Chapter 5
Before and After the Reception Crisis of 2015: Asylum and Reception Policies in Austria

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5.1 Introduction

In 2015 Austria was among the European countries with the largest asylum arrivals per capita. Pictures of refugees crossing the borders from Hungary and Slovenia dominated the media and influenced how the issue has been framed, politicized and perceived by political elites, journalists and citizens. Although the massive refugee movement did not come as a surprise, the humanitarian challenge was enormous and the reception framework went through a major crisis. When state institutions partly failed to serve the high numbers of refugees with accommodation and basic services, volunteers from all walks of life and human rights organizations reacted and did their best to provide help and support. During this refugee policy crisis[1] local communities became key actors and sites in the admission of asylum seekers. However, this included both acts of support for individuals and protest against the creation of new facilities. Open and closed doors existed simultaneously. In addition, the reception policy crisis in 2015 was intensified by longstanding conflicts between the various political tiers over responsibilities for the territorial distribution and reception of asylum seekers[2] (Gruber 2017; Haselbacher and Rosenberger 2018; Knapp 2015; Müller and Rosenberger 2017; Rutz 2018; Sauer 2017).

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[1] The term goes back to legal scholar Manfred Nowak, cited in Der Standard, 7 December 2015. Below we use this notion to refer to what is often called *refugee crisis*.

[2] Asylum seekers are defined as international protection seeking persons whose applications are being processed. Refugees are defined as persons who have been granted asylum based on the criteria laid down in the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951.

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Considering this phenomenon of large refugee arrivals, on the one side, and lacking cooperation within the tiers of asylum governance, on the other, this chapter focuses on the local responses to the asylum events of 2015 and considers both *administrative activities* by authorities and *social practices* by civil society and volunteers. Inspired by literature on multi-level governance in migration (Benz 2009; Scholten 2013; Scholten 2014; Tränhardt and Weiss 2016) and local immigrant integration issues (Aumüller 2017; Glorius and Doomernik 2016; Simsa et al. 2016; Walker 2014), we will combine a macro-level perspective on institutional arrangements and multi-level governance structures with a micro-level one to highlight not only vertical but also horizontal cooperation and conflicts between actors performing various types of formal and informal activities. Against this theoretical and analytical background, we explore in detail, first, conflicts and cooperation between the national, provincial and local levels over policy making and policy implementation in the fields of admission and integration. Second, we elaborate on how local communities responded to implementation needs and everyday life challenges during and after the reception crisis. Third, we analyse in which policy fields and forms of activities municipalities have gained or lost power, influence and responsibility during and after this event?

Austria is a case well suited to investigate local responses to the refugee policy crisis insofar as it applies a multi-level reception system that includes administrative tasks for the local level only at the policy implementation stage. As the local tier does not have any legal powers, a significant gap exists between those actors who are in charge of policy decisions and those who have to implement them (Götzelmann 2010; Gruber 2017; Merhaut and Stern 2018; Steininger 2006). At the same time, local communities pursue a wide range of social activities that clearly go beyond what is regulated in institutional arrangements on basic care. They help to enhance everyday wellbeing and inclusion into certain societal relations and institutions (De Jong and Ataç 2017; Simsa 2017). Finally, worth to be mentioned, the events of 2015 had a major impact on politics in Austria. The attitudes towards refugees changed profoundly during and after 2015 from welcoming to openly rejecting. Eventually, the asylum issue dominated the ensuing elections (Plasser and Sommer 2017), which led to a change in the coalition government from centre-left to centre-far right in 2017. As will be shown, this political shift to the right has severely affected the priorities in territorial dispersal and refugee integration.

This paper demonstrates that the assumption of a *local turn* in migration governance is shaped by very different designs and sequences. Austria does not follow a linear local turn-track in reception and integration governance as found in several country case studies (Hinger et al. 2016; Kos et al. 2015). As our case study highlights, the local turn rather depends on policy fields involved and the type of tasks considered. Most of all, in Austria the national government pursues a rather ambivalent strategy – to strengthen the central powers on admission policies and to take back responsibility and funding for policies to facilitate integration. Hence, the vertical governance structure clearly differentiates, first, between admission and integration issues and, second between decision making, implementation of policies and social assistance provided at a voluntary basis.

The findings presented in this chapter are derived from a qualitative analysis of the following sources: empirical studies on protest and volunteering in connection with asylum, human rights reports, legal texts, government documents, newsletters of the Municipalities Association, as well as media articles (from 2014 till 2018). Moreover, the analysis of local responses is based on a report on best practices compiled by an informal network of mayors (Forum Alpbach 2016). This range of material allows us a detailed mapping of policy developments and practical responses during and after the events of 2015.

In the next sections, we locate our analysis within multi-level governance literature and then we move on to a brief overview of current political developments.

5.2   Multilevel Governance in Asylum and Reception

The issues of migration and asylum have a strong national and European orientation. Literature discusses municipalities and local arenas primarily as sites where European and national regulation is implemented (Bendel 2015; Trauner 2016). However, as Walker (2014) underlines, national policies are not only being reproduced locally, but local sites also reinterpret national policies and may change the original intention by their own activities. By adopting a local perspective, scholars address the (discretionary) power of municipalities in the making and implementation of admission and inclusion policies (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016; Langthaler and Trauner 2009).

Based on the fact that municipalities exert major tasks in accommodation and integration processes, scholars analyse the relations between national and local levels (Kronenberg 2018). In general, it is noted that the power relations within a multi-level system are subject to challenges by actors at all levels through negotiations, disobedience or redistribution of responsibilities and resources. Multi-level dynamics are mostly expressed as cooperation and/or conflict. As Hinger et al. (2016: 445) demonstrate, the local administrations can "negotiate, enhance or question legal norms and regulations according to specific problem definitions not anticipated by or included in state regulations." Also, Alexander (2003: 412) points out that municipalities can either "complement, contradict or preempt" national policies.

In the event of conflicts, Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx (2016: 4) note that opposed policy rationales exist at national and local level. While the national government aims for control and sovereignty, local authorities tend to focus on social cohesion and well-being instead. Breeman et al. (2015) add that if there is a topic of major concern for the municipality, it will tend to handle it with a view to the best outcome for the local level rather than sticking to the national agenda. In the case of the Netherlands, among others, Kos et al. (2015) identify a situation of competition between national and local levels. The authors demonstrate that local authorities try to balance restrictive national regulations, which would lead to homelessness and destitution of unregulated/unregistered migrants, consequences which local communities want to avoid in the interest of coexistence, social order and security.

For Germany, studies which investigated the involvement of municipalities in the federal refugee regime stress a different aspect. They report that municipalities faced huge challenges and met them with rather pragmatic approaches. Civil society engaged in smoothing everyday life problems for both hosting society and newcomers. Finally, several studies notice that the local level gained in influence within the federal structure as a result of providing social practices (Aumüller 2017; Bogumil et al. 2017; Schammann and Kühn 2016; Tränhardt and Weiss 2016). In contrast, Emilsson (2015) stresses that in Sweden and Denmark the national government has increased its power and restricted the local governments' scope of actions (for more about Denmark see Chap. 3).

These insights from different countries reveal that the path is not linear, but that contradictory developments are ongoing; in some cases, the local level gains, in other cases it loses in importance.

The analysis of administrative functions of municipalities refers to federalism studies (Joppke and Seidle 2012) and to the multi-level governance framework. These studies include insights on modes of sharing and separating powers, activities and tasks between national, provincial and local levels. According to Benz (2009), the term multi-level governance describes political structures and processes at different political levels; multi-level governance may also refer to horizontal and vertical forms of coordination between state authorities as well as between state authorities and non-state actors. The specific constellations of the relationships within and between the levels also affect the policy outcomes. If politicians cannot fulfil the tasks and responsibilities assigned to them, these can be downloaded to the lower level.

Peter Scholten (2013) presents four approaches to describe and identify the relationship between the national and the local level and/or the role of the local level within a multi-level setting: (1) centralist; (2) multi-level; (3) localist and (4) decoupling. The centralist approach describes a top-down relationship between the national and local authorities. In this model, the national government is responsible for the formulation of policies, while local authorities are supposed to administer and implement them. The multi-level approach is characterized by cooperation, negotiation and strategic interactions between the tiers. In contrast, the localist approach entails a bottom-up procedure in which policies are not simply implemented but formulated as well. Finally, a decoupled approach refers to tensions between the national and local levels that arise from contradictory policies and interests between the levels.

As already emphasized, the different modes entail different manifestations of horizontal and vertical governance structures, conflicts and cooperation. Whereas a vertical structure describes how powers and responsibilities are divided or shared between national, provincial and local levels, a horizontal governance perspective indicates if and how administrative authorities cooperate with civil society actors, NGOs, political associations and organizations (Scholten 2013).

This chapter is informed by this briefly sketched scholarship and investigates local responses to the events of 2015. It discusses administrative activities and goes a step further by including also everyday practices and collective actions of resi-

dents – both in support of and in resistance to the admission of asylum seekers. We thus combine an institutional approach that refers to institutional arrangements and legal frameworks with a social perspective that covers acts performed by individuals and civil society.

At this point we want to clarify the key notions used in this paper and explicate our conceptual framework. The overall term *local response* is operationalized by two dimensions of activities and respective actors – administrative activities and social practices. *Administrative activities* pertain to officials and cover mainly implementation policies in the field of admission and basic care provision. By contrast, *social practices* are performed by individuals, initiatives and organizations who act for or against the admission of asylum seekers and their inclusion in local communities. Expanding work by Scholten (2013) in order to capture conflicts and cooperation between the tiers and actors we refer to multi-level governance framework which differentiates between *vertical* and *horizontal* structures. The vertical approach looks at the dynamics of legal responsibilities between the administrative levels (national, provincial, local). The horizontal approach sheds light on interactions, cooperation and conflicts among local actors, mostly mayors and refugee initiatives (see Table 5.1).

5.3 Contextual Information: Application Numbers and Asylum Politics

The reception policy crisis in 2015 was very serious, but it did not come as a surprise. Already in 2014, the two initial reception centres, designated to accommodate asylum seekers during the phase of bringing in their asylum claim, were overcrowded and overstrained. In late spring 2015, the large-scale facility in Traiskirchen, which is equipped to hold 1750 individuals, had to handle 2500–3000 people (Knapp 2015). At this time, the mayor of the city, alongside human rights activists and refugees from the camp, protested outside the Ministry of the Interior in Vienna

Table 5.1 Framework of governance structure and forms of activities

Forms of Activities/ Vertical governance structure	Administrative activities	Social practices
National level	Decision making on admission and integration	–
Provincial level	Decision making on and implementation of admission/ reception policies	–
Local level	Implementation of reception policies (basic care services)	Horizontal governance: Authorities and volunteers to welcome and integrate

Source: own illustration

and demanded better reception conditions and a faster distribution of refugees to other provinces. However, this protest met without any response or success.

With 90,000 asylum applications in 2015, almost four times the number of 2014, the demand for reception facilities and basic care increased massively. Within 1 year, the demand for accommodation places had risen from 30,000 to 78,884 by December 2015 (Mouzourakis and Taylor 2016). Between June and November 2015, the number of municipalities hosting asylum seekers, most of them located in rural areas, rose from 683 to 1138 (out of 2100 municipalities nationwide; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2015). This rise in the total number of municipalities indicates that small municipalities also came to host asylum seekers. Not only were asylum seekers distributed to small rural areas, within a few months the facilities had to be expanded from small and medium-sized facilities to some large-scale and camp-like settings (Knapp 2015).

The large influx lasted for a brief period of time. As a consequence of national and European measures, in particular the EU-Turkey refugee deal in March 2016 and the following closure of the Balkan route, the number of asylum applications dropped significantly.[3]

Interestingly, the number of asylum applications has continued to fall, but the issue of asylum has remained a highly negative politicized issue since then. As will be shown below, the situation was not only characterized by intense struggles between the national and municipal levels over the need to accommodate asylum seekers, it was also followed by major political changes. In 2016, the Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) came under pressure by his conservative coalition partner and the far-right opposition party to resign. Doubtless there were several reasons behind this resignation, but they included his role in the summer of 2015 when the government decided to take in refugees as well as letting them move through the country, largely without any registration at the borders. This loss of control over borders was a decisive factor in public perception. Within a very short time, attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees changed from welcome to refusal, from an emphasis on humanitarian aspects to the threats and burdens that come with admitting refugees. Eventually, the provincial and the national election campaigns in 2017 became dominated by the asylum theme. The political promise of measures to stop future asylum seeker movements were supported by a majority of voters and led to a change in the government composition. The coalition government of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) was removed from office, to be replaced by a coalition government formed by the ÖVP and the far-right Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ).

Before we shall elaborate on the consequences of this change in government, we shall now turn to conflicts and lack of cooperation within the vertical governance structure and show how this impacted on the management of the reception crisis.

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[3] In 2017, it had dropped by 42% compared with 2016 (Federal Ministry of Interior 2017).

5.4   Lack of Cooperation: The Local Within the Legal Framework

Drawing on the four-dimensional typology of multi-level governance proposed by Scholten (2013) and speaking strictly in legal terms, we can identify two phases in the Austrian case: a centralist governance phase from 1991 to 2004, and a multi-level governance phase after 2004, characterized by divisions of powers between the national and the provincial level, but with the municipalities left out in this framework.

Below, we briefly sketch the Austrian reception regime and then go on to show how the local level responded to the demand for huge numbers of accommodation places in 2015. We argue that the federalist framework, which largely ignored and ignores the role of municipalities, has to be seen as a cause for the conflicts with and resistance from municipalities and communities.

5.4.1   A Multi-level Framework without Municipalities

In 1990, for the first time in history, nationwide basic reception conditions were adopted and the responsibility for material support assigned to the national level. One year later, the *Asylum Act* introduced accelerated asylum procedures in an effort to reduce the number of asylum applications. The aim of sharing responsibilities for basic care and accommodation between the federal state and the provinces could not be reached. Eventually, the legal responsibility for the reception remained with the national government till 2004, when a multi-level framework was introduced in the course of the transposition of *Council Directive 2003/9/EC 2003*.

The current legal basis for reception conditions and responsibilities for asylum seekers is the *Basic Welfare Support Agreement* (*Grundversorgungsvereinbarung, GVV*) of 2004. This framework was negotiated between the federal government and the governors of the nine provinces in the interest of achieving two goals: First, to comply with Council Directive 2003/9/EC 2003, which stipulates minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, and second, to implement a power- and cost-sharing model between the federal government and the provinces. In this regard, the agreement also includes the compulsory distribution of asylum seekers across the territory and requires the provinces to offer places in proportion to the size of their population. However, the agreement envisages no sanctions if provinces do not comply with the quota system. As a result, the law failed to ensure even distribution of asylum seekers across the country or to sufficient shelters. On the contrary, conflicts between the provinces and the national government over the distribution of asylum seekers continued (Rosenberger and König 2011). To illustrate the situation: In 2015 Vienna was the only province fulfilling the quota requirement and taking in a proportionate share of asylum seekers.

The GVV sets out a multi-level structure of responsibilities. The administrative responsibility for accommodating asylum seekers rests with the nine provinces, not the federal state. The latter is responsible for running initial reception centres, deciding upon procedural regulation and border policies. That makes the provinces more powerful on the issue of reception than in other policy areas, where the main decision power remains with national authorities. Vice versa, national authorities enjoy a limited capacity for setting up new facilities. In this regard, the mutual cooperation of national, provincial and local authorities is needed (Götzelmann 2010).

As mentioned, the GVV leaves out municipalities as decision makers of asylum and reception. Local authorities are supposed to implement federal propositions and provide accommodation sites and fulfil various incorporation tasks. Municipalities have a say on only very few administrative aspects (for example, on building regulations). In 2015 and after, this two-tier structure was far from working properly and opened up for mutual finger-pointing and severe conflicts, causing what is called a reception policy crisis.

5.4.2   Conflicts, Resistance, and the Search for Cooperation

As early as 2014, but even more so in 2015, tensions between the three political tiers increased on the issue of taking in and sheltering asylum seekers. The federal government, formally co-responsible for accommodation and support for asylum seekers, faced resistance from provinces as well as municipalities when they were looking for new accommodation facilities.

In addition to the increased numbers of asylum applicants, two other developments contributed decisively to the reception policy crisis: First, the national distribution system laid down in the Basic Welfare Support Agreement did not work properly, most of the provinces refused to meet the quota requirements. Second, some municipalities, residents and politicians alike, protested against the federal and provincial demands to set up accommodation facilities for new arrivals.[4]

Although municipalities have almost no formal powers on asylum and therefore no legal instrument to stop the creation of an accommodation facility, they hold informal powers to do so. Protests organized by municipalities contradicted, questioned and partially also pre-empted national and provincial legislation. One policy instrument which successfully prevented the set-up of new accommodation facilities was withholding the classification approval for a building conversion (Gemeindebund 2016a; GfK Austria 2016).

During the time of many arrivals, the Ministry of Interior decided to run large accommodation facilities, predominantly for financial and logistic reasons. However, these facilities, mainly emergency shelters, often met with local protest.

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[4] Haselbacher and Rosenberger (2018) collected data on all protest activities reported in the (local) media in the province of Upper Austria between 2014 and 2016. The findings below are based on this empirical study.

Sometimes the protests stemmed from worse reception conditions, sometimes from resentments towards the inclusion of migrants and foreigners (Meinhart 2015).

The resistance against facilities for asylum seekers was more pronounced in small, rural municipalities than in cities. According to the survey carried out by GfK Austria (2016), bigger municipalities (>5000 inhabitants) had already sheltered asylum-seekers before 2015, while smaller ones (<5000 inhabitants) often provided accommodation for asylum seekers for the first time. Personal contacts with ethnic, cultural and religious diverse people had an impact on instances of resistance from the local population, authorities and politicians. As the study by Haselbacher and Rosenberger (2018) reveal, especially people and political authorities in rural areas, where the idealized norm of cultural homogeneity continued, took to the streets and started petitions to mobilize against the admission of asylum seekers. Moreover, this study emphasizes that

> […] mayors play an especially important role in organizing collective action against accommodation centres. As they feel left out, local politicians have a strong incentive to speak up against actors on the national level, claiming their involvement in consideration of local interests and sentiments. (Haselbacher and Rosenberger 2018: 263)

The national government in turn criticized the local protest activities and held municipalities responsible for the reception crisis. However, the task of sheltering refugees was poorly coordinated between the authorities. This lack of coordination increased the tensions on the side of municipalities as well as on that of the federal institutions.

In response to local protests, the national government took several measures, soft and not so soft ones. In September 2016, it installed a *refugee coordinator* with the task to facilitate a better distribution of asylum seekers across the territory through dialogue. The refugee coordinator stayed in office for 1 year and then left somewhat disappointed about a lack of governmental support for and interest in integrating asylum seekers.

In January 2016, the government adopted some restrictive measures concerning the admission of asylum seekers. The *Asylum Summit* organized by the federal government with the participation of representatives of the provinces, cities and municipalities agreed to limit new arrivals per year to a maximum of 1.5% of the population. This condition was supposed to result in 37,500 applications in 2016 and to decrease in the following 3 years to 25,000 applications in 2019 (Federal Chancellery 2016).

In addition, the national parliament amended the legal framework and entitled the national government to open up shelters without the consent of the given municipality. The *Accommodation and Distribution of Aliens in Need of Aid and Protection Act* (2015) guarantees the federal state the right to operate accommodation centres directly. The bill is meant to enforce distribution of asylum seekers by the federal state, without consent of provinces (and municipalities). In particular, it allows the Ministry of the Interior to establish new reception facilities in those municipalities that have not met the reception quota of 1.5% of the resident population. In 2015, in a similar way, the provinces Salzburg, Vorarlberg, Lower and Upper Austria adopted

state laws on accommodation and distribution of asylum seekers in order to bypass local resistance against the admission of asylum seekers. Carinthia even introduced a quota system for municipalities and changed the building regulations to lower administrative barriers for running accommodation facilities (Gemeindebund 2016b; Müller 2017).

These legal provisions envisage even greater powers for the national and provincial level at the expense of municipalities. Therefore, following Filomeno (2017), we state that the local power in migration policy is rather limited, but local activities can be seen as the result of broader multi-level governance constellations and conflicts.

Summarizing these lines of conflicts, we identify three major configurations: conflicts between federal and provincial authorities over admission and costs, conflicts between federal and municipal authorities over admission and reception standards, and conflicts between provincial and municipal authorities over providing accommodation places and sharing the burden. These conflicts are not novel to the asylum regime, but they were intensified during and after the crisis (Rutz 2018).

5.5   Social Practices to Welcome and Integrate

From the very beginning of 2015, tensions and polarization as well as support and engagement ran through municipalities. On the one side, refusal of and protest against new asylum facilities, on the other, instances of welcoming and voluntary initiatives, which helped in providing shelter and basic care. Local authorities and individual volunteers became key actors in the reception and integration of asylum seekers (De Jong and Ataç 2017; Gemeindebund 2016a; Simsa 2017).

Municipalities are the sites were asylum seekers live and receive material support according to European standards (Rosenberger and König 2011). In the course of 2015, municipalities developed a variety of measures to deal with asylum seekers and demonstrated that their responsibility goes beyond the simple implementation of regulations from higher levels. Citizens, associations and local authorities alike gave a hand to asylum seekers to cope with daily struggles, guided them to participate in community activities and found ways for them to access education and the labour market (Mouzourakis and Sheridan 2015).

In view of the admission situation in Germany, Bogumil et al. (2017) differentiate two temporalities, which require different types of support. In the first phase, institutions and people offer services to welcome and provide accommodation and basic care. In the second phase, when structural integration becomes the priority, local communities facilitate access to housing, education and job opportunities. Language acquisition and social contacts, often provided by local initiatives, are viewed as important facilitators for successful structural integration.

In the following, we differentiate between two groups of actors who respond in a supportive way to the needs of asylum seekers: administrative authorities on the one side, and civil society actors on the other.

5.5.1 Administrative Authorities

In Austria, mayors occupy an influential position in municipalities and enjoy a high degree of trust among inhabitants. The introduction of direct elections in many provinces has even strengthened their role within the municipalities. This is particularly true of their role in communication and information sharing within the community (Steininger 2006).

Mayors have been at the forefront of the challenge to act and find humanitarian and voters-oriented solutions. Some mayors leaned towards protest and rejection of asylum seekers (see above), others found pragmatic solutions for the admission and inclusion of asylum seekers.

In September 2015, a nation-wide horizontal coordination initiative started to provide mayors with best practice knowledge. It was initiated as a non-partisan network by the European Forum Alpbach, the Municipalities Association and the refugee coordinator. The network meetings brought together mayors who already hosted asylum seekers and those who were planning to do so. In five network meetings, more than 350 mayors gathered and exchanged best practices in the reception of asylum seekers and in further integration measures. One result was the compilation of a *Handbook for Municipalities* (*Offenes Handbuch für Gemeinden*; Forum Alpbach 2016) which lists and discusses reception and integration measures developed and realized in different municipalities and cities.

The handbook shows how mayors responded in various ways to the admission policy crisis: First, mayors became temporary policymakers, creating individual policies in their communities and enhancing the structural integration of newcomers. Administrative units and mayors were particularly active in the field of accommodation, education and opportunities for community, and unskilled work. They supported families in sending their children into kindergarten and schools, sometimes even paying for additional tuition for them. They also tried to include asylum seekers and refugees through offering small jobs for the community, like mowing lawns, clearing snow or cleaning windows. Some municipalities provided support beyond these petty jobs and help with everyday life and included activities like opening bank accounts to collect donations which were then used to help asylum seekers with public transport costs. Here and there, cultural events and leisure activities have been organized to build interaction between different sectors of society.

Second, mayors created horizontal coordination and cooperation structures, some nationwide, some limited to a region. For instance, twin cities or neighbourhood cities embarked on coordination and exchange of best practices. Regional networks have formed not only between municipalities but also including regional municipal associations, NGOs or churches. Then mayors initiated cooperation with civil society actors. For instance, some created volunteer platforms to enable the involvement of and exchange with local citizens. Other offered space for volunteers to hold German classes or provided room where locals and asylum seekers could meet regularly (Forum Alpbach 2016).

5.5.2 Civil Society Actors

Langthaler and Trauner (2009) argue that NGOs and civil society play especially in reception and integration demands a crucial role, be it due to personal solidarity or professional interests. In 2015, the visible suffering of asylum seekers, including families and small children, triggered a broad coalition of supporters to improve poor living conditions. Individuals and civil society organizations provided assistance, such as emergency shelters, on a nightly basis. Across the country, voluntary associations emerged which helped ad-hoc with goods and guidance, but also offered services and assistance for empowerment and structural integration. This has been visible in Austria but as well in many other European countries (Feischmidt et al. 2019; Mouzourakis and Sheridan 2015; Pries 2019; Simsa 2017). For more information on the practices in other European countries see for e.g. Chaps. 6 and 7 in this volume.

Some civil society actors became involved only locally within a given municipality, others exchanged experiences with initiatives active in other municipalities, with NGOs or local authorities. They created horizontal as well as vertical cooperation and coordination structures. De Jong and Ataç (2017) noticed that established NGOs in the field of asylum did not necessarily cooperate with newly established initiatives, because of different views on professional or not so professional work with social care and legal aid.

Civil society actors are mainly committed to offer cultural services, such as language courses. They are the ones who often established the first social contacts with asylum seekers and encourage further relations between residents and asylum seekers. A relevant source for building close relations are common leisure activities, running errands or meetings within communities (Forum Alpbach 2016).

In general, local initiatives did not receive any financial or other forms of support from the national government. Often local initiatives relied on fundraising or donations to help asylum seekers. Cooperation at horizontal level with local authorities, and especially with mayors, facilitated to secure funds for integrative measures and care (Forum Alpbach 2016; Simsa et al. 2016). Sometimes civic initiatives have enjoyed the material or ideational support of individual politicians. For instance, Secretary for Integration in Upper Austria, Rudolf Anschober, launched a platform "Helping Out in Upper Austria"[5] to spread knowledge and experience over activities and to facilitate partnerships between asylum seekers and citizens, NGOs and local organizations. The main aim was to coordinate groups and their engagement in the region, for instance, through regional conferences for volunteers. The Green Party published a list of local initiatives in Austria on their web page,[6] to enable networking and to share good experiences.

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[5] ZusammenHelfen in Oberösterreich. Gemeinsam für geflüchtete Menschen. Quelle: http://www.anschober.at/politik/asyl-integration/

[6] https://www.gruene.at/themen/menschen-grundrechte/fluechtlings-initiativen-in-ganz-oesterreich

Civil society and NGOs often filled the gap where provisions were missing or had never been envisaged by the national government in the first place. One example were the calls by local initiatives for donations of money and goods to ensure asylum seekers had access to clothing and basic products. With regard to language acquisition, civil society not only makes up for the lack of German classes offered, but sometimes are the only option for asylum seekers to study German, as national programmes are restricted to those who have been granted asylum (De Jong and Ataç 2017; Simsa et al. 2016).

Unfortunately, this kind of positive take on asylum seekers and the supportive mood decreased over time. With increasing critical voices and negative politicization of the issue, an anti-refugee climate emerged, also reflecting a growing dissatisfaction with the positioning of the government as such (Der Standard 2015).

5.5.3   After 2017: Ambivalent Tendencies

With the far-right government in office (since December 2017), the policy making in the field of admission and reception of asylum seekers on the one hand, and the provision of integration measures for refugees reached a turning point.

The national level has reclaimed a dominant role, not only in border control, return and asylum procedure policies, but also in policies on the territorial distribution and the provision of welfare services for asylum seekers. The working programme of the government (Regierungsprogramm 2017) entails a set of measures to separate and isolate asylum seekers and to reduce the scope and quality of integration measures. In office FPÖ ministers raised demands to restructure the accommodation system. In particular, asylum seekers should no longer be put up in small units and private facilities, but allocated to big facilities, camps and barracks with a curfew on the outskirts of cities.

The overall aim of *campization*[7] is to send tough signals to future asylum seekers and the voting population alike complemented by the related strategy of strengthening the federal powers at the expense of provinces and municipalities. Moreover, an indirect effect of the campization strategy will be to make it unfeasible for members of the host society to establish social contacts and relations with asylum seekers. Campization works against any form of belonging, it prevents civil society and NGOs from providing assistance to realize basic rights of asylum seekers. A phenomenon that is also visible in other EU countries (see Chaps. 3 and 4, in this volume).

With regard to admission and basic welfare support, municipalities, in particular in rural areas, will lose their role. This is different for integration activities aimed at those already living in the country. Here, municipalities and local initiatives are needed more than ever.

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[7] Kreichauf (2018: 1) uses this term to describe „a process in which the recent tightening of asylum laws and reception regulations have resulted in the emergence and deepening of camp-like characteristics of refugee accommodation in European city regions."

Although the number and costs of asylum applications are decreasing, more and more facilities remain empty and more and more refugee aid workers have had their contracts terminated, the national government has decided to withdraw funding for integration measures. In particular, funds for German classes as well as the financial resources to facilitate access to the labour market have been drastically reduced (Brickner 2017; UNHCR 2018).

The policy proposals have caused an outcry in civil society, nowhere more so than in Vienna, where roughly half of all asylum seekers live. Critics accuse the federal government of jeopardizing highly necessary integration activities and achievements (Meinhart 2018). These policy responses will affect the scope and quality of services as well as the leeway of local communities on the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. It is to be expected that integration processes and achievements – in the domains of housing, educational institutions and labour market – will depend even more on the good will of municipalities and social relations with volunteers. This voluntary approach to the hotly debated integration issue implies arbitrary results. Integration may become a lottery, depending on where asylum seekers live and whether they are lucky to have access to volunteers.

5.6   Conclusions

This chapter dealt with the multi-level governance of admission and integration of asylum seekers with a focus on the role of the local level. Conceptually, the chapter uses the term *local responses* to cover both formal decisions and implementation of basic care as well as measures that go beyond this to include social integration activities. Moreover, the chapter included not only pro-migrant tasks regarding admission and integration, but also collective actions which were openly directed against the admission of asylum seekers.

In retrospect, cooperation and conflict between the political tiers dominated the responses to the asylum challenges of the year 2015 and beyond. Within this framework, localities certainly have been and still are the places and spaces where reception, accommodation and integration happens, where barriers occur and facilitators are in place. The role of municipalities in migration and asylum governance changed in the course of 2015 and after, but has been and still is characterized by ambiguities and opposing trends.

The local level has shown a high degree of autonomy in implementing or contradicting national and federal legislation and, in turn, has also triggered national and provincial responses. Nevertheless, in some cases the local authorities and initiatives made up for what the national and provincial level could not provide. To do so, municipalities explored support networking strategies through sharing best practice experiences. For some time, the national government had a huge interest in getting as many municipalities involved and to benefit from an extensive voluntary reception and network. This can be understood as turning to a more pronounced localist approach, where not only the national government decides and the local government implements, but both levels work together.

In the meantime, however, on the *admission policy* side municipalities have lost in decision making power. As said above, the national authorities were stonewalled in the multi-level reception framework, when they searched unsuccessfully for places of accommodation. As a response to the resistance against the set-up of accommodation facilities, in 2016, the national government adopted a bill, which point to a strengthening of the central state in the admission domain. However, this reactive answer is followed by pro-active proposals. The centralisation of decision making at the national level has been intensified when the national government has turned to deterrence policies to keep away asylum seekers from entering the country, for instance, by proposing camp-like housing run by the federal state. Eventually, the short-term localist approach shifted back towards a centralist procedure on admission and territorial distribution. Hence, on admission, the local arena has lost leeway as the federal government has strengthened its legal powers.

On the *integration policy* side, the past and future tendencies are different from the admission rational. Here, the local arena has gained in importance when the nation state was overstrained by large asylum arrivals, and it will maintain this role not at least because the national government has largely withdrawn from the integrating tasks and more than ever before it remains with civil society to help with daily life challenges and integration requirements.

We conclude that the large refugee inflows of 2015 challenged municipalities and impacted on the handling of ethnic and religious diversity. However, the change in government, followed by a change in asylum and integration policies, will again largely affect the municipal activities. For the time being, it is local citizens, associations and authorities who have a decisive share in the success or failure of integrating asylum seekers and refugees. All this happens in an informal way and without changing the vertical governance structures, involved are social practices rather than administrative activities.

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