

## Abdirashid A. Ismail

DSc. (econ), Senior Researcher  
Migration Institute of Finland  
abdirashid.ismail@migrationinstitute.fi



# Deportation might be the worst answer

**Keywords: asylum policies; rejected asylum seekers; deportation; Europe; Finland**

*Europe's reaction to the so called 'migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016 was met with unprecedentedly restrictive asylum policies that were particularly harsh to asylum seekers with devastating implications on immigrants' access to legal residence permits. However, the great majority of denied asylum applicants opt to stay and authorities overwhelmingly fail to send them back due to a number of factors, including the dire situation of their countries of origin. Consequently, large numbers of these rejected asylum seekers live among us and only few of them will return to their countries of origin in the near future, regardless of the reasons of their migration and the magnitude of their destitution in Europe. This has enormous impact on the wellbeing of these vulnerable immigrants and their families in their countries of origin, but their long and unproductive stay in Europe has also costed European economies. This short essay argues that instead of pushing these asylum seekers into an abject destitution and feeding their grievances, we need more effective immigration and integration policies.*

He studied accounting at the university and started working for a center that was operating a gas station, a restaurant and a clothing shop, making only 150 USD per month. He asked, as agreed, for a raise as the business was going well, but his boss declined his requests. One evening he came home late and was very upset. He explained that he had a conflict with the em-

ployers and left the job. He left home early in the morning and never came back. He called us one day and said that he was looking for a job. We thought that he was in (a city in Somalia).

He called me another time, telling me that he left for tahriib (smuggling/trafficking) and was in Yemen. I felt deeply upset and talked to him to convince him about the consequences of his action from every dimension. I asked him, 'why are you leaving your kids?' But in vain. He said, 'please forgive me ... I am doing all this for you (the family), that place Somalia is not a place where I can support you.'

One day, his mom received a phone call from Libya. She heard his son screaming while he was tortured. Terrified she threw the phone and asked me to speak, said 'you! Talk to this guy, what is he saying?' (Her reaction) shaken me, though not sure, I was guessing what is happening! I was also very terrified to grab the phone from the ground and kept asking her questions, 'what is he saying?' and she is replying 'I have no idea about it, but talk to him! I finally took the phone and my husband told me that he was in the captivity of Magafe.

The story was narrated by Ruun, a young mother of two whom I met in Somalia during

my fieldwork in spring 2019. Her husband, Nuur (not their real names), a young graduate, had left them some five years ago and finally ended up in Europe, by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. On the way, he had been captured for two years in Libya by *Magafe*, which among Somalis refers to ruthless kidnapper-trafficker networks that function around the Sahara desert. Literally, *Magafe* means a sniper that does not miss a shot.

Currently, Nuur is a rejected asylum seeker who lives in Europe as an irregular migrant. He is facing harsh everyday insecurities, ranging from deprivation from sources of livelihood to fear for detention and deportation.

Europe's reaction to the so called 'migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016 was hasty and unfortunate. It was hasty as the EU member states instantly imposed unprecedentedly restrictive asylum policies that were particularly harsh to certain groups of asylum seekers. For instance, 1) as Chart 1 shows, in Finland the rate of recognition of asylum applications dropped from 57 to 34 percent in one year, from 2015 to 2016, 2) and as Table 1 shows, between 2015 and 2018, the rate of rejection of asylum seekers from Somalia in Finland has increased more than doubled.

The reaction was unfortunate as its implications were devastating. In 2019, 738,425 asylum applications were lodged in the EU+ countries (EU+ means the EU28 member states plus Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland), 584,770 first instance decisions on these applications were made and only 206,000 applicants were awarded positive decisions (refugee or subsidiary protection statuses). In other words, the recognition rate, i.e. the share of positive decisions among the total number of decisions, was 38 percent. As chart 1 shows, at the EU level the rate was reduced from 52 percent in 2015 to 38 percent in 2019. Thus, although after 2016 the number of asylum applications fell down to its pre-2015 levels, the rate of recognition stayed very low. As a result, there were 911,885 pending applications at the end of the 2019 (EASO 2019).

However, the great majority of denied asylum applicants opt to stay and authorities overwhelmingly fail to send them back due to a number of factors, including the dire situation of their countries of origin. Consequently, in 2019, a million asylum seekers live in limbo in Europe (Tondo 2019). According to Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, these rejected asylum seekers "tend to live in substandard conditions, completely excluded from society, lacking residence permits and the means to meet basic needs such as shelter, food, health

or education. In essence, they are deprived of any opportunity to live in dignity" (Muižnieks 2016).

Indeed, most of those rejected asylum seekers live among us in destitution and only few of them will return to their countries of origin in the near future, regardless of the reasons of their migration and the magnitude of their destitution in Europe.

From January 2019 to February 2020, I conducted extensive fieldwork in Finland and in Somalia, with the aim of understanding how restrictive immigration policies affects the lives of rejected asylum seekers in Europe and their families left behind in the Horn of Africa.

About three-quarters of my informants in Finland left Somalia due to fear of persecution, while the remaining quarter migrated to escape the prolonged conflict and precarious life in Somalia.

Even for those who left Somalia in search for a better live, voluntary return is not an option and deportation is far worse. Most of this group, like Nuur, left the country without notifying their loved ones in advance. Many of them, like Nuur, fell prey to the criminal networks after they become desperate. They lost hope in the country and, consequently, they are convinced that submitting to the will of the *Magafe* is the only real option available to them. I am convinced that due to the inequalities and mismanagement that exist in post-civil war Somalia, distorted information that these victims would get beforehand, and their lack of experience, their disappointments in their home country is very reasonable.

Because of the restrictive immigration policies of the EU and member states, migrants from Somalia are forced to take illegal, very time-consuming, extremely expensive and mostly horrifically dangerous routes to Europe. Most of my informants travelled through the Libyan desert, where they expe-

Table 1: Number of asylum decisions on Somali applicants, 2015-2018.

Year	Total	Negative	%
2015	678	193	28.50
2016	1559	1077	69.1
2017	530	316	59.6
2018	566	336	59.4

Source: Finnish Immigration Service (2020).

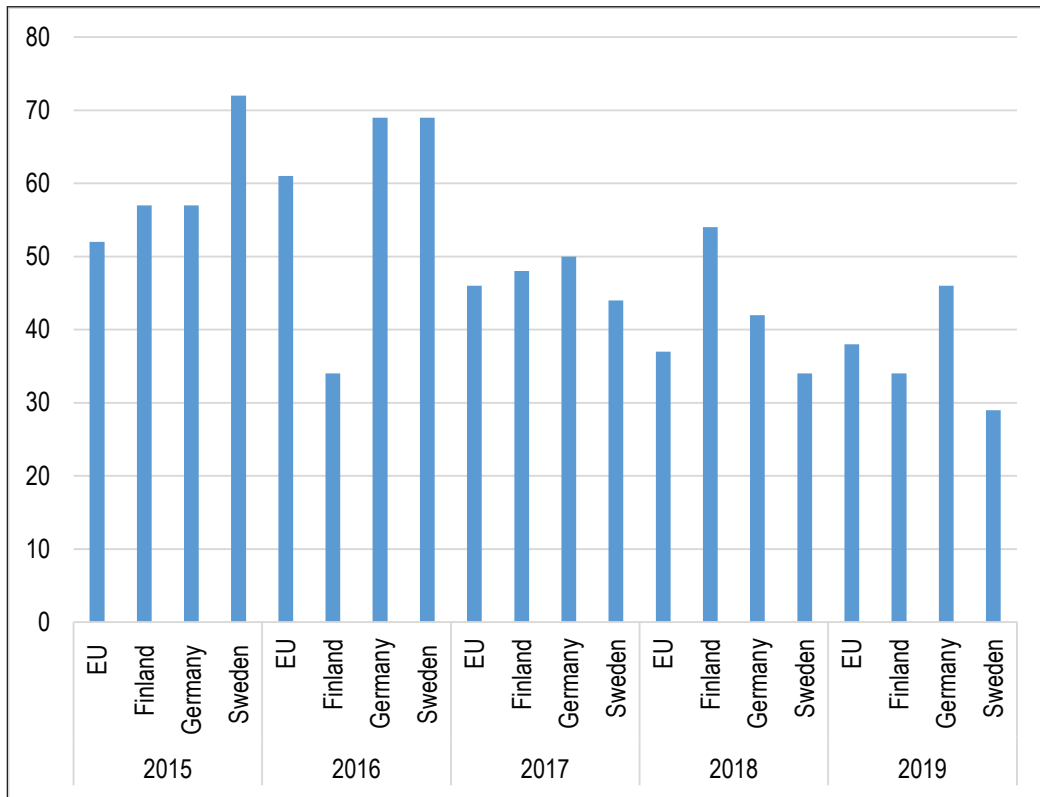


Chart 1. Rate of recognition on first instance asylum applications in Europe, 2015–2019. Source: Compiled from EUROSTAT (2016–2020).

rienced horrific psychological and physical abuses. They were brutally tortured, raped, and traded as slaves by ruthless traffickers. My informants in Europe are probably the luckiest of all. They are those who were not brutally slayed by the *Magafe*, not perished in the Sahara and not drowned in the Mediterranean. According to Sagal, a 27-year-old female informant and a victim of rape and torture in the hands of *Magafe*, “you were ready to choose death, compared to the life in Libya.” Indeed, due to the suffering in the hands of *Magafe*, migrants are psychologically prepared to accept death and not to fear drowning in the sea.

In addition, migration has dramatically shattered the lives of families back home. In most cases, family members have paid large amounts of money as a ransom to the *Magafe*. Many lost all their properties (i.e. homes and lands), accrued unbearable amounts of debts and some were demoted for begging. Furthermore, due to the torments their loved ones were facing in Libya and the economic crises

they went through, many family members in Somalia, particularly parents, developed serious mental and physical illnesses. I met an elderly ailing father who had paid over 30,000 US dollars to the *Magafe* for two minor children. Both he and his wife became seriously ill with diabetes and high blood pressures and since then, his wife barely stood up by herself. In my second visit, ten months later, I found the father himself in a wheelchair.

Moreover, most of the family members I met in Somalia were longing to see their loved ones one day. However, the worst-case scenario for these family members would be to witness their loved ones being deported to Somalia. This would be the end of their hopes and, most probably, would shatter the families even further. In addition, the deportee would be marginalized and seen as a complete failure by everyone, including themselves, family members and acquaintances.

Finally, as the Chart 2 on the Finnish Immigration Service decisions on international protection of 2019 illustrates, most of the re-

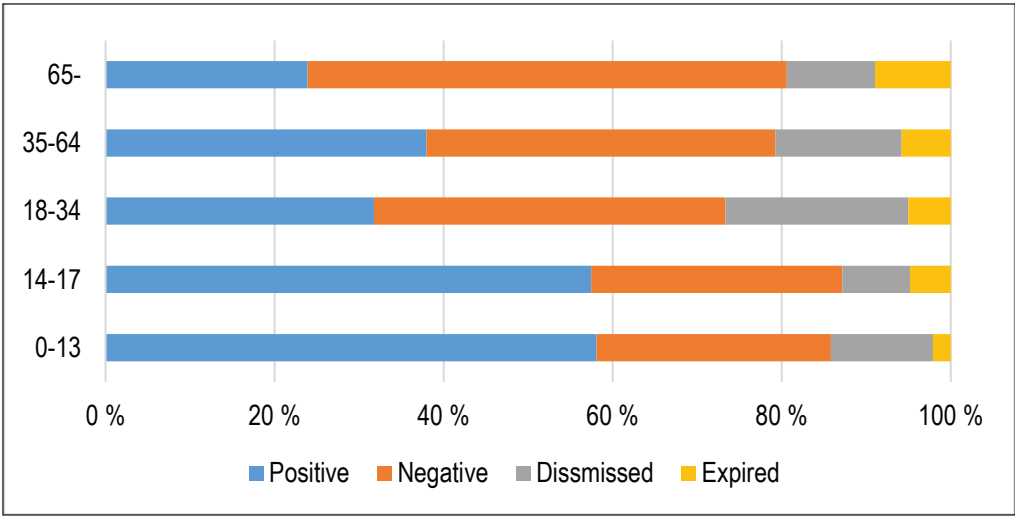


Chart 2. Asylum Decisions by the Finnish Migration Services, Age groups, 1/2019–12/2019. Source: Finnish Immigration Service (2020).

jected asylum seekers were youth; if their migratory and integration processes would be managed well, they could be an asset for the European ageing societies like Finland.

In addition to the financial resources that the families in Somalia lost, their long and unproductive stay in Europe (my informants had stayed 3–11 years in Finland) has also costed European economies.

In the best interest for all, including Europe and its member states, is to manage these resources (time and money) well. Thus, rather than pushing these asylum seekers into an abject destitution and feeding their grievances, more effective immigration and integration policies are needed. Policies that would give these youth hope and nurture them efficiently to become capable residents who are an asset for themselves, their families, as well as for their host societies.

**Sources**

EASO (2020). "Situation of Asylum in the European Union: 2019 overview" EASO's Data Analysis and Research Sector (DARS). Available: <https://easo.europa.eu/asylum-trends-easo-asylum-report-2020>. Accessed 11.11.2020.

EUROSTAT (2016–2019). "Asylum decisions in the EU", Eurostat Press-release, 75/2016 - 70/2020. Available: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>. Accessed 11.11.2020.

Finnish Immigration Service (2020). "STATISTICS- Asylum applications", Available: <https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#decisions/23330/49?l=en&start=588>. Accessed 11.11.2020.

Muižnieks, Nils (2016). "Migrants in limbo in Europe have the right to live in dignity." Available: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/migrants-in-limbo-in-europe-have-the-right-to-live-in-dignity>. Accessed 11.11.2020.

Tondo, Lorenzo (2019). "Nearly 900,000 asylum seekers living in limbo in EU, figures show" Guardian, 5-8.2019. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/25/asylum-seekers-limbo-eu-countries>. Accessed 11.11.2020.