

SOME PERCEPTIONS MIGRANTS HELD ABOUT EUROPE AS A PLACE OF SOCIAL 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 are linked to the recognition that each individual has within society and the rights that he or she has as a human being

and as a member of a specific community. Migrants don't expect migration "to be easy"; however, Europe, by virtue of its self-proclaimed democratic and liberal position, can be perceived as a place where democratic norms are followed, law and order prevails, and where human rights and individual freedoms are often realized. However, once in Europe, the frequent contrast between this idealized vision and the actual conditions and opportunities lead to mismatches between migrants' expectations and the reality 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.

This insight aims to analyze perceptions related to Europe as a place of social opportunity. Interviews suggest that while justice and freedom are the two main axes on which the narratives linked to Europe are structured around, the reality encountered after arrival by the majority of migrants is in contrast to expectations.

Specifically, four different themes were identified:

Human rights: Compared to their countries of origin, Europe is considered as a place where law and order, human rights, and individual freedom prevail. These aspects are often interrelated and mentioned together by migrants.

Access to justice: Europe is perceived as a place where equal rights can be achieved and where access to justice is easier compared to their countries of origin.

Equal rights between genders and LGBTQIA+ people: Europe is a place where importance is given to laws protecting women and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Freedom: Europe is a place where to feel safe, tranquil, and at peace.

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 HUMAN RIGHTS

BEFORE <

PARADISE

"Look, I used to imagine it as the most beautiful continent, the richest continent and also the most civilized".

"One, I would say 'paradise'; two, a place where 'human rights are respected', (and) three, I could say a 'place full of humanity'".

"I thought Europe was a place where people are not discriminated, because of the color of their skin, that there was no social or racial discrimination. That's what I thought".

AFTER <

POSSIBLE DISCRIMINATION

"The problem is that, in Europe, people are racist"

"(The hotspot) was not a place for human beings. We were abandoned there, left on our own, I didn't think a place like this could exist in Europe".

MISMATCHES •

The expectation of moving to a place where democracy, human rights, access to justice and individual freedoms are perceived as guaranteed, is among those that pull men and women most towards Europe, and is also in many cases satisfied once they arrive. In particular, the interviews suggest that there is trust in European governments because migrants expect them to respect their rights in an 'adequate manner'. In addition, many of the interviewees emphasized the multiculturalism and solidarity of European citizens. Expectations regarding these fundamental rights, however, in many cases are also in contrast with some aspects of reality. In fact, some migrants found that they did not find the quality of protection expected and that, on the contrary, they felt a lack of safety. This condition can also be found in the common experiences of racial discrimination reported by migrants.



PERCEPTIONS ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE

BEFORE <

JUSTICE DREAMLAND

"Europe is a place where we can realize all of our dreams. That is a center of opportunities for what we want".

AFTER <

ABUSE OF LAW

"It's a place where people are enslaved, a semi-enslaved place. A place of suffering for certain people".

"And in their head migrants think that what locals are doing might be right. To the workers, they will tell you it's the law. To people in a reception center, they tell you the law is that you stay here for a certain period of time. It's not true!".

"I'm tired of seeing my brothers and sisters coming here and suffering, people dying on the Mediterranean Sea, the arrests, the abuse, especially on the European borders".

MISMATCHES •

In some cases, the need for justice is one of the factors driving migration to Europe. This need is felt in particular by those who come from war zones and who have perceived a danger to their security and freedom. On the one hand, a part of the migrants who have migrated are satisfied with the European justice system; however, on the other hand, mismatches emerged concerning the negative experiences faced by migrants mainly at the moment of reception – for example along the borders – and often consist of abuses reported as implemented by the law authorities itself. Another critical aspect is justice related to migrant labor, which often turns out to be exploitation.



PERCEPTIONS ON EQUAL RIGHTS BETWEEN GENDERS AND LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE

BEFORE <

RESPECT FOR EVERYONE

"My opinion in Europe when I was living in my country was that Europe was a safe and a better place for everybody to live in".

AFTER <

SENSITIZATION ON GENDER ISSUES

"The way I see women here, it's not like Africa, where a woman is always with her husband. Now I'm not married and I'm working, you know? This has boosted me".

"As a person, the LGBTQIA+ collective, I have more rights, more freedom, like they don't discriminate as much as in my country".

MISMATCHES •

Interviewed migrants highlight that expectations about equal rights between genders and LGBTQIA+ have been met. In fact, the interviewees report positive experiences upon arrival in Europe, especially when compared to the prejudices and discriminations existing in their countries of origin. However, it should be noted that some respondents reported experiences of sexual harassment particularly within the reception camps.



PERCEPTIONS ON FREEDOM

BEFORE <

LAND OF FREEDOM

"I was thinking western countries are the richest countries, people are really happy, they do whatever they want, there is freedom, there is happiness, I was thinking western countries are heaven".

"Europe for me is happiness".

AFTER <

POOR INTEGRATION

"What I liked about Europe is that I learned autonomy, to be autonomous ... not to depend on someone, you can do this on your own, you know?".

"Because that place (hotspot) was terrible. It was not good for human beings. It was not a place for human beings. I could say we were just abandoned there, we were abandoned, left on our own".

MISMATCHES •

Although freedom can be linked to European lifestyles, the interviews show some mismatches between expectations and the actual conditions and opportunities. The administration, the complex bureaucracy and sometimes even the lack of documents play a central role in allowing people to defend themselves against abuses, to the point that these factors can actually compromise democracy and its civil rights, for example in the field of labor. At the same time, it emerged from the interviews that among the migrant population in Europe freedom of speech is highly valued, a right that allows, in many cases, to defend migrants and refugees especially in those circumstances in which their rights are denied.

