

The Country of Last Resort: New Beginning

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World Scholars – Spring 2023

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Author Note

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Introduction

The European Union suffered a massive inflow of asylum seekers in 2015, with a total number exceeding 1.3 million. The magnitude of this forcefully displaced population was unprecedented, and while numbers began to decline in 2016, they remained exceptionally high. Throughout Europe, countries scrambled to take in these populations, but France would be eventually known as the "Country of Last Resort" for asylum seekers. While this may be due to a motley of factors, the most notable reason is the chronic shortage of housing units for those in precarious situations. These factors contribute to asylum seekers' inability to fully complete their migration applications and lead to an inability to integrate into French society. French policies have purposely led to the slowing of asylum and residency applications, yet throughout Europe and the global west, solutions have been found to accommodate their new populations and integrate them into global society. Therefore, in order for France to tackle its critical housing dilemma, it must invest in local integration and improved synthesis between the government and nonprofits.

Background on The Housing Crisis

At the root of the housing crisis experts point to the international strategy by French authorities to try to discourage people from seeking asylum in France. For instance, according to Christophe Pouly, the head of Sciences Po Law School legal clinic on migration “From [governmental officials], we can see that it is not just a budgetary problem. There is a desire to put less money towards this” (Stuber 1). To demonstrate, instead of investing in resolving homelessness for those seeking refuge, French authorities have seized unauthorized encampments that were set up to give shelter for asylum seekers and migrants who have been dismissed on the streets. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, police officers continued to forcibly evict people, leaving thousands without alternate refuge.

An alternative dimension to be considered is that in France, there is fierce rivalry for scarce housing for various groups with social needs, such as homeless people, disabled people, and the young and old. “ The provision of accommodation for asylum seekers is therefore related to wider housing and welfare policies, including the extent of social housing and the operation of allocation systems for social housing.”(Koser 22) . However, Asylum seekers in France are, in principle, entitled for housing as soon as they file an application with the Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), “ but in reality, there has been a chronic housing shortage for decades” (Stuber 1). According to a 2014 report by the French National Assembly, in 2001, there were just 5,282 accommodation spaces for more than 47,000 first-time asylum applicants. Furthermore, people who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection must leave state-provided accommodation within three months. However, individuals stay even longer, typically due to a lack of alternative options, increasing the shortage of vacant

homes for new applicants. For those who decided to apply for asylum in France, homelessness is a factor that will affect their applications and ability to rebuild their lives.

The French Asylum and Residency Process:

Comparatively, refugees must not only consider the likelihood of being homeless but also the sheer difficulty of getting an appointment to acknowledge their asylum status and possibility of residency. Once an individual enters French territory to seek refuge in France, he or she must be registered as an asylum seeker with the French Authority responsible for the right of residence, known as the Prefecture. Then he or she can file an asylum application with OFPRA, the only administration in charge of examining asylum claims. To register for asylum claims asylum seekers must first file through GUDA¹ (guichet uniques de demande d'asile). But of course, to no prevail, asylum seekers must present themselves to the orientation platform PADA (Plateformes d'accueil de demandeurs d'asile) before the GUDA and OFPRA applications. Therefore, if one is seeking asylum in France, they must go through three organizations to see if there asylum claim is legitimate and can considered for permanent residency. According to Asylum Information Database this process should take a maximum of 120 days² but with such convoluted procedures this has led to many unfinished application , especially in Paris (and other major cities) that take on largest sum of refugees. Responsively, the OFII (French Office of Immigration and Integration) created a telephone appointment system to help speed up the appointment process and readily reach their audience. In fact, the OFII described their system as effective because according to data reported by them in December of 2020 , “ 200,682 calls were

¹ GUDA was created to record both the asylum claim and the necessity for material reception conditions

² According to the Asylum Seekers Database a report by the Court of Auditors recalled the existence of hidden delays and proceedings the access of SPADAs

answered, and 151,478 appointments were granted during the first 600 days of operation” (OFII Twitter). However according to an La Cimade data³, almost 90% of calls made to the OFII were unsuccessful. Furthermore, La Cimade, also reported that the telephone platform was only operational for a few hours each day, and after 12:00 p.m., individuals are urged to call again the following day. “As a result, the average time to access the asylum procedure is one month” (Asylum Information Database) . Consequently, in February 2019, several civil society organizations filed for urgent actions to the Administrative Court of Paris who ordered OFII to “ deploy at least two more full-time staff members until the end of February 2019 so as to reinforce the capacity of its telephone platform... and grant appointments within 48 hours ” (Asylum Information Database). Despite NGO’s efforts this only exasperated virtual lines since the root of OFII issue (its communication and registration period) were not effectively addressed.

It is important to emphasize that in France refugees are eligible to accessing majority of the state welfare schemes and enjoy several other benefits compared to other immigrants. Furthermore, according to Corinne Giudicelli a French Lawyer specializing in the rights of foreigners : only 25% of applicants who are granted asylum get a certificate of permanent residence meaning that if one is lucky enough to make it through there asylum verification they may have to go through similar procedure in other European countries until they find a place that allows them to permanently stay. In Paris, this illustrated in Porte de la Chapelle because of the demolition of Calais camp⁴ that led thousands to seek refuge in Paris.

³ In its reception centers, La Cimade welcomes and advises tens of thousands of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers each year. It also houses 200 refugees and asylum seekers in its two shelters located in Béziers and Massy.

⁴ Was often referred to as the “ Jungle” for its disastrous conditions and overcrowding

Country Comparisons

The effects of the humanitarian crisis vary across the 12 Member States: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom⁵. On average according to the European Observatory on Homelessness, the 12 Member States recognized 45 percent of asylum seekers at first decision. Like France, countries such as Greece, Hungary and Italy, are struggling to cope with the numbers of people they were being asked to process, due to a lack of political systems. However, France is struggling despite its dedicated systems. In fact, France has been noted for having a “homelessness sector [that is a] active provider of support and accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees” (Koser 9). Despite its accomplishments, its undeveloped plan for local integration and clearer processing policies make France fall behind against other nations.

Asylum seekers are housed in a variety of ways in different EU nations. Some nations have well-established, large asylum-seeker accommodation systems, whilst others have less developed, and sometimes insufficient, asylum-seeker lodging systems. Interestingly, according to experts at the Asylum Information Data Base (AIDIA)⁶, France was one of three countries that had a three-step system for receptions of asylum seekers that did not receive tents. However, of the three the United Kingdom has continually the best offering of social and private rented housing as well as hotels. Noticeably, the quality of provision is greater in Northern and Western Member States, and lower in Southern and

⁵ an EU Member State at the time that the European observatory of homelessness released this research.

⁶ The data examined 9 countries: France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and the UK

Eastern nations. These tendencies are reflective of larger variations in housing and social services across these nations. Despite this, unlike France's fellow northern and western states⁷ it has been found to be the only country to have a reductions of support.

To get a better look at the disparities that reside between France and its north and western neighbors the European Observatory of Homelessness has comprised a document that illustrates the difference between the 12 Member States in relation to reception systems for asylum seekers and housing of refugees. To further illustrate the points of French policies regarding asylum seekers and refugees I will be analyzing Germany (who gets proportionally the most refugees out of the twelve member states) and United Kingdom who have become widely known as the best place for migrants to settle⁸. For instance, in France there are three forms⁹ of accommodations for asylum seekers; “ however only 36 percent of asylum seekers [are] housed in dedicated reception facilities”(Koser 27). Contrastingly, Germany asylum seekers are first housed in temporary reception facilities (today known as 'Ankunftscentren'). Every regional state in Germany has an Ankunftszentrum, and quota systems are used to distribute asylum seekers between the federal states which allows for better dispersion of asylum seekers rather than centered in a city that has been the case of overcrowding. Similarly, the United Kingdom local governments have organized housing with government assistance. Furthermore, policies were made to disperse asylum seekers

⁷ Comparably, with a population of 81 million, Germany received more than six times as many asylum seekers as France (66 million) and more than 12 times as many as the United Kingdom (64 million).

⁸ This has become especially true rejected asylum seekers in France

⁹ The three centers were set up in a range of urgency: CADA-centers (Centre d'Accueil pour Demandeurs d'Asile),HUDA-units (Hébergement d'Urgence pour Demandeurs d'Asile) and ASTAunits (Accueil Temporaire Service de l'Asile).

around the UK rather than allowing the population to congregate in London or in Paris in France's case.

Case Interview:

For instance, France 24 interviewed a 22-year-old man name Hadid who was a refugee from Afghanistan who was seeking refuge in France after being turned away in Germany for residency. Hadid spent 9 months in Port de la Chapelle which is approximately 153 days passed that maximum amount of days that France promises for residency applications. During his wait, Hadid was subjected to violence from government authorities and those within his camp. He so shocked by the police attitudes while living there stating: "sometimes the police come and confiscate our tents... yes were living in the street but that is not a humane thing to do". French bureaucracy has created a dual response to refugees that encourages the migration to France whilst propagating shanty towns because of French policies that inevitably produces more informal camp. For Hadid, and other in his situation France became increasingly the epitome of the "country of last resort."

Similarly, in an interview I conducted with an Iranian and Afghan refugees¹⁰ about their process to attaining residency and asylum status, it forfeited NGO's and academics beliefs of French policies that are aimed to make things difficult for people who want to stay. Mohammed and Osman both got their paper after two years of living in France. Mohammed is a part of the Hazaras ethnic group who currently being prosecuted throughout Afghanistan partly due to religious faith but also historical sense. He was eventually granted

¹⁰ Their names have been changed to maintain confidentiality

asylum in Norway; however, was not given a residency permanent. After two years of immersing himself into Norwegian lifestyle (including learning English and going to intensive Norwegian language classes 5 times a week) he suddenly had to find a way out of the country and into France with hopes of permanent residency. “ For more than a year I had to hide in France, I had no home and accepted jobs that did not pay well because I didn’t have my papers” (Okoye), I asked if during the time what his emotional state was like and his attitude on the likeness of his application for residency being successfully processed. He responded by saying, “ After staying in Norway, I felt that the same thing was going to happen [in France], I didn’t start learning French until I knew that I could stay here.” Mohammed and Osman both eventually got their papers after two years of living in Paris.

Likewise, Osman who is originally from Iran was able to get both asylum and residency in France, which was the first country he came too. However, he received his papers after Mohammed did. Unlike Mohammed, Osman was not given housing and the immigration officers were dismissive and unmotivated to meet the request of his “ community” e.g. while living in a tent for more than a year he would often go out on behalf of his community to ask for shelter during severe weather¹¹; however, an immigration officer, specifically the one responsible for his case responded to him, “ if you are wet from the rain than go inside your tent.” Unfortunately, these experiences for asylum seekers are constant demonstrates that French immigration need to be changed to allow for clearer processing of migrants for ease of transition into Europe that promises safety and a clear decision of their application rather than a convoluted prosing that leads to unsanitary

¹¹ Important to note that his encampment was located close to an immigration facility for asylum seekers and therefore at times was able to come into the office to shield themselves from harsh weather.

Commented [1]: ?

and packed encampments that detrimental effects inefficiencies of application for asylum and residency.

Solutions

To address the problem of asylum seeker and refugee homelessness in Europe, there is a continuing need for adequate prevention, rigorously tested and effective assistance for persons with more complicated needs, and an increase in affordable housing. However, this is not a straightforward policy matter. Some claim that migration has clear economic and cultural advantages in Europe, while others see hazards or a combination of good and bad impacts. Migration is a highly contentious component of public policy since perspectives differ. Asylum seekers and refugees, who come from cultures that are sometimes diametrically opposed to those prevalent in Europe, can be the focus of contentious debates; however, the problems that emit from French policy stem from its inability to stratify its refugees throughout the country, imprecise government policies, and lack of support to NGO's.

One of the NGO's that have helped asylum seekers integrate into French societies is English Pour Tout Le Monde. They are an association based in Paris that run programming as well as English lessons for people in precarious situations. The cofounders Katie Oglive and Kathrine Chalmers gave insight to the housing crisis and ways in which the French government could help the process run more smoothly. Similarly, to what was suggested by Matthieu Tardis, author of *Another Story from the 'Refugee Crisis': Resettlement in Small Towns and Rural Areas in France*, they suggested developing partnerships between national

and local operations and strengthening the legal basis for resettlement to disperse the concentration of asylum seekers in Paris to decrease the homelessness crisis. Ms. Oglive and Ms. Chambers both highlighted these strategies as key points of resolve since:

“ NGO’s take on a great amount of responsibility concerning refugees and asylum seekers because the government is unable to manage them on their own; therefore, we [EPTLM] and are partners such as Aurore and Masion des Refuges seek more support from the government since housing drawback has only led to a larger involvement of NGO’s”
(Oglive and Chalmers)

Furthermore, they furthered emphasized a strengthening the legal basis for resettlement would allow for faster, safer, and more guaranteed pathway to accessing international protection in France. In fact, efforts to create a more efficient legal procedures and integration between local government, associations, and the national government have already taken form in France. For instance, due to described visibility of the Paris and Calias camps the government decided to hurriedly open hundreds of temporary accommodation centers, these were done mostly in small and rural towns because of the amount of free buildings that could be mobilized quickly. While this decisions were made from urgency it contracted to unoccupied housing; but the areas also benefit from renovations and occupation of their rental housing stock. Furthermore, according to Tardis inhabitants of small towns have shown their desire to contribute to the situation as volunteers. In fact, research showed that including refugees in a local community, small towns can break out of the “us” and “them” paradigm and the competition between disadvantage groups. It is understood that such resettlement comes with a motley of problems such as access to health

care for refugees and language barriers however long withstanding the resettlement of refugees in small towns thanks to NGOs and a spontaneous government policy has proved to be a helpful means to solving the housing crisis and eased of processing for asylum seekers.

Conclusion

Designing an appropriate solution to homelessness among asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants have not been fully developed in France leaving thousands without homes and a uninsurance of their prospects. When examining other countries procedures, France has not been performing at the capacity it could be given its resources. Furthermore, when talking with experts and people who have experienced the asylum process designing a long standing and efficient process for local integration that is supported by the partnership of the French government and NGO's has not only been proven effective but has also benefited the communities that have received refugees. It is imperative that France acts now as the possibility of a humanitarian crisis (such as the Russia-Ukraine War) is inevitable in our global society so rather than dismissing such prospect France should embrace these possibilities and join the fight of global equity.

Commented [2]: The European Union has been facing a humanitarian crisis, as hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers have approached EU Member States seeking to escape wars and persecution. In 2015, the number of asylum applications reached over 1.3 million, close to double the previous peak experienced by 15 EU Member States in 1992, when 672000 people fled the Balkans war.2- Thinking about introducing with this

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