

Austria: The situation of refugees in a reluctant destination country

Dr. Ursula Reeger and Ivan Josipovic

Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Austrian Academy of Sciences



Graffiti on a wall in the inner city of Warsaw.
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Abstract

Though Austria has been an immigration country for a long period of time, the arrival of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan around the year 2015 has resulted in a panoply of new legal restrictions when it comes to their reception and structural as well as socio-cultural integration. The restrictions set at the national level are responded by varying strategies on the local level by federal governments, NGOs, civil society actors and the refugees themselves.

References

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Contact

Mag. Dr. Ursula Reeger
ISR/ÖAW
ursula.reeger@oeaw.ac.at
<https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/isr/team/rg-urban-transformation/ursula-reeger/>

Introduction

Together with Germany and Sweden, Austria was one of the major receiving countries of refugees in 2015 and 2016. In these two years, 130,625 persons filed an asylum application, about 81,400 in total received a positive decision on their asylum application between 2015 and today. The field of asylum poses a myriad of simultaneous challenges in the realms of reception and integration.

Main Results

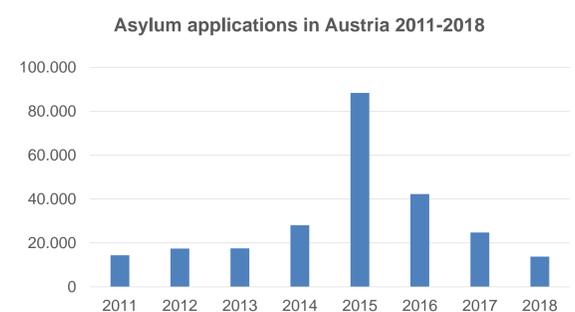
For some refugees, the period of reception takes only a few months while others have to wait for a couple of years in legal limbo until they receive a title. Being in this state means not having access to the labour market, depending on social aid and having no choice as to the residential location in Austria. These circumstances immediately change upon the acquisition of a title.

Conflicting views between the federal and provincial/local levels concern the question of the time at which integration measures should set in. Whereas some federal provinces offer measures for asylum seekers, federal government is rather reluctant in this matter and considers integration measures only to be relevant for beneficiaries of international protection. This restrictive stance directly opposes integration efforts at a local level.

From the refugees' point of view, situations of legal limbo and precarious socio-economic conditions make it difficult to establish solid expectations about the future and to fully enjoy a wide range of rights upon receiving protection status. Several beneficiaries of protection experienced discrimination and other severe access problems both in their search for housing and employment related to religion or legal status. On the other hand, many interlocutors discussed helpful relations with Austrians and appreciated the guarantee of freedoms associated with liberal democratic rule compared to situations of exclusion and political persecution in their homelands.

Methods and Material

- Analysis of legal and policy documents, literature review.
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 asylum seekers, 17 beneficiaries of international protection and 12 stakeholders active in the field of asylum in urban and rural areas.
- Qualitative content analysis of the transcripts of all interviews based on a joint RESPOND coding scheme.
- Focus group with practitioners in the field of asylum.



Lessons Learned

Much time is lost during protracted reception. This most of all refers to the de facto ban from the labour market which results in missed opportunities for social contacts, language learning and providing the feeling of leading a self-determined life. Lifting this ban would help to overcome these obstacles.

Regarding access to housing, there is a clear lack of public assistance in the form of financial support for decent accommodation. The development of innovative models for the promotion of access to affordable housing would clearly help refugees and other groups in need and tackle issues of exploitative and discriminatory practices some interlocutors experienced.