

**RESPOND**

## **Working Papers**

### **Global Migration: Consequences and Responses**

Paper 2020/55, June 2020

## **Integration Policies, Practices and Experiences**

### **Austria Country Report**

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



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>German</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>AMS</b>	Arbeitsmarktservice Österreich	Public Employment Service
<b>BFA</b>	Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl	Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum
<b>BMASK</b>	Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit und Konsumentenschutz	Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection
<b>BMEIA</b>	Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äußeres	Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs
<b>BZÖ</b>	Bündnis Zukunft Österreich	Alliance for the Future of Austria
<b>BM.I</b>	Bundesministerium für Inneres	Federal Ministry of the Interior
<b>EJF</b>	Europäischer Gerichtshof	European Court of Justice
<b>FPÖ</b>	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	Freedom Party of Austria
<b>FSW</b>	Fond Soziales Wien	Vienna Social Fund
<b>ÖIF</b>	Österreichischer Integrationsfond	Austrian Integration Fund
<b>ÖVP</b>	Österreichische Volkspartei	Austrian People's Party
<b>SPÖ</b>	Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs	Social Democratic Party of Austria

## About the Project

RESPOND is a Horizon 2020 project which aims at studying the multilevel governance of migration in Europe and beyond. The consortium is formed 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-national 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 will study 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 Europeanisation.

Each thematic field reflects a juncture in the migration journey of refugees and is designed to provide a holistic view of policies, their impact and the responses given by affected actors.

In order to better approach these themes, we divided our research into work packages (WPs). The present report is concerned with the findings related to WP5, which focuses specifically on refugee integration.

## Executive Summary

This report deals with different aspects of integration of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Austria. A series of interviews with these groups (conducted in 2018) reveals that their primary concerns relate to the two integration dimensions of labour market participation and language acquisition. Following a period of legal limbo during the asylum procedure, recognized refugees and holders of subsidiary protection were primarily concerned about their precarious socio-economic situation and about matching and further developing existing skills in order to find employment.

While these structural issues have been addressed by federal-level policy makers, especially following the year of 2015, national integration policies strongly focused on individual compliance and the symbolic dimension of integration, namely cultural or religious norms and values of immigrants. In response to more than 88,000 asylum applications in 2015, the federal government invested an additional 25 million euro in 2016 for integration courses and the Public Employment Service (AMS) started programmes for the evaluation and development of immigrants' job skills. In 2017, the increased investment in integration structures for beneficiaries of protection was matched by the legal codification of obligations and conditions of participation in integration courses, including sanctions upon violation. These measures were accompanied by the 2017 Anti-Face-Covering Act that aimed at banning burqas from public places as well as new policies that prohibit girls' wearing of veils in kindergarten (2018) and primary school (2019). These policies resulted from political debates on the integration of Muslim immigrant populations.

Experts active in the field of asylum who were interviewed for this project criticized the federal government's narrow and often instrumentalist approach to cultural and religious aspects of integration and pointed towards flaws of measures addressing structural integration. Arguably, the funding of integration courses and labour market support fluctuated, depending on trends in asylum applications and party-political constellations in government. The content of integration courses would be focused on passing standardized tests and depictions of "Austrian values" would be partly built on national stereotypes. The most important problem however relates to the fact that the federal level generally only supports integration measures for beneficiaries of international protection and not for asylum seekers. The experts who were interviewed considered this highly problematic as many people had to wait for months or even several years for their asylum decision, not only losing valuable time to learn the language but also losing their motivation and sense of self-esteem.

In Austria's federal system, these deficits are sometimes compensated by provincial integration policies, as the cases of Vienna and Upper Austria demonstrate. Vienna for example provides funding for asylum seeker integration courses and the Upper Austrian Integration Department fostered the creation of Regional Competence Centres for Integration and Diversity. The local level furthermore played an important role in the aftermath of 2015 as many municipalities actively created and promoted support networks. Likewise, established bonds with civil society actors, either NGO workers or volunteers, have proved to be an important anchor for orientation in the everyday life of our interlocutors, sometimes supporting them with bureaucratic procedures, job applications, flat hunting, and language learning.

Sub-national politics, however, can also take a restrictive stance towards immigrants. Although provinces are equipped with considerable political power and economic resources to provide



refugee support, the case of Austria suggests that their intervening role strongly depends on the political staff in provincial government or within the ministerial department responsible for immigrant agendas. In this regard, it is worthwhile to highlight how Upper Austria and Lower Austria pursued a strategy of cutting provincially governed social aid for certain groups of refugees and linking them to individual integration efforts. In both instances, the measures were supported by the right-wing Freedom Party and the conservative People's Party. Both sets of measures however were overturned by higher courts (the ECJ in the first case and the Constitutional Court in the latter). Yet, the policies served as a template for a similar national policy reform in 2018, once the Freedom Party entered a government coalition with the conservative People's Party. In 2019, this policy was once again overturned by the Austrian Constitutional Court.

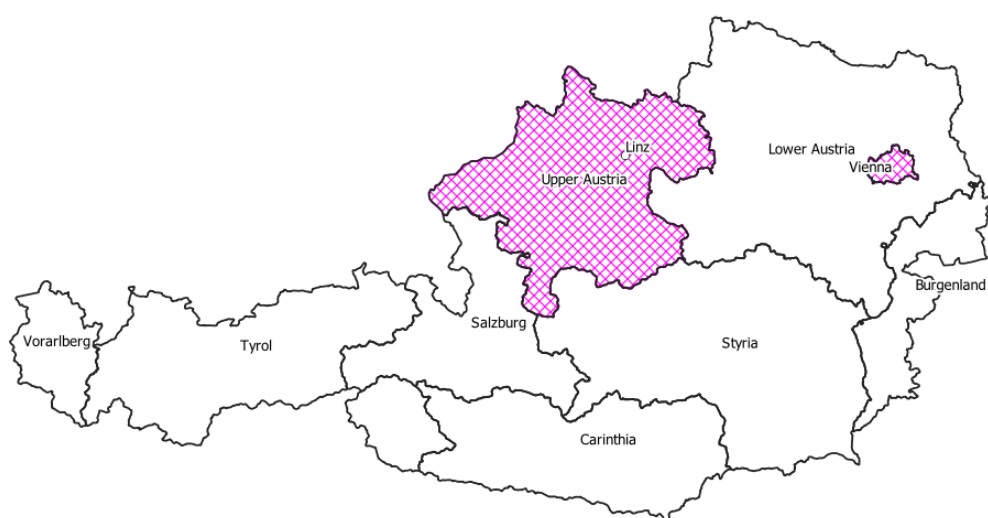
Although our refugee interview partners had not experienced cuts in social aid, they nevertheless displayed great awareness of national-level anti-immigrant rhetoric. Encounters with these debates on race and the Muslim faith were not only confined to media consumption but were also related to experiences of discrimination. Arguably, as categories of ethnicity and religion have turned into grounds of political conflict in public discourse, our interlocutors sought to distance themselves actively from stereotypes presented by politicians and media outlets.

## 1. Methodology and Sources<sup>1</sup>

In line with the methodological approach of the RESPOND project, we seek to analyse Austrian governance in the realm of refugee integration 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.

Starting out from the national legal framework in Austria, this report also focuses on the systems of integration in two Austrian provinces: Upper Austria and Vienna (Figure 1). In recent years, both provinces have been highly active in providing integration measures.

**Figure 1: Federal provinces included in the RESPOND research**



Source: cartography by Maximilian Wonaschütz, ISR.

Vienna is the only metropolis in Austria. The city has the double function of 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 migrant integration. 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 thus used to receiving newcomers.

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 is currently home to 1.47 million inhabitants, ranging third in terms of population after Vienna and Lower Austria. The share of

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 is adopted from the WP3 Country Report “Refugee Protection in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020a) and the WP4 Country Report “Refugee Reception in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b) and updated where necessary.

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 largely dominated by the conservative ÖVP since World War II.

## Expert interviews

This set of interviews addresses 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 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 (non-urban 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.<sup>2</sup>

With each of our eleven experts, we conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately one and a half hours each, 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.<sup>3</sup> For each of these areas, we asked 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 regarding the topics discussed in this report.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

## Interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection

In order to account for the micro-level analysis, we conducted interviews with 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 have largely focused on two groups: persons from Afghanistan and from Syria. This choice was motivated by statistical figures indicating a strong attribution of these groups to the most recent immigration dynamics. In the time 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), 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 contrast to that we also interviewed persons from Iraq, Georgia, Iran, Nigeria, and Pakistan (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Overview of refugee interview partners in Austria**

<b>Gender</b>	Men: 14	Women: 15	
<b>Country of origin</b>	Syria: 9	Afghanistan: 13	Iraq: 2
	Iran: 2	Nigeria: 1	Pakistan: 1
	Georgia: 1		
<b>Age</b>	18-29: 14	30-49: 12	50+: 2
	Unknown: 1		
<b>Marital status</b>	Married: 13	Single: 12	Other: 4
<b>Educational background</b>	Higher secondary, tertiary: 13	Lower secondary: 7	Elementary, illiterate: 6
	Unknown: 3		
<b>Legal status</b>	Asylum seeker: 12	International protection: 14	Subsidiary protection: 3
<b>Place of residence</b>	Vienna: 15	Rural area: 14	
<b>Employed</b>	Yes: 8	No: 21	

Source: own compilation.

Concerning the place of residence, our focus was first on persons living in Vienna, which in 2018 was home to 39.8 per cent of persons born in Afghanistan and 49.1 per cent of persons born in Syria who now lived in Austria (Statistics Austria, online database). The province of Vienna has a great attractiveness as the largest urban centre in Austria, particularly for beneficiaries of international protection, who in many cases chose to move there upon the acquisition of a title. In the second phase of our interview process, we shifted our focus to a rural area in Upper Austria to account for perspectives of people who live in small and medium-sized municipalities. We thus also wanted to investigate how the two provinces manage refugee reception and integration under different structural conditions.

Regarding the age structure of the refugee respondents, the clear majority was below the age of 50 years at the time of the interview, and 14 persons were below 30 years, which reflects the statistical dominance of younger persons coming to Europe and Austria around 2015. Many Afghan refugees came to Austria alone, while refugees from the other countries of origin predominantly came with their families (spouse and children). There is a large variation in educational background, although comparing school degrees between different educational systems is rather difficult. The range however varies from persons with little or no education to university graduates.

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

We led semi-structured interviews of approximately one to one and a half hours. In order to compensate for the time 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 for specific Austrian terminology. Topics of discussion included:

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 experiences and points of view regarding the respective topic with us. This allowed interviewees first to elaborate on those aspects which they considered personally important or generally relevant. Once they had set the thematic agenda in an area, we continued with open questions addressing specific dimensions.

To address the problem of language proficiency, particularly in 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 on 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 in two aspects. First, conveying sufficient information regarding the content and purpose of the project in an understandable way. Second, avoiding strong negative emotions or re-traumatization during interviews. Due to on-

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

going 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 held the phone number of a socio-psychiatric emergency service on standby.

All conversations were recorded, anonymized, and transcribed. Among all German-language interviewees, the language skills were sufficient to make sense of our questions and communicate meaningful answers. However, given the fact that most people 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.

## **2. Integration Policies: Legal, Political, and Institutional Framework**

In this chapter, we describe the general national-level framework on migrant and especially refugee integration in Austria and the ideas prevalent on the national level concerning norms and values, religion, and social cohesion. A more detailed look at the framework for integration measures and policies in relation to the labour market, housing, the school system for children, adult education, health care, and citizenship, each pertaining to central features of structural and social integration, will be discussed in chapters 3 to 9. There we will also analyse the federal provincial and municipal levels in Vienna and Upper Austria and discuss the respective legal frameworks, the implementation of national-level measures, as well as local stances and governance divergences.

### **2.1. Brief historical background of the development of Austria's integration policies**

In Austria, immigrant integration policies arrived only relatively recently on the political agenda of the federal government. Although aspects such as immigrant labour market participation, immigrant social and political rights, as well as citizenship had been part of the political debate since the 1960s, the terminology of immigrant integration only became relevant to governmental activities by the early 2000s. This in fact was more than one decade after local integration efforts in Vienna and other urban regions had started, and more than three decades after Austria had turned into an immigration country. Today, integration is mainly related to third-country nationals (rather than EU-citizens, who represent the largest group among the total migrant population). On the one hand, this concerns some citizens from former Yugoslavia and Turkey, whereas on the other hand it relates to immigrants who had arrived via the asylum system in recent years, notably people from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq (Permoser & Rosenberger, *Integration Policy in Austria*, 2012).

Thus, from a historical perspective, this third-country national immigrant population consists of former labour migrants and their descendants as well as past and present refugees. By the end of the 1960s, Austria had experienced a considerable inflow of foreign workers from southern Europe. In response to a delayed post-war economic boom and demographic changes (women dropping out of the labour market due to a baby boom), Austria recruited so-called guest workers from Spain (recruitment agreement 1962), Turkey (1964), and former Yugoslavia (1966). Widely-held political assumptions that this group of immigrants would remain mere guests however proved wrong. As the economy started to stagnate by the mid-1970s and temporary residence papers were no longer extended, many foreign workers were reluctant to leave and instead applied for family reunification. After a period of relatively low influx, the early 1990s saw a resurgence of immigration. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the beginning of the Balkan Wars, tens of thousands of asylum seekers arrived in Austria between 1990 and 1992 (Bauböck & Perchinig, 2006).

The developments since the late 1980s coincided with a critical shift in the Austrian political and party system. The left-wing Green Party and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) increasingly turned into political competitors. Standing outside of traditional patterns of consociational democracy established by Social Democrats (SPÖ) and Conservatives (ÖVP), the FPÖ sought to develop issue ownership of migration (Gruber, 2014). Through a racialized

discourse often played out in the context of religion, the FPÖ shifted the focus of the public debate to the cultural dimension of integration, namely norms and values. In the following decades, broad public support on this topic particularly led the ÖVP to challenge the Freedom Party's issue ownership, by institutionalizing integration policy within government departments held by the ÖVP (Meyer & Rosenberger, 2015).

Apart from intra-EU mobility, the asylum system has since remained a major pathway of immigration, with applicants coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Russia. In 2015, during the so-called refugee crisis, Austria received a large number of newly arriving people, mainly from the Middle-East and Afghanistan. About 88,000 persons applied for asylum in that year alone. The admission and integration of refugees, but also of other groups of migrants, has remained a highly politicized topic in Austria until today (Josipovic & Reeger, 2018).

Against this background, the paradigm of individual performance has been further complemented by integration debates in the context of religion. Islam in particular has turned into a major terrain for political conflicts over integration.

## **2.2. Legal and political framework of immigrant integration**

Today, the integration of third-country nationals is a strongly institutionalized political subject. The beginning of federal-level activities explicitly addressing immigrant integration dates back to the so-called Integration Agreement of 2002, which was part of a reform of the Settlement and Residence Act. New immigrants from third countries were hence obliged to take part in integration courses<sup>5</sup>. This marked the formal start of a predominantly cultural understanding of integration. Despite the fact that integration has been acknowledged as a cross-sectional policy field and indeed informed debates and structural reforms of education policy or labour market policy, the primary concern of institutionalized federal-level integration policies remained civic integration. Civic integration addresses a strategy whereby immigrants are required to prove their language competence and their knowledge of certain rules and values considered important in Austrian society in order to be considered socially well-adapted and in some instances to legally acquire certain rights. Attending obligatory integration courses and passing tests has been gradually linked to citizenship or the provision of certain welfare services (Permoser, 2012).

In 2007 the Federal Ministry of the Interior set up an integration platform, in which experts from ministries, science, and practice began to develop new integration policy concepts. Three years later, the federal government adopted a National Action Plan for Integration (NAP.I) that was drafted by representatives of the Federal Ministries and the federal provinces, the Association of Municipalities and Cities, the social partners and civil society organisations. The plan set out guidelines for an integration policy by means of a detailed catalogue of general challenges and objectives. Parts of this package encompassing a total of 60 measures, together

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<sup>5</sup> Integration courses are school-like programmes that teach German and typically entail diverse thematic modules providing practical knowledge about life in Austria. They also encompass lessons on norms and values in Austria. In this report, we use the term "integration course" in this general sense, although it might imply specific services depending on the concrete provider (for example, the national provider Austrian Integration Funds [ÖIF] includes language classes together with so-called value and orientation classes).



with a monitoring system, were implemented with the help of a newly-established Council of Experts.

In 2011, integration was institutionally entrenched with the creation of a Secretariat for Integration that was first located within the Ministry of the Interior and moved to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2015 with an administrative section exclusively commissioned with immigrant integration. In 2011 and 2012, several measures were implemented in relation to the education of children. This implied the further expansion of compulsory kindergarten attendance and the increased transformation of kindergartens into preschool educational institutions. Furthermore, the government appointed prominent “integration ambassadors” acting as role models.

In 2013, the State Secretary for Integration presented a “values brochure” entitled “Living together in Austria”. The brochure was supposed to serve as learning material for subjects that are included in the citizenship test. It is based on the six basic principles of the Federal Constitution: freedom, democracy, rule of law, republic, federalism, and separation of powers.

In early 2015, Austria passed a new Islam law (the previous law dated back to 1912). The core provision explicitly stipulates the primacy of Austrian law over Islamic religious rules. Accordingly, in their obligation to comply with general state norms, religious communities or other religious subdivisions and their members may not refer to contradicting rules or teachings within the community.

In response to the arrival of a high number of asylum seekers in 2015, the federal government introduced another series of integration policies. Together with a Council of Experts, the BMEIA presented a 50-point plan for the integration of recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The plan includes measures in all areas of life, involving other tiers of government, the social partners, as well as civil society in the implementation strategy. This action plan entailed a mainstreaming approach, acknowledging that the integration of refugees requires measures in the realms of education, labour market participation, and housing. Even though not all commitments have been translated into actions, financial resources for integration courses were vastly increased with an additional 25 million euro in 2016<sup>6</sup>. The Public Employment Service (AMS) introduced “competence checks”, individually evaluating the skills of refugees upon or even before accession to the labour market.

In 2017, the Integration Act (IntG) and the Integration Year Act (IJG) were adopted. The latter addresses beneficiaries for asylum and subsidiary protection as well as asylum seekers for whom the granting of international protection is “likely”. It details obligatory integration courses as a way to promote the labour market integration of these groups. The Integration Act contains a preamble providing an official definition of the term integration and detailing measures for both beneficiaries of protection and third-country nationals who are settled in Austria as defined under the Settlement and Residence Act (NAG). It stipulates the promotion of language skills, as well as value and orientation courses<sup>7</sup>, yet the law also entails a duty to cooperate, which is referred to as a “declaration of integration” or an “agreement to integration”. As a general rule, target groups are thereby required to pass German language exams and display knowledge of the legal and social order in Austria within the first two years upon acquisition of a title. The law provides for the possibility of sanctions upon the violation of these rules. A

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5190265/Alle-Macht-dem-Integrationsfonds>.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that these form part of the standard ÖIF integration course programme.

violation of the duties might accordingly lead to sanctions carried out by the respective provincial authorities responsible for social aid services.

In conjunction with the Integration Act, Austria introduced the Anti-Face-Covering Act (AG-esVG). The law was mainly discussed in relation to Muslim women wearing Burqas. Establishing a nexus with security policies, it generally prohibits the wearing of clothes or any other objects possibly concealing facial features in all public places. In this regard, the law also mirrors how religion, in particular Islam, has turned into a major terrain for political conflicts over integration (Mattes, 2020).

While the 2017 federal integration package sought to ensure compliance with integration obligations, single provinces began to link integration efforts to provincially governed social aid, providing sanctions upon failure to comply. Although attempts by the provinces of Lower Austria and Upper Austria to make cuts in this area were overturned by the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Justice, the federal government adopted their policy templates for a national reform in 2018. As a means of ensuring labour market integration, the national provision required beneficiaries of protection to reach a German level of B1 or English level of C1. Those without a good command of these two languages would receive 300 EUR less of the standard maximum of 863 EUR per month. In late 2019, the Constitutional Court also repealed this national law, arguing that German and English skills are not an exigent criterion for employment and that the policy maker disregards “the fact that people may not be able to achieve such a high level of language proficiency for a variety of reasons (learning and reading difficulties, illnesses, illiteracy, etc.), but may still be employable on the labour market”<sup>8</sup>.

### **2.3. Governance of integration policies: policy-making and implementation level<sup>9</sup>**

At the highest institutional level, matters of asylum, immigration, and integration are subject to the portfolios of three major ministries (see Figure 2)<sup>10</sup>:

- The Federal Ministry of the Interior (BM.I): It covers matters related to federal borders, immigration and emigration, return, citizenship, and asylum. The BFA works as a subordinated agency that carries out first-instance procedures on asylum applications and issues residence titles as well as return decisions (EMN, 2015: 85).
- The Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (BMEIA): It is responsible for visa issuance, which is linked to the diplomatic authorities abroad, as well as (development) cooperation with third states and the UNHCR. It largely finances the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) as an organization that manages integration projects and regularly produces evaluation papers (EMN, 2015: 85).

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.diepresse.com/5739941/vfgh-hebt-kernpunkte-der-turkis-blauen-sozialhilfe-neu-auf>.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 2.3. was adopted from the WP4 Country Report “Refugee Reception in Austria” (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b) and updated where necessary.

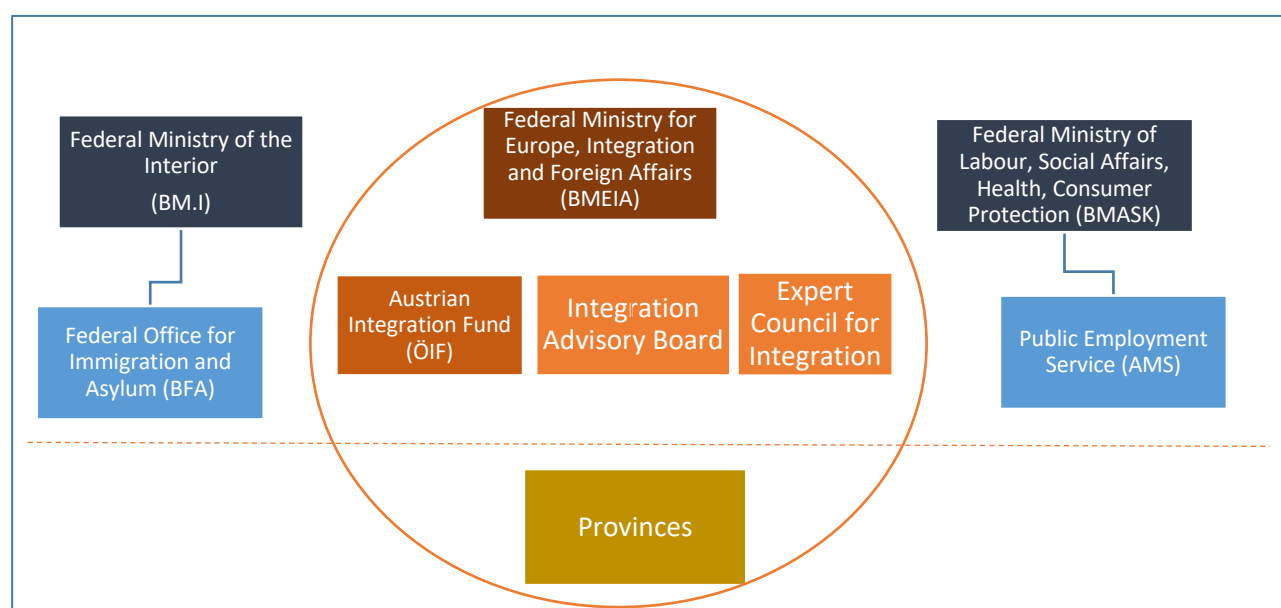
<sup>10</sup> Please note that the ministerial structure has changed following the formation of a new federal government in early 2020. Integration matters are no longer part of the Federal Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs but were transferred to an own Ministry of Integration.

- The Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection (BMASK): It determines criteria and quotas for work permits. The AMS as a subordinated administrative body for labour market matters executes the permissions, performs consultative work and provides qualification courses (EMN, 2015: 85).

As mentioned, at the federal level, the issue of integration was institutionally assigned to a newly created State Secretariat, located in the Ministry of the Interior and led by Sebastian Kurz in 2011. An upgrading of institutional integration policy took place in 2013, when the field of integration moved to the “Ministry for Europe, Integration and External Affairs” (BMEIA). A dedicated section (VIII) with three specialist departments has since taken on comprehensive coordination tasks. The federal government also established an Integration Advisory Board, which serves as a networking and exchange body of the Austrian federal policy landscape in the field of integration. All ministries and federal provinces, the Association of Towns and Municipalities, the social partners and the five largest NGOs are represented there.

The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) is the central service provider of the federal government. Until 2020, the ÖIF was institutionally linked to the BMEIA and is now affiliated to the Ministry of Integration. It takes over the nationwide rollout and implementation of concrete integration measures, including consulting services, general and job-specific German courses, or value and orientation courses.

**Figure 2: Institutional structures for integration policy**



Source: author's illustration.

The development of the Austrian integration politics described above took place in the context of varying constellations of coalition governments (2000-2002 ÖVP/FPÖ, 2002-2006 ÖVP/BZÖ, 2006-2017 SPÖ/ÖVP, 2017-2019 ÖVP/FPÖ). At the time of data collection (second half of 2018 and early 2019), Austria's federal government consisted of a coalition between the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). This political constellation has been rather the exception in Austria's history of consociational democratic patterns and is partly a result of the refugee influx of 2015. Polls taken on the day of the fol-

lowing national elections in 2017 showed that “asylum and integration” were the most discussed topics for voters of the three biggest parties (ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ) with 58% of respondents stating that they had talked about it during the electoral race (SORA/ISA, 2017). This was followed by the topics of “social aid” with 49% and “security” with 40%, which in return also displayed a strong discursive nexus with immigration. The winning coalition between the ÖVP and FPÖ fell apart due to a political scandal in 2019 and has recently been succeeded by a coalition between the ÖVP and the Green Party.

### **The City and province of Vienna**

In the Viennese city government, the current Executive City Councillor for Education, Integration, Youth and Personnel is Jürgen Czernohorsky. The administrative unit responsible for integration is the Municipal Department 17, Integration and Diversity (MA 17). Its main task is the coordination of the implementation and future development of Vienna’s integration and diversity policy. This concerns data gathering in relation to migration and immigrants, the provision of language acquisition measures and educational measures, as well the identification of cultural and practical barriers to services.

The MA 17 cooperates with a large number of internal and external partners, supporting state departments and organizations that deal with immigrant integration. The City of Vienna also owns the non-profit organization Interface Wien GmbH. Interface projects aim at education, information, and counselling of foreign citizens residing in Vienna. They are funded by the European Social Fund, the Federal Ministry of Education, the Federal Province of Vienna, the Vienna Social Fund with support from the Adult Education Initiative, the Vienna Public Employment Service, and the Vienna Employment Promotion Fund.

Regarding the governance of migrant integration, Vienna looks back on a long history of measures (cf. Kohlbacher & Reeger, forthcoming), in contrast to the national level, which only started to address this issue less than a decade ago. Viennese measures date back to 1971 with the establishment of the “Migrant Fund” (*Zuwandererfonds*), followed by the “Fund for Integration” (*Integrationsfonds*) founded in 1992. 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 move the integration agenda into the core city administration by establishing the MA 17 (Kohlbacher & Reeger, forthcoming). Promoting slogans such as “Vienna is Diversity” proves the paradigm shift away from the notion of migrant integration to a more mainstreamed approach, targeting the whole population and stressing the importance of social cohesion. The Viennese approach appears to be more inclusive, participatory, and socially oriented than the federal approach (Kohlbacher & Reeger, forthcoming).

### **The province of Upper Austria**

In Upper Austria, which has a system of proportional representation of all parties in its government, a member of the Green Party, Rudolf Anschober, has been responsible for the integration agenda between 2015 and early 2020. Under his leadership, Upper Austria has been pursuing an integration model that starts early during asylum seekers’ reception phase and not

upon acquisition of a protection title. This encompasses the provision of orientation, encounters with local communities, as well as German courses. Acknowledging long waiting periods for asylum decisions, the model also seeks to prepare persons for future employment opportunities. Furthermore it is oriented towards distributing refugees and embedding them in neighbourhood structures in order to avoid accumulation in urban regions. Finally, it seeks to involve volunteers, NGOs, and religious communities. In this regard, 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. Likewise, the province of 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 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. (Integrationsressort-Oberösterreich, 2018).

### 3. Labour Market

#### 3.1. Legal framework<sup>11</sup>

Employment is both a criterion for certain forms of immigration and a right linked to certain legal statuses. Depending on the precise legal status of a third-country national in Austria, he or she might be largely banned from the labour market (asylum seekers), granted access after a waiting period or labour market tests or have unlimited access to the labour market.

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 generally do have 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 limited 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 to 5 EUR per hour). Furthermore, decrees issued in 2012 and 2013 allowed asylum seekers under the age of 26 to obtain apprenticeship permits in economic sectors displaying a shortage of employees. Under the ÖVP-FPÖ-led government,<sup>12</sup> 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. In May 2020, the High Administrative Court (VwGH) ruled that there must be effective access to the labour market for other asylum seekers who have not yet received a decision on their asylum application. This creates a certain ambiguity. Arguably, if the first-instance decision is negative, there shall be no access to a job, according to the Court. Although EU rules state that a permit cannot be withdrawn once it has been granted, the Court did not submit the case to the European Court of Justice for a preliminary ruling, arguing that the wording of the Directive was sufficiently clear.<sup>13</sup>

The highest court did not follow this line of argument. Contrary to its request, it did not submit the case to the European Court of Justice for a preliminary ruling either, arguing that the wording of the Directive was sufficiently clear.

Legal scholars (e.g. Peyrl, 2015) have criticized Austrian provisions which 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 get 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).

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 3.1. was adopted from the WP1 Country Report "Legal and Policy Framework in Austria" (Josipovic & Reeger, 2018) and the WP4 Country Report "Refugee Reception in Austria" (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b) and updated where necessary.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000117496660/hoechstgericht-kippt-jobzugang-fuer-asylwerber>.

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).

By contrast, once asylum seekers are granted a formal refugee status, they have full access to the labour market and enjoy equal labour rights as do Austrian citizens. From that point on, the Public Employment Service (AMS) has to support them in their job search and in the development of skills.

In 2017, the Integration Act (IntG) and the Integration Year Act (IJG) were adopted. Between 2017 and 2019, a support programme obliged persons who were granted asylum or subsidiary protection after December 2014 and who were above the age of 15 to participate in integration courses. The IntG stipulates a duty towards integration that includes the compulsory attendance of integration courses and "value and orientation" courses upon the acquisition of a title. German classes are provided by the BMEIA up to a level of A1 and implemented by the ÖIF, while level A2 classes are offered by the BMASK and implemented by the Public Employment Service. Value and orientation courses are also provided by the BMEIA and the ÖIF, targeting the communication of constitutional and democratic principles, rules of peaceful public life, and values such as self-determination and equality (§ 2, IntG; compare Josipovic & Reeger, 2018).

The IJG defines the provisions for the first year of beneficiaries of international protection and subsidiary protection more narrowly, but it also considers asylum applicants. The purpose is to assess relevant professional skills rapidly and facilitate inclusion into the labour market for those who cannot find a job. The courses are structured as modules and progress has to be recorded in an integration booklet. Asylum applicants may only participate if they belong to a group '[...] where the granting of international protection is very likely under consideration of existing data [...]' (translated from German: § 1, IJG); compare Josipovic & Reeger, 2018).

The "Act on Recognition and Evaluation" which was implemented in July 2016 intends to speed up recognition of formal education and professional qualifications achieved abroad. It targets all third-country nationals but was implemented as a direct response to the arrival of asylum seekers around 2015. They can apply for the recognition of qualifications even if they cannot provide documents as proof.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.2. Employment in the formal and informal labour market**

Labour market participation is the key element for immigrant integration. Statistics from 2018 show that the employment rate (the share of those active in the labour market including employed and unemployed persons compared to the whole population in the age group 15-64 years) among persons with no migrant background was 75%. In comparison, figures for people from the former Yugoslavia indicate 70%, among persons from Turkey it was 60%, and among

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<sup>14</sup> Source: Asylum Information Database.

persons from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq combined it was 36%.<sup>15</sup> Considering economic sectors, third-country nationals are largely employed in manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade as well support services such as cleaning.<sup>16</sup>

In general, unemployment rates dropped between 2017 and 2018 for all citizenship groups under consideration. The lowest rates in 2018 pertain to Austrians, citizens of the “old” EU countries and of the accession states of 2004, which comprise mostly Eastern European (neighbouring) countries. By far the highest unemployment rates have been reported for citizens of Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, although the respective rate has also dropped in 2018 compared to 2017 (see Table 1). Nevertheless, almost 50 per cent of all Afghans, Syrians, and Iraqis that were part of the potential labour force were unemployed in 2017.

**Table 2: Unemployment rate by citizenship in Austria, 2017 and 2018**

	2017	2018
Total	8,5	7,7
Austria	7,5	6,7
Foreign	12,5	11,3
EU before 2004 and EFTA	7,0	6,3
EU countries as of 2004	7,2	6,4
EU countries as of 2007	14,6	12,6
Former Yugoslavia (without EU)	13,6	12,2
Turkey	18,6	16,8
Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq	48,3	40,7
Other countries	19,0	17,4

Source: Statistics from the Public Employment Service (AMS).

It is well known that labour market integration takes time, even more so if there are pronounced barriers and obstacles to integration. In this vein, a recent study by the *wiiw* (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies; Jestl & Leitner, 2019), based on a large register-based dataset from Statistics Austria, provides a more detailed insight. The *wiiw* studied four groups of migrants who came to Austria between 2009 and 2018: European third-country migrants, European third-country refugees, non-European migrants and non-European refugees. Depending on the time since arrival, the authors estimated the likelihood of a successful access to the labour market in comparison to Austrian-born persons. The results show that after a problematic start in the first three years, there is a general trend of refugees’ catching up with labour migrants and also with the Austrian-born group. After seven years, the differences between the four groups and the Austrian group more or less disappear. Jestl and Leitner (2019) furthermore found that there are specific groups among refugees who have greater difficulties accessing the labour market than other subgroups: women, the elderly, and highly educated persons.

<sup>15</sup> Source: [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsbericht\\_2019/Migration-Integration-2019.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsbericht_2019/Migration-Integration-2019.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Source: [https://www.emn.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/emn-national-report-2018\\_labour-market-integration-of-third-country-nationals.pdf](https://www.emn.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/emn-national-report-2018_labour-market-integration-of-third-country-nationals.pdf).



### 3.3. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

Expert interviews revealed a panoply of problem areas regarding the access to employment and the actual situation on the labour market for asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection alike. To start with asylum seekers, the interviewed experts agreed that Austria's de facto ban of asylum seekers from labour market participation is legally questionable and problematic both in political and social terms (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). According to the Reception Conditions Directive 2013/33/EU, asylum seekers must receive effective access to the labour market no later than nine months after they have filed an asylum application. Some experts point out that the current legal framework will inevitably have to be reformed at some point. Loopholes include black market activities or precarious situations in bogus self-employment, for example app-based food delivery services, with asylum seekers rarely being aware of income caps and self-insurance provisions.

Until mid-2018, young asylum seekers were given the chance to take up an apprenticeship. The abolishment of this opportunity by the ÖVP-FPÖ-led federal government was heavily criticised during the expert interviews. Part of the government's argument for this decision was the fear of attracting further immigrants. NGO-workers from both Vienna and Upper Austria expressed frustration about the federal government's restrictive stance especially regarding young male asylum seekers. Such an approach would stand in opposition to their daily integration efforts on the local level.

Regarding beneficiaries of international protection, the interviewed experts elaborated on the various barriers for accessing the labour market. These can be grouped into individual factors on the one hand and systemic factors pertaining to the Austrian labour market on the other. The former include:

- A lack of personal networks due to the short term of residence in Austria
- a poor language proficiency
- a lack of system knowledge concerning the necessary qualifications for different professions.

Factors pertaining to the Austrian system include:

- A complicated approach to the recognition of qualifications
- nostrification of university and other diplomas
- the long duration of asylum procedures that keeps asylum seekers from taking up employment.

A composite issue is the mismatch between refugees' preferences for residence in urban localities and the specific labour market structures, which require skills that are different from those of industrialized peripheries.

Though statistics prove that, in the course of time, labour market participation rates improve considerably (Jestl & Leitner, 2019), the question of the types of jobs people are in fact performing, remains. Individual and systemic factors alike lead to a pronounced rate of dequalification, at least in the first phase that beneficiaries of international protection have to face on the labour market. An expert working at an NGO elaborates:

“That is known anyway, I mean the statistics and studies emphasize again and again that immigrant people are on average employed below their qualifications. And it will not change in this group either, because qualifications are not recognised here, because it is not possible to prove them, or because there perhaps is a three-year period in-between and knowledge has been lost, because people were on the road and then had to learn a bit of German, and then have to enter the labour market. And it is very difficult to take this first step into the labour market... The greatest challenge always seems to be to have done something somewhere, to have shown something: I can work, anything, anywhere, and then I can go on” (E01).

Some experts also discussed the issue of beneficiaries of international protection moving to urban areas (mostly Vienna) hoping for better chances on the labour or housing market. To some extent this is a misconception, because chances on the labour market are rather adverse in Vienna and much better in the Western federal provinces (in the tourism sector) or in Upper Austria, where there is a lack of skilled workers. An interview partner active in public administration in Vienna summarizes this dilemma:

“And like everywhere else in the world, they believe that it is easier to find an apartment and a job in the big city; a common misconception. Worldwide, and in Austria it is no different. Everyone comes to Vienna, perhaps because there are already relatives who have gained a foothold here, or because there is a community where they hope to make contact with fellow countrymen. Maybe it’s just the dream of great luck in the big city, that you can find a job here that you can’t find in the countryside. Big mistake” (E08).

In the same vein, NGO workers in a rural area of Upper Austria identify employers experiencing difficulties finding enough personnel, which improves the chances of beneficiaries of international protection to get a job:

“And on the subject of the labour market: In the countryside we have more of a problem with full employment, in other words we are talking about 3 to 4% unemployment. Companies have the problem of not getting people. They poach people from each other with headhunters. We suffer from a shortage of skilled workers, and I believe that the situation is quite different in Vienna and Linz” (E04).

As these two statements illustrate, preference of residence often is in conflict with labour market opportunities.

### **3.4. Experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection**

The de facto ban from the labour market has had considerably negative effects on asylum seekers and most notably on those who have been waiting for a decision on their asylum application for a longer period of time. Summarizing the respective results from the analysis of reception conditions in Austria (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b), asylum seekers see employment as a crucial factor for their lives and for successfully advancing in Austria.<sup>17</sup> Not being allowed to take up a job reinforces a sense of isolation and social degradation, and may result in psychological problems. A way of overcoming these conditions is engagement in illegal or highly

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<sup>17</sup> See this report for a detailed analysis of early participation in the labour market during reception.

precarious activities. Participating in accessible economic activities such as seasonal work in the catering and hotel industry, non-profit employment with municipalities, or apprenticeships in sectors displaying labour shortages represents a pathway that is perceived as problematic due to competition with other migrants who are better off from a legal perspective (e.g. recognized refugees, EU citizens).

A few interview partners however reported positive experiences relating to non-profit engagement during the reception period. For them, participating in the working world provided a daily structure and was also seen as a chance to learn German, to gain new skills, and to show willingness to integrate and contribute to society (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). However, for some respondents these hopes were destroyed once they realized that actively engaging did not result in a faster and assuredly successful asylum procedure.

As soon as asylum applicants receive protection status, they are entitled to enter the Austrian labour market without any legal restrictions. Among our respondents, there were 17 beneficiaries of international protection, ten women and seven men. Roughly half of these 17 interviewees held a job at the time the interview. For those who didn't, it was due to various reasons, such as going to university, taking care of children in the case of women, or being prevented by ill health to take up employment.

The reports we have heard from our interview partners demonstrate the numerous barriers they have to face, including language problems and discrimination. They recounted submitting repeated and unsuccessful applications and not being able to find a job, least of all a job that matched their qualifications. A 27-year-old recognized male refugee from Syria living in Vienna, who had studied law in his country of origin and continues studying in Austria, reports on his attempts to find a job:

“I sent out over 300 applications. They were all negative... Once I was very close, I applied to Bank Austria and they invited me three times for personal interviews. And then the third time I thought ‘Well, I’ll get the job, this is the third time, what the hell, they’ll give me the job’. And after the third time they told me that my knowledge of German was not sufficient. That surprised me, that disappointed me. That was a year ago, I couldn’t speak as well as today, but I could speak relatively well and no matter if I can speak clever German or not: After the third time! I mean, they have already seen me twice and talked to me, each time we talked for almost an hour and they have seen how I behave in German. And yes exactly, then it was a bit strange for me” (R29).

Among our interview partners, there are pronounced differences in the level of education between different countries of origin. Whereas Syrians generally display a higher level of education, refugees from Afghanistan often only have a basic education. Although it is more or less impossible to apply higher qualifications immediately on the Austrian labour market, they might ultimately be put to use. For persons with very basic or no formal education, the low wage sector is the only sector where jobs are available. They also seem to have more difficulties learning a new language, as a middle-aged woman from Afghanistan with a basic education explained in her interview:

“Without an education it’s hard to find a job. If you have an education, it’s much easier... Since we just came from Afghanistan and German is difficult because it is not our mother tongue. It is a bit difficult to learn a completely new language until you learn it and get used to the society” (R24).

Personal contacts and good relations with neighbours and local stakeholders seem to have a positive effect on the job search. A male beneficiary of international protection from Syria, living in a rural area in Upper Austria (R20), found his current job as a mailman via the competence check at the bfi (a large Austrian-wide institution offering job-related adult education) in Upper Austria. His supervisor made him aware of the position and helped him to get the job, which he is very content with. Another employed beneficiary of international protection from Syria residing in rural Upper Austria talked about the help and moral support he got from the local Austrian community while he was looking for a job:

"They always spoke well to me. When I couldn't find a job they would say 'you'll find a good job later, you need a little language' and when I heard that it gave me strength to try again. Looking, looking, looking... and when I said 'I can't find a job' and I talked to good people and they gave me a lot and I started again. They never said 'it doesn't work' they always said 'it works, it works'. That was a bit difficult time, that time anyway, but it goes away and there is a nice time coming" (R19).

Meanwhile, he found work as a carpenter and also seems to be very happy about that. Moreover, these examples prove that chances are better to find a job outside larger urban areas such as Vienna.

Among some women, wearing a headscarf is seen as detrimental to successful access to the labour market, as some employers seem to be reluctant to employ women wearing what is interpreted as a religious symbol. A young woman from Afghanistan, who came to Austria already in 2012 with her parents and who is still living with them, pursues the strategy of going to school and at the same time looking for an apprenticeship. Currently she is working for a railway enterprise as a promoter, a job she found via the Public Employment Service (AMS) and with which she is rather dissatisfied.

"I've been looking for an apprenticeship for two years, but I can't find one. I think it's because of my headscarf, because I really always send applications, but I always get rejections. ALWAYS. For apprenticeships I always get a refusal, but I think it's because of my headscarf" (R12).

Not wearing headscarf is no option for her. As she earns a little money and still has the support of her parents, she is quite positive about the future and plans to go to university one day. Discrimination experiences in accessing the labour market due to a different religious background was also discussed by a respondent from Syria:

"And work is really hard to find, not only because of the language, they say that but I think sometimes they don't want to have a Muslim or an Arab, I think that. For example I have a friend from Ukraine and he got an education and I didn't" (R09).

He argues that a lack of language proficiency is only used as an alleged excuse and that cultural-religious differences are the true reason for having less chances on the labour market. Having worked as a music teacher in Syria, he is aware that it might take a very long time until he can return to his job. Meanwhile, he would literally take up any job:

"Like I said, I haven't found a job here yet or what I want. I want any job, for me every job is okay, I just want to work, I am a teacher but here it is impossible that I work as a teacher at the moment, maybe in 15 or 18 years" (R09).

As a matter of fact, language is a great barrier for successful labour market integration, but in the course of time, proficiency improves, which might result in better chances on the labour market. Refugees have difficulties proving their qualifications brought along or having them recognised in Austria. Sometimes, the necessary documents have been lost. In the receiving context, the Austrian system proves to be quite inflexible when it comes to recognizing qualifications obtained abroad. Nostrification of academic qualifications is a long and complicated procedure. A 36-year-old man from Syria describes his attempts at procuring proof of the diploma from his home university in the following way:

“Yes, I have a diploma, but the big problem is: the university in my city and (the question) ‘What subject did you study in your home country?’ I have my diplomas, but what subject did I study, I have yet to get from my university. But my university is completely broken, it is completely destroyed and I can’t get these papers. If I don’t get these papers, then my diploma can’t be recognized. That is very difficult. I called a man in Damascus and he said ‘If you need this paper, you have to pay 300 €’. I can’t do that and I don’t know if this paper is original or not” (R07).

To conclude, our empirical data suggests that employment is one of the most important aspects of establishing a new life for individuals who have immigrated via the asylum system. Policy makers created an exclusionary legal environment for asylum seekers, the integration of whom has not been considered desirable by the federal government. The negative social implications for this group have been widely discussed in the WP4 Country Report on reception conditions (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020). It has to be noted however that a recent decision of the Administrative High Court may create a future liberalisation of labour market access in line with EU law. For beneficiaries of asylum and holders of subsidiary protection on the other hand, the federal government created temporary measures for labour market integration. In this regard, the Public Employment Service (AMS) introduced “competence checks”, individually evaluating the skills of refugees upon or even before accession to the labour market. Nonetheless, multiple individual and structural barriers remain, which were not only described by experts in the field but also was echoed by the policy recipients. These include a lack of personal networks due to the short term of residence in Austria, poor language proficiency, a lack of system knowledge, furthermore discrimination, long bureaucratic procedures for the recognition of qualifications, and regional differences in labour market opportunities.

## 4. Adult Education: Language Acquisition and Civic Integration Programmes

Language learning is a key aspect of successful structural and social integration. Measures offered to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are manifold, and again we must discern between these two groups. During reception, language learning opportunities primarily exist on the provincial and municipal levels. These are somewhat under-financed and rather fluctuating, with many offers at times, and dry spells at other times (see Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). Civil society actors have played an important role in providing private aid for asylum seekers in the early phase of arrival. Since then, this kind of support has diminished, not least due to declining demand. Beside the federal integration course provider, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), there is a rather fragmented landscape of other small providers and funding organizations, not only for beneficiaries of international protection, but also for asylum seekers.

### 4.1. Legal framework

The Austrian system provides integration courses for adults. According to the federal government's National Action Plan of 2010, successful integration is achieved if the individual has gained sufficient German language skills for employment and for contact with public institutions, if economic self-sustainability is attained, and if there is comprehension of Austrian and European law and values. The Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) is a central organization responsible for the implementation of civic integration programmes. It offers funding for course providers who adopt its curricula, consisting of lessons on values and orientation knowledge in addition to German classes. The funded projects include final exams that verify whether the desired language level has been reached. German courses and final exams are free of charge for participants. However, the levels A2 and B1 are only subsidized for persons who do not receive any social aid. These integration measures primarily target recognized refugees.

With the introduction of the Integration Act in June 2017, a number of integration obligations were introduced for asylum seekers and people granted international protection. In addition to signing an integration declaration, attendance and participation in language courses as well as value and orientation courses became mandatory. The concept of values and orientation courses was developed at the suggestion of the Expert Council on Integration within the framework of the 50-Point Plan for Integration (2015). The main topics of the courses concern the basic values of the Austrian constitution, such as equal rights for men and women, human rights, the separation of religion and state, democracy, freedom of expression, and the rule of law.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Source: [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsbericht\\_2019/Integrationsbericht\\_2019.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Integration/Integrationsbericht_2019/Integrationsbericht_2019.pdf).

## 4.2. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

For the experts interviewed in our project, the fact that the national level only provides integration courses allowing access to language acquisition for beneficiaries of international protection constitutes a central problem. Asylum seekers on the other hand depend on provincial support structures. In this context, the manager of a reception facility argues:

“So with the language courses, it’s always up and down. My impression is that there are always longer periods where there is too little on offer, then there is a short period where there are a lot of courses and then there is a dry spell again where there is almost nothing. In these times we often have offers financed by donations, because it is often unbearable to watch people who are not allowed to learn German because they cannot afford it” (E01).

Arguably, there are annual fluctuations of resources provided for integration courses along different tiers of government. Clearly, this has a negative impact on those who have to wait for several months or years for the decision on their asylum application:

“There is a lack of contacts. There are of course still many volunteers and civil society activities where people try to keep in touch, involve, 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 it out. We have a German café, it’s more about conversation, that’s what the neighbourhood centres do, and they are very well attended, because there you have the opportunity to try out German, but also to get in contact with native speakers. That is the wish of many. People are also very curious” (E06).

While our experts support both the compulsory provision of language classes and orientation classes for beneficiaries of protection, they are highly sceptical about the content and format of teaching values within federally supported ÖIF programmes. One of our experts for example points out how discussions of social and cultural values are not only too limited in scope but also tend to be moralizing by assuming liberal ideals as fully completed and lived realities of Austrians:

“I find that very difficult because I do understand that you need a certain orientation in the system. If I were to emigrate to Saudi Arabia, I would also be quite happy to have a rough idea of how to do it: What is that, where do I go when something is wrong, how does it work here, when I register a child at school or when I need medical care? Ok, this is practical knowledge, it will probably also help me when I am told ‘there are janitors’ or ‘there are police, they have these powers’ or I don’t know. But the thing that is so difficult for me about this whole thing is that it is now in 8-hour programmes and that such strictly clichéd images are conveyed, which do not correspond to reality. And if we stick to the example of men and women, then it says in the script literally ‘Men and women are completely equal in Austria’. And yes, in a legal sense that is true, I know. But then you have to look at it on a practical level and then it’s not true” (E01).

Another expert argued that policy makers at the federal level need to acknowledge the slow and strenuous character of integration, rather than just dropping a load of information on newcomers:

“I believe that integration is very often seen in this way in the public or on the political side: Being able to speak perfect German within one year, being able to lead your own life within four months after recognition, finding a job, finding a flat and virtually not being noticeable anymore. And do an 8-hour value and orientation course, where they are then completely convinced, where democracy and equal treatment and equal rights and everything have been internalized. That’s the milkmaid’s reckoning, I think, that prevails. At federal level, that is also the wishful thinking. But that is not the reality” (E06).

Arguably, there are both organisational and substantial problems to integration courses. Access is limited, resources fluctuate and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, there can be considerable time gaps between sequences of different modules. Our experts further argue that, rather than acknowledging the slow learning nature of language acquisition and enabling people to learn what certain values are supposed to mean in practice, policy makers would conceive education as information provision.

### **4.3. Experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection**

During reception, integration courses constituted an important aspect of daily life for many asylum seekers (cf. Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). As most asylum seekers are not able to access the labour market, these courses provide some of them with a sense of normality and a structure to a life otherwise characterized by (endless) waiting for a decision on the asylum application. A young asylum seeker from Vienna elaborates how, during his early reception phase, he learned German on the internet, before coming to Vienna and attending a proper course:

“Yeah, everything was... And that’s where I spent my time learning on the internet. That was way better. I studied to A2, I think. And then I came to Vienna and there I took an exam at an academy. At Schottenring. There I passed the exam and they told me: ‘Now you can also pass A2 here’. And then I said: ‘Ok, that’s no problem.’ I did that in three months. And when I started with B1, I also started the bridging course for compulsory school at the same time. That was two shifts. In my morning this and in the afternoon that. That was so difficult because I couldn’t speak German. And nevertheless it helped me a lot afterwards” (R03).

Some interview partners expressed a certain degree of confusion concerning the identification of course providers and the large variation regarding the level of knowledge among participants in the courses. A man from Syria who used to work as a teacher himself, elaborates on the didactical challenges that integration courses bring about:

“[...] And the teachers say ‘Please keep it down’ but they are all old men and there are others in the German course. I am a teacher, there are people coming from the street, they can’t speak English, they can’t speak German and I have to sit next to him now and he can’t do anything, nothing at all, zero and I am B1. Everything must 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 for the alphabet. That is why this test for the language is a lie. That is not right, anyone can do this test, nobody controls it well, it has to be controlled well. I think all people are equal, but I am



a teacher, not like the other man – that is the difference. And also with the age, I am 33 years old and in the class there is maybe a man of 55 years or 13 years. I can understand better than an old man and a young man can understand better than me, I think. I think the difference must not be more than 5 or 6 years. That is the problem with the German course” (R09).

In this vein, a young woman from Syria, who has taken up university courses in Vienna, complains about the obligation to attend integration courses:

“No, and I don’t want to and it annoys me that this is now a must, that it is a must to attend these integration courses and as long as I don’t have to attend this course and it is not urgent, then I don’t want to do it and I really try to stand against it, because I don’t understand what it is all about there. [...] I think anything that is mandatory doesn’t help at all and whenever these courses are a must, then people simply go because they have to go and not because they want to integrate and that doesn’t help at all, another possibility doesn’t occur to me now but I know exactly that it wouldn’t help at all. These integration courses, they are not the right solution” (R10).

Another recurring issue is long waiting periods between different language modules, as a woman from Syria elaborates:

“But the system for German courses, that is not good, that is 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 totally forget about it. I can’t do that, then you can’t do that. There are big problems with learning German or learning the language and looking for work” (R07).

Like many other of our interlocutors, she had to turn to online tutorials on Youtube and reading books on her own.

While integration courses are doubtlessly important for the asylum seekers in our sample, as they allow minimum level societal participation and provide individuals with a daily structure, it remains open whether they are really providing the necessary capabilities for fully communicating in the new language. Instead, some of our interviewees point to the instrumental dimension of these courses, which are designed to pass a test and tick bureaucratic boxes. A beneficiary of international protection from Syria living in Vienna relates:

“I did not do A1, I learned that myself, only A2, B1, B2. A2 was very good, at B1 we only learned so that we could pass the exam, not so that we could learn the language. So we only got slips of paper, we only had to fill in some gaps and that was it. We didn’t go there to learn, we only went there to pass the exam. B2 was good on the one hand, but on the other hand it wasn’t. The teacher was very good. She was a very social person, she liked to talk and me too, I like to talk a lot. And we spent the course with discussions, we hardly learned any grammar” (R29).

He later goes on:

“How can I say this, I did not learn the German language through classical learning. I simply understood that by listening to the people. So if you say a sentence now, then I would analyse the sentence in my head. I would find out the appropriate grammar form and I would look up immediately if I did not understand a word and if I wanted to say a

word I would look up immediately. And I read everything. This is sometimes a very stressful thing: When I go out on the street, I have to read everything, everything that is on the street, signs, advertisements, yes, I have to read everything, that helped, but that [the integration course]...” (R29).

In this vein, many interview partners underlined the fact that learning a language is primarily a matter of interacting with local people rather than attending a language class (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). Personal contacts with people in the neighbourhood are hard to achieve, most of all during reception for people who stay at organized accommodation centres. A young recognized refugee from Syria remembers his early days in Austria:

“But like, I learned German through a YouTube channel and also on the street. [...] And in the city I was standing on the street. Especially at the traffic lights, I watched the people. We stood at the traffic light; you were on the other side, for example. And then I always watched the people and I looked to see who looked likeable or nice. And then I went and I talked to the people. For example I asked for the 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. And that way I could... Yeah, it was... That helped a lot. Then it made sense that I learn the language. I’m using it and not sitting in a class and learning something and then I go out and I don’t use it. And I just stay with my fellow countryman and among my community. I have avoided that a lot. I have many Syrian friends, but back then I really avoided that I just stay among them, even though I didn’t know German back then and even though English was very bad. Maybe it was anyway an advantage that I couldn’t speak English, because I had to use German” (R01).

Overall, our results on language learning in the reception phase show that asylum seekers are very keen to learn German, but they are facing legal problems, a lack of financial support, and confusion about the organisation of courses during their attempts at advancing their skills.

## 5. School Education for Children and Teenagers

### 5.1. Legal framework

Generally, all children who are permanently resident in Austria do not only have the right to visit school but are obliged to do so by Federal Constitutional Law, irrespective of their (migration) background and the legal status or the citizenship of their parents. Compulsory schooling begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> after a child has turned six years old and lasts for nine years. Beside that, Austria introduced an obligation towards skills training or further education of young people until the age of 18 in the year 2017. Parents or legal guardians must ensure that young people who have completed compulsory schooling receive further training. They can either attend a secondary school, complete an apprenticeship, or do some other kind of training (e.g. an internship). However, asylum seekers are explicitly excluded from this obligation which would guarantee access to diverse educational and employment institutions.

In May 2018, an amendment to the *Schulorganisationsgesetz* (School Organisation Act) implemented the installation of German Support Classes for children who are not able to follow regular lessons effectively due to a lack of German language skills. As of the school year 2018/19, these children are classified as “exceptional pupils” and taught in own classes most of the time, except in subjects such as drawing, music, or sports, where they join regular classes according to their age. This measure applies to all children entering school and those who have just arrived in Austria and thus also to children who have fled to Austria with their parents.<sup>19</sup> At the end of each semester, the language progress is checked, and basically, pupils either have to stay on in German Support Classes if their progress was not sufficient or they go to regular classes as “regular pupils” if their German has improved sufficiently. The maximum length of stay in German Support Classes is two years.

In May 2019, an amendment to the *Schulunterrichtsgesetz* (School Education Act) was introduced. It stipulates that children are not allowed to cover their heads at school for ideological or religious reasons until they reach the age of ten.<sup>20</sup> The ÖVP-FPÖ coalition argued that this measure protects Muslim girls from being forced to wear headscarves and thus from being instrumentalised by Islamism. At the same time they underlined that this ban was not directed at the Jewish *kippah* and the *patka* of the Sikhs. In case of noncompliance, parents may be fined with an administrative penalty of 440 EUR.<sup>21</sup>

Islamic religious education has been offered in Austrian schools since the school year 1982/83.<sup>22</sup> The respective curricula are stipulated in the *Religionsunterrichtsgesetz* (Religious Instruction Act). Islamic religious instruction can be taken up by pupils of all school types and

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<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/984374-732-Deutschklassen-ab-Herbst.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Source: [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR\\_2019/PK0605/](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2019/PK0605/).

<sup>21</sup> Source: [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/AKT/SCHLTHEM/SCHLAG/J2019/099NR\\_Kopftuchverbot.shtml](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/AKT/SCHLTHEM/SCHLAG/J2019/099NR_Kopftuchverbot.shtml).

<sup>22</sup> Source: [https://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/content/AT/Fotos/Publikationen/FactSheet/Fact\\_Sheet\\_30\\_Migration\\_und\\_Schule.pdf](https://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/content/AT/Fotos/Publikationen/FactSheet/Fact_Sheet_30_Migration_und_Schule.pdf).

levels. The Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IGGÖ) is responsible for the provision, management, and direct supervision of religious instruction.

## 5.2. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

The recent implementation of separate German Support Classes for children without sufficient knowledge of the German language went hand in hand with a lot of confusion and discussion between the federal level on the one hand and school directors and other parties active in the concrete implementation on the other. At the beginning, there were about 11,000 pupils affected by this measure, they were to attend approximately 730 classes all across Austria with a clear focus in Vienna (about 300 classes).<sup>23</sup> Given the threshold of at least eight pupils per location to set up an extra class, there are another 3,400 so-called “integrative” German classes, where pupils receive language support in regular classes together with German-speaking children.

Though this measure had not yet been implemented at the time of the expert interviews, there were already discussions and clear stances regarding separate classes for migrant children. An expert from the Vienna city administration elaborated:

“In the school context, these new measures have made people who say that here we are really dividing natives and immigrants, very angry. These so-called compulsory German classes are something new. And this is exactly the understanding of integration that we do not share. Integration does not work through segregation. It is laborious. The Federal Government does not want to listen to experts” (E05).

Once more, this quotation indicates the existence of different concurrent views regarding approaches to immigrant integration between the federal level and the federal provincial level. While Vienna pursues a mainstreaming approach and has moved from “integration” to “diversity”, the federal level more or less seeks to go the other way.

One group that needs special attention is that of teenage asylum seekers, who are not of compulsory school age any more. While all children below the age of 15 have direct access to education, persons in the age group of 15-21 years have faced many difficulties, being too old for compulsory schools and sometimes too young to work. To address this situation, the City of Vienna opened its *Jugendcollege* (Youth College) to young asylum seekers, thus going beyond the groups of recognized refugees and third-country migrants. The programme aims at qualifying youth for entering into secondary schools or vocational training. The Youth College offers integration courses, the improvement of general education in mathematics, English, information and communication technology, and in other subjects. In July 2016, 1,000 places were offered and the budget amounted to six million euro (one half from EC-ESF, the other half from the Municipal Department 17, the Public Employment Service and the FSW). The programme is still in place. An expert based in Vienna who works in a large accommodation centre related her experiences regarding this measure as follows:

“Then the youth college, that was madness, because otherwise all those no longer in school would no longer have had the opportunity for any kind of activity. And that is

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<sup>23</sup> Source: <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/984374-732-Deutschklassen-ab-Herbst.html>.

especially important at this age. So that was really great and we managed to get almost everyone of this age group into the youth college” (E03).

Similarly, another expert who works in a reception facility relates:

“I mean in Vienna it’s a little easier, but I’m not saying it’s great either; for the newcomers to the school system the problem is that they are not covered by compulsory education. The duty to provide training does not cover asylum seekers. What this means is that if I come to the country at 13 and then, at 14 or 15, have been in a class as an extraordinary pupil for one or two years, then I am no longer of school age, then I have no chance at all of getting into any kind of training scheme or of remaining on the labour market, except in the assistance segment, and that is actually a tragedy. In Vienna, there are offers in basic education where you can complete compulsory schooling, there is the path to an apprenticeship, some people may take the Matura (school graduation exam) at some point with their apprenticeship and so on. But that is Vienna, there is also the Youth College in Vienna, but in the provinces, we see it every year in the networks, once a year there is the Asylum Forum, where the representatives from the provinces meet. There are offers in Vienna, but in the provinces there are considerably fewer offers. And what does that mean? It means that people can do some kind of work, but they are actually condemned from the outset to either do much more work in order to get where they want to go at some point, or simply to stay in the unskilled labour segment, which is not helpful” (E01).

Regarding the governance of religious education, a broad range of recognized religious communities have the right to teach religion at school. The respective teachers are paid by the state and the religious communities are responsible for the organisation of the lessons. Religious instruction is not obligatory, pupils may opt out. On the other hand, children without religious affiliation may take part in religion lessons. In rural areas, there may not be enough children to constitute a class for a specific religious community such as, e.g., Islam. In these cases, there is an inclination to move this function to the private sphere.

### **5.3. Experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection**

As we did not interview any children due to age limits and ethical considerations, we can only report on the assessment of interviewed parents of the school life of their children. Asked how his children are doing in school, a beneficiary of international protection from Syria who has three children, answers:

“Yes great, the children are not like adults, they can integrate very quickly and they can learn German very quickly and they connect very quickly with each other, understand German very well, especially my first daughter, she is 8 years old. The other one not so good, but she is only in the first grade, but ok” (R07).

Being a teacher himself with no prospects of finding a job at the time of the interview, it is very important to him that his children are doing well. He points out that this is a very hard time for him but as he and his family are safe now and everybody is healthy, he at least hopes for a bright future for his children.

Another rather positive assessment comes from a female beneficiary of subsidiary protection from Afghanistan. She resides in a rural area in Upper Austria with her three children and relates:

“My children go to school without worries. When we lived in Iran I was afraid all the time that they would kick my child out of school. Here I don’t have that fear. The schools here are reputable until graduation.... My oldest son went to school as soon as we came here. My little son went to kindergarten straight away. My little son goes to school now and my eldest son is now in the fourth grade of secondary school. It is his last year. So generally speaking, everything concerning the education of my children was great. They provided my son with exercise books, pens, etc. He even got to go on a ski week twice and he was paid for everything. This year they went to Vienna for one week. They really helped us a lot” (R24).

Regarding teenagers who were not subject to compulsory schooling anymore after their arrival in Austria, narratives demonstrate the difficulties that some of them have in understanding the – quite complicated – Austrian school system and in assessing what courses they are actually taking part in and what options they have. For a young female from Afghanistan who stayed in Turkey with her family for a longer period before they came to Austria, things turned out well. With the help of two advice centres (*Sprungbrett* and *Interface*) she found her way:

“*Sprungbrett* and *Interface* helped me. When I first came to Vienna, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what school to go to, what to do... *Sprungbrett* and *Interface* really helped me a lot. They told me what I could and couldn’t do. They told me what school I could and couldn’t go to... They advised me whether or not to look for an apprenticeship” (R12).

Summing up, all children who are permanently resident in Austria are obliged to visit a school, irrespective of their legal status. Experts mentioned the central issue of teenage asylum seekers who are not of compulsory school age any more. While all children below the age of 15 have direct access, persons in the age group of 15-21 years have faced many difficulties, being too old for compulsory schools and sometimes too young to work. Another issue concerns the separation of some immigrant children into “integrative” German classes. While the rationale is specifically promoting language skills, experts point out the detrimental effects for social integration.

## 6. Housing and Spatial Aspects of Integration

### 6.1. Legal Framework

In the realm of housing and the spatial distribution of beneficiaries of international protection, federal government places virtually no restrictions, quite contrary to the situation of asylum seekers. As explained in detail in the report on reception (Josipovic & Reeger 2020b),<sup>24</sup> asylum seekers are distributed to federal provinces according to an allocation quota based on the number of inhabitants in the province and the availability of free places in accommodations at the very beginning of their stay and once persons are formally recognized as asylum applicants in Austria. After a pronounced governance crisis in 2015 regarding the distribution and accommodation of asylum seekers, a constitutional law was passed that allowed the federal government to establish reception facilities in municipalities; this law expired after three years in 2018. Furthermore, the national government introduced residence restrictions for asylum seekers, who are now obliged to stay in the federal province that provides them with Basic Welfare Support.

Basic Welfare Support is a social aid system that is generally provided to asylum seekers. Likewise, recognized refugees can be entitled to this kind of support during the first four months upon approval and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection may receive it as long as they are in need of aid. Persons who have private earnings or support are generally excluded from this kind of service (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). Basic Welfare Support can be provided through cash or in-kind allowances and includes, among other things, accommodation, which in Austria is typically provided by NGOs and provincial bodies, or through cash support (120 EUR per month) for individual rent in private accommodations.

### 6.2. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

Regarding the governance of housing during reception in Upper Austria, one of the federal provinces included in the RESPOND research, there is a preference for small-scale facilities with only a few housing units. Actors in the realm of housing during the reception phase are major NGOs (e.g. Caritas, *Volkshilfe*, Red Cross, *Diakonie*). Asylum seekers may also choose to move into private flats, but there are considerable financial constraints on the private housing market. The majority of Basic Welfare Support recipients thus stays in organized accommodations.

In Vienna, the FSW sets concrete measures for asylum seekers in the reception phase. It also organizes accommodation in reception centres or housing subsidies for those staying in private apartments. As is the case in Upper Austria, most of the accommodation centres are run by large NGOs (e.g. Caritas, *Diakonie*, *Volkshilfe* and *Samariterbund*) as cooperation partners, with the FSW responsible for quality assurance. Contrary to the strategy in other federal provinces, the FSW prefers private accommodations, with 68 per cent of persons receiving Basic

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<sup>24</sup> See Josipovic and Reeger (2020b) for a detailed analysis of housing and spatial distribution during reception. We offer a synopsis of the governance, and assessments of experts and micro-level interview partners in this chapter.

Welfare Support living privately and only 32 per cent in organized accommodations.<sup>25</sup> The main aim of this strategy is to avoid segregation and enhance social integration from the very beginning.

Regarding housing of beneficiaries of international protection, there are no specific legal measures of public assistance on the federal level. Persons without employment heavily rely on Social Assistance (before 2020 referred to as Needs-based Minimum Income), whereby the reference rate across all provinces is 885 EUR per month. Some federal provinces, such as Vienna, Vorarlberg, Tyrol, and Salzburg also grant additional benefits from the housing subsidy. This is intended to counter-act rising housing costs in these provinces.

Furthermore, some provinces and municipalities at least provide some strategies, specific projects, and home-finding platforms that promote access to housing. Civil society plays an important role here. Upper Austria for example operates along three major routes (E10): (1) In a mainstreaming approach, low-income households – including beneficiaries of international protection – can apply for long-term credits as preliminary financing of deposits. This serves to prevent the over-burdening of these households with the initial costs of procuring housing. (2) There is an attempt to make available vacant flats in non-profit housing schemes, and (3) the provincial government is trying to provide access to vacant, privately owned flats by matching persons entitled to asylum with the owners of the flats. However, all of this was still in a test phase at the time of the interview. In Vienna, a city dominated by social housing (around 30 per cent of its housing stock belongs to this segment), the waiting periods for apartments in social housing units are very long and there is no priority treatment of persons in dire need. As is the case in Upper Austria, there are some initiatives by NGOs and a limited number of so-called “emergency apartments” provided by the City of Vienna. Aigner (2018) points to the remarkable role of civil society actors in helping beneficiaries of international protection to find decent, affordable housing in Vienna. She discerns between the “bad” profit-oriented informal submarket and the “good” de-commodified civil-society submarket with the latter comprising social media networks of inter-ethnic friends and caretakers that help newcomers find their way.

Regarding the profit-oriented informal submarket, experts in our interviews in Vienna point out the problem of people renting out beds instead of rooms to refugees in need. These landlords take advantage of persons in dire situations. Again, features of structural integration intersect: Without a job, people don’t have the financial means to access decent housing:

“In Vienna, there are extremely many awful landlords that rent very bad rooms with seven or eight persons in one room. And because simply nobody wants to offer an apartment to a recognized refugee without a job. And they can’t afford an apartment for 300 or 400 EUR and they can’t make a deposit. They have to find someone who can agree to an instalment plan and that is extremely difficult” (E02).

With neither the state or sub-national authorities nor the market offering sustainable help in improving this situation, the fear of refugees becoming homeless is not far-fetched. The manager of a Viennese reception facility argues:

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://grundversorgungsinfo.net/bundeslaender/wien/> for detailed information on regulations regarding reception in Vienna also used in this chapter.



“It has always been difficult to find a flat for a family with three children, where nobody has found a job yet, because in four months you can’t find a job, it is not easy to find a flat. But in the course of this shortage of housing in Vienna and in the course of the fact that more people have received positive decisions, it is one of our great challenges not to have people sitting on the street when they are no longer in the asylum procedure. That is really, really difficult and it would also be very important to do something about it” (E01).

To conclude, asylum seekers are either provided organized accommodation (often with several or many other individuals or families) or they receive minimal housing subsidies for private accommodation. Once asylum seekers are granted temporary residence status, they are often confronted with problems that are similar to other groups in socio-economically precarious situations. While there are scattered support initiatives from provinces, municipalities, or civil society, beneficiaries of protection also have to deal with discrimination from landlords, who are often aware of their clients’ precarious economic and legal status.

### **6.3. Experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection**

Housing is a key feature of structural integration. The individual housing situation depends on variables such as the accessibility of different segments of the housing market, the availability of decent affordable housing, the economic situation of the household, and personal preferences. Asylum seekers and beneficiaries alike are confronted with many obstacles when they try to find decent housing: A lack of money and/or a job, a tight situation on the housing market in general, most of all in Vienna, and discriminatory landlords who are reluctant to rent out to refugees.

Summarizing the experiences of our interview partners during the early phase of reception when they had just arrived in Austria, issues of overcrowded and noisy rooms with a lack of privacy were mentioned for the chaotic year of 2015. In the course of time and the longer they had to stay in organized accommodations, waiting for a decision on their asylum application, which in some cases lasted for two or even three or more years, notions of isolation and uselessness came to the fore. These are a result of the labour market ban and the lack of social contacts (Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). Furthermore, there is growing dissatisfaction with the housing situation in terms of quality and lack of privacy. In other instances, our interview partners simply express satisfaction, considering complaints illegitimate due to the privilege of having made it to Austria or Europe. 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, with a growing frustration among asylum seekers during the often prolonged process.

#### **Entering the housing market**

Personal connections with relatives who were already living in Austria or connections with (new) friends and acquaintances are of key importance for finding a flat. Many respondents refer to these contacts as crucial for successful apartment hunting. A middle-aged woman from Afghanistan living in Vienna relied on family ties:

“And we found the apartment through my brother-in-law, my sister’s husband” (R13).

As already explained, renting an apartment on the private housing market is the most viable option in Vienna. In order to get an apartment in a social housing scheme, one of the barriers is that applicants need to have lived at the same address in Vienna for two years. A woman from Afghanistan came across another barrier when trying to get access to social housing:

“*Wiener Wohnen* (Vienna Social Housing Association), for example, doesn’t give me an apartment because my husband is not here. They tell me that if my husband was here they could give me a flat faster. On the one hand, they somehow block my way because I have a really hard time living in a small flat with my two children. My way is kind of blocked when it comes to finding an apartment. I can only rent a private flat. On the other hand, children are very important here, the schools are free, the kindergartens are free. I like that” (R13).

Finding appropriate housing seems to have been easier for interview partners in rural Upper Austria compared to those in Vienna. A young man from Syria describes his flat hunting, which went quite unproblematic:

“When we received the positive asylum notice, we found two apartments in this building. Then I took one for my family and one for me. I got married. And my father is my neighbour and I have my own family, too. We don’t live together; we have our own address and our own apartment. We just live next door to each other” (R23).

The same holds true for a beneficiary of international protection from Syria who seems to be rather satisfied with his housing situation and did not report any difficulties regarding access to the housing market. He lives in a small village and enjoys the tranquillity there:

“I used to look for an apartment, only two or three months ago I got a notice of asylum and everyone said ‘Linz, Linz’ (capital of Upper Austria). But I don’t want to go to Linz, I don’t have a balcony in Linz and what should I do? I love the small village, you can go for a walk there, if something is exhausting, for example, then you can go for a walk in the forest, to the river. You’ll have peace and quiet. In Linz, where do you have peace and quiet, e.g. if you work in the office all day, then you go to your flat, what do you do? Watch TV or something or go for a walk in the noise? I work hard all day and when I come home, I need rest. That’s me” (R19).

The third example of rather easy flat hunting in a rural area comes from another beneficiary of international protection from Syria who found a job at the local post office:

“Actually, I like it a lot. I got the apartment from a friend and the apartment is very big and warm and cheap for me and my family. And the place there is quiet, there is no noise, you always have peace and the neighbours are nice, too. We haven’t met that many yet, but the people are very nice there” (R20).

Moving from another federal province to Vienna is another feature of problematic flat hunting. A young woman from Afghanistan who lives with her parents and siblings elaborates that they were in Vorarlberg (the Western-most federal province) during reception and that she would have preferred to stay there because of the new friends she made. But her parents decided to move to Vienna after they received the status of international protection. Again, they could only find an apartment with the help of friends.

“Actually, our rent is very high, but yes, we had no choice. We were supposed to find an apartment and, yes, just move. Otherwise we couldn’t come to Vienna. And the housing situation in Vienna is very bad, because we get money from the social welfare office. And for us this is difficult. There are actually not so many flats for the people who get money from the social welfare office. Because it’s not safe [from the perspective of the landlords], that’s why” (R11).

The connection between the economic situation, e.g. having a job, and a successful apartment hunting has been described by a woman from Afghanistan living in rural Upper Austria with her husband and three children. Though the family has been granted subsidiary protection, they were allowed to stay in the small-scale accommodation centre so far:

“Since we have been granted subsidiary protection, it is not really for us. It used to be, but not anymore. You have to be active and look for a job. We are now allowed to work. Since it’s harder to find a job without training... My husband has to find a job. Then we can look for an apartment (R24).

### **Discrimination in the housing market**

Discriminatory experiences in the housing market need to be mentioned. The reluctance of landlords to rent out to refugees has been described in detail by a young recognized refugee from Syria who reports that he had not experienced discrimination on the housing market himself, but that many of his friends did:

“Luckily I had no trouble finding an apartment. And the thing that all my friends suffer from now is to find an apartment, because... As soon as they, well not always one hundred percent, but often that as soon as they say ‘Hello’ and they say that they are Syrian, then the owner no longer wants to rent the apartment to them. So often they say: ‘I want an Austrian’. And some people don’t care. They want someone who has a skilled job... I was on the phone and once, it was really very bad, so that the owner... that we didn’t say on the phone that he was from Syria and then we made an appointment. And he saw that we were two Syrians, two dark men. The friend had a very Arab face and he sent us away. So we were not even allowed to visit the apartment” (R01).

The second example comes from the father of a family from Syria residing in Vienna, who is a recognized refugee. He argues that not having a job and being a recipient of money from public welfare keeps landlords from renting out to people from outside Europe:

“Landlords only want Europeans, when we say ‘we are refugees’ then they simply say ‘no’. They only want people who work and those from Europe and when they see ‘refugees’ then that is bad. That is difficult. Y [an Austrian friend] told me about this apartment six months ago. Y was looking, I was looking, my brother was looking for an apartment for us and we didn’t find anything when we found it, then it was a bad apartment, very old and expensive and everything broken. And then I still was an asylum seeker. Yes, I looked at two apartments in the 10<sup>th</sup> district and everything was okay and I had money with me and when this woman [the landlord] knew that we are entitled to asylum she said: ‘No, no, no, no’ and I said: ‘No? I came and why no?’, ‘You are a refugee, this is welfare money, maybe you can’t pay anything’. I think they don’t want to and yes the search for a flat is very, very bad, very, very difficult” (R09).

## Qualitative and financial aspects of housing

For those who were successful in finding an apartment, housing still remains a challenge. Due to their often dire economic situation, recognized refugees find themselves in flats much too small for them and their families. A woman from Afghanistan who resides in Vienna describes their overcrowded situation in the following way:

“This apartment... It has a small kitchen, one bedroom and a small living room. It’s really a small apartment. My father, my two children and I live there. I sleep with my children in the bedroom and my father sleeps in the living room” (R13).

Apartments are not only too small but are also often rated as much too expensive. Without a well-paid job, it is not only the rent but also the maintenance costs that put pressure on the households. Although he considers himself fortunate that he had found a place to stay for himself and his family after all, a recognized refugee from Syria finds it hard to formulate positive aspects about his housing situation:

“This is an apartment and the rent is too expensive: 710 EUR per month for 45 square meters and there we live, five people and there are only two rooms, one bedroom and a living room. And I sleep in one room with my children, yes and you have to pay taxes and the internet and the gas and the running costs. *Interviewer: And how do you like where you live now, apart from the fact that it is too expensive?* “Yeah, I could say that’s good. There are few flats for rent in Vienna, also for us, the refugees, too few, if you don’t have a job, then it is difficult to find a flat, to rent but for me the luck was to find this flat” (R07).

Other respondents compared their current housing situation to that in the country of origin, arguing that they were better off in terms of flat size before they had to leave their country. “Small and expensive” seems to be the catchphrase for those staying in Vienna. Though the city has much to offer and many respondents enjoy the infrastructure and the opportunities regarding leisure activities, the problematic housing situation overshadows everything. Accordingly, the following quote of a woman from Syria provides a typical summary:

“I like it very much here. The 2<sup>nd</sup> district is very nice, here is the kindergarten of my daughter, there are many schools, many parks, and the Danube is nearby. It is very nice and there are many shops if you need something. But for me, maybe if I compare with Syria: The apartment here is small, all apartments here in Vienna I think are small. And if I look for a bigger one, it is very expensive. This one too, it is small and expensive and we don’t work yet, for example, and you can’t yet ... but it’s possible” (R08).

In cases where the apartment is spacious enough, a trade-off with the condition of the apartment may occur, as described by a beneficiary of international protection from Syria residing in Vienna:

“No not small, these are the three rooms or two rooms approximately, so one bedroom, one office and one living room, not small, no not small but old, very, very, very old. The first time I opened the door everything fell over [laughs]” (R09).

To summarize, beneficiaries of international protection among our respondents encounter less difficulties entering the housing market and finding an acceptable flat in rural areas compared to the situation our Viennese respondents encounter. The capital of Austria is characterized

by a strong social housing component that is only accessible after two years of permanent residence at the same address in Vienna, a criterion that can hardly be met by refugees. Thus they are compelled to rely on the private rental market, and refugee respondents often mentioned the help of friends and acquaintances that was decisive in their endeavour to find housing and to overcome discriminatory practices. Still, many complain about high costs for small flats, a situation resulting from the strained urban housing market. With neither the state nor the market providing concrete structured help, it is, as Aigner (2019) puts it, networks “in various forms and on various levels” that enabled the refugees’ entrance to private accommodation after having left organized accommodations they lived in during reception.

## 7. Psychosocial Health

### 7.1. Legal framework

Austria allows recognised refugees and asylum seekers alike free access to the health care system, thus exceeding the minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers set by the European Commission. After a person has submitted an asylum application in Austria, he or she is granted health insurance as part of basic care provision. This includes medical care in all areas as well as basic dental treatment. If the asylum application is granted, recognized refugees receive a standard insurance card (e-card) and become part of the same insurance system as Austrian citizens (Kohlenberger, Buber-Ennser, Rengs, Leitner & Landesmann, 2019). On the other hand, persons entitled to subsidiary protection do not receive an e-card unless they are employed in Austria, in which case the employer is responsible for health insurance. Otherwise they receive, as do asylum seekers, a health insurance voucher that enables them to use services such as examinations and treatment. While asylum seekers are automatically exempt from prescription fees, recognized refugees can apply for exemption from prescription fees if their monthly income is below a certain limit.<sup>26</sup>

### 7.2. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

Although asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international and subsidiary protection, and Austrian citizens seemingly enjoy equal formal and legal access to health care, some specific obstacles to medical care and psychosocial support must be mentioned. First and foremost, there is the language barrier and a general lack of knowledge about the structure of the Austrian health care system. According to Kohlenberger, Buber-Ennser, Rengs, Leitner and Landesmann (2019), this results in a high number of visits in emergency units in hospitals and a lower share of visits to general practitioners and resident specialists, a result that has also been mentioned by some of the experts that we have interviewed. Hospitals in turn complain about being challenged by too many patients and too many different languages for which they would need to provide interpreters, which primarily poses a bureaucratic problem.

“In principle, the care is there, all refugees are entitled to medical care. Of course, there are problems for the individual when he/she goes to the doctor, dares to express things, because he/she doesn't know German well yet, even in hospital. About pregnancy and birth, the hospitals say they always have immense problems with registrations and all the bureaucratic things. They actually need mediators to help them.... because languages are a problem. It is still difficult, although a lot has happened. Having an overview and the unusually large bureaucracy are obstacles, and we offer information in our modules. But not everyone takes part, and when I get into this stressful situation and am ill, it becomes difficult” (E06).

This quote from an expert working in public administration in Vienna indicates obstacles in terms of language and bureaucracy. Structural differences between the health care systems in the countries of origin and in Austria however also play a pivotal role. Furthermore, there

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<sup>26</sup> Source: [https://www.wu.ac.at/fileadmin/wu/h/press/Presse\\_2019/190109\\_WU\\_Projektbroschuere\\_ReHIS.pdf](https://www.wu.ac.at/fileadmin/wu/h/press/Presse_2019/190109_WU_Projektbroschuere_ReHIS.pdf).

are special demands, such as more female gynaecologists, according to E04, an expert working at a large NGO in Upper Austria.

Some hospitals and doctors in Austria use video interpretation to overcome language barriers. In contrast to family members or friends, these services provide professional translation per video at any hour. Due to the high costs, the provision of this kind of service is still insufficient.<sup>27</sup>

Many experts elaborated on the enormous need for more psychological help and specialized offers in this area, not only in the past and present, but also in the future. An expert from Upper Austria active in a large NGO stated the following:

“Very broadly speaking, the challenges in the area of refugees are different from those faced by other groups such as third-country nationals. The migration or flight biography plays a role. We notice with many people... that they repeatedly fall back in the labour market, i.e. become unemployed again, lose their job. Very superficially, people say: well, they don't know our working environment, they don't know our working world. We believe that this is much deeper than that. We observe much more strongly that people who have clarified their everyday existential questions, right to stay, etc., experience trauma. Often these people want to be strong, they also are strong, but they have an incredible amount of broken pieces they have not yet looked at. The trauma comes late. I believe that from now on and in the next few years we will have much, much more trauma work. That's a big challenge. One reality is: it is war and I have to flee. The other reality is to accept that this was not a temporary escape: I can't go back, it's gone” (E05).

This expert argues that individuals are confronted with traumatizing events that occurred in the country of origin or on their way to Austria, often only once they have clarified their status and start looking at their new life. In this phase of “exhaling”, trauma reappears and must be dealt with. This assessment was shared by an expert working in Vienna who refers to experiences of trainers in courses offered by the City of Vienna (E06). These trainers are confronted with persons with diverse psychological problems that hinder them to concentrate on learning new skills or a new language.

In Vienna, the major provider of psychological and psychotherapeutic care for survivors of torture and war is *Hemayat*. Founded in 1995, this association offers interpreter-supported help and was able to care for 1,309 persons, including 178 minors, from 47 countries in a total of 14,281 hours in 2019 alone.<sup>28</sup> Still, as E06 argues, this is too little:

“And there also are certain NGOs that offer therapy, but it is difficult to have enough of that in the languages needed. There already are some therapists who speak other languages and are reimbursed by the health insurance system. I believe that much still needs to be done in schools so that teachers are prepared to deal with it” (E06).

The experts from Upper Austria (E04) also elaborated on traumatization yet hidden in children and the youth, which is heavily underestimated. It would be important to start working on this now and not only once it is escalating.

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<sup>27</sup> Source: <https://oe1.orf.at/programm/20191217/582388/Nicht-sagen-koennen-was-weh-tut>.

<sup>28</sup> Source: <http://www.hemayat.org/>.

Traumatization obviously does not only occur in war or during flight, but might be reinforced by the asylum procedure as such and by its long duration. E08, an expert active in reception in Vienna, describes this in the following way:

“But when people are here for a longer period, they are worn down by the long asylum procedure. The asylum procedures often takes 3 or 4 years, this uncertainty combined with a lack of perspectives, a missing daily structure, and the inaccessibility of the labour market, this combination that one is forced to be inactive for years in Austria, leads to the fact that some people who were psychologically healthy before, suddenly show symptoms of a mental illness. This is not surprising” (E08).

Summing up, although asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection are granted formal access to health care, they face practical obstacles such as language barriers and a general lack of knowledge about the structure of the Austrian health care system. Experts furthermore argue that there is a great need for psychological support. Many individuals have been confronted with traumatizing events that occurred in the country of origin or on the way to Austria. Sometimes the mental condition of asylum seekers deteriorates when they have to spend several years waiting for a decision on their asylum case. Responding to this demand for psychological treatment requires additional funding as well as experts capable of dealing with trauma who speak multiple languages.

### **7.3. Experiences of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection**

About half of our interviewees expressed some sort of psychological problem. Regarding the time at which these problems started to occur and their causal factors, some narratives mention the war situation in the country of origin, some relate to the time when people were on the move to Europe, and some psychological problems occurred in Austria, when people found themselves in an insecure position, waiting for a decision on their asylum application, otherwise not being able to do anything. A young man from Afghanistan who lives in a large accommodation centre in Vienna and was still waiting for a final decision on his asylum application gives proof to this problematic situation:

“The good thing is, we have a place to 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 stop thinking about things. If someone has nothing to do then you don’t know what to do, you always have to think. When I have to think then I get stressed and when I get stressed then I get scared and when you get scared then that makes it bad” (R03).

For some respondents, there were no problems whatsoever in terms of getting psychological help. A recognized refugee from Syria who displays a rather positive attitude throughout the interview and in many respects, mostly due to the fact that he did not have to wait very long until he received a positive response to his application for asylum, talks about his experiences with the Austrian healthcare system in the first phase of his stay in Austria, as if everything went very smoothly:

“Physical problems none. It was always just the problem with the winter; I was always sick in the winter because I often went to the doctors, and nobody knew why. And then



at some point someone knew. I just need the sun. Since then I get the sun, but in tablets, in vitamin tablets. There have been no physical problems. I was just very tired. And back then, I often went to a psychologist. About ten times. And it was great, because first this was a woman, and it was very pleasant for me ... It's kind of more comfortable for me, and I just wanted to talk. I've always tried to speak German once in a while. And, yeah, that was good. And so I shared everything I thought with her. Because back then, I couldn't share it with my roommates. I thought maybe they thought a little differently or something. But it was super cool that I could talk to her" (R01).

This quote also demonstrates that some male refugees are reluctant to talk about psychological problems with other men in the same situation. It is easier for them to reveal their thoughts to somebody completely strange.

Concerning the somatic component of health, there are some examples of positive assessments and experiences with the respective care system. A young male from Afghanistan who came to Austria with his parents, elaborates on the help his father got in Austria and compares Austrian health care to that in Iran and Afghanistan:

"It is better now, in Iran we were very stressed and depressed and we didn't feel good or healthy. If we wanted to go to the doctor, then we had to pay way too much. But here it is free, thank God. In Iran and Afghanistan and other countries there are no good methods and no good doctors because we were there for so long and my father had a splinter, a foreign body in his head, but they didn't recognize it. They said 'there is nothing, it's just pain'. But in Austria he had an X-ray and then they saw that he had a splinter" (R02).

A middle-aged woman from Afghanistan who came to Austria with her two young adult daughters also finally found help for her health issues and seems to be quite happy with the direction her life and that of her daughters has finally taken:

"To be honest, I always had many health problems in Afghanistan that I could not solve there. I had several operations there, but these were never successful. Medicine is not very advanced in Afghanistan. But here I had very good possibilities for my health. I managed to get well again. For my daughters, life here is better. They can go to school, they can study and continue their education. For myself there are many opportunities here. I am a studied woman who has completed her studies in Europe. I have every opportunity to learn, to take a course and to improve my language. And I have managed to live a really happy life here during this time and to build a life that I have wished for" (R14).

The following statement has been made by a young woman from Afghanistan who argues that she has no mental problems because being from Afghanistan means that you have to be mentally strong and more resilient than Europeans due to the hard life in the country of origin:

"That I have some fear left in me or something... No, not really. But it's nothing I'd like to talk about. It's true, fortunately nothing happened to us, but anything could have happened. I can still see the smugglers forcing us onto the boat. He was carrying a gun, too. Who knows if it was real or not, but he threatened us and told us to get on the boat. It's just... I don't know, I just... I think it's because we're Afghani, and mentally we're just hardened against some things. We've just experienced so much worse, that

we... I think if a European would experience something like that, then he would surely get sick. We grow up with these things, right?" (R11).

For some of our respondents, thinking about their country of origin and the people they had to leave there is a source of stress and depression. This may be related to the fact that they had imagined their life in Europe to be much easier and that they had assessed their chances of family reunification much too smoothly.

The flight as such and the new life in Austria are enormous challenges our refugee respondents have been and still are facing. We were especially interested in their current state of hope, in what keeps them going and in what gives them motivation in this new situation. Resilience and individual coping mechanisms very much depend on two factors: The legal status (asylum seekers versus beneficiaries of international protection) and the presence/absence of a support system in the form of family members or new friends and acquaintances.

A young asylum seeker originating from Iran has been living in an accommodation centre in Vienna for more than two years. He is in close, daily contact with some family members who are still living in the country of origin, but has not managed to establish any meaningful personal relations in Austria. The contact with his family makes him sad, because they are saddened by his unresolved situation in Austria. Overall, he seems to have lost any kind of hope and motivation:

"I have no motivation now. Honestly. My life is... I think I'm asleep. You know? I'm not living. In my body, it's like a dream. A bad dream" (R05).

The second example regarding motivation and plans for the future comes from a middle-aged female asylum seeker from Pakistan. She is divorced and lives with her two teenaged children in rural Upper Austria where she reports to be well connected in the local community. After suffering from domestic violence in her marriage, she managed to escape from her husband and his family. She had already spent more than three years in Austria but has still not received a final decision about her asylum application; the first interview had been negative. This unresolved situation causes her much stress and seeing her children doing well in the future means a lot to her:

"My goal is for my children to learn a lot. That they have good plans for the future and that they do not live like me. That they have a home of their own. I want them to have good lives. I want them to learn a lot. I want my children to be respected by the people and I want people to respect me" (R28).

This is not the only case among our refugee respondents that proves the outstanding importance of children as a source of hope and motivation. Because many interview partners consider their own position as quite critical and difficult, they project all their hopes and dreams for a better life on their children.

In the assessments of beneficiaries of international protection, that is, of those who no longer have concerns about their legal status, we find more concrete plans and hopes for a brighter future that might actually be fulfilled. A young woman from Afghanistan who lives with her parents and siblings in a flat in a rural area and thus seemingly has a support system, complains about her father and her brother holding her back from enjoying life with her new friends in Austria and being very strict about "Afghan" rules. Yet she goes on talking about her goals in life:

“My motivation is that I will soon find a job and that I can start university soon. That I will soon be able to study pharmacy. And that at some point I will be able to graduate and find a good job. I want to be able to buy a house. All these things motivate me” (R15).

Summing up the assessments and experiences of the refugee respondents, legal status is one of the main factors determining their psychosocial situation. Beneficiaries of international protection are more positive and motivated to pursue future goals while asylum seekers kept in insecurity for a long period show signs of depression and despair. Another factor is the presence of family members and the help received from new friends and acquaintances that raises wellbeing and quality of life.

## 8. The Role of Religion

As mentioned in chapter 2, religion, most notably Islam, has been a field of political conflict over integration in recent years. Related legislation encompasses laws on veiling in kindergarten and primary school or the Anti-Face-Covering Act (AGesVG), which aimed at prohibiting the veiling of faces in public. Although our expert conversations did not explicitly include discussions of religious issues, this was a vitally important topic for the asylum seekers and beneficiaries of protection in our project.

Religion plays a multifaceted role in the lives of our interlocutors. The majority of them identified as Muslim and most often religion was discussed in the context of conflicts in the country of origin or transit, experiences of discrimination in Austria, or gender roles. A common pattern that we could observe was that many of our interview partners' initial statements on their religion were followed by relativizing statements or reference to their parents. For example, a young male asylum seeker from Afghanistan elaborates:

“I am from the Hazara people group, my family are ethnic Muslims, I myself have no religion. I think religion is like a [inaudible] that's a disaster. You can see how bad religion is in our country. I think it's worse than an atomic bomb or something” (R06).

Similarly, a young woman from Afghanistan who has been granted asylum in Austria, states:

“The world view... my family's worldview is very Muslim... My mother believes in many things; her faith is very important to her. When I came to Austria, I saw that the other people, for example the Christians, are also good people. In Afghanistan we don't know this and we ask ourselves what Christians are like... I got to know other cultures here; I got to know Turks, for example. I got to know Germans and I think I learned a lot from them” (R15).

Overall, it became evident that religion is a sensitive topic, because it is related to experiences of persecution and violence in the country of origin but also because many interlocutors were aware of the fact that religion is a central field of conflict concerning the integration of immigrants in Austria. Many of our interview partners thus sought to deemphasize the role of religion in their own identity. A male asylum seeker from Afghanistan argues:

“What is important to me. Every morning when I get up, all I wanna do is go out and talk to those people who are outside, you know? I just wanna show them that I'm me and not them, you know? A lot of people think, they expect the same thing, and I don't want that. And so many stupid messages you see on the news every morning. News against asylum, against financial problems, against all that stuff, I don't know. It would be better if the world was a better place... How do you say it? The world could be a better place if we had changed some rules. You know what I mean? It doesn't ... I have no faith, and in the beginning I was a Muslim. But why am I without faith? Because, I was already a Muslim. I went to church six times. I got the information. I talked to the people and the priest. And then once I was with some Jews. Then I talked to them once. Or two or three times. And that was all right. It was a nice talk. And I haven't found Buddha yet. But I'd like to talk to him. But with those three religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The only thing I can tell you is that all these three religions talk about humanity, about being nice, not lying and all these good things in everyday life. Ok, but we find these things without religion too, we can do that with humanity. It doesn't

have to be a religion, you don't have to fear God. If you are good yourself, everything is good" (R03).

The notion of universalistic humane values is also mirrored in the following two statements of young Afghan women:

"Religion, everyone has his own religion. I cannot say that just because I am a Muslim I will not talk to the other person. Everyone has his own faith, his own religion, you cannot force the other person to believe in the same thing. I will not stop talking to you just because you are a Christian. That is not the way it works. You are a human being and so am I. I cannot change your religion and you cannot change mine. We're all the same. We're all human" (R12).

"I think it is important to be a good person, to be human. It doesn't matter if I'm a Muslim, you're a Jew and he's a Christian, we just have to be able to get along well with each other. Religion is not important. Love, respect and a good relationship with each other are very important. It's important not to hurt people. I think that religion is really not important" (R16).

Problems in relation to our interview partners' past largely relate to the role of religion as part of an identity of oppressors standing in conflict with one's own religion or non-compliance with certain dogmas. For example, a young man from Afghanistan who identifies as Shiite argues:

"I'm not an extreme person who says 'No, the Mullah said so!' Because I used to fight against [argue with] Mullah, when they say something, I say something contrary to this person: 'Why is that? You know that it's this way? You are also a person like me!' If I understand something, I will act so, if you don't explain what you mean... I'm just a polite person, I'm not a religious person, no – no 'you have to accept that!' If someone explains something well to me about the government and stuff, if I understand that, then I accept that. [...] And since I am here: What I like is that men and women are equal and can work. If a man can be an architect, then a woman can also be an architect and work. But in our country there are women... The mullahs say: they are not allowed to go to work and they are not allowed to do anything with men so work and so on... But here everybody gets up in the morning and just goes to work: women, men and they do what they want. But in our country is the mullah: They have the government. When they say something, then all the people accept it, because the people are illiterate and when the mullah says something, then all the people say 'okay, he knows'. But still he doesn't know, because people just want to live and work and so on. They [the mullahs] do extreme Islamic things but they can't do that. Every person can do what he wants to do" (R04).

An older-age woman from Afghanistan also experienced discrimination in the transit country of Iran:

"Yes, also in Afghanistan it was very important to us that our children go to school and achieve something in their lives. That they become doctors or engineers. All parents want that. My oldest son has fortunately managed to achieve something in life. My eldest daughter did the same. But the rest of my children unfortunately didn't make it. And when we were in Iran it was the same. Of course it wasn't our country. We were strangers there. And in Iran it's really very difficult, as far as religion is concerned. The Iranians had big problems with Sunnis. For example, if you wanted to buy bread, then

there were always certain jokes about Sunnis in the bakery. It was always my husband or me who went shopping. Among the young people there were often quarrels. We were already mature and experienced. That's why something like that was no problem for us. They often called us names and said bad things to us. And then we also fled from Iran" (R27).

For some of our interlocutors, like a Sunni woman who was oppressed by Shiite neighbours in Iraq, such experiences lead to a devaluation of certain identity traits upon arrival in Austria:

"I look and what I see is that the Christians are better than the Muslims; the Muslims have no heart that is with people, a person who beats another person who is also a Muslim, that is not a Muslim! I look at Austria and it is all love together. Why is it not like that in my city? Everybody beats each other and they shoot and so on, not like in Austria: everybody loves together, everybody looks, that is a family and that is another family, that is all a whole family" (R22).

More generally, many of our interlocutors highly value being free from religious norms in a liberal democratic society. A young asylum seeker who came to Austria with his parents elaborates:

"I saw freedom in Austria at the beginning. I was surprised that the ladies don't have a headscarf and are a bit free. As time went by, I walked around, got around a bit and then I said 'yes, that's Europe'. And then I experienced that many of us, that many from our country, they took the Austrian culture and simply took off the headscarf and some live with Austrians and others live with Afghan people. And that made me very happy. I said 'yes, you have to be free'. But it's very bad in Afghanistan. You have to have a headscarf, there's a veil, you say 'chador', and my mother hates chadors. She didn't wear it at all but she was forced to wear this in Afghanistan, this chador. And I also had the feeling at the beginning that the Austrian people treated us well, and now they do, too" (R02).

At the same time, our interviewees reported discrimination in Austria due to their Muslim faith. A man from Syria elaborates:

"Yes, for me Austria is really a great country. It is a great country, my dream country, for life, for working for the people, but of course: No country has everything good, there is always something good and something bad. Austria also has bad things, there are always old people, racists but many of my problems are not with Austrians but with foreigners from Serbia or Turkey. [...] There is always something like that about Muslims. When I go to AMS [Public Employment Service], people they don't think about me, what can I do or what do I think, they just think 'ah you are Muslim, your wife has a headscarf, why do you pray, do you have Ramadan?' No please, I'm human, not only Muslim. It really bothers me" (R09).

This comment reflects how a religious individual rejects being primarily identified as Muslim in public, even more so if such an identity is as negatively perceived as Islam is in Austrian political discourse.

## 9. Citizenship, Integration, and Belonging

### 9.1. Legal framework

The legal foundations of Austrian citizenship are based on the principle of descent (*ius sanguinis*). Austrian citizenship can be acquired through descent from Austrian parents, marriage to an Austrian partner, or through compliance with requirements upon application. Naturalization is subject to multiple requirements and is considered the final step in a successful integration process. Generally, applicants must prove at least ten years of uninterrupted residence in Austria, whereby five years must have been spent under a settlement permit (aimed at permanent residence). Furthermore, applicants must provide proof of sufficient financial means and independence of social aid transfers as well as proof of police clearance of any criminal offences. Persons seeking Austrian citizenship must ultimately provide proof of language skills (B2) and take a citizenship test (Fassmann, 2015).

In some instances, third-country nationals have a legal claim to citizenship, which means that a negative decision can only be made if a legal obstacle to naturalization exists. This relates to beneficiaries of asylum or persons married to an Austrian citizen. In the latter case, immigrants must prove at least six years of residence and there has to be an upright marriage of at least five years to an Austrian citizen.

The legal foundations of citizenship law aim to avoid dual citizenship as applicants are asked to renounce their original citizenship. Parents with different citizenships, however, transfer their Austrian as well as a second citizenship to their children. This means that bi-national children can retain their dual citizenship for life.

The naturalization rate (naturalization of persons resident in Austria set into relation to the number of non-Austrian citizens) is relatively low but rising. In 2010, 6,190 persons became Austrian citizens; in 2018 the rate was at 0.7 per cent with a total of 9,335 persons.<sup>29</sup>

Almost all amendments to the citizenship law in recent years have been rather restrictive, the main rationale being to curb further immigration and family reunification. In 2011, the federal government introduced an amendment to the 1985 Citizenship Act which raises the required language skills for naturalization from level A2 to level B1. Furthermore, voluntary entry into foreign military service constitutes a reason for withdrawal of Austrian citizenship.<sup>30</sup> The 2013 reform honoured individual efforts allowing for naturalization after six years for persons with particularly good language skills (B2) and a minimum of three years of voluntary engagement either in a charitable organisation or in the caregiving or education sector. In 2018, a new Aliens Law amendment act curtailed the previously more favourable treatment of beneficiaries of asylum, extending their waiting period for application to citizenship from six to ten years.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Source: <https://www.sn.at/politik/innenpolitik/zahl-der-einbuengerungen-stieg-auch-2018-66090118>.

<sup>30</sup> Source: <http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wissen/timelines/entwicklung-der-staatsbuergerschaft.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Source: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000078069393/neuer-gesetzesentwurf-asyl-unter-ver-schaerften-bedingungen>.

## 9.2. Implementation of measures and experts' assessments

The experts whom we have interviewed give an account of the general legal difficulties of acquiring Austrian citizenship. Some asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection would be interested in becoming Austrian citizens and accordingly ask advisers about the respective requirements (E04). However, they are pre-occupied with their present legal status, which leaves citizenship acquisition to the distant future. If they meet the requirements, beneficiaries of international protection can apply. But, as an expert working at a large NGO in Upper Austria puts it, requirements are hostile to migrants with low incomes and levels of education:

“We notice that citizenship is becoming increasingly difficult. It is extremely poverty-hostile; for obtaining citizenship I have to prove that I can earn a living, not only when I apply, but for three years. You really have to have a very stable employment, earn more than minimum wage, or the family has to be very stable so that several people have an income. That is one story: Really totally anti-poverty. The second story: the Citizenship Act excludes people who, for whatever reason, are educationally disadvantaged. I know people who would never pass the B1 language exam, even if they attended a German course for five years. To learn B1, a foreign language at Matura level, and take an exam is not for everyone. From this point of view, only those elitists who have a good professional education, who are in demand and who earn a good income can manage this. Thus, more and more people will successively be excluded from democratic participation. In Vienna this is now over 25% of the population” (E05).

The expert points to the important notion that a large proportion of the resident population, mostly in Vienna but also in other cities and regions in Austria, is excluded from political participation. More than a million people in Austria are affected by this – in a total population of 8.9 million.<sup>32</sup> Many of these migrants have been living in Austria for several decades or were even born in the country. Nevertheless, they have no influence on political decisions, even though they work, pay taxes, and are permanently affected by these decisions.

## 9.3. Experiences and assessments of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection

### Understandings of integration

Regarding the term and the concept of “integration”, various approaches were discernible and different assessments were given. Some respondents argue that integration must be accomplished through individual efforts. A young asylum seeker from Afghanistan for example displays an individual-integrationist understanding of “integrating oneself”:

“Refugees must try to settle in because it is important, because when you come to a country, the first step is the language. You have to learn the language quickly. Otherwise you can't do anything. I have also experienced it that way. I did not learn at the beginning. Then I came to the point that I first have to learn the language to integrate

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<sup>32</sup> Source: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000108773488/pass-egal-wahl-statt-nationalratswahl-sind-sie-in-oesterreich-wahlberechtigt>.



myself then just work, actually unfortunately we are not allowed to work, only up to 110 EUR. I would say that the refugees have to integrate themselves, learn the language, have communication, participate in events and learn the culture. It is like this: We came to this country and we have to learn the culture, not the Austrians ours. We have to learn the language, not the Austrians our language” (R02).

Interestingly, even though federal-level politics in Austria do not provide institutional support in terms of labour market access or language course provision, our interlocutor considers himself as a refugee who is legitimately in Austria and who has to seize local opportunities to establish a long-term perspective in a new society.

Other respondents have a more critical stance on the term “integration”, arguing that it is rather unclear how integration should take place and even more difficult to know exactly what it is that should be integrated into. A young beneficiary of international protection from Syria expresses the confusion around the term and his critical standpoint towards it. Arguably he considers strong group identities as barriers to a successful integration:

“Integration... There’s a statement by Maria Zuber who says: ‘Integration happens exactly when nationality no longer plays a role.’ And I believe this because people always talk about integration. What does it mean? Should I be Austrian? How can you be an Austrian? Who is a real Austrian, what does he look like? What does he do? But yes, what is integration? What is successful integration?” (R01).

A young woman from Syria who also received international protection describes how she discusses this issue with her friends. As a university student, she has difficulties to identify constitutive markers of difference between the group that is to be integrated and an alleged majority society:

“We always make fun about it, about integration, because it is so difficult to know what integration means and especially in Austria? I mean, do I have to drink a lot of beer to integrate here or do women have to take off their headscarves, is it absolutely necessary for me to shake hands when I greet you or not? It was always so unclear” (R10).

As in the previous example, this interlocutor seeks to deemphasize allegedly fixed collective identity traits. By contrast, a young female beneficiary of international protection describes her struggle between requirements based on an asserted Afghan culture as set out by her family, and her desire to live like her new Austrian friends:

“With young people... The problem I have is with my family. It’s just that my father, and actually my whole family... That all these people are very much Afghani and that prevents me from integrating. It doesn’t help me to integrate. I want to live much more like an Austrian, but my family wants me to keep my Afghan ways” (R15).

Here, a multiculturalist approach to integration prevails, conceptualizing one’s own identity as moving between two nationally defined groups.

When “integration of refugees” is discussed in media and politics, the term often refers to cultural and religious differences. As mentioned in the chapter above, some of our respondents felt that their identification as Muslims had detrimental effects on the treatment they received from public authorities or on social encounters in general. Consequently, some interviewees perceived a need to render particular identity traits invisible in order to receive equal treatment,

which translates into feeling a need to assimilate. By contrast, a 36-year-old beneficiary of international protection from Syria has a more pragmatic point of view. He talks about the necessity of knowing and respecting different cultures:

“For me integration means if you have a job and if you speak German and if you pay taxes and if you have no problems with the government or the police, if you know the Austrian religion, if you know the Austrian culture. They have their culture and we have our culture” (R07).

This again is an instance of a multicultural interpretation of integration. Our interlocutor perceives his own duty of acquiring the German language in order to fulfil the tasks of a lawful and productive citizen. While he embraces an own culture, distinct from that of “the Austrians”, he perceives negatively charged images of his religiously and ethnically defined group through the media. According to him, such negative constructions of “the Arab”, “the Muslim”, or “the Syrian” would have detrimental effects on becoming an integrated person:

“And the media are also a big problem. They’re against us, against Islam, against the refugees. Yes, there is a refugee from Syria or Afghanistan who has done something bad here, one person: him. Not all people from Syria are good people, not all Austrians are good people. The Austrian tabloids: If a refugee has done something bad, then it appears on the first page and is very big. And the Austrians, they are afraid of us today. They think to themselves ‘they are not like our culture, there are such big differences’. No big differences! Austrians and I, yes, there is a difference, but it is not big. We can work together, we can make integration together. But the Arabs or refugees alone, they can’t do that. And the Austrians always say: ‘the Arabs and the refugees must integrate in Austria, we are in Austria, they must speak German’. Yes, but I can’t do it alone. You have to do it together” (R07).

## **Notions of belonging**

In the context of integration, we were interested in expressions of belonging and non-belonging among our interlocutors. While only a few of them explicitly referred to their own sense of belonging, latent patterns representative of different dimensions of belonging became apparent once we sought to interpret the data across different coding categories. We specifically looked into notions of normality, safety, home, and comfort (Simonsen, 2017) within discussions of social encounters and public political discourse, as well as (non)-participation in institutional settings.

Not surprisingly, a sense of non-belonging was more pronounced among the group of asylum seekers than among beneficiaries of international protection. For some of our interview partners, the situation of being in legal limbo meant that they felt as though they only were partial members or even non-members of society. They could not establish solid expectations about the future and felt that they could not decide about their own destiny. An Afghan asylum seeker from Vienna explains:

“What is our future here? We cannot decide that ourselves; the others decide about our future. That’s bad, if you can’t do something for yourself, then there are big problems. But yes, life is like that, like the Austrians say, “let’s wait and see” (R04).

This structural exclusion due to a precarious legal status was repeatedly placed into the context of negative political rhetoric concerning asylum seekers, as can be seen in the following statements, both made by young asylum seekers from Afghanistan:

“The politicians in Austria first exploit the refugees. Every politician has refugees as a major topic. They talk about refugees, ‘I do this, I do that’ and then if someone wins, they do what they want. For example, someone has said something good, they do something with refugees like this and that, then they win, then they do worse things than before. That’s very difficult with politicians” (R04).

“I’m scared. I don’t know, it’s so difficult. Politics isn’t always such a good thing, especially when you mix it with religion and racism. For me the question is whether I get another negative decision. And if I have to leave the country, who wants to learn a new language and live in a new country again? I have lived here for three years. I have done my best to learn the language. Who has the desire to learn a new language? That’s stupid” (R03).

Not only mediatized political messages represented a source of discrimination for our interlocutors. In many instances, they had experienced some form of racist discrimination at the stage of reception in Austria. A young female refugee from Afghanistan for example describes how the manager of a reception facility in Vorarlberg responded to a complaint, arguing “We have not invited you here!” The woman continues:

“It was a really bad situation, you can’t imagine. But we complained about it a bit and we wanted to have a slightly better situation because we are human beings. These were problems that you could easily solve, but they didn’t do that. Yes, then we said again: “We are very sorry, but we can’t live like this anymore” (R11).

Arguably, our interlocutor felt how even her most minor claims or aspirations were dismissed and despised due to her social position in society.

In a different setting, a man from Syria who has received asylum in Austria, encounters difficulties in his dating life:

“When I go to Badoo [dating app], I can’t say ‘I am an asylum [seeker]’, if I say that I am blocked. Yes then I only say ‘where are you from?’, if you ask me, I say ‘I am Arab’. If I say I am asylum, then it will be closed very quickly” (R09).

A central source of belonging, particularly for asylum seekers who are structurally excluded, are ties to local supports, either employees of NGOs or volunteers, as the following example of a Nigerian asylum seeker shows. Asked about how he makes sense of integration debates in Austria, he replies:

“To be honest with you, I’ve always said it before, when I came here and I found out that you ought to adopt to the system, you have to follow the system, that’s what I’m trying to do every day, day by day. I’m not saying that after two years that I spent in Austria that I know everything about Austria, every day is a lesson to go, you know. There are things you’ve seen, you keep in mind ‘this is wonderful, this is how you do it’. So every day of my life, anywhere I go, to visit my friend, I get to speak with some people. Those are the things that have exposed me to Austrian people, those are the things that have shown me: this land is different from the life that you lived before. This

is a life you have to adjust to, to fit up with a system, if you fit to the system, you can contribute to society. Just like I will never forget, that I always tell him, the first day he took me to the restaurant and bought me my first Kebab. See, those are the things I have in my memory. Maybe someday, I never know what tomorrow brings for me, but in me, I know what I feel and I know the things I can do. [...] So integration is something that, it's not something you see as a [inaudible]. If you start to integrate, you start to espouse with society, you are in communication with them and they speak to you and they speak to you. Then you're exposed to their food. When I visited the people in I noticed all these things they did – they gave me the choice sometimes” (R17).

Although not all of our interlocutors had a stable residence status in Austria, they appreciated the country for guaranteeing freedoms of liberal democratic rule. These were often contrasted to situations of exclusion and political persecution in the country of origin. Typical themes included freedom of religion, gender equality, and individualism or access to education. A woman from Afghanistan argues:

“I believe the good things, or the positive things, as they say... For one thing, that I was able to regain my health. And secondly, that my daughters have managed to realize their wishes and go to university. They can both go to university and study here. That is something I am very proud of. I am happy that they were able to achieve something here during this time. And the negative is, for example, that... Of course, it hurts a little when you have to leave your home country. But Austria for me is... Austria has become like a second home. There are no negative things in itself. Of course, you miss your home country, but Austria really has a lot to offer. Austria has given me everything that I was missing there. Therefore, I can't really call anything negative!” (R14).

A man from Syria holding refugee status refers to the power of social norms:

“Society here is better for... Well, society in Syria is stronger than here. There the society is very much involved in the lives of the individual members of the society. Here it's not so strong, so here it's a little bit strong compared to other countries in Europe, but not too strong compared to Syria. And I liked that, even though we are talking in general terms. Here you can actually live as you like, it is also limited but...” (R29).

Arriving in Austria has doubtlessly affected the gender norms for many of our interlocutors. For example, a beneficiary of asylum from Syria who lives in Vienna and who has developed several friendly relationships with different women since his arrival in Austria, elaborates on conflicts with his wife:

“I have a bit of a problem now too, not with my wife... but with the [incomprehensible] for my wife. I don't know if we... when I see... so there are problems... I like Austria or I like the European system better, but my wife, she doesn't want to understand that yet. We are in Austria and not in Syria, I don't like that, I would like to finish with that. We are in Austria now, there must be a difference with everything... not with everything, but we can do something different. Everyone can eat what he likes, can drink whatever you like, you don't have to shout... But woman is woman” (R09).

Many of our female interlocutors point out newly won freedoms since their arrival in Austria:

“The men have always worked and the women did not have this opportunity [in country of origin]. They could never stand on their own two feet. But here you have the opportunity because men and women have the same rights. You are free here and you have the possibility to go to work” (R14).

“Yes, there are many opportunities for women in Austria and they often treat them equally, but not always. I don’t believe they do so in work, and I don’t believe in sports either. But you can also see that it is much better than in my country. Women have the right to do so many things that women in my country cannot imagine” (R11).

Clearly there are limitations to these statements too, considering them in the context of experiences of racial and religious discrimination, experienced for example by women wearing headscarves (see the chapters on employment and religion).

Yet some men are also reporting positively on more liberal gender norms. A Syrian beneficiary of asylum argues:

“We have religion and culture, here in Austria it is open: man and woman. At our place you can’t meet the woman, only marry, here if someone says “yes it fits” and then writes “it fits”, maybe you live together for 30 years and maybe you marry, maybe not. I really like it, I like it. No religion, no culture, no such thing... in the past, I didn’t like it, I did a lot of things, doing a lot of things, but my religion and my culture were always at the top [incomprehensible]. And my family was also open, it wasn’t closed, but that comes from other people, so the family is not enough, but neighbours and the city. Not only the family, my family was open, thank God, and my family knows I have a girlfriend and not a wife. I am not married and everything works fine. My mother, when she calls me, the first question is, “How is your girlfriend?” I say, “Hey, I am your son, not this woman, are you forgetting that?” And she says, “No, I am asking your girlfriend first and then you” (R19).

Overall, notions of belonging are mediated by multiple markers of social difference, most notably formal status, ethnicity, religion, and gender. For our interlocutors, each of these has been strongly affected since their arrival in Austria, with some conditions leading to an increased sense of otherness, while other circumstances have released pressure from group identities to the benefit of individualism.

## 10. Conclusion

Our preliminary analysis generally shows how the field of asylum poses a myriad of simultaneous challenges to collective and individual action towards immigrant integration. While other legal channels of immigration pre-determine a period of residence and require employment, certain levels of language competence, and financial means for housing, all these aspects have to be organised simultaneously in the context of asylum. Furthermore, certain aspects of integration such as employment or language support are politically denied in Austria unless a positive decision has been made in the asylum procedure. Individually, 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.

Our report shows how, for beneficiaries of international protection, concerns over integration largely focus on the problem of finding adequate employment. Following a period of a legal limbo during the processing of their asylum application, most of our interlocutors set out to take the next best apartment they could find and improve their language skills.

While asylum seekers are either accommodated in residential facilities or in private apartments, beneficiaries have to leave organized accommodations no later than four months after they had received status of protection. Without a (well-paid) job and without structured public assistance, some may run the risk of falling into the hands of exploitative landlords renting out rooms or even beds only. The role of civil society actors and friends in helping with flat hunting is crucial, as many respondents reported. Difficulties in finding housing are aggravated by the desire of some beneficiaries to move to a large city such as Vienna. Our analysis suggests that the opportunities toward satisfactory living are higher in rural areas, where there is less pressure on the housing market.

Although the welfare state provided basic means of living, many of our interview partners sought employment in order to improve their economic conditions. However, the search was often accompanied by a struggle to adapt existing skills to formal requirements of the Austrian labour market. This was not only a matter of speaking fluent German but also of providing formal proof of professional skills. While many had tried working in jobs far below their qualification, there was a general hope to be able to continue the professions they had held in the country of origin.

For some of the recognized refugees in our sample, Austria's easily accessible tertiary education system was a welcome opportunity to continue studies that had been started in the country of origin. However, in both cases, progress was difficult, since knowledge of the system and adequate language skills only came with time as social contacts with the local population and institutions increased.

As another obstacles, several interlocutors experienced discrimination both in their search for housing and employment. Our interview partners perceived that discriminatory behaviour was related to other people's negative perceptions of Arabs, Muslims and refugees. In contrast to these negative experiences many interlocutors appreciated Austria for guaranteeing freedoms associated liberal democratic rule. These were often compared to situations of exclusion and political persecution in the country of origin. Typical themes included freedom of religion, gender equality, and individualism or access to education.

For the experts that were interviewed, the most pressing issue was the ban from employment for asylum seekers (see Josipovic & Reeger, 2020b). This ban does not only affect the immediate living conditions of asylum seekers but also has implications for future integration. Arguably, valuable time would be lost if people do not get early access to employment and integration measures. The experts accordingly also criticized federal cuts in public spending on integration programmes for beneficiaries of protection, which were carried out by the ÖVP-FPÖ government from 2018 onwards. Provincial governments can only compensate for the lack of resources to a limited extent. Likewise, our experts highlighted that diverse political and legal initiatives to cut social aid would create extreme poverty among immigrant populations.

Regarding the education of children and adult education as integration measures, the interviewed stakeholders underlined the exemption of asylum seekers between the age of 14 and 18 from education and training obligations. Teenage asylum seekers would often only attend school for one or two years and would later not be able to compete on the labour market. Experts reported annual fluctuations in the funding of integration courses, depending on trends in asylum applications and party-political constellations in government. Integration courses would be focused on passing standardized tests and depictions of Austrian values would be partly built on national stereotypes.

## 11. Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the conclusions of this report and summarizing the experts' assessments, we recommend the following policy reforms:

- **Labour market:** Facilitation of rapid access to the labour market and lifting of the labour market ban for asylum seekers (see WP4); Counteractive measures regarding dequalification and easier access to the validation of qualifications; Keeping social aid for beneficiaries of protection equal to those of citizens in order to provide minimum socio-economic support structures.
- **Adult education:** Return to federal investment in integration courses as well as in programmes for the evaluation and promotion of labour market skills; Stronger focus on providing system knowledge about the Austrian education system and associated labour market opportunities within integration courses.
- **Education for children:** Inclusion of asylum seekers in the agegroup 14-18 into education and training obligations.
- **Housing:** Public assistance in the form of financial support for housing integration and the development of innovative implementation-oriented models for the promotion of access to affordable housing.
- **Psychosocial health:** Further expansion of the offers in the respective languages for all age groups in order to address long-term traumatization.
- **Citizenship and notions of belonging:** Lowering criteria for access to citizenship or providing stronger legal stability and associated rights of asylum status (see WP3); Avoiding moralizing, stereotypical, and dichotomous depictions of Austrian and foreign citizens in public communication and integration courses.



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## Appendix

### Interviews with asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection

	Country of Origin	Federal state	Gender <sup>1</sup>	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

Note 1: m = male, f = female.

**Interviews with experts**

	<b>Main field of expertise</b>	<b>Type of institution</b>	<b>Work profile</b>
<b>Vienna</b>			
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
<b>Upper Austria</b>			
E04	Reception/Integration	NGO	Administrative & practical
E05	Reception/Integration	NGO	Administrative
E10	Reception/Integration	Local government	Administrative
E12	Reception/Integration	Public administration	Administrative & practical
<b>National level</b>			
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