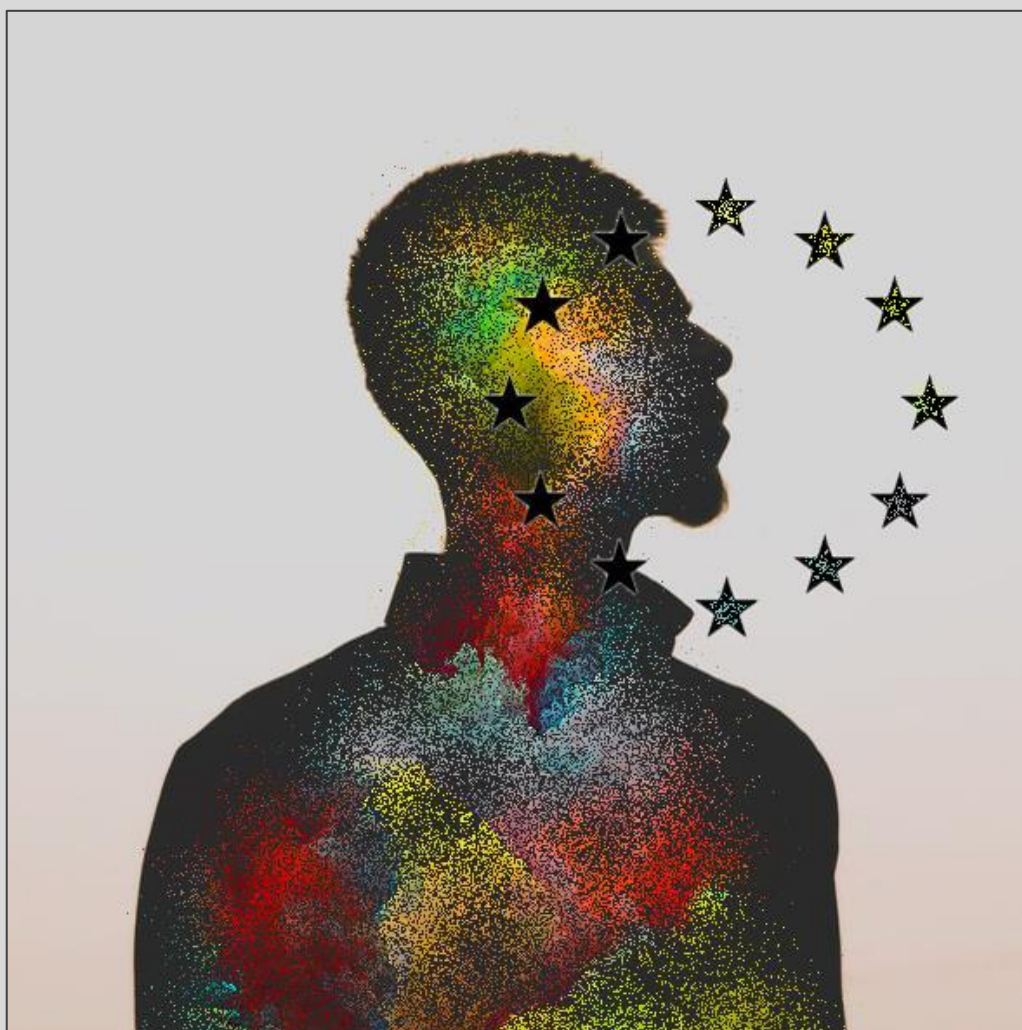


Coloring Europe as an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

A multi-sited study on changing migrant imaginaries
en route in/to Europe



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Abstract

In the context of the European Union's Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, this thesis gains insights into the emergence and development of non-European, 'unwanted' migrants' imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe. A qualitative, multi-sited research has been conducted in five European countries. From the obtained data, an inductively developed model was created, called 'the cycle of changing imaginaries', which structures the empirical chapters. Within this thesis, the elements within 'the cycle of changing imaginaries' are examined as migrants move through im/mobility in/to Europe.

The thesis shows the vivid dynamics between autonomy of migration, social networks, and information power and precarity along migratory journeys. By use of the 'cycle of changing imaginaries', it uncovers three dimensions in which migrants continuously and temporarily reposition themselves. First, there is a tension between trust and mobility-dependency, as migrants often depend on smugglers in order to move but generally regard them as untrustworthy actors. Second, migrants continuously need to (re-)position themselves between trust and truth when searching for credible information about the journey ahead and when sharing information with their networks. Third, migrants move on a spectrum between forced and voluntary movements during their fragmented journeys, based on current circumstances and imagined opportunities in other places.

The non-linearity of migration journeys with respect to both geography and imaginaries becomes utterly clear. This study shows how migrant imaginaries of Europe are constantly being recolored along migration routes. Migrant imaginaries are intrinsically mobile and appear resilient as they adapt to clashing realities, which allows people to move again. Hopes to find better opportunities elsewhere fuel migratory motivations, and horizons of what Europe is move. This makes migrant imaginaries uncontrollable by mobility regimes.

Keywords: Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), autonomy of migration, Europe, migration, im/mobility, imaginaries, information, infrastructures, social networks, trust, truth, platforms

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research context: The Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

“The European Union is a unique area of freedom, security and justice, where every person must be able to trust that their freedom and security are guaranteed and well protected.”
European Commission, 2020

There appears to be much discrepancy between the way freedom, security and justice has been created for and experienced by EU citizens, and the way non-European migrants become involved in Europe. This, despite the intention that freedom and security must be guaranteed and protected for ‘every person’, as stated in the quote above here. This statement generally seems to match the expectations of non-European migrants. This research will focus on migrant imaginaries of Europe with respect to the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice which the European Union (EU) proclaims, and how these imaginaries change along their routes in/to Europe.

The EU’s Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ) concerns a field of laws, ranging from border control and civil law cooperation to security and criminal law. It became part of the EU policy framework with the 1993 Maastricht Treaty (Herlin-Karnell, 2014). By creating an area of freedom, EU citizens would be able to cross internal borders freely, without jeopardizing their security and human rights (Cini & Borragán, 2019). The Schengen Zone was also implemented: a border-free area for anyone residing legally within the EU (European Commission, 2021). By establishing an area of security, the EU aimed to prevent criminals from using this free movement as a way of pursuing their actions with impunity. Free movement was, however, not intended to undermine the effectiveness of the national laws and therefore transnational legal reach should be acquired. This required common policies within the EU in order to prevent third-country nationals who might pose a threat to European security from entering Europe. In setting up the area of justice, legal dialogue among national judiciaries was regarded as the proper avenue for the establishment and functioning of the AFSJ (Fletcher, Herlin-Karnell & Matera, 2016).

The EU security and border enterprise was strained by the refugee and migration “crisis” in 2015. This brought a new reality and raised questions about what Europe as a place of justice and solidarity actually means. The strong internal security agenda of the EU has been well-documented over the last decade. Less explored has been its security mission and the trajectory of that mission. The idea of open internal borders was one of the EU’s hallmarks, but its future is now uncertain (Fichera & Kremer, 2013; Herlin-Karnell, 2017). An increasing number of scholars considers the AFSJ as a site of inhumanity and injustice, despite its embedding of fundamental rights values and its institutionalism (Mann, 2016). Paradoxically, the AFSJ seems to be intertwined with contestations and crises in many fields of EU law, especially with respect to migration (Kjaer, 2017). Its aims increasingly turn out to misalign and conflict with each other. The AFSJ has, for instance, been criticized for lacking a meaningful transparency and failing to contribute to solving the EU’s perceived democratic deficit (Colson, 2012). With the AFSJ, the EU created a seemingly borderless space for freedom, security and justice within its external borders. One of the AFSJ’s most contradictory aspects is best exemplified in its external migration policy, which lacks any uniform category of rights bearer regarding the construction of personhood, citizen and fundamental rights (Thym, 2016). As a result, there are many competing visions, varying from the exclusionary to the security driven (Costello, 2016).

Looking at the global scale, there is no comprehensive legal framework governing the mobility of human beings (Appave, 2012, as cited in Fahey, 2019). Despite the Global Compact for Migration¹, attempts to align the interests of immigration and emigration states have appeared to be almost

¹ The first inter-governmentally negotiated agreement covering all dimensions of international migration, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations and adopted on 10 December 2018 (International Organization of Migration (IOM), 2022).

impossible (Bradford, 2013). The framework regulating mobility looks now more like a “*giant unassembled jigsaw*” (Lillich, 1984, p.4), consisting of many scattered pieces of normative and legal frameworks within regional and global instruments and informal understandings amongst countries (Plender, 1988, as cited in Fahey, 2019). From a legal perspective, the contradictions within the EU migration law and the AFSJ, including as to third country nationals, reflect the extensive conceptual challenges of migration regulation (Fahey, 2019).

These contradictions between the implementation of the AFSJ for EU nationals and non-European migrants are the important socio-political background of my research. I aim to explore how, from the perspective of non-European migrants, the imaginaries of and experiences with freedom, security and justice in Europe change over time and across space.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

Migration in/to Europe took a substantial rise in 2015 (Kuschminder, 2018). European migration policies generally assume that migrants are not aware of the risks that come along with migration, despite research proving the contrary (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015; Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Heller, 2014; Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). Exploring migrants’ imaginaries at different stages of migration routes in/to Europe can lead to new insights in what fuels their expectations, hopes and worries. It might also nuance the caricature of the unaware and ill-informed migrant.

This study focuses on non-European migrants’ ideas of freedom, security and justice of Europe. It aims to obtain insights into non-Eurocentric imaginaries of Europe and to learn about the multiple and contradictory faces that Europe embodies. The study includes a wide variety of information sources that affect (aspiring) migrants’ ideas about Europe. I aim to understand how migrants use information sources to gain autonomy over their migration trajectories, even though the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice does not exist for them. To grasp the changeable character of imaginaries I chose to do a multi-sited research. I collected first hand information into migrants’ imaginaries of Europe through 23 in-depth interviews in different European countries (chapter 3.1), and developed the following research objectives:

1) Conducting multi-sited semi-structured interviews among non-European migrants, in order to 2) obtain insights on how their imaginaries of Europe emerge and change along their trajectories through Greece in/to Western Europe, and 3) understand how their imaginaries relate to the autonomy of migration.

From these objectives the following research question and sub questions were formed:

How do migrant imaginaries of Europe emerge and change, and how do these imaginaries relate to the autonomy of migration journeys?

The research question will address different points in time and space of migrant journeys, before they arrive in Europe, in Greece, and in Western Europe. Together, these insights paint a multifold Europe with different boundaries, hopes and imagined futures. They will indicate the role of imaginaries in migrants’ autonomy as they move through im/mobilities. In order to explore this, the research question has been differentiated into the following sub-questions:

1. How are imaginaries of Europe shaped for migrants who travel in/to Europe?
2. How are imaginaries of Europe related to the level of trust in information (sources)?
3. How do imaginaries of Europe contribute to the autonomy of migration when traveling in/to Europe?

To answer these sub-questions, this thesis seeks to “follow the imaginaries” of Europe throughout the three empirical chapters (4, 5 and 6). This implies that:

- Chapter 4 focuses on migrants’ imaginaries before being confronted with Europe’s realities;
- Chapter 5 elaborates migrants’ imaginaries during their confrontations with realities in Greece;
- Chapter 6 explores migrants’ imaginaries after having arrived in Western Europe.

I will focus on imaginaries regarding freedom, security and justice throughout these chapters. Following the sequence of imaginaries of Europe along with the routes my respondents have followed, has helped me to better understand the dynamic and changeable nature of their imaginaries. Although the sequence of the empirical chapters described the mobilities of the respondents in a rather linear way, I am very much aware that migrants’ mobilities are everything but linear (in chapter 2.1 I will further elaborate on mobility theory). The outcomes of the empirical chapters result in a reflection to the research questions in the concluding chapter 7.

1.3 Scientific relevance

This study strives to contribute to scientific research by taking an innovative perspective. Over the years, research on imaginaries of Europe has been rather Eurocentric (Amin, 2004; Trakilovic, 2020). The quest for a non-Eurocentric analysis is high and responds to both academic and policy needs (Timmerman et al., 2010). In line with this necessity, Timmerman et al. (2010) conducted an extensive research called ‘EUMAGINE’, that mainly focused on the perception of Europe through the eyes of non-European migrants outside Europe. Schapendonk (2020) elaborated how African migrants (re-)view Europe after their experiences of traveling through ‘Eurosace’. My research takes into account the non-Eurocentric perspective too, as it focuses on the imaginaries of migrants. This gives migrants a voice in the European migration discourse. I will mirror the non-Eurocentric imaginaries of Europe concerning all three dimensions embedded in the AFSJ with how the EU describes their idea of security, freedom and justice in Europe.

European public discourse on migration has especially been dominated by the influx of African migrants who are ‘invading’ Europe by crossing the Mediterranean sea (De Haas, 2008). European publics and leaders are prone to regard current migration movements towards Europe as the result of events of local range that take place beyond Europe’s borders. Examples are the stateless status of large areas of Africa, and bad governance and violence in North Africa, the Middle East and other parts of the Arab world. According to some European leaders, these conditions ‘push’ people to leave their homes in search of a better life elsewhere (Attinà, 2016). Migration is, however, not just a reaction to difficult conditions at home. It seems primarily driven by the search for better opportunities and preferred lifestyles elsewhere (De Haas, Miller & Castles, 2020). This study will take this notion into account, searching for what (aspiring) migrants are hoping to find in Europe and how this relates to their imaginaries.

The image of the unaware and undocumented migrant as an ignorant person whose pre-migration expectations do not match post-migration realities, is undoubtedly contested, but has not yet progressed beyond just an anecdotal narrative (Browne, 2015). Besides, there has been little scholarly focus on how migrants’ awareness in decision-making relates to a broader theoretical framework (De Haas, 2014). This research will therefore include the differences between lived realities in Europe and their pre-migratory imaginaries, as well as the influence of imaginaries on their im/mobilities and the multiple thresholds that exist in the process (Smith, Van der Velde & Van Naerssen, 2018). The unique angle of this research is the focus on three aspects of what Europe might encompass (security, justice and freedom) combined with a multi-sited approach (Greece, Belgium and the Netherlands). This angle will add to scientific insights in how and why imaginaries of Europe emerge and change. An increasing amount of research is being conducted on the influence of social networks on mobility (Frouws, Phillips, Hassan & Twigt, 2016; Kuschminder, 2018). Mobility studies so far quite

successfully bridge the gap between migration and media scholarship, but are generally a-politically concerned with urban movements and elite migrants. This study will function as a link between the media and migration research, and focus on transnational migrants in mixed migration² movements (Leurs & Smets, 2018).

1.4 Societal relevance

With this study I aim to create a better understanding of the apparent dichotomy between 1) how freedom, security and justice are experienced by European-born Europeans, and 2) how this is for non-European migrants in Europe. This study therefore aligns these multiple realities and observes how they simultaneously exist. By looking at the different sides of those three European values (freedom, security and justice), I aim to zoom out from the current Eurocentric discourse in policy making. This will hopefully increase Europe's understanding in migration processes, and might make migrants feel more heard by European authorities. I wish to align the ideas on irregular migration of European policy makers and non-European migrants. If we understand and include multiple perspectives on Europe in our European discourse and policy making it might be easier to create better-fitted and up-to-date policies around migration. We need policies that do not necessarily focus on keeping out the 'unwanted' (De Haas et al., 2020), and sketching a migration discourse based on fear, but instead form more humane and inclusive policies around people who will try to arrive in Europe.

Policy makers tend to look at migrants as ill-informed (Pécoud, 2010), and usually base their migration policies on this assumption. An increasing amount of studies show that migrants are quite well-informed about the dangers and routes ahead of them, but decide - for various reasons, to migrate anyway (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015; Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Heller, 2014; Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). One important issue is the trustworthiness of the information they assess along their trajectories. In a recent study, Mallett and Hagen-Zanker (2018, p.170) state the following:

“In conclusion, the identity of the information's source matters as much as (if not more than) the content of the information itself. [...] Ultimately, it is wrong to assume it is possible to prevent migrations simply by exposing an individual to new information. For information to be acted on, it needs to come through particular channels and from particular sources – especially from those with whom a relationship of trust has already been established.”

Governments and policy makers need to be more conscious about their role in migrant's decision making and route-planning processes. Understanding actual contemporary information (sources) that migrants use might counter this assumption. Perhaps policy makers are the ill-informed actors, in this sense. By contributing to filling this knowledge gap, this study tries to hold a mirror to migration policy makers and governments, and hopes to raise awareness on how their policies are experienced and mis/trusted by (aspiring) migrants.

Scrutinizing imaginaries and information (sources) migrants use might also add to a fairer treatment of unwanted, non-European migrants. Declaring that Europe is an area of freedom, security and justice should not only come forward in how we treat “us” (European-born Europeans), but also how we treat “others” (people among which are future European citizens). As much as migrants may or may not expect to find freedom, security and justice, they are often far from being treated in a fair way when in Europe (Amnesty International, 2019). In order to humanize European migration policy, this thesis seeks to broaden our scope and include non-European asylum seekers in our European values as well. The risk for Europe is to base policy on wrong assumptions and overlook migrants' reasons that fuel their movements. I will, finally, name three reasons why policy-making should adapt to realities instead of assumptions: 1) Europe invests money in their current migration policies, and

² Explanation of this concept in chapter 2.1.

perhaps this money could be used differently and more-effectively for both parties; 2) The current migration policies are not based on the protection of human rights and the right to apply for asylum, which does no good for the image of Europe as a protector of human rights; 3) Basing policies on wrong assumptions makes Europe lose understanding and control of alternative, irregular migration developments on their continent.

1.5 Organization of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the research objectives and questions, as well as the relevance of the study. The theoretical framework of this research will be discussed in chapter 2. It encompasses academic debates around mobility regimes versus autonomy of migration, un/controllable imaginaries, migration infrastructures and platforms, and information power and precarity. This chapter is followed by the methodological set-up of this study in chapter 3, providing an extensive explanation of conducted choices regarding research methods, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 concludes with a description of my inductively developed 'cycle of changing imaginaries', which serves as the backbone of my empirical chapters (4, 5 and 6). With chapter 4, we start elaborating on the empirical findings of this study. This chapter encompasses the imaginaries of Europe of non-European migrants before arriving in Greece. Chapter 5 subsequently describes migrant experiences with and imaginaries of Europe in Greece. Chapter 6 concludes the empirical section with the development of migrants' imaginaries in Western Europe. Chapter 7 forms the conclusion of the study, answering the main research question. It also reflects on this study's limitations and poses recommendations for follow-up studies and European policy-making.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will describe academic literature that serves as the foundation for my study. I elaborate theoretical concepts in four subchapters in order to understand how imaginaries of Europe change or develop along migratory routes: In chapter 2.1 I describe the dynamic between autonomy of migration and mobility regimes; in chapter 2.2 I explain the theory behind imaginaries; in chapter 2.3 I focus on platforms and infrastructure in migration studies; and in chapter 2.4 I outline the power and precarity of information.

2.1 Autonomy of migration versus mobility regimes

Mobility as well as immobility have a great impact on how migrants perceive space, which makes the concept of im/mobility interesting for this research. Schewel (2020) describes how the 'mobility bias' has led scholars to neglect immobility while overly focusing on determinants and consequences of mobility. Already decades ago De Jong, Fawcett and Gardner (1981) and Hammar, Brochmann, Tamas and Faist (1997) presented extensive interdisciplinary inquiries into the question "Why do people *not* migrate?". By asking this question, they pointed out that the inability of scholars to explain why people move was largely caused by a failure to ask the opposite.

The economic explanation of poor economies pushing people to move to wealthy countries has been extensively accepted in migration studies, summarized by socio-economic push and pull factors that exist respectively in the areas of origin and destination (Attinà, 2016). The main argument of the 'mobilities turn' is that social sciences have not dealt thoroughly with mobility. The same could be applied to migration studies. For a long time, mobility has been studied from the position of fixed locations (from origin to destination country, from home to host country, from A to B) (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). Migration scholars have long tended to focus on single moment decision-making in order to understand departures (Zhang, 2018). Field studies, however, have clearly shown that migrants' destinations often change 'en route' (De Haas et al., 2020). Even the starting point of a migratory journey is often hard to define: when exactly does someone decide to move to a certain place that is formed through their imagination? These relatively new insights will be taken into account in this study, by not automatically regarding their countries of origin as the place where respondents started to create their imaginaries of Europe. In addition, this study will not regard Greece as a transit country and the Netherlands and Belgium as destination countries, but consider them as points in time and space where temporal imaginaries can change and vary.

Migration trajectories cannot be fully explained by solely focusing on individual migrant agency as autonomous power, since individual pathways depend on social networks, helping hands, policy interventions, unexpected encounters, and brokering services (Schapendonk, 2018). To understand the outcomes of individual trajectories, one has to take into account events that affect migrants' decisions and therefore their mobility moorings, routes, and life courses. Considering mobility trajectories as webs or bundles that extend into multiple time-spaces will contribute to a better understanding of the impact on a specific mobility trajectory - or a set of related trajectories - and the decision-making processes (Van der Velde & Van Naerssen, 2016). This study aims to understand the dynamic between migrants' im/mobility, which is affected by mobility regimes and state control, on the one hand, and migrants' autonomy and power to reshape their own im/mobility within those regimes on the other hand.

The autonomy of migration approach has to be seen in the light of post-colonial policy making (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013; Scheel, 2013). Migration towards Europe has created an uncomfortable mirror that forces the West to look back at its past colonial pursuits. Throughout the discourse in migration policies and fear of migrants in Europe, it has become apparent that many Europeans do not like their colonial reflection. The 'migration crisis' has coincided with a European racial crisis, which has become visible in border regimes and security acts that aim to increase mobility for some and immobility for others (ODwyer, 2018). The EU's institutionalized apartheid structure

seems to divide the world into two mobility realities with their immigration policies (Kinnvall, 2015; ODwyer, 2018). People's movement across borders tests and defines both (radical) politics around migration and autonomous politics involving migrants (English, Grazioli & Martignoni, 2019).

Borders can be regarded as a relation between state control and autonomous mobility of people on the move (English et al., 2019). As borders and national spaces are fundamental features of nation-states, borders are perceived as both the affirmation of a state's sovereignty on its society and in relation to other nation-states. Strengthening borders and state control can be seen as a reaction to growing threats due to a perforated border - caused by uncontrollable migration flows (Pellerin, 2013; Rybakov & Kvon, 2019). The autonomy of migration approach recognises that migrants do not simply react to the power and control confronting them, but instead operate as autonomous creators and self-organizers (Bishop, 2012). This approach recognises that migrants, their families and communities organize migration themselves, and are forcing some institutions of a nation-state, such as the border, to be reshaped in the process (English et al., 2019; Karakayali & Tsianos, 2005; Martignoni & Papadopoulos, 2014; Mezzadra, 2011; Moulner Boutang, 1998; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2007; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013; Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008). By highlighting the idea that migration is not just occurring within the spaces for voice and action defined by institutional governance, the autonomy of migration approach brings the subjective and social aspects of mobility before control on the foreground. When migration is regarded as autonomous, it is seen to develop its own logistics, motivation and trajectories. State measures and control come later in response and not the other way around (English et al., 2019; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe & Andrijasevic, 2007).

Many European countries manage migration by labeling migrants as voluntary or forced, which positions them on an ostensible dichotomy. Distinguishing voluntary and forced as two very different forms of migration tends to stick around in both policy and academic work. Most migrants, however, experience some extent of volition during their journeys, which means that they fall somewhere on the forced-voluntary spectrum depending on the stage of the migration route (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). This study takes into account the dynamic positioning on the forced-voluntary spectrum of migrants en route, when examining their autonomy of migration.

Mobility regimes can privilege the movement of certain migrants whilst hindering the movement of others (Shamir, 2005; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), separating the 'wanted' from the 'unwanted' migrants (De Haas et al., 2020). The related notion between making people either mobile or immobile inevitably involves questions of power and justice, usually referred to as 'politics of mobilities' (Cresswell, 2010; Ernste, Martens & Schapendonk, 2012). Along their way into Europe, unwanted migrants move within bilateral concepts of 'irregular' and 'regular' migration. A migrant can enter a country without papers and thus be considered an irregular migrant, but that person can later acquire regularization, thereby making their stay regular. Vice versa, a migrant can enter regularly, such as with a visa, but can become irregular by overstaying their visa (De Haas, 2008). This study will not refer to migrants as irregular or regular for two reasons. Migrant trajectories are dynamic processes that involve both mobility and periods of rest, blockage and re-orientation (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). Furthermore, Dahinden (2016) stresses the importance of awareness of reproducing categories within the migration discourse - like irregular and regular migrants. Instead, this study indicates all of them as 'migrants'. In mixed migration movements, all people moving between international borders, such as refugees, victims of trafficking or people seeking better lives and opportunities, are migrants (Mixed Migration Center, 2022). The lived mobility experiences of people in mixed migration movements share many commonalities, even when assigned different legal mobility categories by the state (Cantat, 2016).

Applying the autonomy of migration approach to this study will help understand the diverse challenges that migrants face along their routes. It gives insights in their decision making along their routes and upon what kind of perceptions, information sources and confidentialities those decisions are based. By regarding mixed migration movements in the contexts of interaction between post-colonial policy making and the self-organization of people on the move and their connection to a network of migrants at different times and spaces en route, this study aims to obtain insights in how imaginaries of Europe emerge and change along trajectories in/to Europe.

2.2 Un/controllable imaginaries

Imaginaries can be defined as culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with personal imagination, and are used as meaning-making tools, mediating how people cognize, act and value the world (Salazar, 2020). Imaginaries are part of the glue that holds groups together and act as an energetic source that inspires people's social life (Baeza, 2008). Imaginaries refer to the symbolic patrimony that a social system uses to communicate, usually expressed through interpretative categories and images (symbolic or visual) (Abruzzese & Borrelli, 2000, as cited in Bayerl, Pannocchia & Hough, 2020). According to Salazar (2020), it is hard to talk about human mobilities at all without taking into consideration how mobility is being shaped by processes of imagination.

Appadurai (1996) developed the concepts of 'imagined worlds' and 'possible lives'. He states that identity is to be understood in terms of how people imagine, rather than in terms of nation, ethnicity, geography and culture. The role of the imagination, acknowledged as a mental practice, both social and individual, is of crucial importance to understand the local production of meaning in an increasingly globalized world (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Salazar, 2011; Weiss, 2002). The link with imaginaries with respect to migration is established through identifying possibilities and alternative ideas about future lives in places elsewhere (Salazar, 2011). Migration researchers before tended to separate imagination from practice, while imagining is an embodied practice of transcending socio-cultural and physical distance (Salazar, 2014). Migration is connected to certain representations of reality in another place, in a way that aspiring migrants regard it as a way for success, regardless of the actual reality (Salazar, 2011). According to Cangìà and Zittoun (2020) imagination can even support escaping immobile space and time as it creates zones of liminality that show the possibility of change through navigating what is and what may be. Hence, imaginaries are of influence on our sense of reality (Beidelman, 1993, as cited in Salazar, 2011); everyone pictures places as mixtures of the imaginary and the real (Salazar, 2011).

For this study, the mixture of the imaginary and the real is looked at in relation to the social networks of migrants. According to Salazar (2014), one of the central challenges related to imaginaries is the deficiency of correspondence between, the aspirations and projected ideals on the one hand, and the experienced realities on the other hand. Imaginaries are never imposed in a one-way direction, but always acted on in terms of co- and counterimaginaries (Salazar, 2010). This interplay between imaginaries and reality is at the basis of this research. As Benson (2012) states:

"Clearly, 'wider culturally specific imaginings make lifestyle migration an aspiration for many people; indeed, the experiences of those who have undertaken this migration strengthen and reinforce these imaginings'". - Benson, 2012, as cited in Salazar, 2014, p.125.

One example has been outlined in a research on how Tanzanians interpret 'living abroad in Europe' when based on the experiences of their relatives and friends living there. Salazar (2011) explains that for his Tanzanian respondents the West is an act of imagination and aspiration, a dream that is not only appealing for its imaginative features, but also interesting because it points to it being a product of fantasies. Images of migration processes and the West derive from information from sources of which people are aware (like mass media and transnational networks) and of which they are unaware (like stereotypes and prejudices) (Salazar, 2011). Media and social networks, reporting from people who have 'made it to Europe', are of great importance to how imaginaries of (aspiring) migrants are shaped and will therefore be a major subject within this study (chapter 2.3).

For this study, the concept of imaginaries is linked to the autonomy of migration approach by looking at the role of imaginaries on autonomy along migratory routes and vice versa. Mobility is inherently shaped by processes of imagination, and is shaping imagination at the same time (Salazar, 2020). Autonomy within autonomy of migration theories is also incited through radical imagination while shaping moments of uncontrollability (Metcalf, 2021). This generates an interesting issue: to what extent are migrants' imaginaries un/controllable within oppressive migration controls, and what

is their role in the ongoing evolution of migration routes? European authorities have implemented measures to improve the entire system of regulating migratory processes, such as the strengthening of both the external and internal borders of Europe - all with the aim to control the “*uncontrollable influx of migrants*” (European Council, 2022; Rybakov & Kvon, 2019, p.18). Concurrently, migrants’ developed imaginaries about routes and life in Europe are an “*uncontrolled area*” (Davoudi et al., 2018, p.2). This study tries to understand how imaginaries and the autonomy of migration relate to each other, and what their mutual role is in creating un/controllable mobilities and routes alongside the tighter European migration regime.

2.3 Migration infrastructures and platforms

“Platform migration is not a different form of migration but rather highlights that migration operates through multiple, mutating components and applications that inspire, act on, constrain, limit and redirect flows of people across territories.” - Collins (2020), p.867

The term ‘platform migration’ has been developed in order to better understand how current migration systems are affected by embodied dimensions of mobility, control, and possibilities of disruption and reconfiguration (Collins, 2020). Migrants have increasingly been framed as security threats within the war of terror since the early 2000s (Collins, 2020). This has channeled migrants into making precarious and dangerous movements in response to bureaucratic mechanisms aimed at restricting migration flows (Soto, 2018). Even authorized migration, which has put greater emphasis on personal aspects like health, family and finance, alongside a shifting landscape of visas and permits, has contributed to a well-functioning ‘migration industry’ serving as an extension of state control and which has become essential for the continuation of movement (Goh, Wee & Yeoh, 2017; Walton-Roberts, 2020). A focus on platform migration, however, highlights the shifting and complex landscape of networks, actors, materials and ideas that come together in places that facilitate migration, and bears on issues of power relations and migrant agency (Collins, 2020).

Regarding the autonomy of migration approach, migrants will keep finding ways to cross borders by operating as autonomous self-organizers (Bishop, 2012), especially within the cobweb of border control. Partly due to the shifts in forms of border control and the growing complexity of state attempts to manage migration, the work of agents, brokers and recruiters (in this study referred to as ‘smugglers’) in so-called migration industries has become more significant (Cranston, Schapendonk & Spaan, 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013). Despite the normative view of migration industry practices, which reinforces problematic dichotomies between un/free and in/voluntary migration (Cuttitta, 2018; Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; McKeown, 2008), smugglers do enhance a migrant’s mobility and create space for agency. Their work is, however, commonly observed as a practice that increases the migrants’ precarities (Lindquist, Xiang & Yeoh, 2012).

Researchers have recently taken a ‘infrastructural approach’ in migration studies (Collins, 2020). Infrastructures can be seen as socio-technical platforms for mobility (Lin, Lindquist, Ziang & Yeoh, 2017). A focus on migration infrastructures enables a departure from West-centric migration scholarship which is ruled by rhetoric of the state as pre-eminent migration manager (Shrestha & Yeoh (2018). This departure from West-centricity connects with acknowledging the ongoing post-colonial European policy making in which autonomy of migration develops (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). In line with Wajsborg and Schapendonk (2021), this study approaches infrastructures as the relational practices of migrants as they constantly create dynamic, social platforms to enhance their autonomy of migration. The notion of migration infrastructures points to interlinked processes of control and facilitation in migration trajectories. “*It’s not the people who migrate, but the networks.*” (Tilly, 1990, p.79). Instead of setting out how migration turns into self-sustaining practice through networks, migration infrastructure inverts this perspective and aims to analyze how networks work by serving as an element of migration infrastructure (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

This study focuses on the emergence and changeability of imaginaries. This implies scrutinizing the temporalities of im/mobilities and imaginaries that are enabled by the various platforms and infrastructures en route (McGarrigle & Ascensão, 2017). Infrastructural practices can move along migratory pathways, along with the (re-)navigations, improvisations, and entanglement of emotions of im/mobile migrants (Wajsberg & Schapendonk, 2021; Simone, 2019; Vigh, 2009; Wajsberg, 2020). Collins (2020) outlines that some of the most important dimensions of migration are generated when people negotiate places on route, rather than before leaving or after arriving in the (changeable) intended destinations. These infrastructural practices are impossible to fully govern (Cowen, 2017). Circumstances surrounding migration change continuously, new opportunities emerge, and aspirations diminish, develop or become (re)directed (Amrith, 2020). Infrastructural practices might, therefore, be called 'uncontrollable', similar to imaginaries (as discussed in chapter 2.2).

2.4 The power and precarity of information

Information available to people is of great importance for the emergence of migrants' imaginaries of Europe. Researchers speak about weak and strong ties within network theory. Weak ties are characterized by distant social relationships and infrequent interactions, like strangers or acquaintances, while strong ties exist between close-knit members with frequent interactions, like close friends and family (Granovetter, 1973). Criticism on this theory regards the perception of networks as static and grid-like entities, linking pre-defined sets of weak and strong ties, which may suggest that migrants use their yet existing networks, but not create new ones. Another criticism of network theory is the idea that social ties automatically lead to transfer of social capital, which neglects the fact that migrants need to put effort in social connectivity and mobilization (Schapendonk, 2015). This study therefore takes the influence of weak and strong ties into account, but pays attention to the work migrants put into maintaining and creating their dynamic, changeable networks. The development of new ties are also taken into account in this research.

Imagination has become an organized field of social practices, such as negotiation between individuals, and of globally defined fields of possibility (Appadurai, 1996). Imaginaries are representational assemblages that interact with personal imagination and are used as 'meaning-making devices', mediating how people cognize, act and value the world (Salazar, 2020). Those assemblages are based on information input. Access to social media and other applications make (aspiring) migrants less reliant on the information from their social network in Europe, smugglers or other migration industries. Shared online information is often (semi-)publicly available, and does not only reach an already existing group to whom the information was addressed initially, but also others with access to the medium. This expands migration networks based on weak and strong ties with latent ties created by the technological infrastructure (Dekker, Engbersen, Klaver & Vonk, 2018). Information provided by infrastructures such as governments, NGOs and other migrants circulates and is increasingly exchanged through social media (Dekker, Engbersen & Klaver, 2016). However, the availability of information on social media does not always imply being better informed (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). The cutting edge between information precarity and migrants' imaginaries is of interest for this research. Circulating information can create uncertainties about its credibility (Misztal, 2000). Migrants are highly dependent on this type of, usually, unverified information and, as part of a marginalized group, they can not always trust information from authorities (Dekker et al., 2018). The work of smugglers is also often regarded as increasing migrants' precarity (chapter 2.3).

Information sharing practices come with power too. Already settled migrants can function as so-called bridgeheads (Böcker, 1994), reducing the risks of subsequent migration and settlement by giving information, organizing travel, helping in finding housing and work, and assisting in adaptation to the new place (De Haas et al., 2020). Being embedded in social networks has a great influence on migration decisions (Haug, 2008). A higher number of asylum seekers in a 'destination' country lowers not only the risks, but also the migration costs for those 'left behind', since positive examples have been set and dubious businesses will have evolved to arrange transportation or visas (De Haas et al.,

2020; Massey et al., 1993; Koser & Pinkerton, 2002; Robinson & Segrott, 2002). Imaginaries are sustained through social media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones. Both channels are increasingly being regarded as key survival tools and have long been giving power to migrants who share migration stories and include integration, recommended routes and safety advice, but also provide the ability to maintain cultural ties through a social-cultural network (Frouws et al., 2016).

In conclusion, information comes with both precarity and power, and has a great impact on migratory decisions. Both the power and precarity of information (sources) are being researched in this study, as well as their impact on the un/controllable imaginaries of migrants about Europe and how it is connected to the autonomy of migrants along their journeys to and in Europe.

2.5 Concluding remarks

The theoretical framework of my research comprises a few core academic core insights. Migratory journeys have starting points that are difficult to define and cannot be explained by just focusing on migrants' individual autonomy. Instead, migrants are continuously involved in different dynamic, social platforms, performing infrastructural practices that enhance their autonomy of migration. Within these practices, credibility of the information shared through the platforms is of great importance, as migrants are dependent on information in order to move to certain places. Information can give power, but also put migrants in vulnerable situations. By studying events that affect migrants' decisions and mobilities, one can better understand how routes unfold and why. Involving the autonomy of migration approach in this research will help to grasp how migrants organize themselves within the scope of European politics of mobility. This study aims to understand how imposed immobility and confrontations with Europe's realities impacts migrants' imaginaries of Europe.

Chapter 3: Data and methodologies

My research tells a story about changing imaginaries of people on the move. It shows the struggles, power, and adaptivity of ‘unwanted’ migrants traveling in/to Europe. This chapter describes the research methods I used, the way data has been collected, documented and analyzed, and reflects on this methodology. It ends with presenting and explaining the inductive model I developed which helped me to structure the subsequent empirical chapters.

3.1 Research methods

This study focuses on how non-European migrants’ imaginaries of Europe evolve along their routes through Greece, and in/to Western Europe. To obtain insights in how their imaginaries emerge and change, I have chosen to use a multi-sited approach, and conducted interviews with migrants in both Greece, and, from what I will now refer to as, Western Europe. Western Europe includes mainly Belgium and the Netherlands, as most of the interviews were conducted there. Two interviews, however, were conducted with migrants in France and Finland. I am aware that Finland is not exactly located in Western Europe. Due to the facts that only one respondent was located in Finland, and Finland is more often included in academic studies on Western Europe (Liem et al., 2019; Parth & Nyby, 2020), I decided to include also this country my umbrella term ‘Western Europe’.

With multi-sited research, researchers move away from local situations of conventional ethnographic research and thereby examine the circulation of objects, cultural meanings and identities in diffuse time-space (Boccagni, 2020):

“Ethnography by way of “following” may take place in a literal sense, whenever ethnographers and/or research subjects, practices, objects and sites are mobile themselves. However, it can also amount to theory-driven exploration of meaningful connections between sites, through conceptual and even imaginative work.” - Marcus (1995, p.110), as cited in Boccagni (2020, p.2).

I did not follow my respondents in a literal sense by traveling along with them or encountering them several times en route. Instead, I connected the multiple imaginaries of my respondents located in different locations in Europe. This allowed me to grasp the relation between imaginaries in various time-spaces along trajectories in/to Europe through Greece.

3.1.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

“Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, the SSI [Semi-Structured Interview] employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions. The dialogue can meander around the topics on the agenda—rather than adhering slavishly to verbatim questions as in a standardized survey—and may delve into totally unforeseen issues.” – Adams, 2015, p.493

I used a semi-structured means of in-depth interviewing. My interview questions served as guidelines, and I also aimed to leave space for unexpected topics. I conducted 22 interviews with 23 respondents, since one interview occurred with two respondents at the same time. Most interviews were in-person, for which purpose I traveled to different cities and villages in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Greece to meet with my respondents. A minor part of the interviews was conducted through Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp Video Call due to COVID-19 and the additional travel restrictions.

My interviews usually began with the question ‘Can you tell me about your story of migration?’. This allowed for opening up the conversation, and I noticed that the question had a

comforting effect on respondents; they could tell me anything they considered important to convey about their journeys. One of my goals was to understand their perspective on freedom, security and justice along their route, but I decided to specify these three topics only at the end of the interview. I allowed me to not influence their thoughts and perspectives, and often they mentioned topics related to freedom, security and justice themselves.

Most of my interview questions were open-ended. Only a few were closed, for example: 'Did you trust the information you received along your journey?'. A closed-ended question would generally be followed-up by questions such as: 'Why did/didn't you trust the information?'. I had a copy of my questionnaire with every interview to serve as a guideline to check if all the topics I listed were covered in the end (although after conducting a few interviews I knew the questions by heart). There was enough space during the interviews for the respondents to broach a topic they regarded necessary to mention.

Almost all interviews were conducted in English and some in Dutch, since I looked for respondents with whom I could communicate directly. An interpreter could perhaps interfere with the interaction and atmosphere between the respondent and me. The fact that the majority of my respondents spoke English might have a significant effect on their perception and idea of Europe, since they are able to read English internet websites and communicate with a wider and more diverse group of people along the way. I am taking this factor into account when discussing the results of my study. In Greece, I conducted one interview with someone who spoke English just on a very basic level. But because this interview took place with another respondent at the same time who spoke English excellently and could translate, this was no major issue.

3.1.1.1 Who: Case selection

For this research I interviewed 23 migrants (Table 1) in five different European countries: Greece (7), the Netherlands (6), Belgium (8), France (1) and Finland (1). I only selected respondents in Western Europe who had traveled through Greece, and in or after 2015. They all have roots in the Middle East, and had traveled from five different countries: Afghanistan (7), Iran (2), Iraq (3), Syria (9), and Turkey (1).

There are two main reasons for studying the imaginaries of Europe of people with origins in the Middle East. *First*, migration has become the subject of European securitization since the recent influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe (Beck, 2017). Securitization is a form of political speech that dramatizes and presents the issue as an existential matter of supreme priority which calls for extraordinary matters (Williams, 2003). Multiple European politicians, mostly right-wing, have claimed that refugees, especially Muslims, are a threat to European culture (Cooper, 2017; Poushter & Manevich, 2017). Take Le Pen: "*There are a number of neighborhoods where you are no longer living a French life*" (Cooper, 2017) and Wilders, who denies that Islam is a religion and instead regards it a totalitarian ideology (Traynor, 2008). Wilders even recommended Muslims to declare themselves atheists or convert to Christianity (Zwartz, 2013). Because migrants from the Middle East are often Muslim and are subject of fierce discussions in Europe, I want to explore their imaginaries and experiences of Europe. *Second*, I already had a network of respondents with Middle Eastern backgrounds as I had lived and worked with migrants on the Greek island Samos for one year. With a number of them I kept in touch since. Some of the people in this network had continued their journeys and arrived in Western European countries. Others had stayed in Greece. The fact that I already had good connections with Middle Eastern migrants all over Europe contributed to my decision to focus on them as my research population.

Selecting respondents from Middle Eastern countries who had arrived in Europe via Greece became thus the most obvious option. I could expect they each had to adapt to changing imaginaries of Europe as they arrived at different points of time (but all since 2015) and had arrived in different countries in Europe. I had set 2015 as demarcation for the arrival of my respondents in Greece, because this year has been a breaking point in migration history (chapter 1.1 and 1.2).

Table 1: Overview of this study's respondents

Name ³	Country of interview	Origin country	Age	Gender	Entered Greece in (year)
Rahima	Greece	Afghanistan	27	Female	2019
Rhayze	Greece	Afghanistan	24	Female	2019
Akiva	Greece	Afghanistan	32	Male	2018
Alan	Greece	Afghanistan	26	Male	2018
Amin	Greece	Iran	24	Male	2017
Soufian	Greece	Syria	29	Male	2019
Mustafa	Greece	Syria	25	Male	2019
Bastian	Belgium	Afghanistan	35	Male	2020
Abdel	Belgium	Afghanistan	28	Male	2017
Pari	Belgium	Iran	33	Female	2017
Omar	Belgium	Iraq	22	Male	2018
Anouar	Belgium	Iraq	34	Male	2016
Ayman	Belgium	Iraq	28	Male	2015
Kamil	Belgium	Syria	32	Male	2015
Anass	Belgium	Syria	23	Male	2016
Marouan	The Netherlands	Syria	27	Male	2015
Akram	The Netherlands	Syria	27	Male	2015
Musa	The Netherlands	Syria	29	Male	2015
Mirza	The Netherlands	Syria/Lebanon	25	Male	2015
Nadir	The Netherlands	Syria/Palestine	21	Male	2015
Halil	The Netherlands	Turkey	36	Male	2019
Rafih	Finland	Afghanistan	39	Male	2018
Somaye	France	Afghanistan	24	Female	2018

3.1.1.2 Where: Multi-sited research and practical implications

This multi-sited study aims to understand migrant imaginaries of Europe at different points in time and space in Europe. This is why I selected my respondents on the basis of one commonality: they all traveled through Greece, whether they stayed there for a few days, a few months or even for years. All respondents followed more or less the same trajectories: 1. Middle East, 2. Greece, 3. Western Europe. Greece is one of the EU's 'front-line' Member States, where the vast majority of migrants first arrive (Nielsen, 2020). Greece is widely known as a 'transit country', which migrants use as an entry point to the rest of Europe (Stevens, 2018). This country has witnessed an increase of migrants during

³ All names have been changed by the author for anonymity purposes.

the second half of the 2000s, through both its land border and its maritime borders with Turkey (Triandafyllidou, 2019).

Both the Netherlands and Belgium experienced labor migration and received large numbers of asylum seekers in the 1990s, but are now stepping up their efforts to exclude, identify and expel irregular migrants next to providing ways to legalize their statuses. Both countries are considered 'destination countries' (Caarls, Bilgili & Fransen, 2020; Kuschminder, 2018; Van Meeteren, 2014). However, this research will not use the terms of transit and destination countries, since destinations are possibly in between and might turn into transit places, and migrant trajectories can have multiple moments of arrival and departure. Along journeys in/to the EU there are several kinds of relay places, mobility hubs and places of confinement. Migrants easily jump over static policy categories during their process of mobility (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014), making Greece, Belgium or the Netherlands their intended country of destination for a while, but possibly moving on once arrived there. Migrants' changing aspirations as well as contextual factors can shape mobility outcomes (Hoon, Vink & Schmeets, 2020).

For all these reasons, Greece, Belgium and the Netherlands offered suitable cases for researching how non-European migrants execute their migratory plans, how their mobility relates to their imaginaries, and how they navigate restrictive border policies.

I have met respondents at different places, depending on the case. We met at my house, their house or at a public space. I usually trusted the people I connected with through friends, family members or acquaintances of mine. This made me feel secure about meeting at their homes, and I believe it added to a secure feeling for my respondents too. If the weather was good enough we would meet in a public space, but with enough privacy to talk. I generally preferred this, because I did not know the majority of my respondents yet. The only times I conducted interviews at my own place was at my Airbnb in Athens. Here, my room was quiet and its air conditioning was more than welcome in the heat of July. I had met these respondents before, through my network from Samos, or I first met up with them for a coffee to mutually check if we felt comfortable in each other's company.

3.1.1.3 How: My network and the snowball effect

I used my own network to find respondents for this study. Not only did I interview people I already knew, I also made use of 'snowball sampling'. Because of its flexibility and networking characteristics, snowball sampling is a popular means of recruiting participants when seeking, for example, geographically dispersed people (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). This was the case for my research. I used the following entrances when looking for respondents in Western Europe:

1. My own network from my work with migrants in Samos in 2019-2020;
2. My father who knew a Syrian migrant in the Netherlands;
3. An extended WhatsApp group concerning migration activism;
4. My partner who works with migrants in Brussels, Belgium;
5. My cousin's network of people with a migration background in the Netherlands.

I had assumed that connecting with potential respondents in Greece would take at least some weeks, but within no-time I was able to conduct eight interviews through snowball sampling. In Greece I found respondents through three networks:

1. My own 'Samos' network;
2. The same activist WhatsApp group;
3. Colleagues whom I had worked with in Samos and who now lived in Athens.

A limitation of the snowball technique can be that most respondents derive from the same network (Dahinden & Efionayi-Mäder, 2009; Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). My research was, however, multi-

sited and for that reason I used different starting points for snowball recruitment. This resulted in a group of respondents that was not connected to each other. Apart from snowball recruiting, I also conducted a spontaneous interview with a man I met on Victoria Square in Athens, during the Soccer World Cup finals.

I generally felt that people were content to speak with me. Their attitudes towards me and my research varied from curiosity to a short relief of their loneliness. Most respondents seemed to intrinsically want to share their stories with me in helping to make the world hear their voices. Just one respondent did not feel comfortable enough to let me record the interview. He was in the middle of his asylum procedure in Belgium and did not want to risk anything that could influence the outcome. We did not plan to do an interview, so I regrettably didn't bring a notebook with me. He did, however, show me around in the reception center for asylum seekers in Brussels (Petit Château), he started telling me about his story. In the end we had a two-hour conversation, and afterwards I recorded as much as I could remember in a voice note to myself. During the recording of this voice note, I wanted to respect his feeling of discomfort by not mentioning his name or any other personal details. I also waited with recording until I was home without the presence of other people. Some information got lost, but I was able to remember most essential parts of his story.

3.1.1.4 Ethical considerations

"Any research decision is an ethical decision." - Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz (2020, p.3)

During and after conducting the interviews, I tried to keep ethical considerations in mind as much as possible. I based my considerations on three key ethical principles (Clark-Kazak, 2019).

First, all interviews were based on 'voluntarily, informed consent'. Before each interview, I explained the reason for the interview and answered any questions they had. The respondents were informed of the fact that they could stop participating at any time, also after the interview. In case they wanted to stop participating I promised them that their data would then not be used for this study. I also never gave any financial compensation for their time. As Clark-Kazak (2017, p.2) states: "*Displaced people in financial need should not feel pressured to participate for financial reasons.*" I would bring snacks and/or drinks to the location to share during the interview. Apart from informing my respondents about the usage of their data beforehand, I used double-consent by sending the transcript of the interview to the interviewee through WhatsApp. I asked them to look at the document and to let me know whether or not they agree with me using the data. They were also allowed to change and/or add anything to the transcript. Sometimes I had a few additional questions about the interview. Some words were difficult to understand from the recording or I would have a follow-up question about something they had said. I put these questions in the document and my respondents usually answered by responding either in the document or directly through WhatsApp.

Second, the respondents were all informed about the 'confidentiality and privacy' of the interview. When contacting them through WhatsApp I would explain that I would always guarantee their anonymity. I changed the names of my respondents in this thesis. I also asked whether they agreed to use audio recording during the interview and explained in detail that I would be the only person to use it. Although Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick (2008) state that the use of a field recorder might influence the behavior and answers of the respondents negatively, my respondents seemed to have forgotten the presence of the audio recorder during the interview as they shared their stories with me extensively.

Third, I aimed to 'do no harm'. I avoided topics that could be too sensitive or potentially retraumatizing. Only when a respondent would tell me about such topics by their own accord, I would let them elaborate on their experiences, but refrained from digging into these topics. A few times it happened that I asked a respondent to answer some more questions after the main interview, for instance through WhatsApp. I always strongly urged them to only reply to my voice messages while being in a safe place, away from people who could potentially misuse the information.

3.1.2 Expert interviews, informal conversations and Facebook groups

I conducted three interviews with four experts in the migration field. Each of them covered a different angle of my research. I spoke with Bram Frouws, head of the Mixed Migration Center (MMC), through Zoom. We discussed, amongst others, his research on migrants' use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in mixed migration flows. I also interviewed Amal Miri who works for the Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS) through Zoom. She studies different perceptions of Europe as part of the PERCEPTIONS project (2021). In Athens I spoke with Vasiliki Mitsiniotou and Nizar Amri in-person. They both work for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Greece.

While being in Greece, I had many informal conversations. One example is my encounter with Dutch journalist Ingeborg Beugel, who offered me a room in her house during my stay in Athens. I described my experiences when arriving there in the vignette in chapter 5. After every informal conversation regarding my research topic I immediately made notes in my 'observation document' on Google Drive, although not all turned out to be equally useful for my study.

I asked my respondents if I was allowed to connect with them on Facebook and/or Instagram after every interview, and the ones who had social media accounts permitted me to do so. This gave me insights in the way they depict their current lives to their social networks. One respondent shared the names of two Facebook groups with me. He had used these groups to obtain information about potential places of destination, as well as about migratory routes. The names of these pages were 'بلوغ هجرة' ('migration blog') and 'الْمَشْنَطَةُ الْبَيْنَكْرَاة' ('the station of the homeless')⁴, and both concerned migration to Europe. These groups allowed me to take a look into the information that is shared among (aspiring) migrants regarding routes, asylum procedures, smugglers, and many other migration-related topics.

3.2 Data documentation and analysis

I transcribed and coded the 23 interviews I conducted with migrants, plus the three interviews with experts. The software 'Express Scribe Transcription Software' helped me significantly with transcribing. During this process, I started coding the transcripts with the use of 'ATLAS.ti'. Since it was my first time coding documents, I had to figure out the best suitable approach for analyzing my data in the process. I decided to use both a deductive and inductive coding strategy simultaneously: the 'blended approach' (Graebner, Martin & Roundy, 2012). I started with developing codes based on my theoretical framework, by means of deductive coding:

"This approach helps focus the coding on those issues that are known to be important in the existing literature, and it is often related to theory testing or theory refinement. It is also a helpful approach if the aim of the study is to generalize analytically across cases." – Rowley, 2002, Eisenhardt, 1989, as cited in Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p.13

According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), beginning to code deductively ensures structure and theoretical relevance, while it still enables an inductive exploration later on. The notion of blending suggests a cycling back and forth between data and theory, which allows the researcher to remain open to surprising outcomes in the data whilst staying attuned to the theoretical framework. Turning deductive coding into inductive coding will move the researcher closer to the data and lose some theoretical focus.

The aims of my study were to understand migrants' imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe and how these emerge and change. This made me decide to stay close to these concepts at first, and therefore I created the following codes beforehand: 'freedom', 'security', and 'justice'. During the process of coding, I expanded this code framework in two ways. On the one hand,

⁴ Translated by one of my respondents.

I added codes that derived directly from the data. On the other hand, I complexified the yet existing codes, by using an inductive coding method. Researchers create precise and narrow codes when executing inductive coding, which helps to capture the diversity and complexity of the data:

“Working systematically with coding allows the inductive researcher to observe transparency and thus offer credible interpretations of the empirical material.” - Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013, as cited in Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p.12

After coding all my transcripts I had established 63 codes in total. I had allocated most of them into seven main groups: ‘f/actors’, ‘freedom’, ‘security’, ‘justice’, ‘imaginaries’, ‘origin country’ and ‘other experiences’. In the end I decided to divide the codes within each of my code groups into three sub-groups: ‘Before Greece’, ‘In Greece’ and ‘After Greece’. This, because I developed the structure of my empirical chapters during the process of data analysis, and these three sub-groups corresponded with this arrangement (chapter 3.4).

3.3 Methodological reflections

Apart from some differences, most of my research process went as I had imagined it beforehand. I was able to find respondents relatively quickly after informing my own network about my project. As I started conducting interviews in the Netherlands and in Belgium, I first got in touch with my contacts in these two countries. The snowball started to roll and I was able to plan all the interviews in a relatively short period of time, from April to June 2021. I landed in Greece on the 29 of June 2021 without knowing how long I would stay. Since it had taken me some weeks to create a network of respondents in Western Europe, I planned to give myself sufficient time in Greece to activate my network and to meet potential respondents. But, this process went much faster than I imagined. Within no-time I had conducted seven interviews. In September 2021 I conducted one more interview with an Afghan friend whom I met in Samos in 2019 and who was now living on the island of Lesbos.

I rewrote and reshaped my interview questions a little during the first weeks of interviewing in Western Europe. I came to understand which questions generated more insights and which were less useful. Interestingly, it appeared quite difficult for respondents in Western Europe to recall their past imaginaries of Europe, whilst in Greece this was the other way around. In Greece migrants found it often challenging to explain their imaginaries of a potential place of destination they had just heard about. Despite these trials I encountered, I believe that I gathered a good amount of insightful data altogether.

Another subject to reflect on is the influence of the interview location. I have met people in four different site situations: in public spaces, at my home, at their homes, and online. Interview locations can provide opportunities for researchers to make observations that produce richer information than can be collected from the interview data alone (Elwood & Martin, 2000). A personal example is when I conducted my interview with Amin (24) in his shared apartment Athens. While we were sitting and talking in his room, the doorbell rang. His roommate opened the door and we continued our conversation. A few minutes later Amin paused the interview, because he needed to greet the guy who had just arrived. He left the room and almost immediately came back to take something from his room. He opened the drawer and a big plastic bag full of weed appeared. This turned the interview to a conversation about how he earned money by selling weed and walking dogs. In the drawer, Amin also kept a fake passport which he had managed to buy from a man he met at a party. He only paid 200 euros for it, while other people would pay between 3000 and 6000 euros for such documents. He explained the main differences with a real passport to me: *“If you look at your passport, the side cuts of the papers are really well-cut. But this one has small things, you will never see a real passport with this. It has actually been good, but I fucked it up. It was always there, but I closed and opened it and it became worse. But it’s a good one, because in the UV light you can see some things there. These papers are quite good.”* If Amin would not have sold the weed while I was in his room, I

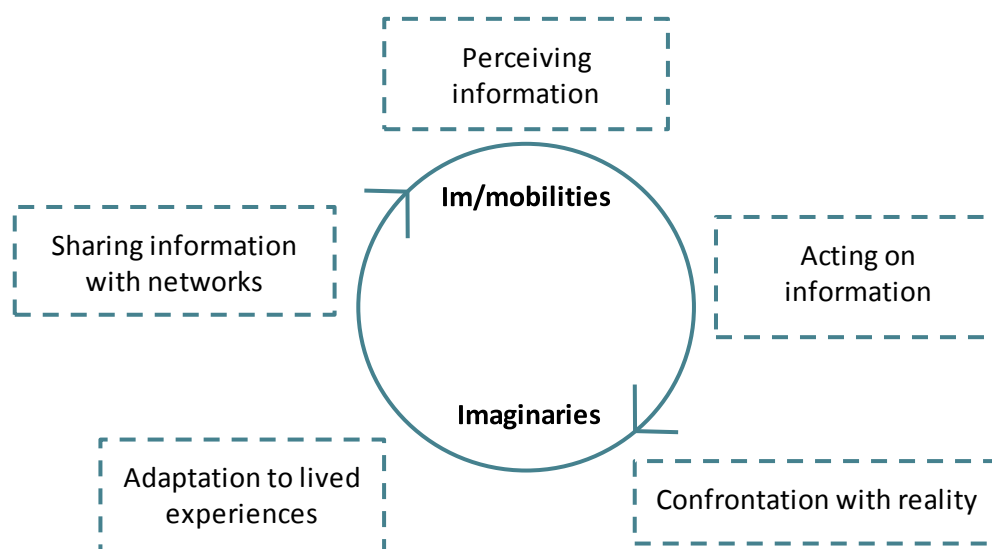
would have possibly obtained less information about the whereabouts of his financial situation and traveling plans.

I did not feel uncomfortable during any of the interviews I conducted. It happened quite often that my respondents had brought snacks and drinks or even cooked me an amazing meal. Their efforts made me feel a bit uneasy at times, since I did not want them to spend money and I felt like already asking a lot from them: their time, trust and stories. I noticed, however, that it was their way of showing happiness for the ability to share their stories with the world. It would also most probably come across as rude if I would reject their offers. Eating and drinking together also created an amicable setting, which might have contributed to how comfortable my respondents felt to speak with me. I had a good connection with all of them, which perhaps made it easier for them to answer my questions.

3.4 Inductive data structuring: ‘The cycle of changing imaginaries’

Based on this study’s data analysis, I inductively developed a model: ‘the cycle of changing imaginaries’ (Figure 1), hereafter referred to as ‘the Cycle’. The Cycle has been of great help to organize and present my data in the following chapters. It has also allowed me to compare my data with current academic debates as described in my theoretical framework. The Cycle consists of five consecutive steps:

Figure 1: The cycle of changing imaginaries



I distinguish five elements in a cycle of how migrants’ imaginaries of Europe can evolve along their journey in/to Europe, through phases of im/mobility. ‘*Perceiving information*’ encompasses the period in which (aspiring) migrants obtain and perceive information about potential routes and destinations. Here, I describe the different information sources respondents used, and how they perceived the information from these sources. Perceiving information leads to ‘*acting on information*’. This step contains (re-)gaining autonomy over trajectories and is usually leading to mobility. After having acted on autonomy, respondents were ‘*confronted with reality*’ in their (temporary) destinations. These reality confrontations will be described in comparison with their initial imaginaries of this place. Once confronted with reality, respondents ‘*adapted to their lived experiences*’, and use different strategies to cope with these new realities. In this process of adapting, migrants continuously ‘*shared information with their networks*’ about their current lives, which can lead to a new rotation of the Cycle.

I arranged all these consecutive elements together in one Cycle, which allowed me to analyze the continuous (re-)positioning of my respondents and their changing imaginaries of Europe as they move through im/mobility throughout the three empirical chapters (4, 5 and 6). In my study, the Cycle takes a 1.5 times turn in the course of my empirical chapters, scrutinizing altogether a total of eight steps. Eight, because some elements appeared to encompass extensive differences regarding their time-space context and needed to be scrutinized twice. Other elements, such as 'information sharing with networks' appeared to remain relatively similar amongst all respondents en route in/to Europe. Repeating them would therefore cause information overlap.

Implementation of the Cycle in this research helped me understand how, when and why imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe change. We start its analysis in chapter 4, where I describe migration imaginaries before migrants encounter Europe's realities. With the steps 'perceiving information' and 'acting on information', we will observe how imaginaries of Europe emerge and are acted upon. In chapter 5 I will discuss the imaginaries of migrants in Greece with the steps 'confrontation with reality', 'adaptation to lived experiences', 'sharing information with networks', and 'perceiving information'. I will conclude the analysis of migrant imaginaries of Europe in chapter 6 with the steps 'acting on information' and 'confrontation with reality', exploring imaginaries of Europe when migrants are in Western Europe.

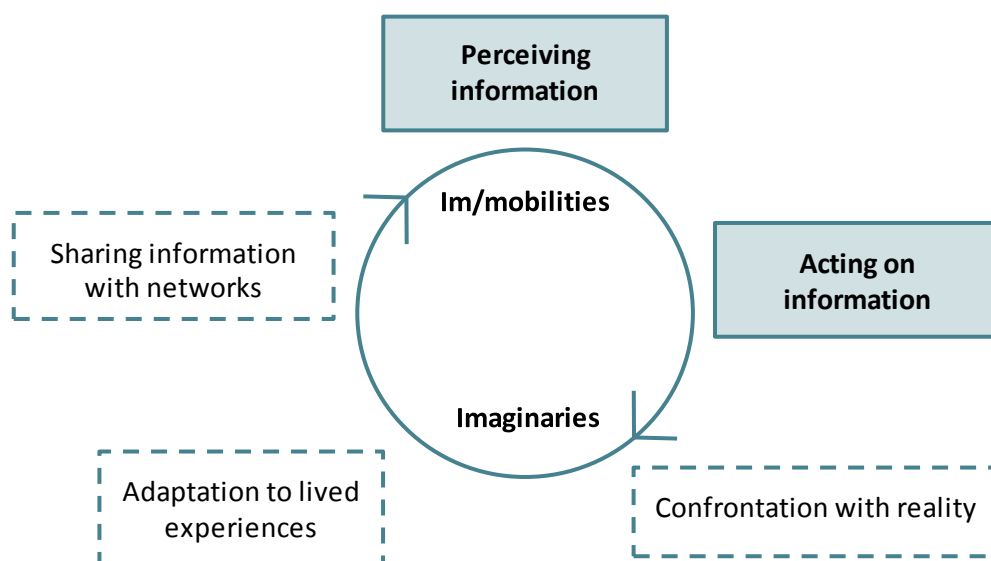
Chapter 4: Europe as a rainbow – imaginaries before Greece

“I thought of Europe in a lot of colors, it was like a rainbow in my mind”. - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

Box 1: Symbols in quotes

[G] = Greece
[N] = Netherlands
[B] = Belgium
[Fi] = Finland
[Fr] = France
[...] = One or more words left out / two disconnected sentences put after each other
[] = Word addition / clarification
(...) = Unclear / not understandable
- = Truncation of the sentence
< > = Description of gestures

Migrant imaginaries of Europe before entering Greece could be seen as a collection of colorful assemblages, as illustrated in the quote of Pari above. In order to elaborate on these multi-colored perceptions, this chapter describes two steps in the ‘cycle of changing imaginaries’. First, where (aspiring) migrants’ imaginaries of Europe emerge, and then how (aspiring) migrants act on their perceptions of Europe. Both are situated before migrants physically arrive in Europe and/or are confronted with acts of the European border regime. Chapter 4.1 covers the step ‘perceiving information’, and studies how imaginaries of Europe come to exist and what f/actors are of influence on these perceptions. I will elaborate on the precarious and dynamic struggle between dependency and trust of information. In chapter 4.2 I will analyze the following step ‘acting on information’ in order to understand how (aspiring) migrants continuously deal with the struggle of repositioning themselves in finding trustworthy information about potential migration routes and destinations. Box 1 provides a legend to symbols in quotes of respondents. This will help to understand the adjustments that I have made, although the content of the quotes has never been changed.



4.1 Perceiving information - before Greece

The emergence of imaginaries is based on an insufficient correspondence between the experienced reality of migrants in Europe, and how (aspiring) migrants perceive this communication of reality (Salazar, 2014). Imaginaries can be seen as culturally and socially transmitted representational assemblages that help people cognize, act and value the world (Salazar, 2020). Mustafa is a 25-year-old Syrian guy who had been in Greece for almost two years. During our interview in Athens, he told me about a joke that illustrates this:

“[...] [I]n Arabic, when we see European people holding their dog, we say: ‘[D]o you see this dog? He has a better life than you.’ [...] This dog, held by a white person, anywhere on earth, has a better life than us. It’s a joke for us, but we keep saying it. Until now [in Greece]. If I am with my friends, they will tell me [...]: ‘This dog has a passport. Do you have it? No. He is loved. Are you loved? No.’” - Mustafa [G], 07-07-2021

Meaningfully joking about the life standard of Europeans and white persons, Mustafa and his friends shared a certain image of Europe that influences and/or sustains their perceptions of Europe. In this subchapter, I will research various imaginaries that circle amongst (aspiring) migrants and how these imaginaries have come to existence.

4.1.1 Imagined freedom, security and justice in Europe

I looked at (r)evolving imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe. All three subjects appeared to exist in my respondents’ ideas of what they would find once arriving in Europe. I also found that these three imaginative components appear rather connected with each other when respondents talked about their imaginaries.

Earlier studies on imaginaries and perceptions of Europe of non-European migrants like the EUMAGINE⁵ and PERCEPTIONS⁶ projects do not specifically address imagined relations between the three subjects. Some of my respondents, however, did so. Amin is a 24-year-old Iranian guy whom I randomly encountered at the Victoria Square in Athens. He had been in Greece for four years, and received two rejections to his asylum request. Amin believed that migrants hope to find paradise in Europe. I asked him what he means with ‘paradise’:

“Highest quality of life basically. Having a big house, good car, [and] being able to travel. [...] It’s also the freedom they want to get. It means they want to spend the rest of their lives in a normal way. Get rights. And to get some materialistic things. But also rights and freedom.” - Amin [G], 11-07-2021

Amin’s explanation of paradise contained a connection between freedom and rights. Soufian [G], a 29-year-old Syrian guy who lived in the Ritsona Refugee Camp near Athens, related freedom, security and justice in his description of personal previous imaginaries of Europe, too:

“Freedom, rights of speech, all things. Safety and freedom are related words, you can’t separate them. If you have freedom it means you are safe. You can’t say: I’m safe but I’m not free. Freedom means a safe life.” - Soufian [G], 06-07-2021

Halil (36) was my only Turkish respondent, and one of the oldest. Forced to leave Turkey due to persecution, he eventually received a residence permit in the Netherlands:

⁵ Hemmerechts, De Clerck, Willems & Timmerman (2014).

⁶ Bayerl et al. (2020).

“How do you describe the borders of freedom? For me, when I was in my home land [Turkey], all Europe and the members of Europe [were] very lucky about freedom. They can do whatever they do, say what they want. [...] In Turkey it’s hard when you have a person like Erdogan, to talk and say your real ideas. [Turkish authorities] can arrest you easily and you are in fear. I thought that this would be impossible in Europe.” - Halil [N], 11-06-2021

Halil related his perceptions of freedom with his experiences regarding in/security in Turkey. In the above quote, he pointed out an interesting question: how does one border freedom? In order to understand the changeable nature of “borders” around concepts of freedom, security and justice, we will take a look at the relation between experiences in the past, and future hopes and imaginaries of Europe.

4.1.2 Past experiences and future hopes

Asking my respondents about their memories of what they imagined about Europe before they actually experienced it, provided insights in how their imaginaries had emerged. They often described their past imaginaries by comparing them with feeling un/free and un/safe, or sensing in/justice in their countries of origin. According to Amin, injustice is one of the reasons why Iranian people leave their country:

“[T]hey just want a chance to live normally. They took many rights [from citizens] [in Iran]. As a girl you can’t be without [a] hijab and many [other] things.” - Amin [G], 11-07-2021

Marouan (27), who obtained a residence permit in the Netherlands, made a similar suggestion:

“I knew that justice is better in the whole of Europe than in Syria, because in Syria it’s zero.” - Marouan [N], 14-04-2021

Abdel (28), who is still waiting for an answer to his asylum application in Belgium, contained freedom and security in Afghanistan in his previous imaginaries about Europe:

“Free people, everything is easy. Life is easy. [...] In Afghanistan no woman can speak with a man like we speak now. Only with their husband. A big difference. I don’t like the life in Afghanistan. [...] When you go with a girl and her father and brothers know about it, they will kill you immediately.” - Abdel [B], 01-06-2021

Upon close analysis of the statements, negative experiences regarding un/freedom, in/security and/or in/justice in origin countries helped shape positive imaginaries on finding these aspects elsewhere. Salazar (2011) argues that hopeful imaginaries are representations of reality, regardless of the actual reality. Interestingly, even though some of my respondents received information about Europe that included negative accounts, they compared these stories with their current situations and cherished their hopeful imaginaries of Europe. I had known Alan (26) since the summer of 2019, when we both worked on the Greek island Samos. After waiting for two years, Alan received asylum in Greece:

“I saw some documentaries in Afghanistan, I knew it was [going to be] difficult [in Greece]. [...] But it was much more difficult to stay in Afghanistan, so I preferred the ‘bad’, not the ‘worst’.” - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

Mustafa described that he had heard negative stories of Europe too. Nevertheless, he believed the situation in Greece could not be as bad as his situation in Syria:

“I heard that there were camps and bad situations and conditions, but I lived the worst in Syria.” - Mustafa [G], 07-07-2021

Both Alan’s and Mustafa’s hopes regarding Europe were related to their lived experiences in Afghanistan and Syria respectively. Staying in their origin countries was, in their perception, the worst of all options.

(Aspiring) migrants develop imaginaries about other places, based on hope and in comparison with their past and current experiences. European states have, meanwhile, developed several attempts to temper, or rather control, these imaginaries of (aspiring) and, in Europe’s perspective, ‘unwanted’ migrants.

4.1.3 The wish to control (aspiring) migrants’ imaginaries of Europe

States have a variety of interests in portraying Europe to (aspiring) migrants. On the one hand, European policy interventions have been deployed over the past years to “affect risky migration behavior and, more directly speaking, reduce irregular migration” (Ademmer et al., 2018, p.91). On the other hand, some of my respondents shared that governments in their countries of origin often tended to depict Europe in a negative way. This was, for example, reflected in media and education contents. Images that are shared by governments are generally led by the wish to influence imaginaries of Europe of (aspiring) migrants.

European states have been aiming to inform potential migrants about the dangers and obstacles of the il/legal journey in/to Europe through so-called ‘information campaigns’ since the early 1990s (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). Such campaigns particularly contain information about the procedural aspects of asylum in “destination” countries, including deportations and the risks of being smuggled (Oeppen, 2016). The basic idea behind these information campaigns is that, if aspiring migrants are aware of the risks of traveling il/legally, they might decide not to migrate. In this line of thoughts, migration in/to Europe is mainly portrayed as difficult and dangerous, with little chances of success for migrants - especially concerning the collaboration with smugglers (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007; Oeppen, 2016).

European countries are not the only ones using information campaigns. Oeppen (2016) writes that the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation launched a Facebook page in 2015 to share content about rebuilding Afghanistan as well as pictures about the risks of the journey out of Afghanistan. According to Oeppen (2016), the reason behind this Facebook page can be questioned: it coincided with a German information campaign whilst Afghanistan was highly dependent on donor countries. Regardless of the intention behind it, my respondents’ imaginaries did not seem to have been significantly influenced by authorities in their countries of origin:

“The Syrian government tried to make us believe that Europe is not safe [...], because they want to show that Syria is really safe. They say: ‘Look at the USA, Chicago. In Chicago people don’t leave their houses after 6 PM because they will be killed and the mafia rules.’ But my uncle in Germany always used to say that that’s bullshit. But the [Syrian] government [depicts] [...] the situation [in the West] as if it’s really bad so we can appreciate the heaven that we live in [...]”. - Musa [N], 18-05-2021

Musa (29) trusted his uncle more than the Syrian government, and was able to reflect on reasons behind the government’s propaganda about Syria. Opinions about the trustworthiness of ideas shared by authorities in their countries of origin differed among my respondents. Kamil [B], a 32-year-old Syrian guy with refugee status in Belgium, believes that Syrians who hear the same governmental story about Europe every day might believe certain aspects of the story. By contrast, Amin [G] thinks that Iranians generally do not believe their government anymore due to corruption. Imaginaries of success

are also fueling ir/regular migration. Information about the dangers of an ir/regular migration journey seems therefore often irrelevant for (aspiring) migrants who have not been able to escape local hardship yet (Alpes & Nyberg Sørensen, 2015). This is confirmed by respondent Abdel [B], when asked about eventual information campaigns: *"If I would have seen it, I would think [that] if I die in Europe, it's better than being in Afghanistan."* (01-06-2021). The persistent idea of finding a "better" life in Europe seems to serve as an uncontrollable motor for mobility in/to Europe.

In the following part, I will describe how smugglers may provide mobility in/to the 'better' Europe to migrants whose movements are restricted by mobility regimes, though smugglers generally have their own agendas too. (Aspiring) migrants therefore are forced to balance between trust and mobility-related dependency when it comes to finding a reliable smuggler.

4.1.4 Balancing between mobility-dependence and trust

I have chosen to explore different social platforms that are involved with the shaping of migrants' imaginaries, and which are based on their influence on migrants' mobility and judgments of their trustworthiness. As stated by Alpes (2012, p.93), trusting the information migrants obtain is essential when explaining *"contemporary perceptions and practices of emigration"*. One of the platforms of information that was discussed during the interviews stood out: smugglers. This platform regarded discrepancy between its facilitation of mobility and high level of mis/trust. In order to understand this discrepancy, I will examine the dynamic between smugglers and (aspiring) migrants, and the influence of this dynamic on my respondents' imaginaries of Europe.

Although the work of smugglers is often observed as practices that increase the precarity of migrants, they can also enhance a migrant's mobility and create space for agency (Lindquist et al., 2012). Social networks can facilitate connections with smugglers. According to Van Liempt (2007) and Sersli (2009), many (aspiring) migrants find smugglers through their strong ties. Alan's story illustrates how migrants use their network as a platform to find smugglers at any stage of the migratory route, as family members or friends do not have to be physically close. Through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) strong ties can help, even if they are far away:

"I was texting for two to three hours with one of my cousins in France, asking if he knew any smugglers where I was [in Van, a Turkish town], to move me to Istanbul. He somehow found one and the smuggler found me [in Van] and we moved to another accommodation and to Istanbul." - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

Apart from meeting smugglers through social networks, migrants may hear about possible smugglers through new encounters. 27-year-old Rahima from Afghanistan, for instance, learned about the possibilities of finding a smuggler while being in Istanbul:

"(...) [is] a [like a] city inside Istanbul. [...] (...) is like Afghanistan [...]. So many shops, supermarkets, restaurants, all Afghan. When you stop in any place they will talk about Greece, how to go there, how to pay, about the smugglers." - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

Another way of finding smugglers is through social media. I found that social media serve both as a means of getting in touch with smugglers directly online, and to get informed about certain physical spaces where smugglers offer their services. Musa (29) from Syria remembered a Facebook group where he learned about such physical spaces:

"I knew that I had to rent a room in a hotel and then search for a smuggler who would help me to go to Greece. [...] On this square you just raise your hand and you say I want a smuggler and they give you one." - Musa [N], 18-05-2021

Physical spaces can be understood as physical migration platforms where supply and demand meet. Migrants are in need of mobility (demand), and smugglers offer their mobility-related services to them (supply).

In order to understand the effect of smugglers' stories on the imaginaries of Europe of migrants, I first note that human smuggling is quintessentially a business which should be understood as part of a market, providing a service to people who aim to cross a border illegally (Tinti & Reitano, 2018). When we keep in mind that the majority of smugglers have gotten involved in the smuggling business for their own financial benefits (İçli, Sever H. & Sever M., 2015), one could assume that they will portray the offered route as well as the place of destination as positively as possible to potential clients. Akram, a 27-year-old Syrian guy who has been living in Amsterdam since 2015, confirms this assumption:

"[...] [A]ll of [the smugglers] are sending you to heaven. You will go to the best place, it will be super easy, don't worry. If you cross this, you will see no-one. [...] They sell you the product and they get money. It's not in their benefit to scare you." - Akram [N] (27), 17-05-2021

Pari (33), who traveled to Belgium with her husband and two children in 2019, was still unsure about being granted asylum at times of the interview. Her smuggler, too, portrayed Greece much brighter than it was:

"[The smuggler] said 'You [will be] here and Greece is there, very close. In Turkey, you are able to see the people who are walking on the other side [Greece].' He described the situation in Europe and how [the] journey will be. [...] [The] smuggler was positive in every sense about Europe. He did not say anything about the negative parts." - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

The responses above illustrate that smugglers do serve as image-shapers. Motivated by their own financial profit, they sketched positive pictures of what their clients will find arriving at the agreed destination. In line with this, a smuggler who was interviewed for the research of Nimkar, Savage and Mohammadi (2021) stated that he encourages people to migrate by posting pictures of European countries online to create an idea of Europe as beautiful and secure. These practices make me wonder about the extent to which migrants are aware of certain imaginaries smugglers impose on them. Pari appeared to be the only respondent who had truly believed her smuggler's stories. This to her great regret, for she had unintentionally "*put her children's lives in danger*" (22-06-2021) by crossing the Aegean sea. We need to acknowledge the constant dynamic between trust and mobility-dependence on smugglers. Although many of my respondents mentioned not to have trusted the images of Europe that were depicted by smugglers, they also depended on them to be able to continue their journeys ("*You don't have another choice. You have to trust them.*" - Nazier [N], 20-05-2021). In 'the good smuggler' (Achilli, 2018), Achilli challenges the Western narrative of smugglers as villains and develops important insights. He shows that the relationships between migrants and smugglers also can be rich in solidarity, reciprocity and morality. Looking at my own respondents, it is essential to take into account that the relationship between smugglers and migrants is generally asynchronously embedded in mobility-dependence and trust. Even when migrants fully realize that imaginaries imposed by smugglers are too good to be true, they often depend on them. We could, therefore, suggest that the answer to the question whether migrants are aware of by smugglers positively depicted imaginaries does not matter in the end. Because, regardless of trust, the need for mobility overrules.

In the next subchapter I will research the next step in the 'cycle of changing imaginaries', and describe how (aspiring) migrants act on information by actively challenging information (sources) through their social networks.

4.2 Acting on information - before Greece

In the consecutive step in the Cycle, (aspiring) migrants 'acting on information' they have obtained about potential routes and destinations, and/or possibly reliable smugglers. This subchapter describes the empowering role social networks can play, and their added value in the un/controllability of both migrants' mobilities and imaginaries. (Aspiring) migrants have developed several ways to enhance the safety of their migratory routes, which I will set out in chapter 4.2.1. Regardless of potential information precarity, (aspiring) migrants gain autonomy by using their social networks and this may put them in positions of power, which will be elaborated on in chapter 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Social networks as safety enhancers

Many respondents shared that their networks served as major social connectors. Migrants en route in/to Europe mainly stay in touch with their networks via Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), through which they share information with each other and where imaginaries are sustained (Frouws et al., 2016). ICTs allow migrant networks to function as platforms that connect migrants with other people on the move. D'Angelo (2021) called these chains of social connections as 'stepping stones of connectedness', presenting a journey as a series of ties. Out of all platforms, my respondents stated they have trusted their family and friends the most. This level of trust helps (aspiring) migrants to combat un/credible information, but also to create alternative pathways and dynamics that allow them to stand stronger together in challenging the rules of Europe's mobility regime. Social networks can enhance a migrant's safety.

Musa traveled from Syria to Jordan with his family, but continued his journey to Turkey alone. When in Izmir, his family in Jordan connected him with an acquaintance who also happened to be there: "[...] *[I]t is [safer] to travel with somebody than alone.*" (Musa [N], 18-05-2021). This example shows how informal platforms are continuously created by migrants en route, using their social networks through ICTs in order to provide a journey as safe as possible.

Social networks can also give each other warnings about upcoming dangerous situations. These warnings can result in improvisation, (re-)navigation and aiming to escape the entanglement of feeling unsafe (Wajsberg & Schapendonk, 2021). Rahima was aware of difficulties in Greek camps, but decided to go there. This decision was triggered by unsafety in Turkey as she had received cautionary information from her sister in Iran. Rahima's Afghan family-in-law had arrived in Turkey, searching for her and her daughter. Their goal was to take her daughter away, which is (according to Rahima) a common practice in Afghan culture when the father of a child disappears. After hearing the news, Rahima moved to Greece. Rahima's sister functioned as an infrastructural mobility trigger for Rahima and her daughter.

4.2.2 Social networks as engines of power over precarious information

Migrants navigate between mobility-dependence and trust, especially when it comes to smugglers (chapter 4.1.4). In order to gain power over their mobility and to reduce the risk of being frauded, migrants have developed several systems. I encountered two systems that migrants use to deal with un/trustworthy information from smugglers during my research.

First, migrants use escrow services. Escrow services are arrangements whereby a third party becomes custodian of the migrant's money until they have successfully reached the agreed destination. The service increases the confidence of migrants when choosing smugglers, whilst it simultaneously guarantees smugglers that the full amount of money is available and, with conditions, accessible (Campana & Gelsthorpe, 2021). A considerable number of my respondents have used escrow services, which they often found through their social networks. Escrow services have been used en route before Greece:

"[In Afghanistan] [w]e [had] put some money in a shop like a supermarket and the owner knows us and the smuggler. So when I [would] arrive at my destination, the supermarket [would] give the money to the smuggler. So you don't pay directly. The same thing happened when I [was in] Turkey." - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

And 23-year-old Anass, who lives in a Belgian apartment and works to spare money for his parents in Syria, also used escrow services when traveling through Europe:

"I [had] put my money in one office [in Bosnia] and told the smuggler that my money was there. When I [would] arrive [in] Italy [they] can take my money. So I trust the office, but not the smuggler. I also knew [whether] the office was good or not, because many people before me put their money there." - Anass [B], 15-06-2021

The quotes above show that escrow services function as alternative platforms that enhance collaboration and trust. Kamil [B] (11-05-2021) contacted more than eight smugglers in Athens before he found one that agreed to his own terms and conditions. Kamil wanted to store his money with a trusted friend until he would have safely reached Belgium. By using third parties, migrants reclaim autonomy and security over their mobility, and over information regarding routes or destinations shared by smugglers.

Second, migrants use Facebook groups to empower their knowledge. They share migratory experiences and inform each other about matters regarding smugglers or escrow services (Figure 2 & 3).

Figure 2: Person (anonymized by author) warning for the services of a smuggler underneath this smuggler's Facebook post. Source: 'أورب' 'إلى هجره' ('Emigrate to Europe')



Figure 3: Person (anonymized by author) warning for an escrow service suggested by a smuggler underneath this smuggler's Facebook post. Source: 'أورب' 'إلى هجره' ('Emigrate to Europe')



In this way, migrants challenge the information they obtain from smugglers, including the migration practices smugglers promise them. Since migrants are highly dependent on smugglers regarding their mobility in/to Europe, they develop ways to gain as much power as possible over their dependency. Their extending social networks simultaneously combat information precarity, and provide migrants with more autonomy over their mobilities. This exemplifies how social networks are integral parts of migrant journeys.

Apart from smugglers, information from authorities is being challenged as well. European authorities share information about (dangerous routes to) Europe with aspiring migrants through

information campaigns (chapter 4.1.4). The aim of these campaigns is to reduce irregular migration (Ademmer et al., 2018). Such information campaigns appear to have been largely ineffective in influencing migration behavior. According to Ademmer et al. (2018), most (aspiring) migrants were already aware of the risks through information from friends and family in Europe. Information from authorities that contradicts information from trusted family and friends may therefore be perceived as propaganda, intended to discourage (aspiring) migrants. According to Benson (2012), communications about experiences of people who migrated to Europe before, strengthen and reinforce the imaginings of those striving to move. Imaginaries are always acted upon in terms of co- and counterimaginaries; a dynamic between projected ideals of (aspiring) migrants and the experienced reality as shared by their network in Europe (Salazar, 2010; Salazar, 2014). Many respondents confirmed that information received from their networks in Europe was of great influence on their imaginaries and aspirations, due to a high level of trust.

Hence, as much as European governments wish to control the imaginaries of Europe of (aspiring), 'unwanted' migrants (De Haas et al., 2020) through campaigns, this information is contested by social networks which migrants trust.

4.3 Concluding remarks

With this chapter I have elaborated on migrants' colorful imaginaries of Europe, before encountering realities of Europe in Greece. Chapter 4.1 showed how (aspiring) migrants 'perceive information', and chapter 4.2 described the importance of social networks when 'acting on' the perceived information.

The immense importance of social networks on the enhancement of their information power came to the surface in this chapter. Social networks do not only enhance the safety of (aspiring) migrants en route, they also challenge imaginaries and information shared by smugglers and European authorities. The main reason for this is that (aspiring) migrants appear to regard their own social networks as the most trustworthy information platforms. When acting on perceived information, (aspiring) migrants use their networks to navigate between trustworthy and untrustworthy information. They are often dependent on smugglers in order to move, but generally regard smugglers as untrustworthy. This creates a struggle between trust and mobility-dependence. Migrants have developed several strategies to combat this precarious position. These include the use of escrow services and (online) platforms where information about the credibility of smugglers and/or escrow services is shared among (aspiring) migrants.

In my interview with Halil, he raised the question 'How do you describe the borders of freedom?' (chapter 4.1.1). We have seen that the "borders" around imagined freedom, security and justice in Europe relate to personal lived experiences of (aspiring) migrants. Negative experiences in the past fuel the hope of finding freedom, security and justice elsewhere. The fact that their social networks are regarded as trustworthy, and often used as a means of measuring information from less reliable actors, shows their impact on imaginaries of (aspiring) migrants. In chapter 6.2, I will reflect further on the "borders" of migrants' imaginaries, and their un/controllability.

Chapter 5: Disappearing colors – imaginaries in Greece

“But in Greece I found [...] only gray. In Greece I could not find colors.” - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

June 29, 2021, Athens - After my arrival in Athens I go straight to the house of an acquaintance, a Dutch journalist. She has a lovely house in Metaxourgio, a neighborhood home to a variety of people, among them drug addicts, sex workers, migrants and, more recently, a small number of tourists. The neighborhood has been “cleaned up” by the municipality over the past few years and now hosts artists who are attracted by the low rents in the area as well. After Ingeborg has taken me on a walk through her beloved neighborhood, I take a shower at her place to cool down from the pressuring summer heat. While I enjoy the cold water, I suddenly hear screams. I realize it’s Ingeborg and her “adopted son” Fawad⁷. Two years ago the two met in Lesvos, whereafter Ingeborg decided to host the Afghan refugee in her house in Athens. *“I saw Fawad taking care of a puppy in Moria camp. He was feeding the animal with food that he needed as much as the puppy did. That’s when I thought: Someone who takes care of another being while being in such a difficult situation themselves, must be an intrinsically good person”*, Ingeborg told me during our walk. So she decided to make him her protégé.

While I am in the shower, Fawad starts to throw empty glass bottles from the 5th floor apartment on the street. The downstairs neighbors, migrants from Bangladesh, had been making “too much noise” over the past months, as they started their own steel company in the street - and now Fawad is fed up with it. After months of yelling from the window without significant impact, he wants to finally show his neighbors that his threats were all too real. Ingeborg witnessed the situation and loudly intervened. I hear their voices from the shower and decide to see if I can be of any help.

Two hours and many shouts and discussions later – Fawad and Ingeborg appear not to have calmed down yet. Fawad doesn’t seem to register our words, and the anger is written on his face. Every once in a while he says something. *“I don’t want to live in fear anymore, I don’t feel safe in this [Ingeborg’s] house.”* He tells me that he compares being in Greece with being allowed to sit on a chair. He can use the chair, but the moment he stands up, he will lose the right to this chair. The chair is not his property, he is just someone who is allowed to use it. Fawad draws a line on the ground: *“All I ask for is one square meter that I can call mine.”* Even at Ingeborg’s he has to conform to her rules, including not to throw bottles at people, as this can harm his asylum case as soon as the police would turn up. *“In Afghanistan a man will fight with another man when he is annoyed or angry, but here in Greece I can’t do this because of my process. I have to hold myself back all the time. I am not free.”* He seems to have calmed down, but just thirty minutes later Fawad loses control over his body. He starts to shake, jumps up, grabs his phone, holds it for a few seconds, releases a scream and smashes his phone on the floor. The gateway to his social network is scattered in dozens of pieces around him. *“This is what Europe does to people.”*, Ingeborg cries out. *“Welcome to Athens!”*

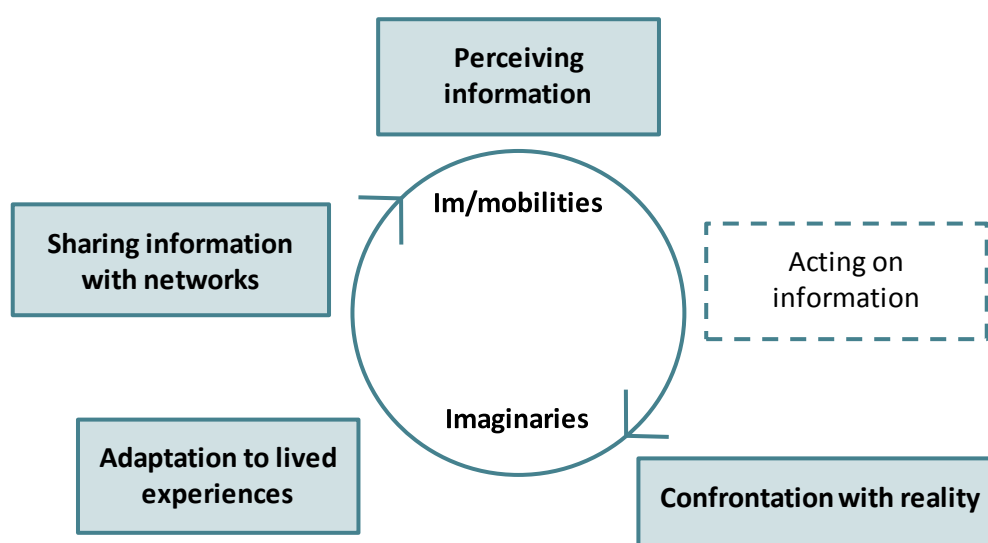
This chapter deals with junctures in which migrants’ imaginaries of Europe and their lived experiences in Europe clash. After following the emergence of imaginaries in chapter 4, I will describe how imaginaries of Europe lose their colors after they first encounter Europe’s reality. The vignette above illustrates the negative implications of Greek asylum procedures on migrants’ feelings of freedom and safety. This illustrates the grayness that generally covered my respondents’ imaginaries of Europe when they were in Greece.

The majority of quotes and examples I selected throughout this chapter illustrate confrontations with Europe’s realities in Greece, as for all respondents Greece has been the first experience with Europe on European soil. All my 23 respondents traveled to Greece through Turkey. 21 of them crossed the Aegean Sea after which they arrived at a Greek island, and two crossed the land border. Respondents who entered Greece after 2015 experienced a shorter period of involuntary immobility (between a few weeks and a few months) than the ones who arrived after 2015. For them

⁷ Name has been changed by the author for anonymity purposes.

procedures took between one and four years, due to stricter migration regulations aimed to discourage onward movement (Dimitriadi & Sarantaki, 2019). These regulations had a great impact on my respondents' imaginaries of Europe, on which I will elaborate in this chapter. My eight respondents who were in Greece at the time of the interview had different reasons to in/voluntarily stay, but all dreamed of eventually moving to other European countries (on which I will expound in chapter 6).

The Cycle continues to develop as migrants move through im/mobility. With this chapter I endeavor to continue untangling nuances and to create space for exploring the recurrence and development of the Cycle and its impact on imaginaries of Europe. In chapter 5.1 I will introduce the distinction and dynamic between trust and truth of information, in order to understand the continuous struggle with information credibility migrants find themselves in. In the subchapters that follow, I will extensively explain the other steps within the Cycle: 'confrontation with reality' (chapter 5.2), 'adaptation to lived experiences' (chapter 5.3), 'sharing information with networks' (chapter 5.4), and 'perceiving information' (chapter 5.5).



5.1 The dynamic between truth and trust of information

A substantial part of a migrant's journey consists of searching for credible information regarding the journey ahead, and sharing information with their network. This section focuses on the ongoing dynamic between information sharing and information searching practices. In order to understand the complex role of these practices within developing imaginaries, I will start with distinguishing the notions of trust and truth. I will explain why truth seems to be to a greater extent related to information-sharing practices, and trust with the practice of information searching. Differentiating trust and truth enables me to explore their interdynamics. These will help unravel two dilemmas many migrants face: what information can be trusted, and what information do they wish to share with their networks?

First I will outline the notion of truth. Truths do not exist in singularity, especially during migrant journeys. At any point along their routes in/to Europe, my respondents have shared stories with their networks that have highlighted certain aspects of their lived experiences in Europe. Information sharing can be therefore seen as practice that depicts a subjective truth. These subjective truths can clash with other migrants' truths, as truths exist in multiplicity and everyone has their own individual understanding and perspective of reality (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). Let me explain the idea of multiple truths through 'the tale of the blind men and the elephant' (Box 2).

“In an old Indian tale, a king has the blind men of his empire examining an elephant. Then he asks about their findings. Their descriptions of what an elephant is, naturally differ widely. The one who felt the ear of the elephant describes it as a hand fan. The others insist that an elephant is like a pot, a ploughshare, a tree trunk, a pillar, a wall, or a brush, depending on whether they felt the elephant’s head, tusk, trunk, foot, belly, or the tip of the tail, respectively.” - Zimek & Vreeken, 2015, p.122

Imagine that the various descriptions of the elephant represent the many stories migrants share about their experiences with Europe. All stories are subjective, and cover different parts of a truth. The blind men in the tale above, as well as migrants traveling in/to Europe share singular stories that are components of a bigger reality. There is, however, a striking difference between the two groups. The blind men describe their imaginaries of the elephant as completely as possible. They depict the head, foot or belly as true to how they perceive it. For migrants, I found that the completeness and depicted aspects of their stories depend on individual interests concerning what (not) to share with their network. As I will further elaborate on in chapter 5.4, migrants have different reasons and strategies for selectively sharing information. All shared images and stories do comprise a piece of the elephant: singular aspects of a multiple truth.

Secondly, the practice of information searching brings me to the concept of trust. In the tale in Box 2, the elephant is depicted to the king, but - considering that the king has not seen the elephant himself - it is up to his own perception what he imagines the elephant to look like. Similarities can be noted in obtaining information regarding migration. Even when stories are truthfully shared with (aspiring) migrants, it is up to the receiver of the information how information is perceived and whether or not to trust it.

In chapter 4.2 I described how social networks empower migrants in obtaining trustworthy information, as these can adjust expectations. Along this chapter I will further research how information sharing and searching are continuous and collaborative efforts, based on dynamics between depicted truth and perceived trust, starting with the confrontation of imaginaries with reality.

5.2 Confrontation with reality - in Greece

“I saw a video on Facebook, where a guy is in a taxi and asks [the driver] to take him to New York City. There were holes and rubbish on the [roads], the taxi was avoiding them. The city was dark. The guy was so angry that he [started] beating the taxi driver. ‘I told you to take me to New York City!’ And the taxi driver said: ‘We are in New York City, this is it.’ But the guy didn’t believe him. [...] He had an idorea [about New York City] from movies or stories, books, this affects [him] a lot. [This video] was played by actors [...], but I think we all have ideas and imaginations.” - Mustafa [G], 07-07-2021

The man in the Facebook video had certain ideas of New York City that differed from the reality he observed from the taxi. Such clashes are what I aim to understand within this step of the Cycle (confrontation with reality). I will explore junctures along migrants’ journeys where imagined security, freedom and justice in Europe meet the reality of European migration policies. Where many participants of this study stated that they thought to find freedom, security and/or justice in Europe, their imaginaries clashed with realities of how they are treated by the EU. The clashes are arranged within three contrasts concerning imagined and lived security, justice, and freedom respectively. Although the three contrasts are described as three separated events in this subchapter, the junctures are often interconnected.

5.2.1 Looking for security versus being regarded as a security threat

Many respondents hoped to find security. However, they were generally un/welcomed as 'security threats' (Collins, 2020; Léonard & Kaunert, 2019). My respondents encountered security issues at the Turkish border, in Greek camps, and with the Greek police, which I will describe. In Europe there has been a significant increase in the securitization of refugees that resulted in threat perceptions of migrants bringing violence and crime. These fears consequently overpower Europe's will to provide safety (Klein, 2021). Instead, hardship is imposed on people who seek security in Europe, which endangers them. Fontana (2021) describes this discrepancy, where migrants move in search of protection despite facing hazards such as border enforcement and lack of legal mobility channels, as the 'human insecurity trap'. This trap has also been emphasized by my respondents, who had faced unsafe situations due to European regulations already at the border between Turkey and Greece. One such example is 32-year-old Akiva [G] from Afghanistan:

"The day that I was trying to attempt [crossing the Mediterranean sea], I had a friend in Turkey who said: 'Do you know the chances in the water? It's 10 out of 100. 10% survives, you choose.' And I had to do it. It was the only way. In Turkey I didn't have any chance, so here I had at least a 10% chance of survival. And I told my wife, and we hoped we would just be alive over there. We said goodbye [to each other] when we were just entering the boat. [...] <cries> Even when I think about those moments, it makes me start shouting. I feel the whole pain inside me. It was difficult." - Akiva [G], 08-07-2021

Even though Akiva was aware of the dangerous route he and his family were about to take, he hoped for a better life in Europe. He fled Afghanistan due to personal danger; he was looked for by both the Afghan government and the Taliban (which were not yet the same institutions in 2018). However, when he reached Europe he still had not found the security he had hoped for. Asking 28-year old Afghan respondent Abdel about his experiences in Greece, he answered:

"Greece is not very good. I didn't feel safe there. For the mental health it's also very bad there. After you have been in Greece, you will have a psychological problem. You will become crazy directly. I saw many people who became crazy." - Abdel [B], 01-06-2021

That experiences with insecurity can impact mental health, has also been endorsed by Omar (22) from Iraq. Abdel and Omar were both currently in Belgium. Abdel had not (yet) received asylum. Omar had, but still regretted his decision of traveling in/to Europe, *"because the psychological effects [are] horrible."* (30-04-2021).

In/security issues regarding lack of help from police officers were mentioned often by my respondents. When I asked Abdel if he felt safe in Greece he answered that he did not, as there were many fights in the camp on Lesbos between groups of residents with different nationalities (I will further elaborate on this in chapter 6): *"[P]eople go outside and drink during the night. [...] It's very dangerous and after 7 or 8 PM you can't go outside anymore. [...] And the police [were] not working."* (Abdel [B], 01-06-2021). Episodes in which the police were not responding to migrants' problems were experienced by Pari as well. At times that she needed help, police officers refused to intervene:

"They asked us for our ID cards. Then they said: Yes, refugee, that's not our case. Fights between refugees are normal in Greece. Go. [...] That is what we always heard from the police [in Greece]." - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

Akiva [G] confirmed Pari's feeling that Greek police officers do not take conflicts between migrants seriously, as *"[the police] are just laughing [at them]."* (08-07-2021).

As described above, the sense of security in Greece has many gradations; risk of drowning in the sea, not receiving proper police treatment, and developing psychological traumas are just some examples. Europe's own understanding of the discrepancy of putting migrants who fled danger in unsafe situations is questionable. In 2018, Commissioner Avramopoulos stated that *"Europe will continue to offer safety for those in need of protection"* (European Commission, 2018). It is however indisputable that Europe does not live up to its own expectations, nor to the expectations of migrants, regarding the provision of security. The next contrast encompasses expectations and realities of in/justice in Greece.

5.2.2 Looking for justice versus receiving unfair treatment

A contrast that encompasses imagined and lived in/justice in Europe regards hope for a fair asylum process, and the unjust treatments that many migrants actually receive. The notions of in/justice that I elaborate on include asylum, random exposure to good or bad luck, and unjust imprisonment. When I asked my respondents about their experiences with in/justice in Greece, three of them burst out laughing. *"This is the most hilarious [question] I have to [answer]."*, Rahima [G] uttered with amusement. *"I see [...] people who came in 2018, before me, who are still [in Greece]. Other families who came in 2020 are in Germany now. They got their ID and passport really fast, some without interviews, like single moms. This is not justice."* (05-07-2021). Rahima, also a single mom, had been in Greece for 2 years. She and her daughter obtained asylum, but due to a mistake in the asylum office concerning her daughter's date of birth in her refugee passport, they had to wait for it to be fixed for an indefinite period of time. Rahima felt unlucky. *"In Greece everything is by chance. [...] As you see [...] I am not lucky."* Rahima was not the only respondent who mentioned 'luck' and 'asylum' together in a sentence. Iraqi Anouar (34) obtained asylum in Greece, but had been waiting for an answer to his asylum request in Belgium since 2018. In Greece, he considered himself fortunate:

"I was the lucky one in the whole camp [...], to be the only one who got asylum in three months and just one interview. My lawyer was in shock, she said that no one does it in [...] such [a] short amount of time. Even my sister who had a child and [is] a special case [because] she has epilepsy." - Anouar [B], 02-06-2021

In theory, everyone fleeing serious harm or persecution in their own country should have the right to receive international protection (European Parliament, 2022). Despite this fundamental right, a significant number of respondents had been imprisoned based on unjustified reasons on their way to Europe where they aimed to ask asylum. Since the early 2000s, the EU has pressured Turkey to strengthen border controls between Turkey and Greece (Özçürümez & Şenses, 2011). All my respondents have traveled in/to Greece via Turkey, and many of them were arrested and confined by Turkish police officers executing European border policies (Erensu & Kaşlı, 2016). Kamil was one of them:

"[W]e [...] spent 10 days in [...] prison because the Turkish police caught us when we [tried] to leave the country illegally. [...] [W]hat was more difficult was that you know the reason that you are there, but just that no one gives you information or a judge or a legal process." - Kamil [B], 11-05-2021

After Turkey, migrants experience unjust imprisonment in Greece too. Omar volunteered as a translator in a hospital. One night he interpreted for a pregnant woman. When he walked back to the camp at 3 AM, the police drove by and asked him what he was doing outside at that hour. Omar explained himself, but they did not believe him. He got arrested and imprisoned for two days, without ever being told why. In line with Omar's experience, the police were often mentioned by my respondents regarding their sense of in/justice in Greece. Amin [G] (11-07-2021) mentioned that the

police would not help him if he would get robbed; an idea that is based on previously experienced discrimination. According to Amin, they would help him if he were Greek. My respondents did not just feel discriminated against by Greek police officers. Pari [B] (22-06-2021) tried to find work as a baker in Greece. She obtained eight pastry certificates in Iran. Nonetheless, when people looked at her ID card, they said not to have jobs for refugees.

From my respondents' stories, I can conclude that most of them were disappointed with their imaginaries of justice in Greece after having experienced injustice. Akiva summarizes this feeling in the following quote:

"As I came here I was expecting that in a European country at least I would have access to [...] basic human rights, which I didn't. And that was the most serious point that made me very disappointed about [the] European Union or Greece, which is a member of the EU [...] [M]ost of the time we have the image that it's Europe [...] who are the human rights defenders." - Akiva [G], 08-07-2021

Akiva added that he imagined having access to basic human needs. This sense of injustice overlaps with sensing unfreedom, which I will now elaborate on.

5.2.3 Looking for freedom versus being physically and mentally restricted

Regarding the reality confrontation with un/freedom in Europe, many respondents' experiences can be linked to the European 'politics of mobilities', designed to control the movement of 'unwanted' migrants (Cresswell, 2010; De Haas et al., 2020; Ernste et al., 2012; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Shamir, 2005). The consequences of this mobility regime unfold into a twofold contrast, where migrants hope to find freedom (chapter 4.1.1) but find themselves physically and mentally unfree. Mustafa described this sensation as following:

"I [didn't] feel free at all. Where is the freedom if I am not making my own choices? I don't have choices. Where is the freedom if I had to stay in Chios for two years [waiting] for my decision? [...] [T]he [ID] card they gave me [said] 'geographical restriction'. [...] I came to Chios and was restricted in my movement. So where is the freedom? It's physical freedom but mental freedom too." - Mustafa [G], 07-07-2021

Mustafa felt restricted on a physical and mental level when immobility was imposed on him on the Greek island Chios. When migrants experience periods of immobility, imaginaries of 'possible lives' elsewhere can help to escape current space and time (Appadurai, 1996; Cangià & Zittoun, 2020). When I worked on the Greek island Samos in 2019, I witnessed the effect of mobility restrictions on imaginaries of possible freedom elsewhere through the response of migrants that received an 'open card'. An open card gave migrants the possibility to travel to Greece's mainland. Whereas they had been geographically restricted by the fences around the camp as well as the sea surrounding the island, I witnessed their happiness. According to them, their freedom and mobility would increase. Akiva was one of them:

"[O]n the island [the other migrants] used to describe Athens as a heaven. Even now, when someone's [card] is open and they can go to Athens, they throw parties for people and dancing and- The way I saw people enjoying this moment, I used to believe that Athens must be a real heaven, because maybe I am not in a good place now, but as soon as I go to Athens it will be the heaven I was looking for. [...] [T]he day I received [the] open card I bought 4 bottles of Red Label [whisky] for all the guys and threw a party and everyone celebrated that I finally [would go] to Athens. And as I reached Athens I was like 'God dammit, why did I buy those bottles?', because there was nothing to celebrate." - Akiva [G], 08-07-2021

Akiva's imaginaries disappointed him when he arrived at the mainland. There, migrants are generally still restricted to abide by the mobility regime. After Abdel [B] received his open card on the Greek island Lesbos, he was transported to a camp on the mainland. He was not allowed to leave this camp, and felt imprisoned again. Abdel joined a running team so he could periodically escape the immobility in the camp: *"I don't want to stay at home, I want to be free."* (01-06-2021).

A problem often described by my respondents was a lack of basic needs during periods of immobility. At times of needing shelter (e.g. when becoming homeless after finishing the asylum process) or food (e.g. when distributed camp food expired), this affected not only their physical im/mobility, but mental im/mobility too. I will explain this with the case of Amin. Amin never planned to stay in Greece, but had been forced to stay for four years already when I interviewed him. He was young (20) and reckless when he traveled to Greece and lost most of his money to a smuggler who fooled him, as well as to drugs. Unable to continue his travels to the Netherlands, he applied for asylum in Greece. The Greek authorities rejected his case twice. Amin started to live in illegality:

"My plan was to study. But when I came [to Greece], the situation was difficult. So studying was the last option that [I] could do at that moment. You have to feed yourself. [...] [I]n these kinds of countries you can't plan something. You can plan something if you have a job. [...] When you don't have any money it's difficult. [...] I went to language classes, but at the same time I was homeless [...]. I had to look for a place, I didn't have time. [...] [I]t was kind of impossible for me to focus on many things. [...] I wanted to study in another country. I didn't have the money to move, so I stayed." - Amin [G], 11-07-2021

Amin expressed that a lack of basic needs made him discard his study plans. His first priority was to keep himself alive in a country he had previously regarded as a transit place. Amin lacked the freedom of mobility, money and time to obtain the personal development he wished for, resulting in involuntary mental immobility.

The examples of un/freedom in this subchapter regularly overlap with the issued situations of in/security and in/justice, and the other way around. Migrants seem forced to deal with their lived realities that clash with imaginaries, which reduces their autonomy. The next subchapter will cover the consecutive step in the Cycle, where migrants adapt to Europe's realities.

5.3 Adaptation to lived experiences - in Greece

Migrants in Greece are generally confronted with different realities than imagined. I aim to understand how these clashes influence the imaginaries of a Europe they still hope to find, while experiencing the first difficulties that Europe imposes on them. Reality clashes force migrants to cope with new situations, such as involuntary immobility, bureaucratic procedures, and mental health issues. In Fontanari's (2021) research, migrants underlined the need to be active subjects in regaining control over their lives and aspirations by 'moving on'. Moving on was not just referred to as movement in space, but mostly to movement in time which they created in their own minds. When people feel that they are somehow stuck, they start contemplating the necessity of physically going elsewhere (Hage, 2005). Looking forward, literally and figuratively, helped escape the dominance of present stuckness. Even though they were forced to deal with stuckness at Europe's external border, my respondents still tried to retrieve useful and trustworthy information for a next phase with regained mobility. A notable response to finding ways of navigating through the realities of life as an 'unwanted' migrant in Greece is changing adaptation strategies regarding perception and trust. I observed three adjustments in coping with lived reality clashes after the arrival in Europe.

First, migrants become more critical and cautious with trusted information along their journeys. One telling illustration comes from Akiva, whose disappointment regarding obtaining an

'open card' was described in chapter 5.2. In my conversation with him, he explained how his imaginaries kept on disappointing him time after time:

"I heard so many things about Turkey [...]. [Then] I came there [and] the people who [traveled] together with us [...] described [...] Greece as a heaven. Like a safe and evergreen heaven. But it was nothing like that. And on the [Greek] island [people] used to describe Athens as a heaven. [...] But [in Athens] I wanted to go back to the island [...] when I saw that there [are] no opportunities, no services [...]." - Akiva [G], 08-07-2021

I wondered if Akiva trusted information from strong and weak ties in potential destination countries. He answered that he has lost belief in their stories, after having been confronted with different realities in the past so often. Akiva had become more critical towards information, as disappointments increasingly reduced the credibility of his own imaginaries. This brings me to the next adjustment strategy.

Secondly, migrants continue to look for information that gives them a trustworthy idea of other places, and develop information validation methods. Migrants continue to use ICTs en route (Frouws et al., 2016). Facebook groups are used by migrants as online platforms that enhance agency by sharing experiences and by challenging imaginaries that are depicted by, for example, smugglers. These online spaces of information sharing and searching are essential as they enlarge people's networks and provide collaborative migration efforts. Social media enables people to get in touch with strangers anywhere around the world. An ambivalent aspect of information on online platforms comes with trust (chapter 4.2), for which validation strategies are used. I encountered one such strategy, which I call 'validation through multiplicity'. It is explained through quotes of Akram:

"If [...] more than three people indifferent [Facebook] groups or in the same group or different time zones [...] share the same information, you can trust it." - Akram [N], 17-05-2021

And Musa:

"[W]hen you have one story, it's debatable. But when you have 1000 stories with similar contexts, you can somehow isolate the wrong ones and filter the right ones [...]." - Musa [N], 18-05-2021

Validation through multiplicity differs from Dekker et al. (2018, p.8)'s 'validation through triangulation of online sources'. Whereas Dekker et al. (2018)'s triangulation strategy concerns validating online information with *external* offline or online sources, the multiplicity strategy validates online information through sources *within* the same online platform. As quoted above, Musa and Akram found multiple affirmative stories within the same Facebook group. The idea behind validation through multiplicity is that a story's trustworthiness increases when more people share it. Apart from validation strategies for social media, migrants use information validation strategies on site as well. In Athens I talked with Vassiliki Mitsiniotou and Nizar Amri who both work for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), an established international NGO. They told me that the DRC has field staff in camps all around Greece, who formally provide residents with answers to their questions:

"When it comes to trust, we have established a good communication line with refugees and asylum seekers in Greece [...]. [...] Our field staff has [a] daily presence in the camps [...]. Asylum seekers ask about Greece and the asylum procedure here, because apart from having their own asylum case examined here, some may also want to be reunited with a family member outside Greece [...]." - Vassiliki Mitsiniotou, 19-07-2021

As illustrated in the quote above, camps are physical spaces where information can be validated through NGOs. Online validation through multiplicity, as well as validation on site, can both be regarded as coping mechanisms to deal with struggles regarding trust and perception. Within this

struggle, migrants continually adjust their imaginaries of Europe. This act connects with the next strategy.

A *third* coping mechanism I observed regarded reshaping imaginaries. This mechanism makes imaginaries intrinsically mobile, which preserves hope. When I asked my six respondents in Greece without asylum status about their expectations of potential destination countries (all in Western Europe), the majority mentioned the word ‘hope’ in their answer. Hope fuels motivation, and draws from a migrant’s sense of pathways (meeting the desired goal) and agency (Koikkalainen, Kyle & Nykänen, 2020). Some of them specifically mentioned to hope for more freedom, justice, and/or security in future places:

“I would really like to go to another country. [...] Because right now I don’t have any safety or security. [...] [O]ther European countries are better than Greece. I am sure. I am hopeful that they are better than Greece.” - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

Unfulfilled imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Greece, and developed hope of finding it in other European countries, may be regarded as moving imaginaries of Europe. When I asked Pari [B] if she regards Greece as Europe, she firmly answered: “*No, no, no.*” (22-06-2021). Halil [N] indirectly hinted the same: “*Many people are following the way: Greece, Italy, and then Europe.*” (11-06-2021), indicating that Greece and Italy are not Europe. Pari and Halil seemed to have shifted their ideas of Europe from Greece to other European countries due to reality encounters in Greece. In chapter 6 I will further elaborate on moving imaginaries and hope.

A *fourth* coping mechanism regards the formation of new ties. Random connections can differentiate between short-term and long-lasting ties, and between uninfluential and life-changing ones (D’Angelo, 2021). In chapter 5.2.3 I elaborated on how migrants share imaginaries about places elsewhere with each other in order to escape stuckness, giving the example of perceptions about the ‘open card’ on the Greek islands. In chapter 5.5 I will further elaborate on the coping mechanism of forming new ties, and the influence on perceived information on migrants’ imaginaries.

Within the practices of coping with and adapting to realities in Europe, migrants continue to share information with their networks. In the next subchapter I will discuss how sharing practices change when migrants cope with un/expected difficulties.

5.4 Sharing information with networks - in Greece

Imaginaries of Europe are continuously adjusted to reality along the route. This forces migrants to reposition themselves not only within their imaginaries, but also within the decision what to share with their networks. A social network analysis of migration journeys allows us to rebalance the accounts of migratory experiences by putting the social, the individual and the relational dimensions at the center (D’Angelo, 2021). Many researchers point out that connections to home are highly important to the wellbeing of migrants (Boccagni, 2015). Strong ties usually involve relatively intimate and frequent interaction over time, generating higher trust than weak ties (Lin, 1999, in Moroşanu, 2016). Migrants navigate between trust and precarity regarding obtained information, but the practice of information sharing comes with struggles too. At any point along a migrant’s journey, they have to decide what part of their lives to depict. In the tale of the blind men and the elephant (Box 2), the king received multiple depictions of what an elephant is, which all differ from one another. My respondents mentioned being rather considerate with their information sharing practices. I asked all of them about the particular information they shared, with whom they shared this information, and why they shared this particular element. I extracted a few interesting approaches to sharing information, based on my respondents’ personal concerns.

5.4.1 Varied reasons behind sharing information

There are a number of reasons behind sharing certain information with social networks. I encountered two trends concerning communicating the truthfulness of depicted lives in Europe. The *first* one relates to avoiding encountered difficulties. Abdel [B] explains why. He takes me back to Greece, to the day he tried to enter a truck set to go to Italy. Abdel was discovered and beaten up by five police officers. He never shared this with his family, because “*they would become angry*” at him and “*speak badly about it*” (01-06-2021). During the whole journey, Abdel decided to just tell them that he was doing well and to avoid topics regarding encountered problems. Amin had avoided talking about difficulties for reasons related to empathy with his family:

“[...] I don’t want to make [my family] worried. [...] Maybe I told them when the hard days were already past and I was in a better situation. I don’t want to worry them, it’s not helpful. What can they do for me?” - Amin [G], 11-07-2021

Amin actively tried to not worry his family. This is a tendency I encountered more often during interviews with respondents. Not worrying their families was the main reason for not sharing difficulties for respondents in Greece. In Western Europe, by contrast, respondents usually mentioned not wanting to share personal difficulties for reasons like “*no matter how hard it is for me [in the Netherlands], [...] compared to what happens in [Syria] it is the most easy.*” (Nazier [N], 20-05-2021).

The latter is in line with a *second* trend regarding sharing experiences with strong ties. This trend concerns a difference in information sharing with parents on the one hand, and with siblings and friends on the other hand. Soufian exemplified his siblings:

“[...] [T]o my brother and sister I told everything, I just lied to my mom and dad, because I don’t want to cause them more worries.” - Soufian [G], 06-07-2021

Anouar did the same, but regarding his friends:

“[To] my close friends I tell [...] that it’s difficult. To my family I can’t say everything. My parents are old and when I would tell them my story they would be sad and my mom already has a heart problem. I don’t want to worry them.” - Anouar [B], 02-06-2021

Soufian and Anouar predicted that their parents would worry more, which made them highlight the positive aspects of their lives. The main reason seemed to be protection, as several respondents’ parents live in hardship and/or are already worried about their migrating children. The two trends regarding information sharing practices with strong ties show that sharing seems to be based on personal decisions, taking into account possible negative judgment and receivers’ personal situations.

Some respondents wished to share their lives with acquaintances collectively rather than individually. Somaye [Fr], a 24-year-old Afghan woman whom I had met in Samos and who had just received a residence permit in France, explained: “*I am not calling them [individually] to say that I have a very good life.*” (17-06-2021). Rahima [G] stressed that although she posts content of “*nice places or [...] nature*” on social media, she does not aim to promote European countries online: “*I never try to convince people to come.*” (05-07-2021). Information sharing practices on social media platforms can be observed as collaborative efforts to inform others about Europe. After every interview, I asked my respondents if they allowed me to follow them on Facebook or Instagram. Only one respondent uploaded general pictures of Greek camps in his Instagram stories (that last for 24 hours), but these pictures were not depicting his personal life. The rest of the shared content was pointing out positive elements, as well as perceived successes. Rahima, for example, posted pictures of her and her daughter walking out of an airplane in Germany, after 2.5 years of waiting for their refugee passports in Greece.

The truthfulness of shared information by respondents differed according to the recipient of the information, and according to individual and collective sharing too. Many respondents opened up about their tendency to color their lives a little more positive than it actually was, for reasons varying from fear of angry reactions to empathy, and depending on sharing information individually or collectively. Positive depictions, however, can impact the imaginaries of recipients.

5.4.2 Perceptions and expectations

This part will provide an elaboration on the previously discussed emergence of perceptions of Europe in chapter 4.1, although that solely comprised the perceptions of (aspiring) migrants. Now I will expand on information recipients in home countries as a whole.

Mainly depicting rather positive elements of one's life or trajectory as a migrant may lead to certain perceptions from the recipients side. I discussed this topic with Amal Miri, researcher with the PERCEPTIONS project (2021). As part of her research, Amal had spoken with many professionals in the humanitarian field. She told me that these professionals had stressed the importance of nuancing the influence of positive information on recipients, for three main reasons. *First*, influence is much dependent on time. Migrants who have been traveling for years may start struggling with concealing or disguising certain truths to their social networks. *Second*, after a while, some migrants may have more fulfilling lives than before. In this case, their narratives can change even more positively compared with previous stories. Amal exemplified this: *"Then they go back in time, [sharing information] like: 'it's really going better with me now compared with last year.'"* *Third*, the professionals noticed that the longer migrants had been in Europe, the more honest they dared to be with their social networks. This contrasts with the beginning of their trajectories, when people can feel overwhelmed and rather choose not to share negative aspects of their realities.

Perceptions also exist as expectations. Expectations with respect to financial support is generally rooted in the idea that geographical mobility improves a migrant's socio-economic status, but conditions in new places often make these expectations impossible to realize (Belloni, 2020). Consequently, migrants try to conceal the negative sides of their migration journey (Baldassar, 2007), on which I elaborated in chapter 5.4.1. On top of that, people in home countries find it hard to imagine their family member, friend or acquaintance struggling in countries of destination (Van Meeteren, 2012). This creates a gap between expectations and reality, which can lead to tensions and misunderstanding between a migrant and their social network back home (Belloni, 2020).

Rahima shared an illustrative story concerning this gap. Her aunt's cousin lived in France. According to Rahima's aunt, this cousin had sent 1000 euros to his own family in Iran. When Rahima's aunt heard about this money transaction, she called Rahima to ask for money as well:

"[W]hen my aunt asked me why I didn't send her any money, I told her that when you have a positive decision [...], you have to live by yourself without help from the authorities. I barely have money for myself." - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

Rahima believed it to be impossible that this cousin had sent his family this amount of money, in comparison with her own financial situation. But, in her aunt's perception Rahima was *"overusing and spending too much money"* (05-07-2021). Rahima, however, regarded her aunt's expectations as the result of information that was not based on reality. Regardless of the truth around the money transfer from France to Iran, Rahima's aunt's expectations about Rahima's presence in Europe were real.

The influence of positively depicted lives on recipients can fuel their migratory aspirations or expectations towards someone who has already migrated. However, such impact can change over time and therefore needs to be nuanced by researchers.

5.4.3 Cognitive dissonance

Sometimes, my respondents were contacted by people they did not yet know. (Aspiring) migrants asked them questions regarding their journeys. In these cases, my respondents did share stories with these new connections about difficult lived experiences, hoping to create space for them to make a well thought-out migratory decision. Despite answering truthfully in these situations, respondents like Rahima were doubtful whether or not their stories were believed by the recipients:

“Some friends told me that they didn’t want to stay in Iran for some reason and they asked me questions about money and smugglers. I tell them: ‘Please don’t come. Here it’s not good.’ [...] But they think that I am jealous and that I don’t want them to come here. They don’t trust me. I said: [...] ‘You’re asking me and I tell you the truth. If you can live in a tent and face every problem that you don’t even think of now, don’t come. But I don’t know if they believe me.’” - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

In this conversation, Rahima addresses the issue of mistrust between migrants and their connections with the places of origin. Maite Vermeulen, who writes for Dutch journalistic platform *De Correspondent*, describes the above as ‘cognitive dissonance’. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological discomfort that we experience when we encounter facts, ideas or images that contradict our world view (Vermeulen, 2018). This concept partially elaborates on the aforementioned perceptions of Alan and Mustafa in chapter 4.1.2, who imagined the situation in Greece not to be as bad as in their home countries and preferred the ‘bad’ over the ‘worst’. (Aspiring) migrants develop the idea to leave on the basis of a partial and subjective understanding of reality. Their interpretation is grounded in a social context and exposure to signs of a better life, which creates a mental disposition that favors migration (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). Hence, it is not just migrants in Europe who might be ‘bending’ the truth by emphasizing positive aspects of their lives; aspiring migrants tend to discard information that conflicts with their positive imaginaries of Europe just as well. The practice of cognitive dissonance triggers a new question: if my respondents are conscious of the fact that their stories might not be believed, (how) does that influence what they share with (aspiring) migrants? Do they anticipate a possible response? Anouar and Rahima felt being perceived as jealous, while they actually aimed to depict a bigger truth and meant to inform. I could imagine that experiences of not being trusted create tension between sharing migrants and receiving (aspiring) migrants regarding truth and trust. I regard this as another example of the continuous repositioning of migrants who are on the one hand looking for credible information and on the other hand looking for affirmations of their imaginaries. In the next subchapter I will further elaborate on the perception and acts of migrants who obtain information from other migrants in places they might want to go to, as well as from other information sources they encounter when experiencing Europe’s realities.

5.5 Perceiving information - in Greece

Whereas the previous subchapter described sharing practices of people with lived experiences in Europe, this step in the Cycle represents the subsequent phase. In this phase, I will show how migrants perceive newly obtained information. I started my empirical chapters with the step of ‘perceiving information’ before migrants encounter realities in Europe (chapter 4.1). With this subchapter, we are back at ‘perceiving information’, but we enter a new cycle. Migrants now perceive information with reality confrontations in the back of their minds. The quest for information about other places continues, as well as the development of migrant networks. I will explain how migrant networks develop and expand due to new encounters during phases of immobility and how these encounters affect imaginaries of Europe. The new connections that are created during immobility make dealing with the now a bit easier, and exchanged stories in spaces of involuntary immobility help migrants look forward.

In chapter 5.3, I expounded on formal encounters with NGOs in camps to validate information and influence imaginaries. Despite these formal encounters, migrants have informal encounters with NGO employees and volunteers in camps. Many respondents mentioned that informal stories shared by NGO volunteers and employees have been of influence on their imaginaries. Mustafa [G] shared how his imaginaries of other European countries developed through listening to their conversations: *"When they [were] [...] talking about where their next holiday [would] be. [...] Everything that we are missing are things they don't even think about"* (07-07-2021). Soufian [G] (06-07-2021) has worked with many Western European volunteers during his stay on Samos. He found Dutch volunteers to be *"very kind"* and Germans *"very organized"*, and stated that these experiences reflected in his understanding of these country's situations. Rafih [Fi], a 39-year-old Afghan journalist who fled his country due to persecution, agreed (*"We could learn from [Dutch NGO employees] how life is in the Netherlands, how the government is doing, how the [asylum] procedure is."* (12-07-2021)), but stressed that he doubts to what extent this influences migratory decisions of people, since *"[m]ost of the refugees who are coming [already] know the situation in the countries."* (12-07-2021).

Migrants do not only develop new relationships with NGO members. Camps are good examples of spaces where infrastructural practices are created and imaginaries are shared among camp residents. Migrants' imaginaries continue to develop through creating new connections with fellow migrants on site. An example given in chapter 5.2 are migrants' expectations of receiving an open card, a condition to leave the Greek islands. These imaginaries were fueled by stories of other migrants on the islands, some of whom had already moved to the Greek mainland. The open card represented a gateway to regain mobility to people who felt stuck in time and space.

Connections that started during periods of immobility often proceed to exist. *"It's not the people who migrate, but the networks."* (Tilly, 1990, p.79). Alan [G] and Pari [B] encountered other migrants in Greece who then regained mobility and moved to Western Europe, while Alan and Pari stayed in Greece. They continued to exchange experiences through social media and phone calls. Alan doubted the completeness of his ties' stories of Western Europe:

"[T]hey probably face difficulties and don't show them." - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

And Pari mentioned her skepticism about lives that are depicted as easy:

"It is just thoughts of people, I think. Some [said] that France easily gives you a positive decision [...]. But I don't believe in that. I believe you have to work hard to get something." - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

The disbelief described above may be an example of migrants becoming more cautious and critical with obtained information (the *first* adaptation strategy in chapter 5.3). The development of new networks that consist of, for instance, other migrants and NGO employees is an illustration of the *fourth* adaptation strategy to 'deal with the now'. New encounters can transit into strong ties (Ryan, 2016), and may fuel imaginaries of places elsewhere - despite their perceived trustworthiness. Mustafa illustrated how both moving imaginaries (the *third* strategy in chapter 5.3) and cognitive dissonance (chapter 5.4) made him discard negative stories that were shared with him by friends in Western Europe:

"[When] I was in Turkey [...] [I] asked [friends in Greece] about the situation in Greece, and they would tell me the reality. But I [thought]: 'no that's bullshit, you don't want me to come.' But now, if I call my friends in Germany and they tell me that the situation in Germany is super bad, I will be like: 'no that's bullshit, I will see it myself, it will be fine, I will get a lot of money and a job and I will be integrated.'" - Mustafa [G], 07-07-2021

Mustafa continued hoping to realize his unfulfilled imaginaries elsewhere in Europe, even though these imaginaries are contradicted by his friends' stories. This illustrates the extent to which perceiving

information is entangled with hope. New, often random encounters can be of major influence on the development of migratory imaginaries. How migrants act on their perceived imaginaries will be scrutinized in chapter 6.

5.6 Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have observed how colored imaginaries of Europe turned gray. Migrants encounter their first ‘confrontations with Europe’s realities’ (chapter 5.2), ‘adapt to these realities’ (chapter 5.3), ‘share information with their networks’ (chapter 5.4), and continue to ‘perceive information’ about possible elsewhere (chapter 5.5).

The grayness symbolizes how migrants are forced in a position of struggle within truth (information sharing) and trust (information searching). As they move through phases of im/mobility and experience reality clashes, my respondents continuously (re-)positioned themselves within their changing imaginaries about Europe. Linking the reality clashes with the imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe, we observed that all were embedded in contrasts between imaginaries and lived realities. This gave insights into how adaptation strategies are developed to cope with realities. By becoming more cautious and critical towards obtained information, migrants protect themselves from potential disappointments in future experiences en route. Apart from that, migrants use validation strategies to decrease the risk of obtaining untrustworthy information from online platforms. Unfulfilled imaginaries of freedom, security and justice due to different realities align with the development of hope. Hope fuels motivation to move, and respondents that experienced unfulfilled imaginaries in Greece shift their horizons to other European countries. Coping with reality also comes with connecting to new ties, which can sometimes develop into strong ties over time. Sharing imaginaries about possible elsewhere helps escape current immobility and stuckness, by creating mental mobility. Gaps between expectations of ties in home countries and migrants’ realities can lead to misunderstandings and tensions. Many migrants try to conceal negative aspects of their new lives. Respondents had several different strategies regarding information sharing practices, and all of the respondents seemed conscious about which depicted aspects of their lived realities they shared and with whom. They sometimes encountered cognitive dissonance when sharing information with aspiring migrants.

Migrants are obliged to deal with unexpected realities and imposed periods of immobility, while endeavoring fulfillment of their imagined lives in Europe. Whether it is on the border between Turkey and Greece, Greek islands and mainland, or in other European countries, they face reality clashes. The Cycle revolves as the journey continues. As people move, social networks develop with them, while functioning as facilitating platforms that enhance information availability. Migrants keep on repositioning themselves between trust and truth, while searching for reliable information about possible elsewhere. In the next chapter, I will explore how migrants regain autonomy over their trajectories after experiencing reality clashes, and how hope and reasons to (not) continue to migrate develop along a migrant’s journey.

Chapter 6: Recoloring Europe – imaginaries after Greece

“I see Belgium as a rainbow.” - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

07-07-2021, Athens - I meet Mustafa near the metro station at Victoria Square, a place known for the many refugees that gather here to socialize. It's a hot and sunny day. Adults sit in the shadow of the few trees, their children play and run around. Mustafa and I will take a metro to the airport from here.

Mustafa faces deportation to Turkey after two rejections to his asylum commission. He has been living on Chios island for two years, where he worked for an NGO. He did not plan to leave Chios - he loved its nature and had many friends - but after his second rejection he felt forced to take the ferry to Athens and come up with a plan. When I first met Mustafa at the apartment of mutual friends he seemed tired. His Chios colleagues in Athens, of which some my friends, had offered to host him until he had decided about his next step. This gave him some rest and time. Intrinsically, he wished to go back to Chios, to re-apply for asylum, and to continue his life on the island. However, his case was likely to be rejected again, as he did not have new information to strengthen his case with. It would probably be better to go to another country and retry it there.

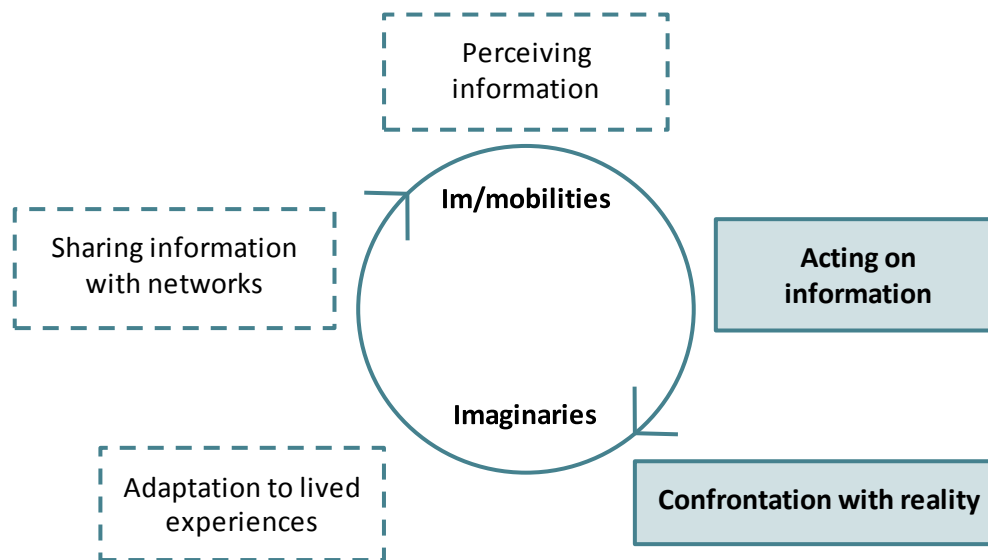
A few days after our first encounter, Mustafa involved me in his plan of potential mobility. He had been in touch with a smuggler, someone who offered traveling services to Western Europe for 5000 euros. Mustafa had already collected 3000 euros, and was waiting for a friend to lend him the required last 2000 euros. This route to a yet unknown destination would be by airplane infrastructure, and Mustafa shared that he had never been to an airport before. I asked Mustafa if he would feel more comfortable if he would have been at an airport before leaving. He said yes, and we decided that I would show him around.

Upon arrival at the airport, Mustafa verbalizes that he feels tense with the security guards in sight. He asks me not to point at anything, as he wants to avoid drawing any kind of attention. As we walk through the airport, I explain the actions to conduct, trying to not use my hands. Suddenly Mustafa asks me a particular question: could I bring his expensive camera and lenses to the Netherlands? In his camera bag, he also keeps eight passports of family members from Syria. I briefly think about his question. If the airport security stops me and finds the eight Syrian passports, they will ask me questions for sure. However, the chances for me to be stopped are much lower than Mustafa's, since my passport is Dutch and my skin is white. I agree, and one week later, I am on the airplane to Amsterdam with Mustafa's bag in the luggage compartment above me.

In this chapter, I conclude my empirical section with two more steps in the 'cycle of changing imaginaries': 'acting on information' and 'confrontation with reality'. The vignette above illustrates Mustafa's preparations for the next step in his migration trajectory. He felt forced to move from Greece, but tried to retain autonomy over his movements, developed a plan to escape the mobility regime and used his network to help him (e.g. financially, for shelter, and for information). Mustafa 'acted on' obtained information that fueled his imaginaries about the next possible destination. A destination that seemed to be more colorful and bright than his current, gray reality.

In Greece, my respondents had their first confrontations with Europe's realities, adapted to them, continued to share their lives with their networks, and perceived information in new contexts of lived realities in Greece. The next step, described in chapter 6.1, is to act on their changed imaginaries. In chapter 5.3 I suggested that imaginaries are intrinsically mobile, which preserves hope. When imaginaries are not met by realities, hope fuels motivation to fulfill imaginaries elsewhere, which draws from a migrant's agency (Koikkalainen et al., 2020). 'Acting on' in the 'cycle of changing imaginaries' encompasses the act of (re-)taking autonomy over one's own migratory trajectory, with decisions partially based on perceived information (see chapter 5.4). Now I elaborate on the reasons why some of my respondents were (still) in Greece, and why other respondents had been able to take another step and travel to countries in Western Europe. In chapter 6.2 I describe their reality

confrontations in Western Europe (Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Finland), and stress the impact of legal statuses on people's imaginaries of freedom, security and justice in Europe.



6.1 Acting on information - in Greece

Imaginaries about Europe constantly develop and move as migrants encounter Europe's realities. I observe the imaginaries about 'possible elsewhere' in the light of the autonomy of migration approach. The autonomy of migration approach sees migrants as self-organizers who develop their own trajectories and logistics, using social aspects of mobility (Bishop, 2012; English et al., 2019; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe & Andrijasevic, 2007). By creating alternative trajectories, migrants challenge and reshape borders that are forced upon them by the state (English et al., 2019; Karakayali & Tsianos, 2005; Martignoni & Papadopoulos, 2014; Mezzadra, 2011; Moulier Boutang, 1998; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2007; Papadopoulos et al., 2008). I seek to understand how migrants navigate, (re-)take autonomy, and thus 'act on' information and perceptions through imposed im/mobility and what the role of their imaginaries is on these processes. The outcomes of my research made me decide to elaborate on this step by touching three elements: mobility regardless of recognized status (6.1.1), stepwise migration (6.1.2), and the role of luck and opportunities in the development of alternative migration routes (6.1.3). This arrangement allows me to describe the multiplicity of influential factors in 'acting on information'.

6.1.1 Mobility regardless of recognized status

Four out of the sixteen respondents located in Western European countries had been granted a residence permit already in Greece. However, none of them had decided to stay in Greece and traveled on instead.

Three out of eight respondents located in Greece had also been granted a residence permit. One was still awaiting the decision of his case, but planned to move to Germany. Three respondents' cases had been rejected, and they aimed to leave Greece as well (Table 2). Why did all my respondents leave or aim to leave Greece, regardless of the outcomes of their asylum claims?

Table 2: Asylum statuses of respondents in Greece

Name	Asylum status
Soufian	Waiting
Alan	Residence permit
Akiva	Residence permit
Rahima	Residence permit
Amin	Request rejected
Mustafa	Request rejected
Rhayze	Request rejected

The answer could be related to imagined opportunities elsewhere. The link between migration and imaginaries is established through the identification of possibilities about future lives in another place (Salazar, 2011). Erdal & Oeppen (2018, p.985) similarly describe this as ‘improvement’: to what extent are migrants able to enjoy a reasonable life quality without migrating? Being ‘here’ increased the longing to reach ‘there’ as new opportunities appeared on the horizon (Schapendonk, 2020). Greece was not regarded as ‘Europe’ by Pari and Halil (chapter 5.3). The imaginaries my respondents had developed about certain opportunities and living standards in Europe were not met by Greek realities, and therefore shifted to other countries. For instance, migrants who applied for asylum in Greece are allowed to stay in camps or government-provided housing to wait for their asylum decisions. They receive food, have access to medical facilities, and receive a cash card, all often provided by aid groups. In some camps, children are able to attend school classes and adults can join language courses. But, once they have been granted asylum, most of the support stops. Migrants then lose the monthly cash assistance on their cash cards and have only thirty days to find housing before they become homeless (Andrea, 2022). In Greece, it seems a penalty to become a recognized asylum seeker. The case of Rahima, with asylum granted but still awaiting her passport, illustrates this struggle:

“[...] [T]hey stopped my money after I got my ID [card]. And also they kicked me out of the camp. ‘Go and find a house and start your life’. It’s [been] about two years that I am here, [and] I didn’t learn any Greek [...], because of many problems: because of the quarantine, because of corona, because of my situation in the camp [...]” - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

Not speaking Greek complicated Rahima’s quest to find a job, but she did speak English. This facilitated her with a job as interpreter for an international NGO in Athens:

“[...] it’s only [...] twelve hours a week. So my salary is about 240 euro [a month]. With 240 euro I have to rent a house, pay for everything, so it’s not possible.” - Rahima [G], 05-07-2021

Having just thirty days to become financially independent without speaking the local language is almost impossible. At least, Rahima managed to get a job with a non-Greek organization. The same strategy to independence accounted for Alan. I met Alan on Samos in 2019, when he was still awaiting the result of his asylum request. After I left, he received a positive answer, and due to his connections and volunteering experience with NGOs on Samos he found a paid job with an NGO on Lesbos. His Greek ID card, which was only valid for one year (Angloinfo, n.d.), expired, *“but when I have the new one, I will definitely move from Greece, insha’Allah.”* I asked him why. He had a job, after all? The answer: improvement and opportunities.

“[E]ven though I am learning [...] and working here and having an income, I feel that I am wasting my young years, because I just want to learn something at first. That’s why my long-term goal is to go to university in a country. [According to] my information the universities in Germany are much better, but getting asylum there is very difficult. So the plan is to [...] start

university [in Germany] with my Greek documents. If not, I will start again to seek asylum in Germany. ” - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

Thanks to his job, Alan had been able to sustain himself and the urgency to move to another place was less pressuring than for other respondents in Greece. However, due to the fact that he worked instead of studying made him feel as if he was wasting his young years. Alan wished to develop himself through education before starting a career. Like many other respondents, Alan did not fulfill his desired (educational) opportunities in Greece. This brings me to the notion of fragmented migration.

6.1.2 Fragmented migration

Most respondents migrated to Greece due to security reasons. Although security encompasses many dimensions, and my respondents did not find the security they had hoped for (chapter 5.2.1), they were not in acute danger anymore in Greece. Erdal and Oeppen (2018) describe how migrants move within the ‘forced-voluntary spectrum’ during their migration trajectories. One can feel forced to leave a place, but may encounter situations along the route that lead to decisions to move again based on circumstances anywhere between force and voluntary. My respondents’ situation in Greece did not feel able to fulfill certain expectations and hopes. Hence, a new phase began. Being in relative safety allowed them to reflect, investigate, and decide about what they wished for now. Bram Frouws, head of the Mixed Migration Center, shared the following during our Zoom conversation:

“[T]his second phase of migration is in a certain sense comparable to the migration of so-called economic migrants. Because then it is less about where you have fled from [...], but more about where you want to go and what your aspirations are for your life or for your children, education, work opportunities.” - Bram Frouws, 10-06-2021

Acting on these reflections that result in new migratory movements is in the academic world often referred to as ‘onward’, ‘stepwise’ or ‘transit’ migration (Collins, 2020; Della Puppa, Montagna & Kofman, 2021; Schapendonk, 2020). In the case of EU policy making, ‘secondary movement’ is a popular frame (Schapendonk, 2020). However, these terms seem to imply a trajectory with a beginning and end, from A to B (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). Erdal and Oeppen (2018) state that stepwise migration usually occurs among people without legal documents as they seek opportunities of legality, though even my respondents with legal statuses in Greece aimed to leave. The process of migration trajectories seems to be more complex than the idea of ‘steps’ that just follow each other ‘onward’. I wonder how connotations of migration fit into a concept like the ‘cycle of changing imaginaries’. Whereas stepwise, onward or transit migration considers migration a linear process, the Cycle gives a more diffuse and turbulent idea of migration routes. In a process of continuous confrontations with realities, imaginary adjustments, and precarity of available information, the Cycle shows the complexity of migrants’ need to constantly reposition themselves in the temporal order of reality. Collyer’s (2010) idea of ‘fragmented migration’ aligns better with this perspective, as it emphasizes that trajectories are broken into a number of separate stages, involving different motivations, living and employment conditions, and legal statuses. As entire journeys are often not planned in advance, Collyer states that one stage may arise from the failure of a previous stage, draining resources, and limiting future options. Looking back at Frouws’ comparison between the second phase of migration due to relative safety, and economic migration, the statement bypasses the convoluted process behind shifting destinations. The comparison neglects the ever-changing position of migrants on the spectrum of forced and voluntary movement. A lack of opportunities to build a life in Greece in combination with developing imaginaries about places elsewhere made none of my respondents wish to stay in Greece. The trajectory of Akiva [G] shows how migrants continuously move along the forced-voluntary spectrum during their fragmented trajectories and ongoing confrontations with reality.

Akiva, my third respondent with residence status in Greece, had never planned to leave Afghanistan until he and his wife were forced to due to persecution. In Turkey, Akiva noticed that opportunities for migrants were scarce (“[...] *[Y]ou can’t legally work in Turkey. They’re not giving you housing either. Not paying you anything. So how should I survive?*” (08-07-2021)) and many people he met there were on their way to Greece. Not being forced to leave out of danger, but also not seeing an opportunity for him and his family to build a life in Turkey, a next stage of migration arose from the previous one. After two months of trying to cross the Aegean sea and facing many unsafe situations they reached Greece. At the time of the interview, he and his family had been in Greece for three years and had just received status as recognized refugees. He and his wife had not had the opportunity to learn Greek, and were still waiting for official residence papers; two reasons for employers not to hire them. His plan was now to buy plane tickets to several cities in Europe as soon as they would receive the official papers. He wanted to see the realities ‘there’ with his own eyes, before starting a new stage of migration that would be, again, based on both voluntary and forced reasons.

Just like Rahima and Alan, Akiva had not seen an opportunity to learn Greek and did not receive his residence papers yet. These two causes restrict his ability to find a job, become financially independent, and create a life in Greece. Akiva imagined having better opportunities elsewhere, which would fulfill his family’s life necessities. He had the prospect of receiving official papers that facilitated him to travel legally to other European countries and take a well-conceived decision. However, this is not given to everyone. Within autonomy of migration, asylum status is one aspect that eases new migratory movements. My data shows that, apart from status, fragmented migration also requires random exposure to luck, as well as (the creation of) opportunities.

6.1.3 Luck and migratory opportunities for alternative migration routes

Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017) theorized the role of ‘chance encounters’ in migration trajectories. In their article, they distinguish chance events into impersonal events, caused by non-human agency (e.g. sudden illness or winning the lottery), and interpersonal events, which involve human agency. Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017) argue that “*chance events are mainly interpersonal*” (p.4), and therefore focus their analysis on this type of chance manifestation. However, looking at my collected data, I do believe that impersonal events are of critical importance too. To stress this, I have divided the notion of ‘chance’ into two concepts: ‘luck’, focusing on non-human related aspects within trajectories, and ‘migratory opportunities’, elaborating on the influence of new encounters on migrant’s trajectories.

According to Colburn (2008) the perception of acceptable alternatives elsewhere is shaped by a person’s access to information and beliefs. Bartram (2015, as cited in Erdal & Oeppen, 2018) adds that volition in relation to migratory decisions is tied closely to both acceptable alternatives, and to the autonomy to act on these options. In line with them, I argue that the ability to (re-)gain autonomy over migration routes and to act on the developed imaginaries and hopes about acceptable alternatives elsewhere are related to ‘luck’ and ‘migratory opportunities’. Though in some ways connected with one another, both aspects cover different sides of migrants’ autonomy of migration, which I will explain through some examples.

6.1.3.1 Luck

Migrants can be un/lucky in several ways during their trajectories, of which I will highlight two. *First*, luck can depend on the country of origin. Certain passports allow for visa-free travel and the ability to work abroad (Cezars, 2018), and European countries use a Safe Country of Origin (SCO) policy when assessing someone’s asylum request. When someone’s origin country is on the list of countries that are considered safe, their application is rendered ‘unfounded’ (Gierowska, 2022). Morocco is on the safe country list in the Netherlands, which makes the applications of Moroccan asylum seekers

unjustified (Rijksoverheid, 2022). Another example was marked on 7 June 2021. On this day, a new Greek law was implemented that stated that migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistanian, Bangladesh, and Somalia are safe in Turkey. As a result, applications by those nationalities could be rejected without being examined on the merits (Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). Alan [G] referred to this law as “*a bad thing*” (18-09-2021), and Syrian Mustafa felt forced to leave Greece due to the risk of deportation to Turkey after the second rejection to his asylum application. Mustafa’s response to this law shows that the unlucky factor of having one of the five designated nationalities generates circumvention by searching for alternative migration routes.

Second, some respondents shared their points of view on luck within asylum procedures. In chapter 5.2, Rahima described how she had felt unlucky regarding the handling of her asylum request in Greece. She and her daughter had to wait an indefinite amount of time before receiving their papers due to a manual spelling mistake. Rahima argued that people who applied for asylum in Greece later than her had already been able to leave, whereas she had been forcibly immobilized. A respondent who, on the other hand, had been feeling lucky in Greece is Anouar. I spoke with him in his brother’s apartment in Antwerp, where he awaited the result of his asylum commission:

“I arrived [in] Belgium in 2018, to Brussels airport, because I had the papers. I was the lucky one in the whole camp [in Greece] [...] to be the only one who got asylum in three months and [after] just one interview. My lawyer was in shock, she said that no-one does it [after one interview and in] such [a] short amount of time.” - Anouar [B], 02-06-2021

Anouar still didn’t know why he turned out to be the “lucky one” in Greece, and on the contrary Rahima had been feeling highly unlucky. Exposure to luck during asylum procedures impacts the mobility of migrants, as residence papers facilitate legal traveling.

Scrutinizing exposure to luck through the autonomy of migration approach, we could say that luck does not necessarily relate to migrants’ autonomy. This, because luck in this sense is not directly affected by personal actions of people on the move, but rather depends on external events. However, I do believe that luck can lead to opportunities. Anouar, for instance, was able to legally travel to Belgium after obtaining residence papers in Greece. In the next part I will elaborate on migratory opportunities that facilitate irregular migration routes, and appear to be significantly related to autonomy of migration.

6.1.3.2 Migratory opportunities

In this part I refer to different kinds of opportunities than the ones I outlined in chapter 6.1.1, which concerned ‘improvements’ and ‘imagined opportunities elsewhere’. The opportunities I am referring to now are migratory opportunities. By mobility regimes ‘unwanted’ migrants continuously challenge existing borders that are aimed to hinder their movements (De Haas et al., 2020; Shamir, 2005; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), as they seek alternative, irregular migration routes (De Vries & Guild, 2019). We can research how alternative migration routes are developed as they circumvent imposed borders, and how they are enabled by migratory opportunities. During this research, I understood that migratory opportunities have to be seized. They can randomly and luckily arrive, but chances to encounter an opportunity can also be increased by, for instance, active networking or trying to find ‘openings’. Alpes (2012) notes how traveling is viewed as ‘overcoming closure’ and migrants therefore look for openings. When his Cameroonian respondents heard about a new opening they had to rush, since the opening could close again and it was unclear when new opportunities would arise. When opportunities are actively looked for they can thus serve as crucial momentums for the next fragment of one’s journey.

I will cover two different migratory opportunities: ones that are seized by migrants (e.g. networking), and ones that exist already (infrastructural facilities or smuggler services). To illustrate

the development of migratory opportunities, I will describe two stories by taking into account different f/actors that influence my respondents' alternative migration trajectories.

Alan

When still in Turkey, Alan [G] was arrested by the Turkish police and brought to a camp with other people who traveled solo. In the camp, Alan overheard that all of them were to be deported to their home countries. Alan managed to develop an opportunity that undermined this mobility intervention as he luckily encountered a 60-year-old Iranian woman:

"I told [the lady]: 'If they arrest us they will deport us, so let's make an agreement. You are my mom [...]. We don't have any option'. She agreed. [...] [And] we were in the camp just for two weeks." - Alan [G], 18-09-2021

By making up an alternative story and not fitting in the camp for solo travelers anymore, Alan and his new encounter managed to self-organize their mobility and dominated the mobility intervention of the Turkish police. Due to luck and relational practices with their network, they seized an actively-developed mobility opportunity and regained autonomy over their trajectories.

Mustafa

In the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, I described how Mustafa prepared for a flight to Western Europe. He had contacted a smuggler, asked friends to lend him money for the trip, and I showed him around at the airport and later took his bag with me to the Netherlands. Hence, Mustafa used his social network for a better chance to succeed the alternative migration route.

Back in the Netherlands for one month I received a text message. It was Mustafa, and he had arrived in the Netherlands too. Mustafa had managed to collect the money and had trusted the smuggler with it. A good choice, because this smuggler had planned a smart, alternative route to the Netherlands that neither Mustafa nor me had ever heard about before. Mustafa had to wait for a couple of days after receiving a passport. It was a real passport, and with a bit of fantasy the man in the picture could be Mustafa. He had also gotten not one, but three plane tickets: one from Athens to Rhodes (a Greek island), one from Athens to Spain, and one from Spain to the Netherlands. These three different tickets were the essence of the migratory plan. Mustafa was instructed to show the ticket from Athens to Rhodes to airport security, as they would not suspect someone with a domestic flight from traveling irregularly. At the check-in desk and the gate, however, Mustafa had to show his international ticket to Spain. Luckily, airport employees believed the man in the passport picture to be Mustafa, and let him through. In Spain, Mustafa did not need to pass airport security anymore and could therefore easily take a plane to the Netherlands.

Both stories above illustrate how migrants develop alternative migration routes, fueled by luck and migratory opportunities. They also demonstrate the importance of social networks within migration trajectories. Alan challenged the border regime by joining forces with his new encounter, bypassing the characteristics of solo-traveling people locked up in the Turkish camp. Mustafa took the opportunity of using existing airplane infrastructure, and surpassed the strict border controls. He challenged the mobility regime by paying a smuggler who offered an alternative migration route to Western Europe. Having been able to collect the required money through his social network, I assumed Mustafa had ended up in financial indebtedness with his friend. But when I met him in the Netherlands he said his friend had waived the debt. Mustafa did, however, not feel comfortable with the financial gift and was still planning on returning it as soon as he would have a job. Schapendonk (2020) mentions the 'relational' dimension of situations like Alan's and Mustafa's at play; whether migrants' efforts and negotiations to seize opportunities help them get ahead highly depends on the efforts and intentions of people they (attempt to) connect with. Both Alan and Mustafa had felt forced to develop an escape from potential involuntary deportation and thereby used their networks. Their movements exemplify the autonomy of migrants before mobility control.

After succeeding in acting on information and having (re-)gained autonomy over their trajectories, my respondents in Western Europe arrived in their new destination countries. Here, their imaginaries clashed, again, with different realities.

6.2 Confrontation with reality – after Greece

Many imaginaries had clashed with reality in Greece (chapter 5.2), and migrants had to adjust their imaginaries as long as they moved and encountered new situations. Some issues that were touched upon in chapter 5.2 overlap with parts of chapter 6.2. This subchapter will provide an elaboration of the aforementioned findings. I will again describe my respondents' main unexpected encounters with freedom, security and justice, but this time in Western Europe. I will therefore examine the extent to which they feel able to fulfill the hopes they had when leaving Greece, based on their different current realities and asylum statuses.

Eleven of my sixteen respondents in Western Europe received a residence permit. All eleven lived in private accommodations at the time of the interview. The remaining five were still waiting for the answer to their asylum request. Two of them were living in a reception center, while the other three had already moved to an apartment (Table 3).

I wonder what the impact of their asylum statuses and living conditions was on their possibility to fulfill expectations, and want to understand whether or not their imaginaries of freedom, security and justice match their lived realities. In chapter 6.2.1 I will therefore describe some of their experiences during three different phases in asylum claims: upon arriving, and whilst living in reception centers and private accommodations. Chapter 6.2.2 looks at the uncontrollability of imaginaries in the face of mobility regimes' wish to regulate these, taking into account both the resilience of imaginaries and migrants' changing perceptions regarding their past lives.

Table 3: Respondents in Western Europe

Name	Accommodation	Asylum status
Bastian	Reception center	Waiting
Abdel	Reception center	Waiting
Anouar	Apartment	Waiting
Pari	Apartment	Waiting
Rafih	Apartment	Waiting
Omar	Apartment	Residence permit
Kamil	Apartment	Residence permit
Ayman	Apartment	Residence permit
Anass	Apartment	Residence permit
Somaye	Apartment	Residence permit
Marouan	Apartment	Residence permit
Akram	Apartment	Residence permit
Musa	Apartment	Residence permit
Nadir	Apartment	Residence permit
Halil	Apartment	Residence permit
Mirza	Apartment	Residence permit

6.2.1 Freedom, security and justice during three phases of asylum

Respondents in Western Europe shared their opinions of personally experienced un/freedom, in/security and in/justice with me. In this part, I will elaborate on their experiences upon arriving

(registration), and whilst living in reception centers and private accommodations, by use of some examples.

6.2.1.1 Registration

Musa and Pari shared their positive amazement with me about their first experiences in the Netherlands and Belgium respectively. When Musa walked into a Dutch police station to ask for asylum, he expected to be aggressively detained. Instead, Musa was offered a coffee and lunch (*"I was speechless and overwhelmed, I didn't know if I was in the Netherlands or in heaven."* (18-05-2021)), and received a free day ticket for public transport to arrive at the registration center in Ter Apel. We have to keep in mind that this was in 2015, before the European asylum system became stricter (Kyriakopoulos, 2019). Pari applied for asylum in the national registration center 'Petit Chateau' in the heart of Brussels in 2019. Upon entering the former castle, she encountered a visual statement that, for her, implied freedom and justice:

"[T]he first picture in Petit Chateau was amazing, because [...] it had written: 'love is always OK'. And there were different pictures, of two men, two women, a white man and a black woman, etc. And I showed it to my husband and said: [...] here we have the right to be in love. [...] We missed that in Greece. [But in Belgium] I have the right to [rely on] the police and the government." - Pari [B], 22-06-2021

Although the first experiences of Musa and Pari were positive, this is certainly not the norm. Hundreds of migrants had to sleep on Brussels' streets before being allowed to apply for asylum at the Petit Chateau in the fall of 2021, as reception centers were full (Geldof, 2021). In the same period, Mustafa's first nights in Ter Apel consisted of sleeping on a rag in an overcrowded container for the same reason. Ankie Broekers Knol, Dutch state secretary for justice and security in 2021, stated that this situation impacted the quality of registration, and caused inhumane and unsafe situations as people increasingly fought (Open Kamer, 2021). Respondents' registration experiences in Western Europe thus vary widely, highly depending on the period of time.

6.2.1.2 Reception centers

After registration, asylum seekers in Belgium and the Netherlands are relocated to reception centers (COA, 2022; Fedasil, 2022). There are many different reception centers, but my respondents generally had similar experiences regarding un/freedom, in/security and in/justice. I will illustrate these experiences with a few illustrative stories.

Mirza [N], a 25-year-old guy with Syrian and Lebanese roots and who currently obtained a Dutch residence permit and an apartment in Nijmegen, had resided in several reception centers in the Netherlands. One of these centers used to be a prison, and had bedroom doors that could be locked by the managers. Bizarrely enough, the doors were locked a few times, which negatively impacted Mirza's sense of freedom: *"When the rooms are closed, you are really locked up and that is very scary."* (08-06-2021) On top of that, the reason for locking the doors was not communicated with the residents. In Belgium, Bastian [B] (35) from Afghanistan still lived in a reception center. He told me that his freedom of privacy had been violated. Bastian had been volunteering as translator for Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen⁸. One day after work he returned to the center and noticed that his room was messy. He found a note on his table confirming his thought: his room had been searched, but without Bastian's permission. Bastian was furious and went to seek redress with the manager. To his great surprise, and mine too when he told me, instead of listening to him the manager added a note to Bastian's file that reported "bad behavior". Bastian tried to defend his rights, but was punished

⁸ A Belgian non-profit organization supporting refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2022).

for it. From the variety of respondents' I extracted the notion that, for the majority, the heavenly idea of the Netherlands and Belgium regarding reception practices had clashed with different, more negative experiences in reception centers.

Apart from violations of freedom and rights, some respondents had felt relatively unsafe and/or controlled in reception centers. Where the police had a great share in their sense of in/security in Greece (chapter 5.2.1), here it was mainly fellow camp residents that caused a feeling of unsafety. This issue has been mentioned by my respondents, regardless of their locations. I observed two causes.

First, being obliged to live together with people from a range of backgrounds and cultures can generate issues. Abdel B] remembered how he had felt in the camps in Greece: "*[I]n the refugee camp where I lived there were all nationalities combined. Every month when the money comes on the card, people go outside and drink during the night. [...] And there are always fights. It's very dangerous and after 7 or 8 PM you can't go outside anymore. People would rob you, people from the camp.*" In Belgium, Abdel still lived in a reception center: "*I need to live in [a] place without refugees. Without problems.*" (01-06-2021). Halil [N], now living in his own apartment, stated that he "*[did] not feel very safe in the [Dutch] reception center, [...] because of other nationalities.*" (11-06-2021) Mirza [N] shared that there were continuous fights and discussions when he had to share his room with eight other men.

Second, some respondents experienced social control by community members. To better understand these events, I take into account the argument of Portes (1998), who states that social networks may lead to restrictions to individual freedoms of group members. This can reduce the privacy and autonomy of individuals in the group. In his article, Portes states that a number of researchers had been calling for norm observance and stronger community networks in order to (re-)establish social control. Being part of a strong community network does indeed have many upsides. For instance, social networks help combat untrustworthy information (chapter 4.2.1), and serve as social connectors (chapter 4.2.2). Despite the positive aspects, I agree with Portes that the downside of social networks must be kept in mind too. I had heard of social control in camps in Greece, where community members expressed themselves negatively when Rahima [G] and Somaye [Fr] did not want to wear a hijab. Pari's husband ended up in a fight with another Afghan man, who refused to understand why her husband had married her, an Iranian. Pari herself was beaten up by a group of Afghan women when she was waiting in the food line in Moria camp on Lesbos island, because Pari married one of their Afghan "brothers". Through Zoom, Pari showed me the scars that still marked that fight. After Greece, Pari experienced social control in the reception center in Belgium too, as community members were checking whether she wore a headscarf. Now living in her own apartment, Pari finally felt the liberty to go outside without a headscarf.

6.2.1.3 Private accommodation

I noticed that the relationship between residence permits and accommodations appears to be a bit indistinct. Lately, due to the Dutch housing crisis, asylum seekers with a residence permit are obliged to stay in reception centers as there are not enough private accommodations (Kors & Altena, 2021). Belgian status holders have to leave reception centers after four months, whether or not they have found an accommodation. In Belgium, too, this has become increasingly difficult due to the national housing crisis (Robeyns, D'Eer & Geldof, 2019). On the other hand, asylum seekers sometimes wait for the outcome of their asylum cases whilst not living in reception centers anymore. This accounted for Pari and Anouar. Anouar's case had been rejected twice in Belgium. He had applied for asylum again and was therefore waiting for the answer while living in his brother's apartment in Antwerp. Anouar often mentioned the sense of mobility unfreedom, or 'stuckness', in Belgium, similar to what respondents experienced in Greece (chapter 5.3):

“They let me wait for nothing. Just say yes or no. Why do they let me wait for one year and then reject me? [...] How many days do you need for that? [...] Just let me go and find another way or another country.” - Anouar [B], 02-06-2021

Anouar perceived the length of this procedure as unjust, as he had to wait for a long time and the outcome was unsure. Meanwhile, he was not allowed to move to another country, which added to his sense of stuckness in Belgium (Hage, 2005).

But how are freedom, security and justice perceived when people do obtain a residence permit? Three of my eleven respondents with residence permits in Western Europe had a paid job at the time of the interview, six of them were studying, and two had the wish to study but did not enroll yet (Table 4). Since education was one of the main goals of my respondents in Greece for their next step in their migration trajectory (chapter 6.1.1 and 6.1.2), I could state that this imagined opportunity might generally be fulfilled once having a residence permit in Belgium and the Netherlands (and France and Finland). In chapter 4.1.2 I have described how (aspiring) migrants compared their past experiences with what they hoped to find ‘elsewhere’. Now my respondents had arrived at the point that they actually experienced that ‘elsewhere’.

Table 4: Respondents in Western Europe with residence permits

Name	Education/work
Omar	Not yet
Halil	Not yet
Nadir	Paid job
Ayman	Paid job
Anass	Paid job
Somaye	Education
Marouan	Education
Akram	Education
Musa	Education
Kamil	Education
Mirza	Education

Omar had lived in shared accommodation with students and young professionals in Brussels for two years when I met him. He described his current sense of freedom as ‘social freedom’: “*no-one judges you by your looks, your clothes.*” (30-04-2021). Musa’s residence permit had just turned into citizenship status when I interviewed him. He explained how this new status increased his idea regarding personal freedom in the Netherlands, compared to his former feeling: “*[Y]ou always [had] this feeling of not wanting to get into trouble, because they might stop my citizenship application or put a red dot in my file.*” (18-05-2021). Kamil had almost finished his bachelor in International Cooperation in Belgium when I met him (11-05-2021). He told me that his idea of freedom changed according to his im/mobility, and compared his perception of freedom with a frame that had increased in size since leaving Syria. This reminded me of Halil’s quote (“*How do you describe the borders of freedom?*”) in chapter 4.1.1. Both Halil and Kamil described how their imaginaries of freedom in Europe depended on their past experiences and changed en route. Although Kamil’s frame of freedom had increased in Belgium, he acknowledged that Belgium was not the paradise he had imagined it to be. He realized that the frame, or border, around freedom determines “*the way you can live your freedom*”. Kamil and Halil were both happy with the available current possibilities, e.g. studying, even though they did not feel fully free yet.

Respondents with residence permits felt supported by the Dutch and Belgian legal system. Musa [N] shared his feeling about his workplace: “*I know that there’s always someone higher up to go*

to [when being treated unfairly]. And otherwise there's always the media." (18-05-2021) Nadir [N] (21) experienced justice when he announced to quit his job, but his boss refused to pay his last salary. Nadir's parents are Palestinian, but Nadir grew up in Syria. In Syria, Nadir explains, he would have challenged his boss for a fight to get his rights back:

"Us Palestinians always say: 'Eat my soul, but don't eat my rights'. Because otherwise you're not worth anything. What person are you if you don't fight for your rights?" - Nadir [N], 20-05-2021

When his boss 'ate' Nadir's rights, Nadir prepared to fight him. His father, who also lives in the Netherlands following family reunification, pointed out to him the possibility of filing a complaint against his boss. Nadir went to the police, informed his boss about the case, and received his salary:

"When I experienced that, I felt the difference with Syria. [...] This is the safer way [of getting my rights], I don't even have to face [my boss]." - Nadir [N], 20-05-2021

Nadir acted on defending his rights in a different, safer way than he used to do. His idea of the possibilities of justice changed along his migration trajectory, similar to how Kamil's and Halil's ideas of freedom had varied en route.

Some respondents shared how they did not feel the urge anymore to look over their shoulders while walking outside at night, whereas in their home countries and Greece they did. In chapter 5.2.1 I described how experiences with unsafety in Greece were much related to negative police behavior. Now, most respondents finally felt able to relax with police officers around. Akram summarized his relationship with the police by touching all three topics of freedom, security and justice, and explained how this relationship had changed since leaving Syria:

"In Syria I would be so scared when seeing police cars. That [feeling] stayed with me the first three, four years in Holland, I would freeze. Now it's better, I know that they are there for my safety, because I am a citizen here. And even if they would do something, I could take my phone and film them [...]. So this is related to freedom and safety. No-one can touch me or arrest me without giving a clear reason and it will always be in the media." - Akram [N], 17-05-2021

Akram made peace with the police. He was a Dutch citizen now, and he knew his rights. This juridical backbone gave him a sensation of freedom and safety.

Living in private accommodation in combination with a residence permit has generally given my respondents a bigger sense of freedom, security and justice. Being recognized as an asylum seeker, however, is not every migrant's reality. Regardless of recognition, imaginaries are by any means incredibly adaptable. This will become clear in the next part.

6.2.2 Un/controllable imaginaries

In chapter 4.1.3, I have described Europe's attempts to control imaginaries of (aspiring) migrants through targeted information campaigns. Having followed the trajectories and developments of imaginaries of Europe through the 'cycle of changing imaginaries', I can now reflect on their un/controllability based on examples of respondents.

I will illustrate the resilience of imaginaries through a conversation I had with 28-year-old Ayman [B] from Iraq. Ayman worked in a day center by the Red Cross in Brussels. Luckily, he met a Belgian girl through his work, and the two fell in love. As Ayman's case was rejected, they decided to move in together and officialize their relationship: "[...] I am lucky to have her. And to have a place in Belgium to sleep, to have food. I know the fear [of not having] it though. I was sleeping on the streets.

That's why I'm so happy to work now. Because I see the beneficiaries who are in the situation I also was in." (13-06-2021) Ayman worked with a variety of people, many of them migrants whose asylum cases had been rejected in Belgium and started living in illegality. According to Ayman, many did not want to return to their home countries:

"When someone arrives in [...] Brussels, the capital of Europe, and they sleep in the streets, how do you imagine your future here? [...] How can you dream if you sleep in the streets? [...] [A]ll the dreams that you had in your country about the capital of Europe, and [now] you sleep in the streets. [...] They don't want to be alone and in danger. But it's difficult to go back. After a hard trip arriving here, [...] deep inside you don't want to go back." - Ayman [B], 13-06-2021

After trying to fulfill imagined opportunities for such a long time and facing so many reality clashes and difficulties, many migrants still hoped to find fulfillment elsewhere; in the United Kingdom for example (Bouhenia et al., 2017). In chapter 5.3 I described how hope fuels motivation and draws from a migrant's sense of agency and pathways (Koikkalainen et al., 2020), and connected hope to shifting imaginaries. Ayman's story exemplifies that even after imposing extreme hardship on people, making them live in illegality without access to basic services, imaginaries continue to move. Migrants keep shifting their hopeful horizons to places where imaginaries could become reality.

Simultaneously, ideas around freedom, security and justice change as migrants move into Europe. This may lead to sensations of not being able to go back to their home countries (*"I can't live [in Iraq] anymore. I am used to living [in Belgium] now. Used to the system."* (Ayman [B], 13-06-2021)). Where Ayman lived a life of legality, Amin [G] did not. After living in Greece for four years and receiving two rejections, Amin reflected on his previous life in Iran. He especially remembered the social control (chapter 6.2.1):

"Maybe I won't be able to live [in Iran] anymore, I am more close to European culture. [...] People in Iran are very warm, but the warmth is not always good, because sometimes you prefer to [...] just do your own stuff [...]. [In Greece] there's problems but [...] [y]ou are focused on yourself [...]." - Amin [G], 11-07-2021

Both Ayman and Amin believe they have changed too much to be able to return to Iraq and Iran respectively. Both compared their experiences en route with experiences in the past, and adjusted their perspectives on their previous lives. This, in combination with imaginaries continuously being moved to 'elsewheres' as long as imagined opportunities have not been fulfilled, shows that migrants' imaginaries of Europe are uncontrollable by mobility regimes as imaginaries are continuously in development, regardless of people's asylum statuses.

6.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter encompassed how migrants re-color their imaginaries of Europe. I elaborated on elements within the Cycle in which migrants move away from Greece and experience reality confrontations in Western European countries. As chapter 6.1 showed the unconditional motivation to move away from Greece since opportunities elsewhere seemed 'better' regardless of one's legal status, chapter 6.2 stressed that imaginaries continue to exist and develop, fueled by hope, and also regardless of one's legal status.

Following the trajectories of my respondents, all believed Greece not to be a place to stay and build a life. This, for migrants in Greece do not feel able to fulfill life aspirations. Indicative for this feeling is the sense of wasting their young years in Greece by waiting or working instead of, for instance, following desired education. Imagined opportunities about other countries hence fuel the motivation to act on imaginaries about other countries. In order to (re-)gain autonomy, having

obtained legal status in Greece facilitates regular traveling. Nonetheless, chance in the form of exposure to luck and migratory opportunities has a great part in migration autonomy as well.

Once in Western Europe, my respondents were sometimes positively surprised - more so than their imaginaries had reached -, but experienced reality clashes too. I divided their experiences location-wise, into registration practices, reception centers, and private accommodations. Interestingly, periods in reception centers generally were not experienced positively. Mentioned were violations of freedom by camp personnel, and being forced to live with other asylum seekers. The latter considered both having to share space with different nationalities, as well as with community members. Social control appeared to be a great issue, which they felt able to escape once living in private accommodations. Once obtaining a residence permit, respondents usually felt able to fulfill the imagined opportunities they had had about Western Europe. They were now allowed to follow education or were able to work, they experienced more safety than in the past, and felt juridically supported by society.

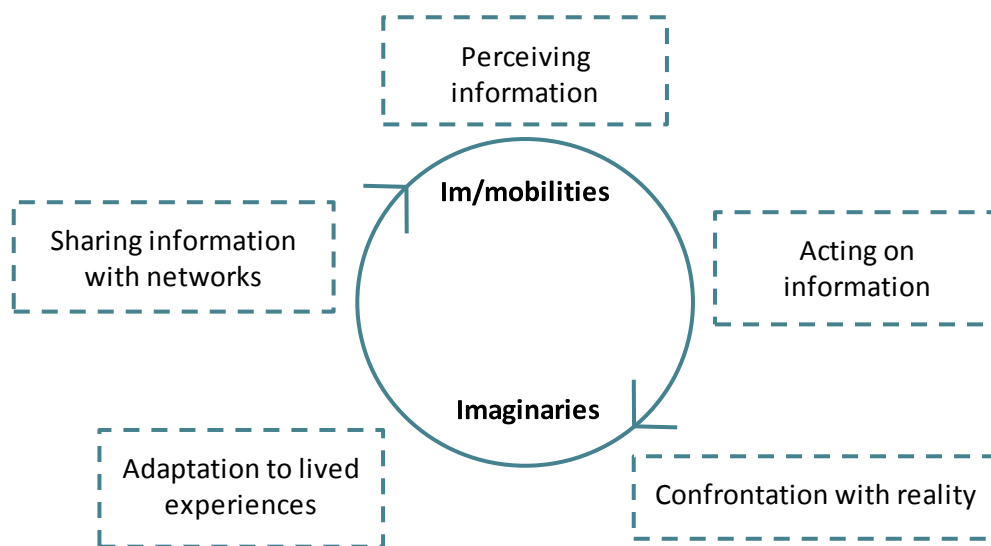
An important element in this chapter were the concepts of movement on the voluntary-forced spectrum, secondary movement, and stepwise, onward and transit migration in perspective with the Cycle. Stepwise, onward, transit and secondary can be observed as processes in which phases of mobility succeed each other in a linear time-space dimension. The idea of fragmented migration better emphasizes the unplannedness of migratory journeys and acknowledges that routes are often broken into separate stages. During these fragmented routes, migrants continuously change positions on the spectrum of forced and voluntary movement. Fragmented migration therefore better synchronizes with the complexity of the Cycle of changing imaginaries. The Cycle acknowledges the fact that confrontations between imaginaries and realities provide for periods of adaptation and re-planning. Being confronted with (un)expected realities so many times, imaginaries seem to gain in flexibility as people get used to disappointment. The Cycle turns and turns, and after every confrontation, hope shifts horizons to someplace elsewhere. This, combined with changing point of views on topics like freedom, security and justice make imaginaries uncontrollable by regimes that wish to control the mobility of 'unwanted' migrants. Migrants continue to find alternative migration routes, fueled by renewed imaginaries about opportunities that may become true somewhere else. Acting on trustworthy information, often with the help of social networks, creates autonomy.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this research was to gain insights in changing imaginaries of Europe of (by the EU regarded as) ‘unwanted’ migrants who traveled into Europe via Greece. I studied this by relating their imaginaries of Europe to the EU’s Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, looking at these three concepts through the eyes of non-European migrants. The study was centered around the research question *‘How do migrant imaginaries of Europe emerge and change, and how do these imaginaries relate to the autonomy of migration journeys?’*. I used respondents’ stories to relate to findings from existing literature and add new insights about non-European imaginaries of Europe to the debate around im/mobility and migration.

This multi-sited research unpacked past, current and future oriented imaginaries of Europe and hopes attached to these imaginaries. Through the collected data I inductively discovered a pattern, which I decided to call the ‘cycle of changing imaginaries’ (Figure 4). The Cycle consists of five consecutive steps that continue and repeat at a new level as migrants move through geographical and social spaces. Implementing the Cycle throughout the empirical chapters and following its sequence 1.5 times helped me to structure the data I gathered from the conducted interviews. It also provided me insights into the processes and complexities behind migrants’ imaginaries of Europe. Within three empirical chapters (4, 5 and 6), I positioned my respondents at certain stages of the Cycle.

Figure 4: The cycle of changing imaginaries



In chapter 4, I discussed migratory journeys before Greece. At this stage, respondents’ imaginaries of Europe were generally colorful. The Cycle started here with ‘perceiving information’ followed by ‘acting on information’. I described how (aspiring) migrants obtain and perceive information about Europe, focusing on the concepts of freedom, security and justice. We saw that (aspiring) migrants often embed future hopes for finding freedom, security and justice in their past experiences. Migrants can be confronted with attempts of governments to influence and control their imaginaries of (journeys to) Europe. However, this information often contradicts information from social networks, which are generally seen as more trustworthy sources of information than governments (Ademmer et al., 2018; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007; Oeppen, 2016). Social networks provide each other with autonomy. They inform each other about un/trustworthy smuggler or escrow services, serve as social platforms by sharing contacts of trustworthy smugglers and other migrants, and function as mobility triggers by warning or informing each other.

In chapter 5, I focused on migrants' first encounters with the European mobility regime. Their imaginaries lost color and turned gray. In analyzing this, I covered four elements of the Cycle: 'confrontation with reality', 'adaptation to lived experiences', 'sharing information with networks', and 'perceiving information'. I first elaborated on the differences between trust and truth of information, relating trust to information searching (who and which platforms to consult), and truth to information sharing (which elements to depict and to whom). Migrants continuously aim to seek accurate information about future places, and have several reasons for (not) sharing information about their current lives with their social networks.

We saw three imaginary-reality contrasts once migrants enter Greece: looking for security vs. being regarded as a security threat; looking for justice vs. receiving unfair treatment; and looking for freedom vs. being physically and mentally restricted. After these reality confrontations, we observed three adaptation strategies to cope with the new realities: becoming more critical and cautious with trusted information along their journeys; information validation through multiplicity; and moving imaginaries, fueled by hope, to 'elsewheres' in Europe.

To understand how migrants maintain certain imaginaries, I looked at sharing practices with their social networks. This gave insights into the reasoning behind depicting an often incomplete truth. It also gave an understanding of effects on the emergence of imaginaries of (aspiring) migrants. Respondents often tended to avoid sharing stories about encountered difficulties. They also often depicted their lives more positively to their parents to avoid anger or not to worry them, while hardship was shared more easily with siblings and friends. Regarding social media, respondents tended to share mostly positive elements of their lives. Positively depicted stories can fuel a recipient's migratory aspirations or expectations towards migrants, but stories about encountered difficulties may be discarded by recipients due to cognitive dissonance (Vermeulen, 2018).

Finally, I elaborated on the development and expansion of migrants due to new encounters during phases of immobility. Perceived information from these new encounters helps escape mental stuckness (Hage, 2005) and fuel imaginaries of elsewheres. Connections made during immobility periods often proceed to exist when people (re-)gain mobility, and weak ties may become strong ties over time. Due to a combination of moving imaginaries and cognitive dissonance, respondents tended to discard the negative stories about places their encounters moved to.

In chapter 6, we saw how migrants re-colored their imaginaries of Europe. I zoomed in on the concept of autonomy of migration in relation to the element 'acting on information' in the Cycle. It explored how migrants find alternative routes to escape forced immobility in Greece and move to Western European countries, regardless of their legal statuses. Here, I challenged linear ideas of migration such as stepwise, onwards and transit migration, and found that the idea of fragmented migration aligns better with the Cycle. In the light of chance encounters (Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017), I discovered that exposure to luck and actively searching for migratory opportunities contribute to mobility away from Greece.

The last element of the Cycle was 'confrontations with reality' in Western Europe. By separating ideas of freedom, security and justice into different stages along the asylum seeking process, I found that the imaginaries of each of the three concepts clashed with reality again. Once having left the Belgian and Dutch camps (reception centers) and having obtained resident permits, my respondents however generally felt able to fulfill their opportunities as imagined. They could follow education or work legally, and experienced more safety, freedom and juridical support from the government than before. The way to Europe has proven to not be straightforward, nor is it a gradual pathway to fulfilling hopes.

7.1 Valuing 'The cycle of changing imaginaries' as an analytical tool

In chapter 2, I first explained the main ideas behind the Cycle, building on my empirical data. The theoretical framework for this study included literature on several debates: autonomy of migration versus mobility regimes, the concepts of imaginaries, platforms and infrastructure of migration, and power and precarity of information within network theory. With the Cycle I was able to elaborate on the academic debates and the data of my multi-sited research, while showing the fluid nature of their contents. The Cycle allowed me to show the vivid dynamics between autonomy, im/mobility, social networks and information power and precarity that affect the ever-changing imaginaries of Europe. It uncovered dimensions that contribute to (re-)colored migrant imaginaries en route on/to Europe. My respondent Pari's reference to imagining Europe as a rainbow, which turned gray in Greece and became colorful again in Belgium, has been given a central role in the empirical chapters of this research. Grayness symbolizes the feeling of being stuck and involuntarily immobile, whilst not being able to fulfill imagined opportunities. Colors are telling for the ability to do so, and to (re-)gain autonomy over trajectories and lives. Pari's rainbow reference vibrantly illustrates the changeable nature of imaginaries, as well as the role of a migrant's autonomy in recoloring imaginaries fueled by hope after experiencing reality clashes.

While analyzing the empirical data I understood the main difference between the Cycle and yet existing academic concepts of im/mobility and migration. The Cycle takes into account three different dimensions in which migrants constantly (re-)position themselves. In chapter 4 the Cycle stresses the continuous struggle between trust and mobility-dependency when finding a reliable smuggler. Chapter 5 separates trust and truth of information and shows how migrants move to its dynamics. In chapter 6 the Cycle takes into account the constant repositioning of migrants on the forced-voluntary continuum along their fragmented journeys. These dimensions blatantly demonstrate that migratory movements are everything but linear, both in terms of experience and geography. The Cycle hence positions the migrant within various struggles, all drawn by temporal order.

With the Cycle we have gained a better understanding of the complexity of how imaginaries emerge and change. The fact that imaginaries continuously clash with realities along migratory routes makes imaginaries resilient; they do not break, but bend and adapt to current circumstances. The changeable character of imaginaries allows people to move again. People keep on adapting, sharing, perceiving and acting on (newly obtained) information. The Cycle showed how motivations to migrate are fueled by a sense of hope when imaginaries are not corresponding with reality. Horizons of imagined opportunities shift to elsewhere. This makes imaginaries themselves intrinsically mobile, and illustrates that not only mobility, but imaginaries too are non-linear.

As I used the Cycle as the backbone for structuring the empirical chapters, this resulted in the fact that (sub)chapters sometimes contain partial overlaps of information. This may possibly at times lead to certain unclarities about the structure of the empirical part. I came to realize that these overlaps are a reflection of the actual migration journeys of my respondents and in fact cast a light on their fragmented and dynamic nature. Migration trajectories inevitably contain overlaps as migrants continuously and non-linearly move through time and space. When classifying a journey into five separate elements, as I did with the Cycle, it is inevitable that certain aspects interfere with each other as each of the five elements share certain aspects. The Cycle might make the structure of the empirical chapters look somewhat jumbled at times and perhaps a little confusing, but at the same time it mirrors the complexity of migration routes. I tried to map the routes of my respondents as close to reality as possible, for which the Cycle appeared very useful despite the overlaps.

The three dimensions that were described in the empirical chapters also stress the immense importance of social networks en route. Social networks help create alternative migration routes that challenge yet existing borders aimed to keep migrants from moving, which relates to how migration is autonomous. People develop routes, but clash with reality. This reveals the resilience that lies in adversity of moving their hope elsewhere. As the Cycle's step 'acting on information' relates most with

the autonomy of migration approach (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013), we have been able to see how reality confrontations and adaptations, and sharing and perceiving information all build up to one's autonomy. In this dynamic process of autonomy, social networks facilitate connectivity and provide (aspiring) migrants trustworthy information. In this sense, they do not only challenge physical borders forced upon them by mobility regimes, but also challenge the mental borders of imagination. Social networks develop as people move, enhancing information availability. However, I also came to understand that social networks can generate negative experiences. Boyd & Nowak (2012) already mentioned the necessity of additional research on the negative effects of social networks on migrants' lives. My research did so, by showing that migrants experience social control by their communities, that borrowing money to finance anything along the journey can lead to indebtedness, and that expectations from relatives can put a migrant in complicated situations.

Concerning the dynamic between trust and truth of information, following the Cycle throughout the three empirical chapters has given insights in the occurrence of 'cognitive dissonance' (Vermeulen, 2018), where aspiring migrants discard information that contradicts their rather positive imaginaries of Europe. Reflecting on the elements in the Cycle, I could state with certainty that some respondents experienced cognitive dissonance too, when their imaginaries about (the route in/to) Europe were created. Their wish to fulfill imagined opportunities in Europe might have been bigger than the negative information their networks shared with them, and hence respondents perceived it in a more positive way than the senders intended. Bending information seems to continuously happen at any stage within the Cycle, as migrants balance between searching and sharing information at any point along their routes.

A tricky question arises when we transfer the idea of cognitive dissonance to governmental information campaigns. Tricky, because governments are relatively biased in their information provision to (aspiring) migrants. (Aspiring) migrants can not always trust information from authorities, as they are part of a marginalized group (Dekker et al., 2018). European governments intend to create awareness concerning the risks of traveling illegally, hoping (aspiring) migrants reconsider their migratory plans to Europe (Oeppen, 2016; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007). (Aspiring) migrants often mistrust information campaigns due to contradictory information from their social networks in Europe (Ademmer et al., 2018). But, to what extent is it beneficial for the (aspiring) migrant to not believe information campaigns? Many respondents were quite well-informed and expected some kind of hardship, whereas others thought to find "paradise" in Europe. The well-informed ones had a form of autonomy over their trajectories, as they were prepared. Taking into account the Cycle, we could say that migrants who positively imagine their (temporary) places of destination could potentially experience heavier reality clashes than the ones who consider negative images too. Some respondents stated not to have believed eventual information campaigns, and they often discarded information about difficulties from their social networks in Europe. However, this more negatively depicted, somewhat biased information could perhaps have been beneficial if used as preparation to anticipate Europe's realities, empowering and autonomizing migrants.

7.2 Reflecting on and refining 'The cycle of changing imaginaries'

Having executed this study allows me to reflect on and refine the Cycle. I had initially built up the Cycle with four elements, combining 'perceiving information' with 'acting on information'. In the course of analysis I found that those two elements embody significantly different aspects in the processes of mobility and changing imaginaries. I believe that dividing them has turned out well, as the five elements proved to fit well together and created the possibility to understand the bigger picture behind how and why imaginaries change along migration trajectories.

Now that the empirical chapters are written, and the analysis is done, I would consider making one main adjustment to the Cycle in follow-up research: repositioning the element of 'sharing information with the network'. Not because the operations within this element are less important than the others - to the contrary. The reason is that 'sharing information with the network' encompasses a

different positioning of the migrant within the Cycle. The Cycle follows the mobility of a migrant through time and space and so allows us to observe how their imaginaries change based on obtained information and lived realities. According to the Cycle as presented in this study, this migrant perceives information, acts on information, is confronted with realities, adapts to these lived experiences in reality, and in turn shares information with their network. However, if we would take a deeper look at how their imaginaries change, the element regarding information sharing practices is not positioned exactly well in the Cycle. As 'sharing information' precedes 'perceiving information', this step regards information sharing practices of other people than the person we, as readers, follow within the Cycle. Certainly, as we have seen, the migrant we follow within the Cycle shares information with their network too. The Cycle is however meant to unravel reasons behind the changing imaginaries of the migrant whom we follow within the Cycle. Adding the element 'sharing information' creates a certain switch of perspective: from within the Cycle (a migrant on their trajectory), to an external position (information people share with the migrant we follow within the Cycle). I also realized that sharing practices should not appear as a separate element, because information is continually shared along the Cycle. For instance, my data showed that migrants also obtain information from their networks while adapting to realities, or when preparing to act on information.

I do not argue for elimination of 'sharing information' from the Cycle, as it has proven to be essential for shaping the imaginaries of migrants along their routes. I would instead choose to place it in an external position, perhaps even as a "cover" around the other elements. This would visualize the constant occurrence of information sharing practices with migrants en route and its effect on their imaginaries of Europe.

7.3 Discussions and reflections for future research and policy-making

There are a few recommendations for future research, building up from the approach applied to this study and the extracted results. I will discuss these, describing recommendations for an increased validity of follow-up studies and recommendations for future research. I will conclude this subchapter with some afterthoughts on my study.

7.3.1 Reflections and recommendations for future research

My research was centered around the research question '*How do migrant imaginaries of Europe emerge and change, and how do these imaginaries relate to the autonomy of migration journeys?*'. In line with the autonomy of migration approach, my study illustrated the importance of social aspects on mobility and autonomy, as migrants keep finding alternative routes when they act on obtained, often bent information from their networks. However, to state that mobility always comes before control, as the autonomy of migration approach does, is rather radical. I prefer to observe the dynamic between migrants' autonomy and regimes' mobility control as a play of cat and mouse; both parties try to outsmart the other with strategies based on power and invention, and both anticipate each other. The uncontrollable and changeable character of (aspiring) migrants' imaginaries of Europe fueled and re-colored by hopeful imagined opportunities elsewhere will, regardless of imposed temporary immobility by regimes, continue to generate new, alternative pathways that bypass Europe's mobility control.

I developed three recommendations to increase the validity of follow-up studies, that build on the approach that has been applied to this study.

First, the distribution of respondents could be more balanced. My respondents were - apart from one - all English-speaking. The fact that they speak English could possibly have enhanced contact with e.g. NGO employees, which influenced the imaginaries of other places in Europe of many respondents. Speaking English could have also positively affected connection with other people at any point en route, and the chances of finding a job at any stage. Perhaps the ability to speak English had been a capital for some respondents, deriving from socio-economic opportunities in the past. Including

non-English speaking respondents in follow-up studies could improve the diversity of migrants, and perhaps relations could be found between respondent diversity and imaginaries of Europe. The number of male and female respondents was relatively out of balance too: four women and nineteen men. To obtain a clearer understanding of potential differences in imaginaries between male and female migrants, it would be interesting to increase the number of female respondents. Implementing gender perspectives provides insights in our understanding of migration processes (Morokvašić, 2014) and could add our knowledge of imaginaries from the perspectives of different genders.

Second, regarding the geographical context I conducted a multi-sited research in three countries: Greece, Belgium and the Netherlands, apart from two respondents in France and Finland. It would be interesting to conduct interviews in a larger variety of locations along migration trajectories in/to the rest of Europe. Both within the European continent, as well as with migrants who aspire to reach Europe. I believe this would help gain insights in the spatial characteristic of changing imaginaries.

Third, it would be interesting to use a greater variety of research methods, apart from conducting interviews. An option could be 'mental mapping', which is the representation of the respondent's cognitive map and facilitates a lens into the way they experience and produce space (Gieseeking, 2013). The researcher could ask the respondent to draw a map of, for instance, the desired route, potential imagined obstacles on the way, or a spatial explanation of what they hope to find. Another option could be 'participant photography', a visual method that empowers respondents to document and reflect on social issues important to them (Allen, 2012). In the case of follow-up studies, respondents could for instance take pictures of personal experiences regarding un/freedom, in/security, and in/justice. Such methods would enrich the findings, because a respondent would be given more time to reflect on what these three aspects mean to them and may come up with material and insights that would not have been collected during just one interview.

While extracting my data, some questions arose that could be interesting for follow-up studies. Research about the effects has been carried out regarding information campaigns from destination countries (Ademmer et al., 2018; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007), while research about the influence of depicted images from origin countries on the imaginaries of (aspiring) migrants is still lacking. I think it would be valuable to better understand the effects on imaginaries of the latter. It could contribute to an increased understanding of both the emergence of imaginaries, and trust in information from authorities.

According to Lindquist et al. (2012), smugglers create space for migrants' autonomy. I believe it would be interesting to research to what extent both migrants and smugglers experience autonomy when working together, as both parties depend on each other in order to pursue their goals: a smuggler wants clients, and a migrant wants mobility. In this dynamic of the migrant screening the smuggler and the smuggler gaining trust of the migrant, the un/presence of both party's autonomy raises interesting questions regarding negotiation of trust.

A question regarding cognitive dissonance (Vermeulen, 2018) arose, since respondents shared to be aware that their less positive stories might not be believed by (aspiring) migrants. This makes me wonder whether this consciousness influences the content of the stories migrants share with (aspiring) migrants, and whether or not information sharers anticipate a possible response. It could be an addition to the academic field to research the influences of this awareness, as this would enhance our knowledge about information sharing practices with (aspiring) migrants, as well as the emergence of imaginaries of Europe.

7.3.2 Afterthought

On the night of February 24 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine (Reuters, 2022), forcing Ukrainians to seek safety, protection and assistance in other European countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2022). Many European countries have offered Ukrainian citizens to travel for free to their countries with public transport upon showing their

passports (European Commission, 2022). On March 24 2022, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a resolution on 'The war in Ukraine and its economic and social consequences'. At the opening of the debate, chairwoman Christa Schweng stated that "*[t]his invasion has endangered [the EU's] security and values [...]*" Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson stressed the important role of the EESC in putting its knowledge into practice in the reception of 3.5 million Ukrainian refugees Europe has welcomed so far. She added that the unprecedented solidarity of civil society organizations, citizens and authorities with the people fleeing the war in Ukraine is remarkable and "*makes us all proud to be European*".

The contrast with the 2015 migration "crisis" is immense. Those who move through Europe do so through racialized lines, and by the power of their imaginaries. For some, freedom, security and justice are guaranteed, whilst for others, not. The regularization of pathways in/to Europe for every migrant, regardless of their Europeanness, would make the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice a reality for all.

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Appendix 1: Interview questions for respondents in Greece

Introduction of myself and my research.

Respondent and their migration route

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your story of migration? What is important for you in your story of migration?

Check items:

- *Home country/town*
- *Reason for leaving*
- *Date of leaving*
- *Intended destination*
- *Migration route until now*
- *Current living situation*
- *Current current asylum status*
- *Age*
- *Future plans*

Ideas of Europe

2. How did you see Europe before your departure? Is it different from how you see Europe now, that you are in Greece?
3. What did you know about Greece and the refugee situation here before coming to Greece?
4. Would you like to stay in Greece? If not, where do you plan to go?
5. How was your geographical/political/cultural/economical/etc. knowledge of Europe?
6. What caused changes in your idea about Europe? (If it changed)

Information sources

7. Can you tell me something about what information sources you used to learn about Europe along your journey? For example social media, friends/family, internet, smugglers, information campaigns, etc.
8. What information source do you use to learn about Europe now?
9. Did/do you trust the information you received/found? Why (not)?
10. Could you tell me what sources you use to tell your social network about your life here in Greece?
 - Do you tell them the truth? Why (not)?
 - If you do not/sometimes tell the truth, what do you tell them instead?
 - Does it differ with what you told them when you were on the islands/other places in Greece and on your way to Greece?

11. Now that you're here, what do you think of the information about Europe/Greece that you obtained before coming here?

Freedom, security and justice

I would now like to understand your ideas on a few topics.

The first one is security in Europe.

12. Can you tell me about your experiences with feeling safe and with security in general in Europe/Greece?

13. Is this different than what you expected?

The second topic is freedom in Europe.

14. Can you tell me about your experiences with freedom of movement and with freedom in general in Europe/Greece?

15. Is this different than what you expected?

The third topic is justice in Europe.

16. Can you tell me about your experiences with fairness and with justice in general in Europe?

17. Is this different than what you expected?

18. What do you expect of these three topics regarding the place you want to go to?

19. Is there something you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Interview questions for respondents in Western Europe

Introduction of myself and my research.

Respondent and their migration route

1. Can you tell me something about yourself and your story of migration? What is important for you in your story of migration?

Check items:

- *Home country/town*
- *Reason for leaving*
- *Date of leaving*
- *Intended destination*
- *Migration route until now*
- *Current living situation*
- *Current current asylum status*
- *Age*
- *Future plans*

Ideas of Europe

I would like to understand how Europe appears in migration stories of migrants. My next question is :

2. How did you see Europe before departure? Is it different from how you see Europe now and when you were in Greece?
3. How was your geographical/political/cultural/economical/etc. knowledge of Europe?
4. What caused changes in your idea about Europe? (if it changed)
5. What did you hope to find in your next place of destination when you were in Greece? Why?
6. Did your expectations of what you had hoped to find here meet the reality?

Information sources

7. Can you tell me something about what information sources you used to learn about Europe along your journey? For example social media, friends/family, internet, smugglers, information campaigns, etc.
8. Did you trust the information you received/found? Why (not)?
9. Could you tell me about what sources you use to tell your social network back home about your life here?
 - Does this differ with what you shared when you were in Greece?
 - Do you tell them the truth? Why (not)?
 - If you do not/sometimes tell the truth, what do you tell them instead?

10. Now that you're here, what do you think of the information about Europe that you obtained before coming here?

Freedom, security and justice

I would now like to understand your ideas on a few topics.
The first one is security in Europe.

11. Can you tell me about your experiences with feeling safe and with security in general where you live now?
12. Is this different than what you expected?
13. How did you experience security when you were in Greece?

The second topic is freedom in Europe.

14. Can you tell me about your experiences with freedom of movement and freedom in general in Europe?
15. Is this different than what you expected?
16. How did you experience freedom when you were in Greece?

The third topic is justice in Europe.

17. Can you tell me about your experiences with fairness and justice in general in Europe?
18. Is this different than what you expected?
19. How did you experience justice when you were in Greece?
20. Have your ideas about these three topics changed along your travels? Why?
21. Is there something you would like to add?