum applications (right) for the post- Arab Spring crisis.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of violence and asylum applications for the mid-1990s Balkan Crisis. The pattern of violence and asylum application differs from the post-Arab Spring crisis, in that we see both the peak of violence and asylum applications, as well as a secular downward trend in both data series since the early-2000s. Even though first-time asylum applications do not decrease to pre-crisis levels, they taper off after the year 2000 indicating that the crisis has ended.

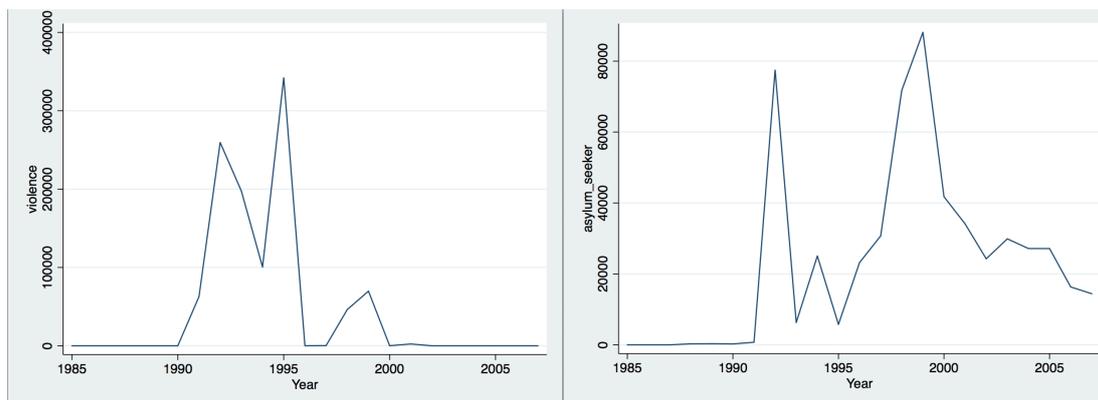


Figure 2: Temporal distribution of violence (left) and first-asylum applications (right) for the Balkan crisis.

We use a range of macro-econometric techniques typical in the migration literature to study two model specifications: the number of first-asylum applications and economic migration (proxied by the number of successful migration applications for

each country pair). We find that previous migration movements are a robust indicator for current migration patterns across both model specifications. In addition, the current stock of migrants in a destination country is positive and robust, suggesting that there are strong effects from networks and the flow of information back to origin countries.

Conflict is identified as a robust push-factor for forced migration. In particular, individuals respond to spikes of violence rather than to accumulated violence, implying that individuals' perceptions of safety in origin countries is formed in the short-term but still informs the decision to migrate. For the post-Arab spring crisis, it is not only the perception of violence in the origin country that plays a role, but also the violence in the neighboring countries. In other words, violence in transit countries drives individuals to seek refuge further afield. This implies that some transition countries that were previously considered safe might have become unsafe, resulting in more migrants to move to Europe. Economic variables, with the exception of labor market opportunities, play no role in the observed migration patterns. In this manner, it is not the economic gains of a destination country in general that is important but, potentially, the chance that an individual arriving in that country can share in these economic gains. This is, perhaps, not terribly surprising – although there is variation in the size of European economies, as Figure 3 shows, all European countries are vastly larger than destination countries. The law of diminishing returns implies that the marginal benefit of moving to a country that, like Denmark, is about 120 times richer (per capita) than Eritrea is small compared to moving to a country like Spain, which is about 70 times richer.

Similarly, official development assistance in the origin country has no effect on migration patterns. An interesting finding is that violence in the origin country is also a driver of economic migration, suggesting that people wishing to leave their country of origin due to security perceptions do so using different migration channels.

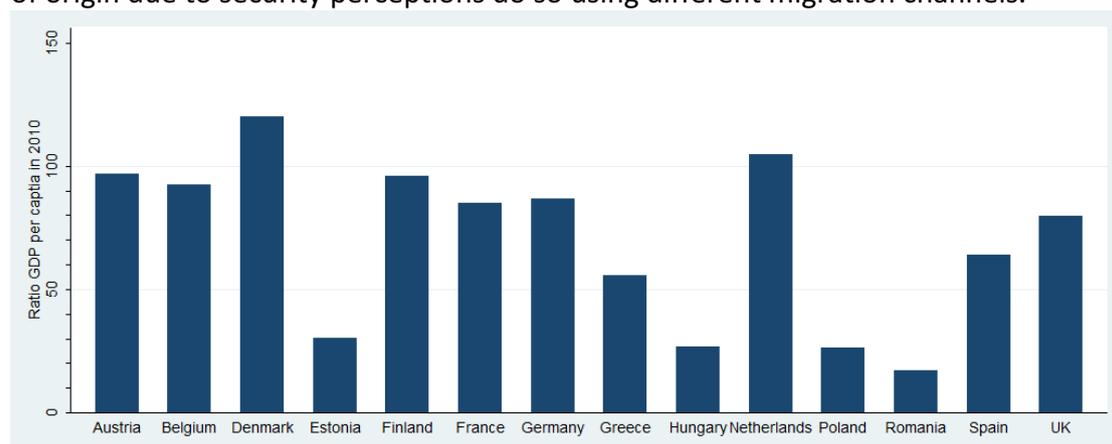


Figure 3: Ratio of GDP per capita in a range of selected European countries compared to Eritrea.

Out of sample predictions suggest that, should conflict end in all destination countries tomorrow, forced migration will drop by some 60% but will not come to an end entirely, due to the network effects we find. That these effects are the most important driver of selection into destination countries, however, implies that the

long-term accumulation of migration is decided early in the crisis. In other words, the spatial distribution of applications in period one determines the distribution in all subsequent periods. Thus, governments that wished to proportionally distribute asylum applicants across the EU should have sought commitments, only, for the first period. Economic equilibrium effects would have ensured such distributions would have been maintained for the rest of the crisis.

Conclusion

In this study we have constructed a “3D panel” that looks at bilateral flows of migration from origin-destination country pairs. The structure of the data allows us to both look at what “pushes” people to migrate from their country of origin but also what “pulls” them to a particular destination. We looked at two crises, the recent post-Arab Spring crisis and the Balkan crisis that occurred in the mid-1990s.

On the push-side, conflict can be identified as a main driver of migration. The impact of violence on migration is rather specific. Neither current violence, nor accumulated violence over time, drive migration flows. Violence lagged over a short period of time does, however. For the post-Arab Spring crisis, conflict in bordering countries is also an important driver.

On the pull-side we find that typical macroeconomic variables do not play a significant role. This finding could be explained by only marginal differences in the macroeconomic environment between destination countries but large differences between origin and destination countries. Only the employment rate in the destination country is a robust pull factor, which could be explained as a proxy for how easy migrants might be able to integrate into the labor market, which differs between destination countries. Development programming in the form of official development assistance in either origin countries or bordering countries does not have an effect on migration patterns. The findings of this study have wide-ranging policy implications:

Policy Recommendations

- Policy makers should focus on reducing spikes of migration and ending conflict in migration prone areas. Policy makers should not only focus on countries individually but reduce violence in conflict-prone areas, including transit countries, which previously might have been considered safe but have become increasingly insecure. More specifically, reducing short-term escalations and their intensity will have a strong impact on migration flows.
- Development aid has been shown to have little to no effect on reducing migration flows, implying that development programming in origin countries does not deter movement from origin countries to Europe.
- Partial adjustments and network effects are highly indicative for the selection of the destination country. Managing expectations about destination countries through these networks could potentially reduce forced migration flows to these countries. Managing early distributions of forced migrants

would, through these processes, ensure that those distributions are self-maintained in the longer-term.

- Reducing conflict to zero will not reduce migration completely. Instead, policy makers will have to make arrangements to accommodate future asylum applications. The structural effects of lags and stocks of migration and the lagged impact of conflict imply that even if conflict can be reduced, first-time asylum applications might remain high.

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