

RESPOND

Working Papers

Global Migration: Consequences and Responses

Paper 2020/38, February 2020

Reception Policies, Practices and Responses

Austria Country Report

Ivan Josipovic and Ursula Reeger

Institute for Urban and Regional Research

Austrian Academy of Sciences

© Ivan Josipovic and Ursula Reeger

Reference: RESPOND Deliverable 4.1

This research was conducted under the Horizon 2020 project “RESPOND Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond” (770564).

The sole responsibility of this publication lies with the authors. The European Union is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: ursula.reeger@oeaw.ac.at

This document is available for download at <https://www.respondmigration.com/>

Horizon 2020 RESPOND:
Multilevel Governance of Mass
Migration in Europe and Beyond
(770564)



Co-funded by the Horizon 2020 programme
of the European Union

Content

Acknowledgements	4
List of Figures and Tables	5
List of Abbreviations	6
About the Project	7
Executive Summary	8
1. Introduction	9
2. Methodology and Sources	10
Expert interviews	10
Interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection	11
3. Policies and Legal Regulations of Reception: A Multi-level Perspective	13
3.1. National Policies and Regulations	15
Institutional setting	15
National legal framework and developments between 2011 and 2019	16
3.2. Regional and Municipal Policies and Regulations	20
Governance of reception and related regulations in Upper Austria	20
Governance of reception and related regulations in Vienna	22
4. Practices of Reception – Vienna and Upper Austria	25
4.1. Housing and Place of residence	25
Arriving in the Austrian reception system	25
Size and location of reception facilities	27
Isolation and a lack of rights	28
Life under Basic Welfare Support	29
4.2. Early Access to the Labour Market	31
Labour market ban	32
Moving in a legal grey area	33
Employment and the place of residence	37
4.3. Education, Services and Allowances	38
Dependency	38
Engaging in language courses	39
4.4. Encounters with Officials, Civic Actors and the Receiving Society	41
Officials	41
Civil society actors	42
“Welcome culture” versus discrimination	44
5. Notes on the Multi-level Model of Reception	46
6. Conclusions: Challenges, Prospects, and Policy Recommendations	47
References and Sources	49
Appendix	51

Acknowledgements

This report contains information on the Austrian refugee reception policies and their implementation, as well as experiences of experts working in the field and policy recipients, namely asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. Sections on the project methodology and the legal framework were partly adopted from the WP1 Country Report “Legal and Policy Framework in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2018), the WP2 Country Report “Border Management and Migration Controls in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2019), and the WP3 Country Report “Refugee Protection in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020) and were updated where necessary. These reports are not cited in the text due to the integrated character of the RESPOND Working Paper Series and in order to improve readability.

We wish to thank our colleagues Astrid Mattes and Hanneke Friedl for supporting this report. Astrid Mattes carried out a peer review and provided us with valuable comments and suggestions. Hanneke Friedl supported the quality of the paper via a thorough language editing. Furthermore, we would like to thank Zohal Wafa who supported us with her language skills throughout the interviews she conducted. Ultimately, we wish to express our thanks to all interlocutors who were willing to take part in in-depth interviews or contributed to a written Q&A for taking the time and for the valuable insights they have shared with us.

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Federal provinces included in the RESPOND research.....	9
Figure 2: Divisions of administration in Austria	13
Figure 3: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Austria, 2014-2018.....	14
Figure 4: Fulfilment of quotas in Austrian federal provinces, 2015-2018.....	178
Figure 5: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Upper Austria, 2017-2018	20
Figure 6: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Vienna, 2017-2018.....	24
Table 1: Asylum seekers receiving Basic Welfare Support in the federal provinces, 2016 and 2018	14

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	German	English
AMS	Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich	Public Employment Service
BFA	Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl	Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum
BMASK	Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit und Konsumentenschutz	Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection
BMEIA	Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äußeres	Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs
BM.I	Bundesministerium für Inneres	Federal Ministry of the Interior
FSW	Fonds Soziales Wien	Vienna Social Fund
ÖIF	Österreichischer Integrationsfonds	Austrian Integration Fund

About the Project

RESPOND is a Horizon 2020 project which aims at studying the multilevel governance of migration in Europe and beyond. The consortium consists of 14 partners from 11 source, transit and destination countries and is coordinated by Uppsala University in Sweden. The main aim of this Europe-wide project is to provide an in-depth understanding of the governance of recent mass migration at macro, meso and micro levels through cross-country comparative research and to critically analyse governance practices with the aim of enhancing the migration governance capacity and policy coherence of the EU, its member states and third countries.

RESPOND studies migration governance through a narrative which is constructed along five thematic fields: (1) Border management and security, (2) Refugee protection regimes, (3) Reception policies, (4) Integration policies, and (5) Conflicting Europeanization. Each thematic field between (1) and (5) reflects a juncture in the migration journey of refugees and is designed to provide a holistic view of policies, their impacts and responses given by affected actors within.

In order to better focus on these themes, we divided our research question into work packages (WPs). The present report is concerned with the findings related to WP4, which focuses specifically on the Austrian reception system.

Executive Summary

This report deals with the reception of asylum seekers in Austria between 2011 and 2019. In the federal Austrian system, competences in the area of reception are divided between the federal government, which is responsible for persons during their early asylum application phase, and the nine provinces which are responsible for providing care and housing during the substantive asylum procedure. During the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, the shortage of reception facilities led to a series of conflicts between different tiers of government involved in the regulation of asylum seeker distribution and housing. Following the introduction of a federal constitutional law, stipulating an obligatory admission quota for all municipalities, the number of accommodations increased. Nonetheless, the distribution across all provinces remains uneven, with Vienna admitting the relatively largest share. As the number of new arrivals decreased from 2016 onwards and as applicants from 2015 and 2016 received final decisions on their asylum cases, newly created small scale facilities had to close down.

In this regard, experts engaged in the field of asylum mention the issue of volatile resources. Beside this stated contraction of the Austrian reception system that followed the expansion of 2015, they allude to the federal government’s recent attempts to expand control. Arguably, the creation of a federal care agency responsible for the initial reception phase and for legal counselling points towards attempts to decrease the influence of NGOs in both areas.

The most pressing issue among both asylum seekers and experts relates to Austria’s de facto ban of asylum seekers from the labour market. In combination with a very long asylum procedure, it has a negative impact on the mental health and social life of the interviewed asylum seekers. Among experts there is a strong consensus that Austria’s de facto ban of asylum seekers from labour market participation is legally questionable and politically problematic. Considering the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU, according to which asylum seekers must receive effective access to the labour market no later than nine months after they have filed an application, as well as different high court decisions, some experts point out that the current legal framework will inevitably have to be reformed at some point.

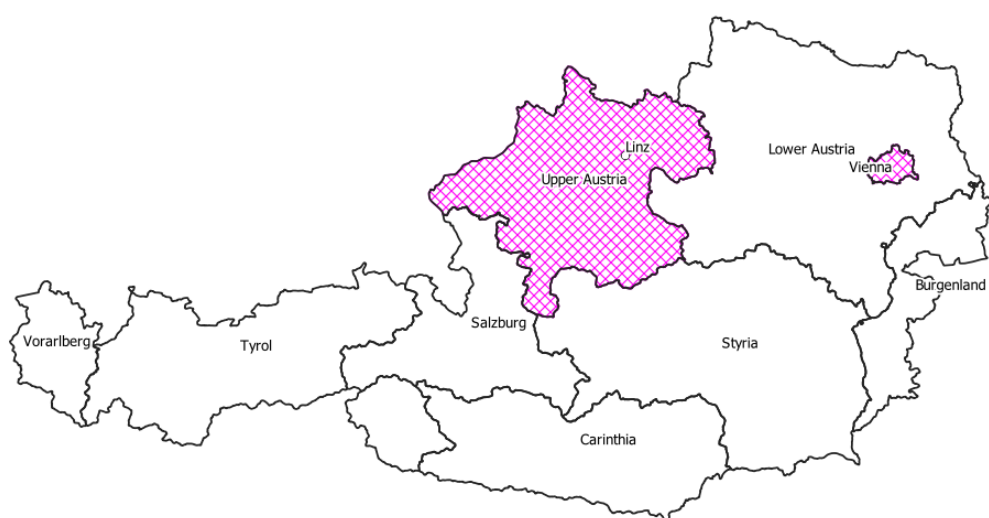
In this regard, the interlocutors of this project also widely discussed the legal option of apprenticeships for asylum seekers, which was abolished in 2018. Asylum seekers who had tried to apply for such positions expressed anger and frustration, discussing the matter in the context of isolation, lack of daily structure, socio-economic dependency, and black market employment. Our experts considered this legal situation a result of restrictive immigration policies or a restrictive welfare state. While all agree on the detrimental effects on integration efforts, some point to the fact that a liberalization of the labour market could contribute both to integration and to the economy.

Similarly, our experts pointed to the federal government’s restrictive stance with regard to early integration measures such as language courses. Arguably, most asylum seekers are dependent on provincial (or even municipal) structures if they want to learn German during their asylum application procedure. These structures however proved to be important for our interlocutors, providing them with a certain sense of social normality and adding structure to their daily lives.

1. Introduction

Refugee reception represents a central pillar of national asylum systems in the European Union. Regulated by the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU, this policy area addresses rights, duties, and material conditions for asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim to international protection in host states. In federal systems such as that of Austria, the transposition and implementation of EU norms are not only subject to federal-level politics, but also concerns provinces (*Bundesländer*) and municipalities (*Gemeinden*). Starting with the national legal framework in Austria, this report sets out to focus on the systems of reception in two Austrian provinces: Upper Austria and Vienna (Figure 1). In recent years, both provinces have been highly active in providing reception facilities and improving early integration measures.

Figure 1: Federal provinces included in the RESPOND research



Source: cartography by Maximilian Wonaschütz, ISR.

This report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 offers insights into the methodological framework of RESPOND, explaining which type of data has been gathered and how it was analysed. Chapter 3 provides a descriptive account of the institutional framework and major national as well as provincial policies targeting the reception of asylum seekers. Here, we build on our RESPOND Country Reports “Legal and Policy Framework in Austria”, “Border Management and Migration Controls in Austria”, and “Refugee Protection in Austria”, including updates of information and data with regard to developments between mid-2018 and mid-2019. These parts of the report are based on legislative texts, national or European reports, official statements, newspaper articles, and press releases of governing bodies. In chapters 4 and 5 we turn our perspective to problem definitions among experts working in the field of asylum as well as persons affected by policies: asylum seekers and early beneficiaries of international protection. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, we provide contrasting arguments in relation to the following topics: housing and place of residence, early access to the labour market, education, services and allowances, as well as encounters with officials, civic actors, and the receiving society. Chapter 5 focuses entirely on the issue of multilevel governance. The final chapter 6 provides a conclusion of the central arguments.

2. Methodology and Sources¹

In line with the overall RESPOND objectives, we seek to analyse Austrian governance in the realm of refugee reception along three levels, namely the macro, meso and micro level. The macro level relates to national policy makers and their output in terms of setting and enforcing certain rules. The meso level addresses experts engaged in the field of asylum and builds on their practical knowledge. Finally, the micro level relates to the primary recipients of public policies, namely asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

Expert interviews

In the chapters 4 and 5, dealing with practices of reception, we address the meso level. Here, we provide insights from persons who are working in the field of asylum or who are monitoring developments in the field. What are their experiences and how do they assess policy reforms carried through between 2011 and 2018? We draw on data collected through semi-structured interviews that were conducted between August 2018 and February 2019. Regarding the selection of our interview partners, we considered three dimensions:

Spatial scope of professional activity and differences between provinces:

- Urban – Province 1 (Vienna)
- Rural – Province 2 (rural areas in Upper Austria)
- National level

Type of institution:

- (Semi-)public administration, representatives of local governments
- NGOs, immigrant organizations

Work profile (related to the type of institution):

- More administrative in nature (no direct contact with refugees in daily work)
- More practical in nature (everyday contact with refugees)

Following two pilot interviews with legal counsellors from an NGO, we conducted a total of 11 qualitative face-to-face interviews and one written Q&A.²

With each of our eleven experts, we led semi-structured interviews of approximately one and a half hours, based on a joint RESPOND questionnaire. This questionnaire was divided into a general part about their own work and three thematic modules: borders and refugee protection, reception conditions (*Grundversorgung*), and integration.³ For each of these areas, we asked

¹ Chapter 2 was adopted from the WP3 Country Report “Refugee Protection in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020) and updated where necessary.

² For a full list of meso-level interview partners, cf. the Appendix section; in the empirical parts of this report, we use the abbreviations E01 to E12 when we refer to expert interviews.

³ For the Q&A, we narrowed down and adapted our questionnaire to the topics of refugee protection and border management.

open questions, addressing the expert's own experiences and assessments. The conversations were recorded, anonymized and transcribed. Based on these texts, we conducted a content analysis, allowing us to summarize and contrast the most important arguments with regard to the topics discussed in this report.

Interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection

The sub-chapters 4.1. to 4.4. account for the micro level of analysis, namely experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. In this context, we were interested in the policy recipients' encounters within the Austrian asylum system and the problems they perceive to be relevant. Therefore, we carried out 29 semi-structured interviews between August 2018 and January 2019.

Micro-level sampling was conducted with consideration of a person's country of origin, his/her place of residence in Austria, and his/her legal status. Concerning the country of origin, we largely focused on two groups: persons from Afghanistan and from Syria. This choice was motivated by the fact that in the period under consideration, the Syrian population in Austria increased by 1,265 per cent (from 3,046 persons in 2011 to 41,588 in 2017; data from Statistics Austria, population register), while the Afghan population increased by 430 per cent (from 8,428 persons in 2011 to 44,684 in 2017). These two groups accounted for 46.6 per cent of all asylum applications between 2011 and 2016. In order to diversify the investigation, we also interviewed persons from Iraq, Georgia, Iran, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

Concerning the place of residence, our focus was first on persons living in Vienna, which is home to 35.5 per cent of all persons born in Afghanistan and 44.7 per cent of all persons born in Syria, according to register data from Statistics Austria. The province of Vienna has great salience as the largest urban centre in Austria, particularly for beneficiaries of international protection, who in many cases choose to move there upon the acquisition of a title. In the second phase of our interview process, we moved our focus to a rural area in Upper Austria accounting for perspectives of people who live in small and medium-sized municipalities. In this regard, the aim was also to consider how the two provinces manage refugee reception under different structural conditions.

In terms of legal status, we mainly differentiated between asylum applicants and beneficiaries of international protection (which includes recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection). Considering socio-demographic aspects, we included 15 female participants and 14 male participants, despite the quantitative dominance of men among the refugee populations investigated.⁴

We conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately one to one and a half hour each. In order to compensate for the time they had invested, participants received shopping vouchers after the interview. Similar to the preparation for the expert interviews, we had developed a joint RESPOND questionnaire that was later translated into German and modified to account

⁴ For a full list of micro-level interview partners, cf. the Appendix section; in the empirical parts of this report, we use the abbreviations R01 to R29 when we refer to the interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

for specific Austrian terminology. The thematic modules that were discussed entailed the following topics:

1. General questions about the person
2. Current everyday life in Austria
3. Arrival in Austria and experiences during reception
4. Life in the country of origin
5. Journey to Austria
6. Process of asylum application and status determination procedure
7. Physical and mental health
8. Possibility for interviewees to discuss topics not mentioned previously

Within each of these modules we started the conversation with an invitation to share with us their experiences and points of view regarding the respective topic. This allowed interviewees first to elaborate on the aspects that they considered personally important or generally relevant. Once they had set the thematic agenda in an area, we continued with open questions targeting specific dimensions. For example, in module 3 we asked people about their experiences during the reception phase, their specific needs when they first arrived in Austria and the help they received or still receive during reception (means of subsistence, legal advice, child care, language classes, accommodation).

Regarding the problem of language proficiency, particularly concerning interviews with asylum seekers, we employed an Afghan native speaker of Dari. Based on an introduction by the project leaders on methodological and ethical approaches, as well as existing experience in social research projects, she conducted, translated and transcribed 12 of the 29 interviews.

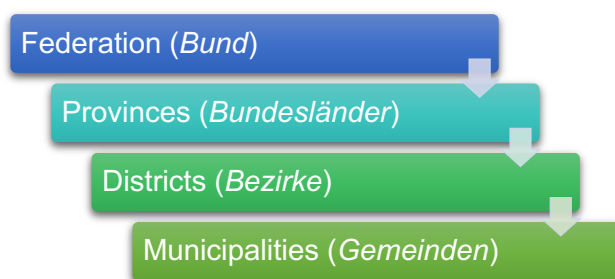
The interview process also included early project- and team-internal reflections on research ethics. In line with Coleman's (2009) consideration of consent-based, risk-based and justice-based vulnerabilities, we particularly invested thought into two aspects: First, into conveying a sufficient amount of information regarding the content and purpose of the project in an understandable way, and second, into avoiding strong negative emotions or re-traumatization during interviews. Due to ongoing reflections and deliberations between the two interviewers and gatekeeper persons, we managed to complete all interviews without any incidents or withdrawals from the project. For cases of emergency, we kept the phone number of a socio-psychiatric emergency service on standby.

All conversations were recorded, anonymized and transcribed. Among all German language interviewees, language skills were sufficient to understand our questions and communicate meaningful answers. However, given the fact that the majority of these respondents had only recently started learning German, we had to reckon with many grammatical errors during the transcription. In order to render the material accessible to researchers other than those involved in the interviews, we changed the grammatical structure of sentences where necessary and only to the degree that it did not alter the meaning of a statement. In case of doubt about the meaning, we refrained from editing. Based on these texts, we conducted a content analysis using the software Nvivo, which allowed us to summarize and contrast the most important arguments.

3. Policies and Legal Regulations of Reception: A Multi-level Perspective

Reception refers to a particular phase in a migration process within the context of asylum. It starts with a person's application for asylum, continues throughout the duration of the administrative processing of an applicant's asylum case, and ends with a final decision on that case. From a governance perspective, reception covers issues such as housing, services and allowances, as well as special provisions for participation in the labour market. In the case of Austria, we focus on the regulation of the state system of accommodation and care for persons who are formally recognized as asylum seekers (*AsylwerberIn*). This system is called Basic Welfare Support (*Grundversorgung*). Thus, we are primarily interested in the phase of reception under Basic Welfare Support, but we consider it in the context of immigrants' arrival in the country and the (generally short) phase of first admission, during which authorities examine whether Austria is responsible for an asylum application.

Figure 2: Divisions of administration in Austria

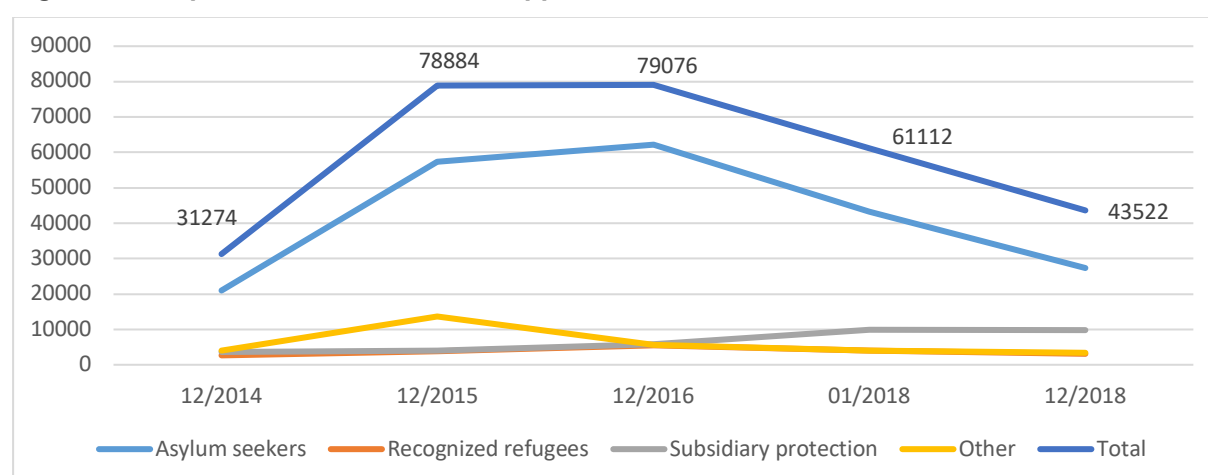


Source: own design.

The legal basis for reception into the federal system of Austria (Figure 2) was created in 2004 under the Basic Welfare Support Agreement (*Grundversorgungsvereinbarung*, GVV No. 80/2004). This legal framework was developed for the transposition of the Council Directive 2003/9/EC (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020) and today covers the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU. It regulates power- and cost-sharing between the federal government and the nine Austrian provinces, stipulating the provision of suitable accommodation, adequate care and the granting of monthly pocket money. During the time of the substantive asylum procedure, the provinces are responsible for the provision of Basic Welfare Support, admitting asylum seekers into their system according to an allocation formula that takes into account the number of inhabitants and the availability of open spots. Municipalities are responsible for the implementation of housing during reception, yet they are excluded from policy formulation (Haselbacher & Hattmannsdorfer, 2018).

Considering the number of Basic Welfare Support recipients in Austria, we find that it started out from a relatively low level at the end of 2014 (31,274 persons), reached a peak at the end of 2016 (79,076 persons) and has declined ever since (43,522 persons at the end of 2018). As Figure 3 shows, asylum seekers indeed account for the majority of Basic Welfare Support recipients, but there are also other groups that are included here: Recognized refugees are entitled to this kind of benefit for another four months after they have received a title. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are also a target group of Basic Welfare support, should they be in need of aid. Their share in the total number of recipients has been growing over time and is currently at a little more than one fifth of all Basic Welfare Support recipients in Austria.

Figure 3: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Austria, 2014-2018



Source: own design based on data derived from https://www.migration-infografik.at/soz_gvs_statistiken.html; BM.I.

Comparing figures relating to asylum seekers from the beginning of 2016 and 2018 respectively, we find a considerable drop across all provinces, ranging from -59 per cent in Upper Austria to -74 per cent in Vorarlberg. In Burgenland and Vorarlberg, the two smallest federal provinces (see Table 1), absolute numbers even fell below 1,000 persons. The reasons for this decrease are the lower numbers of arrivals of refugees as of 2016 on the one hand, and the higher numbers of decisions on applications for international protection in recent years on the other. Vienna and Upper Austria together accounted for 41.7 per cent of the asylum seekers present in Austria in 2018.

Table 1: Asylum seekers receiving Basic Welfare Support in the federal provinces, 2016 and 2018

	2016 abs.	2016 in %	2018 abs.	2018 in %	Difference 2016/2018 in %
Vienna	20,957	24.6	5,867	21.5	-72
Upper Austria	13,574	15.9	5,512	20.2	-59
Lower Austria	15,537	18.2	4,821	17.7	-69
Styria	12,341	14.5	3,718	13.6	-70
Tyrol	6,380	7.5	2,424	8.9	-62
Carinthia	4,763	5.6	1,603	5.9	-66
Salzburg	4,786	5.6	1,552	5.7	-68
Vorarlberg	3,939	4.6	986	3.6	-74
Burgenland	2,874	3.4	804	2.9	-72
Total	85,151	100.0	27,287	100.0	-67

Source: Statistics BM.I and Austrian Integration Fund.

3.1. National Policies and Regulations⁵

In this chapter, we first of all provide an overview of the institutional setting for reception governance, including ministerial responsibilities and the NGO landscape. Secondly, we provide information on the legal framework for different dimensions of reception, thereby also accounting for policy change in recent years.

Institutional setting

At the highest institutional level, matters of refugee reception belong to the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Interior (BM.I) and the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs (BMASK). The BM.I covers issues related to initial reception centres and the coordination of Basic Welfare Support. Concerning the admissibility phase of the asylum procedure, the federal government bears sole responsibility and provides asylum seekers with care in Initial Reception Centres and Distribution Centres. This also relates to aliens whose asylum applications have been rejected in the admissibility procedure (mainly Dublin cases). There are two Initial Reception Centres (*Erstaufnahmestellen*) – one in Traiskirchen, Lower Austria, and one in Thalham, Upper Austria. Following the reception crisis of 2015, the federal government introduced Distribution Centres in all provinces (Ossiach, Traiskirchen, Bad Kreuzen, Bergheim, Graz, Innsbruck, Vienna). In federal facilities, the private company European Homecare was active until 2012 and was later replaced by ORS Service, which is now responsible for care and maintenance tasks.

Regarding persons who are admitted to the asylum procedure, a specific department of the BM.I (Sektion V – Abteilung 9) is dedicated to the coordination, financial management, and accommodation management of Basic Welfare Support. At the sub-national level, each province has a political department within the provincial government responsible for the specification and an administrative unit responsible for the execution of Basic Welfare Support. Although municipalities are responsible for the implementation of reception through the provision of accommodation facilities, they are excluded from any decision-making.

Regarding the regulation of employment and apprenticeship of asylum seekers, the BMASK holds relevant competences. It governs the access of asylum seekers to the labour market as well as the integration of asylum seekers with a high recognition probability. For the latter group, the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (BMEIA) also bears responsibilities regarding integration programmes. It finances the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as an executive body carrying out integration projects and conducting evaluations.

Non-governmental organizations (which are largely non-profit organizations) also play a crucial role in the implementation or monitoring of reception policies in Austria. Historically, some of them are established aid agencies (for example: Austrian Red Cross, Samariterbund), while others emerged from a Christian social environment (for example: Caritas, Diakonie), social democratic organizations (for example: Volkshilfe), or new social movements (for example: Asyl in Not, SOS Menschenrechte [Langthaler & Trauner, 2009: 456]). Today, NGOs engage in numerous fields of activity such as legal consultation during asylum procedures, the provision of Basic Welfare Support services as well as integration and voluntary return programmes

⁵ Chapter 3.1. was adopted from WP1 Country Report “Legal and Policy Framework in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2018) and updated where necessary.

(Langthaler & Trauner, 2009: 452). In the context of reception, NGOs act as “operative partners of the provinces for the performance of care tasks” (Langthaler & Trauner, 2009: 460). They cooperate with the provinces through service contracts and are accordingly tied to legal provisions regarding the scope of activities covered by public finance. Financial resources are generally provided for the accommodation of asylum applicants by the provinces, whereas counselling tasks, additional care services and integration programmes may be funded by the European Refugee Fund and are only co-financed by the Federal Ministry of the Interior (Langthaler & Trauner, 2009: 457).

National legal framework and developments between 2011 and 2019

Reception during the admissibility procedure

The 2004 Basic Welfare Support Agreement (No.80/2004) stipulates that the federal government is responsible for reception during the first phase of the twofold asylum procedure. This is referred to as the admissibility procedure and relates to the period during which the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA) determines whether Austria is responsible for an asylum case. During the period of this pending decision (20 days), applicants carry a green identification card and are obliged to cooperate at all times. They have no legal residence as such and are merely tolerated within the territory of the district of their Distribution Centre or Initial Reception Centre. The violation of these borders is considered an administrative offence that can lead to detention in extreme cases (Rössl & Frühwirth, 2016). During their stay at the reception centre, applicants undergo a medical examination and are offered legal support by the organization *Verein Menschenrechte Österreich* (VMÖ)⁶.

Unaccompanied minors are accommodated in special facilities or living communities where they receive 24-hour supervision and social care. In case of doubt they need to undergo an age test by means of a wristbone x-ray. During the admissibility procedure they are represented by a legal adviser.

In 2019, the federal government again initiated a reform of the Austrian reception system. A law that was passed in May 2019 (*Bundesgesetz über die Errichtung der Bundesagentur für Betreuungs- und Unterstützungsleistungen Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung*, No.53/2019) establishes a federal agency that will operate all Initial Reception Centres from mid-2020. From the beginning of 2021, the state agency will also take over all legal and return counselling for asylum seekers. According to the former Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl, this measure would increase the cost efficiency and reduce the number of asylum applications. Parliamentary opposition and refugee-rights NGOs fear that conflicts of interest will arise in the future with regard to the legal counselling of asylum seekers, as the persons responsible are no

⁶ VMÖ has been repeatedly criticized by diverse refugee rights NGOs who argue that VMÖ has the character of a governmentally initiated NGO. They point out how in 2011, the Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Chancellery issued a call for tenders for legal advice during asylum and alien police proceedings, awarding the contract to VMÖ as the cheapest bidder, which accordingly lacks quality in its work (Asylkoordination, 2017).

longer independent. Concerning the assignment of accommodation, NGOs fear an increasing centralization and isolation of reception facilities following the blueprint of return centres.⁷

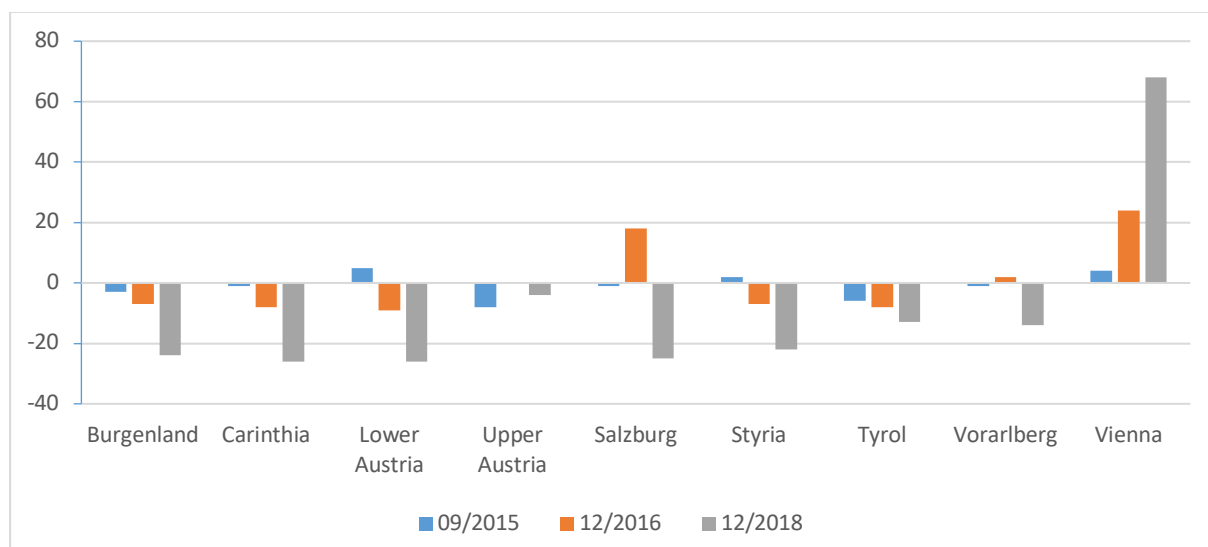
Spatial distribution

In case of a positive outcome in the admissibility procedure, a person is formally recognized as an asylum applicant (*AsylwerberIn*) with a corresponding white temporary residence card that is valid during the entire substantive procedure. During this procedure of several months or even years, the BFA must examine the reasons for the flight through interrogations and investigations and then decide whether the asylum seeker is to be granted protection status or a residence permit for Austria. In accordance with the Basic Welfare Support Agreement (No. 80/2004), asylum applicants are distributed to federal provinces according to an allocation formula that takes into account the number of inhabitants in the province and the availability of free places. The federal government covers 60 per cent of the costs and the provinces the remaining 40 per cent. In certain provinces, there are further mechanisms for distribution towards administrative districts.

The distribution and accommodation of asylum seekers entered into profound difficulties in 2015, as the number of asylum applications grew rapidly. According to the analysis of Rosenberger and Müller, this led to “conflicts between federal and provincial authorities over admission and costs, conflicts between federal and municipal authorities over admission and reception standards, and conflicts between provincial and municipal authorities over providing accommodation places and sharing the burden” (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020: 102). Due to the lack of reception accommodations by mid-2015 and the unwillingness of certain provinces to fulfill their admission quotas, the federal government initiated a constitutional law (*Bundesverfassungsgesetz über die Unterbringung von hilfs- und schutzbedürftigen Fremden*, No.120/2015) that was passed in October 2015. This law stipulated that, if necessary, each municipality had to provide the required number of places for asylum seeker accommodation (based on the benchmark of 1.5% of municipal inhabitants) and furthermore allowed the federal government to install its own reception facilities within municipalities. The law expired, as planned, by the end of 2018.

Looking at the admission figures across all provinces (Figure 4), we find that Vienna is the only federal province in which the number of places provided for persons entitled to Basic Welfare Support always exceeded the quota, especially at the end of 2018 with +68 per cent. This is noteworthy, as the overall number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection has diminished sharply since 2016. This however did not lead to a more even distribution across federal provinces, but rather to a more pronounced inequality. An explanation can be seen in the fact that beneficiaries of subsidiary protection can choose where they want to live, with many of them moving to Vienna after having received this title.

⁷ The Aliens Law Amendment Act 2017 (No. 145/2017) introduced the possibility of ordering rejected asylum seekers to move to a return centre. Those are existing asylum accommodations of the federal government, which have been repurposed. They no longer accommodate people at the beginning of the asylum procedure, but instead now accommodate those with a negative asylum decision who are obliged to return. Counselling and social benefits for these people are only available in the return facilities. Return centres are not detention centres. People can move freely; however, these centres are located in remote areas and there are territorial restrictions to remain in the political district. Four facilities have been dedicated to the accommodation of this group: one in Fieberbrunn (Tyrol), one in Schwechat (Vienna Airport), one in Krumfeld (Carinthia), and one in Steinhaus (Styria).

Figure 4: Fulfilment of quotas in Austrian federal provinces, 2015-2018

Source: own design based on data derived from https://www.migration-infografik.at/soz_gvs_statistiken.html; BM.I.

With the 2017 Aliens Law Amendment Act (No.145/2017) the government also introduced residence restrictions for asylum seekers. As a rule, persons are obliged to keep their residence within the province of their Basic Welfare Support throughout the entire asylum procedure. Moving to another province can be fined (at a rate of 100 to 5,000 EUR or sanctioned with imprisonment upon repeated offence).

Housing and social services during the substantive procedure

Based on the 2004 Basic Welfare Support Agreement, housing and social services for asylum seekers are regulated at the federal level by the Federal Basic Welfare Support Act 2005 (*Grundversorgungsgesetz - Bund 2005*, No.100/2005) as well as through specified provincial laws.

Basic Welfare Support is a social aid system that is generally provided to all aliens in need of help and protection. This means that, aside from asylum seekers, recognized refugees are also entitled to this service during the first four months upon approval and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection may receive it as long as they are in need of aid. Furthermore, persons with legally binding residence terminating decisions and persons that can de facto not be returned have a claim to this type of support until their effective departure. Persons who have private earnings or support are generally excluded from this service.

Basic Welfare Support can be provided through cash or in-kind allowances. It encompasses the following (Koppenberg, 2014: 44-45)⁸:

- Accommodation, which can be provided by NGOs, by provincial bodies, or through cash support (120 EUR per month) for individual private rent. Special facilities are

⁸ This list presents the maximum figures as agreed under the Basic Welfare Support Agreement between the federal government and the provinces.

provided for unaccompanied minors and care-dependent persons, who receive 2,480 EUR per month.

- Clothing and food (three meals per day in organized accommodations or a maximum of 215 EUR per month for individually accommodated persons).
- Health insurance.
- Social counselling.
- Spending money (40 EUR per month) in the provinces of Vienna, Tyrol, and Vorarlberg.
- Compulsory free schooling for children, regardless of their status.

This list of important basic welfare provisions is based on the legal framework of the 2004 Basic Welfare Support Agreement of the federal government, which finances services that are rendered on the provincial level. The 60 per cent share of the budget that is generally derived from the federal level amounted to a total of 473 Mio. EUR in 2017 and was complemented by the respective provincial budgets.

Early employment and education

Concerning asylum seekers' access to the labour market, the Federal Basic Welfare Support Act 2005 (*Grundversorgungsgesetz - Bund 2005*, No.100/2005) refers to the Aliens Employment Act (*Ausländerbeschäftigungsgesetz*, No.218/1975), which holds provisions about the conditions for taking up employment. Whereas asylum seekers do have general options for obtaining an employment permit three months after the beginning of their procedure, a 2004 decree ("Bartenstein Decree") of the Federal Ministry of Economic and Social Affairs became well known for limiting the scope of permits to seasonal employment. So-called non-profit employment constitutes another possibility of securing employment. This is compensated with a small recognition contribution (3 EUR to 5 EUR per hour). Furthermore, decrees issued in 2012 and 2013 allow asylum seekers under the age of 26 to obtain apprenticeship permits in economic sectors displaying a shortage of employees. Under the ÖVP-FPÖ-led government⁹, this provision was abolished, leading to a broad public debate about persons in apprenticeship who had received a negative decision on their asylum application and could be deported.

Legal scholars (e.g. Peyrl, 2015) have criticized Austrian provisions that de facto exclude the largest share of asylum seekers from the labour market. Based on the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU, asylum seekers must receive effective access to the labour market no later than nine months after filing an application. The restriction to seasonal work could therefore no longer be maintained, even if labour market tests are continually possible under European law (Peyrl, 2015).

As of November 2019, there have been three related decisions by the Federal Administrative Court in favour of asylum seekers' employment. The Ministry of Social Affairs stated that the Public Employment Service (AMS) would appeal to the Administrative High Court in two of these cases (derStandard, 2019).

⁹ In office from December 2017 until May 2019; coalition between the conservative ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) and the right-wing FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria).

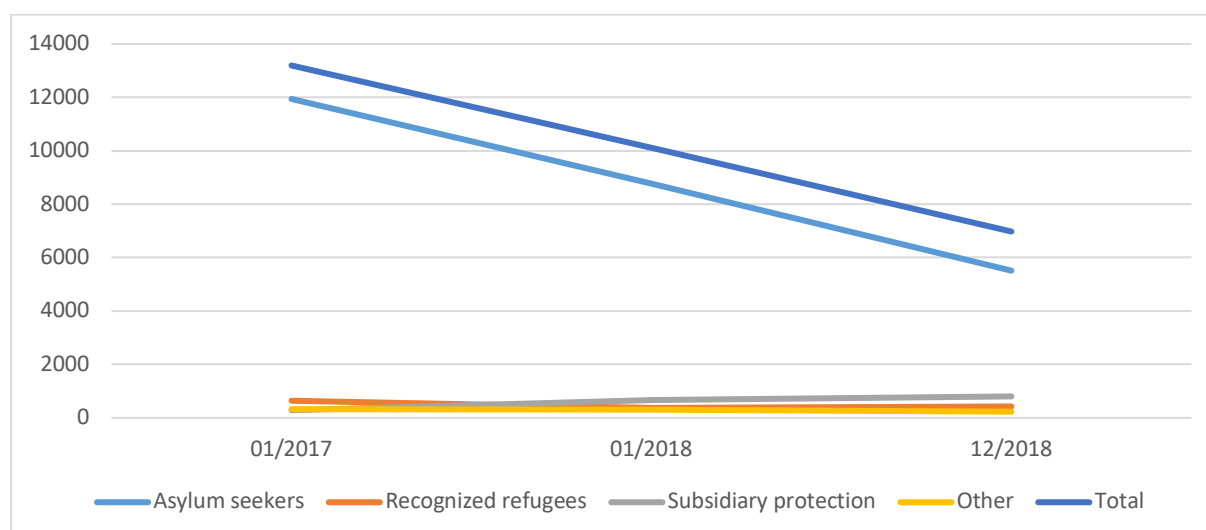
3.2. Regional and Municipal Policies and Regulations

Governance of reception and related regulations in Upper Austria

Upper Austria is the fourth largest federal province in Austria, located in the north-west part of the country. It borders Germany and the Czech Republic and currently is home to 1.47 million inhabitants, ranging third in terms of population after Vienna and Lower Austria. The share of persons born abroad was 15.6 per cent at the beginning of 2019 (Statistics Austria). Its capital, Linz, has 207,000 inhabitants and also ranks third among cities in Austria (after Vienna and Graz). Upper Austrian politics has been dominated by the conservative ÖVP since World War II. All post-war governors belonged to this party. Currently, four out of nine members of the provincial government are ÖVP members. The right-wing FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) is the second largest political force in Upper Austria, with three out of nine provincial government members representing that party. As Upper Austria still pursues a system of proportional representation of all parties in its government, the SPÖ (Social Democratic Party) and the Green Party also each hold one seat in the provincial government. The former Green Party member of government, Rudolf Anschober, has been active in this position from 2003 to 2020. Since 2015, his agenda (Environment, Energy, Water Supply) had been enlarged by adding the topic “integration” which includes the field of refugee reception. From 2015 to 2020 he had been in charge of Basic Welfare Support. The administration is located within the Department of Basic Welfare Support for Aliens of the Social Affairs Office.

Since 2015 and under the leadership of Rudolf Anschober, Upper Austria has been pursuing a reception model that is focused on distribution at the provincial level, small scale accommodation, and early integration measures for asylum seekers. In 2018, the province had to admit 16.7 per cent of all asylum seekers in Austria into its Basic Welfare Support programme. In that year, it fulfilled the quota by 96 per cent (see Figure 4). The number of asylum seekers receiving Basic Welfare Support dropped from 13,574 in 2016 to 5,512 in 2018 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Upper Austria, 2017-2018



Source: own design based on data derived from https://www.migration-infografik.at/soz_gvs_statistiken.html; BM.I.

Regarding the governance of reception as of 2015, the provincial government promoted the development of asylum steering groups at the level of municipalities and districts, typically consisting of a variety of regional actors: mayors, municipal representatives of political parties, municipal and district administrators, refugee-support NGOs, owners of privately organized reception facilities, and social care workers. District-level steering groups may also encompass representatives of federal agency bodies such as the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) or the Public Employment Service (AMS). Particularly in the aftermath of 2015, such steering groups formed in connection with the opening of new asylum reception accommodations. They contributed to coordination and information management.

Furthermore, Upper Austria fostered the creation of Regional Competence Centres for Integration and Diversity (ReKIs). These centres are the first contact points for municipalities regarding questions of immigrant reception and integration. The ReKIs accompany and moderate development processes. They also provide advice and information on legal novelties and resources in the field of integration. Finally, they promote the networking of all actors in the region and support the exchange among those involved.

At the end of 2015, Rudolf Anschober launched the initiative *"ZusammenHelfen in OÖ – gemeinsam für geflüchtete Menschen"* (Helping Together in Upper Austria – together for forced migrants). A broad alliance of civil society actors was thus founded, supporting both the search for accommodation and integration efforts.

Once asylum seekers are transferred from Initial Reception Centres to the Basic Welfare Support accommodations of the province of Upper Austria, they are taken care of by NGO workers of Caritas, *Volkshilfe*, *Diakonie*, the association *SOS Menschenrechte*, the Red Cross, or private operators. There is a preference for small-scale facilities with several housing units, catering for families or single persons who share rooms. The operators are financed with a daily coverage of 21 EUR per person, of which 6 EUR have to be given to the asylum seekers as subsistence allowances, since they generally provide food for themselves. Under-aged persons receive a total of 132 EUR per month. In addition to the option of organised accommodation, asylum seekers may also choose to move into private apartments. According to the provincial administration "[t]his type of accommodation is considered particularly useful if asylum seekers have been staying in Austria for a longer period of time, have appropriate German language skills and it is foreseeable that a residence permit will be issued" (Land Oberösterreich, 2019). However, private accommodation requires considerable private expenditure. Individuals only receive a rent allowance of 150 EUR per month and a subsistence allowance of 215 EUR. A family receives a maximum monthly allowance of 300 EUR for rent and operating costs. Support in private accommodation is subject to evaluation and approval by the Department of Basic Welfare Support for Aliens. At the beginning of 2018, 78 per cent of Basic Welfare Support recipients stayed in organized accommodations and 22 per cent in private ones.¹⁰

If asylum seekers are accommodated in an organized facility, the Basic Welfare Support also provides for the following:

- Clothing assistance in the form of vouchers: max. 150 EUR per year.

¹⁰ See <https://grundversorgungsinform.net/bundeslaender/oberoesterreich/> for detailed information on regulations regarding reception in Upper Austria used in this chapter.

- School supplies: max. 200 EUR per school year (either directly via the school or as cash payment).
- Leisure activities: 10 EUR per month (no cash payment, leisure activities are organised by the care organisation or the accommodation providers, e.g. joint excursions, attendance of a German course, purchase of a joint table tennis set for the accommodation, etc.).

In order to inform asylum seekers about their rights but also about their duties, mobile social care is provided by *Volkshilfe* and Caritas. Employees of these NGOs visit asylum seekers locally in organised accommodations as part of this mobile support. They provide guidance and support in various aspects of everyday life – from accompaniment to authorities, schools, doctors, etc. to translation and interpreting services and assistance in crisis situations. In addition, legal advice can be arranged if necessary. If possible, German courses are organised within this framework. The mobile support service also provides public services for asylum seekers (clothing vouchers, etc.). The mobile care helps to avoid conflicts, thus ensuring an environment for a peaceful coexistence.¹¹

The health insurance of the basic care recipients is taken out by registering with the OÖ Gebietskrankenkasse (Regional Health Insurance Fund; including exemption from prescription fees).

Governance of reception and related regulations in Vienna

Vienna is the only metropolis in Austria. The city has the double function as capital of Austria and federal province, bestowing local as well as provincial competences on it. This double function offers better access to decision-making processes, including those concerned with refugee reception. Politically, Vienna has been dominated by the SPÖ (Social Democratic Party of Austria) for many decades. Currently, the city is governed by a coalition of the SPÖ and the Green Party. At the beginning of 2019, Vienna had 1.897 million inhabitants, of which more than one third had been born abroad (689,000 persons; Statistics Austria). The city has a long migration history and is no stranger to receiving newcomers.

Regarding municipal-level governance of migrant integration, Vienna thus looks back on a long history of measures (compare Kohlbacher and Reeger, forthcoming). This contrasts with national-level governance, which only started to address this issue less than a decade ago. Viennese measures commence with the “Migrant Fund” (*Zuwandererfonds*), established in 1971 as a reaction to the inflow of so-called “guest workers” from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey, followed by the “Fund for Integration” (*Integrationsfonds*) which was founded in 1992 as a reaction to the growing immigration due to geopolitical changes in Europe as of 1989. In 1996, the appointment of an Executive Counsellor for Integration moved the integration agenda to a higher political level. The ever-growing significance of immigration after Austria’s EU accession in 1995 and the accession of Eastern neighbouring countries in 2004, as well as growing unrest expressed publically and in the media, resulted in the decision to close down the Fund for Integration and to move the integration agenda into the core city administration by establishing the Municipal Department for Integration and Diversity (MA 17; Kohlbacher and Reeger, forthcoming). Promoting slogans such as “Vienna is Diversity” proves the paradigm

¹¹ Source: <https://www.caritas-linz.at/hilfe-angebote/asylwerberinnen/mobile-soziale-betreuung/>.

shift away from the notion of migrant integration to a more mainstreamed approach, targeting the whole population and stressing the importance of social cohesion.

MA 17 still plays a central role with its assignments of developing and implementing integration and diversity policies as well as diversity management in general, but also with the implementation of measures for newly-arrived migrants and the cooperation with and funding of project partners. Furthermore, MA 17 was part of a dense network of cooperation partners well before the arrival of refugees around the year 2015 which – due to the unique developments – was in need of several adjustments.

The key player in organizing refugee reception is the Vienna Social Fund (FSW – *Fonds Soziales Wien*), an agency founded in 2001 and controlled by the City of Vienna regarding terms of operation and finances, but managed according to private-sector principles. A large share of the budget (totalling 1.75 billion EUR in 2016) is used for care and support, mostly for the elderly, for handicapped persons and for the homeless. In the context of reception, the FSW bears main responsibility also for Basic Welfare Support for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection; the respective expenditures amounting to 138 million EUR in the year 2018.

Peter Hacker, head of the FSW from 2001 until 2018, was appointed “refugee coordinator” by the mayor of Vienna, Michael Häupl, at the peak of the arrival of refugees in Vienna. He exercised this function until he left the FSW to become City Councillor for Health, Social Affairs and Sport in 2018. Due to the low number of new arrivals of refugees after 2016, no new refugee coordinator was appointed after Hacker left to become a politician. During his term of office as refugee coordinator, Hacker advocated a pragmatic approach towards an appropriate reception of refugees in Vienna.

Regarding concrete measures for asylum seekers during the reception phase set by the FSW, the scope of services ranges from accommodation in reception centres or housing subsidies for those staying in private apartments, food supplies, health insurance, financial aid for school supplies (maximum 200 EUR per year) and clothing (150 EUR per year) to social counselling (FSW, 2018). Most of the accommodation centres are run by large NGOs (such as Caritas, *Diakonie*, *Volkshilfe* and *Samariterbund*) as cooperation partners, with the FSW responsible for quality assurance. Providers of organized accommodation receive a daily amount of 21 EUR per person, 5.5 EUR are given to the asylum seekers in cash or in the form of rations. Contrary to strategies applied in other federal provinces, the FSW prefers private accommodations, with 68 per cent of persons receiving Basic Welfare Support living privately and only 32 per cent in organized accommodations.¹² Adults living in private accommodations receive a 215 EUR boarding fee per month and a 150 EUR rent allowance. Additionally, there are 100 EUR for minors in the household. For families, the monthly rent allowance is 300 EUR. Given the tight situation on the Vienna housing market, these sums are quite low, which makes it hard to find affordable and satisfactory accommodation.

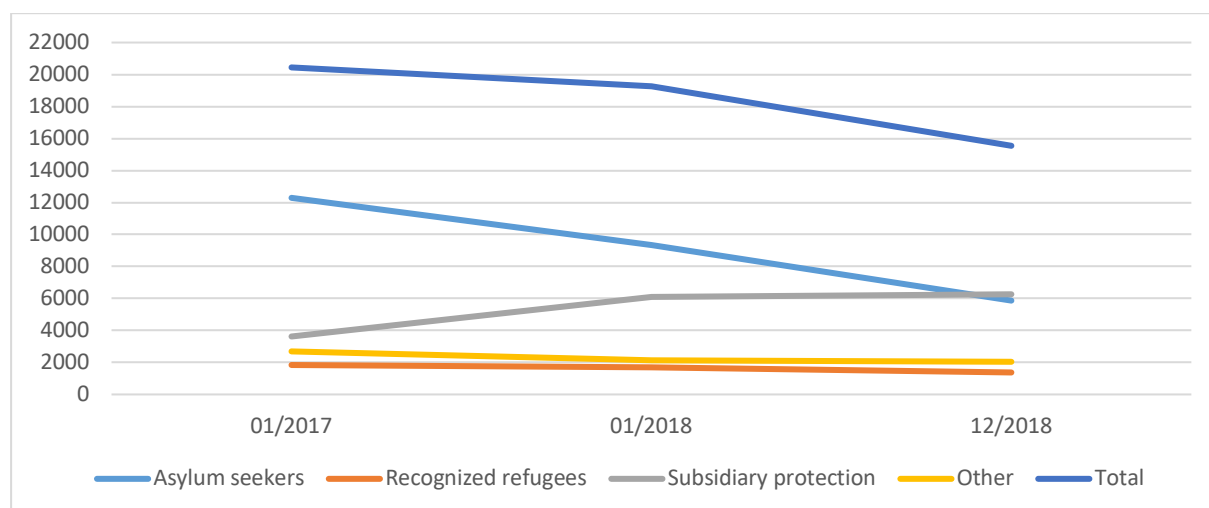
Social counselling has been outsourced to five major NGOs: Caritas, *Diakonie*, *Volkshilfe*, *Integrationshaus* and *Verein Ute Bock*. Regarding health services, all recipients of Basic Welfare Support are insured automatically and have full access to all services.

¹² See <https://grundversorgung.info.net/bundeslaender/wien/> for detailed information on regulations regarding reception in Vienna also used in this chapter.

There is close cooperation between the MA 17, other Municipal Departments, and the FSW. Regarding preparatory measures for access to the labour market, the Public Employment Service (AMS) and the Vienna Employment Promotion Fund (WAFF, an agency of the City of Vienna) should be mentioned. Labour market issues are also discussed with the Chamber of Labour Vienna and the Economic Chamber, important partners representing employees and employers. This cooperation constitutes a specific form of Austrian corporatism. Further partners in the network include Interface Vienna, an agency owned by the City of Vienna offering language courses, and *Bildungsdrehscheibe* (Education Hub), which is a measure for asylum seekers only, offering education counselling and language courses. Contrary to national policies that largely exclude asylum seekers from integration and language courses, the City of Vienna has created an operative system of introductory courses under the banner of “Integration from Day 1”. It consists of language education and information workshops on various topics such as the health or education system in Austria. Furthermore, there are constant negotiations with the BM.I about funding, and annual gatherings with representatives of the governments of all federal provinces aimed at exchange of experiences and harmonizing approaches.

The Viennese approach appears to be more inclusive, participatory and socially oriented than the federal approach (Kohlbacher and Reeger, forthcoming). This however is not the only factor that makes Vienna more attractive for migrants, and among them for refugees who have arrived during the past decade. Being the only large metropolis in Austria, with almost two million inhabitants (the second largest city in Austria is Graz with 292,000 inhabitants), migrants come here because they hope to find jobs and affordable housing, and in the hope of becoming embedded in social networks of compatriots or other migrant groups with greater ease than would be the case elsewhere. The same holds true for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (see Figure 6). Compared to the numbers in early 2017, this group now outnumbers asylum seekers in Vienna. Since beneficiaries of subsidiary protection no longer have to reside within the federal province providing them with Basic Welfare Support, many choose to move to Vienna.

Figure 6: Recipients of Basic Welfare Support in Vienna, 2017-2018



Source: own design based on data derived from https://www.migration-infografik.at/soz_gvs_statistiken.html; BM.I.

4. Practices of Reception – Vienna and Upper Austria

In this chapter, we deal with practices of reception, providing a synthesis of the empirical evidence derived from semi-structured interviews with experts who are working in the field of asylum, as well as asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. We were interested in perceptions and experiences in diverse areas of reception. Building on a content analysis, we group our findings around inductively created thematic clusters that emerged around the issues of

- Housing and place of residence.
- Early access to the labour market.
- Education, services, and allowances.
- Encounters with officials, civic actors, and the receiving society.

4.1. Housing and Place of Residence

In this section, our research interest is twofold: We are looking at the housing situation as such (quality aspects associated with different types of housing such as accommodation centres or private homes) and the place of residence in urban or rural areas. Of course these two aspects of “how” and “where” are interrelated to some extent.

Arriving in the Austrian reception system

All our interview partners had formally entered the substantive asylum procedure in Austria within the last eight years and had thus gathered experiences in the reception system. While there have been no reports of denied access, a recurring topic in this context is the fragmented character of the early reception phase. This relates particularly, but not exclusively, to the group of people arriving in 2015 and 2016. More specifically, many interviewees display a great sense of disorientation regarding their first weeks and months in Austria – not only due to a lack of geographical knowledge, but also due to multiple relocations. Thus, narratives would sometimes place accommodation in an Initial Reception Centre after reception in an emergency camp, followed by a temporary location before arriving in a long term accommodation. Our interlocutors often were not able to explain whether and how their transfers were tied to stages in the asylum procedure. Others, such as an Afghan asylum seeker who arrived in 2015, point to the fact that wrong information posed one of multiple factors of stress in a seemingly endless journey:

“I had heard that the people who left their fingerprints somewhere should be sent back. The night the buses came, everyone thought: they should all go back there now. Then when I came here I thought ‘maybe not... maybe I live here’. Then I had a bit of stress during that time, whether I had to go back today or tomorrow, that was already a stress. When this stress was finished, there was the next stress: language. Then came the next stress, always another one” (R04).

Particularly in relation to the initial reception phase, our interlocutors express a sense of restlessness, which is largely tied to the notion of not having arrived permanently on Austrian territory. Being moved to unknown places combined with the knowledge that one could be deported can cause severe stress, as this female beneficiary of subsidiary protection argues:

“We spent the first two weeks in Traiskirchen and then two months in Bad Kreuzen. And then here”. *Interviewer: How was it in Traiskirchen and Bad Kreuzen? What was the situation like there?* “Bad Kreuzen was a disaster. That was very stressful. [...] Normally they send people back from Bad Kreuzen [to their own country] every day. And to see that was not so funny” (R21).

Although most of our interlocutors had spent little time (ranging typically from several days to, in some instances, several weeks) in Initial Reception Centres (mainly Traiskirchen and Bad Kreuzen), many criticised unhygienic conditions and a lack of privacy. Persons who arrived in 2015 furthermore report overcrowded accommodations where people temporarily had to sleep on the floor. However, civil society at the same time displayed a high level of support, largely in the form of commodity contributions such as clothing or toiletries.

Overall, our interviewees expressed a great need for a calm and private place to rest in the early reception phase. This need derives from physical and psychological strain experienced both in the country of origin and during their journey, as the following example shows:

Interviewer: And when you arrived in Austria: What were your most urgent needs, what did you need, what was the most important thing for you in the first days? [...] Food, clothes, what did you miss? “I can say that: Sleeping one night without stress is a big deal. Safety, just sleeping without stress and nobody can do anything with you, e.g. swear or fight or something. That's difficult in our country, you don't know when you go out on the street, whether you can go back home or not, because every second a bomb explodes or someone does something bad. Security is a big deal” (R04).

Similarly, a recognized refugee reflects on his time in Traiskirchen:

“Yes, Traiskirchen first three days. There were too many people and that was a time for me, I was not quite right, I was totally confused. I don't know, new home, new country, new people, different language, too many people: black, white, blond, Arab. I was confused and I didn't know what would happen later, what I would do later. Then I got a transfer to a village in Lower Austria that was, too, what's the name of the village, I forgot” (R07).

For some of our interview partners, moments of rest during the early reception phase meant having time and spatial distance in order to reflect on what had happened. A recognized refugee from Syria relates:

“Yeah, okay, when I got there, I didn't know what was going on. Everything was different, I didn't know: What am I doing here? Why am I here? I was in the camp for a month or two, I just lay in bed and I didn't talk to anyone, I just lay there and I didn't feel like it. If someone told me 'come shopping or walking with me', I didn't feel like it. That was because I came alone and my father stayed behind and he is so old and my mother and my old brother, he is also very old and he cannot do everything, so housework. In Syria there is no electricity, we have this electricity with generator [illustrated with hands], you have to do many things yourself, the housework. And I was very sad because I thought to myself 'oh my God, nobody helps my brother, nobody helps my father, why am I here, maybe I would be better there than here” (R09).

Clearly, the arrival in the Austrian reception system often implied a perceived waning of existential threats, yet among most interlocutors, this situation was paired with a sense of confusion

over their current status, the procedural steps to follow and of course stress relating to other issues. New concerns typically evolved around friends and family abroad and about what was going to happen to themselves in a legal and practical sense (relocation to other reception facilities or return to another country).

Size and location of reception facilities

Whereas there is broad consensus among almost all experts who were interviewed that evenly distributed small-scale facilities provide a higher quality of care and are beneficial to early integration efforts, the manager of an NGO-run large-scale accommodation centre in Vienna (approximately 300 asylum seekers) offers a counterargument. Arguably, given the financial constraints, she is able to provide better divisions of labour and higher specialization in terms of language and professional skills, and offer more continuity. Such a facility would allow for increased accessibility to orientation services or psychological health services. Our interlocutor argues:

“So I think 2015 was really an extreme year, also for the new arrivals. What I notice is that when they arrive, when the house is well structured and when they can also calm down, then they know what the daily routine is like, they know when they will receive the payment, they have fixed contact persons, they talk to you about how they want to make good use of the time here until the asylum procedure has been completed, and they can finally get started a little and I think that is important to do justice to this need, too” (E02).

Likewise, following a considerable increase in the number of municipalities with reception facilities, small accommodations have found it difficult to prevail once the asylum seekers of 2015/2016 dropped out of the system and fewer people arrived. As funding is tied to the number of persons living in an accommodation facility, these facilities are no longer able to cover their running costs and are thus urged to close down.

Concerning distribution policies, the head of a refugee-rights NGO argues how government officials need to account for the overall demographic change in a country:

“So I am not an advocate of the concept of ‘the revitalisation of regions of emigration through [the settlement of] refugees’, because the people are supposed to integrate in a region that is actually abandoned by everyone” (E07).

Clearly rural locations are not automatically socio-economic peripheries and, as our Upper Austrian case has shown, they can provide integration structures too. The provincial head of government responsible for refugee reception elaborates:

“And now we have, for example, an integration radar. Once a year we take a look at the mood in these integration/migration areas in Upper Austria. We do this with the SORA Institute and thus have a bit of an overview: How it changes from year to year. Once a year we are in the field, that is representative, the survey, and two things become apparent: One is that the smaller the communities, the better it works. Of course, where the contact is there, where a relationship is established - I really believe that encounter is everything in this area - there you can see very, very quickly: ‘Hey, these are actually people like you and me, they have life dreams just like you and me’. The children play with each other and you cook together once, you invite each other and a

community develops. And then the mood is right. It's more difficult in urban centres" (R10).

In this regard, the NGO worker of a former emergency reception facility in Vienna shares her experiences of asylum seekers, who are not necessarily drawn to urban localities:

"This is an exciting topic, because it has kept me very interested. I originally thought that it would be much more terrible for refugees or people from abroad in general to live in a small community instead of a big city. And only then did I learn through working with the people that some people would actually prefer to live in a rural area on the one hand and on the other hand that other things are possible at the municipal level through this small structure. So that the support can also be much closer knit and the reception can actually be much more direct than when you are in the big city, for example. The reception in the accommodation is very nice, but otherwise there was hardly any contact with the neighbourhood whereas in such a small community, you have to deal with all the people very quickly. So I find it ambivalent and I have no idea about the receptiveness, I must say. I believe that a lot has happened in that time and that many municipalities have made their way where there was resistance at first" (E03).

Against this background, there is broad consensus among the experts interviewed by us that individual needs and preferences have to be matched with local socio-economic conditions and integration prospects. This however would have to take place at a very early stage of reception with the support of qualified staff and interpreters who can conduct a broad anamnesis. Better matching could in turn minimize the need for further relocations upon a positive asylum decision, which would be beneficial both to individuals and to local communities that often invest money and social efforts into new arrivals.

Isolation and a lack of rights

Notions of isolation, protracted waiting and uselessness have been central topics for the asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. However, they are not primarily related to reception situations in rural locations, but rather to the lack of social ties in any protracted reception phase. Most notably, this was discussed in the context of not being allowed to take up formal labour (see next chapter). While our interlocutors largely problematize the lack of employment as leading to a circle of negative thoughts and emotions, two recognized refugees from Syria (not related), who waited a comparably short time for their decision, refer to this period in their life in more positive terms. In the first case, our interlocutor experiences the social degradation as a throwback into childhood. Asked about his life in a small reception facility in Lower Austria, he states:

"How am I supposed to describe that, so that was my second childhood literally. Look, as a child you don't have any big problems. I don't know what you're thinking about, you just have to eat and get enough sleep and play and that's what we did - not intentionally, but unintentionally. We didn't have any worries, we knew exactly that we couldn't do anything before we got the asylum and so we lived carefree for four months" (R29).

In the second case, our interview partner refers to his first weeks in a remote reception facility in Tyrol as a period of lost identity:

“And then it was like... Because there on the mountain there was only the refugee reception facility. So really, the next place was 25 minutes away by car, I think. Yes and there I had this feeling that I lost my name for the second time. I lost my name once, I was seven then and at that moment I was the refugee. So really an unwanted person, without identity, without anything. So a refugee, a criminal. And then I thought, ‘So that’s why I’m so far away from people?’ And there I had a problem with myself. So not a problem, but rather... I was very preoccupied with this question: ‘Who am I? So it was no longer clear to me why, why am I there?’ I didn’t do anything bad anyway. I was just looking for a new beginning, for peace, for a normal life. And why should I now spend my days here like a criminal? It was really very bad, that was right at the beginning. [...] So I learned to think differently. I shouldn’t lock myself up in such narrow ideas and say: ‘Everything is bad, everything is shit and, and, and’. But I should live on and this is my fight. And then at some point I thought: ‘Yes, here the landscape is beautiful. I enjoy it.’ Then I always did sports. I was also alone with myself for a very long time and only thought about it. And I was also able to enjoy it, so to speak. And at some point it was beautiful again” (R01).

Clearly, it is important to consider the serious undertone of these two latter statements. Although both interview partners held asylum status and the reception phase appeared to be a closed (and to some extent positive) chapter, the context is a deeply troubling one. It refers to a legal incapacitation that becomes manifest in notions of loss of adulthood and loss of identity.

Isolation, social exclusion and the obstruction of legal aid have also been central topics for our experts, most notably discussed in the context of legal reforms in the Austrian reception system. Their concerns do not entirely relate to large-scale facilities per se, but more specifically to large-scale supra-regionally located federal facilities that aim at isolation rather than integration:

“The great fear has always been large supra-regional federal accommodations, where 200 people are accommodated. We wanted to avoid that at all costs, and that was also our firm conviction. Also because then the question is: Where do you do that in the countryside? It’s too big for every town, every community we have. It is not possible to integrate 200 people. Completely impossible. We were more the advocates of facilities with 20 to 40 people, so smaller units” (E04).

Life under Basic Welfare Support

A central topic for the experts who took part in our research is the transformation of Austria’s reception system in the course of the so-called “crisis” of 2015 to 2016. They point out how the lack of reception facilities in 2015 was not only a problem of quantity but also of quality – this primarily relates to the numbers of staff, their professional experiences, and financial means. A manager of a small reception facility in Vienna elaborates:

“Of course, a house that I open in a month’s time is in a different state than one where I allow myself half a year’s advance and so on, that’s for sure. The same in the counselling centres, where the FSW has successively increased the number [of staff]. Meanwhile we have the situation that there is a formula for how many people, how many counsellors have to be available and there were simply more and more staff approved because it was clear that people need that, that actually worked” (E01).

She points out the need for a higher degree of professionalization in this policy area, allowing for systematic data gathering in order to match regional opportunity structures with needs and capabilities of newly arrived asylum seekers.

Among the asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in our project, a large share both in Vienna and in Upper Austria expresses an overall dissatisfaction with their housing situation. This mainly relates to a lack of privacy as well as to deficient building structures and furnishing that fulfils basic needs, but is far from comfortable. A 21-year-old asylum seeker, who was moved to Vienna with his parents, elaborates on the trade-offs between two accommodations in relatively central districts in Vienna:

Interviewer: And here in the 20th district, how are you doing, how are you feeling here?
 “At first I felt bad again. We were in a small room, then I talked to the boss and the boss was really good. I talked to her ‘We need a bigger room, I’m an adult I can’t just live with my parents’. She said ‘We can’t offer you two rooms, we can give you a big room where you all live together’. Then it got better, but I really liked it there [at the old place] because it was in a good location. There were many trams, subways and it was very easy to get there by public transport” (R02).

Aiming for a larger room, which still had to be shared, our interlocutor had to compromise on connectedness and proper heating. As this example also shows, some of our interlocutors did in fact turn to NGO- or social workers whom they had direct contact to (here referred to as “boss”), in order to express specific needs, for instance that of finding more appropriate housing. Other interlocutors did not further pursue improving their housing situation, and were also reluctant to issue too much criticism, being aware of existing power relations, as was this 26-year-old male asylum seeker in Vienna:

“There are many bad things... when I tell [laughs]” *Interviewer: Are there any good things?* “It’s difficult when I say some words, you have to cut it out [laughs]” (R04).

Clearly, there seems to be much potential dissatisfaction or even anger among asylum seekers. However, their subjectively perceived social and legal position prevents many of our interlocutors from expressing dissent too explicitly.

Similarly, a 64-year-old female asylum seeker who lives in a container house in Upper Austria mentions her position as a refugee in society:

Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable where you live right now? Or do you wish to live somewhere else? “No. Why? Well, it’s not that pleasant to live there. It is not so pleasant for me and my husband, because we are already quite old. The neighbours who live next to us all have small children. Of course we two need our peace and quiet. But you can’t forbid the child to play or be loud. If, for example, we are ill, it is of course even more unpleasant for us when the children are loud. It is already loud. Football is often played, it is played loudly. The children do everything in this house. But if it gets too much for us, then of course I go out and tell the children or their parents. I say that I have a headache and they should please be a little quieter. And of course the parents of these children respect that. It’s okay. Life is fine there. That’s the way it is when you have to leave your home country and have to live abroad” (R27).

In other instances, our interlocutors simply express satisfaction, considering complaints illegitimate due to the privilege of having made it to Austria (or Europe). In this vein, a young asylum seeker from Nigeria who had experienced detention camps in Libya relates as follows:

Interviewer: And your room: You said you share your room at the moment with one other guy: Do you feel like you have enough privacy or what did you do to make your room feel comfortable or feel like home? “You have to keep where you are clean, no matter what. I just clean, I just want to make sure the room is okay for me. You cannot have privacy in the room for two [inaudible] so it’s not a problem for me but it’s not something I’m happy with. But that’s the situation in the system and you cannot change it. You can only change the economic situation by yourself ... you have to follow up, that’s what I’m doing. Everybody needs privacy but the situation is okay, I have to adjust at this level. So it’s not that I’m hungry or that I’m upset. I am happy because there are those who don’t have what we have, you don’t know what will happen tomorrow. No matter if he cleans or not, I clean for him, it doesn’t take anything for me. I said, I will keep my place clean if I had the possibility to get one” (R17).

Asylum seekers’ dissatisfaction with their housing situation seems to increase in proportion with the duration of the reception phase. Some of our interview partners have been waiting for the decision on their asylum application for two or three years, have received a negative decision in the first instance and are waiting for their second interview. Being trapped in an insecure situation regarding the decisive question about their future life – that is, their legal status – leads to a negative perception of their housing situation, too, irrespective of the setting they are currently residing in. The following two quotes come from two single males from Afghanistan, one staying in Vienna and the other in the Upper Austrian countryside:

“I see only downsides here. There are so many people here, it’s loud, the police are downstairs. The building is old, everything is broken, including the kitchen. Sometimes we don’t have a washing machine for a month or two. In the previous accommodation it was a bit better. But there we always had problems with the carers” (R06).

“It’s in a container in N [small village in the countryside]. There are about twelve people, all single men. It’s not a very good place. I’ve been living there for three years and you don’t live well there. One year, two years, three years it is already that I live there. We are twelve, 13 people in this container. It is difficult. There are four rooms, with three people per room” (R25).

These comments reflect some of our experts’ notions that reception facility standards need to be considered against the background of the duration of an asylum procedure. Certain minimum standards might be perceived as reasonable for a few months; however, as asylum seekers continue to wait several years for a final decision, their frustration grows.

4.2. Early Access to the Labour Market

In this section, our research interest focuses on the ways in which conditions of labour market participation are perceived among our micro-level interview partners during reception phase. Furthermore, we seek to understand the problem definitions of experts related to this topic.

Labour market ban

The importance of employment in the lives of our micro-level interlocutors, particularly in those of asylum seekers, cannot be overstated. The issue typically ran through most topics under discussion during the interviews like a golden thread, starting with current living situations and difficulties, and continuing through to the final section of the interviews when hopes for the future were discussed.

In the context of reception, the de facto legal ban from taking up employment in Austria as an asylum seeker is the core reference for our interview partners. Evidently, this perceived problem played a more important role for those who, at the time of interview, had still been waiting for a final decision on their status, and it was less pronounced among interlocutors from Syria, who had all been formally recognized as refugees.

It was one of the key aspects contributing to a sense of isolation and social degradation during the time of reception. A young male asylum seeker in Vienna, who has been waiting for a final decision for three years, explains how this condition furthers his isolation and aggravates psychological problems:

“What’s good: We have a place where we can sleep and a kitchen and food. And the bad thing is: We have nothing to do. That’s the worst thing. If someone is busy with something then you can talk to someone or not think about things anymore. If someone has nothing to do then you don’t know what to do, you always have to think. If I have to think then I get stress and if I get stress then I get anxiety and if you get anxious then that makes it bad” (R04).

In this vein, another young male asylum seeker from the same facility reflects on the political change that is needed:

Interviewer: And if you could change anything, as a politician, would there be anything that you would change? “Yes, to give permission to work. If we work and earn something, then our head is, what do you call it? It works and we can live and we can have a family. And maybe we’ll do less shit then. Some people sell drugs, hashish and stuff. But if they have a job, they don’t do it. It’s about unemployment” (R05).

A highly skilled female asylum seeker in a small town in Upper Austria, who has taken up the study of technical chemistry again, reflects:

“It [the accommodation] is not like home, but... Because we still have so many worries. You have to be honest. We are still in the first steps. The asylum procedure has not yet been completed and we are still waiting for the second instance. And we do not know. We are already hearing about the government and what has happened today... And there are many pulls and it is a great challenge for us. This work... My husband and I, we are both well trained, but unfortunately we are not allowed to work. And all our worries, our daily worries... And every day we get up with these and also go to sleep with them at night. But yes, we fight for our lives. It’s just like that” (R26).

Likewise, among our interviewed experts, there is a strong consensus that Austria’s de facto ban of asylum seekers from labour market participation is legally questionable and politically problematic. Considering the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU, according to which asylum seekers must receive effective access to the labour market no later than nine months

after they have filed an application, as well as different high court decisions, some experts point out that the current legal framework will inevitably have to be reformed at some point.

From a political stance, they underline a number of detrimental public and individual effects. The manager of a reception facility, for example, underscores that the impossibility of taking up formal labour provides the incentive to engage in black market activities as well as criminal activities like selling drugs, especially among young men:

“And also in terms of drug dealing and stuff: Of course, this is also an issue, because it is so tempting when you get 40 EUR a month and sell something in one evening, and then you suddenly have 100 EUR in your hands. That’s just too much of a temptation. There are many people who come from a system where it is quite normal that they simply do something illegal and that laws are not so important. And here it is important to do educational work. There’s nothing we can do but say at the move-in interview that if we find out then we have to report it so that they have this information” (E02).

In this regard, our experts also emphasize the problem of self-employment, typically in precarious positions of the low-wage sector. In Vienna, several interlocutors referred to employment in mobile telephone application-based ride sharing and ride hailing taxi and car services, as well as in food delivery services. Arguably, such occupations would also appear tempting for many asylum seekers who are not aware of maximum wage limitations on social security payments and self-insurance provisions. An expert further elaborates:

“So this is difficult with Uber or Foodora and so on: Many asylum seekers don’t know well enough that what they’re doing is illegal. And these companies, Foodora, they can pull themselves completely out of responsibility because the people are self-employed. So I also think it’s very nasty that you can’t even hold those people accountable who can take advantage of that. [...] And we say that they can only earn up to 110 EUR per month. [...] They always think: ‘Big money’ and all that and they don’t know how that works with all the subsequent payments, because of social insurance that you have to pay yourself” (E02).

As these examples show, the de facto employment ban for asylum seekers has a negative social and psychological impact on individuals and may push members of the affected groups into highly precarious and sometimes illegal economic activities.

Moving in a legal grey area

Many of our interlocutors, mainly those in their early to mid-twenties, tried to seize exemptions from the employment ban such as seasonal work in the catering and hotel industry, non-profit employment in municipalities, or apprenticeships in sectors of shortage. However, even here, a commonly perceived problem among asylum seekers remains the notion that persons with a stable status (namely beneficiaries of international protection) have better chances of getting the position, as this asylum seeker from Vienna elaborates:

“[I applied] as a hotel and restaurant assistant, but I didn’t have a chance.” *Interviewer: Why, do you think?* “Because it... I knew it from the beginning, but I tried it anyway. But there are people who have a better status than me and it is easier for the employer to take them than me. So...” (R03).

Similarly, another asylum seeker, who is spending his third year in Austria, articulates frustration, assuming that there is a general unwillingness, even among top political elites, to employ asylum seekers:

“Last year I sent 10 to 15 applications away as electrician and all, all labour shortage jobs. There’s a list of what you can do without a notice. But I don’t know, I think it’s a symbolic list. They say: ‘You can do that’, but when we apply, they say: ‘I’m sorry, there’s a problem’. Then they just say something. Last week [September 2018], the state said that refugees were no longer allowed to do an apprenticeship, not even in occupations that are lacking. This situation is very difficult” (R04).

Some of our interlocutors did however also report positive experiences. Here, engagement in labour opportunities did not only present an end in itself, but was also considered to be instrumental towards integration and showing one’s willingness to contribute to society. A recognized refugee in Upper Austria remembers his first weeks in Austria:

“I worked in the unit in [village], I cleaned the street with a garbage can and collected plastic and paper from the street when... Nobody wants to do this work, all foreigners complain, all want to go to the office and at the computer and sit. This office work is not dirty work. And then I worked there, every day, one hour and the boss came and said ‘I want this man three hours a day’ and then thank God I was allowed to work three hours, one hour 5 EUR. 15 EUR is great every day and I have known the people because I was always on the street and have said ‘hello, hello, hello’ and so on” (R19).

An asylum seeker in Vienna reports about a temporary position as care staff for elderly persons which he took in the hope of quicker integration:

Interviewers: How did you experience working in elderly care? “I thought to myself: OK, if I want to integrate quickly, I should have some contact with old and young people. They are completely different. No, I thought maybe it would be better to first have contact with old people who understand and talk rather little, and then my German is better and I can do other things. I sent an e-mail to the old people’s home, they invited us. At the beginning once a week for four hours, after two months two times a week and once a month I made a trip with them, once to the Wachau, once to Slovakia. I helped the old people with the wheelchair and so on. We talked a little bit, some I understood well, others it was very difficult because they were very old” (R04).

These examples show the individual importance of employment, not only from an economic perspective, but also for a sense of self-esteem, in order to develop social and language skills or simply for social encounters.

Turning to our experts, a member of the Viennese administration responsible for integration points out how early employment would contribute to the often discussed cultural dimension of integration:

“It is not about putting people into courses and teaching our culture in theory. I acquire culture by sitting down with the people of this country, working with them and so on. Then I look at something, then I learn the culture playfully and automatically and can adapt to the so-called Austrian culture. An important factor is the work culture, and we have a work culture in this country, and if I can adapt to it because I am accepted, and because I am allowed to work, even if it seems to be low work: Never mind. I am in a

working community and I learn a lot from it. I also learn the language very quickly and can orient myself much better in the city. It would also help to reduce xenophobia. There are many people who say: 'Arabs are terrible, but I won't let anything come of Arab XY. I know him personally'. In other words, integration also begins with me bringing the real people, who have a name and a face, together with an Austrian, and perhaps this Austrian will still not break down his prejudices, but this one foreigner, whom he knows personally, whom he likes, because he is a dear colleague, he will then perhaps defend" (E08).

An expert working in a reception facility, on the other hand, points out how structural integration measures, such as early access to the labour market, stand in conflict with rationales of the Austrian welfare state:

*Interviewers: Where do you think does this come from that Austria has this strong will to regulate the labour market at any price? "Well, I guess it's a labour protection thing. [...] I would say that it has to do with the strength of the trade unions or with the *Sozialpartnerschaft* [institutionalized mutual representation of employers and labour forces] - rightly so. It is indeed ambivalent. So, of course, I think the trade unions are right that they should first or foremost represent their clientele and these are people who are already on the labour market in Austria. And, of course, any cheaper labour is a threat to current jobs. I do not mean for the jobs but for the people who have them. I guess that has something to do with political power games, I mean they are also not just doing it for the employees, simply the power of the trade unions [is relevant] as well. And I don't think it's just a bad thing. I think that from an integration law perspective or a refugee perspective, it is extremely difficult to deal with the fact that no employment opportunities are created. But I do not think it is unjustified to want to protect the labour market, because you could actually create tourism that way" (E03).*

Another controversial topic is that of asylum seekers in apprenticeship, more precisely the abolishment of this legal option through the ÖVP-FPÖ-led federal government in mid-2018. Rather than addressing concerns about labour market protection, here the rationale was eliminating a potential pull factor for immigration. The ban had been planned in advance, but was ultimately implemented following increased support of the Initiative "Education instead of Deportation", fostered by the Upper Austrian Provincial Councillor for Integration, at the time, Rudolf Anschöber. The initiative started a petition supported by citizens, employers, and municipalities, arguing against deportations during apprenticeship training, in favour of a continued access to apprenticeships for asylum seekers and the creation of a residence permit for any third-country nationals who are within the country and who are engaged in an apprenticeship programme. In an interview with one of our researchers, Anschöber (E10) argues:

"However, the area of job integration is also a major focal point, as it is quite appropriate in Upper Austria. The economic situation is positive, companies are looking for employees and that's why we said: 'Combine that as much as possible, the economic benefit, the economic interest with the integration interests', and the Upper Austrian economy plays an important role here. Many companies have taken asylum seekers as apprentices, I can keep to the masculine form, unfortunately hardly any girls. I think we are with 15 girls, the remaining 420 are boys, for quite different reasons, but it is an issue that is very difficult to solve but which we are facing up to. But that is a central focus" (E10).

He further points out that employers are generally interested in keeping persons who have completed their apprenticeship. Even in the worst-case scenario that a person receives a return order upon the completion of an apprenticeship, he or she would return equipped with skills, which presents a modern form of development aid. Similarly, the head of a national refugee rights NGO argues:

“There is frustration and a lack of perspective due to the long asylum procedures. We do not allow them to start an apprenticeship. That is totally unreasonable, because if they were to begin at least one apprenticeship, they would probably do so. Even in the event that they are deported, they take some knowledge with them. That is priceless, you can make yourself independent in your home country with it. This is not the primary goal of our education, which we give to the people here, because we want them to use their labour in Austria. But it is at least a detour profitability and they see a meaningfulness. But the fact that they are not even allowed to start an apprenticeship anymore as asylum seekers is a catastrophe. That is so unbelievably stupid of the Federal Government, I can't think of another word” (E08).

Similarly, an NGO-worker from Upper Austria expresses frustration about the federal government's restrictive stance that stands in opposition to their daily integration efforts:

“Also the ‘apprentice offensive’ of Rudolf Anschober, which started in Upper Austria. We supported them very much and were able to place some people. And some are now also threatened to be deported, although the employers are extremely satisfied [...] And although it is officially said that there are no more apprenticeships for asylum seekers, there are still a few people who get one. [...] In the beginning, everyone was highly motivated to integrate, to do everything to stay there. But if there are people who came in 2014: They are very frustrated. Some have been waiting two years for the decision in the second instance. That's a big problem with the will to integrate, because at some point the air is out. We have only little seasonal work, harvest helpers for the farmers, and a little about the communities' remuneration activities, which they are allowed to do, and they are always willing to do that” (E04).

Evidently, the political problematization of asylum seekers' integration into the labour market is not only discussed as an immigration control issue, but also as a socio-economic issue. As such, the problem can also be substantiated by empirical data. For example, a study by Eco Austria (2017), estimates minor displacement effects and negative wage effects of asylum seekers' arrival in the labour market for the domestic low-skilled population. Although limited, these effects are far from undisputed among worker representatives and the Social Democratic Party (which was in government office until 2017). However, publically both have taken a liberal stance in recent years, as is documented for example by press statements in 2013¹³. In spite of a socio-economic consensus with employers' representatives and thus with the conservatives' political spectrum, no legislative consequences ensued. Instead, the participation of the far-right Freedom Party in government between 2017 and 2019 led to a return of the narrative of immigration control in connection with asylum seekers' employment.

¹³ See: https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20130221_OTS0051/ak-fordert-arbeitsmarktzugang-fuer-asylwerber, and <https://www.diepresse.com/1335045/spo-asylwerber-sollen-nach-6-monaten-arbeiten-durfen>, 21.1.2020.

Employment and the place of residence

The topic of employment was also repeatedly discussed in the context our interlocutors' place of residence. For singles (mainly young male Afghan asylum seekers in Vienna), job opportunities presented the most important factor for a potential future relocation. Persons with family and close relatives shared this priority, but they tended to point out the importance of those ties which stand in conflict with economic interests. A family father in Vienna with asylum status relates:

“I have heard that the possibility of finding work or training in Linz or Styria is better than in Vienna. But my brother is here in Vienna, I have three brothers and a sister and many acquaintances, I cannot go alone to Linz or live there. That's why I can only stay in Vienna” (R07).

Interestingly, a family member of R07 has different assumptions about employment opportunities in Vienna as he believes that job opportunities in Vienna are better:

“And why am I in Vienna and not in another city? Maybe there is another city or village where it is cheaper or where you get more than here, but that is difficult. I am here in Austria with my brother; I have four brothers and a sister here and many cousins and if I go to another city, oh my God, then my child would have to visit my brother every day [from a long distance]. And there is another reason: Vienna is the capital. Opportunities for work are better here, not maybe, surely. I tried to find an apartment in Vorarlberg but my friend there told me 'no, this is a stupid idea'” (R09).

This example also illustrates the way in which persons who had spent time in reception in different parts of Austria perceived regional ties even upon their move to Vienna. Similarly, a young female refugee from Afghanistan argues that she would preferably move back to Vorarlberg:

“Yes, I have so many girlfriends there and most people are very nice. And there are so many possibilities, so many job opportunities, so many jobs, in Vienna it is really more difficult. But the problem is, in Vorarlberg most people speak dialect and that makes it really more difficult for us as new language learners” (R11).

In recent years, uneven employment opportunities across different provinces have also been a widely discussed topic in Austrian media. The tendency of many asylum seekers to move to Vienna upon receiving the status as a beneficiary of international protection brought the Austrian Labour Market Service (AMS) to the centre of the debate. Arguably, in the tourism regions of Tyrol, Salzburg, and Vorarlberg, entrepreneurs complained about a lack of cooks and waiters. In agriculture, large farmers reported a lack of harvest workers. In this regard, the AMS discussed with the Social Partners and federal ministries possible obligations for unemployed persons of taking up jobs in other provinces outside a commuting distance provided that the employers made adequate accommodation available.¹⁴

¹⁴ See: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000093243855/9230-fluechtlinge-sollen-bauern-und-wirten-aushelfen>.

4.3. Education, Services and Allowances

In this section, our research interest first focuses on the topic of services and allowances provided to asylum seekers, which have largely been discussed under the notion of dependency. We furthermore investigate perceptions of educational programmes aiming at the development of language skills and the provision of basic information on the host country.

Dependency

As discussed above, asylum seekers strongly depend on public services and financial allowances due their legal status and their precarious socio-economic position. This is also reflected in the central themes discussed by the experts and our micro-level interview partners. In some instances, the topic even had an indirect impact on the interview situation with certain asylum seekers. For example, one of the two interlocutors who refused to accept our voucher felt that his contribution to the project did not represent any working effort and that receiving charity was no option for him. In another instance, an asylum seeker from Pakistan (R25) asked the interviewer whether she could help him to get certificates for his language course, assuming that he was subject to systematic discrimination.

Particularly male interviewees would point out that they preferred work over social welfare. For example, a young male asylum seeker in Vienna elaborates on his shattered hopes and his frustration about life in reception:

“When you’re in Afghanistan, you hear a whole different story about European countries. I don’t know: equality, human rights, blabla. I think the whole thing is just nonsense. Right now you can see here in Austria that the government is making a policy with fear. If you go into the subway with black hair, nobody wants to sit next to us or something. And there are really too few possibilities. For example, I myself don’t want to take 40 EUR from the government or the state, I can work, I am strong. And we are not allowed to work, we have to work here in this house... This is the best house, you can look at the others, it is completely different. I also lived in a room together with 30 people near the Donaustadtbrücke/U2... We lived there for about six months without a German course, every day we slept and then we got something to eat” (R06).

In a different context, a recognized refugee in Upper Austria reflects on his language courses during reception, which he insisted to pay, given the fact that he had a minor employment in the municipality:

Interviewer: So did you have any language classes? “Yes, I paid for that myself, the A1 and A2 courses.” *Interviewer: Why did you pay for that yourself?* “I want this. I want to do everything myself. I don’t want any help from Austria. Austria said ‘welcome, come here’ and I can do it myself. Maybe there are people who don’t have money, they can’t do that. But I had a little and I said ‘I can do it myself’” (R19).

Clearly, such statements might derive from a desirability bias inherent to qualitative research. However, discussions about the ambition to work were by far not the only means of demonstrating moral compliance. Rather, they resulted from the mere hope of being able to escape dire economic conditions through work. Several of our interviewees thus related that the amount of spending money they received was not enough to cover occasional extra costs, for

example those of certain extra school supplies. Contrariwise, this 64-year old female asylum seeker in Upper Austria expresses content about her situation:

“We got a lot of help. We were helped in every way. [...] For example, financial aid. Or that we get clothes. That we get money for our food and clothes. These are all important things. In summer we get a summer card with which we can buy summer clothes. And the same in winter. It is really very good. We have a good life. As far as these things are concerned, we really have no problems at all” (R27).

Poverty and dependency during reception were also central topics for our experts. One of our interlocutors, who stands in daily contact with the asylum seekers of her reception facility, points out that the condition of protracted reception results in dietary issues:

“If the Basic Welfare Support was already very tight, they get 5 EUR for food for the whole day, so this is really little that they have for food alone. So you see: They eat potatoes with rice and eggs and beans, that’s what they live on, and that’s also a very one-sided diet. So that’s really little money for food, if they want meat, they have to spend some of the pocket money and I can understand that, because the Basic Welfare Support was imagined differently. They thought ‘okay that’s about three months where they are in Basic Welfare Support until the asylum procedure is finished’. And in this time it is just a basic supply that they get, only basic services. But because it is so extensive, not just three months, but three years, the needs are quite different” (E02).

A Viennese NGO worker who became active during the “crisis” of 2015, while considering the province of Vienna a Basic Welfare Support pioneer, also expresses astonishment about the fact that her improvised crisis camp was better staffed than the regular reception facilities:

“On the one hand, I was surprised how much worse the care in a Basic Welfare Support facility is. So due to the fact that we were on our own and made things to our best belief, as it would be needed, we had completely different standards. And because we also had too much staff, so normally there are no social workers at all, they are unqualified carers, one or two on duty, it’s all about someone being reachable. So there are no special care services at all or it is very different in these cases I would say” (E03).

Being confronted with a completely outstanding situation with nobody really exactly knowing what to do in the summer of 2015, left stakeholders with some freedom in terms of offers and the way they were solving pressing issues. In the course of time and with procedures getting more organized and streamlined, higher standards in terms of financial aid and staff could no longer be obtained.

Engaging in language courses

A chronic under-financing can also be felt in the context of language and integration courses, as the manager of a reception facility elaborates:

“So with the language courses, it’s always up and down. My impression is: There are always longer times where there is too little on offer, then there is a short time where there are many courses and then there is a dry spell again where there is almost nothing. In these times we often have donation-financed courses, because it is unbearable to watch people not being allowed to learn German because they cannot afford it. Who

pays them 300 EUR per month for the German course? So I mean from what money?” (E01).

The asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in our sample were rarely able to identify the actual organizers of their language classes or to identify the principles according to which participants were admitted to a course. A major reason for this certainly is the fragmented landscape of course providers and funding organizations. However, among the asylum seekers whom we had interviewed, language courses presented an important aspect of their everyday life. These would typically be mentioned in response to the first question about current everyday activities. They seemed to provide a certain sense of social normality and to add structure to daily life. Yet, as a recognized refugee in Vienna elaborates, a central problem is the lack of cohesion between different course levels and providers:

“But the system for German courses, that’s not good, that’s not right. I do A1, then I attend a German course B1, then I have to wait three or four months until a new German course starts, then I have totally forgotten that [what I have learnt before]. I can’t do that, then you can’t achieve it. There are big problems with learning German or learning a language and looking for work” (R07).

Likewise, criticism was expressed regarding the wide range of different capabilities among the participants of language courses. A man from Syria who used to work as a teacher himself explains:

“Yes [they speak] Arabic and the teachers say ‘please be quiet’ but these are all old men and there are others in the German course. I am a teacher, people come from the street, they don’t know English, they don’t know German and now I have to sit next to him and he can do nothing, nothing, zero and I am B1. Everything has to be explained to him, I don’t need that. There are many things I can already do, that is stupid for me and for me it takes three months, for this man it takes six months just to learn the alphabet. That’s why this test for the language is a lie, that’s not right, everybody can do this test, nobody controls it well, it has to be controlled well. I think all people are the same, but I am a teacher, not like the other man, that’s the difference. And also with the age, I am 33 years old and in the course there is maybe a man aged 55 years or 13 years. I can understand better than an old man and a young man can understand better than me. I think the difference should not be greater than five or six years. That is the problem with the German course” (R09).

At the same time, some of our interlocutors underlined the fact that learning a language is primarily a matter of interacting with local people rather than attending a language class. In the following example, a recognized refugee from Syria reflects on his first weeks in Austria, when he felt isolated in his reception facility and was not able to attend any courses, which may be the case in rural areas, where there are not enough people to fill a whole class and available courses are further away and hard to reach. Thus, like some other interviewees, he learned German with the help of Youtube tutorials, and later began to approach people on the street:

“And then I went there and I talked to people. For example, I asked for a lighter although I had one or I asked for an address. Or anyway, I went there and said: How are you? And then it was often funny... That helped a lot. Then it made sense for me to learn the language. That’s what I use and not that I sit in a class and learn something and then I go out and I don’t use it... and I just stay with my fellow countrymen and my community.

I avoided that very much. I have many Syrian friends, but at that time I really avoided to just stay among them, although I could not speak German at that time and even though my English was very bad. Maybe that was an advantage anyway, that I couldn't speak English, because I had to use German then" (R01).

An asylum seeker from Afghanistan on the other hand points out how he felt the need to learn German when his mother fell sick and he had to communicate with the doctors:

"Then we went to the doctor. Before we went to the doctor I spoke with an interpreter. Then I said 'maybe you can go to the doctor with us if we don't speak German, neither German nor English'. He said 'no, you have to learn, you've been here for two months and you just go out, you go out, otherwise you don't learn. I am here voluntarily and I work voluntarily'. And then I said 'okay if you don't come with me, then I'll go there myself'. Then I went there with my mother and the doctor told me something in German. Then he translated in English. I didn't understand that either, then I got very nervous. Then I said 'I have to learn German'. Yes, that day I started learning and then for two months I learned 12 hours a day" (R02).

Overall, there is a strong demand from asylum seekers to learn German, although legal hurdles for persons without a resolved status, the lack of financing, and poor organizational standards make it difficult to advance skills. This is particularly true against the background of an environment where social contact with German speakers greatly depends on local integration structures.

4.4. Encounters with Officials, Civic Actors and the Receiving Society

In this section, the research interest focuses on the way in which our micro-level interview partners experienced encounters with officials, civic actors, and other people in public space during their first months in Austria.

Officials

For our micro-level interview partners, the most relevant contacts with officials concern the asylum procedure¹⁵ as well as encounters with the police upon arrival and during the early reception phase. In some instances there was a very positive perception of the police, as this example from a 54-year old woman from Afghanistan shows:

"To be honest, people have been really nice to us. The people were very nice to us, the state was generous to us. The interpreters were friendly. We are really very happy to be here. I wish all these people that God is always content with them [Note: Afghan proverb]" (R14).

¹⁵ Regarding this issue please see the WP3 Country Report "Refugee Protection in Austria" (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020).

In other instances, our interviewees contrasted their positive perceptions to experiences of violent police in countries of transit or, as in the following case, existing rumours about police in Austria:

“Yes maybe, the first month I was afraid, afraid of Austria, because there were a lot of people who went to Europe before, not all together, very slowly, and people also talk about ‘Austria is not good’, police and stuff like that. And I was really a bit scared but when I was here and I was five days with the police and I said ‘there is good food’, what can I say? [Inaudible]. The police there are really human beings and I hope all policemen in Austria are like that, because that’s quite right, always when I was scared, the police would come to me and talk to me. I didn’t understand it but the feeling... I interpret what he says myself: ‘no fear, no worries everything is fine, short time, sign and you can go on, you don’t stay here forever, it’s like that, for real” (R19).

A young woman from Afghanistan who had arrived in 2015 on the other hand reports how the Austrian police repeatedly asked her and her family if they wanted to continue their journey to Germany, a question that some other interview partners were asked, too. Being the only person in her family who speaks English, she pointed to a sick family member and insisted to stay in Austria. Thus a policeman asked her about the reasons for leaving her country of origin.

“I told him, ‘Because we weren’t safe there.’ And then he laughed about it. He made fun of it. At that moment everything was just too much for me. On the one hand, my mother was sick, then I still had so much pressure because of the whole escape and then something like that. At first I thought about getting upset and insulting him, but then I thought to myself: ‘Why should I?’ I have refrained from saying anything. My father always told me that when I translated into English, I should always be careful how I talk and always speak politely and respectfully....And at that moment, his reaction hurt me very much. Really very much. Because he really made fun of me. And nobody understood the two of us. Only the policeman and I understood each other. Sure, my father was present, but he didn’t understand anything. My mother was also sick on the side. And my father couldn’t defend me either, because he didn’t understand the language. That means only the policeman and I knew what he had just said to me. And then other Afghans had gathered behind me and asked me to tell the policeman that they wanted to stay. [...] A little later the interpreter came and said that there was no problem. And then we had another confrontation [...] They told my mother to take off her headscarf. And these people didn’t actually have that right. But they told my mother that she had to take her headscarf down so they could take a picture of her. My mum said: ‘No, I don’t want that’. But they said she must. And then they forced my mother to put down the headscarf and took the picture. They then gave us the white cards. They didn’t give us the cards right away, I think they gave them to us about three weeks later in Tyrol. Yes, when we were already in Tyrol” (R11).

Here, emotional violence results from a disbelief in the stated reasons for coming to Austria and intersects with discriminatory practices in relation to the wearing of religious symbols.

Civil society actors

Civil society plays a crucial role in the reception and integration of asylum seekers. Among our interlocutors, this aspect was particularly pronounced among persons who had arrived in 2015

and 2016. The lack of accommodation facilities prevailing during the reception crisis of 2015 was partly compensated for through refugee support initiatives and private persons who admitted newly arrived people into their own homes. A recognized refugee from Syria puts it this way:

“So I say it’s so nice when the people, the newly arrived people, don’t have to live in a refugee reception facility, but with the people. And there are many, for example small associations, people who help in the shadows. And for me they are the heroes of integration” (R01).

We had several interview partners who arrived during the most chaotic months of 2015, who were sent back and forth by authorities and eventually ended up staying at a private persons’ homes for a few weeks. A young woman from Syria recalls her experiences upon arrival in 2015. Her father, who had already been in Austria, suggested that she went to Salzburg:

“I then went to the train station, called my father and just yelled ‘You sent me to Salzburg and I’m on the street now and have no room’. He then organized something and called friends and then a guy came to me to the station and picked me up and he said he knew a nice family, they are only girls in the apartment, a mother with three girls and I can stay with them for a week – ‘until I then find something else’. That was just this Turkish family, they are now Austrians but yeah, they have a Turkish background, then this woman came and picked me up. We then came into the apartment and she said, she is sorry but she has to go now, she has to do something but I can stay in the apartment, it is okay. I was so shocked, ‘I won’t stay alone in the apartment, I’ll go with you no matter what you do’. And they played volleyball every Friday or so that was a club, they organized volleyball games for women and yes that was my first day in Salzburg, where I played volleyball in the evening” (R10).

Persons who stayed in emergency camps during their early stage of reception were often confronted with volunteers who sometimes were inexperienced in their professional roles. Asked about the organizational tasks in her emergency camp, a former NGO employee argues:

“We invented that ourselves. So there we noticed: There are many different approaches. There were very different ideas of what their tasks are. So at the very beginning I created a support concept with principles on how to deal with people and with respect and so on. And I know that our task is above all to provide for people, i.e. food, hygiene, sleep, simply to meet such basic needs. And otherwise the actual task would be to mediate only to counselling institutions, i.e. help with orientation in Vienna and Austria. This means help with orientation in the health care system and the necessary information, and mediation for counselling and psychosocial matters also in the end.” (E03).

The head of a refugee rights NGO discusses the role of civil society in the context of the urban-rural divide:

“You can see in various [rural] municipalities that the willingness to help is enormous and that the people have just quickly found a connection, and due to that their linguistic competence is clearly better than with people who are accommodated in the anonymous city, which is often more pleasant for the refugees themselves because they are not subject to social control. But on the other hand, the support structures are not so

easily accessible, because in the countryside, people often approach the refugees directly. In the city, the refugees often have to look for structures where they can get involved. So both have certain advantages and disadvantages” (E07).

Concrete reception in terms of implementation is carried out by NGOs as operative partners all across Austria. Some interview partners explicitly mention the help they have received from social workers active with these NGOs, as a female asylum seeker elaborates:

“The first contact for us was in the accommodation centre. The caregiver was nice and she tried to help us. To give us motivation, to give courage. Yes, we had good experiences with the people with whom we had contact” (R26).

These first positive or (negative) encounters in some cases set the tone of what was to follow during the asylum procedure and later on. Oftentimes, a distinction between volunteers and NGO workers is not possible from the interview material, still their role has often been emphasized by the interviewees.

“Welcome culture” versus discrimination

Many of our interlocutors who arrived in 2015 or early 2016 experienced broad support by civil society. Citizens often actively engaged themselves in emergency camps, organized clothing, or established informal language courses. These interactions left a lasting impression on many of our interview partners. However, several statements reflect how this welcoming culture has faded away since then, particularly pointing to the role of federal government and restrictive policies and statements. An asylum seeker from Afghanistan accordingly relates:

“When I came to Traiskirchen I saw the people, the great helpers, the Austrians, it was all full of people, of migrants. And they all liked to help and did a lot of things. But slowly the government gets worse every month and the people who want to help us get a bit scared. They don’t want to do it anymore, at first it was good but...” (R04)

Another man from the same reception facility, reflects on discrimination through media outlets:

“At first it was like this, a lot of people were nice. If there is a good government all are nice... First everything was OK, but the black-blue parties [conservatives and right-wing populists], they have such a policy, they always talk about refugees, refugees, refugees ... When Alex does something, the newspapers “Heute” and “Österreich” [Austrian tabloids] write: Alex did it. But when Ahmet or Ersan or Hakan do something, they write for a week: refugees from Afghanistan or Iraq have done it. I think it’s personal. If someone does something, then not the whole country is guilty” (R06).

Our experts attribute the fading away of a welcoming culture not only to a general change in public attitudes after 2015, but also to a retreat of volunteers. The NGO worker of an emergency reception facility of 2015 for example has mixed feelings:

“Many things have certainly already fallen silent of this civil society commitment or voluntary work. But I’m sure some of it has remained. For example the family of X, they are still friends now, so one of the friends he mentioned is a woman who gave German lessons for free. So that was a pool of volunteers who were originally organized in the soccer stadium through this volunteer group and who then joined us over there [in the new reception facility] and gave German lessons to the residents” (E03).

Another expert relates the importance of volunteers to the process of language acquisition:

“There is a lack of contacts. There are of course still many volunteers and civil society activities where people try to keep in touch, get involved, sponsor, all that. But there are certainly too few. Basically also with German: that is always the same problem. You go to a German course, then you go back home and then there is no opportunity to speak German. There is a lack of opportunities to try that out” (E06).

During the interviews in Upper Austria, some of our gatekeeper contacts at a local NGO shared their impression that many volunteers were disappointed when asylum seekers suddenly began to move to the city once they had been granted a positive asylum status. Asked about this perception, the provincial councillor for integration says:

“Yes, that comes as well. It absolutely adds to the fact that some feel a bit betrayed. So in a way of saying: ‘Now I was there for him or his family for two years and now he is away’ and when the asylum decision is there, yes, that didn’t always work out the way the affected people wanted it to” (E10).

Thus the provision of integration structures during reception and most notably employment possibilities in rural areas is argued to be crucial for future social cohesion.

Summing up, the quality of encounters with officials, civic actors, and society as such varies greatly in the narratives of our micro-level interview partners. Positive experiences with people showing openness and offering different kinds of help are contrasted to negative experiences involving xenophobia displayed by owners of private accommodations and racism displayed by fellow residents or persons in shared public spaces. Generally, the micro-level interviews depict a deterioration of the so-called “welcome culture” in politics, the media and society since the summer of 2015.

5. Notes on the Multi-level Model of Reception

As discussed at the outset, multi-level conflicts in Austria concern, on the one hand, the question of housing for and dispersal of asylum seekers during reception and, on the other hand, the role of early integration measures for persons who do not yet enjoy international protection.

Starting with the question of refugee reception across the EU, there is broad consensus among the experts we have interviewed that reforms are needed. Pointing to the heavy burden borne by countries with external borders such as Italy and Greece, these experts are largely in favour of distribution mechanisms for asylum seekers and increased EU funding for reception and integration. Moving beyond a focus on the role of nation states, the (now former) integration councillor of Upper Austria (E10) argued that cities and regions must be included in potential distribution mechanisms. He opted for a bonus system for regions or cities that are willing and able to assume responsibility. This could be in the form of per capita support earmarked for a specific purpose.

Regarding the allocation of asylum seekers within Austria, our experts point out the disparities in the quality of Basic Welfare Support and specific accommodations across different provinces. Arguably, Austrian federalism creates a fragmented system that could rightly be perceived as unfair by asylum seekers. Based on prior experiences, people would accordingly tend to move away from regions with weaker support structures, once they have received a positive decision on their asylum application. Aside from that, the head of a national refugee rights NGO (E07) expresses criticism regarding the current lack of transparency in informal provincial negotiations on regulative details concerning reception standards.

This, however, by no means constitutes a plea for greater centralization. Quite to the contrary, as the manager of a reception facility in Vienna (E01) argues, cooperation should be more stringent and rules should be harmonised without being minimised. Our expert interview partners thus largely expressed strong scepticism about the federal government's recent attempts to expand its power in the realm of reception. To be more precise, the head of a refugee rights NGO (E07) pointed out that the dominant rationale inherent to federal governance was that of isolation and migration control.

Conflicting views reigning between the federal and provincial levels concern the question of the time at which integration measures should actually set in. Whereas federal provinces such as Vienna and Upper Austria try to offer measures as soon as persons have passed the admissibility procedure, federal government is rather reluctant in this matter and considers integration measures only to be relevant for beneficiaries of international protection. Furthermore, provinces have no direct influence regarding access to the labour market, an issue decided at the federal level. Federal government's restrictive stance on these issues directly opposes daily integration efforts at a local level.

6. Conclusions: Challenges, Prospects, and Policy Recommendations

Finally, we found that the experience of reception for asylum seekers is largely characterized by feelings of concern, anxiety, and uncertainty as a result of a legal limbo. The protracted duration of the asylum procedure (see WP3 report) particularly leads to notions of being “stuck in reception”. Material conditions such as housing and services, although relevant, can be interpreted as second order issues compared to the two most pressing problems: obtaining a stable legal status and finding permanent employment.

Drawing from the conclusions of this report, we recommend considering the following three aspects for future policy reforms:

Compliance with the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU and thus an increased access to the labour market for asylum seekers:

The de facto exclusion of asylum seekers from the labour market was prominently discussed among experts, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection alike. In 2018, young asylum seekers were banned from apprenticeships as a major remaining legal exemption, due to political concerns of attracting more immigrants, an issue still heavily debated in Austrian politics. The only currently remaining possibilities are seasonal work and charitable employment with earnings of up to 110 EUR per month. Asylum seekers affected by this condition mentioned negative consequences including a general sense of frustration, isolation and the lack of meaningful social relationships, dependency on social aid, and a turn to black market activities. Some of our interview partners, who had had the opportunity to take up minor jobs in the past, experienced positive effects on their daily life during reception in terms of contacts with the local population, a little spending money and a daily structure – simply having a purpose. Interviewees (particularly men) furthermore emphasized the importance of own work over social welfare in order to be able to live independently and to escape dire socio-economic circumstances. According to the interviewed experts, early employment would furthermore contribute to the cultural dimension of integration on the societal level, which would be beneficial for non-migrants, too.

Federal level support for the expansion of language courses for asylum seekers across all provinces:

Language and education courses provided at the provincial and municipal level have proved to be an important part of everyday life in reception, not only by promoting skills but also by creating a routine and a sense of social normality. The landscape of language courses however seems to be confusing and there are difficulties in the matching of participants and finding the right course providers. The system of services and allowances generally displays discrepancies across federal provinces. Experts active in reception facilities expressed the wish for more extensive financial means in order to be able to hire more staff and offer better services to their clients. Financial support and coordination efforts from the federal level could strengthen and expand local structures. Clearly, this would promote a more active lifestyle among asylum seekers, develop language skills at an early stage and therefore prepare them for potential employment opportunities upon being granted a protection status.

Informed dispersal policies and integrated reception facilities:

Concerning the housing situation during reception, interviewed experts elaborated on the chaotic situation in 2015, when there was a severe lack of facilities, of high-quality staff and of financial means. While civil society, NGOs and some local government actors helped overcome the reception crisis, their involvement has received little acknowledgment from the federal state level. Instead of promoting existing support and integration structures, the federal government has pursued a restrictive approach with the most recent plans pointing towards a centralization of competences in the realm of reception. As many experts fear, this may imply a monopoly on the management of reception facilities and an isolation strategy, placing asylum seekers in remote areas with limited access to social and legal aid. On the contrary they suggest that dispersal policies need to be further strengthened through data gathering and a better matching of asylum seeker and municipal needs. This also requires tighter cooperation with provinces, districts and municipalities. While experts expressed a clear preference for small scale facilities, our research in an all-male large scale facility in Vienna has shown that this form of accommodation can also carry benefits. This may imply professionalized and specialized staff, in-house services and workshops, and good public transportation infrastructure. A central criterion, it seems, is the question of who runs accommodation facilities. Experienced non-profit NGOs are preferred over private providers or care companies. Arguably what is needed are integrated reception facilities that promote social interactions and professional exchange with stakeholders in the field of asylum, language acquisition and a certain degree of independence of asylum seekers.

References and Sources

- AMS-OÖ (2015). *Arbeitsmöglichkeiten für Asylwerberinnen und Asylwerber*. Retrieved from http://www.ams.at/_docs/400_AsyL-Folder_DEUTSCH.pdf
- Asylkoordination (2017). *Kritik am VMÖ reißt nicht ab*. Retrieved from <https://www.asyl.at/de/information/presseaussendungen/asylkoordinationkrisiertvereinmenschenrechteoesterreich/>
- Coleman, C. (2009). Vulnerability as a Regulatory Category in Human Subject Research. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, pp. 12-18.
- DerStandard (2017). *Wie viel Flüchtlinge in der Grundversorgung bekommen*. Retrieved from <https://derstandard.at/2000068157547/Wie-viel-Fluechtlinge-in-der-Grundversorgung-bekommen>
- DerStandard (2019). *Asylwerber dürfen in Österreich früher arbeiten*. Retrieved from <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000107356454/eu-recht-ermoeslicht-beschaeftigung-von-asylwerbern-in-oesterreich>
- EcoAustria. (2017). Auswirkungen der Fluchtmigration auf Wachstum und Beschäftigung in Österreich. Retrieved from <http://ecoaustria.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Policy-Note-No.-13-Auswirkungen-der-Fluchtmigration-auf-Wachstum-und-Bescha%CC%88ftigung-in-O%CC%88sterreich.pdf>
- FSW (2018). *Unterstützung von Flüchtlingen - ein Überblick*. Retrieved from <https://2018.fsw.at/p/wiener-fluechtlingshilfe>
- Haselbacher, M., & Hattmannsdorfer, H. (2018). Desintegration in der Grundversorgung - Theoretische und empirische Befunde zur Unterbringung von Asylsuchenden im ländlichen Raum. *Juridikum, Heft 3*, pp. 373-385.
- Josipovic, I., & Reeger, U. (2018). *WP1 Country Report: Legal and Policy Framework in Austria*. Vienna.
- Josipovic, I., & Reeger, U. (2019). *WP2 Country Report: Border Management and Migration Control in Austria*. Vienna.
- Josipovic, I., & Reeger, U. (2020). *WP3 Country Report: Refugee Protection in Austria*. Vienna.
- Kohlbacher, J. & U. Reeger (forthcoming). Globalization, Immigration and Ethnic Diversity: the Exceptional Case of Vienna. In S. Musterd (ed.), *Handbook of Urban Segregation*. Edward Elgar.
- Koppenberg, S., 2014. *EMN: Die Gestaltung der Grundversorgung in Österreich*. [online] Available at: http://www.emn.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Organization-of-Reception-Facilities_DE_final.pdf [Accessed 27 April 2018].
- Land-Oberösterreich (2019). *Grundversorgung von Fremden (Asylwerbenden)*. Retrieved from <https://www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/26937.htm>

- Langthaler, H., & Trauner, H. (2009). Das österreichische Asylregime unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle zivilgesellschaftlicher Organisationen. *SWS-Rundschau* 49, pp. 446-467.
- Peyrl, J. (2015). *Der Zugang zum Arbeitsmarkt von AsylwerberInnen - eine rechtliche Bestandsaufnahme*, A&W blog. Retrieved from <https://awblog.at/der-zugang-zum-arbeitsmarkt-von-asylwerberinnen/>
- Profil (2018). *Schwertner: "Wahlkampfthema am Köcheln halten"*. Retrieved from <https://www.profil.at/shortlist/oesterreich/klaus-schwertner-caritas-fluechtlinge-kickl-8610614>
- Rosenberger, S., & Müller, S. (2020). Before and After the Reception Crisis of 2015: Asylum and Reception Policies in Austria. In B. Glorius & J. Doomernik (eds.), *Geographies of Asylum in Europe and the Role of European Localities. IMISCOE Research Series* (pp. 93-110). Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Rössel, I., & Frühwirth, R. (2016). *Verein Mosaik: Österreichs Asylpolitik - Ständiger Entzug des Zugangs zum Recht*. Retrieved from <http://mosaik-blog.at/oesterreichs-asylpolitik-staendiger-entzug-des-zugangs-zum-recht/>

Appendix

Interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection

	Country of Origin	Federal state	Gender	Age	Status
R01	Syria	Vienna/ Graz	m	27	Recognized refugee
R02	Afghanistan	Vienna	m	21	Asylum seeker
R03	Afghanistan	Vienna	m	20	Asylum seeker
R04	Afghanistan	Vienna	m	26	Asylum seeker
R05	Iran	Vienna	m	n.S. (>18)	Asylum seeker
R06	Afghanistan	Vienna	m	19	Asylum seeker
R07	Syria	Vienna	m	36	Recognized refugee
R08	Syria	Vienna	f	31	Recognized refugee
R09	Syria	Vienna	m	33	Recognized refugee
R10	Syria	Vienna	f	22	Recognized refugee
R11	Afghanistan	Vienna	f	19	Recognized refugee
R12	Afghanistan	Vienna	f	23	Recognized refugee
R13	Afghanistan	Vienna	f	35	Recognized refugee
R14	Afghanistan	Lower Austria	f	52	Recognized refugee
R15	Afghanistan	Burgenland	f	23	Recognized refugee
R16	Afghanistan	Vienna	f	34	Ben. subsidiary protection
R17	Nigeria	Upper Austria	m	21	Asylum seeker
R18	Iraq	Upper Austria	f	22	Asylum seeker
R19	Syria	Upper Austria	m	34	Recognized refugee
R20	Syria	Upper Austria	m	41	Recognized refugee
R21	Georgia	Upper Austria	f	40	Ben. subsidiary protection
R22	Iraq	Upper Austria	f	31	Asylum seeker
R23	Syria	Upper Austria	m	23	Recognized refugee
R24	Afghanistan	Upper Austria	f	34	Ben. subsidiary protection
R25	Afghan./Pakistan	Upper Austria	m	26	Asylum seeker
R26	Iran	Upper Austria	f	39	Asylum seeker
R27	Afghanistan	Upper Austria	f	64	Asylum seeker
R28	Pakistan	Upper Austria	f	47	Asylum seeker
R29	Syria	Vienna	m	27	Recognized refugee

Interviews with experts

	Main field of expertise	Type of institution	Work profile
Vienna			
E01	Reception/ Integration	NGO	Administrative & practical
E02	Reception	NGO	Administrative & practical
E03	Reception/ Integration	NGO	Practical
E06	Integration	Public administration	Administrative
E08	Reception	Public administration	Administrative
Upper Austria			
E04	Reception/Integration	NGO	Administrative & practical
E05	Reception/Integration	NGO	Administrative
E10	Reception/Integration	Local government	Administrative
E12	Reception/Integration	Public administration	Administrative & practical
National level			
E07	Refugee protection monitoring	NGO	Administrative
E09	Border management	Academia / Federal administration	Administrative
E11	Q&A: refugee protection and border management	Federal Ministry of Interior	Administrative