

Asylum in Italy: Longitudinal Evidence from Administrative Data

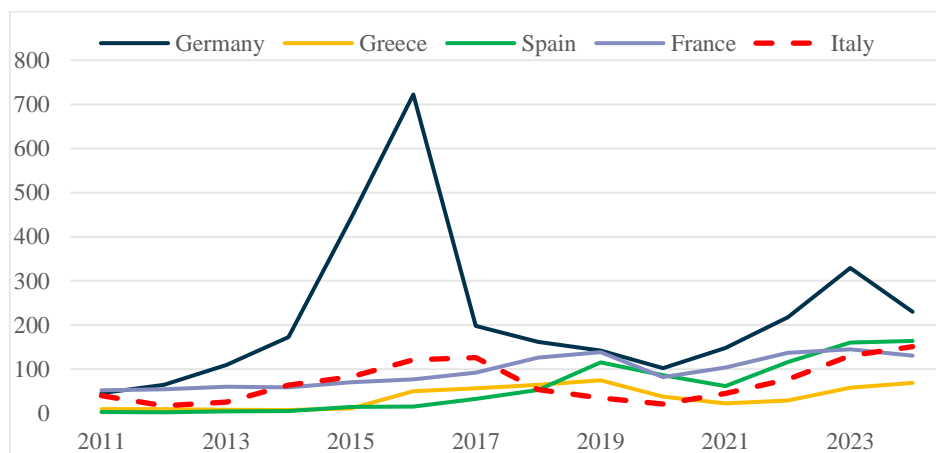
Background and motivation

An asylum seeker is an individual who has left their country of origin, has applied for asylum in another country, and is awaiting a decision by the host authorities on the recognition of refugee status (UNHCR). The term *refugee* applies to anyone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of that country's protection (United Nations, 1951).

In the wake of recent conflicts and wider geopolitical turbulence, asylum applications in Europe have returned to levels equal to or higher than those observed during the so-called Mediterranean refugee crisis of 2015-2017. In 2024, Italy ranks third among the main destination countries in the European Union (Figure 1). Entry routes into Europe are diverse. In the Mediterranean, the Western, Central, and Eastern routes are particularly significant and involve countries of North Africa. Another major influx originates from Asia and the Middle East, as well as from the Atlantic route from West Africa, which is considered the most dangerous due to the length of the journey (Ministry of the Interior, 2024; McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024). This diversity of entry routes is reflected in the wide range of citizenships that most shape host countries' inflows. Likewise, other characteristics of asylum seekers that matter across EU Member States, such as sex and age, differentiate the composition of the flows affecting various European countries.

This context makes it necessary to produce timely, granular evidence linking individual characteristics of applicants to procedural outcomes and to territorial stabilisation. Comparative EU-level statistics offer an essential benchmark, but they rarely capture the micro-level heterogeneity that characterises the initial phases of presence and the functioning of national and sub-national administrative systems.

Figure 1 – Asylum applications in Germany, Greece, Spain, France, and Italy; 2011–2024. Values in thousands. (Source: Eurostat)



Literature review

The study of asylum seekers has generated a wide body of literature, both academic and, given the many social implications, from national and EU institutions. Work on the use of administrative microdata highlights advantages in terms of granularity, timeliness, and linkages to territorial sources (population registers, local socio-economic indicators), alongside known limitations of coverage and comparability. At the European level, EUAA and UNHCR reports stress the need to complement aggregate official statistics with micro-level evidence to better understand both differentials in outcomes and the mechanisms of initial mobility across territories (EUAA, 2024; UNHCR, 2025).

On the determinants of outcomes, a well-established strand examines how recognition probabilities vary with conditions in countries of origin as well as with compositional and institutional factors. More generally, the

literature identifies a systematic component of heterogeneity linked to applicants' citizenship, which remains one of the most informative dimensions behind differences in rates and outcomes, even when controlling for other covariates (Neumayer, 2005).

A second strand concerns procedural times and administrative workloads: recent Europe-wide analyses report spatial and temporal variation in backlogs and processing durations, shaped by shocks to inflows and by local administrative capacity; these dynamics affect applicants' trajectories and the allocation of resources (EUAA, 2024).

The geography of asylum and allocation (dispersal) policies is explored in a growing comparative literature. For the United Kingdom, for example, austerity logics and outsourcing have reshaped mobility across territory, with consequences for reception quality and residential stability (Darling, 2016). In Northern Europe and Germany, studies leveraging the quasi-random initial administrative assignment of refugees show that local networks, neighbourhood quality, and service infrastructure influence integration outcomes and residential trajectories, yielding patterns that are not purely geographic but functional (Damm, 2009). In the Italian context as well, the territorial presence of different cohorts of asylum applicants has been observed through the lens of longer stays, and citizenship has similarly been identified as the principal discriminant (Casacchia, 2024).

Objectives

The aim of this study is to improve the understanding of asylum seekers in Italy by exploiting the detail of integrated administrative microdata to follow cohorts over time, thereby contributing to the literature on the topic. We will document recent advances in the use of administrative microdata to quantify the characteristics of asylum seekers, refugees, and individuals under other forms of protection in Italy. The paper considers asylum seekers who arrived in Italy in different years as distinct cohorts to be followed over time through different administrative sources. More specifically, the work pursues three main objectives:

a) to examine **types of protection and residence permit** obtained by asylum applicants over time (including refugee status, subsidiary protection, special protection, and other forms of residence). This section aims to discuss the pathway leading to the recognition of status and the regularization of presence from a longitudinal perspective, drawing on recent studies on asylum seekers' trajectories in other countries (Schoumaker et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2025).

b) to assess the degree of **stabilization in Italy of different cohorts**, the hypothesis is that asylum seekers are a temporary presence (Jacobsen et al, 2021). Many authors have recently highlighted the tendency to regard the presence of asylum seekers - even from a regulatory perspective - as temporary. In reality, however, some studies focusing on the Italian case seem to indicate that, for many, this presence extends over time (Casacchia et al. 2024).

c) to analyze **internal mobility**, the hypothesis is that asylum seekers are more mobile than other migrants who arrive through established migratory networks, but that they have less consolidated networks in Italy (de Hoon et al. 2021; Dimitriades and Ambrosini, 2023).

It also explores the sociodemographic profiles of applicants and the territorial patterns that accompany the different phases of their presence in the country - from entry to settlement.

Particular attention is devoted to the evolution of procedural outcomes, as well as to key demographic events that mark individuals' life courses. Finally, the study will also investigate the tendency to enter marriage among applicants, with particular attention paid to gender differences. One of the aims will also be to observe whether there are differences between the different cohorts, paying particular attention to that arrived during the refugees' crisis.

Data and methods

We use administrative data on residence permits granted to non-EU citizens in Italy. These data, provided by the Ministry of the Interior, are validated and processed by Istat. The analysis focuses on individuals who were

granted their first residence permit for seeking asylum from 2016 and we trace them and the subsequent cohorts in the stock of valid permits in the latest available archive, referring to 2024. The main socio-demographic characteristics of individuals are considered in the analysis. In addition to issued residence permits, we also use data on asylum applications in Italy—the step that precedes permit issuance. These data include everyone who ultimately does not obtain an asylum-related residence permit.

The methodology leverages administrative linkages and two complementary analytical layers. First, we use multivariate methods (e.g., clustering and related techniques) to derive core profiles of asylum seekers and to compare them between recent entrants and the 2016–2017 crisis cohorts. Second, we implement longitudinal approaches to follow individuals over time—capturing status transitions, territorial mobility across provinces, and key life-course events.

Expected results

Following the 2016–2017 crisis cohorts through to the present, we expect persistent heterogeneity by citizenship and age at arrival, with distinct longitudinal pathways combining status transitions and internal mobility. Compared with recent entrants, the 2016–2017 cohorts are likely to display more differentiated sequences of permits/protection statuses and clearer patterns of early anchoring versus re-settlement. We anticipate pronounced territorial sorting: provinces of first entry will not necessarily align with subsequent places of residence, as migrant networks, the pull of large urban areas, and local administrative capacity shape movements and registration in municipal population registers. We also expect systematic differences in key life-course events (e.g., family formation, presence of children) across demographic groups, and associations between family composition and both procedural outcomes and anchoring trajectories. We also believe that there may be interesting gender differences. By identifying stable profile groups and their recurrent pathways over time, the study aims to provide a cohort-based baseline for monitoring future entrants and for targeting reception, case management, and local service provision.

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