

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Background

Research on migrant integration has for a long time focused on larger cities, while neglecting the role of small and medium sized towns and rural municipalities, and Austria is no exception to that general trend. Yet, the role of non-metropolitan and often non-traditional arrival areas has greatly increased with the arrival of large numbers of refugees¹ after 2014, often – as in Austria – linked to dispersal policies involving the reception of refugees across the territory, including in small and medium sized towns and rural municipalities.

Against this background, the Whole-COMM project set out to examine policy responses of small and medium-sized towns and municipalities in rural areas to new arrivals, attitudes of and practices of local populations, experiences of refugees themselves and the interaction of refugees with the local population and relevant institutions.

As in other European countries, the 2015 refugee and migration crisis had a major impact on migration policy making and politics in Austria more generally. While the focus of debates initially was on emergency measures, the management of refugee flows and refugee reception, including their dispersal across the territory, integration soon took centre stage, leading to the adoption of a series of measures on the national level, mainly relating to civic integration of refugees and their labour market integration. The role of local communities by and large remained neglected and only featured when conflicts arose over overcrowded reception centres or the establishment of new reception facilities. Yet in the context of recent debates on the concentration of refugees in Vienna as a result of onward migration from other parts of the country after post-reception and recent challenges related to the significant number of family members arriving through family reunification there is an emerging debate why refugees don't stay in initial areas of reception, highlighting also the role of smaller non-metropolitan areas. Against this background, understanding small and medium-sized towns' and rural municipalities responses to refugee arrivals, their capacities to adopt and shape relevant policies, the challenges they face and gaps in the overall framework for refugee reception and integration have become all the more urgent and relevant.

¹ We use the term refugees in a generic sense, referring to asylum seekers, recognised refugees and beneficiaries of international protection.



About the Austrian Whole-COMM study

In Austria research was carried out in two provinces – Lower Austria in the East of the Country and Tyrol in the West. Cases selected included the two provincial capitals – Innsbruck, a medium-sized town according to international standard definitions, and (St. Pölten) – a small town. In addition, a municipality in the Tyrolean Inn valley and a small district capital in Northern Lower Austria were studied. Empirically, the study involved 72 interviews with stakeholders on the local, regional, provincial and national level, 37 migrant interviews as well as focus group discussions and participant observation.

Findings

Municipalities as policy actors

The conditions for the local integration of refugees in Austria are defined by two distinct sets of policies and related institutional arrangements: the framework for the reception of refugees, on the one hand, and the framework for the integration of third country nationals, on the other. Municipalities do not have a formal role in either of these frameworks and the key institutional actors are all located above the municipal level and all formal institutional actors dealing with refugee reception and integration are located either on the provincial or the national level. While the two towns in our sample were at least to some extent involved in the consultation and decision-making about refugee reception, the two small municipalities felt bypassed by the provincial and federal level, respectively, and faced concerns and reluctance from the local population. Similar limitations of the capacity of municipalities to shape policies outside the area of formal competence can be noted in relation to integration, all pointing at deficiencies of the existing policy framework on integration – the National Action Plan on Integration and subsequent updates, which currently does not consider the role of municipalities in a systematic manner and moreover, which does not provide a sufficient framework for involving municipalities in policy making.

But also more generally, the capacity of municipalities to respond to and actively shape the arrival and settlement of refugees differ markedly. Reasons include differences in spatial and socio-economic characteristics of municipalities, their size as well as their different functional roles – as ‘ordinary’ municipalities, district or provincial capitals, determining the presence – or absence – of relevant institutions, influencing the strength of informal links to other actors, but simply also the presence or absence of relevant services. Provincial and district capitals feature a range of public and third sector organisations thanks to their functional-administrative status, which provided and extended their services to refugees, while such services were not locally available in ‘ordinary’ small municipalities. In these cases, civil society, including ordinary citizens individually supporting refugees, informal initiatives often within established associations or faith communities and local NGOs were crucial in addressing local needs, both in the initial phase of refugee reception and in respect to refugees’ longer-term socioeconomic integration, thus to some extent making up for the absence – or distance – of institutionalised actors dealing with integration. In the case of the

municipality in Northern Lower Austria an NGO emerging from a citizens' initiative was practically delegated powers by the local municipality.

Access to employment and housing

One focus of the study was on refugees' access to the labour market and housing. While we identified a demand for low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs in retail, tourism and various industrial sectors and a certain reliance on temporary employment agencies as well as informal networks to match demand and supply, access to employment proved difficult due to delays in language acquisition, and in particular in the two small municipalities, lack of public transport and childcare facilities.

Access to housing has been challenging for refugees in all four localities studied. Importantly, housing as a policy area largely falls into the competence of provincial governments and municipalities, yet public housing largely focuses on longer-term residents (with the exception of emergency housing for exceptional cases available only in the two provincial capitals), or, in the case of non-profit housing associations, requiring a certain level of financial capital, leaving refugees largely to the private market for rented accommodation, once they lose housing or housing support under the reception systems shortly after being granted a status. Access to housing proved particularly challenging in Tyrol. Importantly, lack of affordable housing also was found to act as a barrier to taking up employment.

It is against this background that we derive the following policy recommendations:

Recommendations

- **Creating a framework for exchange of information for small and medium sized municipalities, accounting for their different functional-administrative status and using established networks and structures:** The cases of Innsbruck and St. Pölten have shown that existing municipal social (integration) units have been beneficial in responding to current needs of refugee reception and integration by using and adapting existing structures and tools. On the other, the two towns benefited from exchange within the association of cities and towns (Städtebund). The creation of such an infrastructure for smaller municipalities, e.g. within the framework of the Association of Municipalities and briefing days for mayors at district level, could help to respond to future (unexpected) migratory events and to manage and transfer existing knowledge between municipalities.
- **Establishing a comprehensive policy framework considering capacities and potential role of SMTRAs:** The study of the four municipalities of different size and functional-administrative status has revealed their different involvement in multi-level and inter-municipal exchanges, as well as differences in the provision of immediate and further integration support services (public and third sector organisations vs. mainly civil society). Establishing a framework that takes these differences into account could help bridge gaps

between different actors and municipalities of different status and size. As a first step, the integration needs of municipalities should be assessed. As a side effect, this could facilitate awareness-raising and networking among and between municipalities.

- **Establishing policies on housing for refugees leaving the reception system:** Difficulties in accessing housing relate to a general lack of affordable housing for both locals and newcomers, particularly in our two Tyrolean cases, as well as a lack of access to local social housing and a general reluctance and discrimination against refugees. Policies that address these challenges could help to reduce the out-migration of migrants from their original place of residence and facilitate their integration into the labour market. Tackling the wider housing crisis goes beyond integration policies. Third sector organisations acting as intermediaries (e.g. Diakonie starter flats) between property owners and refugees have helped to facilitate matching between property owners and refugees looking for accommodation on the one hand, and to address reluctance/discrimination against refugees on the other.
- **Promoting policy coherence as a tool to address the reasons for out-migration from SMTRAs and strengthen their role as an alternative to larger cities:**
Integration is a cross-cutting issue that affects and depends on general policy areas. Difficulties in accessing housing and the labour market point to challenges of policy coherence. Refugees receiving benefits may be attractive to landlords because the welfare authorities are seen as reliable payers. However, this incentive structure, combined with the general challenge of covering housing costs from wage income, may delay the transition to employment. A better understanding of these interlinked mechanisms and their drivers can help to improve policy coherence and demographic balance, strengthening the role of smaller and rural areas as alternatives to larger cities.