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Albert Kraler & Isabella Skrivanek

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Arenas of conflict? How local integration infrastructures and multi-level dynamics shape the space for conflict and cooperation at the local level in Austria

Albert Kraler and Isabella Skrivanek

Department for Migration and Globalisation, University for Continuing Education Krems (Danube University Krems), Krems, Austria

ABSTRACT

The 2015 'migration and refugee crisis' had a major impact on national level politics, media and policy debates in Austria. This article explores how the conflictual politics of refugee reception and integration evident at the national level are articulated at the local level, focusing on changes in integration governance arrangements and multi-level dynamics in four Austrian municipalities, two towns and two smaller rural municipalities in the provinces Tyrol and Lower Austria. Leadership exercised by local government leaders and pro-migrant civil society organisations reduced the local space for conflict and opposition to migration. Key differences between the urban and rural cases derive from differences in their territorial, political, and administrative set-up and related differences in the role of civil society, the presence, or absence of municipal integration infrastructures and the nature of horizontal networks, particularly on a sub-provincial, regional level. Vertical relationships to higher levels of government varied along several dimensions.

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KEYWORDS integration; migration; conflict; cooperation; local integration infrastructures; Austria; multi-level governance

Introduction

The 2015 'migration and refugee crisis' had a major impact on migration policy making and politics in Austria more generally (O. Gruber 2017; Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). The arrival of large number of humanitarian

CONTACT Albert Kraler albert.kraler@donau-uni.ac.at Department for Migration and Globalisation, University for Continuing Education Krems (Danube University Krems), Dr. Karl-Dorrek-Str. 30, Krems 3500, Austria

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migrants between Summer 2015 and Spring 2016 was major turning point in the politics of refugee reception in Austria, leading key actors to change their positions and narratives and fuelling the rise of the radical right Freedom, while serving as steppingstone for the then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Migrant Integration, Sebastian Kurz, to take over the party leadership of the People's Party, to reposition the party as centre right anti-migration alternative to the far right and to take over the chancellorship after the 2017 general elections (Hadj Abdou and Ruedin 2022). Migration has remained at the top of the policy agenda ever since and has been dominated by negative perception of migrants' and refugees' capabilities and value orientation, a reliance on mandatory instruments, and strong centralisation (Gruber and Rosenberger 2021). Following and to some extent in parallel to the 'crisis' at the borders, the large-scale arrival of migrants also was a major challenge for the reception system and triggered an unprecedented spike of voluntary engagement (Simsa 2017; on Germany see Karakayali 2018) encapsulated by the term 'Willkommenskultur' ['Welcome Culture'] (Trauner and Turton 2017). Subsequently, the refugee crisis came to be used by political actors and other stakeholders as a key reference to justify or demand policy changes (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018), thus discursively reinforcing the interpretation of the crisis as a turning point.

While the notion of 'refugee and/or migration crisis' has been widely criticised, we consider the term quite apt, for a number of reasons. Following Bitschnau (2023), the term ‚refugee crisis' reflects the ambiguity of views and divergent perceptions surrounding the significant influx of refugees to Europe in and beyond. This includes stereotypical interpretations of refugee and asylum issues in Austrian public discourse (Greussing and Boomgarden 2017), as well as specific stages in policy responses, as depicted by the term 'reception policy crisis' (Rosenberger and Sandra 2020), and actor dynamics and outcomes Kriesi et al. (2024)

The crisis also triggered a series of integration-related policy changes at national and provincial levels, starting with a '50 points plan on the integration of refugees' and related action plans in several provinces. In addition, two integration acts were adopted, while at the provincial level integration-related considerations have also been incorporated into existing social assistance legislation. Overall, the crisis reinforced the trend of an expansion of the material scope of integration policy and the intensification of policy making already set in motion by the National Action Plan on Integration (2010) several years earlier. A clear change was the identification of refugees[1] as a primary target group of these policies, thus also linking asylum and integration policy more forcefully, even if these continue to constitute separate policy domains. The federal government also increased its efforts to coordinate and steer provincial and local level actors in relation to integration policy, thus assuming a bigger role in integration policy – in addition to its

central role in regard to reception policies (O. Gruber and Rosenberger 2021). While some larger municipalities have developed their own local integration frameworks and are involved in municipal networks on integration, only the provinces have a formal competence in regard to the reception of asylum seekers. Municipalities are also not systematically involved in integration governance and most relevant institutions, and policy instruments are located at the national and provincial levels. Yet the concrete impacts of large-scale refugee arrivals, for example in terms of housing or service provision or the social dimension of integration (neighbourhood relations, day-to-day interactions, etc.) have been specifically felt at the local level and created strong incentives for local actors to take action, despite the lack of formal competences and pre-existing capacity.

Against this background and focusing on a medium-sized, a small town and two rural municipalities in the Austrian provinces of Tyrol and Lower Austria, this article addresses two research questions: First, we examine how conflicts over reception and integration are articulated on the local level. Secondly, we examine how municipalities have dealt with the mismatch between their limited formal competences in integration governance, for example in relation not offering language courses or promoting access to the labour market, and the perceived need to develop local responses in a context characterised by a high degree of politicisation of migration at the national level.

While existing research on Austria has extensively covered different aspects of migration, post-2015 asylum and integration policymaking at the national level (Rosenberger and Gruber 2020; Josipovic and Reeger 2020), much less is known about how the arrival of refugees has played out at the local level. Recent studies have explored integration governance structures and modes of cooperation between national and subnational actors more generally, but have not specifically examined the impact of the 2015 crisis on multilevel governance dynamics and the role of different actors from a local level perspective (M. Gruber and Daniel 2023; Lukešová 2024; Skrivanek 2023). Both the literature on Austria and the comparative literature has tended to focus on the initial reception of refugees (see for example Haselbacher and Segarra 2022) and only started to address the longer term governance of their integration (but see Caponio and Pettrachin 2023 and some of the studies in; Glorius and Doomernik 2020; Jonitz, Schiller, and Scholten 2024). While studies have broadened their focus from larger urban areas and metropolises (Broadhead 2020; Fry and Islar 2021; Oomen 2020) to more 'average' cities (Schiller 2024), scholars still pay insufficient attention to very small localities (Caponio and Pettrachin 2023) and how they are integrated into multi-level arrangements, particularly in federal and other regionalised settings, as local studies tend to address the interaction with national level actors (Bazurli and Kaufmann 2023; Myrberg 2017; Oliver et al. 2020) and

federalism scholars tend to focus on provinces and regions rather than municipalities (Adam and Hepburn 2023; Hepburn and Zapata-Barrero 2014). Insufficient attention is also paid to the different structural, spatial and functional roles of municipalities.

At the horizontal level, studies have noted a shift from state-centric to polycentric governance and generic policies (e.g., on housing, social cohesion, education, etc.), but with weak or absent coordination structures (Scholten, Collett, and Petrovic 2017). Consequently, integration related issues often remain inadequately addressed. Mescoli and Roblain (2021) speak of 'grey zones' of migration and integration governance, which are filled by other actors, including civil society and local governments. Overall, integration policy in Austria is aimed at migrants whose status has been determined and who have a right to stay. Refugees, on the other hand, are first subject to the asylum regime and the transition to the integration regime takes place, in principle, after they have been granted status. After 2015 this led to a situation of limited formal competences for integration in the field of asylum, but pressures on local policymakers to respond to the presence of refugees and shape their integration.

The article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we present our conceptual and theoretical framework. In the subsequent section, we describe our methodological approach, including the case study selection, followed by an analysis of the overall framework for the reception of refugees at the national and provincial levels. The core of the paper consists of a comparison of our cases and a discussion of findings.

Conceptualising local integration governance regimes

In this article, we use governance as our analytical lens to understand local integration politics. A governance perspective is useful in contexts marked by the absence of a single dominant public actor and the presence of multiple state and non-state actors, complex forms of coordination, cooperation and conflict that unroll horizontally between different actors and vertically between different levels of policymaking. In our analysis, we go beyond the rather narrow practical focus of national level integration policies on structural aspects of integration, notably language, employment, and education and qualification,[2] and understand it following Heckmann (Heckmann 2015; see also Spencer 2022) as encompassing a structural, cultural, social, and identificational dimension.

Following Caponio and Pettrachin (2021, 10), we understand governance as both referring to the purposive dimension of governance ('political steering and social regulation') and a specific mode of policymaking 'based on coordination and negotiation' between different actors along horizontal and vertical axes. In understanding modes of collaboration, we draw on Caponio's

and Pettrachin (2023) typology of modes of cooperation between local and national governments and other actors. Distinguishing between a vertical dimension of collaboration, defined by a continuum between conflict and cooperation between different levels of government, and a horizontal dimension, characterised by a continuum between dense and scarce networking with non-public actors, respectively, they identify four ideal-typical modes of governance (Caponio and Pettrachin 2023, 15). What matters for our own analysis is primarily their emphasis on vertical and horizontal governance relations as central analytical dimensions.

While Caponio and Pettrachin explicitly consider the role of actors beyond local governments, they do not explicitly spell out who these actors are. To identify relevant actors and as a way to structure our analysis we adapt the typology of Ambrosini (2021). He distinguishes between, (1) pro-refugee civil society, (2) coalitions of diverse non-public actors, (3) opponents to refugee reception, (4) local governments, and finally (5) migrants themselves. For our analysis, we add a sixth category, namely public service providers on the national and local level.

Following our understanding of local integration regimes, we expect that broader structural conditions as well as functional and spatial characteristics will shape relevant integration infrastructure and impact the patterns of (non) collaboration (cf. Schammann et al. 2021, 9001). While Austria's municipalities show a high degree of formal homogeneity with a uniform model of municipalities defined in the constitution, in practice there is a high diversity linked to differences in size, capacity and wider functions performed by municipalities – as national, provincial or district capitals, location of regional public services, etc. (See Haller 2023). Spatial characteristics refer to the degree of urbanisation, including also characteristics of surrounding areas, relevant in particular for smaller municipalities (European Commission, Statistical Office of the European Union, 2021). Structural conditions refer to demographic dynamics and the economic situation, including the financial situation of municipalities themselves (Caponio and Pettrachin 2021) as well as the density and specific configurations of local 'integration infrastructures' (adapted from Meeus et al. 2020; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). We understand the latter as a particular class of enabling and constraining structures that shape the arena(s) in which local actors involved in integration governance (inter)act. These include, amongst others, public institutions (e.g., Public Employment Service, Integration services), NGOs, associations, faith communities as well as informal support groups and individual citizens supporting refugees. Such infrastructures encompass both more stable as well as changing elements and in turn form an important part of what we call local integration governance regimes. We consider integration governance regimes as involving these 'infrastructural' elements as well as principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures and longer term cooperation

practices between different actors involved in the governance of integration (see Krasner 1982, 182; Schiller 2024, 5). In terms of political factors influencing the likelihood of conflict and non-cooperation, we consider two aspects, namely party incongruence between different policy levels – which we expect to increase the likelihood of conflict and non-cooperation and vice versa (Caponio and Pettrachin 2023), and politicisation, that is the process by which 'something – an issue, an institution, a policy – that previously was not a subject to political action [is turned] into something that now is subject to political action' (Palonen et al. 2019), or, one may add, whose priority on the political agenda is moved up. Driven largely by right-wing parties, migration has increasingly become politicised in national, but also provincial election campaigns, which has also shifted mainstream actors to the right, thus reinforcing migration as a key political topic on the political agenda (see on the politicisation of migration during national election campaigns across Europe Hutter and Kriesi 2022). National level politicisation is not only driving the perceived 'problem pressure' on the local level, but also is articulated at times more directly in conflicts at the local level. Politicisation may also occur if there is a 'mismatch between local problems (or problem perceptions [. . . .]) and solutions from higher levels' (Schammann et al. 2021, 2908).

Methodological approach and case study selection

Our analysis is based on empirical research conducted in four Austrian municipalities as part of a larger research project examining the integration of recent migrants in small- and medium-sized municipalities (Caponio and Pettrachin 2021). Localities were selected using a common theoretical sampling frame, based on socioeconomic structural conditions and prior experience with migration as the two key variables (Caponio and Pettrachin 2021, 30). The individual case study localities were then chosen based on variations in population size, the share of (non-EU) migrants, unemployment rates, demographic trends and political orientation of local governments, aiming at maximum variation between the localities. Rural areas were identified based on population size (less than 50,000) and the proportion of the population living in local rural units, while excluding peri-metropolitan areas. Only localities with reception facilities – irrespective of their size – were considered. Reflecting the role of provinces in the Austrian context, we first selected two provinces and then chose two municipalities in each – the provincial capital of Tyrol, Innsbruck; a rural municipality in the main valley of Tyrol ('locality B'); the provincial capital of Lower Austria, St. Pölten, and a district capital in the province' less populated and peripheral northern region ('locality D'). Key characteristics of our four cases are described in Table 1, below.

The analysis is mainly based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 74 stakeholders at the local, regional, provincial, and national level conducted

Table 1. Overview of cases - territorial, political and administrative characteristics.

				Territorial features	Political affiliation			Refugee shelters		
Case	Province	Population (approx) (2021)	Share of non-nationals	Type of municipality	Political tradition	Local government (2015-2021)	Administrative function	Before 2014	After 2014	Responsibility for integration
Innsbruck	Tyrol	131,000	28.1%	Medium-sized town (Urban - large urban centre)	Conservative	Mixed (Mayor from a conservative list until 2018 followed by Greens, multi-party coalitions, flexible majorities from spring 2021 onwards)	Provincial capital	yes	yes	Integration office
Locality B	Tyrol	5,000	10%	Rural area (Rural area – central)	Conservative	Conservative majority	Ordinary municipality	No	yes	Only political (local councillor)
St. Pölten	Lower Austria	56,000	18.5%	Small town (Urban -Medium urban centre	Social democratic	Social democratic majority	Provincial capital	Yes	Yes	Integration office (since 2015)
Locality D	Lower Austria	6,000	9%	Rural area (Rural - Regional centre, intermediary)	Conservative	Conservative majority	District capital	No	yes	Only political (local councillor)

*Based on Whole-COMM typology. In brackets: Urban-Rural Classification used by Statistics Austria (Statistik Austria 2021).
Source: own compilation (Skrivanek et al. 2022).

between October 2021 and April 2022, coded and analysed using MaxQDA.[3] In addition, we also undertook a document analysis of grey literature and policy documents and analysed newspaper reports, both largely used to inform the fieldwork and the analysis of interviews. Stakeholders interviewed included major stakeholder groups involved in the reception and integration of refugees in the different localities, including the mayor and/or members of the local government responsible for integration, local officials in charge of integration affairs, pro-migrant groups, members of the opposition (in our case, representatives of the Freedom Party), street-level bureaucrats, non-profit service providers, employers, estate agents and private landlords, and representatives of trade unions and the Chamber of Commerce. In the case of locality B, not all groups were represented in the municipality and we therefore interviewed stakeholders in the wider region. A uniform interview guide was developed for all countries covered by the Whole-Comm project, with questions varying according to the stakeholder group interviewed. The questions were informed by conceptual considerations relating to modes of governance and access to key services (in particular housing and employment), as well as existing research evidence. The analysis of fully transcribed interviews followed a deductive coding approach, deriving key codes from the list of topics in the interview guide (contextual information about the locality, frames/perceptions of integration, integration policies, support structures, protests and mobilisations, perceived impact of migration, institutional interactions and multi-level governance mobilisation, self-perception of own role in multi-level governance framework), and was complemented by additional codes derived from the transcripts.

Framework for the reception and integration of refugees

The conditions for the local integration of refugees in Austria are defined by two distinct sets of policies and related institutional arrangements. The first of these is the framework relating to the reception of applicants for international protection (the 'asylum regime'). The second is the framework for the integration of third-country nationals who are legally residing in Austria (the 'integration regime'). This includes individuals with refugee or subsidiary protection status based on the Asylum Act, as well as other groups of third-country nationals with a residence permit based on the Settlement and Residence Act (see Figure 1, below and Article 3 of the Federal Integration Act). The latter includes specific integration-related aspects but is also closely linked to general social and labour market policies. Whereas labour market policy is a federal prerogative, welfare support is a provincial matter. The reception framework covers the duration of the asylum procedure and a short transition period of up to 4 months after granting of the status, whereas the integration policy

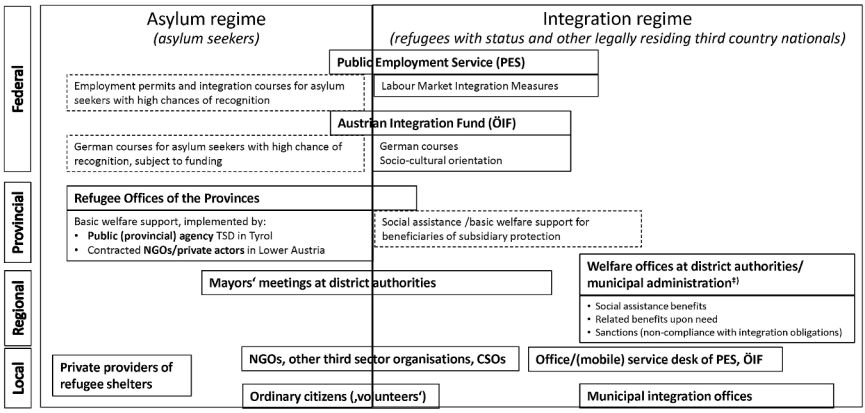

Figure 1. Framework for the reception and integration of refugees*).

framework mainly relates to the period after a status has been granted. This said, the two frameworks partially overlap.

A key element of the reception system anchored in the 2004 Basic Welfare Support Agreement between the federal level and the provinces is the dispersal of asylum seekers across Austria's nine provinces based on a quota reflecting the relative population size of the province. No similar mechanisms exist at the provincial level, but several provinces, including Tyrol and Lower Austria, have defined benchmarks to obtain a fair distribution of asylum seekers between municipalities. Provinces can run the reception system themselves or delegate it to third sector organisations or private actors. In Tyrol, an outsourced agency – Tiroler Soziale Dienste (TSD) was established in 2014 to provide its own shelters and manage the procurement of additional ones. In Lower Austria, by contrast, organised shelters are directly contracted by the provincial department responsible for asylum affairs or through contractual partners of the province (Skrivanek et al. 2022).

Following 2015, a distinct integration policy framework for refugees was developed at the national level based on the integration policy framework for third country nationals adopted in 2010, including specific measures for civic integration, labour market policy and social assistance. The main actors are the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) responsible for civic integration courses, the Public Employment Service (AMS), responsible for job placements and other employment measures and (provincial) social welfare offices, providing social assistance once refugees leave basic welfare support under the reception system and still require support. All three institutional structures are generally located above the municipal level and are only present in a locality if the municipality in question is a provincial or district capital, which is the case in three out of our four cases. NGO structures and integration services largely follow this structure, sometimes supplemented by some services in

other larger towns within a district and by mobile services such as on-site counselling sessions (Skrivanek et al. 2022).

Empirical analysis

In this section, we present our empirical findings, examine the constellation of actors, and analyse patterns of conflict and cooperation in the reception and the post-arrival phases.

Constellation of actors and integration infrastructures

The four cases in our study differ in the constellation of actors, and in the way the localities have been involved in shaping the reception and post-arrival phases. A first difference between our cases is their location in two provinces with different political constellations and integration policies. While both provinces are led by conservative governors, the Greens served as the junior partner in the coalition government in Tyrol, whereas in Lower Austria the radical right Freedom Party was in this role.[4] In both cases, the junior parties provided the councillor in charge of integration and asylum. In Lower Austria, this implied a higher degree of politicisation of migration as a political issue on the provincial level marked by conflict with other stakeholders, both horizontally and vertically, whereas in Tyrol a more pragmatic, cooperative approach prevailed.

The political constellation in the local councils of our four cases is mixed. While Innsbruck has a conservative tradition dominated by the People's Party and various split offs, a Green mayor was elected into office in 2018. The other town in our sample, St. Pölten, by contrast has long been dominated by the Socialist Party and was led by a Socialist mayor. Locality B (Tyrol) had a conservative mayor until the elections 2022, when the conservative People's Party lost its council majority, and the candidate of the Freedom Party became mayor. The other small municipality, locality D (Lower Austria) is dominated by the People's Party. While the radical right Freedom Party was a relevant force in all our cases in terms of electoral outcomes (between 9 and 19% in the most recent elections during the period under review) and used local anti-refugee sentiments strategically, it only played a more significant role in Locality B, in part due to media amplification.

The two towns in our sample had a significant integration infrastructure in place already before 2015, including a municipal office on migrant integration in the case of Innsbruck. In St. Pölten, the mandate of a pre-existing municipal diversity office was extended to include integration in 2015. All four localities saw significant voluntary engagement by citizens in the reception phase, which, in the case of locality D led to the formation of a formal pro-refugee association that became a key partner for the local government.

In St. Pölten, the municipality supported the creation of the 'diversity café', a civil society initiative which too became a key partner of the integration office of the city. In Innsbruck, the city offered coordination and training to volunteers, but no long-term structures emerged. Across all cases, civic engagement focused on service provision rather than activism, reflecting Karakayali's concept of 'infra-politics'.

Local governments and civil society actors participated in translocal networks. St. Pölten and Innsbruck were linked to the Städtebund (Association of Towns and Cities), while locality B was part of the Gemeindebund (Association of municipalities). Mayors in localities B and D also engaged in regional coordination. Civil society groups, including national NGOs like Caritas and Asylkoordination, facilitated knowledge exchange and support. In Tyrol, a provincial refugee network fostered collaboration between civil society and public institutions, highlighting the multi-level and translocal nature of refugee governance. The constellation of actors and local integration infrastructures is schematically shown shown in figure 2, below.

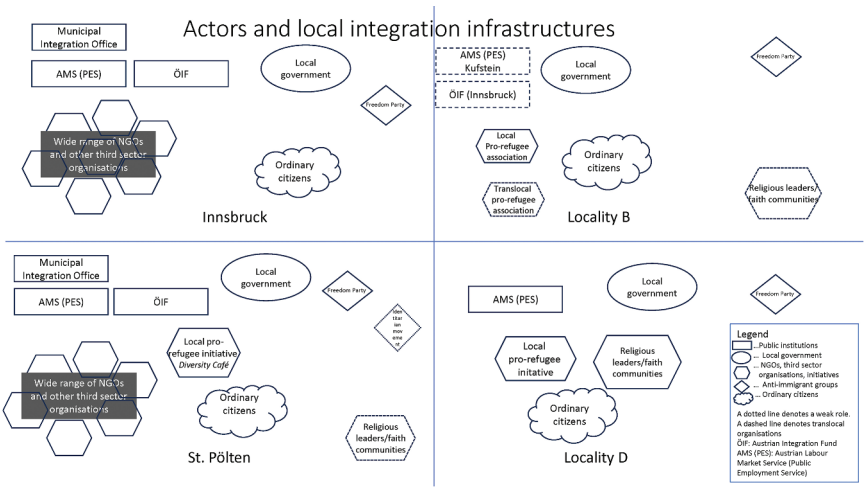

Figure 2. Actors and local integration infrastructures.

Dynamics and patterns of reception governance

All four localities faced conflicts in the initial phase of refugee reception. These conflicts manifested themselves locally in a refusal to accommodate refugees in general (locality B), or in particular neighbourhoods (Innsbruck) or as opposition to large shelters (locality D). Conflicts were most pronounced in the two small municipalities that had not shelters prior to 2014/15, where local political leaders also took a more active role in managing the reception of refugees.

In locality B, protests supported and channelled by the Freedom Party emerged when refugees were relocated to the municipality without prior consultation with the local government. In the local government the deputy mayor was put in charge to deal with the issue. While she could only protest against the province's decision, she actively addressed discontent and the presence of refugees, using informal relationships with like-minded mayors as well as exchange and cooperation formats for municipalities as resource.

In locality D, the federal government's plans to establish a large refugee centre triggered a public outcry and led the local government, supported by the opposition and the provincial government, to renegotiate the terms of the refugee reception, while the mayor used party networks to directly negotiate with the Ministry of the Interior, offering a different facility for a smaller yet still substantial number of refugees. Subsequently, the mayor also convened an 'Asylum Advisory Board' as a forum for regular and formalised exchange involving a representative of the district, the district police commander, local religious leaders, the management of the refugee centre and occasionally also the provincial asylum officer. In addition, the local government regularly exchanged with the new pro-migrant association, also providing small-scale in-kind and financial support.

Conflicts in this phase in St. Pölten and Innsbruck occurred primarily on a horizontal and neighbourhood level. These were politically channelled by the Freedom Party. In addition, the nationalist identitarian movement organised some demonstrations in St. Pölten but failed to mobilise on a larger scale. In Innsbruck, one planned camp was not realised, but all others were established with comparatively little protest.

During the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015/2016, St. Pölten proactively identified emergency shelters and generally aimed at spreading asylum seekers across the entire town area to prevent 'hot spots' and conflicts, supported by direct access to the Ministry of the Interior and at the time amicable relations with the provincial government. Informal networks around key actors on the horizontal level and strong network to other towns, with the mayor chairing the integration working group of the Association of Cities and Towns (*Städtebund*) ensured a steady information flow. The relationship with the provincial level became more conflictual after the 2018 provincial elections, when responsibility for asylum and integration was transferred to the radical right Freedom Party and the municipality no longer received information on the number of asylum seekers allocated to St. Pölten from the provincial government. In this political context, the Provincial Integration Council also lost any practical relevance, as points brought up by members were not addressed by the provincial government.

In the case of Innsbruck, interviewees pointed to the active and engaging role of the then mayor and deputy mayor in charge of social affairs, including

a regular 'jour fix' involving the provincial level until 2018 and regular meetings at the administrative level since then. Furthermore, the city's Integration Office also drew on its networks with NGOs and the Tyrolean-wide 'Network Asylum' (*Vernetzung Asyl*).

Dynamics and patterns of integration governance 'post arrival'

Conflicts at the local level remained low profile in the post-arrival phase in all four localities. While resentment, dissatisfaction and negative attitudes towards migrants were present, little open protest occurred, apart from isolated incidents taken up by the media and the radical right Freedom Party, notably in locality B.

In all four localities, general labour shortages contributed to employers' more open attitudes, and indirectly, to a more general welcoming climate. The strong presence of young people as a result of Innsbruck's role as a University city and the transformation of St. Pölten into a post-industrial university city was pointed out as important structural enabling factors. While also in the two towns, but in particular St. Pölten refugees often left after a positive decision, onward movement was far more significant in the two rural municipalities. In locality B, the lack of affordable housing left little opportunities for refugees to stay, although many stayed on in the wider region; in locality D it was mainly families who settled for good. On a policy level, housing was largely left to the private market, including beneficent landlords offering accommodation at lower than market prices, as well as civil society initiatives running housing referral services and providing transitionary accommodation. The two towns also provided emergency housing for refugees in need. However, access to public housing otherwise remained barred. In locality B, access of refugees to public housing was discussed, but rejected, as was exemption from kindergarten fees, underlining Locality B's position as a reluctant host.

The reception of refugees also triggered changes in the local integration infrastructures. During the initial reception phase, temporary forums were created, such as a jour fix of relevant actors in Innsbruck, an asylum advisory board in Locality D, or the reorientation of mayor meetings at district level as coordination meetings regarding the reception and integration of refugees. Some of these activities were either scaled down or reorganised after the initial reception period, and in locality B declined altogether as refugees left. Some institutional innovations became more permanent – such the institutionalisation of a pro-refugee association in locality D, the up-take of migrant integration as a core activity by the municipal department in charge of diversity in St. Pölten, or the establishment of a provincial refugee network in Tyrol.

While conflicts with higher levels of government were reported in all localities except Innsbruck in the reception phase, in the post-arrival phase conflicts with higher levels of government were limited to frictions associated with the referral of refugees to language courses and the difficult collaboration with the Integration Fund (ÖIF), and in the case of St. Pölten frictions in regard to restrictions in provincial social welfare support for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. By contrast, interaction with the federal level remained largely limited to indirect interaction through the Association of Cities and Towns. The latter in itself provided an important format for developing new approaches, even if perhaps on a more technical level (e.g., the use of video-interpretation in service provision).

Discussion

Conflict and collaboration on reception and integration of refugees

Our first research question asked how conflicts over reception and integration played out at the local level. Our analysis shows that conflicts have mainly revolved around the initial reception of refugees at the local level, which were more pronounced in the two small localities (cf. Haselbacher and Rosenberger 2018; see more broadly; Rosenberger 2018). As a policy devised without the formal involvement of municipalities, dispersal policy is a prime example of an issue triggering politicisation (Schammann et al. 2021). Yet access to higher levels of government and other relevant actors involved in dispersal policy could mediate conflictual situations (such as in locality D and Innsbruck), or prevent them altogether (St. Pölten). Importantly, apart from Innsbruck, where multilevel coordination was institutionalised, informal networks – party networks in the case of locality D, and in personal networks to the Ministry of the Interior in the case of St. Pölten, presumably resulting from the mayor's role in the Association of Towns and Cities. This points to the role of existing networks as a source of conflict mediation, which may be one of the mechanisms – alongside ideological aspects – that may underly the party incongruence as a source of conflict (cf. Caponio and Pettrachin 2023)

By contrast, conflicts in the post-arrival phase remained limited. Rather than signalling the absence of discontent, we argue that the successful occupation of the local discursive space by pro-migrant initiatives, political leadership and intense collaboration on a horizontal level, in particular with civil society actors, but at times also local representatives of national institutions, has contributed to reduce the space for open conflict at the local level (see for similar observations in relation to Dutch municipalities Jonitz, Schiller, and Scholten 2024). The exception is locality B, where opposition to the reception and presence of refugees was strongest. This can be explained both by active mobilisation of the radical right Freedom Party and the

absence of an integration infrastructure in the municipality, or more precisely the location of such infrastructures outside of the municipality.

Relations were more diverse vertically: they were largely absent in the case of locality B and D, apart from some involvement in regional municipal networks; collaborative towards the provincial level in the case of Innsbruck, whereas conflict prevailed vis-à-vis the provincial level in the case of St. Pölten, reflecting a fundamental dissensus about migration between the radical right provincial councillor responsible for integration and the social democratic local government, and supporting the thesis of party incongruence as source of conflict in a multi-level setting (cf. Caponio and Pettrachin 2023)

In both cases, no substantive interaction on integration-related matters took place with the federal level. We argue that the prevalence of both multilevel and local conflict in regard to the reception of refugees, on the one hand, and the relative absence of conflict in the post-arrival phase, reflects differences in the institutional design and temporality of the reception governance regime on the one hand, and the integration governance regime, on the other. While municipalities play a key role as places of reception of refugees, the key actors in the governance of reception are federal and provincial authorities. Both the absence of allocation mechanisms within the provinces involving municipalities in the decision making and the short time frame within decisions on relocation of refugees to municipalities are made to provoke conflict, including protests by parts of the local population, while fuelling anti-immigrant mobilisation and conflicts between the local government and higher levels of government. In relation to integration, established infrastructures and processes (mandatory civic integration and language courses, registration with the Public Employment Service and qualification programmes), by contrast, channelled refugees into established programmes for which national institutions were responsible. In this context, local level actors were left to address issues such as housing or social integration absent from the national framework on integration, largely within a 'localised' governance framework (Scholten 2013).

The space for policymaking in the absence of significant formal competences

Our second research question asked how municipalities deal with the mismatch between their limited formal competences in integration governance and the perceived need to respond to concrete local problem pressures. Combining insights from previous work (Skrivanek et al. 2022) and the material presented here, we suggest that municipalities responded in two ways, on the one hand, by intervening in areas neglected by the national policy framework, notably in regard to social integration and supporting and

coordinating volunteer activities, and on the other hand, by drawing on or expanding pre-existing 'integration infrastructures' or fostering the establishment of new structures. The socio-spatial characteristics ('size'), the administrative status of municipalities, and relatedly, the presence of relevant other public institutions, have important implications for the presence, capacity, level of professionalisation and roles of local level actors (Jonitz, Schiller, and Scholten 2024), in particular the role played by civil society organisations and initiatives. In the case of our two towns (as 'large' municipalities and provincial capitals), public actors and NGOs dominate as providers of public services, while in the two 'small' municipalities (representatives of) local government and individuals, informal groupings and voluntary associations are key actors. The case of locality D illustrates the importance of administrative status. Being similar in size to locality B, some public actors and NGOs are present as public service providers, while this is not the case in locality B.

Thus, the functional differentiation of the roles of our four cases (as provincial capitals, district capital or just 'ordinary' municipalities) partly overlaps with the spatial differentiation and implies the presence – or absence – of certain actors on the ground and of informal networks to such institutions, which in turn affects the ability of local actors to influence certain policy areas. This also impacts on the type and availability of support structures during and after procedures. This was most noticeable in the case of the two small municipalities, where individual actors – such as the pro-refugee association in locality D or the deputy mayor in locality B – were also put into a much more pronounced role in the local context, precisely because of the absence of other, more formalised actors. Echoing Haselbacher's and Segarra (2022) analysis, we also find political leadership more important in the rural municipalities compared to the more pronounced role of administrative bodies in the two cities. Whereas in St. Pölten the mayor was reported as not 'talk[ing] about [integration] very much, but [. . .] financ[ing] projects', policymakers in very small communities do not have this opportunity, but instead need to talk to mobilise resources. Yet they are not just 'policy takers' but able to actively shape conditions for integration in their localities.

Another difference concerns the interaction patterns between state and non-state actors, which do not fully align with the urban-rural division in our case studies. Civil society initiatives were a key resource for local policy makers, notably in the two small municipalities and St. Pölten, confirming insights from other studies on the importance of pro-refugee coalitions as allies in cooperative policymaking. Finally, the involvement in various networks along the vertical dimension provided an additional resource for shaping policies, both in terms of information sharing and for policy making. In summary, four points are noteworthy: first, in regard to reception governance the success of municipalities was very much shaped by their relations with upper levels of government, either using networks to influence policies

or relying on established collaborative modes. Only locality B, the least resourceful municipality, was unable to shape the relocation of refugees to the municipality. Second, even in the absence of formal role in key areas of integration governance (civic integration courses; employment, and welfare support), all localities have developed, or at least considered developing policies in their own right. Third, to develop policies they have activated existing local infrastructures such as specialised municipal offices or civil society initiatives for the purpose of integration. Fourth, due to the institutional dynamics of the reception system, refugees were present in all the municipalities examined during the reception phase. However, only three municipalities maintained an integration infrastructure in the longer term. This was not the case in locality B, which resulted in refugees leaving the municipality after acquiring status, in particular due to a lack of affordable and accessible housing.

Finally, our analysis shows that governance relations on a vertical and horizontal level differ between the reception and the post-arrival phase. Vertical relations to both the province and the federal level are key in reception governance, whereas in relation to integration governance only the provincial level is relevant, though not in all cases and only in relation to fields not regulated by the – in Scholten (2013) terms – centralist national framework on integration. This suggests that modes of governance are likely to differ between specific fields of integration governance. In addition, the analysis also points to the importance of different governance levels in federalised states, where a collaborative mode of cooperation involving dense networks in relation to one level may sit side by side with other modes in relation to others.

Conclusion

This article has examined how municipalities in Austria deal with the mismatch between the absence of any competence in relation to the reception of asylum seekers and the limited formal competences for integration policy on the one hand, and the pressure on local policy makers to respond to the arrival and presence of refugees, on the other. As we have shown, overt political mobilisation is rare in the localities under study, and has been a consistent factor in only one out of the four cases, while in another case it was limited to mobilisation around the planned establishment of a large reception centre in the initial phase of refugee arrival. Yet the politicisation of migration at the national level does shape local debates and frames, but also has very concrete political repercussions in the form of actual or feared electoral gains of the radical right in local elections (Haselbacher and Segarra 2022, 360). Combined with latent or occasionally voiced dissatisfaction by residents, there are thus strong incentives for local level actors to act, not

least to contain dissatisfaction and prevent conflict. As we argue, municipalities' capabilities to actively shape the reception and settlement of refugees varies according to their social, economic, and spatial characteristics, their functional roles and formal competences, the existing integration infrastructure, and the leadership of local actors and their ability to mobilise resources, including emerging initiatives that could be transformed into building blocks of the local integration infrastructure. The ability to build and maintain alliances, both horizontally and vertically, has been an important resource local governments draw on in all our cases, both for short-term action (such as negotiating the terms of the allocation of refugees to a locality) and for longer term action (for example ensuring a certain integration infrastructure catering for particular needs), reflecting similar findings in other studies (Bazurli and Kaufmann 2023). Rather than just an adjustment to nationally set policies, we argue that municipalities in our sample actively have tried to shape reception conditions in their localities, thus overcoming the paradoxical situation of federal and provincial dominance in setting policies and their absence as actors on the local level (see Paquet 2014).

Notes

1. We use the term ‚refugees' in a broad sense, including asylum seekers, recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.
2. The National Action Plan on Integration (NAP.I) in principle has a broader scope, but de facto limits most action points to structural aspects such as employment and education.
3. For reasons of space all references to interview codes have been removed.
4. In Lower Austria, a system of 'proportional representation' foresees that the biggest parties are all represented in the provincial government. Coalitions in this context concern arrangements between coalition parties on the distribution of responsibilities between parties, leaving low priority issues to parties not part of the coalition. In Tyrol, by contrast, a majority rule system is in place.

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Ethics approval

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