

# **SOME PERCEPTIONS MIGRANTS HELD ABOUT EUROPE AS A PLACE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**



PERCEPTIONS



## What are perceptions?

Perceptions are generally intended as the ways someone thinks about a particular object, person or location. They are often based on ideas and beliefs not necessarily derived from lived experience. Perceptions are mostly interpreted at the individual level and they are always "right" in a sense that they are always related to how an individual thinks about and interprets something. Perceptions of Europe are multiple and extremely heterogeneous, and are produced and spread by individuals as well as institutions, with media and social media as key channels.

The PERCEPTIONS project focuses on perceptions migrants hold about the EU (or a particular EU-country) and its approach thus envisions perceptions as "geographical imaginaries", intended as "the subjectivity of the human conception of locations, spaces, countries and the people inhabiting these physical spaces" (Coppola, 2018). Such spatial imaginaries, within the project, are best understood as performative discourses, which are 'discursively constituted, materially acted upon and reproduced' (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008).

## Why are perceptions studied?

The need to investigate perceptions of Europe in the framework of migration phenomenon emerges because these play a significant role in influencing the decision to migrate and the experiences of migration. Moreover, they contribute to the production and reproduction of social spaces, as well as to the definition and management of borders and the determination of communities and otherness and their inclusion or exclusion.

## Perceptions about Europe

Perceptions about Europe, spread at individual and collective levels, may play a key role in the decision making process of third-country nationals considering to migrate to Europe. People migrate for many reasons that are often linked to the possible improvement of their living and working conditions. This seems to encourage – and be encouraged by – idealistic, overly positive visions of what European countries are like, transnationally spread by media and social media as well as through word-of-mouth. In particular, these imaginaries often concern certain perceived standards of wealth, job offers and opportunities, as well as access to housing, education and health care. Migrants don't expect migration "to be

easy"; however, once in Europe, important mismatches emerge between migrants' expectations and the actual conditions and opportunities they encounter in host countries.

## Methodological clarification

This insight provides some of the key findings of PERCEPTIONS fieldwork involving 61 asylum seekers and recognized refugees and 39 other migrants who arrived in Europe between 2015 and today and their perceptions about Europe before and after arrival. Thus, the insight outlines positive and negative mismatches between migrants' expectations and reality and how they intersect and shape a more complex European landscape. The different partners of the consortium conducted semi-structured interviews in Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Spain, United Kingdom, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco. It is considered necessary to specify that the selected interviews should not be considered exhaustive of all perceptions of the migrant population regarding Europe, but are referable to the experience of the interviewees only as, in the recruitment of participants, a non-probabilistic sampling was adopted. To wrap it up, the document highlights the realities of the interviewed participants whose mismatches between perceptions before arrival and after arrival are more pronounced.

This insight reports perceptions related to Europe as a place of economic opportunities. Interviews suggest that while the European continent is mainly perceived as a land of wealth, prosperity and economic opportunities, the reality encountered after arrival proves to be far from those expectations.

Specifically, four different themes were identified:

**Access to better living conditions:** Europe is perceived as a place of welfare in terms of quality of life, public safety, accessibility to housing and a wide range of facilities in daily life.

**Access to a job:** Europe is perceived as a place where job opportunities, economic stability and career advancement are numerous and guaranteed compared to countries of origin.

**Access to education:** Europe is perceived as a place where education opportunities are easily accessible for both children and adults.

**Access to healthcare:** European healthcare systems are taken into great consideration by migrants, being perceived as particularly efficient and high quality.

This insight is designed along two axes, one temporal and one spatial. The first aims to illustrate the changes in the perception of migrants and refugees "before" and "after" their arrival in Europe. The second, through the displacement of Europe's silhouette, recreates the multiplication of the European border produced by the extensive mass of perceptions and narratives that co-exist and contribute to generate imaginaries of Europe.

\* All the bibliographic references are available on the PERCEPTIONS platform





# PERCEPTIONS ON ACCESS TO BETTER LIVING CONDITIONS

BEFORE <

## WEALTHY LIFESTYLE

"I thought Europe, Europe was very better. Making money was easy. Life, everything. That was my perception of Europe".

"Europe it's a dream for me. It's a safe place to build a family, to take care of your child".

"Because coming to Europe is a dream of every boy. So, as I was saying a moment ago, you just don't want to listen more to those people who tell you only negative things about Europe. So, they say is fine, if he is man enough to do, because women also cross, so they do not want those discussion".

AFTER <

## ECONOMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

"This is what is happening in Europe: I'm living in a refugee center, I'm living in a hotspot. If you don't have a document, what are you going to do?"

"Now you have to worry about things that are lacking, like accommodation, to live in tranquility. And you find that 8 people live in one room".

"I was very vulnerable, but I never gave up because I was expecting a lot of things: rights, respect, and possibility to help my family members especially the problems that are there. Real problems connect to my life and existence".

MISMATCHES •

The improvement of living conditions is one of the main expectations of those migrating to Europe. However, after arrival, migrants can face both economic and administrative difficulties. The bureaucratic process to obtain a condition of regularity is often complex and articulated, and this firstly means that finding a job is not immediate and thus its benefits such as social security. Moreover, once found, the payment of taxes, and the cost of living, in many cases do not allow to save money or send remittances.

Among the major problems related to these economic issues there is housing. In fact, migrants and refugees, facing high rents, are forced to live in overcrowded housing, often in conditions of low quality infrastructure. As such, many irregular migrants in destination countries, cannot rent and this leads to "ghettoisation" and rough-sleeping in abandoned zones. Although expectations about the quality of life in Europe often collide with the reality encountered after arrival, there seem to be also positive aspects: the interviews show that expectations regarding public safety and infrastructure were met.





# PERCEPTIONS ON ACCESS TO A JOB

## BEFORE <

### FLOURISHING JOB MARKET

"I always wanted to come to Europe because of the stories I heard that this is a good place, where work is well paid. Where everything is fine. Where they pay you well at work".

"I thought that finding a job in Europe would be easy".

"Europe is an accessible continent for jobs, for freedom".

## AFTER <

### INADEQUATE WORK CONDITIONS

"Look, boy, I'm going to a farm, a farm is where I'm going to. And they are paying me 25 euros per day. I'm working for 12 hours. I'm working for the full day and they are paying me 25 euros. And sometimes, if you work and the boss is not satisfied with what you did, he will not pay you".

"When we came here, I mean, it wasn't what we were told because it's very difficult to find a job for people who don't have papers, it's very difficult".

"If you are without a document, we are forced without a contract, illegally. You are forced by the condition you're living in to enslave yourself. I have some relatives who live illegally in Europe, I also know European people here, and they tell me that finding a job in Europe is not that easy".

## MISMATCHES •

Before their arrival, the majority of migrants and asylum-seekers and/or refugees imagine a prosperous life once in Europe and this perception can be linked to the idea of accessing better job opportunities. However, after arrival, many migrants are faced with barriers and problems in job search, due to the difficulty of learning a new language and the need to cope with strict bureaucratic procedures and regulations. In addition, the interviews show the low quality of employment and the low salary migrants receive, that often does not correspond to their qualifications and expectations, and which subsequently lead to poor living and working conditions for many. As such, coupled with their often irregular migratory status and the social isolation, migrant workers become easy targets of illegal employment and many of them work in the gray economy where they are abused and exploited.





# PERCEPTIONS ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION

BEFORE <

## EDUCATE & LEARN

"I came to Europe to pursue higher education. I am here in order to build a better life, I want to go to school, this is why I came to Europe".

AFTER <

## BUREAUCRATIC INSTABILITY

"After learning a new language, if you don't want to continue education, my brother go and learn a profession. It's Europe, you have many opportunities".

"I've been in a hotspot for one year. There are no schools, you can't go to school".

"This is what is happening in Europe. I'm living in a refugee center, I'm living in a hotspot, I'm not going to school, I have problems related to documentation".

MISMATCHES •

Access to education is one of the reasons that drive men and women to migrate to Europe. The expectation of being able to access an educational system that offers the possibility of acquiring both basic and more complex expertise is satisfied in most cases. It should also be highlighted that migrants interviewed consider education not only as a right but also as a tool that helps them acquire professional skills needed in the labor market. In addition, education and qualifications are considered by the interviewees a factor that helps integration and interaction with local communities and among newcomers.

However migrants have stressed the importance of institutions specifying clearly the administrative procedures necessary for regularization, access to education and other areas affecting their daily lives. Several state they feel they have lost a lot of time searching for the answers to these questions, and have had very frustrating experiences trying to fulfill requirements and understanding the law and so to access education.



PERCEPTIONS



# PERCEPTIONS ON ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

BEFORE <

## ACCESSIBLE HEALTHCARE...

"Generally, I came to Europe and I saw that health is a human right ... The health infrastructure is very good".

AFTER <

## ... FOR A REGULAR STATUS

"We all know how difficult Italy is, but with this difficulty they manage to help those who are in need so ... if you are sick, they treat you, and then they ask you to pay".

"Even now with COVID, some people who have little income, they help them, so I like this thing".

"If you are sick it's always a problem accessing the hospital, because when you go there, they ask you for documents".

MISMATCHES •

The general overview that emerged from the interviews shows that some migrants are satisfied with the healthcare system in destination countries. In particular, the idea that healthcare is a human right is well associated with Europe. However, the expectation of an efficient healthcare system may not be met due to the insufficiencies in the host societies integration/healthcare system that failed to understand the syndemic vulnerabilities most migrants face. To this regard migrants have stressed the importance of institutions specifying clearly the administrative procedures for regularization, access to healthcare and other areas affecting their daily lives. Many migrants said they spent a lot of time searching for answers to these questions, and had very frustrating experiences trying to meet the requirements and understand the law.



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