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# Asylum Destination Choice

What Makes Some Western European Countries more Attractive than Others?\*

## FINAL VERSION

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines what explains the relative attractiveness of Western European countries as a destination for asylum seekers. Individuals coming to Western Europe in order to lodge an asylum application are modelled as utility maximisers who choose the destination country that offers the highest net benefit. This benefit is seen as a function of economic attractiveness, generosity of welfare provisions, deterrent policy measures, hostility towards foreigners and asylum seekers, existing asylum communities, colonial and language links as well as geographical proximity. Results from a large dyadic panel over the time period from 1982 to 1999 demonstrate the impact that these fundamental determinants have on asylum destination choice. The implications of the results for the ongoing debates over fair burden-sharing are complex as they provide arguments for two conflicting interpretations of burden-sharing as either financial side-payments or the physical re-allocation of asylum seekers.

Key words: asylum destination, migration, origin, burden-sharing, networks

## **Introduction**

Asylum seekers coming to Western Europe have preferred some destination countries over others. Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland have been the main destination countries relative to their population size in the 1980s and 1990s, whereas Finland, Italy, Portugal and Spain have taken on very few asylum seekers. Sharing the burden of hosting asylum seekers has long since been on the political agenda of Western European countries (Hailbronner, 2000). Vink (2002: 204) calls it the ‘most salient aspect’ of European Union (EU) immigration politics in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, those with a high burden – whether perceived or real – have been arguing for a more equal or ‘fair’ burden-sharing. Germany, in particular, has been an outspoken proponent of such requests (Lavenex, 1999: 57).

It is far from clear what amounts to fair burden-sharing, however. For some, it means that developed countries assist poor front-state developing countries in coping with mass inflows of refugees (Suhrke, 1998), keeping in mind that many of them host a far greater number of refugees than any developed country (UNHCR, 2002). However, within the European debates, fair burden-sharing has come to be understood as the demand of countries, which perceive themselves as overburdened, to share this burden with other Western European countries. Of course, it is not even clear how the burden of hosting asylum seekers should be measured (Hailbronner, 2000: 419). Germany, during its Presidency in the second half of 1994, proposed a complex set of criteria ranging from population and territory size to gross domestic product and the contribution of destination countries to peace-keeping forces and other security measures (Thorburn, 1995: 476). Others have speculated about the number of existing refugees previously granted asylum and the destination country’s ethnic composition (Dacyl, 1995: 104) as well as cultural, historical and linguistic links (ECRE, 1995) as supplementary criteria. Equally unclear is whether sharing the burden would mean a re-allocation of asylum seekers as in the German proposal or financial side-payments.

Calls for harmonised policy measures aimed at a fairer burden-sharing of asylum seekers have only had modest success. The non-binding 1995 Resolution on Burden-sharing (Official Journal of the European Union (O.J.) 1995, C262/1) and the 1996 Council Decision on an ‘Alert and Emergency Procedure for Burden-Sharing with Regard to the Admission and Residence on a Temporary Basis of Displaced Persons’ (O.J. 1996, L63/10) only apply to unusually large inflows of asylum seekers who are taken out of the conventional asylum determination system and are granted temporary protection status, such as those fleeing the war in former Yugoslavia. These represent important flows in terms of absolute numbers, but there is no harmonised approach towards sharing the burden of receiving the vast majority of other asylum seekers not falling into this category. More ambitious are the European Refugee Fund, established in 2000, and the Temporary Protection Directive from 2001 (O.J. 2001, L212/12), which allows EU countries to draw upon the Fund’s resources in the event of mass influx of displaced persons. The Fund’s objective is to ‘support and encourage the efforts made by the Member States in receiving and bearing the consequences of receiving refugees and displaced persons’ (O.J. 2000, L252/12 at 13). However, its financial endowment of 216 million Euros for the five-year period 2000 to 2004 is too small to have much of an impact, keeping in mind that in 1998 the costs of hosting asylum seekers in Germany alone are estimated at around 2.1 billion Euros (DG Justice and Home Affairs, 2001: 25).

As a result of the rather modest success of calls for fairer burden-sharing, those countries with the self-perception of a high burden have undertaken unilateral measures to reduce their burden as well as measures in co-operation with selected other countries, mainly within the framework of the Schengen Convention. Examples of these are so-called ‘safe’ third country and ‘safe’ origin country provisions, re-admission agreements with these countries and sanctions against carriers bringing in asylum seekers without valid visa and other documentation. Aspiring EU accession countries were required to fully comply with this so-

called Schengen *acquis* from an early stage onwards (Lavenex, 1999; Boswell, 2003). In the end, rather than sharing the burden with other Western European countries, those who perceived themselves as overburdened shifted the burden to other 'safe' countries or simply prevented potential asylum seekers from entering the country. It is only very recently that the EU and its member countries have also started to initiate more preventive approaches aimed at addressing and mitigating the causes of migration with the help of aid, trade, investment and foreign policy instruments (Boswell, 2003).

The objective of this article is not to come up with a formula for a fair burden-sharing and to judge to what extent reality complies with such an ideal formula. Rather, the objective of this article is to explain for those asylum seekers coming to Western Europe the choice amongst the various countries on offer as their destination. I want to explore to what extent one can explain the relative attractiveness of destination countries. The results have policy implications for the debate on burden-sharing, albeit rather complex ones.

The article is structured as follows: The next section provides background statistical information on the choice of destination countries by asylum seekers coming to Western Europe. The following section reviews the few existing quantitative studies. I then discuss what theory predicts to be fundamental determinants of asylum destination choice. Afterwards the research design is described, followed by a presentation of the estimation results. The final section discusses the findings and the policy implications for the debate on burden-sharing.

### **The choice of destination country: some background statistics**

To make my analysis possible, I need to account for the great differences in the size of destination countries. A very simple, but widely used, method is to normalise the data one analyses by population size. In the absence of a commonly accepted alternative, I use this as a way to make the number of asylum claims in, say, Germany comparable to those in

Luxembourg. This should not be misinterpreted to the effect that I would regard a simple per capita measure as the only relevant criterion for measuring the burden of hosting asylum seekers.

Table 1 presents the share of total asylum seekers a Western European country has received as a percentage of the sum of asylum seekers in this region, normalised by population size of the destination country. In formal terms:

$$(1) \quad \text{Share}_{it} = \frac{(\# \text{ of asylum seekers in country } i / \text{ population in country } i)_t}{(\# \text{ of asylum seekers in Western Europe} / \text{ population in Western Europe})_t}$$

where *i* stands for each Western European country and *t* represents the relevant time period. The data cover the period from 1982 to 1999 and are presented in three year averages to keep the information reader friendly. Western Europe refers to the 15 European Union (EU) countries plus Norway and Switzerland.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 shows that over the period as a whole, Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland have taken on the largest proportion of asylum seekers in Western Europe relative to their population. Besides these four countries, Belgium, Denmark, France and the Netherlands have also had higher than average per capita shares.<sup>2</sup> There is also clearly substantial variation amongst destination countries. As a measure of variation, one can look at the so-called coefficient of variation (CoV), which is also listed in table 1. This coefficient is defined as

$$CoV = \frac{\frac{1}{N} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^N (X_i - \bar{X})^2}}{\bar{X}}$$

where  $N$  is the number of countries,  $X_i$  is the relevant share of country  $i$ , and  $\bar{X}$  is the arithmetic mean. Note that the numerator is nothing else but the standard deviation.<sup>3</sup> A value of zero would indicate no variation, whereas higher values would indicate greater variation. There is little indication for convergence in the relative share of asylum seekers amongst Western European destination countries as the CoV does not decrease much over the period. There is a slight converging trend, however, if one looks at the 1990s only.

< Insert Table 1 about here >

The substantial variation across destination countries in terms of total numbers could be due to one of two reasons. First, some destination countries might simply receive a high share from a few countries that are the top sending countries in terms of absolute numbers of asylum seekers. Second, some destination countries might be generally more attractive to the ‘average’ asylum seeker no matter what his or her country of origin is. The evidence compiled in table 2 speaks in favour of the second explanation. This table presents the same information as table 1, but the share is computed for each country of origin sending asylum seekers to Western Europe separately and these shares are then averaged over all origin countries. In formal terms:

(2) 
$$\text{Share}_{it} \text{ (origin-specific)} = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{j=1}^N \frac{(\# \text{ of asylum seekers in country } i \text{ from country } j / \text{ population in country } i)_t}{(\# \text{ of asylum seekers in Western Europe from country } j / \text{ population in Western Europe})_t}$$

where  $i$  and  $t$  are defined as before,  $j$  represents each country of origin and  $N$  is the number of origin countries.

The ranking of countries in terms of share of asylum seekers hosted is somewhat different from table 1. Austria drops out of the list of top destination countries, whereas France heads the list. What this means is that, for example, France has a higher share of asylum seekers from many countries of origin, which are not major sending countries of asylum seekers in terms of absolute numbers, however. The opposite is true for Austria. For this reason France heads the ranking over the whole time period in table 2, but not in table 1. Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland have a per capita share of asylum seekers averaged across all origin countries that lies above the mean of Western European countries. With the exception of Austria and Denmark, this mirrors the list of countries that were above the Western European mean in table 1. Also, I observe as much, if not more, variation across destination countries in table 2 as in table 1. Looking at the development of the CoV over time, however, one can find some evidence for convergence across Western European countries. In other words, asylum seekers from specific origin countries generally spread their applications very unevenly across Western European countries, but the distribution has become slightly more even over time.

The fact that substantial variation persists in table 2 means that some countries are more attractive destinations for the ‘average’ asylum seeker and not just those from a few origin countries, which send the most asylum seekers in absolute numbers. It follows that in explaining destination choice within Western Europe it is important to take into account general aspects of destination countries that render them attractive for asylum seekers from any country of origin. In my empirical model I will therefore include both variables, which capture specific dyadic links between destination and specific origin countries, and variables, which represent the general attractiveness of destination countries to asylum seekers from all countries of origin.



< Insert Table 2 about here >

## **Literature review**

To my knowledge, there are only two quantitative studies examining directly the choice of destination country within a region. Böcker (1998) examines the effect of colonial, cultural and language ties, geographical proximity and trade relations on the choice of destination at one moment in time from 44 origin countries to 10 Western European destination countries.<sup>4</sup> Since she does not report standard errors or t-values, one cannot know which of her estimated coefficients are statistically significant. Colonial ties had the greatest influence on destination choice, followed by language ties. Geographical proximity had an unexpected negative sign indicating that destination countries received a higher share of asylum seekers from more distant countries, which is highly counter-intuitive. Thielemann (2003a) examines the share of asylum seekers for 20 OECD countries over the period from 1985 to 1999 normalised by the destination country's population size. He finds that the dependent variable is negatively associated with the total number of registered unemployed people and with an index of deterrent policy measures. It is positively associated with the share of foreign nationals from the top five asylum countries residing in the destination country and with aid disbursement relative to gross national product, which he interprets as a proxy for a destination country's 'liberalness'. No association is found with the economic growth rate and the average geographical distance to the top five asylum countries. My study improves on this research in a number of ways: First, I include more control variables; second, unlike Böcker (1998) I include all origin and all destination countries in my sample; third, I use a dyadic panel data design, which unlike Thielemann's (2003a), allows us to control for origin and destination country fixed effects and helps accounting for special links between destination and origin countries.

My study also relates to Holzer and Schneider (2002) who analyse the determinants of the total number of asylum applications in EU, Western European and 20 OECD countries over the time period from 1980 to 1995. Controlling for destination country fixed effects, they find that economic factors impact upon the number of asylum seekers, but political factors do not. More specifically, a higher unemployment and inflation rate is negatively associated with the number of asylum seekers, as expected. However, contrary to expectation, the same is true for the economic growth rate. Neither the ideological orientation of governments, nor extremist right-wing electoral success, nor in most cases the share of foreigners amongst the total population matter. They also find some evidence for convergence in the number of asylum seekers within these country groups over time.

My model can also explain the relative attractiveness of countries as destinations for asylum seekers. But my dyadic research design not only allows for this general effect, but also for the attraction that destination countries might have for asylum seekers from specific countries of origin. Additionally, my research design has another advantage. One of the problems of the analysis of Holzer and Schneider (2002) is that they ignore so-called push factors, that is, factors in countries of origin that push people towards asylum migration to destination countries. Clearly, such factors can have an influence on the number of asylum applications in destination countries and are given great prominence in the literature (Bauer and Zimmermann, 1994; Schoorl, 2000). Rather than modelling these factors, my dependent variable circumvents this problem as it is defined in relative terms as the share of asylum seekers coming to the destination country from a country of origin relative to the total number of asylum seekers in all destination countries of Western Europe. It follows that I do not need to model the push factors that can lead to temporal changes in the total number of asylum seekers from developing countries. Such an analysis of the fundamental determinants of the number of asylum seekers coming to Western Europe is provided in Neumayer (2003a). This

study finds that economic hardship, political oppression, human rights abuses, violent conflict and state failure in developing countries create more asylum seekers, with geographical proximity and migration networks functioning as important facilitators.

### **The determinants of asylum destination choice**

What factors can be expected to influence an asylum seeker's choice of destination country within a region of various potential destination countries? Such a decision is likely to be the result of a multitude of complex and mutually non-exclusive factors, the relative importance of which can differ across origin countries as well as across individuals from the same country of origin (Efionayi-Mäder et al., 2001). I will conceptualise the decision to lodge an application for asylum in a particular destination country as the consequence of utility maximising behaviour of asylum seekers. Maximisation is subject to the side-constraint of exogenous circumstances, which are taken as given by the asylum seeker, but can at least partly be influenced by the destination country. An individual choosing between destination countries in a particular region weighs the relative net benefits of applying for asylum in each country and decides on the one which offers the greatest benefit. Asylum seekers might very well take recourse to the (costly) help of better informed traffickers in their decision-making as well as in their migration. Of course, sometimes asylum seekers will have fled their country of origin under imminent threat to their personal integrity or that of their family and under great time pressure. In such circumstances, asylum seekers might just apply to the destination country that is geographically closest. I try to make this fact compatible with my conceptual framework of utility maximising behaviour in regarding geographical proximity (distance) as one of the factors raising (lowering) the net benefit of applying to a particular destination country.

Economic theory predicts that asylum seekers will apply for asylum in rich countries and in countries with a low unemployment and high economic growth rate (Massey et al., 1993; Borjas, 1994). Rich countries are likely to be more generous in their welfare provisions, and low unemployment and high economic growth make it easier to find a job. They present the most attractive alternative to the poor living conditions and employment opportunities in the countries of origin.

Migration is costly since one leaves one's familiar surroundings and culture and needs to adapt to new living conditions. It follows that aspects of destination countries, which lower the transition and adaptation costs, will mean a higher share of asylum seekers. Transition and adaptation costs are lower if, for example, the same language is spoken in the origin and destination country. Destination countries with former colonies should also receive a higher share of asylum seekers from these countries (Robinson and Segrott, 2002). This is because there are often long-term residents from former colonies living in the destination country who can help in finding jobs and who provide some cushioning of the cultural shock linked to migration to a foreign country. Furthermore, there are often direct flights available between these countries, but not with other potential destination countries.

Similarly, according to network theory a higher share of past asylum seekers and long-term residents from a particular country of origin lowers the costs of migration for others to settle in this destination country (Massey et al., 1993; Rotte, Vogler and Zimmermann, 1997; Vogler and Rotte, 2000; Efonayi-Mäder et al., 2001; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Robinson and Segrott, 2002). This is because already existing asylum seekers provide valuable information channels to those left behind and can help newcomers in finding their way in the country of destination, e.g. in the search for employment (Boswell, 2000). Immigrants tend to cluster spatially in order to lower the costs of migration (Money, 1997). Destination countries often try to prevent such clustering without much success (Black, 1991). Geographical

proximity will also lower the costs of migration. Geographically close countries can be reached with cars, buses, boats or sometimes even walking, whereas flying is often necessary to reach distant destination countries. Geographical proximity often translates into greater cultural proximity as well.

Finally, generous welfare provisions for asylum seekers also render a destination country more attractive.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, deterring measures such as restrictions on welfare benefits and working rights, the risk of one's application becoming rejected due to low recognition rates, limited appeal opportunities and the threat of forced removal all raise the costs of migration (Neumayer, 2003b). If asylum seekers are regarded merely as a burden by destination countries, then there are powerful incentives to pass the burden on to other countries. Restrictive measures undertaken by any one destination country work on the basis of creating a negative externality as asylum seekers are deflected to other destination countries.<sup>6</sup> Faced with the well-known problems of collective action (Olson, 1965), countries resort to free-riding behaviour at the expense of others. The free-riding logic sees countries caught in a 'race to the bottom', where welfare provisions are decreasing and deterrent measures are increasing until the former hit rock bottom and the latter run into severe conflict with a country's obligations under international human rights treaties such as the Geneva Convention. Against this model of free-riding behaviour and downward competition to the lowest common denominator, a different view suggests that destination countries have strong incentives to co-operate and converge in their asylum policies (Holzer and Schneider, 2002). Overcoming the free-riding logic of races to the bottom provides policy makers with a chance to harmonise their policies. Such co-operation is particularly attractive if, as argued by Holzer and Schneider (2002), the number of asylum seekers in any one country within a region is positively affected by the number of asylum seekers in the most liberal destination country in the region.

Western European countries have tried and to a great extent succeeded in converging their asylum procedures with respect to ‘safe’ third countries, ‘safe’ origin countries, visa restrictions, sanctions against airlines bringing in passengers without valid visa and the like (Böcker and Havinga, 1998; Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Schuster, 2000; Noll, 2000; Gibney and Hansen, 2002). The same is true for the conditions of reception and the rights and obligations that asylum seekers face once they are allowed into the asylum application process. Partly, this has been the result of tentative or implicit co-operation without explicit consultation and concertation – a process called ‘implicit burden-sharing’ by Vink and Meijerink (2003). Indeed, within the EU it was only with the coming into force of the Amsterdam Treaty that co-operation on immigration and asylum was shifted from the mainly intergovernmental so-called third pillar to the more supranational so-called first pillar (Boswell, 2003). Even before the Amsterdam Treaty some harmonisation has been achieved by formalised agreement within the framework of the Schengen Convention and the Dublin Convention. Critics argue that the only result of policy convergence and limited harmonisation has been that instead of shifting the burden on each other, the co-operating countries have shifted the burden on third countries and the origin countries of asylum seekers (Roberts, 1998). In other words, the end result has been that standards within the fortress Western Europe have been lowered in a more concerted rather than unilateral and conflictual manner (Holzer and Schneider, 2002).

Hostility in potential destination countries against asylum seekers renders these countries less attractive. This will be particularly relevant where such hostility becomes conspicuous as in public demonstrations or violent acts committed against foreigners in general and asylum seekers in particular. Such hostility also often prompts politicians to respond with further restrictive measures against future asylum seekers. At the ballot box it usually translates into a higher voting share for right-wing populist parties that run on a decisively anti-immigration

and anti-asylum platform. Such electoral success can be understood as a shift of the median voter to the right, and political economy in the wake of Downs (1957) predicts that policy-makers will respond to such a shift in passing laws and regulations that accommodate this shift. In other words, the electoral success of right-wing populist parties often prompts governments and parliaments – regardless of their political orientation – to enact restrictive asylum policies with a view to winning back the voters and eroding the ground on which right-wing populist parties build their success. A good example for this is the July 1993 constitutional change of law in Germany denying the individual right to seek asylum to persons from ‘safe’ countries of origins and those who have passed through ‘safe’ third countries (Rotte, Vogler and Zimmermann, 1997). Whilst the reasons for this constitutional change are manifold, it can be seen as a reaction to rampant hostility and violence against foreigners and particularly asylum seekers and the electoral success of right-wing populist parties in some of the German states (*Länder*).

## **Research Methodology**

### **The dependent variable**

The dependent variable (*ASYLUMSHARE* *p.c.*), as defined in formula (2), represents the share of asylum seekers coming to the destination country from a country of origin relative to the total number of asylum seekers in Western Europe, normalised by population size. The dependent variable can thus vary between a minimum of zero and a maximum of one. Instead of normalising the dependent variable by population size one could have also included population size of the destination country as a control variable. The results reported below are almost identical in terms of coefficient sign and statistical significance if this latter strategy is chosen. The asylum data are published by the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR, 2001).<sup>7</sup> The data cover the period from 1980 to 1999, but I lose the first two years since some of my independent variables are lagged.

The number of asylum seekers from countries of origin is based on data reported to UNHCR by national governments of destination countries, even though UNHCR might be involved in refugee status determination either under its own mandate or on behalf of the national government (UNHCR, 2001: vii). The applications generally refer to the number of applicants or persons rather than the number of applications or families and they exclude repeat or appeal applications. I focus on asylum application in Western European countries mainly for reasons of better data availability. The UNHCR does not provide information on asylum applications by country of origin in the United States before 1987, in Canada before 1989 and in Australia, New Zealand and Japan before 1996. Data from European countries other than the Western European ones are similarly sparse. Given that Western Europe received some 12 million asylum applications amounting to about 72 per cent of all applications lodged in developed countries over the period 1980 to 1999 (UNHCR, 2001), my dependent variable captures the main flows of asylum seeking.

### **The independent variables**

To capture the economic attractiveness of a country, I include the gross domestic product per capita (*GDP p.c.*), its growth rate (*GDPGROWTH*) and the unemployment rate (*%UNEMPLOYED*) in destination countries. Data are taken from the World Bank (2003) and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2003). To test for the importance of colonial ties, I include the number of years between 1900 and 1960 a country has been a former colony of a destination country (*COLONY*), with data taken from Alesina and Dollar (2000). A shared language dummy variable was set to one if the country of origin shares the same language either as the official or commonly spoken language (*LANGUAGE*). Data are taken from Hall



and Jones (1999) and Parker (1997). I capture geographical proximity by the minimum air distance in miles between the capital city of the country of origin and the capital city of a destination country (*DISTANCE*), with data provided by Bennett and Stam (2001). To capture the migration network effect, I use the average share of asylum seekers from an origin country who have applied to a destination country in the past two to five years (*PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.*).

With respect to deterrent measures, in an ideal world I would model my estimations in a game theoretic framework where destination countries set their policies taking into account the reaction of other countries on their choice. However, it is virtually impossible to quantify such measures in a way that would allow such estimation. In as much as deterrent policies have converged across Western European countries, they can be expected to influence the total number of asylum seekers in Western Europe, but not the destination choice within Western Europe. In addition, I have tried to proxy some national aspects of asylum policies that make some destination countries more attractive than others. Lower recognition rates, for example, are likely to deter asylum seekers. Unfortunately, using recognition rates broken down by each country of origin and each destination country would reduce the sample size very substantially. My measure is therefore the total first instance recognition rate in a destination country for all asylum seekers taken together (*%RECOGNISED*), with data taken from UNHCR (2002). This comprises all those formally recognised as asylum seekers plus those allowed to remain for humanitarian reasons. I lag this variable by one year for two reasons: First, potential asylum seekers cannot know the current year recognition rates, at best their information covers the preceding year. Second, lagging this variable circumvents the problem that the recognition rate is potentially endogenous to the inflow of asylum seekers into a country as shown by Holzer and Schneider (2002). Restrictive policies aimed at curbing the inflow of asylum seekers other than the recognition rate are difficult to quantify. As one

crude measure, I create a dummy variable, which is set to one in years the destination country has been a full party to the Schengen Convention (*SCHENGEN*), with information taken from Lavenex (1999), Hailbronner (2000) and Noll (2000). As Lavenex (1999: 41) points out, one of the main objectives of the asylum relevant provisions of the Convention was ‘to prevent the uncontrolled movement of asylum seekers in the European Union and limit their access to member states’ territories and asylum procedures’ with the help of visa restrictions and sanctions against carriers bringing in asylum seekers with insufficient or invalid documentation. As the Convention has been applied by some European countries earlier than others and by some not at all during the period of my study, I expect a negative effect on the share of asylum seekers in a destination country that is a full party to the Schengen Convention.

Unfortunately, I have no measure of the generosity of welfare benefits specific to asylum seekers. In its absence I resort to a variable measuring general social and welfare expenditures relative to GDP (*%SOCIALWELFARE*), with data taken from IMF (various years). Of course, this is not a totally satisfactory proxy variable since countries with more generous general social and welfare benefit systems need not extend this greater generosity to asylum seekers.

Further, I presume that left-wing dominated governments might enact policies that are more friendly towards asylum seekers than right-wing dominated governments. Some tentative evidence for this can be inferred from the positive correlation of a party’s orientation towards the left wing of the political spectrum with favourable references to underprivileged minority groups (including asylum seekers) and the negative correlation with negative references to multiculturalism in party manifestos ( $r = .17$  and  $-.19$ , both significant at  $p$ -value  $.0000$  with 797 observations; data taken from Budge et al., 2001). I therefore include the percent of cabinet portfolios held by left-wing parties (*%LEFTGOV*), as classified by and listed in Swank (2002) and supplemented by Lane, McKay and Newton (1997).

I have no direct measure of hostility against foreigners in general and asylum seekers in particular, but I take the share of votes in general national parliamentary elections going to so-called right-wing populist parties such as the Front National in France, the Republikaner in Germany or the Vlaams Block in Belgium as a proxy variable (*%RIGHTPOPULIST*). Data are taken from the same source as for *%LEFTGOV*. Strong anti-foreign sentiments in a destination country can be expected to be correlated with a higher voting share for these parties as they usually have policies high on their agenda that are unfriendly to foreigners and asylum seekers. This variable can also partly capture restrictive asylum policies that are difficult to measure, as argued further above.

I take the natural log of the *GDP p.c.* and *DISTANCE* variables to reduce their distributional spread. The results reported below uphold, however, even if these variables are not logged. Table 3 provides summary descriptive variable information and a bivariate correlation matrix.

< Insert Table 3 about here >

### **Estimation technique**

I estimate the following model

$$y_{ijt} = \alpha + \beta_1 \sum_{k=2}^5 y_{ij(t-k)} / 4 + \beta_2 x_{ijt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}, \text{ where } \varepsilon_{ijt} = u_i + w_j + v_{ijt}. \quad (1)$$

The subscript *i* represents each destination country, the subscript *j* each country of origin in year *t*, *y* is the share of asylum seekers normalised by population. The second term on the right-hand side is the *PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.* variable, which will be discussed in more detail below. The vector *x* contains the other explanatory variables. The *u<sub>i</sub>* represent individual

unobserved or latent destination country effects. These cover the general attractiveness of a destination that is either not measurable or not captured by my explanatory variables. The  $w_j$  represent individual unobserved origin country effects. Their inclusion ensures that any time-invariant aspect of origin countries is controlled for such that correlation of the explanatory variables with the fixed effects does not bias my estimations. The  $v_{ijt}$  is a stochastic error term.

I estimate my model using ordinary least squares (OLS) with origin and destination-specific fixed effects. I employ standard errors that are fully robust towards arbitrary autocorrelation and heteroskedasticity and adjusted for the clustering of observations, i.e. observations are merely assumed to be independent across, but not necessarily within, countries of origin.

The second term on the right-hand side variable, *PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.*, is similar to a lagged dependent variable. I take the average of the past two to five years rather than the simple one-year lag of the dependent variable for two reasons.<sup>8</sup> One is to average out coincidental temporary ups and downs and to capture the more long-term existence of groups of asylum seekers from countries of origin. Second, the value of the immediately preceding year is left out to mitigate correlation of the variable with the error term. The reason is that correlation of one of the regressors with the error term leads to bias in OLS estimation results (Nickell, 1981; Anderson and Hsiao, 1981). To avoid this bias, one would need to employ a first-differenced estimator such as Anderson and Hsiao's (1981) two-stage least squares (2SLS) first-differenced estimator or Arellano and Bond's (1991) Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator. Due to the use of first differences, neither can estimate any time-invariant variables such as colonial and language links and geographical proximity, which are of great interest for my analysis.<sup>9</sup> I therefore have to live with the fact that my estimations are potentially slightly biased and mitigate the problem by excluding the immediately preceding value from *PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.* Also, Nickell (1981) has shown that the bias becomes

smaller the longer is the period of study ( $T$ ) and the time dimension of my panel is higher than in many other panels where  $T$  can be as small as two or three.

## **Results**

Table 4 presents my estimation results. Richer destination countries receive a higher per capita share of asylum seekers. Apart from this general attractiveness, however, economic factors do not impact upon the choice of the destination country in accordance with my expectations. The unemployment rate and the level of social and welfare expenditures in the destination country are insignificant, whereas the economic growth rate is negatively associated with a higher per capita share of asylum seekers. As expected, I find that destination countries with electoral success of right-wing populist parties attract a lower share of asylum seekers. The opposite is true for countries with left-wing dominated governments, but the effect is marginally insignificant at the 10% level. A higher recognition rate in the past year leads to a higher share of asylum seekers next year.<sup>10</sup> Full parties to the Schengen Convention managed to reduce their share relative to non-parties in my period of study. Both results suggest that destination countries can pass on some of the burden of taking on asylum seekers to other countries in changing their asylum policies. However, many of my other explanatory variables show that this influence is rather limited as the decision-making by asylum seekers is to some extent based on factors entirely outside the control of the destination country. I find, for example, that countries receive a higher share of asylum seekers from countries of origin that are former colonies, that speak the same language and that are geographically closer. I also find highly statistically significant evidence for network effects as a higher share of asylum seekers from a country of origin already resident in a destination country attracts a higher share of new asylum seekers from the same country.


< Insert Table 4 about here >

## **Discussion and concluding observations**

Asylum seekers coming to Western Europe are faced with a choice of seventeen potential destination countries. The main objective of this article has been to explain this choice with what theory predicts to be fundamental determinants. I have found that the economic attractiveness of a destination country is perceived by asylum seekers in terms of a destination country's general level of economic development as measured by per capita income. Rich countries are more attractive than poor countries, quite independent of the unemployment and economic growth rate prevailing. The reason for this is probably that potential asylum seekers have a very crude picture of destination countries in their mind and the general level of economic development, which is quite persistent over time, has a stronger impact upon how economically attractive destination countries are seen than short-term perturbations in the form of economic growth and unemployment rates. Indeed, like Holzer and Schneider (2002) I find that the economic growth rate has the opposite effect than predicted by theory. I have no explanation for this counter-intuitive result beyond the observation that poorer Western European countries tend to grow faster than richer ones (convergence) and since richer countries are preferred destinations, this might explain parts of the puzzle. I find that the level of social and welfare benefits as a share of GDP is no statistically significant determinant of destination choice. One caveat is that this variable refers to the general generosity of welfare programmes rather than the generosity of social and welfare benefits specific to asylum seekers.

Like Thielemann (2003a), I find some evidence that destination countries can influence the inflow of asylum seekers with restrictive policy measures. For example, I find that full parties of the Schengen Convention managed to lower their share of asylum seekers and that a

lower lagged recognition rate was also associated with a lower share of asylum seekers. My variables are very crude due to the difficulties of quantifying restrictive measures and thus, the results need to be treated with care.

I find that a higher voting share to right-wing populist parties is associated with a lower share of asylum seekers. The share of government portfolios belonging to left-wing political parties was estimated with the expected positive sign, but did not assume statistical significance. Unlike Holzer and Schneider (2002), I therefore find some evidence that political factors matter. It is difficult to say what drives this difference in results, but the dyadic research design with the dependent variable expressed relative to the Western European total is arguably superior. n factors need not be included in the model.

My results also indicate that the destination choice of asylum seekers is influenced by historical colonial links, the sharing of a common language with the destination country and geographical proximity. The first two confirm results found by Böcker (1998), whereas the latter stands in contrast with her study, but is strongly in accordance with theoretical expectations. Another important variable is the presence of existing communities of asylum seekers in the past. This implies that countries will find it difficult to limit the inflow of asylum seekers from particular origin countries once a high share of asylum seekers from such origin countries has applied in the past for asylum in the destination country. These factors together with a country's level of economic development clearly limit the extent to which governments can try to lower their share of asylum seekers.

How strong are the effects of the fundamental determinants of asylum choice? As variables are held in different units, the estimated coefficients cannot be directly compared with each other. If I take one standard deviation to represent a substantial increase in a variable, then I can compare how much a substantial increase in each variable changes the dependent variable. Table 5 provides such information. It is clear that existing communities of

past asylum seekers are substantively most important and clearly dominating the other variables. It is followed by a destination country's income level, the share of right-wing populist parties, geographical proximity, language ties, colonial links and the Schengen dummy variable. The recognition and the growth rate have smaller effects. The remaining three variables are not only statistically insignificant, but also substantively not very important.

< Insert Table 5 about here >

What are the policy implications of my analysis? First, the fundamental determinants of asylum destination choice need to be taken seriously in debates on what constitutes fair burden-sharing amongst Western European destination countries. Some destination countries will always be more attractive due to their history of colonisation and immigration, their geographical location and their language ties with developing countries. Second, my analysis has ambiguous implications on whether fair burden-sharing should be interpreted in terms of financial side-payments from less burdened to more burdened destination countries or in terms of a re-allocation of asylum seekers. On the one hand, a physical re-allocation of asylum seekers would clash with the role that links with existing communities of asylum seekers and historical and language ties play for asylum destination choice. Asylum seekers can be expected to resent and resist a re-allocation to poorer destination countries and to countries, with which they have no connection. They will regard such re-allocation as unjust and are likely to try to revert over time their deflection to undesired destination countries, if need be by illegal means. On the other hand, popular destination countries will fear the positive feedback that existing communities exert on future asylum destination choice. My analysis confirms qualitative and quantitative case studies (e.g., Efonayi-Mäder et al., 2001;



Vogler and Rotte, 2000) and shows that once countries have become popular destinations for some time, the network effects imply that they will remain popular independently to some extent from any policy changes undertaken. As table 5 has shown, the effect of existing communities of asylum seekers is by far the substantively most important factor explaining destination choice. It is therefore not surprising that popular destination countries like Germany prefer the physical re-allocation of asylum seekers to financial side payments. In addition, an enforced physical re-allocation of asylum seekers might also have a deterrent effect on the total number of asylum seekers, which makes this mechanism again attractive to the more popular destination countries.

In my perspective, fair burden-sharing should be interpreted in terms of financial side-payments rather than re-allocation of asylum seekers. First, less popular countries are more likely to agree to payments than to accepting asylum seekers from other countries as the establishment of the European Refugee Fund shows. Its funding is currently low, but could be stepped up if unilateral initiatives from more burdened countries are perceived as increasingly threatening the project of European integration (Thielemann, 2003b). Second, financial side-payments do not interfere with the fundamental determinants of asylum destination choice and it is far from clear whether a physical re-allocation would not largely be reverted after some time by those deflected to undesired destinations.

## NOTES

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I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as the editor for many helpful comments. All errors are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Note that a few observations are missing. By definition, these missing observations do not enter the computation of the average share of a country over the period from 1982 to 1999 or the CoV introduced later.

<sup>2</sup> The recent surge in the number of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom is too recent to be visible in our data.

<sup>3</sup> Since the mean of the variable analysed here does not change over time, one could instead look at the standard deviation alone. However, the CoV is the more general measure of variation and is therefore used here.

<sup>4</sup> Böcker (1998) does not state which year the data refer to. The qualitative results are also described in Böcker and Havinga (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Robinson and Segrott's (2002) study of asylum seekers in the UK and Efonayi-Mäder et al.'s (2001) study of asylum seekers in Switzerland as well as potential migrants in Albania, Iraq and Sri Lanka shed doubt on whether asylum applicants know much about these. However, asylum seekers often make use of traffickers and they are likely to be much better informed.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the difficulties of collecting reliable data, it is unclear, however, to what extent restrictive measures simply lead to a shift from official asylum to illegal migration.

<sup>7</sup> Note that figures below five are not available and were coded as zero in our sample.

<sup>8</sup> At the start of the panel this variable goes back fewer years to avoid a five year loss of observations.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the dyadic nature of our panel data makes estimation of time-invariant variables possible despite fixed effects estimation.

<sup>10</sup> This result remains true if the recognition rate used is specific for each origin country (data supplied by UNHCR). The sample size is much smaller, but *%RECOGNISED* remains positive and statistically significant.

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Table 1. Share of total aggregate number of asylum seekers (normalised by population in destination country).

	1982-84	1985-87	1988-90	1991-93	1994-96	1997-99	1982-99	1982-99 Diff. to average
Austria	20.7%	12.3%	13.9%	9.8%	6.5%	6.5%	11.6%	5.23
Belgium	7.8%	8.4%	6.4%	9.2%	10.2%	9.7%	8.6%	2.23
Denmark	11.0%	9.2%	7.6%	6.8%	8.6%	6.9%	8.3%	1.93
Finland	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	1.5%	1.1%	1.2%	0.7%	-5.67
France	15.0%	11.2%	9.3%	4.8%	3.9%	3.2%	7.9%	1.53
Germany	12.9%	13.8%	12.3%	20.4%	18.2%	14.7%	15.4%	9.03
Greece	1.7%	3.9%	3.4%	1.3%	1.2%	1.3%	2.1%	-4.27
Ireland	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.1%	1.0%	3.4%	1.5%	-4.87
Italy	1.4%	1.1%	0.4%	0.9%	0.4%	0.3%	0.8%	-5.57
Luxembourg	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	1.8%	6.7%	4.3%	-2.07
Netherlands	2.8%	4.4%	5.1%	6.3%	13.4%	12.9%	7.5%	1.13
Norway	n.a.	7.9%	6.7%	5.7%	3.8%	4.2%	5.7%	-0.67
Portugal	0.9%	0.4%	0.2%	0.5%	0.4%	0.2%	0.5%	-5.87
Spain	1.4%	1.0%	0.9%	1.1%	1.6%	1.1%	1.2%	-5.17
Sweden	12.7%	13.9%	12.9%	14.0%	8.9%	5.9%	11.4%	5.03
Switzerland	19.8%	18.2%	20.7%	16.2%	16.2%	18.7%	18.3%	11.93
UK	2.2%	1.2%	1.2%	1.9%	4.2%	4.3%	2.5%	-3.87
Sum	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
CoV	0.9339	0.8254	0.8981	0.9877	0.9577	0.8938	0.8556	

Note: n.a.: not available; CoV: Coefficient of Variation; Difference to average in percentage points.

Source: Own computations from UNHCR (2001) and World Bank (2003).



Table 2. Average share of asylum seekers by country of origin (normalised by population in destination country).

	1982-84	1985-87	1988-90	1991-93	1994-96	1997-99	1982-99	Diff. to average 1982-99
Austria	6.2%	6.0%	4.6%	3.5%	2.8%	3.1%	4.4%	-1.69
Belgium	3.9%	6.5%	6.8%	9.8%	12.3%	12.9%	8.7%	2.61
Denmark	1.4%	3.8%	3.6%	5.7%	6.5%	5.0%	4.3%	-1.79
Finland	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	1.0%	1.3%	1.3%	0.7%	-5.39
France	33.0%	32.4%	25.3%	13.9%	10.7%	9.5%	20.8%	14.71
Germany	13.7%	14.3%	11.1%	22.1%	17.9%	15.0%	15.7%	9.61
Greece	0.9%	1.4%	1.4%	0.5%	0.3%	0.2%	0.8%	-5.29
Ireland	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.2%	0.7%	3.6%	1.5%	-4.59
Italy	2.4%	1.7%	0.8%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	1.0%	-5.09
Luxembourg	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.3%	1.0%	0.6%	-5.49
Netherlands	2.9%	5.8%	8.7%	8.6%	14.3%	13.2%	8.9%	2.81
Norway	n.a.	5.1%	4.1%	3.3%	3.1%	3.4%	3.8%	-2.29
Portugal	3.3%	1.9%	0.8%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	1.2%	-4.89
Spain	4.0%	5.1%	2.2%	3.8%	6.9%	3.8%	4.3%	-1.79
Sweden	4.0%	4.1%	16.6%	12.7%	9.9%	10.5%	9.6%	3.51
Switzerland	19.7%	12.2%	9.4%	8.5%	7.6%	11.7%	11.5%	5.41
UK	9.7%	3.3%	5.2%	6.0%	5.0%	5.3%	5.8%	-0.29
Sum	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	
CoV	1.214	1.164	1.018	0.978	0.939	0.867	0.953	

Note: n.a.: not available; CoV: Coefficient of Variation; Difference to average in percentage points.

Source: Own computations from UNHCR (2001) and World Bank (2003).

Table 3. Descriptive summary variable information and bivariate correlation matrix.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
ASYLUMSHARE p.c.	20146	0.07	0.17	0	1
COLONY	20146	2.22	10.64	0	60
ln DISTANCE	20146	7.95	0.70	3.56	9.40
GDPGROWTH	20146	0.02	0.03	-0.07	0.13
ln GDP p.c.	20146	9.89	0.22	9.18	10.26
LANGUAGE	20146	0.04	0.19	0	1
%LEFTGOV	20146	26.05	20.65	0	65
PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.	20146	0.08	0.17	0	1
%RECOGNISED	20146	38.61	26.54	2.2	100
%RIGHTPOPULIST	20146	4.03	5.65	0	23
SCHENGEN	20146	0.20	0.40	0	1
%SOCIALWELFARE	20146	15.03	4.50	5.1	24.53
%UNEMPLOYED	20146	8.21	4.58	0.40	24.20

	ASYLUM- SHARE	PASTASYLUM- SHARE	%RIGHT- POPULIST	%LEFT- GOV	LAN- COLONY	ln GUAGE	ln DISTANCE	%UNEM- PLOYED	ln GDP p.c.	GDP- GROWTH	%RECOG- NISED	SCHENGEN
PASTASYLUMSHARE	0.6133											
%RIGHTPOPULIST	0.0382	0.0634										
%LEFTGOV	-0.0261	-0.0367	0.0916									
COLONY	0.2416	0.2993	0.0421	-0.0491								
LANGUAGE	0.2266	0.2645	-0.0088	-0.0230	0.6008							
ln DISTANCE	-0.0208	-0.0263	-0.0413	-0.0559	0.0216	0.0880						
%UNEMPLOYED	-0.0341	-0.0323	-0.2861	-0.0522	0.0565	0.1424	0.0047					
ln GDP p.c.	0.1435	0.1314	0.5206	-0.0780	-0.0286	-0.0764	0.0007	-0.4316				
GDPGROWTH	-0.0443	-0.0454	-0.1711	-0.0168	-0.0027	0.0427	-0.0075	0.1240	-0.0981			
%RECOGNISED	-0.0208	-0.0440	-0.1886	0.0117	0.0096	-0.0168	0.0299	-0.0488	-0.0610	0.0375		
SCHENGEN	-0.0047	0.0234	0.0487	0.0775	-0.0028	0.0037	-0.0423	0.1580	0.0471	-0.0147	-0.0363	
%SOCWELFARE	0.1718	0.1622	0.3295	-0.0207	0.0466	-0.0110	0.0270	0.0307	0.4939	-0.1507	0.1435	0.0275

Table 4. Estimation results (1982 to 1999).

Dependent variable: ASYLUMSHARE p.c.	
ln GDP p.c.	0.073 (4.63)***
GDPGROWTH	-0.147 (5.36)***
%UNEMPLOYED	-0.000 (0.02)
%RIGHTPOPULIST	-0.002 (4.52)***
%LEFTGOV	0.000 (1.56)
%SOCWELFARE	0.000 (0.53)
%RECOGNISED	0.000 (2.66)***
SCHENGEN	-0.017 (5.42)***
COLONY	0.001 (1.84)*
LANGUAGE	0.056 (2.45)**
ln DISTANCE	-0.017 (3.79)***
PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.	0.543 (19.84)***
Observations	20146
# of origin countries	125
R-squared	0.40

Notes: Coefficients of 125 origin country and 17 destination country fixed effects not shown.

Absolute t-values in parentheses. Standard errors robust towards arbitrary autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity. Observations assumed to be independent across, but not within, origin countries (clustering). \* significant at .1 level \*\* at .05 level \*\*\* at .01 level.

Table 5. Estimated percentage point increase in ASYLUMSHARE p.c. following a one standard deviation increase in an independent variable.

PASTASYLUMSHARE p.c.	9.22
ln GDP p.c.	1.61
%RIGHTPOPULIST	-1.24
ln DISTANCE	-1.15
LANGUAGE	1.08
COLONY	0.75
SCHENGEN	-0.71
%RECOGNISED	0.53
GDPGROWTH	-0.46
%LEFTGOV	0.21
%SOCWELFARE	0.20
%UNEMPLOYED	0.05