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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON IMMIGRATION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF NORWEGIAN MIGRATION POLICY ON ASYLUM SEEKERS

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Until just a year ago, hardly anyone believed that the increasingly unrestrained growth in mobility could be so abruptly interrupted by a radical immobilisation of large population groups. Neither mobility studies nor other research fields had foreseen this kind of scenario in their mobility and migration models. And why should have they? In the past decades, the belief in unconstrained mobility, as well as the practice of mobility and its scientific modelling, relied on the idea of unbounded growth at the sub-national, national and supra-national level. The article focuses on immigration to Norway, showing how institutional constraints were used to deal with the spread of COVID-19 and how they affected immigration to the country.

Due to complexity reasons, we focus exclusively on the situation of asylum seekers, giving additional attention to unaccompanied minors. These groups' migration status is assumed to make them especially susceptible to the newly established immigration measures. Drawing upon a combined focus of data on migration regulations and asylum application statistics, we examine what impact mobility-related COVID-19 measures implemented in Norway since January 2020 had on asylum procedures, asylum mobility and asylum applications in Norway.

Keywords:

COVID-19, immigration, asylum seekers, Norway, policies

Point of departure

Until recently, the belief that mobility and migration would grow indefinitely still dominated public, political and scientific debates. More than twenty years ago John Urry wrote, “It sometimes seems as if all the world is on move” [1, p. 3].

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Steadily growing numbers of commuters, business and vacation travellers have determined the forecasts, debates and scientific analyses of recent decades. And it was believed that mobility not only would, but also should continue to grow. More students should be able to study at foreign universities, workers should be able to move with fewer restrictions through international economic areas according to labour market demands and it should be possible for individuals to take vacations, parties or family reunions wherever they want, even if these places are increasingly scattered around the globe. Three main reasons are given for the growth in mobility:

“International mobility has become easier since the 1980s because of political reform, cheaper transport and a communication revolution that has opened up access to information, ideas and networks hitherto the prerogative of the few” [2, p. 7].

Parallel to increases over the last decades in these forms of mobility or migration, which are mostly seen as positive and functional, mobility and migration due to poverty, war, political persecution or climate change have also been rising [3; 4]¹. One recent peak in this latter form of migration was the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015/2016, in which more than one million migrants knocked on Europe’s doors within a short period of time to gain entry, protection and a perspective in life. However, COVID-19 and the fears and perceived threats associated with the virus and its aftereffects led to mobility restrictions for a wide majority of the population with a scope and intensity that were unprecedented in post-war Europe [5–7].

“Many people stopped going out to work (unless deemed essential) while others were sent back to rural villages or distant countries; children were kept home from school and struggled to learn online; many businesses closed their doors while others had to reorganize their work processes; airplanes stopped flying, airports emptied, and cruise ships were turned away from ports as borders closed; factories stopped churning out inessential products, and the global shipment of goods slowed to a trickle.” [6, p. 1].

COVID-19 posed a new unforeseen and unfamiliar challenge that caused formidable insecurities among people and governments “that confront decision-makers and undermine assumptions of security, including the security goals that were defined by the UN.” [8, p. 406].

In this context, which was classified as a state of emergency, governments quickly implemented mobility and migration regulations so that by mid-April restrictions were in place at the sub- and supranational levels which were more comprehensively and globally encompassing than any time before this in his-

¹ INFORM # 1 — EU and OECD member states responses to managing residence permits and migrant unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, *European Migration Network*, European Commission, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/home-affairs/files/oo_eu_inform1_residence_permits_and_unemployment_en_updated_final.pdf (accessed 25.04.2020).

tory [9–12]. Furthermore, this took place largely without parliamentary or extra-parliamentary participation of the population — in the EU states specifically, but also globally².

Transit provisions and entry and exit regulations became modified, restricted or in many cases suspended³ short or long term [13, p. 1237; 11]. This for example led to a significant decrease in arrivals to Europe in the Mediterranean region. While in January 2020 8,223 and February 6,732 arrivals were counted the numbers dropped to 3,686 in March and to just 1,658 arrivals in April [11, xxiv]. One year before, in April 2019, 5,675 migrants arrived in Europe via the Mediterranean migration channels [11 p. xxiv]. In addition, within the framework of COVID-19 measures, service provision measures for migrants — depending on the respective national, regional or local conditions — were more or less drastically changed, adapted to the new situation or suspended [13, p. 1238]. Many countries, such as Norway, made drastic legislative changes, giving governments the mandate to make decisions, also without broader parliamentary consultation, which would temporarily suspend or change the existing legal framework for national borders for the duration of the COVID-19 crisis COVID-19⁴.

If the reports, documents, minutes and decisions that formed the basis of COVID-related political decisions become available at all in the future, then only after a longer period of time, as in the case of Norway, where such information might be held back for 60 years in accordance with provisions in the Administration, Personal Information and Security Act [14].

Although substantial measures were implemented against this perceived threat and challenges it is argued that “countries could have been better prepared and taken early measures to contain the spread of COVID-19” [15, p. 379]. Especially, when the threat of a pandemic rose on the horizon, supra-, national and sub-national policies reacted — under the lack of a coherent international policy — almost idiosyncratic to the perceived COVID-19 challenges. Many countries shifted from the policies managing the COVID-19 threat in a purely health perspective to a mobility and/or migration perspective. “While the COVID-19 pandemic is not a migration issues it is being viewed and managed as one” [16]. Additionally, some country-specific debates and policies tried to instrumentalise and utilise the COVID-19 pandemic for introducing or pushing anti-migration arguments and measures [16].

This paper discusses the changes in the Norwegian institutional framework for immigration in reaction to COVID-19 and the consequences these changes

² COVID-19 emergency measures in asylum and reception systems, 2020, *EASO*, Brussels, p. 5, available at: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/covid19-emergency-measures-asylum-reception-systems.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020).

³ For example were search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean suspended “due to logistical difficulties caused by COVID-19” [13, P. 1238].

⁴ Ny koronalov, 2020, *Regjeringen.no*, available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/ny-koronalov/id2694038/> (accessed 25.04.2020).

might have had for immigration to Norway. As a concrete example, we have chosen to focus on the policy field of asylum, since its framework conditions are especially sensitive to influences related to COVID-19. This article is structured as follows. In a first step, we briefly outline the perception and reaction to COVID-19 on the EU level, since this was a factor framing political decisions in Norway. Next, we will examine how policy in Norway reacted to the perceived challenges of COVID-19 and how this changed the conditions affecting immigration, cross-border and internal migration and mobility. In a third step, we will examine how immigration to Norway — with a special focus on asylum-related migration — has developed since COVID-19 spread to Europe. The article concludes with a further discussion of the contents of the paper.

First Reactions of the EU to the COVID-19 Threat

Before we discuss the concrete developments and measures in Norway, it is important to take a closer look at the developments at the European level since February 2020, which have influenced mobility and migration-specific restrictions, not just at the European, but also at the national, regional and local levels.

First, we will summarise how this situation began. The virus was first discovered in Europe in February 2020 in Italy, which immediately declared a state of emergency. From the end of February onwards, the EU introduced various public health, economic, agri-food and travel measures to contain the consequences of Covid-19 within the European states⁵. On 17 March the European Commission established an international advisory panel of “leading epidemiologists and virologists” from different EU Member States.

The perceived threat of COVID-19 had lasting consequences for asylum-related migration and the associated asylum and repatriation procedures⁶.

It quickly became clear that asylum procedures and processes, as well as the resettlement and repatriation of migrants in general and refugees had to be adapted to the new situation with regard to COVID-19⁷. For asylum registration and housing, this meant altering the interviewing procedures as well as the reception

⁵ Summary of the European Commission’s response to coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis to date, 2020, *European Commission*, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/news/summary-of-the-european-commission-s-response-to-corona-virus-covid-19-crisis-to-date_en (accessed 25.04.2020).

⁶ COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement, 2020, *European Commission*, p. 1, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/guidance-implementation-eu-provisions-asylum-return-procedures-resettlement.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020).

⁷ *ibid.* P. 2

conditions (including detention and asylum procedures)⁸. This posed a significant strain on the EU regarding the variable contexts of implementation among the EU member states and associated EEA countries. “The Commission fully acknowledges the difficulties that in the current context Member States face when implementing relevant EU rules in this regard”⁹.

In principle the EU, although acknowledging the complexities of COVID-19 challenges, aimed to maintain the usual processes and procedures. “Therefore, even if there are delays, third-country nationals who apply for international protection must have their application registered by the authorities and be able to lodge them.”¹⁰ However, with the rise of COVID-19, measures were also implemented to allow for some flexibility in asylum procedures. “As regards reception conditions, Member States may make use of the possibility under Directive 2013/33/EU (hereafter ‘the Reception Conditions Directive’) to exceptionally set, in duly justified cases and for a reasonable period that should be as short as possible, different modalities for material reception conditions from those normally required”¹¹.

For example, it was proposed, in accordance with Article 31 (3) of the Asylum Procedures Directive, that the periods for the examination of asylum applications be made more flexible. In this context, several recommendations were made to sustain adequate asylum procedures and processes despite the new constraints. It was proposed to the Member States that they practice “social” or “physical distancing” by replacing their face-to-face interaction with media or digital communication via phone, mobile or web-based electronic services¹². As for asylum procedures, this meant that personal interviews were to be suspended for a certain period or conducted per video conference.

The Commission further recommended, “that Member States as far as possible make use of such specific temporary arrangements, provided that necessary arrangements concerning the facilities are set up and that interpretation, as well as access to legal assistance and representation, is ensured by the competent authorities”¹³.

From these statements alone, it can be seen that from the first appearance of the virus in Europe, especially in January and February, the EU’s way of dealing

⁸ *ibid.* P. 2

⁹ *ibid.* P. 1

¹⁰ EASO Guidance on asylum procedure: operational standards and indicators, 2020, EASO, Brussels, p. 3, available at: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/covid19-emergency-measures-asylum-reception-systems.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020).

¹¹ *ibid.* P. 3.

¹² *ibid.* P. 4.

¹³ *ibid.* P. 5.

with COVID-19 had a substantial influence on the temporal as well as substantive rules regarding mobility processes, especially with regard to asylum. Asylum process procedures in the partner countries began to be delayed — for example, owing to the change from face-to-face interaction to digital communication and digital processing of cases. Defined deadlines — e. g. “six months for concluding the examination of an application”¹⁴ or procedures under Regulation (EU) N^o 604/2013 — as well as associated procedures, had to be divided into parts and in some aspects decelerated, which meant longer processing and waiting times as well as a delayed onward journey for asylum seekers to other destination countries within the Euro-Zone — e. g. in the context of Dublin Transfers¹⁵.

The same lasting effects that COVID-19 had on asylum applicants’ mobility could be observed with regard to their “immobility”, i. e. the conditions where they were staying in reception or temporary camps or in their borderlands. Almost overnight common procedures such as health screening, health care, quarantine and isolation¹⁶ had to be adapted to the requirements associated with the perceived COVID-19 problem. “Many Member States have introduced stricter medical screening for applicants and mandatory COVID-19 testing for new arrivals”¹⁷. In addition to typical health care issues like emergency care and treatment of illnesses and mental disorders, now member states had to implement new measures dealing with COVID-19 health issues under higher risk situations, for instance, because they had to be conducted face-to-face¹⁸.

This was complicated by the different rates, at which national or regional governments implemented such measures. Not only did the countries follow different assessments and decisions regarding the timing of the implementation of relevant measures.¹⁹ The measures themselves were different in character and their impli-

¹⁴ “Article 31 (3) point (b) of the Asylum Procedures Directive allows Member States to extend the six-month period for concluding the examination of applications by a period not exceeding a further nine months when a large number of third country nationals or stateless persons simultaneously apply for international protection, making it very difficult to complete the examination within this time-limit.” (EASO Guidance on asylum procedure: operational standards and indicators, 2020, EASO, Brussels, p. 7, available at: https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Guidance_on_asylum_procedure_operational_standards_and_indicators_EN.pdf (accessed 25.04.2020)).

¹⁵ EASO Guidance on asylum procedure: operational standards and indicators, 2020, EASO, Brussels, p. 7, available at: https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Guidance_on_asylum_procedure_operational_standards_and_indicators_EN.pdf (accessed 25.04.2020).

¹⁶ *ibid.* P. 10.

¹⁷ *ibid.* P. 10.

¹⁸ *ibid.* P. 10.

¹⁹ *ibid.* P. 7.

cations for mobile and non-mobile people²⁰. Hence, actions or mobility practices that were appropriate in one national or specific regional context, may not have been appropriate in another one.

Norway's Responses to the COVID-19 Threat in the Context of Migration

Norway started to introduce emergency measures in mid-March 2020²¹. However, already on 31 January, in response to the development of COVID-19 in Asia, the Ministry of Health and Care Services commissioned the Norwegian Directorate of Health to “coordinate the health and care sectors’ efforts in collaboration with the National Institute of Public Health and other affected actors”²². On 31 January COVID-19 was also categorised as a highly infectious and generally dangerous disease and it became a requirement to report all cases. In the following weeks and months, the Norwegian government introduced further measures to control COVID-19 and its effects. These are considered the most far-reaching measures taken in Norway since the end of the Second World War [10, p. 776].

On 14 March, a travel ban was instated for health professionals who work directly with patients. Two days later a recommendation was issued that also the general public should not travel abroad. Also on 14 March, to implement measures limiting the further spread of the coronavirus, the arrival of resettlement refugees (quota refugees) was suspended²³. At that time, there were 5,120 refugees²⁴, who were to be moved to around 200 municipalities in Norway. Ref-

²⁰ COVID-19: Guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement, 2020, *European Commission*, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/guidance-implementation-eu-provisions-asylum-return-procedures-resettlement.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020); COVID-19 emergency measures in asylum and reception systems, 2020, *EASO*, Brussels, p. 5, available at: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/covid19-emergency-measures-asylum-reception-systems.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020).

²¹ COVID-19 emergency measures in asylum and reception systems, 2020, *EASO*, Brussels, p. 7, available at: <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/covid19-emergency-measures-asylum-reception-systems.pdf> (accessed 25.04.2020); In the following, only those measures relevant for mobility or migration will be discussed. Other measures will not be discussed here, such as the introduction of hygiene regulations, the closure of public facilities such as kindergartens, schools, universities and recreational facilities (sports centres, clubs, etc.) and the closure of hairdressers, hotels, shopping malls or stores, etc. or the ban on overnight stays for people with second homes (mostly vacation homes) in other localities [10, P. 775].

²² Tidslinje: myndighetenes håndtering av koronasituasjonen, 2020, *Regjeringen.no*, available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/Koronasituasjonen/tidslinje-koronaviruset/id2692402/> (accessed 25.04.2020).

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ More than half of the people to be moved were resettlement refugees (*Regjeringen.no*, 2020).

ugees who had been granted a residence permit in Norway and a settlement in a municipality, but who were not yet in Norway, were refused entry until further notice²⁵. At the same time, temporary entry and exit controls were introduced at the Schengen internal border²⁶.

On 15 March, the “Forskrift om bortvisning mv. av utlendinger uten oppholdstillatelse i riket av hensyn til folkehelsen” (regulation no. 293) came into force²⁷. Paragraph 1 of this law, “The Expulsion of Foreigners without a Residence permit, etc.”, stipulates with reference to the Immigration Act that in order to ensure public health under COVID-19 conditions, foreigners without a residence permit (including all foreign nationals who were arriving after 16 March, 8 a. m.)²⁸ should immediately be expelled from Norway or leave of their own accord²⁹. From that time onwards, foreigners without a residence permit for Norway were refused entry at the borders, in accordance with the Infection Law. Still excluded from this regulation at that time were foreigners who were already in airport transit but had not left the country, those seeking asylum or those with caregiving or other important welfare-related duties in Norway³⁰. In addition, procedures for making case decisions and presenting grounds for those decisions were simplified. In urgent cases, it became possible to inform asylum applicants of the decisions concerning their application orally via phone or digitally as long as other procedural channels were not available³¹.

On 16 March, medium term internal border controls were introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In the most extreme cases, there were mobility controls and restrictions or even bans within or between municipalities or localities.

On 8 April, a medium-term regulation concerning the accommodation of asylum seekers in reception centres was issued, which included requirements regarding social distancing, quarantines and isolation, as well as rules limiting personal contacts and travel mobility³². In addition, all practices within the asylum application and related procedures which were previously performed face-to-face — e. g. fact-finding — were to be conducted using phone or digi-

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Forskrift om bortvisning mv. av utlendinger uten oppholdstillatelse i riket av hensyn til folkehelsen, 2020, *ustisog Beredskapsdepartement*, Oslo, available at: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/forskrift/2020-03-15-293> (accessed 25.04.2020).

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, para 5.

³² The first paragraph does not apply to those EEA citizens and their family members who are residing or working in Norway pursuant to section 110 of the Norwegian Immigration Act.

tal communication. As of April, for example, asylum applications were no longer be submitted during a personal interview, but rather by mail to the police. Changes were also made regarding the entry deadlines for residence permits. As many asylum seekers were unable to continue their journey to Norway due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions in Europe, this was recognised as a justified reason for an extension of the deadline to enter Norway³⁵. All this had “a consequent impact on the processing, renewal and validity of temporary authorisation of stay, residence permits and long and short stay visas of third-country nationals in (the EU and) Norway”³⁴.

Finally, the ‘Corona Act’ (conceived as a provisional measure) came into force at the end of March. Since this made it possible to adapt 62 other basic laws or areas of law in the context of COVID-19³⁵, it can also be regarded as a kind of enabling act. The resulting “restrictions gave priority to health over the economy and to standardised national regulations over local flexibility, and they were a combination of mandatory regulations and more soft advisories.” [10; p. 776].

In July another law came into force, the “Midlertidig lov om innreiserestriksjoner for utlendinger av hensyn til folkehelsen”³⁶, which was aimed at regulating immigration to Norway for the following months. This included the following regulations:

«A foreign national is only entitled to enter if

a) the foreign national resides in Norway with a residence permit or right of residence under the Immigration Act;

b) the foreign national seeks protection (asylum) in the realm or otherwise invokes a right to international protection due to risk of persecution etc.; see section 73 of the Immigration Act;

c) the presence of the foreign national in the realm is essential to maintain the proper operation of critical public functions or attend to fundamental needs of the population;

d) the foreign national has been granted a residence permit without deferred entry; see section 3;

³⁵ Beboere i asylmottak etter statsborgerskap og status i søknad, 2020, *UDI*, available at: <https://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/beboere-i-asylmottak-etter-statsborgerskap-og-status-i-soknad-2020/> (accessed 25.04.2020).

³⁴ Inform N° 1 — EU and OECD member states responses to managing residence permits and migrant unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, *European Migration Network*, European Commission, p. 3, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/oo_eu_inform1_residence_permits_and_unemployment_en_updated_final.pdf (accessed 25.04.2020).

³⁵ Midlertidig Lov om Forskriftshjemmel for å Avhjelpe Konsekvenser av Utbrudd av Covid-19 mv. (Koronaloven), 2020, *Justis- og Beredskapsdepartement*, available at: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/lov/2020-03-27-17> (accessed 25.04.2020).

³⁶ This is an Interim Act relating to entry restrictions for foreign nationals concerning public health (Interim Act Relating to Entry Restrictions for Foreign Nationals out of Concern for Public Health, 2020, *Ministry of Justice and Public Security*, Oslo, available at: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2020-06-19-83>) (accessed 25.04.2020)

e) the foreign national has been granted an entry visa under section 12 of the Immigration Act;

f) the foreign national has been granted a visa under section 10 of the Immigration Act by the Norwegian decision-making authority subsequent to 15 March 2020».

Furthermore, there is an optional provision that names specific reasons for which a foreign national may nonetheless enter the country, such as care obligations for a family member or other important welfare-related duties³⁷. Violations of this decree are to be punished with non-entry or expulsion.

Regarding the area of mobility and migration, it can be concluded that Norway's strategic approach with respect to immigration can be described as inclusive, even during the implementation of COVID-19 measures [10]. Although Norway intensified its border controls, established entry restrictions and even closed borders with Sweden and Germany (for example, ferry traffic between Norway and Germany), asylum seekers (and immigrants in general) continued to have access to safety, health-care services and integration-relevant information (for example, on the subject of application procedures, communication and contact possibilities, etc.) despite the implementation of pandemic measures.

As Christensen & Læg Reid [10] conclude: "The government measures were implemented through a joint strategy of advice, guidelines, and mandatory directives, the last followed up with potential penalties for non-compliance. Although the measures were pretty strong, the most draconian measures, such as a full shutdown of businesses, a curfew, full border closure and isolation of infected citizens in designated buildings, were not imposed." [10; P.777].

The Case of Asylum Applications in the Context of COVID-19 and the Implementation of COVID-19-Related Measures

For finding out if the implemented measures somehow had an effect on immigration in Norway in the following we will examine the impact the COVID policy had on asylum mobility, asylum applications in general and asylum applications from unaccompanied minors. In particular, we look at the development of the number of asylum applications to Norway for the last three years (2018, 2019 and 2020).³⁸ These numbers are collected and made publicly available by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), the main institution responsible for processing asylum applications, including those specifically from foreigners (mainly Third Country Nationals) who wish to visit or live in Norway. The UDI is also responsible for refugee reception centres, refugee housing and deporta-

³⁷ Interim Act Relating to Entry Restrictions for Foreign Nationals out of Concern for Public Health, 2020, *Ministry of Justice and Public Security*, Oslo, available at: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2020-06-19-83> (accessed 25.04.2020).

³⁸ Irregular migrants were not included in this analysis.

tion³⁹. The available data include information on the number of asylum seekers in Norway living in housing centres (currently 35 centres, while there were 40 in 2019) and the number of asylum applications from adults and youths living in these asylum centres (fig. 1)⁴⁰.

The data and respective figures show a general trend, that is, a general decrease in numbers over the entire period between 2018 and 2020 as well as falling figures in the respective years. In January 2018, for example, 4,885 asylum-seekers were living in these centres, whereas by September 2020 this figure had decreased to approximately half of that number, namely 2,626 asylum seekers. Fig. 1 further indicates that the average number of asylum seekers in reception centres have almost halved from 2018 to 2020.

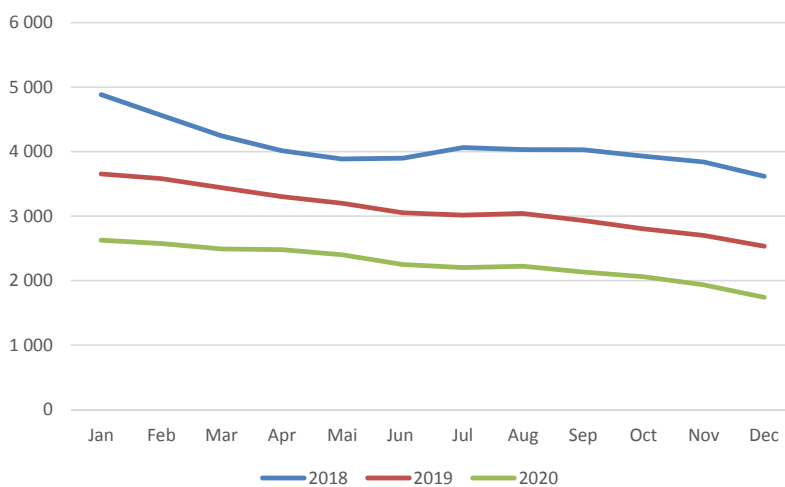


Fig. 1. Number of Asylum Seekers in Reception Centres 2018, 2019, 2020

Source: Data provided by UDI.

Next, we analyse the development of the number of asylum seekers registered at the national arrival centre Råde i Østfold (the only one of its kind in Norway), which was established in 2015. It can be assumed that if COVID-19 and the measures to deal with it had had an effect on immigration — here specifically, asylum-related migration — this should be reflected in a significantly lower number of asylum seekers, starting in February 2020 and over the following months.

³⁹ Beboere i asylmottak etter statsborgerskap og status i søknad (2020), 2020, *The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration*, available at: <https://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/beboere-i-asylmottak-etter-statsborgerskap-og-status-i-soknad-2020/> (accessed 25.04.2020). For an explanation of the different types of asylum seeker reception and housing institutions, see Ulike Typer Asylmottak, 2020, *The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration*, available at: <https://www.udi.no/asylmottak/ulike-typer-asylmottak/> (accessed 25.04.2020).

⁴⁰ This population is very heterogeneous with reference to their country of origin and specific migration motivations. By October, asylum seekers from 37 countries plus so-called stateless persons were living in the arrival centers (Beboere i asylmottak etter statsborgerskap og status i søknad (2020), 2020, *The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration*, available at: <https://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/beboere-i-asylmottak-etter-statsborgerskap-og-status-i-soknad-2020/> (accessed 25.04.2020)).

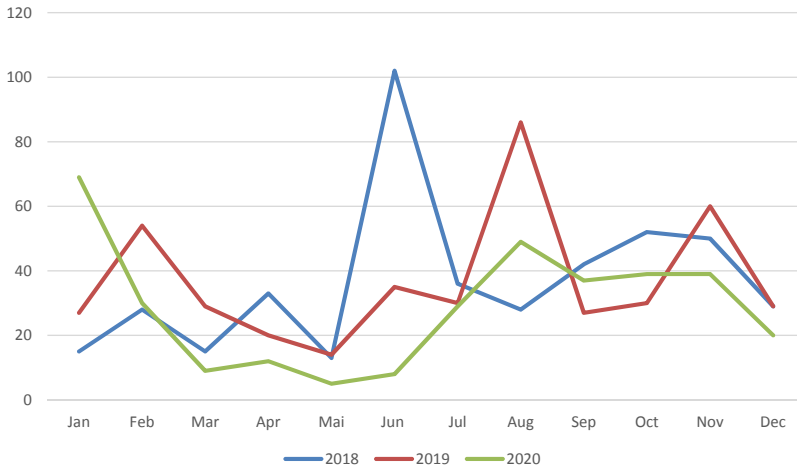


Fig. 2 Number of Asylum Seekers in Reception Centre Råde in Østfold 2018, 2019, 2020

Source: Data provided by UDI.

As Fig. 2 shows, the number of asylum seekers at the arrival centre Råde i Østfold follows a U-curve during this time period. The decrease between February and May is significant and does not recover until July and August, with the gradual withdrawal of the drastic COVID-19 measures introduced in the spring — here specifically related to travel and entry restrictions. Moreover, the curve for 2020 shows a more constant trend with less extreme swings, which could also testify to a possible effect of the COVID-19 measures.

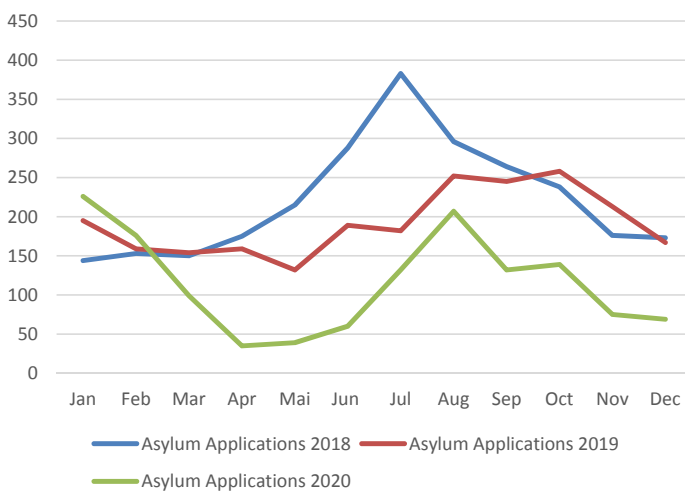


Fig. 3 Asylum Applications Lodged in Norway 2018, 2019, 2020 (N)

Source: Data provided by UDI.

Next, we take a look at the asylum applications registered in Norway over the years 2018—2020. A first glance shows that the number of asylum applications falls noticeably from February to April, remains at a very low level until June, then rises and falls again over September and October. As described above, it seems likely that this is related to the temporarily suspended arrival of resettlement refugees (quota refugees) on 14 March⁴¹. This concerns refugees who had already been granted a residence permit for Norway and housing in a specific Norwegian municipality, but who had not yet resided in Norway. These refugees were not able to travel to Norway from their places of residence at the time. A further complicating factor for all other migrants who intended to seek asylum in Norway was that due to general travel restrictions, travel to Norway was only possible under difficult and costly conditions (e. g. flights or transportation connections to Norway were extremely complicated and expensive and were often cancelled). Finally, many migrants also hesitated to continue their journey to Norway because of the incalculable risks of facing infection, a quarantine or border control issues [8; P.405].

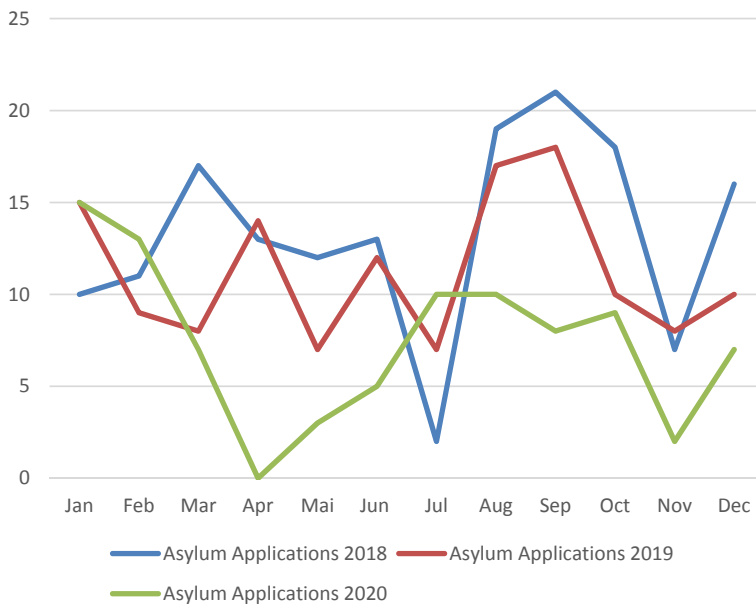


Fig. 4. Asylum Applications of Unaccompanied Minors Lodged in Norway 2018, 2019, 2020

Source: Data provided by UDI.

Finally, let us take a look at the number of unaccompanied minors who have sought asylum in Norway in recent years. First of all, it can be seen that in 2018 and 2019 the number of asylum seekers in this specific migrant group was higher

⁴¹ Tidslinje: myndighetenes håndtering av koronasituasjonen, 2020, *Regjeringen.no*, available at: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/Koronasituasjonen/tidslinje-koronaviruset/id2692402/> (accessed 25.04.2020).

than in 2020. The trend in 2018 and 2019 was that the numbers fell slightly until the middle of the year and rose sharply for a short time from August to September. The year 2020 shows a different trend. The number of young unaccompanied minors seeking asylum falls from 15 in January to 0 in April and then rises again through May, June and July. Then in August, September and October, the numbers remain close to the July/August level, settling down at a lower level compared to the previous years. November is marked by a significant drop in numbers followed by a slight rise in applications in December. Again, the data suggests that COVID-19 affected the immigration rates of unaccompanied minors to Norway.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to discuss how the spread of COVID-19 led to changes in the institutional constraints on immigration and mobility at the European level in general and in Norway in particular, and what consequences this had for immigration to Norway — especially in the case of asylum migration.

We have shown that measures were taken relatively early in Europe — however with significant variations between the member states regarding extent, content and timeline of measure implementation — and later in Norway to prevent the further spread of COVID-19. At the core of these measures were general restrictions on mobility/migration and special measures to reduce close contact in the context of migration. It is important to note that these measures were not primarily aimed at regulating migration or mobility — that is, they were not primarily migration policy measures — but were first and foremost motivated by health and security policy concerns [16].

The respective number curves discussed above must be interpreted in this context. While the developments in 2018 and 2019 (and those of the years before) are mainly a consequence of migration and security policy measures, the rise and fall in migration in 2020 were primarily a consequence of health and security policy measures (related to travel, onward travel or entry bans, reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction, physical or social distancing, quarantine rules, etc.) to combat the COVID-19 threat. In the example we have chosen — asylum applications or claims in Norway in 2020 — the available data show a significant drop in the number of applications. This drop can be considered a proxy for a significantly reduced number of refugees arriving from February to June as a result of the existing COVID-19 measures. These measures, as they were implemented throughout Europe, established drastic barriers to mobility almost overnight, leading to a ‘freezing’ of mobility.

From a political science perspective [17; 18] one can assume a radical change in the procedural dimension of politics. The way in which the content-related dimension of political action (‘policy’) comes about in the process of political decision-making has become de-democratized under COVID-19, i. e. the tension between consensus and conflict has almost been eliminated — at least in a short

term perspective. “We are witnessing the disintegration of daily political routines and the glowing red, existential anxiety driving political activity in the face of an ‘external enemy’, which is creating chaos and fear for life and health.” [19].

As a consequence of the drastic COVID-19-related changes in the established institutional migration or mobility arrangements and in the corresponding procedures, migrants were forced almost overnight to adapt their practices to the existing COVID-19 challenge. “The situation is particularly difficult for movers and non-movers as the Corona Virus, the lack of preparation for a pandemic, and the unknowns that surround COVID-19 become an existential threat to security.” [8, P. 405]. The resulting uncertainties are complex for migrants on multiple levels. First, they concern the perception and factual situation of the institutional conditions for migration. The adjustments and changes implemented and in progress to meet the challenge of COVID-19 must first be understood, deciphered in the context of the new situation and put into practice according to the adjusted institutional procedures. For migrants, it results in a growing uncertainty regarding the amount of information they need to make appropriate decisions regarding their own migration situation. Uncertainties also arose as to what the existing alternatives for action could be in the context of asylum-related migration and corresponding asylum procedures. Finally, this led to uncertainties regarding the consequences of action in connection with the new boundary conditions. Which actions are most likely to help me reach my goal, which obstacles and risks must I reckon with, which institutional rules and procedures apply in the respective countries in the context of the COVID-19 threat, etc.? “At points of origin and destination, movers and non-movers are confronted by these new insecurities and the reality that they may undermine plans going forward.” [8, P. 407]. Should one migrate in times of COVID-19 or should one wait? “This can be as difficult a decision as is staying put and practising self-quarantine.” [8, P. 407].

“This extraordinary situation contains a mixture of frantic political measures and a social life of the lowest possible intensity.” [19]. Migrants should no longer be mobile. Rather, they should follow the political interventions and implemented measures, immobilize themselves, so to speak, and distance themselves physically and socially from one another in immobility. In the context of COVID-19 mobility and migration became more and more perceived as a risk to public health at a supranational, national and sub-national level, an accomplice to the “external enemy”, a threat to life and health [19].

And yet, the intentions of political regulation in the context of COVID-19 must not be confused with their effect, since the object for regulation — in our case mobility and migration — has its own autonomy with respect to control and regulation activities [20; 21]. Accordingly, despite the restrictive COVID-19 migration policy described, a dynamic contingent migration practice can be assumed. Exactly this aspect of emergence, process and autonomy could be used as a starting point for further research to shed light on institutional contexts and

forms of practice of actors (corporate agents as well as migrants) in the context of a defined pandemic. This would help to better understand the role of contingency in the context of restrictive political conditions regarding mobility and migration.

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