BEYOND THE EMERGENCY: CHARACTERISTICS AND BEHAVIOUR OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ITALY

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Abstract. In the last decade, Italy has been affected by significant flows of migration for humanitarian reasons. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) more than 500,000 people have sought asylum in Italy since 2014 (the year of the first humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean). In 2021, there were almost 31,000 new permits for reasons related to international protection. Most of the new documents were granted to Pakistani nationals (6,090), followed at a distance by Bangladeshis (nearly 5,000) and Nigerians (3,057). Incoming flows are clearly recovering (+129%) compared to the previous year, a period affected by the pandemic. Contrary to earlier understanding, some of people arriving for humanitarian reasons are not temporarily passing through the country but remain for many years. Refugees and asylum seekers have special characteristics that distinguish them from the other migrants. The aim of the paper is to present a descriptive analysis of the inflows and the stocks of asylum seekers and refugees during the last decade. The study is based on the data of residence permits. This dataset highlights the dynamics that have affected these particular flows of migrants. In the first part, our paper focuses on the characteristics of migrants and their territorial distribution in Italy. In the second part the authors analyze, applying record linkage techniques and regression models, the likelihood that asylum seekers remain in Italy and study the factors that affect the choice to stay.

1. Introduction

Migration is an important world population phenomenon. It has been observed and studied in numerous fields both for the determinants of moving and the numerous effects that this event is able to generate (World Bank, 2023). Today many international migrations are forced migrations.

According to the UNHCR's main annual report, *Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2022*, the number of people forced to flee due to war, persecution, violence and human rights violations rose to a record 108.4 million at the end of

2022, an unprecedented increase of 19.1 million on the previous year. Even in 2023, numbers continue to grow mainly due to the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan, which has generated new exoduses. In 2022, instead, the war in Ukraine was the main driver of forced exodus, the fastest exodus of refugees since World War II. In Italy, the number of people who have been forced to leave their country due to war and persecution stands at 354,414 and of these 41% come from Ukraine.

The last decade has seen the settling of migrants who arrived in the past decades and by a significant change in the migratory flows arriving in our country (Istat, 2022). Migrant entries have decreased and migration characteristics and patterns have changed. In particular, for migrants coming from non-EU countries, there has been a drastic contraction of flows for *work* reasons. There has been stability in those arriving for *family reunification* (linked to stabilisation processes in Italy). But there has been a sudden growth in arrivals of people seeking *international protection*. This is linked to the "refugee crisis in the Mediterranean" in 2016-2017 (Istat, 2021; Blangiardo and Ortensi, 2023).

This study focuses on asylum seekers that is those who have left their country of origin, filed an asylum application in another country and who are waiting for the evaluation of refugee status by the authorities of their host country.

According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), there are almost 3 million asylum seekers in the world. A large proportion are resident in North America and Europe. In 2022 the United States, Germany, Costa Rica and Spain were the countries that received the most asylum applications (UNHCR, 2023). Based on data from the European Union Agency for Asylum (2023), Italy is the fifth country in the EU in terms of number of asylum requests (after Germany, France, Spain and Austria).

2. Objectives

The preliminary objective of the paper is to provide an overview of regular immigrants in Italy from 2011 to 2021 by examining some socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. citizenship and gender). In particular, we intend to carry out a brief descriptive analysis of regular immigrants in Italy over the last decade, focusing the study on the reason for their residence permit through a longitudinal approach. Using this approach, we intend to study the immigrant population present in Italy five years after the issuance of the first residence permit. Furthermore, we deepen the analysis by focusing only on immigrants to whom the prefecture has issued a residence permit for asylum. For many years, asylum seekers were considered a "temporary presence" in the receiving countries. But it is now clear that several refugees spend long periods of their life in the destination

countries. The aim of this part of the study is to identify how many asylum seekers are not a temporary presence in Italy. We focus on the profile and the main demographic characteristics of the long stayers: regular asylum seekers who remain in Italy five years after the issue of their residence permit.

3. Data and Methods

The data used in this analysis are mainly based on information from residence permits issued to non-EU citizens, particularly those related to political asylum. Istat (Italian National Institute of Statistics) harmonises and processes this information from the archives of the Ministry of the Interior.

The data used in this work refer to residence permits and not to asylum applications. There are numerous differences between the two datasets. This is due both to the time lag between the different procedures (asylum application and issue of the permit) and to the fact that an asylum application does not always correspond to a residence permit. However, residence permits[1] can be a useful source for better understanding the paths chosen by migrants in Italy. Specifically, stock data from 2011 to 2022 and flow data from 2011 to 2021 were used in this work.

For some years, Istat has been employing the residence permit dataset longitudinally. The data referring to the various years are linked through deterministic record linkage, employing unique identification codes. The linkage allows for individuals to be followed over time and to verify the continuity of their regular presence in the area. Obviously, regular migrants can be so monitored. If the person loses his residence permit, but remains in Italy, he or she "disappears" from the residence permit dataset. The unique code is available for about 90% of the cases. This allows for the performance of good quality analyses.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted on a group of over 180,000 non-EU citizens who entered Italy as asylum seekers in 2007 and, then again, from 2011 to 2016. The following variables were used:
- the response variable provides information on the presence or non-presence of the asylum seeker on Italian territory five years after the residence permit was issued;the five covariates used in the analysis are: gender; age (15-20 years, 21-25 years, 26-30 years, 36 years and over); citizenship (the first ten citizenships); Italian territorial units (five macro-regions: North-West,

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[1] As mentioned above, the data of residence permits for "asylum seekers" register the arrival of migrants later than their asylum applications due to the time lag between the application and the issuance of the permit. Some problems were also noted with the registration of asylum seekers' permits in some provinces. In these places there is, therefore, undercounting.

North-East, Centre, South, Islands); and the issue year of the first residence permit (2007, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

For the model, the proc logistic of the SAS software was used, with a recursive procedure, using the backward elimination selection technique: the model initially presents all the covariates, the level of significance (p value) and at each iteration the covariate that exceeds the threshold value of p value (0.05) is eliminated. In the present case it was not necessary to remove any variables.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Longitudinal Analysis

The data on residence permits can provide useful information on the flows and presence of people in our country for asylum or other forms of international protection.

Between 2011 and 2021, a total of 515,616 asylum permits were issued (Figure 4.1).

In recent years, in the face of a very low number of entries for work, permits issued for these specific reasons have become of primary importance. They account in some years for more than 30% of new issuances, as, for example, in 2016 and 2017. Subsequently, between 2018 and 2020, there has been a steady decline in new permits issued for international protection reasons. This is true both in absolute relative terms for the total number of permits issued. In 2020, as a result of the measures put in place to stem the spread of COVID-19 (primarily long border closures), the number of new permits issued reached an all-time low. Newly-issued asylum permits amounted to 13,467, which is 12.6% of the new documents granted in the year, a slightly higher share than in 2011. Between 2019 and 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was thus a negative change in this type of permit of 51.1% compared to the previous year. In 2021, on the other hand, there was a recovery in the number of new permits issued - a total of almost 242,000 (+ 127% compared to 2020) - and new asylum documents also began to grow again: almost 31,000 were issued (+ 129% compared to 2020), a higher number than even in 2019. In relative terms, however, permits for asylum and other forms of protection had, in 2021, a lower relative importance than in 2019 (12.8% vs. 15.6%) because, following the regularisation measure issued in 2020 (Art. 103 of Decree-Law 34 of 2020), work permits have grown considerably. In general, over the last five years there has been a decrease of more than 16% in the number of new permits granted compared to the previous five years.

Figure 1. - *New permits issued during the reference year by reason, 2011-2021 (provisional values), absolute values.*
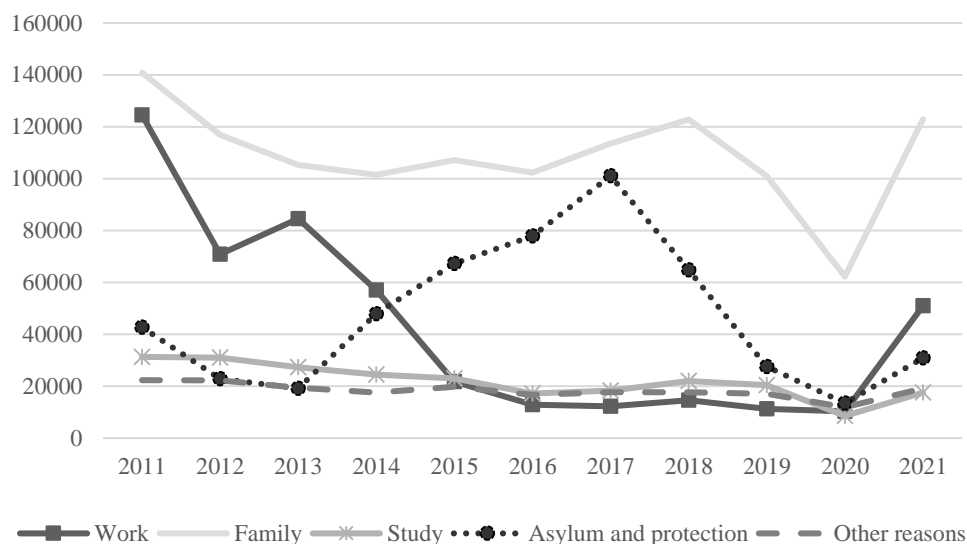
Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

The decrease has also been accompanied by a noticeable change in the characteristics of newcomers, with consequences for flows in general – there has been a change in the main countries of origin of immigrants. Between 2009 and 2021, the rankings of the main citizenships changed significantly from year to year. They tended to go hand in hand with the political crises and conflicts that broke out in different parts of the world.

Between 2016 and 2017, for example, there was a peak in the number of Nigerians who occupied first place in the ranking by number of arrivals (Table 4.1); this dynamic is to be traced above all to humanitarian crises in that country, which, at least in part, receded in the following years. A similar trend, though with smaller numbers, can be seen for arrivals from Mali. More constant over time, with less evident peaks, was the growth in arrivals from the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). These were only partially attributable to the search for international protection.

Asylum flows are special kind of migration, with different characteristics from labour or family reunification flows. Traditionally the share of women and minors among migrants seeking protection is very low, although in recent years the presence of children and young people has increased.

Table 1 - *Ranking of the top 10 countries by number of new residence permits granted in the year (provisional values), 2009-2021.*

2021	2019	2017	2015	2013	2011	2009
Albania	Albania	Nigeria	Morocco	Morocco	Morocco	Ukraine
Morocco	Morocco	Albania	Nigeria	China	China	Morocco
Bangladesh	India	Morocco	Albania	Albania	Albania	China
Pakistan	Pakistan	Pakistan	China	India	Tunisia	Moldova
India	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Ukraine	India	Albania
Egypt	China	China	India	Bangladesh	Moldova	India
Ukraine	U.S.A.	Senegal	Bangladesh	U.S.A.	Ukraine	Pakistan
U.K.	Egypt	India	Ukraine	Egypt	U.S.A.	Peru
China	Ukraine	U.S.A.	U.S.A.	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Egypt
Nigeria	Nigeria	Gambia	Senegal	Senegal	Philippines	Bangladesh

Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

Focusing on 2021, it will be seen that almost 31,000 new permits were issued for protection reasons; most of the new documents were granted to citizens of Pakistan (6,090 new documents issued), followed – but at a distance – by Bangladeshis (almost 5,000 permits) and Nigerians (3,057 new documents). In general, there was a clear upturn in entry flows compared to the previous year, which had seen numbers dampened by the effects of COVID. However, in 2021 new entries were 36% higher than those recorded in 2019 (those for asylum and other forms of protection 12%).

The analysis flags up which types of flows are more transitory and those which are more likely to stabilise on Italian territory. Considering two specific entry cohorts (those who entered Italy for the first time in the same year) – that of 2011 and that of 2016 –a record linkage operation between datasets verified their presence five years after the issuance of residence permits, respectively on 1st January 2017 and 1st January 2022.

As will be seen in Figure 4.2, the largest flows in 2011 came from the share of those who entered Italy for work (122,197 individuals) or for family reasons (111,282 migrants): these flows represented, respectively, 38.4% and 35% of the total number of immigrants.

Then, these were followed by 9.7% of entries for study reasons (30,886 people), 6% for requests for political asylum (18,968 people), 5.4% for other forms of

international protection[2] (17,255 migrants) and 5.5% for other reasons[3] (17,524 individuals).

Figure 2 - *Immigrants arrived in Italy in 2011 (absolute value) by presence after 5 years (01-01-2017) by reason of the permit.*
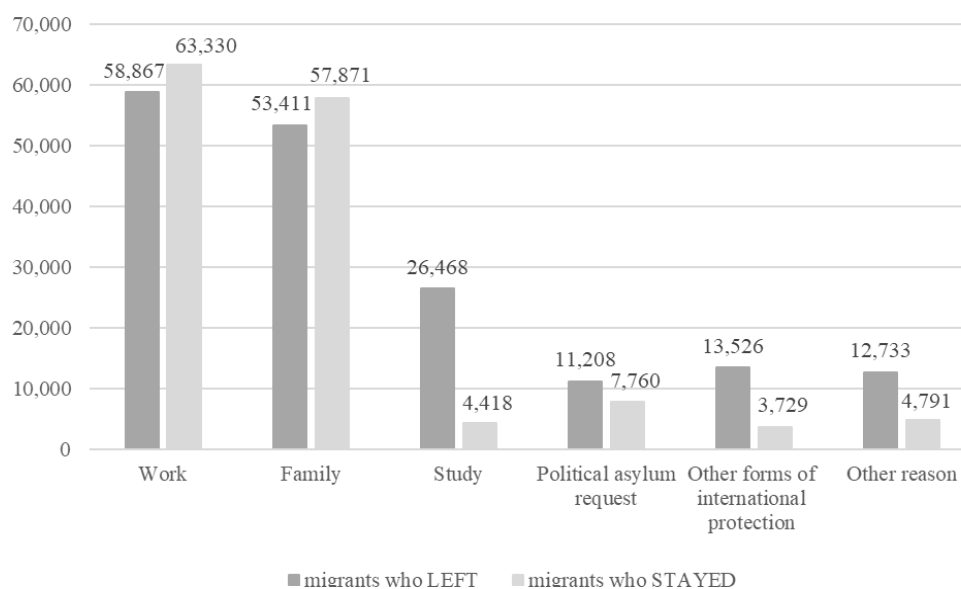
Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

The share of regular "long stayers" from the 2011 entry cohort stands at about 44.6% in 2016 of the total entries in 2011 (141,899 people). In particular, those who remained in Italy on 1st January 2017, both for work and family reunification reasons, were more than 50% (121,201 individuals). In the case of permits for asylum seekers, the share of those who had settled in Italy exceeded 40% (7,760 migrants). For other types of flows (study, other forms of international protection and other reasons) the percentage is, meanwhile, below the average value (35%) and represent 12,938 people.

Considering the 2016 flows (Figure 4.3), one can immediately see how they have changed compared to those of 2011.

This is so both in the reason for the residence permit and in the extent of the flows. First of all, we can see a decrease in the number of people to whom a

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[2] It includes: political asylum, subsidiary protection, humanitarian reasons.
[3] Explicitly taken into account, as statistically relevant, are: religion, elective residence, health and "other"; the latter includes the other reasons for which the permit was issued, such as: reasons of justice, integration of minors, recognised stateless person, sporting activity, etc.

residence permit was issued of about 100,000 compared to 2011. There is a percentage change of about -30%. Looking at the 2016 cohort, one observes a drastic decrease in permits for work reasons, accounting for 5.7% of the total permits issued in that year (in absolute value 12,635 people), and a 45.6% increase in permits for family reasons (100,362 individuals), although these had already stood at high levels in previous years. Another relevant aspect to highlight is the substantial increase in the share of those seeking political asylum, which is about 29% of all permits issued (63,365 migrants). The situation remained more or less similar to 2011 for other types of permits.

Figure 3 – *Immigrants arrived in Italy in 2016 (absolute value by presence after 5 years (01-01-2022) by reason of the permit.*
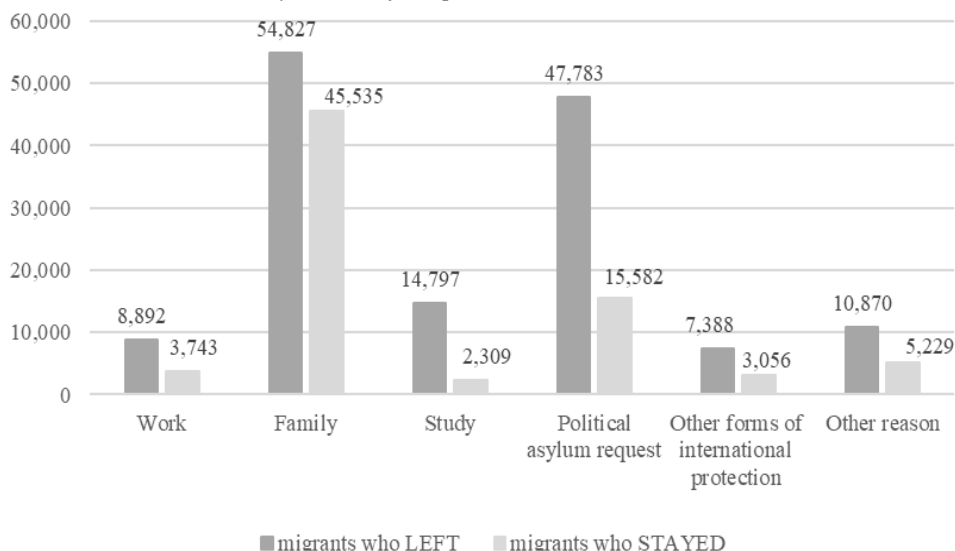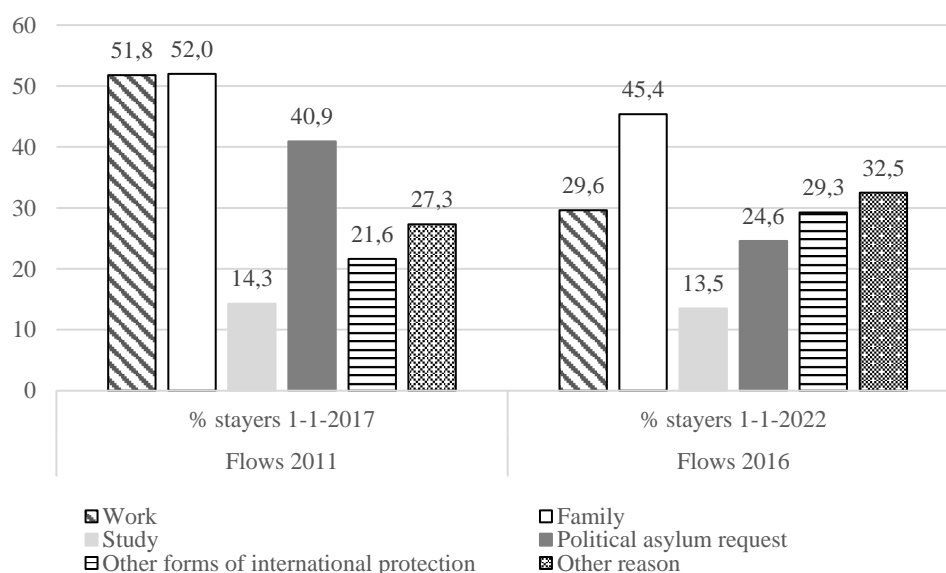

Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

The percentage of those remaining in Italy for work reasons was, in the 2016 entry cohort, about 30% (3,743 individuals) and for family reunification 45% (45,535 migrants). Only the "study" motivation has a lower percentage of regular settlers as of 1 January 2022 (13.5% and in absolute value 2,309 people) than asylum (24.6% or 15,582 individuals).

Finally, comparing the percentages of the 2011 and the 2016 cohorts who remain in Italy after five years (Figure 4.4.), these are migrants who were still in our country on 1st January 2017 and 1st January 2022.

It is worth bearing in mind that the share of settled migrants in the 2016 cohort was almost half (75,454) of that recorded for the 2011 cohort (141,899).

Figure 4. - *Percentages of long stayers (present after 5 years) among migrants who arrived in Italy in 2011 and 2016 by reason of permit.*

Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

The share of those who settled in Italy for family reasons is the highest for both cohorts (52% and 45.4%). The share of migrants for work permits has, meanwhile, decreased by more than twenty percentage points between the two cohorts (from 51.8% to 29.6%) since in many cases these are permits for seasonal work. There has been a clear decrease in those with asylum permits, highlighting in that these migrants are less likely to remain on Italian territory: for the 2011 cohort there was a 40.9% decrease and for that of 2016 a 24.6% decrease. Analysing the two cohorts, an increase of about seven percentage points is observed for immigrants settled in Italy on the basis of other forms of international protection. For "study", the percentage of those who remained in Italy remained almost unchanged in the two years considered (2017 and 2022) and stood at about 14%.

4.2 Logistic regression model

The analysis focuses on migrants who have been issued a residence permit to apply for political asylum. Through the results provided by the application of the logistic regression model, we aim to identify the profile and some demographic

characteristics of asylum seekers who are still in Italy five years after the issue of their residence permit.

As can be seen from the Table 4.2, almost all estimates are significant (p-value<0.05).

It is worth noting that the asylum seekers who were most likely to remain in Italy after five years from the moment their permit was issued were women. In fact women are 43% more likely than men to settle in Italian territory.

Considering age, younger asylum seekers, aged fifteen to twenty, tend to stay in Italy for shorter periods than migrants who are older than 35.

Table 2. - *Results of the logistic regression model.*

Odds Ratio Estimates			
Effect	**Point estimate**	**Wald 95% confidence limits**	**p-value**
Sex Women vs. Men	1.425	1.375 1.477	<.0001
Age 26-35 vs. 36+	0.97	0.933 1.008	0.3385
Age 21-25	0.949	0.912 0.987	0.1472
Age 15-20	0.93	0.891 0.97	0.0013
Cit. Pakistan vs. Senegal	1.961	1.856 2.072	<.0001
Cit. Bangladesh	1.902	1.793 2.018	<.0001
Cit. Afghanistan	1.792	1.654 1.941	<.0001
Cit. Other nationality	1.449	1.376 1.525	0.0032
Cit. Mali	1.405	1.327 1.487	0.5926
Cit. Nigeria	1.393	1.325 1.465	0.9118
Cit. Gambia	1.385	1.307 1.467	0.804
Cit. Ghana	1.351	1.269 1.439	0.1797
Cit. Côte d'Ivoire	1.037	0.969 1.111	<.0001
Cit. Guinea	1.028	0.947 1.116	<.0001
Terr. Centre vs. South	1.46	1.414 1.508	<.0001
Terr. North-East	1.19	1.15 1.23	<.0001
Terr. North-West	1.184	1.147 1.222	<.0001
Terr. Islands	0.85	0.818 0.883	<.0001
Year 2011 vs. 2016	2.083	2.011 2.158	<.0001
Year 2012	1.681	1.608 1.758	<.0001
Year 2007	1.564	1.374 1.781	0.0005
Year 2013	1.494	1.413 1.58	<.0001
Year 2014	0.961	0.931 0.993	<.0001
Year 2015	0.732	0.711 0.754	<.0001

Note: The reference category of each independent variable examined in the analysis was indicated only once.
Source: Elaboration on Istat data.

Furthermore, among asylum seekers, those with Pakistani (+96%), Bangladeshi (+90%) and Afghan (+79%) citizenship are more likely to stay in Italy compared to Senegalese. Senegalese citizens are considered the least likely to remain.

Territorial distribution was taken into account by considering the geographical location of the prefecture that issued the residence permit. Asylum seekers living in Central Italy are 46% more likely to stay permanently than asylum seekers living in the South, while those living on the Islands tend to stay in the country only temporarily (0.85%).

Finally, examining the year of arrival of asylum seekers in Italy, it is evident that only for the 2014 and 2015 flows is there a lower likelihood that migrants will remain in Italy compared to the 2016 flow (respectively 0.96 and 0.73); while for the other years considered there is an opposite trend. In particular, asylum seekers who arrived in Italy in 2011 show a greater propensity to put down roots in the territory than migrants who entered in 2016, and this propensity is double that found in 2016.

5. Conclusions and future developments

Human beings have never stopped moving, producing different cultures, languages and ethnicities. Migration is a powerful force for development, improving the lives of migrants, their families and the societies in which they settle. At the same time, there are also challenges and difficulties for migrants, their countries of origin and for destination countries (World Bank, 2023).

In this paper, a descriptive contextual analysis was carried out on regular migrants who arrived in Italy in the decade 2011-2021 using residence permits. We focussed particularly on the reason for issuing residence permits and citizenship. Subsequently, two cohorts of migrants who arrived in Italy in 2011 and 2016 were followed for five years; through this longitudinal approach, an attempt was made to identify which migrants remained on Italian territory after five years, and then to study those who stabilised according to the reason behind their residence permit. It was thus possible to provide a picture of how migratory characteristics and patterns in Italy have changed rapidly over the last decade.

There was a consistent increase from 2008 to 2019 in the flows of migrants seeking international protection and, in particular, political asylum seekers. In this regard, there is a consensus that the management of these movements and their consequences, political, social and economic, must be properly analysed and addressed. It is important to measure the phenomenon and assess the living conditions and the degree of integration of refugees in host countries, and it is appropriate to monitor their presence on the territory (Giovannetti and Olivieri,

2022). To this end, we sought to identify the profile of the regular asylum seekers who were most likely to remain in Italy five years after the issue of their permit. Our results showed that they are mainly women compared to men, older than 36 years of age compared to younger age groups, and more likely to have Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Afghan than Senegalese citizenship. In addition, it appears that those who have chosen to remain are those who obtained a permit in the central regions of the country compared to those in the south and those who obtained a residence permit in 2011 and 2012 compared to 2016.

Starting from these first results, we would like to continue the analysis by studying the mobility of asylum seekers within Italy, paying particular attention to the effects of the large flows of migrants who arrived in Italy from Ukraine in 2022 fleeing war. There are over 132,000 refugees: 53% of whom are women and 32% minors.

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