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'Europe was a dream for me. This dream came true but remains unfulfilled at the same time': Navigating life aspirations among forced migrants in Austria and Italy

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse the interplay between forced migrants' retrospective expectations and their current experiences in the host country, and how this interaction informs their aspirations in relation to their potential life trajectories. By zooming in on the Austrian and Italian cases derived from qualitative data, this article investigates forced migrants' retrospective perspectives on the 'good life' in (imagined) Europe and their experienced-informed perspectives of the host country context—reception policies—after migration by tracing individuals' self-reported perceptions of life aspirations over the course of their migration journey. By applying the *aspirations-capability framework*, our analysis traces what 'happens' after people have submitted their asylum applications. In this way, this research sheds light on the process of adapting to a new context with gravely restricted capabilities and how this affects people's life aspirations. By doing so, we demonstrate that aspirations are not only dynamic and flexible, but capabilities also change due to the structural confines of national asylum procedures. This study therefore brings an innovative perspective to study life aspirations and capabilities by showing the importance of reflecting not only aspirations but also the (in)capability of acting in the present which informs the process of revisiting original life aspirations for individuals seeking asylum. This process begins after the arrival, based on changes in their capabilities, specifically the national asylum structures that confine them.

Keywords: life aspirations; capabilities; forced migrants; reception policies; Austria; Italy.

1. Introduction

There are human rights, but not for us. Why don't they give us the residency? Why do we have to wait five years in one room? We are five individuals sleeping all together. One

cannot work; nor move his body. We are bored. If I go to the market and ask for work, they ask me “Do you have the residency?” and when I say “No,” they would say that there is no work for me.

(Respondent 21, male, 42, Iraq, arrived in Austria in 2015)

As stated in this quote, the feeling of uncertainty is a particularly pressing issue for those seeking asylum who, after having arrived in Europe, find themselves confronted with long waiting periods for asylum, obstacles to exercising fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement, and to take on work due to national asylum-seeking processes and bureaucracy.

The apparent mismatch between forced migrants’ retrospective life expectations¹ of Europe, for example, about accessing fundamental rights and labour market participation, and their revisited expectations, informed by their current experiences in a host country, is only insufficiently addressed in the literature so far.² One stream focuses on migrants’ decision-making processes and their migration aspirations (e.g. Carling 2002; Boccagni 2017; Carling and Collins 2018; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). The other side of the migration scholarship focuses on individuals’ experiences of ‘incorporation’ or analyses the laws and regulations by shedding light on structural-bureaucratic hurdles faced by forced migrants in their destination countries, such as long waiting periods (Rotter 2016; Vianelli, Gill, and Hoellerer 2022). Yet, why and how forced migrants’ expectations and consequently, their life aspirations, have evolved and changed *after* having arrived in Europe has not received sufficient attention (see few exceptions: Borselli and van Meijl 2021; Van Heelsum 2017; Koikkalainen, Kyle, and Nykänen 2020).

In order to be able to reflect upon forced migrants’ retrospective and imagined expectations of Europe and their current experiences in the host country after arrival, the literature on aspirations could be a useful direction which suggests that migration aspirations should be read together with broader life aspirations (Carling 2014; de Haas 2021; Müller-Funk 2023). Accordingly, life aspirations are defined as individuals’ perspectives of a ‘good life’. The pursuit of the ‘good life’, nonetheless, spans a diverse range of interpretations. On the individual level, considerations of socio-economic opportunities, seeking a different lifestyle or quality of life, or the desire to study abroad are often driven by personal goals. Yet, on the collective level, the desire for ‘a good life’ embodies overarching notions of the desired societal structure such as the aspiration for an egalitarian society or the longing for inhabiting a stable and law-abiding society (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci, and Belloni 2023). That is to say, individuals’ perception of their current and desired/imagined well-being at home or elsewhere at the individual, meso, and collective levels plays a crucial role in informing their life aspirations (de Haas 2021). The formation of life aspirations—and migration itself—is not a linear process and does not end with individuals’ arrival in the destination country. Life aspirations can be made and remade throughout people’s migration trajectory (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014), even after their arrival. It is of particular importance to take into account forced migrants’ capability to realize life aspirations. This capability plays a significant role in shaping and potentially challenging individuals’ perceptions of the ‘good life’ within the context of their current host country. Drawing on interviews conducted within the Horizon 2020 project MIRROR between August 2020 and March 2021 with forcibly displaced migrants in Austria and Italy, this article—through the lens of the literature on aspirations—explores their retrospective expectations of ‘good life’ in (imagined) Europe and their experienced-informed perspectives of reception policies in the host country contexts after arrival: Austria and Italy. Informed by the aspiration-capability framework (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018), we analyse how forced migrants’ expectations, which in turn inform their life aspirations, change and adapt to their new social realities after arriving in Europe. Acknowledging that broader life aspirations are powerful enough to shape migration aspirations (Carling 2014), we argue

that life aspirations in turn are informed by retrospective expectations of having a ‘good life’ in (imagined) Europe. Life aspirations may, therefore, be reshaped by realized/unfulfilled/failed expectations during the asylum application process in host country contexts which make forced migrants revisit their life aspirations in the light of capabilities provided by a given structural context.

The contribution of this article is three-fold. First, despite extant literature on migration aspirations, the interplay between human agency and life aspirations is understudied in the contexts of displacement (Müller-Funk, Üstübici, and Belloni 2023). By studying Austria and Italy as host country contexts, this study fills an empirical gap in the existing literature on aspirations as it evidently shows, in their narratives, forced migrants are reactive agents rather than passive victims when the issue comes to reassessing their life aspirations (e.g. criticizing reception and integration policies, self-questioning original expectations). Second, life aspirations, in the literature, are mostly centred around people’s perceptions of a ‘good life’ relating to perceived socio-economic opportunities at home or elsewhere (de Haas 2021). By zooming in on forced migrants’ narratives of heightened adherence to ‘human dignity’ as another source feeding into their perceptions of a ‘good life’, we expand the existing conceptualization of life aspirations. Third, the theoretical literature on the aspiration-capability framework argues that migration is regarded as the consequence of an individual’s wish to migrate and their capability to realize such a wish (Carling and Schewel 2018). Yet, recent scholarly work invites migration scholars to reconsider the current conceptualization of ‘capability’, questioning the degree to which the fulfilment of migration aspirations is constrained by structural factors. This reassessment highlights the significance of recognizing personal capacity, which includes emotional resources like hope, disappointment, and apprehension, in addition to economic, social, and cultural capital. Instead, aspirations are interconnected to capabilities which thus can be defined as ‘being able to imagine a better future at home or elsewhere is part of a fundamental capability to act on the present’ (Müller-Funk, Üstübici, and Belloni 2023: 9). By applying the aspiration-capability framework (Carling and Schewel 2018) to the case of forced migrants in European asylum systems, that is, in the post-arrival stage, our analysis highlights people’s reflections, narratives, and agency after having submitted their asylum application. In this way, this research sheds light on the process of adapting to a new context with gravely restricted capabilities and how this reshapes people’s life aspirations regarding Europe in turn. By doing so, we not only demonstrate that life aspirations are dynamic and flexible, but that capabilities also change due to the structural confines of national asylum procedures. This traces back to earlier discussions on forced migrants’ personal capacity to act in the present in their host country context which they do by reflecting upon their retrospective life aspirations regarding Europe after migration. This study therefore brings an innovative perspective to study the aspiration-capability framework by showing the importance of tracing not only aspirations but also the (in)capability of acting in the present which informs the process of remaking aspirations for individuals seeking asylum that begins after the arrival based on changes in their capabilities, that is, the national asylum structures that confine them.

2. A Complex interaction between life aspirations and reception policies in the host country context

The traditional debate on drivers of migration has mainly centred around push–pull factors. While reasons such as economic, environmental, demographic, political, and social factors play a role, a growing body of research highlights the plurality of factors explaining migration (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haas 2012; Carling and Collins 2018). That is ‘migration is an ongoing process within which past, present and future are folded together in the emergence of migrant lives and subjectivities’ (Collins 2018: 966). Therefore,

migration decision-making should not be seen as a cut-and-dried process, but rather a dynamic process that is oftentimes adapted and re-made over the course of individuals' migration journey.

Acknowledging the complexity of migration decision-making processes, the *aspiration-capability framework* (Carling and Schewel 2018) seems to be a beneficial conceptual path. This framework helps us understand the dynamic process through which forced migrants' expectations evolve and shape their life aspirations in response to their new social realities upon arriving in a new country context. The aspiration to migrate is understood as 'a conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration; it can vary in degree and in the balance between choice and coercion' (Carling and Schewel 2018: 946). Yet, migratory aspirations need to be considered as a trajectory beyond 'moving onwards' or 'staying put'. The existing scholarship on aspirations (Carling 2014; de Haas 2021; Müller-Funk 2023) indicates that migration aspirations should be considered in conjunction with more encompassing life aspirations. This is because aspiring to have a 'good life' is a dynamic process depending on a wide range of individual, economic, cultural, social, institutional, and environmental factors. Thus, life aspirations can be seen as a continuous trajectory in individuals' lives, which are established before migration and may evolve during and after migration (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014).

Pondering the secondary tenet within the *aspiration-capability framework*, Sen (1999) pioneered the capabilities approach. By placing freedom of choice at the core of analysis, Sen highlights the importance of the empowerment of individuals with the autonomy to design and shape their lives according to their preferences and values. Through the concept of *human capability*, being defined as the capacity of individuals to pursue what they value as essential and to enrich the diverse array of choices available to them, Sen argues that the pursuit of well-being is not just a choice but a moral imperative (Carling and Schewel 2018). While Nussbaum (2011) acknowledges the significance of freedom of choice, she highlights the necessity of fostering international social cooperation based on the principle that every individual should have access to the fundamental elements required for a dignified life.

The term *migration capability* generally refers to (1) potential ability: 'a person's prospects of realising migration aspirations regardless of whether the individual has such aspirations in the first place or prefers to stay' and/or (2) revealed ability: 'the evident migration ability of someone who has actually migrated' (Carling and Schewel 2018: 955). de Haas (2021) further argues that migration should not be viewed solely as 'an instrumental-functional means-to-end' to enhance the living standards of individuals, but also as 'a potentially well-being-enhancing factor in *its own right*'. Therefore, he draws attention to the conceptualization of *human mobility* as a fundamental freedom which should be defined not only by physical movement but by individuals' capability, that is, freedom, to choose where to reside whereby migration represents the realization of this freedom. Conversely, Müller-Funk, Üstübcici, and Belloni (2023) debate that migration is not always synonymous with freedom, especially in the context of displacement; it can also signify a deprivation of it, as seen in those fleeing persecution or in the continuous movement of irregular migrants in Europe who try to find a place for themselves anew. Thus, a conceptual refinement of 'capability' is deemed necessary to better align with the dynamic nature of human mobility and the complexities of the formation of aspirations. 'Capability' thus shall refer to individuals' ability to enact actions in the current moment, thereby realizing aspirations within a specific structural context. Undoubtedly, the capacity to envision a brighter future here and there is intrinsic to the fundamental ability (de Haas, 2021) to act on the present (Müller-Funk, Üstübcici, and Belloni 2023).

Acknowledging the intertwined link between aspirations and capabilities, recent scholarship focusing on the (im)mobility of forced migrants advances our understanding of structural and contextual complexities (re)shaping migration aspirations in the context of

forced displacement. Scholars examine the link between aspirations and secondary refugee movements (Kvittingen et al., 2018). For instance, Belloni (2016) explains that Eritrean refugees in Italy aspire from moving toward Northern European countries, despite policy constraints. Apparently, policies restricting forced migrants' mobility within Europe cannot discourage them from moving onwards because their decision-making processes are shaped by not only countries' migration and asylum policies but also their perceptions of risk, social expectations, and contextual factors. Similarly, Kirişçioğlu and Üstübcici (2023) show how risk perceptions shape migrants' life aspirations, informing their migration aspirations. Their findings disclose that moving onwards or staying put is not always considered as a self-evident choice. Instead, some aspire to move onwards through only legal pathways (with documents) based on their perceived risk assessments. Relatedly, Rottmann and Kaya (2021) suggest the role of emotions and temporal effects in migration aspirations. They found that cultural perceptions and the impact of prolonged residency in a host country are crucial drivers of the decision-making process (Rottmann and Kaya 2021). By resorting meso-level dimension to decision-making processes, Carlson, Jakli, and Linos (2018) find out that information mismanagement drives refugees to engage in distrust toward government and aid organizations in Greece, pushing them to seek information through smugglers and/or other informal sources, resulting in affecting their decisions to move onward from Greece.

Another facet of the literature on the aspiration-capability framework investigates the link between migrants' perception of the host contexts and onward migration. Research suggests that reception policies can influence forced migrants' destination country preferences and their tendency to onward mobility toward Europe. For instance, Rossi and Vitali (2014) argue that the reception policies of host countries may have great importance in influencing refugees' and asylum seekers' destination country preferences and their tendency to onward mobility across EU Member States. Similarly, research on Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan demonstrates that insufficient reception and integration conditions push refugees to re-evaluate their migration strategies which concurrently invokes their onward migration aspirations (Kvittingen et al., 2018). A focus on aspirations after arrival in relation to forced migrants' perspectives of the host country context is particularly important because limited integration and participation capabilities, including long waiting periods and uncertainty about asylum acceptance, negatively influence forced migrants' well-being and their integration motivations in the host country (Esaïasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg 2022).

Notably, the capability of individuals to achieve their life aspirations within the context of their current host country also presents challenges to their perceptions of what constitutes a 'good life'. Therefore, life aspirations can serve as an emotional asset, even within situations where achieving them appears to be, or indeed is, unattainable (Müller-Funk, Üstübcici, and Belloni 2023). Bearing in mind that both capabilities and aspirations can equally reinforce each other, we, in this study, aim to explain the interplay between forced migrants' retrospective expectations and their current experiences in the host country, and how this interaction informs their aspirations in relation to their potential life trajectories. To achieve this, we investigate forced migrants' retrospective perspectives on the 'good life' in (imagined) Europe and their experienced-informed perspectives of the host country context—reception policies—after migration by tracing the process of how individuals make sense of life aspirations over the course of their migration journey. By adopting a bottom-up approach through the lens of forced migrants, we argue that they experience a mismatch between retrospective life aspirations and their current experiences within the scope of their capabilities in national asylum systems which creates a contrast between their original life aspirations and their actual life trajectories after arriving in their host countries and limit their capabilities. The limited capabilities in European asylum systems require new arrivals to critically reflect on and adapt their life aspirations in order to make sense of

their new, strongly restricted agency within the asylum system. As they navigate unfamiliar structural contexts, these individuals go through a transformative journey wherein their original aspirations are challenged and/or interrupted by a multitude of factors including asylum and reception policies (Siviş *et al.*, 2024). By zooming in on these complexities, we gain insight into how they had to adapt their original aspirations in response to their current capabilities.

3. Asylum and refugee reception and integration policies in the Austrian and Italian country contexts

Austria and Italy are appropriate research sites due to their convergent and divergent trajectories in relation to asylum and refugee reception and integration policies. First, both countries have been main contact points for many individuals seeking asylum, particularly during *the humanitarian crisis* of 2015–16. Second, following the humanitarian crisis of 2015–16, both states have adopted crucial changes in their migration and asylum policies as a result of far-right politics which we explain in detail below. Third, as EU Member States, both countries are subjected to the same supranational migration and asylum framework of the European Union (EU) (e.g. Common European Asylum System, Dublin Regulation, or the EU-Turkey Statement).

Regarding the countries' differences, there are important factors that have the potential to shape divergent migration trajectories:

3.1 Austria

Immigration, asylum, and integration are highly politicized issues in Austria, with politicians promoting a narrative of 'integration through effort/performance' (Gruber, Mattes, and Stadlmair 2015). Austrian asylum and integration policies have become increasingly strict since the early 2010s. Integration was gradually established as a policy field in the mid-2000s. In 2003, the Integration Agreement was passed, foreseeing migrants to obtain a certain level of German language skills (A2 in the Common European Framework) to be eligible for permanent residency. In response to the 2015–16 humanitarian crisis and increased immigration rate the asylum and immigration policies were tightened. The politically pressured social-democratic Chancellor resigned in 2016, giving way to a coalition between the Austrian People's Party and the right-wing Freedom Party after parliamentary elections in 2017 (Eberl, Zeglovits, and Sickinger 2017). This coalition promised further restrictions on asylum seekers, resulting in both parties being considered anti-immigrant parties (Hadj Abdou and Ruedin, 2022).

Legally, the asylum procedure is regulated in the Austrian Asylum Act (*Asylgesetz*) and the Austrian Aliens Police Act (*Fremdenpolizeigesetz*). In 2014, the competencies for asylum became more centralized with the establishment of the Federal Agency for Immigration and Asylum (*Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl*, BFA) and the Federal Administrative Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht*) as new first- and second-instance authorities, respectively. Decisions on asylum, therefore including reception, deportation, and possibility to stay (toleration, subsidiary protection, and humanitarian) 'are taken at the conclusion of administrative procedures at the national level by the BFA' (Merhaut and Stern 2018: 36), which has to make a decision within 6 months. Amendments to asylum legislation in 2016 have introduced 'temporary asylum', a quota-based emergency stop that can deny access to federal territory in case of risk to national security and public order, and stricter provisions for family reunification (National Contact Point Austria in EMN 2017). With a reform of the Aliens Law (*Fremdenrechtsänderungsgesetz* 2017) expulsions of rejected asylum seekers have been fastened. Stricter sanctions in case of resistance to expulsion have also been imposed.

There are currently three forms of protection: asylum granted, subsidiary protection, and the right to remain (*Bleiberecht*). Asylum in Austria ('temporary asylum') is now granted for three years. After this period a new evaluation will be made. Subsidiary protection is granted for one year, which can be extended for another two years. Finally, the right to remain is based on the risk that expulsion would violate the right to respect for private and family life, home, and correspondence (Article 8 ECHR). The right to remain is evaluated based on how well the person is already integrated in Austria.

Interestingly, during the asylum procedure, a period we are focusing on in this study, integration is almost impossible. In general, asylum seekers are eligible for *Basic Care* as laid out in the Basic Welfare Support Agreement (*Grundversorgungsvereinbarung*, GVVNo. 80/2004). Basic Care includes a small allowance for asylum seekers—the amount varies depending on the living situation, for example, organized accommodation or rent—public healthcare, and vouchers for clothing as well as children's school material.

In line with EU directives, minimum standards for asylum applicants are ensured, such as access to public healthcare (AIDA 2021a). Needless to say, people still encounter barriers when accessing social services. For example, Kohlenberger et al. (2019) show how people, even after having been granted asylum in Austria, face language barriers and long waiting periods and report a lack of information about doctors.

Asylum seekers also encounter a 'de facto ban' from participating in the labour market. Before a decision on their asylum case, asylum seekers are not allowed to work which usually leads to a dependence on basic welfare support for that time. Longer waiting periods for asylum are a rather common issue in Austria, with negative consequences for refugee integration due to an 'employment gap' as research in similar contexts (e.g. Germany) has shown (Marbach, Hainmüller, and Hangartner 2020).

3.2 Italy

Italy's transition to a country of 'recent immigration' has affected its migration and integration policies and legislation. The legislative Decree No. 286/1998 (Consolidated Act of Provisions Concerning Immigration and the Condition of Third-country Nationals) was issued in 1998. It is seen as a turning point since it allowed the country to regularize and institutionalize its migration and integration framework for the first time by introducing a set of rights and responsibilities for foreigners residing in Italy. The governance of Italy's asylum system is characterized by the lack of coordination among public and private authorities (Ibrido and Terlizzi 2019). There are four different types of protection regimes in Italy: *refugee* and *subsidiary protection* at the international and supranational level as well as *humanitarian*³ and *temporary protection* at the domestic level.

As a result of the increasing immigration and humanitarian crisis of 2015–16, the Italian authorities have tightened reception and integration policies by increasing border controls and restricting the scope of services and integration measures provided to migrant groups (Decree-Law No. 113/2018, known as the 'Salvini Decree') (Ibrido and Marchese 2020). The Salvini Decree halts and/or interrupts the integration process of individuals seeking asylum in Italy as it constrains integration opportunities for asylum seekers in many ways.

In Italy, all asylum seekers who lodge their asylum applications have the right to access reception centres (AIDA 2021b). Yet, the formal registration may take several months; therefore, asylum seekers may have to find temporary accommodations for themselves until the approval of their formal registration. There are two types of accommodation in Italy for asylum seekers: First and Second Reception. *First reception* is provided to those seeking international protection. During the first reception, basic assistance is provided such as food, clothing, and legal advocacy. After the completion of the first reception operations, asylum seekers, lacking financial resources, should be relocated to second reception centres that 'are managed by the municipalities within the National System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*;

SPRAR-SIPROIMI) with the financial support of the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services' (Terluzzi 2020: 19). *Second reception* centres include expanded services such as linguistic and cultural mediation, orientation for local services, vocational training, assistance in housing, job and social integration and psycho-social protection (Terluzzi 2020). However, as a consequence of the Salvini Decree, those who do not possess international protection can no longer access SPRAR-SIPROIMI centres that are responsible for providing vocational training and job counselling (Ibrido and Marchese 2020).

Considering allocated rights, asylum seekers have the right to access the labour market after 60 days from the time of the registration of the asylum application. Accessing education is not straightforward due to practical hurdles, for example, inadequate number of available spots in nearby schools to accommodation centres. As for healthcare, asylum seekers registered with the Italian authorities get free access to the National Health System. Nevertheless, language barriers and delays in the attribution of the tax code provided by Questure create practical hurdles (AIDA 2021b).

4. Methodology

Our primary goal is not to offer a systematic comparison in this study. Yet, our research, by focusing on Austria and Italy through the lens of the multiple case study approach (Yin 2011), enhances the validity of our analysis beyond one specific host country context within Europe. This approach, therefore, facilitates the contextualization of findings and allows for a deeper understanding of how forced migrants navigate life aspirations across two contexts. Both countries are characterized by their convergent and divergent trajectories concerning asylum and refugee reception and integration policies. We rely on semi-structured interviews, collected between August 2020 and March 2021, in Austria and Italy as part of the Horizon 2020 project MIRROR. It is important to underline that interviews were conducted post-arrival, therefore, they reflect participants' own self-reported perceptions of how their initial expectations evolved over time.

The analysis is based on 50 (in total) semi-structured interviews with forced migrants who were waiting for their initial or final asylum decision in Austria and Italy (at the time of the interviews). Thirty-two of these interviews (28 individual interviews: 16 male and 12 female and four family or friend group interviews)⁴ were conducted in Austria, while 18 of them (nine female and nine male) were held in Italy. In Austria, the respondents mostly came from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria with few exceptions from African countries whereas the interviewees, in the context of Italy, were mostly from African countries such as Cameroon, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Somali with few exceptions from Iran, Pakistan, and Palestine.

The interviews took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which required special attention, but also enabled new possibilities for qualitative research (Gruber *et al.*, 2021). Interviews in Austria were conducted face-to-face, in line with social distancing rules, in one of the refugee reception centres in Vienna. In Italy, due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted via a web-based teleconferencing tool. Acknowledging data collection difficulties in reaching potential respondents during this pandemic period, the project team developed a field access strategy. Accordingly, communication occurred through contact persons in refugee centres and/or NGOs that are present in Casteggio, Milano, Pavia, Veneto, and Vienna. In this way, local refugee centres and NGOs acted as facilitators to establish rapport with forced migrants and coordinate interview settings. In the case of interviews which were not hosted by refugee centres or NGOs, interviewers sent a teleconferencing link to interviewees who were responsible for arranging their own interview setting.

For the data collection, ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the University of Vienna and the expert interviews were considered 'standard research' by the

Department of Communication's internal review board. Oral (for Italy) or written (for Austria) informed consent by each interviewee was collected, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. Considering forced migrants' often traumatic experiences of migration, we adopted a 'Do No Harm' approach (Krause 2017), guiding interviewers to avoid asking any sensitive questions which might have distressed participants. The interviews usually lasted from twenty minutes to one hour. They were conducted in participants' native languages by native speaker interviewers who – for the most parts – had been previously refugees themselves or held in English if interviewees preferred. All audio recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed, translated into English, and analysed using MAXQDA. Adopting an inductive approach, we employed a three-round-coding process, accounting for participants' meaning-making process (First round: categorizing interviewees' own accounts; second round: identifying life aspirations capabilities; third round: linking their retrospective expectations and their current experiences after migration). By doing so, we were able to trace the process of how individuals themselves define and make sense of Europe and its asylum policies and how their expectations of Europe are made and remade over the course of their migration journey.

5. Findings: the narratives of forced migrants' life aspirations

Linking changes in aspirations regarding Europe to people's limited capabilities in the Austrian and Italian asylum systems, we find that life aspirations regarding the idea of a 'better' life in Europe lose significance while the national context becomes a dominant factor that shapes people's mental and physical well-being. We, first, elucidate forced migrants' retrospective expectations of life in (imagined) Europe. Second, we analyse the same respondents' critical reflections on these aspirations *after* their arrival and explain the role of the host country contexts in people's overhauling of their life aspirations.

5.1 Retrospective expectations of a 'good life' in (imagined) Europe: 'Europe is a paradise'

Developing one's aspiration to migrate is almost a comparative, yet highly subjective and individual process between 'what is' and 'what could be', based on information gained from various media channels and peers. Our respondents all share positive retrospective life expectations in Europe as part of their original life aspirations: safety, freedoms and dignity, socio-economic prosperity, and equality of opportunity. Yet, it is important to note that forced migrants from different country backgrounds may have distinct perspectives and priorities regarding their migration to Europe. Whilst those who fled conflict or war-torn regions prioritize safety and security (mostly in the Austrian context), those who migrated from African countries are motivated by socio-economic advancement (mostly in the Italian context). This actually indicates the importance of understanding the varying needs of forced migrants coming from different country-of-origin contexts as individuals' diverse motivations significantly influence their expectations of Europe and subsequently shape their life aspirations. These motivations are also fuelled by forced migrants' perceived opportunities in different European countries. These, in turn, are shaped by many factors, such as language, culture, religion, migration routes, their social network, and existing diaspora communities. This highlights the complexity of migration dynamics, as various individual, meso, and collective factors come into play in shaping life aspirations.

5.1.1 Aspire to safety, freedom, and dignity

Seeking safety, freedom, justice, and dignity, which informs forced migrants' life aspirations that in fact make them aspire to migrate, should be considered alongside the dynamic process of developing life aspirations across different levels. Viewed in this manner, life aspirations, concerning the type of community we desire to be a part of, take place at the

collective level (Müller-Funk, Üstübici and Belloni 2023). Many of our interviewees regard Europe as a secure place without immediate dangers to fear on a daily basis. Most respondents hereby refer to security as being able to have a daily routine, such as going shopping or going to work without worrying about whether they would be able to safely get back home:

My information on Europe is that it is a safe country, the most important thing is safety. You can work and get home to relax. You can go and return from work safely. This is my perception about Europe.

(Respondent 6, male, 46, Iraq, arrived in Austria in 2015)

According to him, any person in Europe can live and work safely since there is political stability, in contrast to where he came from. Having been forced to leave his home country for security reasons, he views Europe as a place which allows him to maintain his daily routine as he used to do before the outbreak of civil unrest in Iraq. Similarly, Respondent 20 used the term ‘paradise’ to describe her idea of Europe as a ‘safe’ and ‘beautiful’ place. Yet, she is aware of the downsides of strict migration control toward her own agency:

The picture [*sic*] represents Europe as a paradise, it is beautiful, and safety is always present. It is true that there is safety, but... [...] There are positives and negatives to everything.

(Respondent 20, female, ~35, Syria, arrived in Austria in 2015)

Respondent 20 emphasized that Europe is a safe place for everyone which makes Europe beautiful in her eyes. Her retrospective expectation of Europe is linked to her understanding of a secure place where there is no war and violence against civilians.

Relatedly, Europe is strongly linked with fundamental freedoms and values in the narratives of the interviewees. The right to exercise fundamental freedoms and liberties should therefore be understood as an expansion of the preceding one since interviewees often associate expectations of a ‘safe Europe’ with an assurance of freedoms, equality, and human rights for all regardless of one’s gender, race, ethnicity, religion or language. For instance, Respondent 8, who is Syrian but was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, forecasts Europe as a land of freedom, particularly for women:

[...] Everyone exercises her/his freedom naturally and normally and nobody can restrict this freedom. Women can drive a car, which was not allowed in Saudi Arabia, for example. I had always a desire to drive a car and to have a license [...]

(Respondent 8, female, 20, Syria/Saudi Arabia, arrived in Austria in 2016)

Along with economic reasons, another reason why her family decided to migrate to Europe is to enable their daughter to access better learning opportunities. Therefore, even before migrating, she had knowledge of women’s rights and how they are protected under certain laws in Europe. This knowledge has shaped her expectations—and life aspirations—of Europe. To her, Europe promises to not only guarantee her fundamental freedoms but also enables her to exercise such rights in her everyday life, regardless of her gender. In other words, her aspiration is tied to the capabilities she will have in Europe, and thus the agency, to make her own life in accordance with her aspiration. We found this focus not only in relation to gender but, more generally, in relation to capabilities within more liberal societies. Respondent 9, for instance, sheds light on cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity in Europe directly speaking to his understanding of living in a democratic society:

This is a free country [referring to Europe], a democratic country, a country of multiple cultures. It is a country for all races and religions. There is no sectarianism. There is no racism. It is a tolerant country.

(Respondent 9, male, 26, Iraq, arrived in Austria in 2015)

5.1.2 Aspire to socio-economic prosperity

Another retrospective expectation of Europe which forges some individuals' life aspirations is the socio-economic prosperity of Europe. Interviewees mentioned that Europe is a socio-economically well-developed place which offers better employment opportunities and decent salaries and ensures safer working conditions than their country-of-origin. Many interviewees, especially those from African countries, emphasized the economic opportunities available in Europe as being those of a wealthy society. It is widely circulated that Europe provides jobs and pays decent wages to whoever resides within its borders. Relatedly, Respondent 42 claims that many people think that it is very easy to find a job:

They are thinking it is like easy to find a job and you would be able to do maybe two jobs at the same time or something like that.

(Respondent 42, male, 23, the Gambia, arrived in Italy in 2015)

Often, our respondents were expecting that it would be easy to find a job in Europe. This expectation of Europe regarding socio-economic standards lasts, even as they encounter strict national regulations. The following quote illustrates that some people critically consider what they hear about Europe as overly optimistic in relation to their own ambitions and capabilities to 'work for it':

What I heard about Europe when I was in my country was, that Europe is a bit different and better than Africa. But I knew that there are always consequences. [...] In Europe, I believe, there are good opportunities but you have to study and make a good effort to get a good job. We have come here to live a better life than before. So, you have to work for it. The young people I talked to often, thought that this place was full of money and when they arrive, they could start work right away and help their families back home, but I knew there are always consequences.

(Respondent 43, male, 23, Somalia, arrived in Italy in 2016)

Both comments above implicitly reflect the mismatch between respondents' retrospective expectations and life aspirations and their confined capabilities in the host countries in reference to accessing the labour market. Although the Italian reception decree allows asylum seekers to access the labour market after 60 days from the time of the registration of the asylum application, the realization of unfulfilled expectations is unsurprising, given that asylum seekers still continue to face obstacles in accessing employment (Terlizzi 2020).

5.1.3 Aspire to equality of opportunity

Another retrospective expectation of (imagined) Europe is depicted as a place which provides easy and better access to social services to all individuals officially residing within the EU, including asylum seekers and refugees. Forced migrants in Italy and Austria, in general, have access to public healthcare (AIDA 2021a,b). For example, Respondent 3 expressed trust in welfare provision and named the functioning of the healthcare system as among the main factors for his life aspiration to emigrate:

They say, if you are in Europe and you are sick, they will first take care of you, which is not the case in my country. Many people die because of this negligence. People who have

not learnt their subjects well but who still want to work in the hospital, that's what I don't find correct, one of the reasons that pushed me to leave the country.

(Respondent 3, male, 20, Benin, arrived in Austria in 2015)

Our analysis suggests that personal safety, going hand in hand with equality of opportunity, is a dominant factor in feeding into life aspirations. Personal safety does not only concern the absence of immediate risk to one's life but needs to be understood more holistically. Personal safety includes the capability to shape one's own life, that is, agency, in a more predictable and trustworthy society, which we term as 'human dignity'. Our analysis further highlights that people critically reflect on the life aspirations of Europe shared by their peers. They further are particularly sceptical when expectations seem overly optimistic. In this sense, our analysis provides insights into how people have developed and constructed life aspirations about Europe, confirming that it requires navigation between several realities based on legal status (as an asylum seeker as opposed to a resident in the EU) as well as between stereotypes and official EU policy discourse.

5.2 Current experiences in the host country after arriving: 'It's not what you think; Europe is not like it is on TV'

Once interviewees zoomed in on their current experiences in Austria and Italy after their arrival, the initially overall positive expectations of a 'good life' in Europe shifted to more unfulfilled expectations. This shift is owed to people's adaption of their original life aspirations to their limited capabilities/agency within both countries' asylum policies, as the interview analysis suggests.

According to our analysis, 27 interviewees (out of 32) in Austria expressed their disappointment after their arrival since their original expectations were not matched within the scope of their capabilities in national asylum systems which creates a contrast between their original life aspirations and their actual life trajectories after arriving and limit their capabilities. In a similar vein, 16 participants' original life aspirations of Europe (out of 18) were reversed after their arrival in the Italian case. People interpret their new situation, constrained by limited agency, as a significant mismatch between their prior expectations of life in Europe and their current ability to act on those expectations, largely due to structural constraints within the asylum system. This aspect suggests that individual 'migration and life projects' do not end simply after arrival, but are long-term processes. The mismatch between forced migrants' retrospective aspirations of (imagined) Europe and their limited capabilities in their host countries evokes feelings of stuckedness, challenging respondents' agency to maintain their life as it was initially hoped for.

5.2.1 Human dignity versus long waiting periods

Long waiting periods are typical in the asylum process for our respondents, particularly in the case of Austria. Waiting for asylum is regarded as 'a hallmark of asylum seekers' experiences within Europe and at its edges' (Vianelli, Gill, and Hoellerer 2022: 1015). It is further argued that prolonged periods of waiting for asylum decisions not only disempower forced migrants by challenging their agency but also create instability in their everyday life and uncertainty for their future: Their capability—while waiting—to actively take part in economic and social domains of everyday life is very restricted through the national/local dimensions of asylum reception and integration policies in a given country context (Rotter 2016; Tazzioli 2018).

In line with the research on long waiting periods in the context of asylum processes and feelings of stuckedness, forced migrants express a destabilizing struggle between their retrospective expectations and their everyday experiences with reception policies in the asylum-seeking process in the EU. This struggle becomes prominent especially when they realize the importance of bureaucracy and regulation for leading a 'normal' life:

If you are in Europe, it's good to have papers, if you want to travel or if you want to go somewhere, if there is no paper, you can't go where you want, you will be in the country, you can't go anywhere.

(Respondent 3, male, 20, Benin, arrived in Austria in 2015)

Waiting is often associated with passivity, the feeling of emptiness and time-wasting more than activity which could enable them to spend their waiting time productively (Vianelli, Gill, and Hoellerer 2022).

Respondent 9 has been waiting for his asylum application decision for five years (at the time of the interview) and stressed how his disappointment about the process of waiting has tainted his expectations of Europe. Waiting is regarded as an uncertain period of time which even prevents individual seeking asylum from achieving their goals which are initially formed in reference to their original life aspirations:

Europe was a dream for me. This dream came true but remains unfulfilled at the same time. Yes, I arrived here but I didn't get what I wanted, the residence permit. [...]. For me, Europe is not beautiful anymore because I am restricted without residence, I cannot work or travel, this is the reason.

(Respondent 9, male, 26, Iraq, arrived in Austria in 2015)

This statement captures the respondent's emotional journey, who initially saw Europe as a dream come true but now feels that the dream remains unfulfilled due to being unable to attain the desired legal status, despite being physically present in Europe. The respondent's life aspirations are challenged by the everyday experiences with the asylum-seeking process, resulting in disappointment about Europe and the profound impact on personal hopes.

5.2.2 Socio-economic prosperity versus restricted labour market participation

The second unfulfilled expectation limiting respondents' capability is accessing the labour market both in Austria and Italy as a factor to be disillusioned. Those, who came to Europe with the hope of immediately getting a job upon their arrival, told us about their frustration when they realized the discrepancies between what they expected of Europe and what they experienced regarding bureaucratic procedures that they had to follow to be eligible for looking for jobs. Interviewees describe how they have become aware of the necessity of residence permits as a condition for freedom of movement or access to the labour market:

Of course, I tell them that if you are in Africa and you are thinking Europe is easy, Europe is not easy. It is not as easy as how you would think in Africa. Because, if you are in Africa, you think that life will be good when you come to Europe. That's what you think. But it is not easy like that. When you come here you have to do hard work and stuff like that. It is not like Africa. You cannot go to work without a residence permit. You cannot work without a residence permit. So, it is difficult.

(Respondent 42, male, 23, the Gambia, arrived in Italy in 2015)

Beyond the length of formal registration of or renewal process of the asylum application, forced migrants in Italy encounter obstacles in accessing the labour market such as language barriers, the struggle in convincing employers to hire forced migrants who hold only the asylum request receipt or the renewal request, difficulties in recognition of skills and qualifications (Terlizzi 2020). Conversely, those seeking asylum in Austria are not allowed to work before a decision has been made.

5.2.3 Equality of opportunities versus stratified rights

Respondents also have come to realize that arriving in Europe does not guarantee full access to social services. Accordingly, the insufficiency of their cash allowance provided during the asylum process is widely mentioned. Until hearing back from respective authorities about the final decision on their asylum application, people seeking asylum are usually hosted by the refugee reception centres in given countries. In addition to their mobility, their capability to meet their own needs is also restricted since their income solely depends on cash allowances or, sometimes, informal employment. Undeniably, the allocated amount of cash allowance is deemed inadequate by many of those who depend on them:

We heard from the media, television and people in the news about refugees in Europe and about the safety in Europe, about their life and job opportunities in Europe. For this reason, we decided to immigrate to Europe. Of course, there was a difference between what we heard and what we found here. It is not an easy life here. You cannot find a job easily. You must have the language and the residence permit in order to be able to find a job. [...] You cannot depend on 100 or 200 euros, it is difficult. We thought that things were going to be easier ...

(Respondent 6, male, 46, Iraq, arrived in Austria in 2015)

Relatedly, difficulties in accessing secondary or higher education emerge as another source of unfulfilled expectations about exercising equality of opportunities that speaks to people's restricted capabilities. This so-called 'forced passivity' enables them to act as reactive agents by reflecting upon reception policies in their host country context and self-questioning original expectations, resulting in reassessing their life aspirations. As outlined above, school attendance until 9th grade is mandatory for all, including those seeking asylum in Austria. Conversely, accessing vocational training or higher education is more challenging since forced migrants seeking asylum are not included in the Austrian law (Art. 3 ApfG), requiring youth under the age of 18 to pursue further training or education. Effectively, despite offers from initiatives, this makes it similarly impossible for forced migrants seeking asylum to pursue a university degree as they are banned from participating in the labour market:

I can talk about the university studies. It is an important topic for me and I have always wanted to pursue my studies at the university. I always heard it is very easy here to do that but as it turns out, it is a difficult thing for me and until now, I do not have a clear idea about that. I do not have enough information about the registration at the university or how can I apply directly to the university. Our friends told us that it would be so easy, but it turned out to be more complicated than they said.

(Respondent 8, female, 20, Syria/Saudi Arabia, arrived in Austria in 2016)

Emerging as another theme related to equality of opportunities, many respondents complained about poor hygienic conditions, overcrowding, and lack of privacy in refugee accommodation centres. Some express feelings of humiliation about living under these conditions. This goes as far as people hiding their current situation from family and friends:

No one is giving you this information in the first place and everyone is hiding it. Life is hard I know now ... You live in a camp. There are ten people in one room, I don't know about other countries but in Italy, there are eight people in the room, the hygiene is bad, and the situation is bad. I see it now but they didn't tell us before. They just show a picture of a beautiful place, and their real lives are hidden like the houses they live in and

other things. I was in a camp for two years and I didn't tell anyone except my family. I told them everything but to friends I said I live in a house ...

(Respondent 43, male, 23, Somalia, arrived in Italy in 2016)

As sketched out above, both countries have passed new legislations which halt the integration processes of forced migrants and result in cutting support, such as cash allowances. For instance, the Salvini Decree has led to the cutting of some services in Italy which used to be provided by reception centres such as Italian language courses, psychological support, vocational training, and integration courses. The decree has also reduced the cash allowance over time. More explicitly, forced migrants seeking asylum in reception centres are allocated only 2.50 € per day to cover their personal expenses with respective bodies that are responsible for managing reception centres now receiving 21 € for each person (Terlizzi 2020). Such changes, no doubt, negatively impact people's well-being and consequently their life aspirations:

It has always been difficult, how much I have seen and how much I have been told, but now it is much more difficult as there is COVID-19. The previous government was anti-immigrant and made many anti-refugee laws. The detention centres have closed and the money has been cut off, I don't think it's easy now.

(Respondent 43, male, 23, Somalia, arrived in Italy in 2016)

5.2.4 Everyday racism versus human dignity

Interviewees' unfulfilled expectations and limited capabilities are evoked also by everyday racism. While in Austria experiences of racism are mostly described to be linked to religion, in Italy respondents report to experience more racism in connection to skin colour. For instance, Respondent 20, who identifies as Muslim, shared her observation on the use of public spaces in public transportation in Vienna:

I do not give importance to those who comment negatively on my hijab or what I wear. I feel that people do not perceive us positively, especially when we are, for example, in the metro or in the train. I feel that people do not want you to sit next to me and that they stare at me suspiciously. Some people think that we wear the hijab because we do not have hair on our heads. I try to explain to people that I wear the hijab voluntarily. Not because I am not obliged to.

(Respondent 20, female, ~35, Syria, arrived in Austria in 2015)

Even though she was not exposed to direct discrimination, she senses that her headscarf is not very welcomed and understood. In this sense, exercising her religious beliefs becomes an issue of being understood and accepted in Austria, suggesting the experienced pressure to assimilate. A Nigerian interviewee who has been living in Italy since 2016 reported how her skin colour puts her at a disadvantage in the eyes of host society members:

Like when I was in Nigeria ... I heard the whites love blacks. They always want to go out with blacks. They want to see blacks and all that. But when I came, it was not like that. And they said: 'You will not suffer in Europe ... The whites will give you everything; Europe is a bed of roses. You don't have to struggle. In whatever you are in need of they will give you everything.' But it is not like that ... You have to work for whatever you want. If you don't work, you will suffer.

(Respondent 40, female, 28, Nigeria, arrived in Italy in 2016)

As shown, the narratives of everyday racism described by the interviewees reveal a stark contrast to the principles of human dignity and equality. In contrast to the notion of (imagined) Europe as a land of opportunity, equality, and diversity, the interviewees find themselves confronted with the harsh reality of having to work hard to fulfil their expectations. Forced migrants' retrospective expectations of a 'good life' in Europe have been challenged by the context in which they experience the asylum-seeking process. These firsthand experiences highlight the enduring struggle for dignity and inclusivity faced by forced migrants in the host society. When they come to realize that their agency is restricted by the host countries' asylum reception and integration policies, they start to feel disappointed by Europe as their capabilities are stranded between their life aspirations and the structural limitations they face. Since people's aspirations rely on expectations about their future capabilities to shape their own lives in Europe, people feel disillusioned and frustrated. However, participants tend to preserve positive expectations of Europe when they match with their original aspirations such as safety, access to healthcare, and psychological comfort of being far from the country-of-origin context.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we have analysed the interplay between forced migrants' retrospective expectations and their current experiences in the host country, and how this interaction informs their aspirations in relation to their potential life trajectories. We did this analysis drawing on the aspiration-capability framework to better understand how limited capabilities may reshape life aspirations after arrival. Our analysis suggests that forced migrants' varying retrospective expectations of a 'good life' in (imagined) Europe are part of their individual life aspirations for themselves or their families in search of a more secure and stable life.

Importantly, however, we find that forced migrants in the Austrian and Italian asylum systems reflect critically on their previously held expectations of Europe, leading, in many cases, to expressions of disillusionment and frustrations over their new social realities with limited capabilities to shape their own lives in their new surroundings. By showing the mismatch of forced migrants' retrospective expectations of (imagined) Europe and the limited capabilities after migration as a result of restrictive asylum reception and integration policies in Austria and Italy, our study demonstrates the significance of both country-of-origin and host country contexts. It is crucial to note that the secure perception of Europe mostly dominates the agenda of those who fled conflict or war zones (mostly in the Austrian context) whilst the socioeconomic prosperity perception of Europe is more salient in the agenda of those who migrated from African countries (mostly in the Italian context). Forced migrants' retrospective expectations of (imagined) Europe do not derive from a single reason but multiple factors (Collyer, Düvell, and De Haas 2012), but some expectations can take priority over others due to the country-of-origin context in which individuals develop their life aspirations. Such expectations, however, have to be adapted to the often-debilitatingly strict asylum procedures which force people into revisiting their original life aspirations. These aspirations serve as emotional resources for confronting trauma at the individual level while also laying the groundwork for making claims at the collective level (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci, and Belloni 2023). In turn, their retrospective expectations of (imagined) Europe shift toward the negative, and feelings of disappointment, frustration, or even depression become more dominant.

Specifically, individuals' initial positive expectations of Europe often turn negative after arrival when they realize they do not yet have access to the perceived benefits of Europe. This disappointment and profound frustration arise from the fact that the values of democracy, respect for human rights, freedom, safety, and stability, as proclaimed by European political actors, often do not apply to asylum seekers in Europe. Our study makes another social reality of Europe visible that is distinct for forced migrants and heavily influenced by

long waiting periods, poor living conditions, bans from the labour market, mental and physical hardship, and inadequate available resources. For many individuals seeking asylum, Europe is an utter disappointment.

Our study thus illuminates the stark contrast between forced migrants' aspirational visions of 'the good life' in (imagined) Europe and the everyday realities they experience post-migration. It highlights the urgent call for heightened social awareness, policy reforms, and collective efforts to bridge this gap, combat entrenched inequalities and discrimination, and ensure the fundamental values of democracy, human rights, and equality for all, regardless of one's migrant status.

Further research can deepen our understanding of the interplay between forced migrants' retrospective expectations and their current experiences in the host country through the use of systematic comparative research. Of particular interest could be the adoption of a more systematic comparative approach across Europe. A natural complement to our study would involve examining other EU countries, which serve as main contact points for many individuals seeking asylum such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, and Spain. Moreover, to systematically trace and better understand changes in individuals' life aspirations, we encourage further research adopting multi-sited ethnography. This approach would involve conducting interviews with the same individuals in both their origin and host countries.

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Notes

1. In this study, retrospective expectations involve reflecting on past events or experiences with the benefit of hindsight and reflecting on them from a present vantage point. This process entails considering how one's understanding, opinions, or feelings about those events may have evolved over time.
2. Acknowledging the varying legal classifications of migration and asylum framework at different levels: supranational, international, and national, we utilise the more comprehensive term 'forced migrants' to denote individuals including asylum seekers, refugees, and irregular migrants in our study.
3. Humanitarian protection was abolished by the recent Decree-Law no. 113/2018 on immigration and public security.
4. Two of the family or friend group interviews were mixed-gendered while the remaining two were composed of only male or female respondents.

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