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What Influences the Use of Data on Irregular Migration Flows in Public Debates and Policy Making? Findings from Strategic Case Studies.

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SUMMARY

This working paper explores factors that influence the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making. Observations from five strategic case studies exploring the data on selected patterns of irregular migration flows in different national contexts are compared: visa applications and regularisation data in Spain, irregular border crossing data in Greece, data documenting irregular migration status change in registration data in the Netherlands, data on the administration of asylum procedures in Germany and data on temporarily admitted migrants who fall out of status due to administrative dysfunction in Canada. As cross case unit of analysis, the multiple case study pursues the question of how selected factors influence the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making. The explorative analysis suggests that – in addition to availability, accessibility, and quality – data expediency is a strong factor influencing the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making.

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THE MIRREM PROJECT

MIrreM examines estimates and statistical indicators on the irregular migrant population in Europe as well as related policies, including the regularisation of migrants in irregular situations.

MIrreM analyses policies defining migrant irregularity, stakeholders' data needs and usage, and assesses existing estimates and statistical indicators on irregular migration in the countries under study and at the EU level. Using several coordinated pilots, the project develops new and innovative methods for measuring irregular migration and explores if and how these instruments can be applied in other socio-economic or institutional contexts. Based on a broad mapping of regularisation practices in the EU as well as detailed case studies, MIrreM will develop 'regularisation scenarios' to better understand conditions under which regularisation should be considered as a policy option. Together with expert groups that will be set up on irregular migration data and regularisation, respectively, the project will synthesise findings into a Handbook on data on irregular migration and a Handbook on pathways out of irregularity. The project's research covers 20 countries, including 12 EU countries and the United Kingdom.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This working paper shares the findings from five strategic case studies aiming to expand MIrreM research efforts. The study considers selected factors that influence the presence of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making with a focus on the availability, accessibility, quality and expediency of data.

The task complements the MIrreM project work on data, encompassing so far: a mapping of the landscape and quality of quantitative data on the stocks and flows of irregular migration (Kierans et al., 2024; Siruno et al., 2024), an explication of the relevance of quantitative data on irregular migration in policy debates and policy decision making (Hendow, Qaisrani, Brunovska, et al., 2024), stakeholders' needs and expectation to use irregular migration data (Slootjes et al., 2023, 2024), and an assessment of possibilities for improvement and amendment of approaches and methods for measuring irregular migration (Rodríguez Sánchez & Tjaden, 2023).

This task within Work Package 5 takes data on selected patterns of irregular migration flows as a starting point. The exploration continues from the insight shared in the Working Paper on Irregular Migration Flow Data: "Ultimately and from a normative standpoint, identifying the use of data in policymaking requires understanding the context and the specific circumstances underpinning the production and usage of data and the design and implementation of the policy" (Siruno et al., 2024, p. 53) .

This examination aims to explore factors that influence the usage of irregular migration flow data in administration, policy decision making and public debates. Observations from five case studies exploring different types of flow data on irregular migration and their use in different national contexts are compared:

- irregular border crossing data in Greece,
- data on visa applications and regularisation in Spain,
- data documenting irregular migration status in civil registration in the Netherlands,
- data on the administration of asylum procedures in Germany and
- data on temporarily admitted migrants who fall out of status due to administrative dysfunction in Canada.

Initially, the main purpose of this research task was the exploration and comparison of the *informative value* of these data sources. In order to secure comparability, the case study research was organized around three questions: What data exists to quantify these flows?

How well do the data measure these flows and what would be needed to measure them better? Why would we want to measure these flows better?

However, the subsequent review of the case study reports revealed that not all questions worked equally well for a comparison. The issue of data quality - addressed with the second question regarding the *informative value* of data - cannot be consistently pursued across the five case-studies due to non-existing data, heterogeneity of considered data sources, poor data quality, or the uneven access to available data. At the same time, the reading of the reports suggested to reformulate the cross-case unit of analysis. Consequently, we adapted the research focus and unit of analysis for this multiple case study: As cross case unit of analysis, the multiple case study pursues the question of how selected factors – e.g. availability, accessibility, quality and expediency of data – influence the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making.

The working paper presents the findings from this small n multiple case study and is organized as such: The next section introduces the methodological and conceptual framework of case study research, explains the applied multiple case study design and outlines the conceptualization of the factors informing the comparative analysis. The subsequent section provides brief accounts of the five cases and discusses the cross-case themes. The following section presents the cross-case analysis of the factors that influence data presence in public debates and policy decision making. The final section summarizes and presents the tentative conclusion: The explorative analysis suggests that – in addition to availability, accessibility, and quality – data expediency is a strong factor influencing the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making.

2. METHODOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section provides a brief outline of the methodological framework of case study research approach (2.1), subsequently explains the particular methodological design of this multiple case study and clarifies the cross-case unit of analysis (2.2), considers the particular nature of the considered kind of data (2.3), shares theoretical explanations for the use and non-use of data (2.4), and finally explains the analytical concepts guiding the analysis of factors that influence the use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making (2.5).

2.1 A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY RESEARCH APPROACH

The term case study is frequently used in academic research although usually without a clear definition. A good starting point for a recapitulation is a recent publication by Hunziker and Blankenagel who state that case study research "is a collective term for an in-depth analysis of a small non-random sample" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142) and specify that a "case study depicts a holistic picture of the unit of analysis in its environmental context that contains all relevant aspects, elements, and relationships" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142). Case study research was early and broadly applied in social sciences but met reservations regarding the scientific quality when empirical social research focusing on statistical quality criteria (validity, representativity, reliability) gained dominance and consequently perceived "the individual case as a relatively insignificant and interchangeable aspect of a population sample" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142). Only since the early 1980s, the case study design regained attention and recognition as serious research approach. In the meanwhile, the case study approach is included in the canon of handbooks (Burkholder, 2020) and variations of case study research are explicated in seminal handbooks for particular disciplinary contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017b; Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024; Ridder et al., 2020).

Three examples may illustrate the currently achieved and consolidated quality and variety of case study research approaches. The first and pioneering comprehensive monography on the theory and practice of case study research was published 1984 by Robert K. Yin and subsequently amended in six following textbook editions. Yin differentiates not only between single and multiple case research but adds as two further distinctions holistic (a comprehensive analysis of a system) and embedded (the unit of analysis is part of another system). Yin suggests five rationales for conducting single case study research, that is for critical, extreme, typical, revelatory or longitudinal cases (Yin, 2014). According to Yin, the case study approach is recommended when researchers ask 'how' and 'why' questions,

when they have little control over events, and when the focus of interest is on contemporary phenomena within some real-life context (Yin, 2018).

In contrast, Kathlyn M. Eisenhardt (1989, 2021) emphasized and systematized case study research as an approach for theory development especially appropriate in new topic areas. She describes the case study approach as a research strategy which focuses on understanding dynamics present within single settings. Case studies typically combine data collection methods such as archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations. The evidence may be qualitative (e.g. words), quantitative (e.g. numbers), or both. Eisenhardt emphasizes that case studies can be used to accomplish various aims: to provide description and to test or generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 535).

Finally, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017a) developed the Comparative Case Study (CSS) approach. The approach differs from traditional case study research by responding to conceptual shifts in the social sciences, specifically in relation to recent re-conceptualisations of culture, context, space, place, and comparison itself. The authors refuse the idea of 'holistic' case study research and emphasize the relational nature and relevance of context. Consequently, CSS attends three axes of horizontal, vertical, and transversal comparison and engages two logics of comparison: first, the more common compare and contrast; and second, a tracing across sites or scales (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017a).

The brief and selected account of distinct case study research approaches not only indicates the level of sophistication but also that the label 'case study' encompasses a broad variety of approaches. For the purpose of this study, we take Hunziker and Blankenagel (2024)'s distinction between single and multiple case study research as a point of departure. They argue that case study research is rooted in examining a heuristic case within a single study, seeking to evaluate the generalizability of the procedural or structural logic identified, under the assumption that this logic functions similarly in related contexts. They highlight that a case "can be an individual, a group, an organization, a process, a problem, an event or an anomaly" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142). Contrary to the prevalent view that the exploration of a case usually revolves around how and why questions, diverse research aims can be accomplished with a case study design ranging from comprehensively describing a case out of curiosity to testing extant theories by single cases.

Accordingly, research questions can be identified and developed by inspecting previous studies and identifying any suggestions or opportunities for future research. Most research questions focus on explanations, descriptions, understanding and exploration, but can also serve the purpose to verify or falsify theories. "As a result, case study research has different objectives to contribute to theory and uses extant theories to guide the research process" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142). As a rule, a well-designed case study is explicitly linked to and embedded in theoretical debates and derives criteria for the research questions, the selection of a case or cases, the choice of methods and analysis from theory-guided considerations.

Regarding methodology, Hunziker and Blankenagel emphasize that case study research is often described as an exclusionary qualitative research agenda. However, the practice of contemporary case study research shows that a variety of data sources might be explored

with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including statistical analysis, surveys, document analysis, qualitative interviewing, group discussion, or participant observation. The main criterion for the choice of a method is the expectation to gain deeper insight in the case. Consequently, Hunziker and Blankenagel emphasize as basic features of case study research the holistic orientation and the broad openness and malleability with regard to the issue of interest. A case study "shows (all) the workings of the unit of analysis that are relevant for answering research questions about understanding the case" (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024, p. 142).

The knowledge and insights gained from single case study research can be intensified by methodologically sound comparison in multiple case research (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). With a multiple case study, researchers conduct an in-depth analysis of several cases. For that purpose, first an investigation of individual cases is conducted. Later, these individual results are compared and combined. Multiple case research constitutes a comprehensive comparison in cross-case analysis revealing similarities and differences and how they impact findings. A major advantage of multiple case studies over individual case studies is that researchers can compare their findings. Thus, the results of multiple case research are more robust but might not be as detailed as in a single case research study. The major disadvantage compared to single case research is that they tie up more resources and are more costly if they try to achieve a similar depth of analysis (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). For the purpose of this multiple case study research, we may add that the limitations of resources and time may necessitate to narrow the research question of interest.

2.2 WHAT ARE THE CASES IN THIS STUDY AND WHAT IS THE CROSS-CASE UNIT OF ANALYSIS?

The brief account of case study methodology in the previous section provides a framework of orientation for the description of this study design. In methodological terms, this paper presents the findings from a multiple case study approach. The overarching and common theme is the focus on the presence and use of flow data of irregular migration in the respective five contexts.

Initial design

The initial MIrreM research plan envisaged case studies for an exploration of the informative value of available data sets on particular patterns of irregular migration flows, in particular data on irregular border crossing, visa-overstaying, asylum related irregularity, life-events and labour migration. In consideration of scarce resources and little time, the research team decided to conduct five single case studies, each focusing on one type of irregular migration within one national context. Consequently, the case studies focus on the processes of using flow data across space and contexts. Each single case disposes a particular nexus of a national context with the data on a particular migration flow. Three considerations guided the decision how to combine the pattern of irregular migration flow with a national context: (1) relevance of a type of flow for the particular national context, (2) availability of data and (3) novelty of the expected findings.

In order to secure that all case studies deal with the same aspects and thus facilitate comparability for a cross-case analysis, the research teams agreed to pursue three guiding questions: (1) What data exists to quantify these irregular migration flows? (2) How well do the data measure these flows and what would be needed to measure them better? (3) Why would we want to measure these flows better?

Guided by these three research questions, the research teams conducted fieldwork and prepared draft reports presenting the findings for each of the five case studies. Basic information on the applied methodologies is provided in each case presentation (see section 3.2). The subsequent comparative reading revealed an uneven coverage regarding the second question, i.e. how well do the data measure these flows.

- In the Spanish context, the MIrreM researchers found that relevant data on visa applications and regularisation schemes are available and publicly accessible in an electronic form and can be directly used for further analysis. Subsequently, the Spanish team was able to share an assessment of the quality of the relevant data sets and provide examples emphasizing the informative value of the data.
- In the Greek context, the public authorities policing the borders and administrating irregular cross-border movements produce and store a vast quantity of administrative data. Only selected parts of the data sets are publicly available, while the original data is not directly accessible for researchers. A secondary analysis is hampered by the fact that the data sets are not aligned because authorities apply different categories.
- Also in the German context, a variety of public authorities processing asylum applications produce a plethora of data documenting each administrative action that is executed in the processing of asylum applications. A relevant part of this data is stored in a central register and accessible for researchers on request. Although an assessment of informative value is principally possible, the efforts to analyse these data sets exceeded the research capacities and resources available for MIrreM researchers.
- In the Dutch context, data on the birth of children to a mother or parents without a regular status is collected at the local level by responsible public offices but not aggregated at a higher administrative level. Researchers interested to assess the quality and informative value of available data would have to ask each local civil office individually to grant access to the spatially scattered and statistically not recapitulated data for research – a task that exceeded the capacities of the Dutch research team.
- Finally, in the Canadian context, there is no data available to assess the amount of temporarily admitted migrants who have asked for a renewal of the residence permit on time but get into an irregular-like situation because authorities fail to make a decision in due time, and to retrace longitudinally their individual migration pathways.

Altogether, the brief case accounts indicate that the assessment of informative value is either not possible due to the lack of data, lack of access or lack of necessary resources for an

analysis of the available and accessible date. The initially aspired cross-case comparison of the informative value of the data sets as central unit of analysis is not productive. The first comparative reading revealed, however, that all reports provide at least basic information on the presence and use of the chosen data in public debates and policy decision making. Thus, we decided to take this observation as starting point for an adaptation of the guiding research question for the multiple case study task.

Adapted cross-case unit of analysis

Based on the initial reading of the draft reports, we redefined the unit of analysis of this multiple case study. We now address the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making. While another MIrreM publication explored the use of irregular migration data in policy making and shared suggestions for a more effective use (Slootjes et al., 2024), this publication has a more analytical purpose and focus on an exploration of factors that influence the presence or absence and the use or non-use of data, in particular the four factors of availability, accessibility, quality, and expediency for users. These research questions relate to an ongoing discussion about the presence and absence of data in public debates and policy decision making regarding irregular migration (see section 2.4).

2.3 EXPLANATORY REMARKS ON THE KIND OF DATA

The MIrreM project aims to map and assess quality of the available numerical irregular migration data and to explore possibilities for an improvement of the knowledge on the quantitative dimension of irregular migration. Reports on the available irregular migration stock and flow data show that quantitative data is produced by theory-led scientific research, public administrative bodies and public offices and civil society organizations offering services for migrants in an irregular situation (Hendow, Qaisrani, Rössl, et al., 2024; Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024; Siruno et al., 2024). However, the MIrreM exploration found as an overall tendency that „most data related to irregular migration are collected as a byproduct of ongoing operations (e.g., border controls) or with the aim of improving operational planning (e.g., staffing or budgeting), rather than to establish an evidence base for research and policymaking, as household surveys or census data would“ (Slootjes et al., 2024, p. 15).

In terms of criteria applied in the MIrreM project for the quality assessment of data, the quality of administrative data sources is commonly assessed to be good with regard to accessibility, documentation, validity and reliability. However, due to the inconsistency of available data sources, the irregular migration data landscape is considered to be of an overall poor quality (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024; Siruno et al., 2024; Slootjes et al., 2023). Regarding data produced and applied in research contexts, the hitherto already applied and possible calculation methods display a high level of methodological intricacies that impair the reliable ascertainment of irregular migration stocks and flows, among the different data producers' purposes and intentions, the application of uneven and untuned categorization systems, and the general difficulties to capture the hidden and hard-to-access population of migrants in an irregular situation (Rodríguez Sánchez & Tjaden, 2023).

The MIrreM mapping of public debates and migration policies indicates patterns of highly selective reference making with a focus on statistical indicators that emphasize a threatening nature of irregular migration (Hendow, Qaisrani, Rössl, et al., 2024). In public debates and policy decision making, most attention gain administrative data providing numerical indicators on the refusal of entry, rejection after entry, irregular border crossings, apprehensions in the territory, persons without a right to stay, realized and failed deportations (Siruno et al., 2024). The selective use of these indicators validates the image of migration as a threat and security risk.

Other information that shed more nuanced light on the humanitarian and social situation of migrants and the risks they are exposed to receive less or no attention, even when indicators are principally available. For example, it is neglected that unauthorized border crossing is not a criminal offence in a legal sense when it is related to refugees seeking protection and thus protected by international human rights law against criminalisation (Savatic et al., 2024), or that probably a relevant share among apprehended migrant workers engaged in undeclared employment is recruited by gang masters for the purpose of labour exploitation and should be legally characterized not as perpetrators but as victims (Fox-Ruhs & Ruhs, 2022).

With regard to the presence and use of irregular migration data in public debates, the MIrreM research confirmed earlier observations of a highly selective reference to few indicators which make it apparent that irregular migration is depicted as a threat to public security and overstraining social security systems (Hendow, Qaisrani, Rössl, et al., 2024). Due to populist anti-migration campaigns framing migration as out of control and security threat, EU citizens perceive irregular migration in many European member states as an important or even most pressing policy issue. Consequently, responsible policy decision makers tend to respond to concerns in an ad-hoc manner with announcements to tighten migration and border control and to increase efforts to return irregular migrants in order to signal regained control. The reference data used in public debates and policy decision making consists in numerical indicators from administrative data sources, in particular the number of irregular border crossing apprehensions and the number of third country nationals obliged to leave the country (Hendow, Qaisrani, Brunovska, et al., 2024). These observations suggest that administrative data sources provide the mostly appealed indicators for irregular migration.

Against this backdrop of selective use of data, the multiple case study serves the purpose to explore the factors that influence the use of and reference to irregular migration flow data.

This constellation affects the design of this MIrreM research task. The quantitative data relevant for the different topical areas in five national contexts consists without exception of administrative data sources. The United Nations emphasises that “administrative data sources are not created in response to the need for statistical data but as a part of a government function, such as the provision of services or taxation” (United Nations, 2019, p. 58). The clear distinction between administrative data and census data implies that administrative data does not provide the methodological stringency and reliability of data specifically collected for statistical purposes (Foley et al., 2021).

In a recent paper, Leoni et al. (2023) discuss the potential of administrative data sources for research purposes and statistical accounting and distinguish between traditional and non-traditional sources. Following (MacFeely, 2019), traditional statistical data is defined as information continuously "*collected for an extended period by actors with an official mandate to build evidence for public decisions (e.g. statistical offices)*" (Leoni et al. 2023, p. 400).

Traditional data sources that provide indicators which can be used for the production of estimates of irregular migration include public survey data (census data, EU Labour Force Survey etc.) and also data produced in research projects. However, empirical investigations with the purpose to produce original data and numerical indicators of irregular migration is limited for practical and methodological reasons. Irregular migration data relates to a hidden population segment hard to reach with traditional census related methods.

With regard to non-traditional data, the same authors provide a brief and concise description of the state of art: "[…] *non-traditional data can be collected and updated faster and at a more granular level. A clear example of non-traditional data is administrative data, i.e. "datasets created primarily for administrative purposes by government agencies or other entities working on behalf of the government" (UN, 2019, p. 58). Compared, for example, to traditional surveys, administrative data could provide a more realistic picture of actual activities (e.g. records of public services use) rather than relying on people's answers (Hand, 2020, p. 31). Governments are increasingly addressing the technical integration of non-traditional data, while their potential to foster processual innovation remains unrealised (van Veenstra and Kotterink, 2017).*" (Leoni et al. 2023, p. 400).

Administrative data from public authorities and service providers which register the residence status of non-nationals in case of a contact provides a relevant information source, provided that the indicators used for the generation of estimates are carefully handled (Vogel et al., 2011; Vogel & Jandl, 2008). A main reservation, however, remains that administrative data provides and replicates "state categorization" (Menjívar, 2023).

Hitherto, research rely strongly on administrative data and focus on the secondary analysis of indicators provided in administrative data sets (Rodríguez Sánchez & Tjaden, 2023), including data from mortality records (Surkyn & Bircan, 2025).

The informative value is principally affected by the fact that the paramount purpose of administrative data is the recording of the frequency and kind of administrative procedures and events. Furthermore, the informative value of administrative data for the purpose of measuring irregular migration is affected by the fact that only contacts with such administrative procedures are captured, while the number of migrants in an irregular situation without contacts and not known to authorities remain an unknown dimension.

In spite of the enormous uncertainty in the interpretation of indicators and application for methodologically sound supply of estimates, public debates and policy decision making refer frequently to indicators and estimates of irregular migration in a highly selective and often distorted manner.

2.4 EXPLANATIONS FOR THE USE AND NON-USE OF DATA

The principles of evidence-informed policies based on reliable information play an indispensable role in democratic polities. Legitimate policy making, as Umbach (2022, p. 445) argues, depends more than ever on the capacity of political actors to make decisions based on transparent and accessible evidence. In the age of statistical thinking (Porter, 1986, 1994), statistics and data "are key manifestations of quantitative evidence about the state and society. They are hence essential tools of evidence-informed policy making" (Umbach, 2022, p. 445).

Statistics and data have become instruments of political action and serve many functions: They measure social reality, offer insights into progress in development and have the potential to identify correlations and trends relevant to informing policy designs. "As such, they are used to derive at, explain, and justify policy choices. This link between statistics, data and politics turns quantitative evidence into a central policy instrument and makes its use a specific feature of evidence informed policy making" (Umbach, 2022, p. 445).

The idealized argumentation of the pivotal relevance of evidence is also emphasized by public bodies engaged in the governance of irregular migration. The Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics (2018) states that quality statistics provide the requisite evidence to support (a) better policy formulation and sound decision making, (b) more effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability of policies and programs and (c) enhanced public debate and advocacy. Such statements suggest that public institutions are decisively requesting and intending to utilize high-quality data whenever available, in particular when the information is 'robust', e.g. correspond with the expectations and demands of users (Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, 2018, p. 13; see more generally Nowotny et al., 2003). The United Nations General Assembly (2019) declared in the Global Compact for Migration that the availability of high quality data is an important prerequisite for evidence based designing of policies fostering safe, orderly and regular migration.

However, the use of statistics and data is in democratic policy making not only "subject to principles of legitimacy, transparency and accountability, but also to preference-building and negotiating" (Umbach, 2022, p. 445). Interest-driven political reasoning and partisan communication flourish in the shadow of post-factual contentious politics. Statistics and data have become a target of instrumentalization and politicization which can endanger the democratic legitimation of decision making (Umbach, 2022, p. 448).

The opportunities to use knowledge produced by migration research in such a partisan manner is abetted by internal dynamics in migration research (Natter & Welfens, 2024). As a rule, scientific knowledge production is ideally guided by the principles of critical rationalism with its special focus on knowledge gaps (Popper, 1979). Such a paradigm induced production of scientific knowledge is not only inevitably competing and contradictory but points to the not-yet-known and causes dynamics of succeeding paradigms (Kuhn, 1996). Doubts and uncertainties are inevitable and productive features of

paradigm guided knowledge production. These internal logics of academic knowledge production complicate a one-to-one adaptation of scientifically produced knowledge into practice-relevant expertise and evidence (Weingart, 2013).

As research indicates, non-knowledge needs to be seen on the same basis as knowledge as a normal institutional feature that affects administration across time and space (Boswell & Chabal, 2023; Nassar & Stel, 2019). Consequently, ignorance need to be included as a continuous feature of institutions to some extent and thus an inescapable part of modernization processes (Paul et al., 2022, p. 428).

Using knowledge gaps in any decision-making process display regularity and orderliness. Not-knowing should not be maligned as an epistemological deficit *per se*. People who know how to specify and include ignorance in their decision-making can be better equipped in negotiations (Paul et al., 2022, p. 421). Strategic use of ignorance also includes practices of information or data, such as refusing the collection or systematic use of data, be it for ethical (data protection) or unethical (veiling inexpedient facts) concerns (Paul et al., 2022, p. 423).

Moreover, ignorance can be institutionalized as a political strategy both for maintaining and coping with power relations. "Institutionalized ignorance can appear as unknowns that either are not explored further because they cannot be coped with within a certain time frame or are rendered dangerous of forbidden knowledge… " (Paul et al., 2022, p. 423). State actors are reluctant to produce knowledge on policy issues they are unlikely to solve (Boswell & Badenhoop, 2021). Much of these behaviours are due to institutional inertia and the symbolic, political, and financial costs of innovating established knowledge practices (Paul et al., 2022, p. 428). However, institutionalized ignorance can also be a strategy for inaction and the avoidance of accountability. Since knowledge may be lacking, forgotten, or not-yet produced, it is challenging to hold accountable those who do not know or who *ignore* (Paul et al., 2022, p. 419). Accountability is a normative term that pertains to the need to assess the state of affairs of the performance of an actor based on values and social norms about what is considered good conduct or acceptable performance (Paul et al., 2022, p. 424). Ignorance is seen to produce epistemic injustice wherever knowledge of members of oppressed groups is ignored or denied and when systemic ignorance perpetuates racial inequality or gender-based discrimination (Paul et al., 2022, p. 424).

Welfens and Natter (2024) argue that the effective reference to high-quality data is hampered by a set of factors. The review of research findings considering why, when, and which kind of migration knowledge is used by policy actors points to three key dynamics: "(a) that policy actors often use knowledge symbolically to legitimize their existence or pre-existing preferences; (b) that institutional dynamics shape how knowledge is used (or not) by policy actors, as knowledge can get easily lost in turf wars or complex organizational processes; and (c) that the level of salience and politicization of migration is crucial to understand knowledge (non-)use" (Natter & Welfens, 2024, p. 9).

What counts as evidence or as absence of evidence depends on the institutionalized assessment by officials representing institutions. Policy makers prefer to make use of data that is provided by sources they believe to be more reliable due to political or institutional

closeness of data producers regardless of scientists' judgement of quality (Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2024).

The absence and non-use of data is explained as an outcome of political actors' decision to ignore critical and inconvenient information in favour of a preference to keep a status quo (Hadj Abdou & Pettrachin, 2022; McGoey, 2012; Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2019; Silver & Mitchell, 1990). In general terms, the decision to request and support the production and use of data in political decision making is interpreted as a strategy to maintain epistemic authority (Boswell & Chabal, 2023; Geuss, 2001). As described in the MIrreM project, the willingness of public bodies and authorities to fund and support efforts to improve the quality of irregular migration data remained sporadic and encompassed mainly temporarily funded projects like CLANDESTINO (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024). The lack of determination to support the development of quality data corresponds with the observation that even when data is available and reliable, it is not necessarily seen and used (Berger, 2008; Colombeau, 2023; Scott, 1998).

These arguments provide some ideas, why - in spite of expressed quests for robust quality data - the availability of irregular migration data is still low and the quality poor (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024; Siruno et al., 2024).

2.5 ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS: AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, QUALITY AND EXPEDIENCY OF DATA

In line with the previously introduced methodological orientation that mentions the explication and testing of concepts as an objective of case studies, we apply some selected theoretical concepts as guidance for the description and analysis of factors that influence the use or non-use of irregular migration data in five different contexts.

Possible factors that may influence the presence and use of data in public debates and policy decision making are availability, accessibility, quality and expediency of data. This section offers a brief conceptualization of the concepts applied in this analysis.

A necessary first clarification regards the term data as such which is a very broad and unspecified term. In the context of this multiple case study, the term data refers to any information that is available or used in public debates or policy decision making addressing irregular migration flows. The MIrreM mapping of irregular migration flow data (Siruno et al., 2024) and irregular migration stock data (Kierans & Vargas-Silva, 2024) show that different kinds of data are relevant.

In the MIrreM context, the focus is on numerical data with a distinction of indicators and estimates: Indicators refer to metrics or variables that relate only to observed or known irregular migration flows. Estimates refer to statistical calculations or approximations that quantify both observed and non-observed or unknown irregular migration flows. In other words, "indicators of irregular migration flows show the number of actual observations or

cases, such as border apprehensions, whereas estimates use indicators to come to conclusions about a broader trend, including non-observed components, such as the *total* number of adults, detected and undetected, who crossed into a country without the legal right to do so" (Siruno et al., 2024, p. 11).

So far, the concept of *data presence* is introduced in research on data anxieties of individual digital data users and refers to a sense of insecurity because files could be potentially searched and retrieved, even if it is unlikely that this would happen (Pink et al., 2018, p. 6). For the purpose of this MIrreM research task, the concept of *data presence* is extended beyond the individual use and means mainly that data is a principal reference point for public debates or policy decision making and is implicitly or explicitly relevant whenever an issue is considered.

The term *data use* refers to the concrete invocation of and reference to data by particular actors engaged in public debates or policy decision making. In a very general sense, the concept implies the use of all kinds of information in public debates and policy decision making regardless of validity, reliability and realness.

The presence or absence and use or non-use of data is related to availability or absence, accessibility, quality and expediency.

With regard to scientific data, the factors of availability and accessibility are often not sufficiently distinguished. An editorial piece of the journal *Weather, Climate and Society* uses the term availability for a consideration of the importance of accessibility. The authors emphasize that data availability (e.g. accessibility) is an elementary factor to establish evidence: "Making data available lets other scientists replicate one's analyses, confirm results, uncover errors, or find new insights. Moreover, gathering data can be expensive and time consuming. Because the same data can be used for a range of purposes, making data available can be an efficient use of limited research resources. Doing so can also improve traceability and, thus, accountability when it comes to research findings" (Huntington et al., 2020, p. 647). However, data "about humans and society often require different treatment and protection than do data about natural science topics, such as weather and climate. A one-size-fits-all requirement may, thus, have unintended consequences" (Huntington et al., 2020, p. 647). Conceding that data do not need to be always 'open', as minimum requirement authors need to explain how to find and use the data or why, in some limited circumstances, the data are not available (e.g. accessible). These general considerations, we suggest, relate also to aggregated administrative data sets.

For the purpose of this exploration, the term *data availability* refers to any numerical or statistical information that is supplied by a source – as original or echoed data - and thus at hand for actors engaged in public debates and policy decision making. Data availability refers to all kinds of information regardless of the reliability of sources ranging from fake news, guesstimates, administrative data and original research data. The term *data accessibility* means that data is publicly available and electronically accessible with no permissions required (Siruno et al., 2024, p. 15). This factor is of particular relevance for an assessment of the quality of data.

The concept of *data quality* refers to the argument that available and accessible data is not used or contested due to concerns regarding the quality of data. In the MIrreM context, data quality is assessed by three criteria of validity, reliability and methodological soundness (Siruno et al., 2024, p. 16). The term data quality refers to the assessment of data. High quality data is representative of the phenomenon it is supposed to measure and adequately reflects the type of irregular migration being measured; data is relatively complete (not highly selective) and does not indicate internal contradictions. Medium quality data is selective and points to some internal contradictions. Low Quality data is neither valid nor reliable (Siruno et al., 2024, p. 16).

The importance of quality as factor influencing the use of data is frequently emphasized by political institutions (Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, 2018; United Nations General Assembly, 2019). Irregular migration research identifies poor quality as a pivotal factor impeding the use of research finding for evidence-based policy decision making: "The field of irregular migration is characterised by the absence or scarcity of reliable, comparable, and high-quality data" (Slootjes et al., 2023, p. 3). However, the above-mentioned indication of frequent and distorted references to single indicators and poor-quality data in public debates and policy decision making sheds doubts that data quality is either the final or the decisive factor.

As an alternative explanation, Siruno et al. (2024) argue that the effective use is influenced by the expediency of the message implicitly or explicitly connected with the data. The term *data expediency* means that the use (or non-use) and invocation (or non-invocation) of available data in public debates and policy decision making is guided by data users' given preferences and convictions (for the US context, see Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2024; for the MIrreM sample countries see Slootjes et al., 2024). Data expediency as such implies not necessarily a negative assessment because also good quality data can be and often is convenient for some particular actors - but not for others. Data expediency becomes problematic and detrimental when given preferences and convictions overtrump quality considerations.

The predominant reference to quantitative indicators addressing irregular border crossings is both the expression and response to a toxic polarization (Coleman, 2021) of debates on irregular migration. Challenged by right-wing populists who describe irregular migration as existential threat for European societies, elected policy decision makers feel forced to demonstrate a tough reaction and take measures to contain and prevent irregular migration with a control and punish approach that shall demonstrate the ability to act (Schlepper, 2019; Simon, 2007). The reference to border-related quantitative indicators serves both as a signal that concerns are seen and as a justification to suggest or implement measures in tension with basic humanitarian and human rights principles.

Indicators for detrimental data expediency may be the use of less quality data even when better quality data is available, or when data explicitly described by data producers and holders as poor is nonetheless used without any indication of these caveats. Detrimental data expediency relates also to deliberate ignorance of existing data and a lacking will to improve the quality of data or to close identified knowledge gaps constituted by data absence (Van Rossem & Pelizza, 2022).

The concept of data expediency encompasses policy decision makers tendency to use data that substantiate an established own viewpoint and affirm a given status quo (Silver & Mitchell, 1990). In this vein, policy decision makers tend to ignore information and data that contradicts taken-for-granted convictions (Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2019).

Data expediency relates to research describing policymakers' tendency to rely primarily on internal sources of information, and if internally produced information is not available, on like-minded actors with similar organizational mandates, or actors that shared similar political or ideological views or perspectives on the issue of migration (Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2024, p. 6). In case the status quo is politically contested the selection of reference indicators and data is not primarily guided by concerns regarding data quality but by concerns to defend a policy conviction and convince the electorate. Such a use of data is shaped by a willingness to keep or gain epistemic dominance (Geuss, 2001).

3. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF FIVE CASES

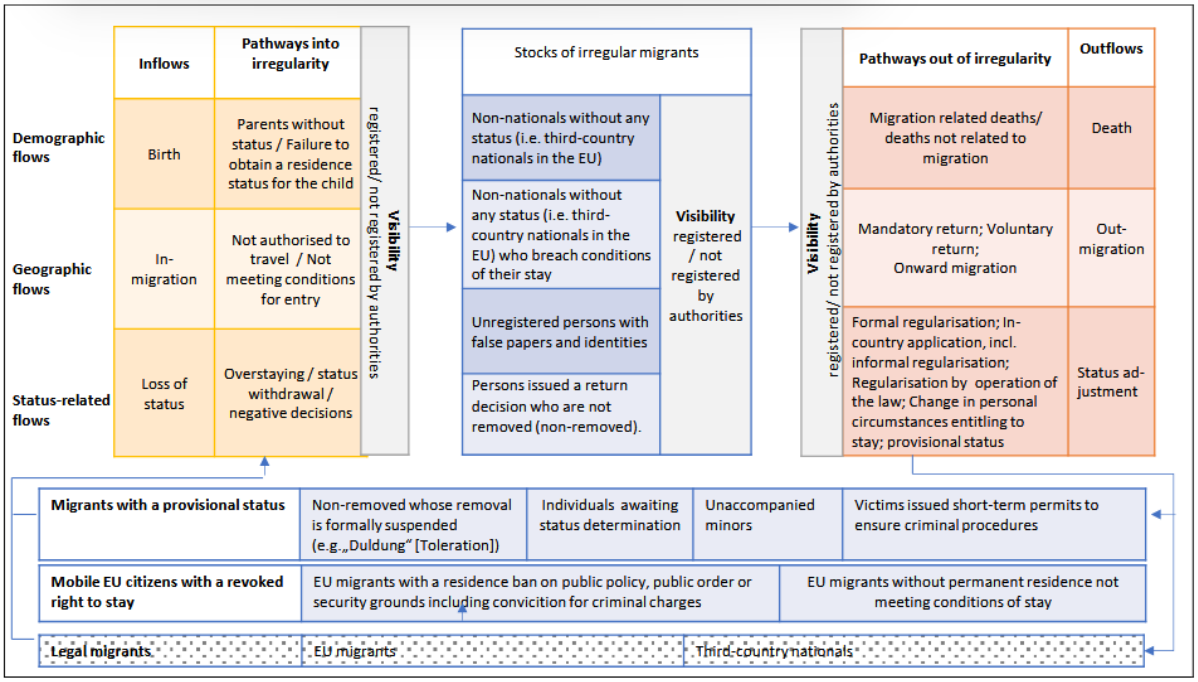
As mentioned in the introduction, each nexus of interest is explored in one national context as a single case study. This chapter provides an explanation for the assignment of a particular nexus to a national context (3.1). Subsequently, for each case study, a short version providing topical information regarding the cross-case unit of analysis and relevant for the multiple-case study is presented (3.2). Finally, similarities and differences are discussed (3.3). The discussion on how factors influence the use of statistical data is subject of the next chapter.

3.1 SHORT EXPLANATION OF THE CRITERIA FOR THE CHOICE OF NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Due to limited resources of the research team and the uneven data landscapes in the countries included in this comparative case study, we decided to explore in every national context only one nexus. With regard to the categories outlined in the MIrreM model of irregular migrant stocks and flows (see figure 1), the case studies address selected geographical and status flows into and out of irregularity.

Clear cases of status related flow constitute the life event – irregular migration nexus and the temporary residence – irregular migration nexus: Migrants loose or obtain a regular status without spatial movement through an administrative act. Also the visa overstayer – irregular migration nexus deals with the status related dimension because the irregular situation emerges from overstaying and ends through regularisation. A clear case of geographical flow provides the border crossing – irregular migration nexus: the administrative ascription of a status of irregularity is related to the circumstances of spatial movement. This case study focusses on the spatial dimension of getting in or out of irregularity. Two other case studies provide a combined consideration of geographic and status flows. The protection seeking – irregular migration nexus constitutes a case of combining geographical and status change in official statistics since protection seeking migrants apprehended on the border are initially registered as irregular border crosser but later obtain a provisional regular status as protection applicant, a regular status than can pertain after final decision or get lost with the consequence, that migrants fall back into an irregular situation without spatial movement. In this case, the pathway out of an irregular situation emerges through regularisation as status flow or voluntary or enforced departure a geographical flow. Thus, the case studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the administrative documentation of the selected flow patterns.

Figure 1: MIrreM model of irregular migrant stocks and flows



Source: Kraler and Ahrens (2023, p. 31), based on a model developed by Vogel and Jandl (2008: 11).

It is important to note that the case studies report on data produced and processed within one national context only. For the purpose of this task, it was not further explored if and to what extent a particular incident registered in the relevant national context is also registered in another national context, e.g. for example exits from Greece as entries in Croatia or if applicants for a protection status in Germany have previously or subsequently applied for a protection status in another EU country.

The choice of a reference country for each of the patterns of irregular migration flow was based on the following observations:

- Regarding the *visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus*, Spain is an appropriate case due to the unique existence of local registers (*arraigo*) which document data on regularisation including previous legal status. The comparison of data from these registers with the data from visa statistics provides a promising basis for an examination of the *visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus* for selected nationalities subject to visa requirements.
- Regarding the *border crossing-irregular migration nexus*, Greece is, within the European Union, an important first-entry location and Greek authorities document irregular border crossings. Therefore, Greece is an appropriate context for analysing the data sources informing on the relationship between irregular border crossing and the relevance of irregular migration status.
- Regarding the *protection seeking-irregular migration nexus*, Germany is in absolute figures the most important destination for persons seeking protection and the responsible authorities collect, store, process and share data for administrative purposes in central registers, including information on status trajectories of protection seeking applicants.

- Regarding the *life-events-irregular migration nexus*, the Netherlands, with a well-functioning public and civil administration, is an appropriate case to explore the irregular migration flow data related to biographical changes, including birth, death or marriage, due to registration requirements mandated by law.
- Regarding the *temporary residence-irregular migration nexus*, Canada pursues a two-step migration policy with temporary and permanent residence schemes. When immigrants have applied for an extension of a temporary residence permit and the authorities did not make the decision before the expiration of the temporary residence permit, the persons get into an irregular-like provisional maintained status. The data on the provision of a maintained status provides an appropriate starting point to explore the link between temporary residence permits and irregularity.

The following section provides an abbreviated version of each case study with a focus on the consideration on the presence and use of data and its availability, accessibility, quality and expediency for users.

3.2 FIVE CASE STUDIES SHOWCASED

This section presents the basic information compiled from the case studies in form of condensed summaries. Due to the particularities of each national context and type of migration pattern, the pieces differ considerably with regard to the scope of relevant data sources and the presentation of details. Notwithstanding, the summaries provide the basic information for the envisaged cross-case analysis of the factors that may influence the use of data.

3.2.1 CASE STUDY SUMMARY: VISA OVERSTAYER-IRREGULAR MIGRATION NEXUS

The case study on the visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus by Claudia Finotelli and Laura Cassain addresses the Spanish context. The main objective of the Spanish case study was to assess data sources relevant for the analysis of the nexus between visa-related flows and irregular migration. For this purpose, the report compares available regularisation data with visa data for selected nationalities subject to visa requirements. Visa policy is a classical instrument of external migration control. In the European Union, visa policy together with other external control instruments has been part of a set of measures that had to match strict controls of the external EU border with freedom of movement within the Schengen space (Lavenex, 2001). Such a combination between free internal circulation and strict external barriers has contributed to forging the image of the European Union as an impregnable fortress (Bigo & Guild, 2005). This notwithstanding, the presence of irregular migrants in the EU has remained fairly high (Andersson, 2014; Carling, 2007; Pastore et al., 2006). As several scholarly works suggest, most irregular migrants in the EU are not clandestine migrants from the outset but entered the EU with a visa and regular travel document in order to stay for a short duration as tourist or visitor or for another purpose with a subsequently issued temporary residence permit (Bommes & Sciortino, 2011; Clandestino, 2009; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010). This also applies to the Spanish case.

At the moment of preparing the case study, Spain does not currently have any official records or data analysis regarding the correlation between irregular migration and visa-related flows. Also, there were no established methodologies to estimate these flows. However, the Spanish case study highlights three data sources that offer some insight on visa-overstaying through an interrelated analysis. Regarding visa statistics, two data sources are provided by the European Commission through DG Migration and Home Affairs and respectively by the Spanish Government through the Permanent Observatory of Immigration (OPI), which is under the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration. The latter also provides the data source on the granting of *arraigo* permits, a form of individual regularisation introduced by the Spanish legislator in 2004 and afterwards extended.

Methodological Information

The single case study on the visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus provides the results of an original exploration conducted in the context of the MIrreM research endeavours. Based on broad expertise gained through expert interviews and national workshops, the authors Claudia Finotelli and Laura Cassain identified and described relevant data sources and explored the potential to utilise the information for an analysis of the visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus. The relevant version used for this case study was delivered 30.11.2023. Later developments are not considered.

Data Availability

The three data sources considered provide different and partly complementing statistical information for an analysis of the visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus.

- The visa statistics produced by the European Commission provide information on the evolution of the number of visa applications submitted, the types of visas granted, and the number of refusals by Spanish consulates abroad. These data can be further broken down by the country where the visa was issued, providing insight into national and regional mobility patterns. One limitation of this dataset is the inability to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of the visa applicant/holders, particularly their nationality.
- As part of the National Statistics Plan, the Spanish Observatory of Immigration (OPI), which depends on the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, offers information based on the SIVICO system (Consulate Visa System), which is the administrative register shared by the consular network. This dataset also provides data on long-term visas. The OPI data's geographical reference is the country of nationality of the visa holder. The statistics provide information on the flow of visas issued during the reference year, by sociodemographic variables (nationality, sex, and age group of the visa holder), visa classification variables (class, type, and purpose of the visa), and area of issuance (country of nationality of the holder, another country of the holder's continent, another continent). As a fundamental limitation, the OPI visa statistics provide only information on visas issued, not on the number of applications, and therefore information enabling to calculate the refusal rate is missing.
- The Spanish *arraigo* scheme is a permanent, individual regularisation mechanism. It was introduced by the Regulation approved in 2004 and confirmed by the new Regulation of 2011. This scheme permitted migrants to get a residence permit if they

were able to demonstrate either a pre-existing labour history (*arraigo* laboral) in Spain or their social integration (*arraigo* social) after two/three years of irregular residence. In 2022, the possibility of obtaining the *arraigo* for training purposes was introduced. People with an *arraigo* permit have resided in Spain irregularly for two or three years before applying for this type of permit and might have entered Spain for the first time with a short-term visa or visa-free. The statistics cover the entire national territory and variables relating to the person (sex, age group, nationality, autonomous community, and province), type of authorisation (*arraigo* for social, labour, family, and training purposes), and type of irregularity, e.g profound irregularity from the outset or befallen irregularity after having entered and stayed on an initially regular basis.

For the purpose of the singe case study, the analysis focussed on migrants from selected countries subject to visa requirements.

Data Accessibility

The accessibility of all three administrative data sources is high. The European Commission and DG Migration and Home Affairs as data holders of information regarding Short Stay Visas make data publicly available and electronically accessible[1] (European Commission, n.d.) with no permissions required for the period 2009-2022. Each Excel file includes filters that allow detailed searches (by consulate/Member state, country of application). The DG Migration and Home Affairs webpage also offers comprehensive information on visa policy (visa-free regime with non-EU countries, visa suspension mechanism, visa code, visa reciprocity, and visa facilitation agreements, among others).

Also the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration pursue an open and transparent data sharing policy. The data regarding Long-Stay Visa is publicly available and electronically accessible (OPI, n.d.-c) with no permissions required for the period 1996-2022. Excel files are available for the period 1996-2009. From 2010 onwards, the OPI web page interface allowed for detailed searches with selected variables and for downloading the tables in different formats (PC-axis, excel, csv). The infographics section (OPI, n.d.-b) offers visualization options for the selected results for the period 2010-2022.
Data on regularisations under the *arraigo* scheme are available every year on the website of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Immigration. The data is publicly available and electronically accessible with no permissions required. Dissemination is carried out in electronic format via the website of the Permanent Observatory of Immigration, in the Experimental Statistical Operations section of the Data catalogue. The "Results" section allows detailed searches both at the national and regional levels (OPI, n.d.-a). Visualisation options are also available in the 'Infographics' tab.

Data Quality

The EU visa statistics offer a complete dataset for the year and the geographical area of reference. According to the Visa Code (Regulation (EC) No 810/2009, 2020), national authorities of all Member States and SACs must submit visa statistics to the Commission by

[1] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en

1 March. Data is gathered using a common reporting template, which includes detailed instructions and encoded formulas (sums, shares, and ratios) to avoid possible errors. Before dissemination, data is checked for inconsistencies and typing errors. In case of suspected errors, data is verified with the provider. This process ensures comparability over time and between countries.

The OPI visa statistics is an administrative register and there are no sample errors. The statistical processing accounts for several controls and revisions that ensure the quality and coherence of the dataset. The Permanent Observatory of Immigration verifies the internal consistency of data. The statistical data are comparable over time. In 2021 the classification variables and the format of the series had been revised and homogenized for the entire period 2010-2021.

The *arraigo* data published by the OPI is representative of the phenomenon it is supposed to measure and adequately reflects regularisations based on the *arraigo* scheme. Data sources are official registers, subjected to statistical treatment, nevertheless it is an experimental statistics, recently launched. The methodological report states that the contents presented in this statistic are considered experimental because they have not yet reached sufficient maturity in terms of reliability, stability, or data quality to be included in official statistics (OPI, 2022). However, the available results are offered to interested persons for their use and evaluation, because of the relevance that they may have and as a means to improve the products themselves by seeking the opinion of the final recipients of the information.

Data Use and Data Expediency

The data sources are used to monitor the tasks of authorities issuing visa or granting *arraigo* permits. Hitherto, the opportunity to use the three data sources for an interrelated analysis was not realized. Only as a part of the MIrreM activities, the Spanish research team was able to show that such a carefully conducted analysis yields new insights about the patterns and dynamics of a visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus for selected countries. For example, the data provide information that can be used to understand the migratory trajectory concerning irregularity. The presence of migrants from countries with a high rejection rate in the *arraigo* statistics could point to migration trajectories that start with clandestine migration. In contrast, the presence of migrants from countries with high rates of visas issued can point to trajectories of irregularity through overstaying.

The available quantitative information derived from the permanent *arraigo* regularisation is not used to stir-up public resentments and to call for more restrictive policies. Much of the public attention has been driven by the entry and residence permits for investors, the management of border crossings in Ceuta and Melilla and the arrivals by sea from Africa on the Canary Islands. The only debates related to visa policy occurred when Spain decided to introduce more demanding criteria for citizens from visa-free countries such as Brazil or Mexico. In both cases, the planned policy change was framed as a kind of betrayal of the historic relationships between Spain and Mexico and Spain and Brazil in public debates which shows how decisions on visa policy are deeply embedded in long-standing bilateral relations. Very little attention is devoted in the public debate to the impact of visa policy and implementation on the development of irregular migration.

3.2.2 CASE STUDY SUMMARY: BORDER CROSSING-IRREGULAR MIGRATION NEXUS

The case study on the border crossing-irregular migration nexus considers the Greek context and has been prepared by Marina Nikolova. The national borders of Greece with non-EU member states are also external borders of the European Union and under the Schengen Borders Code. The latter requires that EU external borders be crossed only at designated border-crossing points. The protection of the external EU borders is regulated by various legal instruments and in this line, the EU Member States are required to put in place effective border surveillance systems and take measures to prevent unauthorized entries, while fully respecting fundamental rights according to Articles 4 and 13 of the Schengen Borders Code (Speciale, 2010).

Responsible for the protection and the surveillance of the borders are the Border police and the Hellenic Coast Guard Force, with an involvement of FRONTEX, which assists in surveillance and border management in line with the Regulation 1168/2011. After the establishment of the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) (Reg. No 1052/2013), as a system for the exchange of information and for operational cooperation, Greece established the National Coordination Center for Border Control, Immigration and Asylum (N.C.C.B.C.I.A.) by the Law 4249/2014 with main task to coordinate the actions of all the relevant agencies at national level on issues of immigration and asylum.

The migrants who cross the sea or land borders of the country in irregular mode and are apprehended upon irregular arrival, are placed temporarily in Reception and Identification Centers under the competency of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. There, they are subject to certain procedures, so data gathered during those procedures reveals details on demographic characteristics of the migrants and on further referrals. The selected indicators as regards to the border crossing-irregular migration nexus refer to the inflows and outflows.

Methodological Information

The single case study on the border crossing-irregular migration nexus the Greek context provides the results of an original exploration conducted in the context of the MIrreM research endeavours. Based on broad expertise collected through expert interviews and national workshops, the author Marina Nikolova identified and described relevant data sources and explored the potential to utilise the information for an analysis of the border crossing-irregular migration nexus. The relevant version used for this multiple case study was delivered 01.03.2024. Later developments are not considered.

Data Availability

The main source of border crossing data is the Ministry for Migration and Asylum (MoMA). The Ministry publishes reports with data on the situation at the sea and land borders monthly since 2020. These datasets refer to the number of irregularly arriving migrants on the islands of the Eastern Aegean Sea and in the border area of Evros. Monthly data on irregular migrants registered at the First Reception Centers by place where the migrant was registered, age

group, gender, vulnerability, citizenship, are published since 2013; as well as the total number of unaccompanied minors, age and gender and place where registered. Data on returns of irregular migrants to countries of origin is also published.

On their website, MoMA publishes also a newsletter with data on daily basis since August 2021 for the situation on the Aegean islands which is produced under the competency of the N.C.C.B.C.I.A. of the Ministry of Citizen Protection. This data refers to the total number of migrants in Closed Controlled Access Centers (C.C.A.C.) on the islands, the capacity in numbers of each of those centers, the total number of migrants staying on the island, and transports carried out to the mainland. Following the procedure, after the apprehension by the police in the border areas, apprehended migrants are led to Reception and Identification Center (under the competence of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum), where they are registered. According to the case characteristics and the vulnerability, different procedures follow, and on each step of these procedures different kind of data are produced and presented in the statistics. The available data covers both the beginning and closure of registration and data processing (see MoMA, 2024a, 2024b).

Monthly data on number of apprehended irregular border crossings by nationality for the period 2010-2019 was published previously by the Greek Police.

Other publicly available and accessible data by EUROSTAT refers to refused entries at the external borders and are disaggregated by type of border, reason for the refusal and country of citizenship of the person refused entry for the period 2014-2023.

Data regarding the outflows refers to different types of returns (Hatzopoulos et al., 2017): assisted voluntary return program of IOM, voluntary non-assisted returns and the forced returns/expulsions, which are gathered and published every month by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum from January 2020. Number of orders to leave to third country nationals (TCNs) and returns by type of return and disaggregated by citizenship, age and sex are published by EUROSTAT by year available for the period 2014-2023.

However, there is a lack of data on secondary movements. For different reasons, the departures of migrants with some sort of legal status or through irregular/undetected border crossing are not registered.

Data on cases of migrants' deaths and missing migrants while attempting to cross the border either by sea or by land, are gathered and published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), while the National Commission for Human Rights registers data in their special reports in 2022 and 2023 on allegations of informal forced returns.

Data Accessibility

The above-mentioned data are published regularly – daily, monthly or annually, by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and annually by EUROSTAT on inflows and outflows. These data are publicly available and electronically accessible. The EU Member States send statistics on enforcement of immigration legislation to Eurostat. These relate to reference periods of one calendar year and must be submitted within three months of the end of the

reference year. Processed data from the Greek police and port authorities for the apprehensions for irregular entry and stay at the border areas (sea and land borders) is also available for the period 2010-2019. The IOM's Missing Migrants' Project maintains an online global database - Mediterranean region included - by compiling information from diverse sources on the number of migrants who lose their lives in incidents when crossing the border.

Data Quality

As regards to the data quality, Eurostat points out that the data they collect are based entirely on administrative sources. Member states compile their data following guidelines and instructions previously disseminated by the agency, and before publishing the data validation checks are performed. Furthermore, Eurostat notes that they started collecting new statistics on voluntary basis with first reference year 2014 as regards to TCNs returns: 1) by type of return and citizenship, 2) by type of assistance received and citizenship; 3) by type of agreement procedure and citizenship; and, 4) by destination country and citizenship. These statistics of Eurostat are the result of a pilot collection, and clarifications and improvement are still being pursued with the data providers.

The Ministry of Migration and Asylum as a member of the Hellenic Statistical System (HSS), aims to develop, produce and disseminate high quality statistics useful to everyone interested in policy making, decision-making, research and dialogue. On EU level, Eurostat provides member states with Technical Guidelines describing the procedures and quality requirements for the statistics collected in advance. Data provided to both agencies for statistical purposes are from administrative sources. MoMA follows uniform standards and harmonized methods with the European Statistical System, applies the quality assessment criteria and takes measures to protect the collected data and its databases. The data are subject to checks, before their use to produce statistics, which allows the assessment of their accuracy and reliability. Altogether, according to the MIrreM criteria the administrative data is of good quality.

However, process-generated data by MoMA and other stakeholders is dependent on the frequency, intensity and modus of activities that induce data entrance. Accordingly, areas and occurrences which are not captured by public authorities remain invisible and unnoticed. In addition, the data on detained migrants in the pre-departure centres (PRO.KE.K.A.) at the islands does not provide sufficient information regarding the reported category. The figure includes numbers of detained migrants who do not have perspectives to be removed and also newly arrived who should have been hosted in other facilities or services (RIC) and undergo procedures of identification.

Methodologies used by the researchers working for the IOM's "Missing Migrants Project", who gather systematically data on migrants' deaths at the borders globally and for the Mediterranean Sea, differ and the validity of the sources they use vary. It is of great importance to note the original sources of the data in the databases (Dearden et al., 2019, p. 60). Further recommendation of researchers dealing with such data is to focus more on the on-going nature of border deaths and on the policies aiming to address them, and not so much on the ups and downs in the numbers (ibid., p. 64).

Data Use and Data Expediency

The gathering and production of data is a tool for the monitoring of the border control polices, and a source of knowledge of the trends, closely linked to the design and implementation on the ground of the policies in terms of procedures on the border and the bureaucracy linked to those procedures. Since 2019, when the New Democracy/Christian Democratic Conservative Parties won the election, there was a change in the collection and presentation of the migration data. Reports on the situation of the Aegean islands and Evros region were not published daily and referred to new arrivals and the number of people staying in in facilities.

Data on border crossing are collected, processed and published by the relevant authorities in charge of the border protection and of the further border procedures and the policy makers and researchers use indicators for inflows, outflows and stocks of irregular migration. With changes in the policies and the governments, the practices of collecting data might change to fit or measure new objectives and monitor the implementation of policies, but also serve the purpose to monitor the changes of the intensity and characteristics of the flows and stocks.

The management of irregular migrants' flows is defined as a priority of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, which needs to be well informed by relevant data policies and measures to effectively protect the borders, but also to safeguard the human rights of the migrants.

In this respect, such statistics on the inflows used in policy making at national level in the framework of border protection measures, are: number of new arrivals by nationality, age and gender, type of vulnerabilities, number of referrals to the asylum services, apprehensions per border area, numbers and nationalities of arrested smugglers.

The establishment of the facilities under the First Reception and Identification Services at the border regions for irregular migrants started in 2012 (EMN, 2013) but data on their capacity and number of accommodated people were not published before 2020. Since 2020 data are published on daily basis informing on the number of migrants accommodated at the pre-removal centres and in RIC’s, which are used by the authorities to monitor that the number of accommodated migrants at the facilities does not exceed their capacity as it was the case in the past.

The existing indicators provided by the state authorities and related to departures refer to assisted and non-assisted voluntary returns, forced returns, and expulsions, but also data on issued orders to leave the country. The comparative analysis of available indicators for return of irregular migrants is used to monitor the efficiency of the return policies. In the monthly newsletters the comparison is between the newly arrived irregular migrants during the month of comparison and the registered returned ones.

The topic of pushbacks is covered mostly in the media. On the other hand, data on border deaths reported by the media, draw attention to the severity of the phenomenon (Dearden et al., 2019, p. 65), might raise the awareness of the general public, and provoke discussions

on the causes of irregular border crossings and potential solutions (ibid.). The focus of the public attention on inflows support that Greece perceives itself as an overstrained country.

An important lesson from the single case study on the border crossing-irregular migration nexus in the Greek context is the observation that authorities intensively collect and process data related to unauthorized border crossings and the subsequent administration of apprehended border crossers.

3.2.3 CASE STUDY SUMMARY: PROTECTION SEEKING-IRREGULAR MIGRATION NEXUS

The case study on the protection seeking-irregular migration nexus considers the German context and has been prepared by Norbert Cyrus. The starting point of the study is the basic principle, that people in need of protection have the right to seek asylum in another country (UDHR, art. 14,2). According to the Geneva Convention (art. 31), asylum seekers are exempted from punishment for the offence of unlawful border crossing. In spite of these international regulations, a protection seeking-irregular migration nexus occurs in particular circumstances. Firstly, public statistics use to account the border crossing of protection seekers as irregular border crossing in spite of the exemption from punishment, thus creating the picture of "false illegals" (Savatic et al., 2024). Secondly, pathways into and out of an irregular migration status relate to particular constellations: the circumstances of border crossing, the willingness and ability of refugees to ask for protection and authorities' willingness to open a procedure for the determination of a protection status, the subsequent recognition or denial of an protection status application, the withdrawal from a status determination procedure or absconding of applicants and subsequent unauthorized stay in the country.

This protection seeking-irregular migration nexus is analysed in the context of Germany, the country which in absolute numbers processes the highest number of applications for a protection status in the European Union. For the purpose of this exploration, the term protection seeking is used as an overall term covering the relevant four kinds of protection status, e.g. asylum, international protection, subsidiary protection and deportation ban (BAMF, 2023).

In Germany, the statistical production of "false illegals" is a highly virulent issue. Every detected case of unauthorized border crossing is registered by the responsible Federal Police as unauthorized entry. However, unauthorized entry[2] may not be punished[3] if the apprehended person applies for protection immediately after entering the country.[4] The protection seekers therefore receive, usually a few weeks after entry, a letter from the responsible public prosecutor's office that the investigation proceedings for unauthorized entry[5] have been discontinued. Subsequently, applicants may be awarded after processing

[2] Unauthorized entry (unerlaubte Einreise) is punishable under Sections 14 and 95 (1) no. 3 of the Residence Act,
[3] According to Article 31 (1) of the Geneva Convention on Refugees (GRC)
[4] Section 95 (5) of the Residence Act refers to the GRC
[5] Pursuant to Section 170 (2) of the Code of Criminal Procedure

one of the four protection status (e.g. related to entitlement to asylum, award of refugee protection, subsidiary protection and ban on deportation) or be rejected. Rejected applicants may remain due to appealing a court or for the reason of factual impossibility to leave and subsequently get a provisional tolerated status. When the decision is later revoked or the temporary residence permit not extended, the status trajectory of former applicants is redirected to a pathway towards a tolerated status. Consequently, tolerated third country nationals without a right to remain are considered by some authorities and part of the public as irregular migrants known to authorities (Haberstroh et al., 2022; Sinn et al., 2006). In Germany, the protection application procedure – officially still called asylum procedure - is organized in sequential processual encounters of protection seekers and authorities (BAMF, 2023). Authorities extensively document, store, process and share personal data of applicants and information on administrative steps and decisions. Each processual encounter works as a status hub granting, extending, or denying a residence permit or a tolerated status. At particular status hubs, an applicants' right to stay can be confirmed or denied and a status will be assigned: refusal or rejection of entry, removal after entry, provisionally registration, granting a residence permit, approval or rejection of an asylum application, international protection, subsidiary protection or deportation ban, and based of this decision granting of a residence permit or a toleration, renewal or denial of the prolongation of a tolerated status (see Stiller & Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2023).

The status trajectory of asylum applicants is documented in the Central Foreigners Register (AZR) (Peitz, 2025). Regarding residential irregularity, it is noteworthy that some authorities consider not only absconded applicants as irregular migrants but also *tolerated* foreign nationals without a right to stay as irregular migrants known to authorities (Haberstroh et al., 2022).

Methodological Information

The case study on the protection seeking – irregular migration nexus was conducted as part of the MIrreM research efforts between January 2023 and March 2025. The inquiry combines information from literature and document analysis, expert interviews and focus group discussion. Altogether eight interviews with experts from NGOs (3), Federal administration (4) and research (1) were conducted between 19.07.2023 and 28.09.2023. The focus group discussions with 12 participants from Federal administration, NGOs and research took place 07.03.2024. The interviews and focus group discussion was summarized and utilized for this examination with a code based topical analysis. The single case study was delivered 5.3.2024. Later developments are not considered.

Data Availability

As a principle, authorities getting in contact with protection seekers have to document each contact and insert data in statistical documentation systems. Data of protection seekers is collected along the encounter with authorities: Federal Police captures the data of refugees who ask at the border for asylum proactively on own initiative or lodge an asylum application after apprehension. The Federal Police document citizenship, sex, age, unaccompanied minor, relation to transit visa, manner of behaviour, asylum request, EURODAC hit,

subsequent whereabouts (for example forwarding to other authorities, rejection, removal, expulsion).[6]

Subsequently, persons asking for asylum are forwarded to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) responsible for the processing of asylum applications. The BAMF deliver as first document a "proof of arrival" certificate and carry out registration and digitalised identification procedures including collection of fingerprints and facial image. Collected information include formal information of involved authority employees (five characteristics) and personal data of the asylum seeker (twenty-eight characteristics). The data is stored automatically in the Central Foreigners Register (AZR) and also in MAriS without fingerprints. Fingerprints are stored in the police data source AFIS-A (INPOL), and documents are automatically cross-checked with the national database on stolen identity documents. Subsequently, the data is cross-checked with other national and EU information systems, including AFIS-A, Asylkon, EURODAC, SIS II, VIS, Visa file (national) (Grote, 2020, p. 52).

In the following data processing, a first step is the check whether the person has already applied in a Dublin state. Subsequently, authorities review the case and collect and store additional information in formal interviews, including vulnerability, information on the language and references to the region of origin. Even in a negative decision of an asylum request, the applicant does not immediately fall back into an irregular status. In addition to the recognition of an entitlement to asylum (art. 16 a, Basic Law), authorities grant a temporary residence permit for refugee protection (§ 3, Asylum Act), subsidiary protection (section 4, Asylum Act) or impose a ban on deportation (§ 60 V+VII, Residence Act) (BAMF, 2023). Rejected applicants can appeal courts for a review of the decision. For cases who are not eligible for one of these options but cannot depart or be deported, a toleration is issued.

During and after the final closure of an asylum processing, the Foreigners' Office at local level is involved as authority issuing the residence or toleration and collaborate in the collection, processing and sharing of data with the AZR.

To sum up: The data produced by Federal Police and Criminal Police covers the identification of persons apprehended in circumstances reported as migrant irregularity. The data produced by BAMF provides information on the status trajectory of protection seekers, covering passages of temporary and permanent regularisation and passages of falling back into a status of toleration or irregularity. Foreigners Offices administrate individual status trajectories of each non-EU foreign national subject to visa or residence permit requirements and living in Germany, including protection seekers. The data is concentrated, processed, stored and shared in the AZR, hosted by the Federal Office for Pension in Cologne. A special identification number allows the tracing of status trajectories at an individual level.

Data Accessibility

The accessibility of data sources providing information on the status trajectories of asylum applicants differs considerably. Federal Police publish merely fundamental information

[6] See the Parliamentarian protocols for details: BT-Drucksache 20/13049, p. 2

related to selected aspects of border crossings in annual reports. No information is provided regarding the volume, circumstances and features of lodging a request for a protection status. Additional information related to protection applications is provided by the Federal Government on request of Members of Parliament and shared in Parliamentarian publications (Thränhardt, 2024). The information is usually shared in a very detailed and scattered manner that requires intensive efforts to reconstruct and understand the development of particular series.

The BAMF reports monthly on aggregated data regarding the processing of asylum procedures and publishes annually a report on the total numbers. In addition, the BAMF research department prepares data analyses of special aspects and conducts research examining AZR data. The personal identification number can be used for an anonymized exploration of the status trajectory of actual and former asylum seekers (Peitz, 2025).

The AZR serves the purpose to provide authorities with information on the residential status and status trajectory of foreign nationals living in Germany. In addition, AZR data is available in an anonymized form for research conducted by public authorities and also on request for academic research.

Data Quality

As an overall assessment, the quality of administrative data can be estimated as high when applying the MIrreM criteria of accessibility, validity and reliability (Siruno et al., 2024). However, the quality of the relevant data differs with regard to the data producers. The assessment of the validity of Federal Police data is impaired by the lack of context information on the definition of categories, the frequency and intensity of control activities, and the coherence and variations of practical implementation. In concrete terms, for example, it is not clear how Border Police apply categories like ‘detection of smugglers’ or ‘prevention of irregular entries’.

The responsible authorities for AZR and BAMF data take measures to establish and secure the coherence of data collecting and processing. The data quality reports provide detailed information on identified shortcomings, including data doublets emerging from misspelling of names, failure to update or delete the records of former applicants no longer in contact with authorities, etc. This constitutes a chronic uncertainty about the reliability of the official registration of departures of tolerated foreign nationals without a right to stay. Consequently, the statistically recorded number of tolerated migrants without a right to stay is considerably inflated (Scheel, 2024). An official interviewed for the MIrreM study stated that the AZR data quality is still impaired by improper or incomplete registration practices in times of high work-loads. Concerns raised in the German MIrreM stakeholder workshop (07.03.2024) addressed improper registration of particular features due to procedural arrangements: When data processing systems offer for the registration of particular characteristics a drop-down menu with predefined characteristic, data encoders show the tendency to simply choose the possibility offered first at the top of a list. In the MIrreM workshop, the participants discussed the issues under the label of ‘data garbage’ (Germany MIrreM Stakeholder Workshop 07.03.2024). This information indicate that the reliability of data depending on the interpretation of a data encoder needs to be treated with caution. To sum

up, the assessment of the data landscape generates an incoherent impression. Consequently, the assessment of the evidence of data related propositions on the nexus of irregular migration and protection application requires a specific and context-sensitive consideration.

Data Use and Data Expediency

The data sources serve the primary purpose to document the activities of authorities and collect information about the processing and features of individual cases. The data is used for internal purposes of case management, monitoring of efficiency and efficacy, analysis of trends and the planning of allocation of resources. Due to the process-driven nature of data production and processing, the data provides a bounded insight about known cases. In spite of these limitations, data from Federal Police, BAMF and AZR is frequently used in public debates by stakeholders in a highly selective manner. For example, while critics of a too generous protection system point to the low rate of recognition of entitlements to asylum, defendants emphasize that the other forms of protection (international refugee, subsidiary protection, national ban on deportation) have to be taken into account as well as recognitions achieved through court appeals (Eberle, 2019).

Actually, the issues of asylum seeking and irregular migration are conflated in public and political debates. For example, the largest opposition party in the Parliament points to occasionally increasing numbers of asylum applications as an indicator of irregular border crossings, [7] an argumentation that is now also adopted by the responsible Ministry. Also the number of tolerated foreign nationals without a right to stay is indicated and used as an argument to enforce departure and deportation without a nuanced consideration of reasons why departure or deportation fails (Mielke et al., 2025). At the same time, already implemented alternative measures which effectively reduce the number of tolerated foreign nationals by offering pathways towards a regular residence status (Cyrus, 2025; Haberstroh et al., 2022; Peitz, 2025) are neglected or strictly repudiated with the argument that regularisation will incentivize irregular migration (Fachkommission Fluchtursachen, 2021). Only recently, researchers have started to utilize the AZR data for an analysis of status trajectories of asylum applicants (Peitz, 2025).

In the German debates, the selective use of isolated and decontextualized numbers which are commonly interpreted as indicators of a threat, insecurity and failure of established migration policies dominates the public perception without a proper attention to data appropriateness and quality.

3.2.4 CASE STUDY SUMMARY: LIFE EVENTS-IRREGULAR MIGRATION NEXUS

The case study on the life events - irregular migration nexus considers the Dutch context and has been prepared by Lalaine Siruno and Arjen Leerkes. Life events refer to significant transitions and experiences that individuals go through over the course of their lives. Between birth and death, these milestones or important life events may include “leaving the

[7] BT-Drucksache 20/10665, p. 45

parental home, marriage, marriage dissolution by divorce or widowhood, migration, labour force entry and exit" (Willekens, 1999, p. 23). Indeed, migration itself is a major life event, which alters how expected and unexpected life cycle events are lived (Falicov, 2016) in multiple ways.

As irregular migration, by definition, occurs without proper authorisation, the life events of migrants in irregular situations may not be systematically captured in formal administrative processes and excluded from official population statistics. The case study looks at the life events-irregular migration nexus in the Dutch context and discusses how some demographic status-related flows related to biographic or vital events such as birth, marriage, divorce, health, dependency on social assistance, work, and death are reflected or not reflected in irregular migration data. Subsequently, the case study focusses on the data of third country nationals without residence rights who are responsible for the care of a minor child who holds Dutch nationality. They are legally entitled to apply for a residence permit under specific circumstances. For this narrow case constellation, aggregated data is available at the national level.

Methodological Information

The single case study on the life events-irregular migration nexus provides the results of an original exploration conducted in the context of the MIrreM research endeavours. Based on broad expertise collected through expert interviews and national workshops, the authors Lalaine Siruno and Arjen Leerkes identified and described relevant data sources and explored the potential to utilise the information for an analysis of the life events-irregular migration nexus. For this examination, the authors conducted additional interviews with stakeholders and officials at municipality level and analysed available information from national and municipality sources. The relevant version used for this multiple case study was delivered 31.01.2024. Later developments are not considered.

Data Availability

The Netherlands has a national population register in the form of the Personal Records Database (BRP) with data supplied by the Registrar of Births, Deaths, Marriages and Registered Partnerships. But while registrations are legally required, records are not systematically linked to migration status.[8] As such, in terms of biographical events in relation to irregular migration flows, there is very limited data available from the Netherlands. Statistics on demographic flows such as births and deaths of migrants in an irregular situation are, in principle, available from the municipalities precisely because of registration requirements mandated by law, but they are not systematically collected. Data on status-related flows, such as regularisation through marriage or partnership or obtaining a residence permit through education or employment, are also unavailable as they are not systematically linked to previous migration status.

[8] A 2019 survey of the content of population registers in 36 countries revealed that while citizenship was registered often, changes to these and information on migration were much less often recorded. Please see: Panteia. (2019). *Population registers in different countries - Design and developments in relation to The Netherlands*. Panteia. https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-d818ede5-232b-42b3-84c2-7b71b9d0a347/pdf.

This said, one relevant biographical event where data is available pertains to the birth and care of a Dutch child by a third-country national (TCN). Building on the 2011 Ruiz Zambrano ruling, the Court of Justice of the European Union made a ruling on 10 May 2017 in the case of Chavez-Vilchez, stating that a TCN who does not possess a right of residence but is a parent responsible for the care of a minor child who holds Dutch nationality can apply for a residence permit under specific conditions. Prior to this ruling, the case that a Dutch parent was capable and willing to take care of the child was sufficient for the right of residence of the TCN parent to be denied. A positive decision is a status-flow indicator because it provides a pathway out of irregularity for TCNs who cannot obtain a residence permit through other means. These occurrences are registered at local level and made available in an aggregated form at national level by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND).

Besides the BRP, various institutional registers collect information to carry out institutional functions like those from schools, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), and the Central Administration Office (CAK scheme) through which healthcare for persons who cannot obtain health insurance like irregular migrants is financed.

Data Accessibility

While the healthcare and education related data sources from institutional registers, IND and CAK have more direct links to migration status, they are inaccessible, even upon request. This 'gatekeeping' can be attributed to privacy considerations and strict data protection regulations such as the EU-wide GDPR.

The data on the Chavez-Vilchez judgment, which speaks to recognition of parenthood, appears to be the only indicator available relevant to the life events–irregular migration nexus that is likewise publicly accessible. Since adopting the ruling in 2017, the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), which assesses applications, has systematically and meticulously documented applications and decisions, analysed associated demographic information (i.e., the profile of applicants), and publicised all results in the Ministry of Justice's annual State of Migration Report. This has been done to gain insight into the consequences of the court ruling and to track its implementation. In 2018, 2020, and 2021, the IND also published a series of more extensive reports about Chavez-Vilchez applications which are publicly available (Liu & Maasland, 2018; Maas & Liu, 2021; Maasland & de Wilde, 2020). These reports provide information on among others, the profile of applicants (gender, nationality, age, age of Dutch child(ren), etc.), as well as number of (repeat) applications and appeals.

Data Quality

The case study assessed the available data on the Chavez-Vilchez judgment based on the MIrreM criteria for quality assessment of irregular migration indicators (see Siruno et al., 2024 for details) and found a high quality in terms of documentation, validity and reliability. The accessible data includes information on the total number of received and approved applications in absolute and relative figures. The IND reports provided further details about the applicants and the applications. In terms of validity and reliability, the figures refer to actual numbers of migrants who had been issued a residence permit based in a positive Chavez-Vilchez decision.

The data on the Chavez-Vilchez judgment has good quality overall. Since the adoption of the ruling in 2017, the IND has systematically and meticulously documented applications and decisions, analysed associated demographic information (i.e., the profile of applicants), and publicised all results. The validity and reliability of this data is high.

Data Expediency and Data Use

The case study findings suggest that while certain life course events (births, deaths, marriages, school registrations, etc.) are routinely recorded in population and institutional registers per legal requirements, they do not necessarily reflect demographic and status-related flows pertaining to migrants with irregular status.

As an exception regarding life events, the compilation of data on the Chavez-Vilchez judgement at a national level serves the purpose to gain insight into the consequences of the court ruling and to track its implementation. Apart from the data on the Chavez-Vilchez judgment, authorities do not release numbers pertaining to births and deaths of irregular migrants, for example, or those acquiring, losing, or re-acquiring permits to stay in the country legally. Schools, medical institutions, and the CAK do not publicise figures either. It is, therefore, difficult to establish if data on life events is used in policy decision-making.

The case study has also not been able to clearly establish a motivation for the non-dissemination of information to the public or whether, in fact, the information collected, however limited, is passed on to immigration authorities and other policymaking agencies (see also Cherti et al., 2024). Still, it may be surmised that the interest to protect on the basis of human rights is stronger than the interest to know. Service providers, civil servants, and other street-level bureaucrats who regularly come into contact with irregular migrants prioritise their public service mission over reporting or statistical accounting procedures. Further, it may be in the public's best interest not to release detailed figures, as migration in general, and irregular migration in particular, is already a contentious issue that evokes strong and often polarising public opinion (Cherti et al., 2024).

Policymakers interviewed have stressed that Dutch migration policies are neither selective nor restrictive in intent, just in outcomes, as authorities have to maintain a constant balance between enforcing regulations and protecting human rights. In view of human rights considerations, the need for accurate and reliable data pertaining to the vital life course events of irregular migrants who are vulnerable members of the population is hugely important. But here again, a careful balancing act is required – ensuring that rights to basic services are respected alongside the universal rights to privacy and non-discrimination.

3.2.5 CASE STUDY SUMMARY: TEMPORARY RESIDENCE-IRREGULAR MIGRATION NEXUS

The single case study on the temporary residence-irregular migration nexus considers the Canadian context and has been prepared by Shiva Mohan and Daniela Ghio. Temporary migrants, including international students, seasonal workers, and visitors, play a central role in Canada's public debates on irregular migration, due to concerns over visa overstayers and

transitions to undocumented status (Harris & Hiebert, 2019). The brief case study analysis underscores how Canada's fragmented and incomplete immigration data infrastructure undermines its ability to address irregular migration effectively and humanely. By failing to provide comprehensive, reliable, and timely data on temporary migration, the system creates significant challenges in the assessment of irregularities and implications on policymaking, public discourse, and resource allocation in Canada.

Methodological Information

The single case study on the temporary residence permit-irregular migration nexus in the Canadian context provides the results of an original exploration conducted in the context of the MIrreM research endeavours. Based on broad expertise collected through expert interviews and national workshops, the authors Shiva Mohan and Daniela Ghio identified and described relevant data sources and explored the potential to utilise the information for an analysis of the temporary residence - irregular migration nexus. For this single case study research, the authors asked responsible authorities to provide access to available but not publicly accessible data sources. The relevant version used for this multiple case study was delivered 27.02.2024. Later developments are not considered.

Data Availability

Canada's immigration data system is managed by key departments: the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). There exists a Memorandum of Understanding in force since 2008 among the three departments that establishes broad guidelines related to their cooperation on administrative measures, with the caveat that it respects the institutional independence of the IRB. However, Canada's immigration data system remains fragmented and presents substantial gaps. A major limitation of the data system is the lack of a comprehensive exit-tracking mechanism, which if in place would provide crucial information about when and whether temporary migrants do in fact leave the country upon the expiration of their permits (Majidi & Kasavan, 2018). The absence of such a system makes it impossible to accurately assess overstays, which can be a significant contributor to irregular migration in Canada.

The implications of these gaps are extensive. Temporary migrants who fall out of status often remain invisible in official statistics, exacerbating public misunderstanding of irregular migration. This invisibility also affects the government's ability to implement *targeted* interventions, tailor-made to support these vulnerable targets (Smith, 2022). Additionally, the lack of exit-tracking fuels narratives that equate irregular migration with security threats, overshadowing the systemic issues, such as administrative inefficiencies, that are major causes of procedural delays and individuals' out-of-status.

Data Accessibility

Public accessibility to immigration data is essential for fostering informed discourse on irregular migration. Canada's data portals aim to promote transparency by providing public access to general migration data (McDonald & Miah, 2021). However, specific data on temporary migration—particularly concerning overstays and status transitions—are mostly

restricted due to privacy concerns (Majidi & Kasavan, 2018). It should be noted that the release of anonymized and aggregate data would fit legal requirements on data protection and remove the current limitations to longitudinally track immigrants' pathways. Although Canada's statistics agency, Statistics Canada, does make some data accessible (after surmounting several barriers), at present, it is still a challenge to map migrants' specific trajectories, for example, from their entry to the subsequent steps and evolution of their legal residence permits or irregular conditionalities (Harris & Hiebert, 2019).

Data Quality

Inconsistent data collection practices among Canada's immigration agencies—IRCC, CBSA, and IRB—pose significant challenges to the quality and reliability of migration data (Auditor General of Canada, 2023). The lack of harmonized definitions (each agency would utilize its own definition, methodologies and periodicity of data) would result in discrepancies and conflicting records arise, undermining the ability to construct a cohesive and accurate picture of migration trends. Without standardized approaches to data collection, the credibility of immigration statistics is weakened, leaving policymakers without reliable tools to address the complexities of migration effectively.

This lack of standardization is further exacerbated by resource disparities across agencies. While the IRCC has made strides in digitizing its processes, others rely on outdated systems, limiting their capacity to manage and share data efficiently (see for example, Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, 2023). The absence of an integrated data-sharing framework impedes collaboration and contributes to fragmented records on irregular migration. Additionally, inconsistencies in data collection make it challenging to measure irregular migration accurately. For instance, overstays may be recorded differently depending on whether individuals are subject to removal proceedings, awaiting status renewals, or remain unaccounted for due to systemic gaps (Smith, 2022).

Data Use and Data Expediency

The access to administrative irregular migration data is restricted. This appears to shape public perceptions, often fuelling xenophobic sentiments or misperceptions of irregular migrants as a homogeneous threat, leading to skewed debates that influence policy. Media reports, which frequently influence public discourse, may provide inaccurate portrayals of irregular migration, inadvertently encouraging sensationalism which can generate multiple negative impacts, and even manufacture discourses of an acute situation or 'crisis' (Harris & Hiebert, 2019). Consequently, with limited accessibility to data, public discourse is often driven by assumptions rather than empirical analyses.

Timely data processing is essential for responding effectively to changing migration patterns, yet Canada's current delays in data processing restrict policymakers' capacity to act swiftly (see for example Harris & Hiebert, 2019). The lags surrounding data on overstays mean that by the time information becomes available, it may already be outdated, reducing its usefulness for proactive decision-making. This is particularly problematic in managing temporary migration, where real-time data would allow for timely adjustments to enhance compliance with residence permit conditions.

Indeed, processing delays can unintentionally push migrants toward irregularity. When inefficiencies in immigration systems occur, applicants awaiting visas, permit renewals, extensions or other immigration outcomes, are subject to the often-negative consequences of protracted wait times. Uniquely in Canada though, during this intervening period of waiting, the country's immigration system provides for a regulatory provision called 'maintained status', previously known as 'implied status'. This 'status' allows for in-Canada applicants to preserve their preceding legal status while awaiting the outcome of their renewal or extension application in the system. For migrants with maintained status, however, despite the so-called 'protections' that are intended, the associated 'waiting' often increases their exposure to marginalization and precarity.

These observed delays suggest that Canada's immigration data system currently lacks the responsiveness necessary to manage irregular migration dynamics effectively. For example, the IRCC delivery timeframes are guided by 'service standards'. The agency routinely publishes the timeframes for services, which tell how long it took to process 80% of the Agency's applications. However, the IRCC still struggles to meet its own service standards due to key infrastructural and capacity issues (Auditor General of Canada, 2023).

To sum up, Canada's immigration data infrastructure, particularly regarding temporary migrants, faces critical deficiencies that hinder effective policy responses and informed public discourse. The fragmented nature of data collection, lack of a comprehensive exit-tracking system, and inconsistent practices across agencies result in statistics that fail to capture the complexities of irregular migration. These gaps not only weaken policymakers' ability to craft evidence-based strategies but also fuel speculative narratives that can distort public perceptions and lead to misaligned policy priorities. Moreover, systemic inefficiencies, including prolonged processing delays, exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants, even under provisions such as maintained status, which is intended to offer protection but often exposes individuals to precarious conditions.

4. DISCUSSION OF OBSERVATIONS

Based on the case study summaries, this section considers similarities and differences in the manner that the observed data on specific patterns of irregular migration flows is dealt with in the respective national contexts (4.1). Subsequently, the factors identified as relevant for the presence and use of irregular migration data in policy decision making and public debates are discussed (4.2).

4.1 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

A first and general observation regards the absence of academic and traditional data source in each of the five case studies. Regardless of the nexus under observation, original data generated in theory guided and methodologically controlled research efforts is not indicated. In addition, there is also no indication that traditional data from census or surveys addressing the particularly treated irregular migration aspects are used or available.

At the same time, the case studies show that administrative data on all patterns of irregular migration flows is available. These data sources are produced by a variety of types of actors dealing with or encountering migrants in an irregular situation, among public authorities, service providers and NGOs. Public authorities produce data on irregular migration flow in the context of implementing public tasks, including border and migration control, administration of residence status, implementation of sovereign acts like granting social assistance, imposing imprisonment, or executing deportation. Private commercial and non-profit service providers engaged in providing accommodation, counselling or humanitarian aid may, depending on the kind of services, collect and store information on geographical and status related changes from the encounter with customers and clients. Also NGOs engaged in advocacy in favour of migrants in an irregular migration and providing support may gain and store relevant information.

The reports provide hints that all addressed patterns of irregular migration flows are made subject to administrative documentation and accounting, although with a very uneven presence and use in public debates and policy decision making. On the one hand, data related to an actual or previous unauthorized border crossing are extensively captured, processed, stored and shared, as the Greek and German case study highlight. Greek authorities make great efforts to capture the quantitative trends of unauthorised entries and subsequent accommodation and administration on a daily basis. The German authorities document each encounter and the subsequent status trajectory of third country nationals having entered without required permissions and asking for protection.

On the other hand, the case studies dealing with authorised border crossings show that the status-related flows receive comparably less attention. The Spanish case study indicates that data sources providing information on status-related flows receive less attention compared to geographic flows, even when the data source is available, accessible and of high quality. Similarly, the Canadian case study shows that the occurrences of irregularity due to the expiration of a temporary residence permit does not raise much attention in spite of the administrative documentation of such cases. The Dutch case indicates that also demographic flows do not gain much attention, in spite of the systematic administrative documentation of births and deaths by authorities at local level and the availability, accessibility and quality of the data. However, public interest is increasing when demographic flows connect with geographic flows, as the attention to the Chavez-Vilchez constellation shows. The establishing and maintaining of a such a central register documenting the status-related flow of third-country nationals in an irregular situation may relate to the suspicion that third country nationals previously having crossed the border without authorization are among the beneficiaries of regularisation.

These observations provide reasons for the assumption that cases related to an actual or previous unauthorized border crossing, e.g. geographic flow, are much more intensively addressed and subject of public debates and concerns of policy decision making than status-related and demographic flows, regardless of availability, accessibility, and quality of data sources.

Another insight from the comparative reading of the case studies is the observation that information on geographical departures and pathways out of irregularity receive less attention than entries and pathways into irregularity. A notable exception provides Spain, offering with the arraigo scheme an established administrative procedure to get out of an irregular situation that is thoroughly documented. In the Dutch case, with regard to the regularisation of third country nationals, the national authorities collect centrally only the number of cases of third country nationals benefitting from the Chavez-Vilchez regulation.

Moreover, the comparative reading of the reports indicates that geographic, status and demographic flows into and out of irregular migration are intertwined and interact. In authorities' reporting, the geographic flow into an irregular situation appears as an objective ascertainment of a person's legal status, usually linked to the non-compliance with requirements regulating the legal circumstances of entry and stay. However, both the Greek and the German case study show that the status of irregularity does not automatically derive from unauthorised border crossing but often from authorities' subsequent assessment of the circumstances of border crossing and a migrant's personal features. In spite of the dominant attention to geographic flow related irregularity, a decisive factor for pathways into irregularity is how authorities act and decide in the assessment of an individual case.

Taking together, the case studies indicate that the emphasis of data collection lies on information on geographic flows and the documentation of encounters of authorities with migrants in an irregular situation. Information on the social situation of migrants in an irregular situation is produced by service providers and NGOs although in a scattered manner and with a much lower level of stringency and intensity than by authorities. Moreover, the

producers and holders of such data are reluctant to make the available data accessible for policy decision making and research for fear that the information can be used to propel resentments against migrants in an irregular situation and service providers. The Dutch and German case study confirm findings from the MIrreM study on the dealing with irregular migration at a local level (Cherti et al., 2024).

While the case study reports prove that some administrative data is produced in the observed national contexts for each of the specific nexus, these data sources are usually not consulted and exploited for scientific analysis, even when they are available, accessible, and of good quality. The reasons for the scientific restraint are manifold and related to, for example, the difficulties to design robust research projects due to the hidden and difficult to observe nature of irregular migration, the intricacies to utilize state defined categories and statistical units for methodological robust and sound research (Menjívar, 2023), or the difficulties to get access to data sources.

To sum up, there is a data landscapes on irregular migration flow consisting mainly of administrative data that is highly fragmented in terms of producers and holders of data and the purposes of data collection.

4.2 CONSIDERATION OF FACTORS

The small n multiple case study design aims at testing the often-declared statement that the unavailability of high-qualitative data on irregular migration data impairs that public debates and policy decision making on irregular migration are evidence-based (Cyrus, 2023; Slootjes et al., 2023, 2024). The five case studies provide the basis for an exploration of the question which factors influence the presence and use of data on irregular migration flows in public debates and policy decision making. Following a discussion of research, the factors addressed in this multiple case study are availability, accessibility, quality and expediency of data.

Data Availability

Data availability means that data is principally at hand in form of numerical indicators or estimates. The cross-case analysis provides suggestions that data availability is very uneven among the observed nexuses.

Abundantly available is data related to unauthorized border crossing (e.g. geographic flows) with a main focus on documenting the entry of foreign nationals and the subsequent trajectory as visa or asylum applicants. Since public agencies conduct as a part of the routine activities checks of personal identity and residential status, administrative data capturing and documenting third country nationals who have been in an irregular situation when getting in contact with authorities is available in all considered national contexts. In contrast, data on the geographic flows out of irregularity is scarce and patchy and there is a high level of uncertainty about the whereabout of third country nationals known to authorities as previously in an irregular situation.

At the same time, administrative data on irregular migration flows without a direct border-relevance is collected and stored by a variety of actors, although at a less comprehensive and extensive scale (Netherlands, Canada). Consequently, the cross-case analysis suggests that the level of centralisation is an important factor of availability. The level of centralisation is influenced and mirrors the assigned political relevance of a particular pattern of irregular migration flow for policy decision making and public debates.

Taken together, the case studies show that data on irregular migration flows is mainly produced by public agencies, and availability is unevenly given for the different patterns of irregular migration flows.

Data Accessibility

Data accessibility means the level of openness to share available data with actors other than the producers and holders of data. The cross-case analysis reveals an uneven level of openness with regard to the observed nexuses.

As a rule, administrative data on the geographic flow pattern that is produced in the context of activities of public security agencies (border guards, police) remains in the ownership of data producing bodies. The opportunity to completely access these data sources is exclusively reserved for other security agencies. This information is usually only accessible for other public security agencies and authorities engaged in the administration of migration. At the same time, security agencies publish selected information on indicators of unauthorized border crossings extensively on an annually, monthly, weekly or even daily basis without sufficient background information regarding data quality (Germany, Greece).

In contrast, the level of openness is high with regard to data on authorised border crossing, e.g. visa application procedures (Spain) or mid-range in the case of centralised data on asylum application procedures that can be accessed for research on request (Germany). Data on the registration of children born to parents in an irregular situation is principally accessible for research purposes but requires an arduous collection effort due to the scattered responsibilities of offices at the municipal level (Netherlands). Finally, the data on bureaucracy-induced irregularity is not published or shared and not accessible for researchers (Canada).

With regard to data collected by commercial or non-profit service providers, the Dutch and German case study approve that accessibility is rather low due to concerns that the publishing or sharing of information cause harm or is used to stir up resentments. These data sources are fragmented and not processed and stored at a more centralised level.

An important feature shaping accessibility is the level of merging and centralising data. All case studies indicate the existence of centralised data sources merging the information of data sources operating at local levels. The comparative reading reveals that all case studies deal in a quasi-naturally manner with data sources centralised at a national level data. The Dutch study is instructive in this regard because the lack of a centralised data source for life-events is explicitly indicated and the only centralised data source of Chavez-Vilchez cases is

subsequently put in the focus of the case study. This observation may support the assumption that the level of centralisation is an important aspect of accessibility.

Data Quality

As already mentioned, quality is frequently indicated as a main feature defining the utility and usability of data in policy decision making and public discourses. However, the issue of the quality of irregular migration data have not been pursued systematically after the relevant EU funded CLANDESTINO project (Vogel et al., 2011). While occasionally mentioned at European level (Vespe et al., 2017), eventually the issue gained relevance with the commissioning of the MIrreM project. This is a direct indicator of this quest for an improvement of the quality of irregular migration data, at least at the EU level.

The five case studies focus on administrative data and assess the quality as good for the administrative purposes to monitor administrative activities and output and to allocate resources on this basis. However, a utilization for scientific analysis requires a more careful processing of available and accessible data. Regarding single data sources, the data quality may be hampered by a lack or unconcise use of the definition of the subject of registration and a lack of information on the circumstances of data acquisition. While the weaknesses, gaps and loopholes in the registration and processing procedures were explicitly addressed only in the German context, the issue is probably relevant for all kinds of producing administrative data and can be addressed by ethnographic case studies on data production (see for example Pelizza, 2020).

Regarding the interrelated analysis of data sources, information on uneven definitions and overlapping categories is a necessary pre-requisite for scientific analysis. The case studies indicate that the informative value of administrative data for a sound and rigorous analysis depends on familiarity with background information, in particular the definitions of applied categories and practices of data collection and processing. While traditional data sources of census or statistical accounting share data quality reports, the background information for administrative data is not similarly provided. Thus, researchers with an intention to use administrative data for analysis have to collect and analyse such background information like for example the amount of personnel, the frequency of controls and the procedures of data collection in the case of border controls. As the German study indicated, the knowledge how data is captured and processed provides important clues regarding the quality of specific classification items within a data set. Such a knowledge is important in order to assess the informative value of a data source with respect to specific research questions.

Data Use and Data Expediency

The case studies show that information on irregular migration flows is used in different application contexts. The first and foremost application context is the monitoring of the bodies that capture and collect this data. All case studies provide information that this purpose is more or less consequently pursued. However, a deeper analysis how administrative data is used *de facto* in concrete terms as an instrument for monitoring the developments and allocation of resources was beyond the scope of the case studies. While data on unauthorized border crossings is intensively screened by security agencies, an

assessment of the concrete impact and mechanisms how this knowledge shapes the organisation of operations is an analysis for future research.

The second application context is the policy decision making context. The case studies deliver only tentative hints for an assessment, indicating that evidence from administrative data is very differently applied in policy decision making in different nexuses and national contexts. The German case study points to the policy decision makers' preference to extent policies to deter irregular migration through border controls and emphasise policies to enforce the voluntary or coerced departure of third country nationals without a right to stay while ignoring the effects of regularisation mechanism for the reduction of the stock of third country nationals with a tolerated status. Also the Spanish case study suggests the assessment that the pursued regularisation approach does not systematically rest on evidence-based knowledge but continue with policy approaches accepted by voters. The Dutch case, however, implies that only centralising the reporting of Chavez-Vilchez cases signals a particular sensitivity and willingness of policy decision makers to monitor the quantitative development of this regularisation measure with the intention to intervene when numbers increase. Altogether, the case studies merely deliver the tentative assessment that policy decision making in the field of irregular migration does not rely on evidence regardless of the availability, accessibility and quality of data. However, this impression aligns with the research findings presented above.

Regarding public debates, the case studies provide basic hints that public debates are fueled by a selective reference to quantitative indicators suitable to support and amplify the impression that irregular migration is an existential threat for European countries. The debates are deeply influenced by images and quantitative indicators of irregular border crossings without any contextualization like pointing to long-term trends or to the situation in other regions that host relatively more refugees. The focus of attention lies on incidents of violent assaults committed by migrants in the countries, the arrival of unwanted migrants taking place at the EU external borders (Franko, 2021) and increasingly also at the EU internal Schengen borders (Carrera et al., 2023). Irregular migration is an issue predominantly framed in media coverage and public attention as a border-related issue linked with concerns regarding public security and crime prevention while humanitarian and human rights concerns remain a subordinate theme. Consequently, an intensification of border control or even the closure of borders is presented as solution.

The case studies provide further support to the insights from other strands of MIrreM emphasizing that the frequent reference to quantitative indicators direct public attention towards border-related irregular entries (cf. Kraler et al. 2025). The cross-case analysis indicates that available quantitative indicators on pathways out of irregularity towards a regular residence do not gain approximately equally attention. The Spanish case study mentions that the ongoing boat arrivals raise concerns while the considerable number of overstayers and their subsequent regularisations through the *arraigo* procedure does not raise much attention. The German case study indicates that public debates on efforts to reduce the stock of tolerated foreign nationals without a right to stay focus on measures increasing the number of voluntary or coerced departures without any recognition that the regularisation measures serve this purpose much more effectively. Although focussing on the demographic inflow into irregularity, the Dutch case study showcases the widely

unnoticed regularisation of irregular migrants through parentship. The Canadian case study too reports that public attention focuses on border-related irregular entries and remains ignorant towards cases of irregularity related to bureaucratic malfunction.

Taken together, the case studies aligns with analysis that the dynamic of irregular migration policy making is driven by a discursive toxic polarization (Coleman, 2021) that is highlighting in a selective manner events which are framed as a threat to the native population. Consequently, available data on irregular migration flows not aligning with policy preferences and taken-for-granted public opinions is hardly referenced. The focus on unauthorised border crossing related data and the ignorance towards regularisation related data is an indicator that the factor of expediency is relevant. However, due to the explorative nature of the case studies, the observation is tentative and requires further investigation.

A last application context is the use of administrative data by researchers for secondary analysis. The comparative reading suggests that, regardless of availability, accessibility and quality, administrative data sources are hardly used to conduct more sophisticated statistical analysis that aim to yield insight on patterns and nature of irregular migration flows and status trajectories.

This notwithstanding, the German case study identified a hitherto unique data reconstructing of the status trajectory of tolerated foreign nationals who previously had in vain applied for asylum. Using administrative data from AZR, the analysis shows that the probability to depart or be deported is relatively high in the first two years of toleration. Afterwards, the probability to remain increases (Peitz, 2025). The other notable analysis is provided by the Spanish MIrreM research team as part of the case study in this work package. As the Spanish case study demonstrates in an innovative research effort, the available and accessible data from visa and *arraigo* statistics can be utilized to conduct an interrelated statistical exploration of visa-overstaying and generate new insights regarding the patterns of visa overstaying, at least for selected nationalities.

Both studies demonstrate the potential of an application of ‘traditional’ methodologies and may encourage the more systematic development and application of these methodologies (Rodríguez Sánchez & Tjaden, 2023).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This working paper documents the results of a specific research task conducted in the context of Work Package 5 on the assessment of data on irregular migration flows. Within a joint research frame of a multiple case study, MIrreM researchers conducted five explorative single case studies each focusing on the data landscape of only one particular pattern of irregular migration flow in a selected national context. The case studies explored the visa overstayer-irregular migration nexus in Spain, the border crossing-irregular migration nexus in Greece, the protection seeking-irregular migration nexus in Germany, the life event-irregular migration nexus in the Netherlands, and the temporary residence-irregular migration nexus in Canada. As cross-case unit of analysis served the question which factors shape the use of data on irregular migration flows in policy decision making and public debates. Based on a review of current research, each case studies explored the factors of availability, accessibility, quality and expediency of data.

The comparative reading of the case studies indicates that the use of data is very uneven among the observed nexuses. As a general finding, the studies reveal that data generated in the context of methodological sound and rigorous research is not available. However, a variety of actors, among authorities, commercial and non-profit service providers, and NGOs produce generate, store and process data when they encounter third country nationals in an irregular situation. In particular data related to border crossings is abundantly available. In addition, data is produced as part of the residence permit administration and the processing of claims for protection. Data is also generated when third country nationals in an irregular situation use the services of commercial, non-profit and humanitarian organisations. The accessibility to this available administrative data is uneven. Very roughly expressed, while data related to authorised border crossings is accessible, data related to unauthorized border crossings is selectively shared by the responsible authorities who retain data ownership. Also data generated by service providers is not shared, mainly out of fear of negative consequences for service providers and clients. Again, the quality of administrative data sources is uneven. However, the investigations point to the potential that administrative data can be used for secondary analysis.

The explorative analysis suggests that - in addition to availability, accessibility, and quality - data expediency is a strong factor influencing the presence and use of irregular migration flow data in public debates and policy decision making. The case studies reveal as cross-case finding that the potential of available data for the generation of evidence-oriented expertise is not utilized.

Due to the explorative nature of the applied multiple case study design, the shared observations and tentative findings have a provisional status that may incite further research.

Further research may consider how inconsistencies in data collection and accessibility impact evidence-oriented policy making. A guiding question could be: How do differing data landscapes shape policy decisions regarding irregular migration. And how can institutions mitigate the effects of administrative dysfunction and data gaps on migrants' statuses and pathways out of irregularity.

Altogether, this multiple case study may provide as main result suggestions for further innovative research that supports a more evidence-based use of data on patterns of irregular migration flows in policy decision making and public debates.

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