

Refugee Family Reunification

The Temporality and Precarity of a Transitional Phase

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Introduction

Uncertainty and precarities have been widely discussed as essential experiences of refugees¹ while they are undergoing asylum procedures (Burridge and Gill 2017; Kobelinsky 2012; Schiltz et al. 2019). The research we are presenting in this paper concerns refugees' attempts to bring over family members as an important step to rebuild their lives in the host country. This time, precarity concerns their living arrangements as couples and families (Motakef 2019), and their life prospects are again exposed to administrative regulations and practices. As we will demonstrate in this paper, the degree of precarity in the family lives of refugees is linked to the temporality of family reunification procedures. During long-lasting reunification procedures, refugees seek to (re)adjust their strategies in dealing with state officials and maintain their family relations across borders without knowing about the duration and outcome of the procedure.

In what follows we will consider family reunification for refugees in Germany and France and how the regulations in both these member states of the European Union (EU) affect the lives and experiences of the families undergoing these procedures.² As signatory states of human rights treaties and refugee law, Germany and France facilitate refugee family reunification. In line with the recommendations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are usually not required to meet the income and housing conditions that apply to other migrants to the EU seeking to bring over their families (Nicholson 2018). Nevertheless, both countries regulate the access to this more favourable procedure and differ in how they have implemented the relevant international and European law in their domestic family reunification policies for refugees (Ndahayo and Schittenhelm 2025, p. 41; EMN 2024). We will look at these differences and their consequences for transnational families of refugees

¹ We use the term *refugee* to refer to people seeking refuge or residing in a country providing them protection; in doing so, we acknowledge influences due to the type of protection they receive (Gibney 2014; Goodwin-Gill 2014).

² This paper is a slightly revised version of our presentation at the DGS Conference. It is based on the project *Asylum Regimes and Transnational Refugee Families in Germany and France*, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) (project number 441512655) and is part of the DFG-Research Unit *Transborder Mobility and Institutional Dynamics* (Research Unit transMID 2025). In addition to the authors, Manuela Barriga Morachimo is also a member of the project team.

navigating family reunification procedures. To this end, the focus of this paper is on the following key issue:

- How are family reunification policies in Germany and France linked to controls that affect the temporality and potential precarities of the family reunification process?

On the side of the refugee families, our research project is also interested in practices 'of doing family' under imposed conditions while navigating the procedures. We continue with a brief outline of how we conceptualize family reunification as a transitional phase. Next, we give some information about our data and method, before presenting the findings of our comparative analysis of temporality and its possible impacts on refugee family reunification in Germany and France. Finally, we discuss our conclusions regarding the impact of temporality on the precarious nature of refugee family reunification, which is often an unpredictable transitional phase for those involved.

Theoretical Framework – Trajectories and Temporality

Scholars have already examined the forms of control exercised by state officials and the legal regulation of family reunification procedures for refugees (De Hertog and Belloni 2026; Palander et al. 2023). Others have paid attention to how refugees deal with phases of separation and waiting to be reunited (Dubow and Kuschminder 2023; Leinonen and Pellander 2020; Löbel and Jacobsen 2021; Tuzi 2023). Our research considers the legal frameworks and administrative practices of family reunification while accounting for how refugees perceive and navigate the procedure (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025, p. 3). To study refugee family reunification as a transitional process over time, we adopt the concept of *trajectory*. It has been employed and discussed in various fields of sociology. We are developing our analytical framework by reflecting on the trajectory concept in light of the following sociological debates.

In life course theory, a trajectory is understood as a "sequence of life events and transitions" (Elder 1985, p. 31) representing a sequence of stages that unfold over time. The idea that earlier stages can profoundly affect subsequent processes is also a topic in Qualitative Sociology (Strauss 1991, pp. 149–174) and reflected on for instance in biographical research (Riemann and Schütze 1991). In qualitative approaches to transitions and life events, trajectories imply the experiences and strategies of the agents involved, and the concept is often used to describe dynamics beyond their control (Nohl et al. 2014, p. 51).

In migration studies, the concept of trajectories has been applied to explore status transitions during migration processes (Nohl et al. 2014) and shifting stages during spatial mobility more generally (Schapendonk et al. 2020). The trajectory approach thus studies sequences of biographical experiences by also considering contextual impacts such as institutional regulations. How people are categorized by state bureaucracies after having crossed national borders considerably influences the opportunities they have in the country of arrival (Menjívar 2023). Migration scholars are therefore interested in migrants' experiences while dealing with administrative procedures, for instance by studying migrants' "bureaucratic trajectories" (Haller and Yanaşmayan 2024, p. 1910). The concept thus also serves for examining the agency of mobile populations in the course of crossing borders (Schwarz 2020) and seeking access to rights and resources.

We think this concept is well-suited for studying the path dependency of highly regulated migratory processes. We conceptualize refugees' family reunification as a transitional phase including a sequence of various stages. During this transitional phase, temporality means that the longer an unpredictable procedure takes, the more precarious it becomes and it poses increasing challenges for maintaining family life across borders. Instead of merely considering temporality and its link to precarity as being

inherent in refugees' conditions as such, we ask how uncertainties are institutionally created and affect refugees' family reunification as well as their family lives. The paper explores how the governance of refugee family reunification produces long waiting times and affects the living conditions of refugees and their families. The temporal course of the reunification poses specific risks, as the validity of documents may expire due to long waiting periods and family relationships are exposed to high levels of stress. To understand how differing institutional regulations matter, our paper explores the reunification procedures for refugee families in Germany and France from a comparative perspective. In doing so, our research project is interested in the strategies adopted by refugees to navigate the family reunification procedure and maintain their family lives across borders.

During the pending stages of the family reunification process, refugees' prospects for family life depend on how state officials assess their application. They are exposed to administrative regulations concerning essential parts of their lives, with no control over the timeframe or the results. However, our findings demonstrate how refugees maintain their family lives and seek to pursue their goals despite the obstacles they face during the family reunification process.

Data and Methods

Data are drawn from a research project comprising fieldwork in Germany and France. Our comparative analysis for this paper considers different levels and dimensions: (1) We analyse documents to examine the legal and institutional framework of the asylum regimes in Germany and France. (2) The main data are narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) with adults who arrived seeking protection and subsequently applied for family reunification in either France or Germany. (3) Finally, we conducted interviews with family members.

Our sample of refugees who initiated a family reunification procedure comprises 56 adults: 26 interviewed in Germany (16 men, 10 women), and 30 in France (20 men, 10 women). For data evaluation, the documentary method (Bohnsack 2014) was employed to analyse temporality in the family reunification procedure and the possible consequences for refugees and their families. The documentary method, a multi-step procedure which is often combined with narrative interviews (Nohl 2017), allows for the systematic comparative analysis of cases. Based on our interview data, we compare cases or case groups of individuals undergoing family reunification to explore how their (similar or contrasting) circumstances may influence the ways in which they deal with possible obstacles and challenges in the course of the procedures (Ndahayo and Schittenhelm 2025). In this paper the comparative approach serves for considering how the institutional regulation of family reunification in Germany and France affects the temporality of this transitional phase and ultimately the family lives of refugees.

Temporality in Family Reunification in Germany and France

We begin the presentation of our empirical findings with a brief outline of family reunification as a transitory process that comprises various stages. Next, we discuss the findings of our comparative analysis of the different regulations in Germany and France. In doing so, we focus on those regulations that influence the application phase, with considerable consequences for the temporality and precarity of the family reunification procedure for refugees.

Family reunification as a transitional phase

Based on our findings, we were able to distinguish various transitory stages that are part of the family reunification process in Germany and France. Before submitting their application, those concerned must have been granted protection status, which entitles them to bring over family members. In Germany this stage is characterized by excluding people with subsidiary protection³ from the right to family reunification (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025, p. 4), unlike in France, where all people who have been granted protection status have the right to family reunification (Ndahayo and Schittenhelm 2025, p. 41; EMN 2024, p. 5).

Once the applicant has initiated family reunification, proof of identity and family ties must be submitted and verified. In the course of this application procedure there are obstacles and exclusive conditions in both countries. However, in Germany and France the conditions for providing proof of personal identity and family ties differ considerably. As we will show in the following section, these differences have consequences for possible obstacles in the course of reunification as well as for the duration of the procedure and the separation of families.

If the family members were finally able to join the primary migrant, the procedure is still not completed. In both countries, the residence status of the newly arrived family members must be stabilized by an additional application. In Germany this stage of the procedure is regulated by deadlines. If people want to stay on the more favourable track to family asylum, which means that the protection status of the first-migrated family members is granted for the entire family, the application for family asylum must be submitted within a short period of time. For some cases in our sample, this period lasted only two weeks, for others three months, as the time for submission was slightly extended (BAMF 2021; Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025, p. 6). If people miss the deadline, the short route to family asylum is unavailable, with long-term consequences for the families. To receive an independent residence permit,⁴ the newly arrived family members must then undergo the standard asylum assessment – which is generally an unpredictable and long-lasting procedure. Consequently, the families had to live under the threat of becoming separated once again if the asylum application of the family members was not accepted. In addition, living as ‘mixed immigrant status families’⁵ creates inequalities in terms of residence permits and rights in Germany. These conditions may considerably influence the relationship of couples with different residence permits or between parents and their children (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025).

In sum, potential obstacles are involved at various stages of family reunification, which extend the duration of the reunification procedure as a transitional phase. On the side of the refugee applicant, there can be both time pressure and long waiting times without having control of the timeframe and outcome of their case.

Bureaucratic practices, temporalities and precarity

Following the previous outline of the procedures for family reunification in France and Germany, this section concentrates on the phase during which the application for family reunification must be submitted and the verification of the documents takes place. Two dimensions are of particular importance:

³ Subsidiary protection was introduced in the EU with the establishment of the Common European Asylum System to cover risks that are not considered in the United Nation's Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (e.g. civil war); however, this status does not always grant the same rights compared to the UN status (Bauloz and Ruiz 2016).

⁴ The residence permit for family reunification is usually issued for one year and implies dependency on the first-migrated person (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025).

⁵ In migration studies the term ‘mixed immigrant status families’ has been used if family members differ in their citizenship; in our study we use it for families in which all members have foreign citizenships but different residence permits issued by the country of arrival (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025, p. 6).

temporal deadlines for the application process and the administrative handling of documents. By examining these dimensions comparatively, our analysis highlights how procedural requirements are not merely technical elements of migration governance but structurally shape the conditions under which refugee families navigate the reunification process.

Temporal deadlines and precarity

As we have outlined in our introduction, in both France and Germany refugees granted protection are generally exempt from certain socioeconomic requirements for family reunification. However, this right is limited in Germany, where there is a strict three-month deadline for applying after having received refugee status (BAMF 2024). Missing this deadline means losing preferential treatment and becoming subject to the stricter rules applied to non-refugee migrants to the EU. Although deadlines can be seen as a way to expedite procedures, for instance by encouraging the prompt submission of applications, they often produce the opposite effect. If these deadlines are missed, rather than facilitating efficiency they generate additional delays and complications.

To illustrate the relationship between deadlines and precarities observed in the processes of family reunification, we take the case of Amanuel,⁶ a refugee from East Africa, with protection status in Germany. His family (a wife and three children) stayed behind in a country neighbouring his country of origin. Amanuel's application was rejected two years after submission, under the allegation that it had been submitted too late. As a consequence of this rejection, the application is not treated under the favourable conditions that apply to recognized refugees in Germany. He now must meet socioeconomic conditions (proof of income and appropriate accommodation). These conditions are especially difficult to meet, given that he is new to Germany and he is supporting two households (one in Germany and one for his family in East Africa). Given this situation, his application for family reunification is taking a very long time. At the time of the interview, Amanuel had been separated from his family for around seven years. This case shows how deadlines in Germany create systemic precarity if refugees do not meet them.

By contrast, France imposes no such application deadlines, which considerably reduces the precarities and uncertainties of the application procedures. As we could observe in our French sample, maintaining transnational family life, which often means caring for the children staying behind and getting access to the necessary information about family reunification, may take considerable time. In France, the more favourable procedure for refugees remains available and is possible at any time after protection status has been granted (Ndahayo and Schittenhelm 2025).

As noted above, while the deadlines may be intended to ensure swift processing, in practice they often produce the opposite effect. Many refugees require time to understand their new legal situation, to access reliable information, and to seek legal or administrative assistance. Language barriers, limited familiarity with German law, and, in some cases, illiteracy can significantly delay their ability to navigate the system. Additionally, health issues, often linked to experiences of displacement and trauma, may further reduce their capacity to meet such a tight timeframe. As a result, the three-month deadline in Germany may function less as a facilitative measure and more as an obstacle to effective family reunification. If refugees miss these deadlines, their family reunification becomes complicated: they must change the procedural track and face more challenging conditions, such as meeting socioeconomic requirements.

The use of deadlines can produce effects linked to temporality and temporalization in immigration governance. These often operate as a mechanism of border control (Griffiths 2017; Robertson 2018), capable of delaying or indirectly restricting access to family reunification (Fattorelli 2024). Temporality

⁶ To ensure anonymity, all names have been changed, and not all details have been included in the case presentations.

imposed by immigration regimes is often linked to precarities in the lives of separated refugee families (Leinonen and Pellander 2020). Rather than merely serving administrative efficiency, such temporal constraints can function as subtle instruments of exclusion. In this sense, these deadlines sit uneasily with the spirit of EU Directive 2003/86/EC, which seeks to guarantee favourable conditions for refugee family reunification (Council of the European Union 2003).

The administrative handling of documents

Precarity is also caused by the administrative handling of documents, which we will examine by considering two levels, namely the (non)-reestablishment of missing documents and the verification of documents which have been submitted with the application. While civil status registration and official certificates are standard procedures in European bureaucracies (Borrelli and Andreetta 2019; De Hertog and Belloni 2026), such practices are often absent or less relevant in the countries of origin of many refugees. As a result, refugees may face difficulties with providing the necessary documents. This mismatch creates challenges when refugee applicants interact with European bureaucratic systems. As our findings suggest, the consequences seem to be harder in Germany, where missing documents are not substituted. To illustrate this, we compare the case of Betty, who initiated family reunification in France, and the case of Ahmed who did so in Germany:

Betty is a refugee from Rwanda. She arrived in France in 2010 without documents and received protection as a refugee in 2014. Her family members (husband and four children) stayed behind in a neighbouring country and arrived in France in 2015 (six months after Betty's submission of the application).

Ahmed is a refugee from East Africa currently living in Germany. He arrived there in 2017 and obtained UN refugee status in 2018. His wife lives in a country neighbouring his country of origin. After he had received protection, Ahmed submitted his application for family reunification. But his attempt to replace his lost marriage certificate failed, as his new one, a religious certificate of marriage, was not recognized by the German authorities. The application is pending, with a risk of being completely rejected.

Comparing both cases, it can be seen that in Betty's case the administration adopted a comparatively flexible approach towards missing or incomplete documents. Her lack of civil status records was not treated as a decisive obstacle; instead, the French authorities accepted alternative evidence, such as expired identity documents or older family photographs, to reconstruct family ties administratively (see also EMN 2024, p. 8). Where necessary, documents were even re-established through administrative procedures. This evident flexibility facilitated a relatively swift process of family reunification, completed within six months.

In contrast, the case of Ahmed reflects a markedly stricter way of handling the verification of documents. This refugee faced considerable difficulties in obtaining new or officially confirmed documents, a challenge closely linked to displacement and limited access to authorities in his former country of residence. These strict verification practices, in which only documents issued or confirmed by state officials are recognized, resulted in substantial procedural delays to the family reunification process which was still pending during the time of our interview (see Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025, p. 9). This delay, combined with the non-recognition of his marriage certificate, creates a significant risk of being rejected and prolongs family separation.

Evidence suggests that the approach to family reunification in France is more flexible than that in Germany. In particular, as we could observe in the sample of cases collected in France, the French authorities can reconstruct civil status documents for refugees, recognizing the difficult conditions under which they flee. In addition, they also accept alternative proof of family relationships, such as photographs or other types of documents apart from those issued by state officials (EMN 2024, p. 8).

These documents are crucial for the family reunification procedure, as they count as evidence of marital status and family ties.⁷

Concluding Discussion

The success or failure of family reunification in France or Germany is not just about legal eligibility; it is also shaped by how legal frameworks are implemented by state bureaucracies. As we could observe, the verification of documents following the submission of applications has a major impact on possible delays in the family reunification process. On the side of the refugee families, a long-lasting procedure increases the precarity of family reunification as a transitional stage during which both the duration and the outcome are unknown to them. Yet the longer the procedure takes, the more likely the validity of submitted papers is to expire. In addition, extended waiting times increase potential difficulties for maintaining family ties across borders (Löbel and Jacobsen 2021).

Family reunification is thus a transitional phase during which refugees and their families are again in a vulnerable position. They risk being stuck in bureaucratic complexities, with long-term impacts on their family lives and their chances to rebuild their lives in the country of arrival in general. As we could observe, in both Germany and France refugee families were dealing with precarious conditions and traumatic experiences. Furthermore, family reunification involves navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems. However, the structural conditions between the asylum regimes in France and Germany differ significantly, which influences the temporality and the precarities of family reunification as a transitional phase.

In Germany the administrative handling of documents compounds considerable delays. The interplay of strict deadlines, documentation requirements, and the non-reconstitution of civil status documents missing due to flight circumstances can ultimately prevent family members from being reunited (Schittenhelm and Ndahayo 2025). In contrast, in France there are no fixed deadlines, and the state substitutes documents for refugees while also accepting alternative proof of family ties. These conditions reduce procedural obstacles and the uncertainties and precarities we could observe for long-lasting, still pending procedures. However, our comparative analysis of family reunification procedures in Germany and France does not only reveal the previously discussed differences in the member states' legal frameworks and administrative practices. Our analysis also shows that the exposure of refugees to waiting times, unpredictable procedures and time-related precarities while they attempt to rebuild their family lives ultimately depends on the member states' migration governance. By excluding people with a subsidiary protection status, Germany, compared to France, is not only more restrictive in its legal framework for the family reunification of refugees, but the way in which the legal framework is implemented also excludes people who are legally eligible for family reunification but do not have the possibility to meet the conditions required in the course of the administrative procedures.

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⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the conditions provided by the French and the German asylum regime, see Ndahayo and Schittenhelm (forthcoming).

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