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Integrating Recent Refugees into the Labour Market: The Action Net in Austria

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Introduction

We welcome with open arms those Ukrainians who have to flee from Putin's bombs, and I am proud of the warm welcome that Europeans have given them. We are mobilising every effort and every euro to support our Eastern Member States – to host and take care of these refugees. We will do this in full solidarity.

This is a statement made by the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen on 27 February 2022, shortly after the Russian attack on Ukraine. It shows a sentiment across the European Union (EU) that Ukrainian refugees deserve solidarity and help from their European

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neighbours. Since the start of the Russian invasion, more than seven million Ukrainian refugees have fled the country, mostly to neighbouring EU countries (UNHCR, 2022). A smaller number are moving to other EU countries, including Austria, which is the context country of this book chapter.

Europe is thus the centre of recent refugee movements, described by historians as the largest on the continent after World War II. This leads to questions of an “effective” integration of these people in European societies. Thereby, policy makers and researchers alike consider labour market integration as the crucial piece in the integration puzzle of people settling in a new country (e.g. Dustmann et al., 2017; Brell et al., 2020).

However, refugees face various obstacles when entering host country labour markets. Previous research (see Lee et al., 2020 for an overview) has uncovered and grouped such obstacles operating at the institutional level (including integration policies), the organisational level (including a lack of support measures by public and private institutions) and the individual level (including a lack of necessary language skills). Moreover, besides the political support at the highest echelons of European politics, other actors are crucial in the labour market integration process of newcomers, including public and private support organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as employers (e.g. Ortlieb et al., 2020; Bešić et al., 2022).

Given the importance of employment for refugees, there is surprisingly little knowledge regarding the organisational environment of their labour market integration. This is the starting point of this book chapter. We analyse organisations and organising practices aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market, thereby showing the collective organising through the example of support in Austria. We focus on the wider organisational networks in which the support is embedded. The questions we address include: How is the labour market integration of refugees organised? How does the institutional context influence the organising of integration? How do organisations collaborate towards refugee employment?

We analyse these questions in the context of Austria, an EU country that has historically hosted a large number of people seeking refuge. In addition, the country has well-developed support structures aimed at labour market integration, against the backdrop of an overall restrictive migration and integration policy.

We further address these questions by comparing the developments following the 2015 refugee movements, whereby Austria became one of the few European countries with a large refugee population, as well as the recent movements due to the Ukrainian war. We identify contrasting developments in the integration of refugees since 2015 and in the light of the current movements from Ukraine.

Our theoretical basis is the action net framework developed by Czarniawska (2008), whereby we view refugee labour market integration as a complex action net in which individual and collective actors are connected to each other via certain actions. This action net is constructed and maintained through repeated behaviours, so that previous practices established in the action net are like sediments. In our example, practices that emerged around the refugee arrivals in 2015 serve as an interpretative template that helps to make sense of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022.

By addressing the organising of refugees as a collective endeavour and contrasting the developments in 2015 and recent movements, we are able to show, firstly, the interconnectedness of various actors in the integration process. Secondly, we show how integration is designed and implemented for diverse groups of refugees in the same context. Thereby, we outline how actors can learn from previous actions. At the same time, we show the cascading impact of the policy environment on refugee integration.

In this book chapter, we define refugees as persons who have crossed a national border to seek refuge and protection due to war, persecution or other circumstances that are life-threatening. This definition includes asylum seekers.

We proceed with an overview of the Austrian context, followed by a presentation of our theoretical background. We then outline the developments in organising refugee integration since 2015 and discuss them in the light of the current movements of people fleeing Ukraine.

The Austrian Context

Austria is an interesting context for studying the organisation of refugee labour market integration for at least two reasons. First, since 2015, a large number of people have applied for asylum in Austria (see Fig. 9.1) and about half of those have been granted asylum (see Fig. 9.2). In

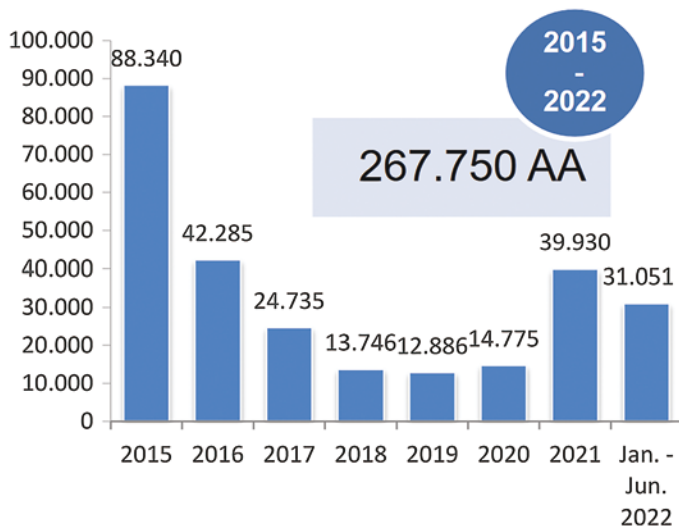


Fig. 9.1 Asylum applicants in Austria January 2015–June 2022. Source: BMI (2022)

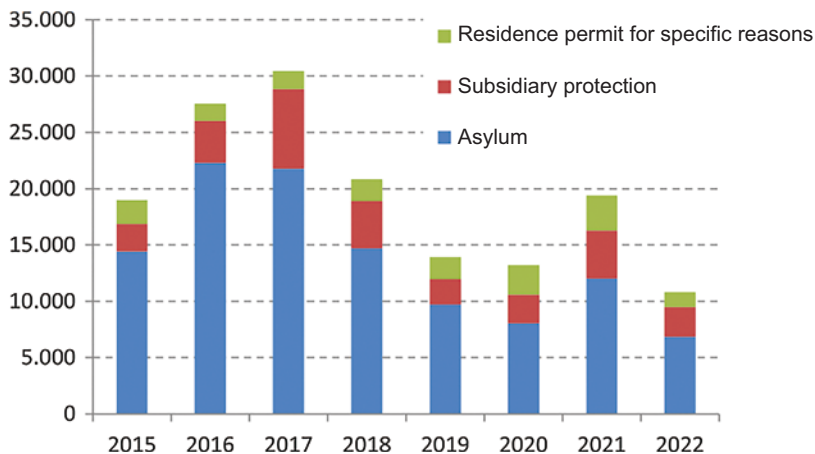


Fig. 9.2 Asylum decisions in Austria January 2015–June 2022. Source: BMI (2022)

addition, since the end of February 2022, almost 82,000 people fleeing Ukraine after the attacks by Russia have officially registered in Austria as seeking protection (as of the end of September 2022; UNHCR, 2022). This number is, however, only an estimate, as there is a high probability that some persons have not (yet) registered as they are located with friends or family, or that those that have registered have in the meantime travelled on or returned to Ukraine. Thus, it remains unclear exactly how many displaced persons remain in Austria and how many of those aim to stay longer (see Expert Council for Integration, 2022).

Second, various initiatives and programmes co-exist, which makes organising difficult. Austria has, since 2017, adapted the integration, and specifically labour market integration, policy towards assimilation (e.g. Bešić et al., 2021, 2022).

In the autumn of 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, civil society and governmental agencies were quick to help the newcomers. The now famous “welcome culture” (*Willkommenskultur*) supported thousands of people in their first weeks in Austria (Kornberger et al., 2018; Meyer & Simsa, 2018). At the same time, agencies and public, private and non-profit service providers developed an array of measures specifically focusing on asylum seekers and refugees. In the subsequent years, however, the political mood changed. After a national election in 2016, a conservative government came to power with anti-immigration rhetoric (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2018). This had a profound impact on Austrian integration policy, specifically with regard to asylum seekers and refugees. The top priority of the Austrian government was re-focused from a humanitarian response towards a “labour market first” policy and thus the swift integration of refugees into the labour market became a top policy priority for the government (Angerer et al., 2020). This has led to a focus on seeing refugees first and foremost as job seekers, leading to cuts in specific support for these groups.

Labour market integration of refugees is governed by the Integration Act and the Labour Market Integration Act (*Integrationsgesetz and Integrationsjahrgesetz*), both passed in 2017. These acts outline specific integration criteria that immigrants from outside the EU need to fulfil to ensure their participation in Austrian society and its labour market.

Depending on their legal status, refugees need to meet various integration requirements. Recognised refugees (Geneva Convention refugees or those under subsidiary protection) without a job must sign an integration contract and take part in an Integration Year, in which labour market integration is expected to be achieved via various measures focusing on competence as well as job preparation measures (Ortlieb et al., 2020). Asylum seekers can participate in the Integration Year under certain circumstances (e.g. possessing German skills at A1 level, completion of compulsory schooling). In addition to the labour market integration focus, the Integration Year also aims to aid societal integration through components such as the values and orientations courses and language training. Recognised refugees have full access to the Austrian labour market. In contrast, asylum seekers have severely restricted access. Three months after submitting their asylum application, they can engage in seasonal work and harvesting or community services on a minimum wage basis.

The data available allows the cautious assessment that integrating refugees into the labour market takes a similar amount of time in Austria as in other western high-income countries (Brell et al., 2020). The latest official statistics show that of the people who received asylum in Austria between 2015 and 2017 and subsequently registered with the Austrian public employment service (*Arbeitsmarktservice*; AMS) as jobseekers or were in an AMS training programme, around 50 per cent were employed in July 2021 (Auer et al., 2021). The quality of these jobs is mixed, ranging from temporary low-skill jobs paid at the minimum wage to highly qualified positions with above-average salaries or good opportunities for further professional development (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020).

Although Austria has been undergoing a period of economic growth, labour market integration for refugees remains challenging. The main barriers are institutional, including policies with regard to the recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as origin-based discrimination by employers, refugees' unfamiliarity with the Austrian labour market and their lack of social networks and credentials (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Verwiebe et al., 2019; Ortlieb et al., 2020).

The Action Net of Integrating Refugees into the Labour Market

To better understand how labour market integration of refugees is organised, it is helpful to map the underlying action net. Barbara Czarniawska (2008) proposed the notion of an action net to grasp ongoing organising. Adopting a constructionist perspective in the sense of Berger and Luckmann (1966), she described an action as “an event to which it is possible to attribute purpose or intention” (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 17). Manifold connections among numerous actions then constitute an action net that leads to an organisation—or, more generally speaking, something organised. As this approach highlights the processual, collaborative and flexible nature of organising, as well as the active doing that is necessary to make things happen, it is well suited to study the practical attempts of multiple actors to integrate refugees into the labour market.

In the following paragraphs, we describe the actions and actors collectively involved in the labour market integration of refugees. We start with general aspects that have emerged especially in the years after 2015 and then address the specifics of recent developments responding to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine. Contrasting the events related to the arrival of Ukrainians since spring 2022 with those of the years after 2015, when particularly large numbers of people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq arrived in Austria, allows for a better understanding of how an action net of refugee integration can emerge and change.

Figure 9.3 shows the integration action net with the interconnections of different actors and their activities, centred on refugees.

The Austrian government mainly operates through the Austrian Integration Fund (AIF) and the AMS. In addition, the federal states, and in particular the municipalities, have implemented numerous local programmes designed to help refugees find work. The AIF runs regional integration centres, whose main activities include counselling for refugees (and other newcomers), providing language courses (including certification of other institutions providing language training), providing value and orientation courses and managing the Integration Year (in cooperation with the AMS). For those refugees with full labour market access,

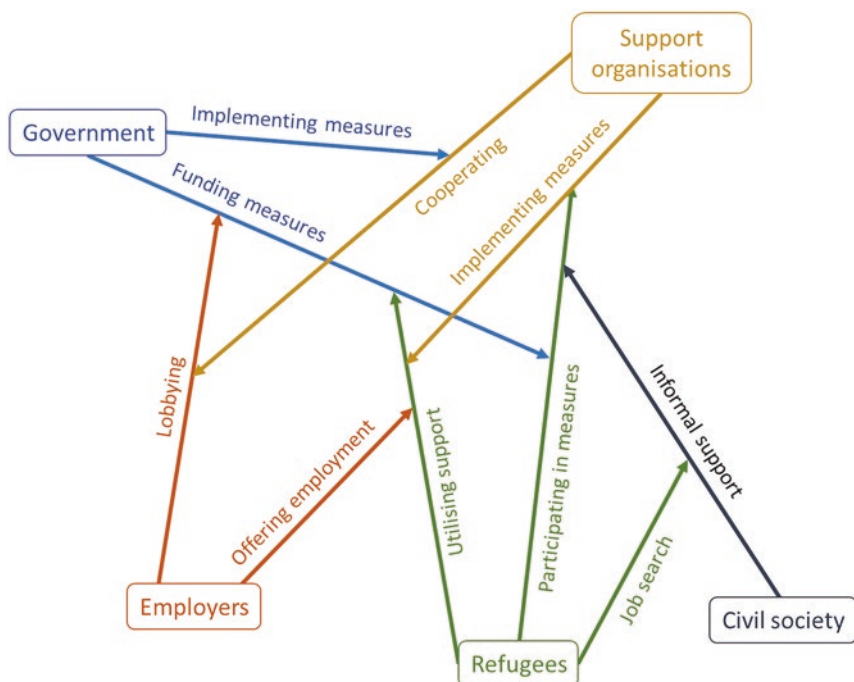


Fig. 9.3 Schematic representation of the action net of integrating refugees into the Austrian labour market

the AMS offers further services such as advice and guidance based on a skills assessment, wage subsidies for employment and qualification measures. AMS officers also decide on the participation in language courses, which are free of charge for the refugees. However, whereas the Austrian government emphasises the need to learn German, and language proficiency is a critical prerequisite for successful labour market integration (Cheng et al., 2021; Ortlieb et al., 2020), budget cuts in 2018 resulted in refugees only being offered free language courses up to A2 level. The refugees themselves must pay for more advanced levels. In addition, AMS teams specialised in counselling immigrants were abolished.

Refugees without jobs and not in education are obliged to register with the AMS. If they do not participate in integration-related measures they face serious consequences, including cuts in welfare and other public services by the AIF and AMS (Konle-Seidl, 2018). They can find a job

through the AMS job board and must prove to the AMS that they regularly apply for jobs with employers.

The AIF and the AMS cooperate with other support institutions, such as NGOs and other private service providers that deliver labour market support measures across the country. Support organisations and volunteers, who advise refugees, help them put together application documents, establish contact with potential employers and sometimes also accompany the refugees to job interviews, play an important role in helping refugees find employment in Austria (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020; Verwiebe et al., 2019). One reason for this is that many employers have high expectations with regard to formal vocational qualifications and the cultural adaptability of refugees (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Support organisation staff and volunteers can often put in a good word for the refugees with employers and thus build trust (Ortlieb et al., 2021).

Employers are mainly represented via the employers and industry associations and have become more vocal recently (see further). Finally, a crucial pillar for support is the civil society, offering support across various integration domains.

How the Action Net Changed After the Arrival of Refugees from Ukraine

With the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in spring 2022, a new wave of solidarity emerged in Austrian society, accompanied by a strong political focus on labour market integration. Whereas in 2015 the civil society played a major role in the early integration, employers are now much more vocal and various initiatives by employer organisations and companies have emerged that aim at a quick labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees. Thus, we argue that the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has entrenched the labour market focus of the integration policies. We describe this in more detail further.

A major difference between 2015 and 2022 relates to the legal framework. As outlined in the contextual description earlier, the integration of asylum seekers and refugees that came into the country in 2015 is

governed by the two 2017 Integration Acts at the national level. In contrast, EU legislation governs the integration of refugees from Ukraine. For the first time in history, the EU invoked the temporary protection directive allowing Ukrainian citizens that are fleeing the Russian invasion the right to live and work in the EU.¹ This means that under this scheme, those who have been displaced as a result of the Russian invasion do not need to apply for asylum but immediately receive temporary protection status. This status, which allows free access to the labour market, health insurance and the educational system, is initially for one year but can be extended to three years. In addition, the Austrian government promised quick and unbureaucratic solutions for housing, education and employment. The fact that the refugees from Ukraine are allowed to work immediately (with higher minimum wages compared to asylum seekers from 2015) allows for a faster access to the labour market, even if some cannot work fully due to personal reasons or limited job offers.

Politicians and public media have also used a special label to denote Ukrainians: Displaced Persons (*Vertriebene*) instead of Refugees (*Geflüchtete; Flüchtlinge*). This linguistic distinction also made it easier in public discourse to justify unequal treatment of Ukrainians and earlier refugee cohorts. The temporary protection directive had already made this distinction at the EU level, and the Austrian government has followed suit.

Another new trend is the role of employers and employer associations, which are much more present compared to the 2015 refugee movements. The AMS has initiated various information campaigns for Ukrainian citizens focusing on access to the labour market, but also showing connections to other actors in the action net (see Fig. 9.3). The AMS has developed an information website in four languages (Ukrainian, Russian, English and German), with abundant information about labour market access (AMS, 2022). In addition, employers have been especially active with various job portals (e.g. <https://austrianjobs-for-ukraine.at/>) advertising jobs specifically for Ukrainians. This can be connected with their corporate social responsibility efforts (Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021),

¹This is the case for 26 out of 27 EU Member States. Denmark, which holds an opt-out on EU immigration policies, implemented similar protection legislation.

although there is a potential danger of discrimination, as addressing a specific nationality in job ads is against the law.

The civil society again plays a crucial role. While many initiatives were developed quickly, including a scheme where private citizens could register if they wanted to host Ukrainian refugees, a certain “helper fatigue” is already visible, as reported by the media and NGOs involved in refugee support (e.g. ORF, 2022).

A final crucial difference compared to 2015 is the composition of the people coming into the country. The majority of refugees from Ukraine are women with children. The level of education is different, with initial data for Austria showing that Ukrainian refugees have (on average) a mid-level or tertiary education (Dörfler-Bolt et al., 2022). This difference might hamper labour market integration, as these women may be unable to work without childcare or unwilling to take a job that is below their level of qualifications. Finally, in the first months of the war, the majority of refugees wanted to return to Ukraine. While it is uncertain if, how and when this will be feasible, it might affect the refugees’ integration motives in the short and medium terms.

Discussion

In this chapter, we wanted to show that the labour market integration of refugees can be viewed as a complex action net involving multiple levels of governance. It also shows how the activities and relationships evolve over time. Tracing developments over time allowed us to show which factors act as barriers and which act as enablers. Thus, it can be claimed that there is great potential for change, which is actualised: for example, employers are much more vocal in 2022 compared to 2015. Such potential should be considered when designing integration policies.

The example of Austria shows how the importance of different actors also changes over time. This can best be seen in the role of employers in the integration of Ukrainian newcomers in 2022 (who have the right to work) compared to asylum seekers in 2015 and later (who had limited access to the labour market). Such changes reveal the complexity of coordination and cooperation between different actors in the action net of refugees’ labour market integration.

A significant number of the changes can be explained by the political and societal framing of Ukrainians as Europeans; in particular, non-Muslims. This led to complaints about the unequal treatment of refugees from different backgrounds. Yet it is also clear that the Austrian government and civil society have learned a lot from the past, which has enabled them to respond more quickly and effectively to the arrival of Ukrainians. The current labour market situation also plays an important role. In spring 2022, as the result of the pandemic, the shortage of skilled workers was greater than ever before, especially in the healthcare and technology sectors. This is another reason why employers showed a great willingness to hire Ukrainians quickly.

Still, a “labour market first” policy should be looked at critically, as refugees need time to adjust to a new working environment, and other integration domains need to be taken into account. Finally, as has become clearly visible in the varying forms of support from the civil society, the initial wave of solidarity quickly recedes, whereas integration needs to be looked at as an investment over time.

Various questions for further research remain, including issues concerning the labour market integration of persons without a longer-term perspective in the receiving country (expats), as well as the issues of collaboration between various actors involved in the integration process over time. The role of employers is crucial here. While many are willing to employ Ukrainians, the Expert Council for Integration in Austria has revealed a number of potential difficulties, such as the fact that the temporary protection status of Ukrainians makes longer-term investment in them unattractive for companies. As it is uncertain how long the war in Ukraine will last and whether those who are in Austria now will stay longer, ensuring proper integration into the labour market and beyond remains a challenging task.

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