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Determinants of Migration Decisions of Asylum Seekers in Vienna

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Abstract

This study analyses the issues that refugees and asylum seekers face in Austria and the effects of their concentration in Vienna. We present an assessment of main difficulties and root causes for asylum seekers in Vienna. Data was collected via personal interviews and also supported by regional and European statistics. In total, 12 interviews with municipality representatives, NGOs, and migrants were conducted. Firstly, our study showed, that the asylum seekers face difficulties integrating into the Austrian labor market. Most refugee children do not have access to the compulsory education. It is argued that a more inclusive policy would improve the labor market efficiency in Austria. The anti-immigrant sentiment in Vienna played a crucial role in creating difficulties faced by migrants in the process of integration. Those who have been granted asylum in Vienna are not interested in moving to another country. This tendency is driven by the following factors: They consider Austria a safe country; they have already learned the language; they are overall satisfied.

Keywords: *Asylum seekers; migration decision; Vienna; labor market efficiency*

Asylum seekers density and concentration

Austria has been an important destination country for people seeking asylum since the end of World War II. During the era of the Iron Curtain, most applications were submitted by asylum seekers from communist East European states. According to Austria Statistics data there were more than 195 thousand applications for Austrian in 1961-1989 and almost 130 thousand asylum applications in 1990-1999.

After the turn of the millennium, asylum migration to Austria changed its character: as a member of the European Union and being located on the most important routes for migration from the Mediterranean region, Austria became one of the main destination countries for asylum migration within the EU. This showed in an initial increase in asylum applications during 2001 to 2005, however, numbers declined considerably from 2006 onwards. Between 2000 and 2009, more than 220 thousand people applied for asylum in Austria, mainly from Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Nigeria. From 2010 to 2015, asylum applications became more numerous again, reaching a peak of 88 thousand applications in 2015. In total there were more than 490 thousand asylum applications since 2000 mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Russia, Iraq and Serbia.

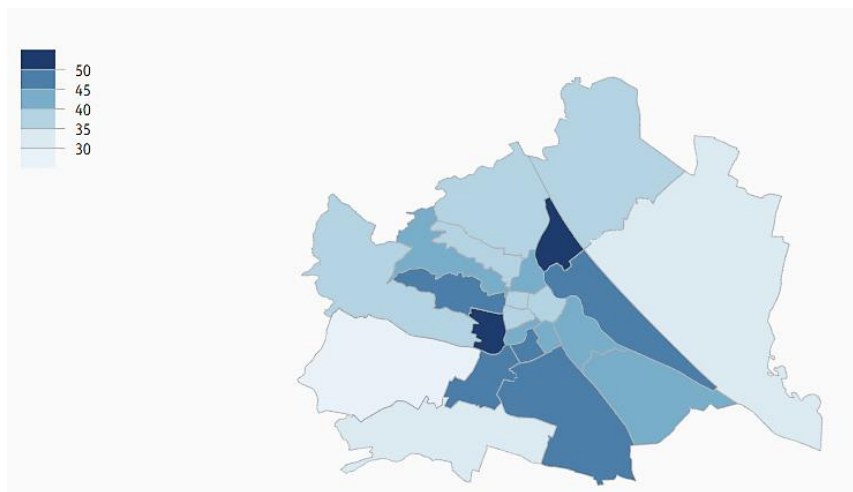
According to the data of the City of Vienna at the beginning of 2020, about 1,12 million Viennese were of Austrian origin, while 790 thousand were of foreign origin. The main countries of origin of Viennese who are foreign nationals or were born abroad have hardly changed over the past years: at the beginning of 2020, about 102 thousand people originated from Serbia, 76 thousand from Turkey, 62 thousand from Germany and 55 thousand from Poland. The districts with the highest concentration of immigrants are as follows:

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Rudolfsheim (53.6%), Fünfhaus (51.3%), Favoriten (49.6%) and Margareten (49.2%). On the other hand, central districts like Innere Stadt, Neubau, Josefstadt have relatively lower share of foreign-born people. Population of foreign origin by municipal districts in Vienna is shown on the Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of Population of foreign origin by municipal districts in Vienna (in %), 2020



Source: Vienna's population 2020 - facts and figures on migration and integration

Labor market insertion: choice over low-paid jobs, black market and volunteering

One of the most important findings was that there is no way for asylum seekers to enter the labor market legally, except for two available options (Ren et al., 2021, Aránega et al., 2021, Koraus et al., 2019, Vukliš, 2020, Vorobeva, Dana, 2021).

“Firstly, they can, for example, clean the premises intended for asylum seekers, but in this case, their remuneration for their work may not exceed EUR 110 per month. Secondly, the asylum seekers who are less than 25 years old have the opportunity to apply for an apprenticeship. However, in reality, this option cannot be used, because the time required for the training program is more than the permissible working hours of asylum seekers, which accounts for 22 hours a month, hence 110 hours in 5 months.” says F03, working for O02, one of the biggest asylum oriented NGOs in Austria.

So, de facto there is only one option for asylum seekers to legally enter labor market, however with a very low monthly remuneration.

Considering the low remuneration of refugees from legal jobs, the issue of illegal employment and salary conditions of asylum seekers is another important issue.

The practice of illegal employment is mostly spread in the following areas:

- construction in case of men,
- cleaning services in case of women.



The essential disadvantage of illicit employees is that they cannot have an employment contract or health insurance (Soares, Mosquera, 2020, Naujoks, 2020). The salary conditions for asylum seekers are very tough. As we have already mentioned above, legally their remuneration cannot exceed 110 EUR per month. However, they can often earn an additional 500 - 600 EUR from illegal employment. The latter makes the illegal jobs very attractive for refugees. We should also mention that asylum seekers don't have access to credit (Sivak et al., 2013, Bösch, Su, 2021, Hirt, Mohammad, 2021).

On the other hand, for obtaining asylum in their preferred destination, many refugees choose doing some volunteering (Popov-Momčinović, 2020, Ljubojević, 2020), which is an attractive occupancy for refugees. The reason for the latter is it helps them in their asylum process evaluation. F04, who is the director of O03 (NGO helping asylum seekers in their integration process in Austria) mentioned to us during our interview "We provide accommodation for more than 100 asylum seekers and I would say that most of them would like to volunteer either here in UTE BOCK or somewhere else. They often ask me if I can help them to work at least as volunteers. We currently have one African lady who is volunteering as a receptionist here in UTE BOCK because she hopes that it will help her in her asylum process."

Labor market insertion: recognition of education and public integration programs

After gaining the asylum the most important issue becomes the labor market position of those who have already been granted asylum. An inclusive policy toward the asylum seekers who emigrated to Austria would improve the labor market efficiency (Saydaliyev et al., 2020, Kabir, 2021, Novák et al., 2018, 2021). The latter highly depends on their level of education. According to F04, director of O03, "The primary factor in favor of educated immigrants is the knowledge of English as the necessary information is mostly in English. The research shows that the educated refugees are mostly Syrians. Having the opportunity to understand and access the relevant information, as well as the ability to communicate with the citizens makes it possible for educated refugees to have some opportunities in the labor market."

However, F01, assumed that "there is a problem of discrimination in the labor market for educated refugees as well. The most important reasons for discrimination in the labor market in Austria is the difficulty in recognizing diplomas mainly for the following reasons:

- In some cases, the recognition of the certification is almost impossible (for example pharmacist),
- The professions who mostly face this problem are teachers of mathematics and physics, doctors, nurses."

On the other hand, we should highlight that this does not apply to those who have an excellent level of English and work for a multinational company based in Austria.

In case of uneducated immigrants, they face the most problems and are the ones who mainly need help from NGOs. The research shows that uneducated immigrants are mostly from Somalis. The lack of knowledge of English makes it almost impossible to communicate and get the relevant information about the refugee regulations and conditions for granting asylum in Austria. Hence, they need the help of NGOs to be able to integrate to the new living conditions and apply for asylum (Jandl, 2004, Murgaš, Petrović, 2020, Cusumano, Bell, 2021).

The authorities of Vienna provide education for refugees. There is an Integration program from day one. The program includes a mandatory German course to level up to level B1 for every asylum seeker, as soon as they arrive. However, we should highlight that levels B2 and B1 are difficult for them to achieve.

Another important fact is that most courses are also paid for by the Arbeitsmarktservice (Austrian Public Employment Service, AMS).

On the other hand, Austria gives access to adequate education for children of asylum seekers. According to the rules for the education of children, all the children must go to school 2 weeks after they arrive in Austria. The period of compulsory school attendance is up to 18 years. This gives them the opportunity to integrate into the Austrian society in the future and have access to the labor market.

According to the official rules, children have access to adequate education, while the reality is different. For example, according to the non-governmental organization UTE, up to 90% of children in contact with them have not completed compulsory schooling. So, *de jure* all the children of asylum seekers should receive adequate education and have the opportunity of a promising future, but the *de facto* situation is much worse, with hundreds of uneducated youth.

Another important determinant despite the language barrier, in this case, can be the fact that many of these children have not been to school for several years. So, they are no longer used to studying.

Another factor can be that in the past, the common practice assumed the presence of 2 teachers for every 14 pupils in a class, including 1 teacher for children with problems. However, nowadays, this practice changed due to lack of finances.

Anyway, it is also worth to mention that there are schools which are very crowded with refugee children.

Asylum seekers have access to language courses organized specifically for them, that include also mandatory intercultural training. During the training all asylum seekers will first of all learn about some crucial aspects, such as:

- men are not superior to women,
- there is democracy in Austria,
- all religions are equal.

Secondly, they should try and learn to work as a team. While in the countries of origin of most of the refugees, people are not used to working as a team, in Austria, however, teamwork is essential. Such programs also help to build trust in public institutions which helps to increase compliance to the rules (Caplanova et al., 2021, Horvath et al., 2021). On the other hand, effective labor market insertion may have a positive impact on people's well-being (Orviska et al., 2014) and the economy as a whole (Hudson et al., 2011, Galstyan et al., 2021, Manić, Mirkov, 2020).

Due to Austria's conservative political philosophy and the distinct form of its postwar nation-state structure, the integration, and naturalization of these immigrants and their offspring was more challenging than in most of the other European countries (Rosenberger, Konig, 2012,



Kienpointner, Kindt, 1997, Gisselquist, 2021). The legal circumstances concerning political rights, residence security, and naturalization is one of the most restrictive in Europe (Milan, 2018, Výbošťok, Michalek, 2020, Gavurová et al., 2020a, Stefancik et al., 2021). The weakest social groups in Austria, in particular, the retired and the elderly, and low-income portions of the population who felt that they were competing with foreign workers (The Labor Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Austria, 2011). In general, the Austrian Asylum policy is limiting and prohibitive, leading to lower welfare and freedom restriction instead of supportive measures for asylum seekers (Gruber, 2017, Klučka, Nováček, 2020, Merhaut, Stern, 2018).

When discussing the factors influencing the asylum seekers decisions about their final destination it is very important to consider the relations between asylum seekers and host country communities. In case of Austria the relationship between asylum seekers and the Austrian communities are largely influenced by the housing conditions of asylum seekers (Ataç, 2019, Haselbacher, Rosenberger, 2018, Tan, 2021). The apartments dedicated to them by the Government usually have a small overall area and a lower standard of quality. Therefore, asylum seekers use more public space. The latter makes refugees more exposed to discrimination, as the public spaces are the places where asylum seekers often face the problem of being discriminated against. M01, who works for O01 NGO, describes the discrimination of refugees in public spaces. He also says that “asylum seekers often come to consult their insults in public transport and even though some of our colleagues were also physically assaulted because our NGO helps asylum seekers which makes some native Austrians angry and they do not always like our activities. The routes of this problem are also coming from the political climate and media reporting in Austria.”

Here it is important to note that the Federal Agency for Immigration and Asylum is the structure that centralizes the decision-making rights for granting asylum, possibility to stay or deportations. The only competence that the Austrian provinces have is the decision about the reception of asylum seekers. Besides, since 2015 the federal government has also the right for intervening in the accommodation of asylum seekers.

The research shows that there is prejudiced and wrong reporting, even false, alarmist reporting, first and primary in tabloid newspapers that have a large spread in Austria, which contributed to the increased illegalization of migrants and refugees in particular to a perception of migration as a threat to national security. Considering the importance of votes in elections, the public opinion has considerable influence on policymaking. With majority voting population in Austria having negative attitudes towards refugees, the politicians shape their politics accordingly (Abdou, Rosenberger, 2019, Petrović, Stanojević, 2020, Šveda et al., 2019).

Another important aspect is the security issues. We consulted this issue with F02, who works at the Department of Integration und Diversity at the municipality of Vienna. She said that “the number of police officers is higher in those districts of Vienna, where the number of asylum seekers is comparatively higher than in the so-called better neighborhoods with lower number or absence of refugees.”

The high numbers of police officers are necessary, as sometimes Viennese have conflicts with asylum seekers. It is mostly due to the fact that they do not like asylum seekers getting shelter,

food and money without any problems, especially when this shelter and food is paid for by their taxes.

On the other hand, refugees may provoke conflict and violence, too. It mostly occurs with refugees who have been in Austria for a long time already but cannot work and do not see any perspective. However, according to representatives of 3 NGOs which we interviewed (Asylkoordination, Ute Bock Haus a Diakonie) cases of violence from refugees are rare and when they occur, they are not specific only to Austria.

Labor market insertion: discrimination

The primary problem the refugees face after asylum are the harsh working conditions for them:

- From our NGO interviews, we were able to gather information regarding discrimination. Muslim refugees frequently consult NGO representatives with regards to discrimination for wearing a burqa. Those who have been granted asylum claim that they were most often discriminated upon while searching for a job. Some claim that they weren't considered for higher qualified positions such as teachers due to the sole fact of wearing a burqa. However, the NGO representatives that we interviewed considered other factors, such as an insufficient level of German, that contributed to their difficulties in the labor market.
- The Labor Office often offers a university-educated immigrant a low-skilled job. In terms of access to the Austrian labor market, the most striking features of the participation of migrants are discrimination based on restricted accessibility to high-wage sectors and pay gaps and discrimination in recruitment. While other countries experience an average higher period of formal access to the labor market, this period in Austria lasts for a maximum of three months. However, asylum seekers are required to pass the labor market test, which is typical only for several European countries, in particular, Cyprus, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. Moreover, there set certain permitted sectors available for asylum seekers, which are tourism, agriculture, forestry.

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Cultural and religious issues

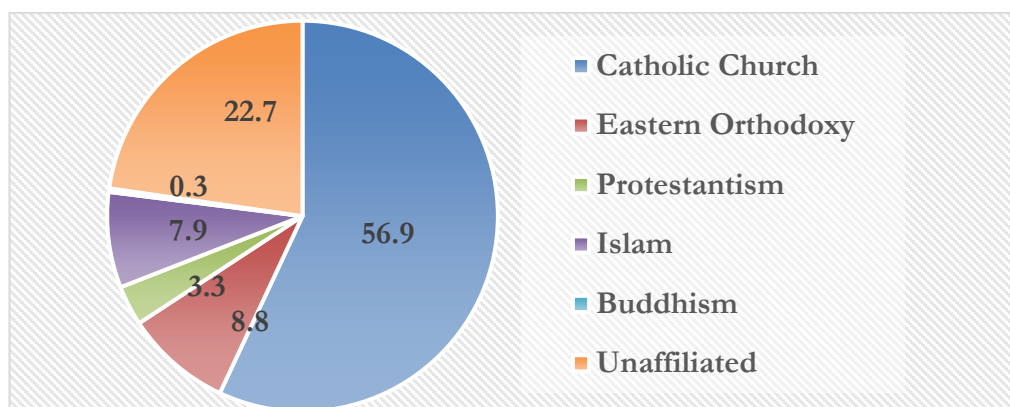
Integration always includes a cultural dimension and thus more than just participation in the education system or the labour market, or mastery of the receiving country's language. And conversely, integration into the education system or the labour market cannot succeed if the



cultural dimension is not taken into account (Balizs, Bajmócy 2019, Rosenberger, König, 2012, Gladwell, 2021). Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism is still the predominant religion in Austria and has a long and intense tradition. In the past 30 years, the people in the several migration movements to Austria brought with them religious traditions that had been scarce in the population, particularly Islam and Orthodox Christianity. As a result, religious diversity has increased. The separation of religion and state in Austria is a basic prerequisite to live a self-determined life independent of confessional world views. As a result of migration Religious plurality is in the first instance a sign of a society in which one can live peacefully, make one's way and find one's place without regard to religious affiliation.

According to CIA 2001 census, more than 73% of the population in Austria was Catholic. According to Austrian Catholic Church data of 2018 there was a significant decline in the share of Catholics to about 57% (~5.1 million people). The religious structure of the country is presented in the Figure 2.

Figure 2. Religious structure of Austrian population, 2018.



Source: Austrian Catholic Church, Wiener Zeitung, Statista.

Currently there are 29 mosques and prayer rooms in 22 Vienna districts. The highest concentrations are in the 2, 5, 10 and 17 districts. The distribution is presented on Figure 3 (red stars on the map). According to our calculations, there is a slight positive correlation of 0.36 between the share of population of foreign origin in the total population of the district and the number of mosques and prayer rooms (Figure 4).

Refugee camps and environmental concerns

The next area that we have analyzed during the current study are the environmental problems in asylum areas. No problem was observed in concern to the air pollution (Caplanova, Willett, 2019). Moreover, when talking about waste sorting and treatment in asylum areas, we should mention some critical positive facts. First of all, in shelters, waste is separated in the same way as elsewhere in Austria and none of our respondents are aware of any waste separation problem. Secondly, according to our NGO interviews, the organization of accommodation for refugees is on a high-level in Austria. Specialized residential containers have been built for refugees, which are connected to sewerage, water supply and heating.

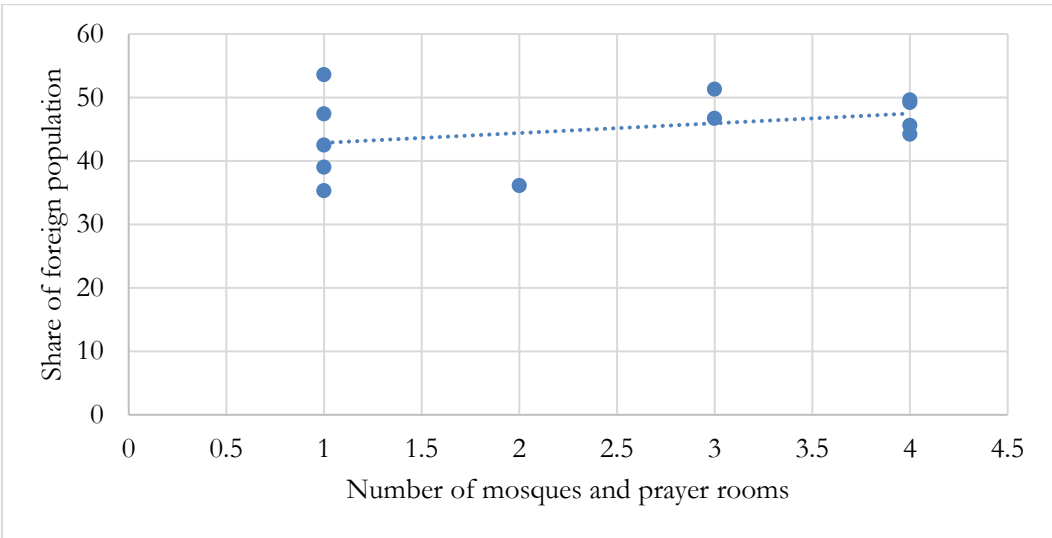
As for the drinking water problems, we should mention that there are no problems for asylum seekers in this respect, as there is plenty of quality drinking water in Austria.

Figure 3. Distribution of mosques and prayer rooms in 22 Vienna districts



Source: Created by the author

Figure 4. Comparison of share of population of foreign origin and mosques/prayer rooms by district



Source: Calculated by the author



Determinants of choosing Austria as the final destination

In the next part of our study, the interviews with asylum seekers gave us the opportunity to assess the main factors influencing their decisions for choosing or not choosing Austria as their final destination.

First of all, most asylum seekers who did not choose Austria as their host country mentioned the following reasons:

- They wanted to get to another country illegally (e.g. Germany), passed through Austria, were caught by the police and had to apply for asylum in Austria under international law. *M02 from Syria described us his journey from Syria to Austria. "It was about 20 of us. We all thought that we are travelling to Germany but we were caught in Austria that is why we had to apply for asylum in Austria."*
- Austria is not very well known abroad. It is often confused with Australia. *"To be honest, I did not plan to live in Austria. I did not even know that Austria exists. I thought that Austria and Australia are the same."* Says M02, asylum seeker from Syria.

Secondly, those who did choose Austria were driven by the motives of family reunification by joining the members of their families already living there. The latter is usually in contact with them by e-mail or telephone and tell them that they will have a better life in Austria. Economic reasons, therefore, predominate in this case. M03 from Kuwait explained us his reasons why he decided to emigrate to Austria. *"My cousins and their families have been living in Austria already for several months and every time when they call me they told me, Jamal, life is too short to spend it in Kuwait. You can have better life and earn more money in Austria than in Kuwait. Come to live here with us."*

When analyzing the determinants of the decision making process of refugees, it is crucial to consider the asylum application process. In Austria the first step of the asylum application process is that the refugee needs to go to the police and present his or her passport. However, it is worth to mention that many asylum seekers **do not have a passport, as they may drop it on the way from smugglers.**

In Austria, they usually claim to be from Syria and to have fled before the war. Anyway, often they are from another country. The reason for lying is the belief and hope to get asylum easier as war refugees than economic migrants. Besides, if it is not clear which country they come from, the Austrian authorities have nowhere to deport them, as the only option for deportation can be their country of origin.

As for the asylum process, it usually includes 2 interviews for Asylum seekers. The waiting period has been significantly extended since 2015. It was about 3 months for the first interview in 2015, while now it can last anywhere between 6 and 12 months. Currently, the usual waiting time for the 2nd interview is 2-3 years.

It raises some issues, such as:

- The asylum seeker is forced to live in insecurity.
- He or she is out of work and because of the current regulations that we have presented and may not have enough money to survive.

- To survive asylum seeker may work illegal, thus increasing the informal economy.
- Moreover, in the long-term perspective, this can lead to an increase in unemployment, as the asylum seeker loses his or her work habits.

Several factors play a crucial role in the outcome of an asylum application (Dahlvik, 2018). We tried to know what are the factors which might influence the asylum application result from our interview with F04 from O03. *She said - "I am in daily contact with more than 100 asylum seekers to whom UTE BOCK provides accommodation and I can say that factors of success in the asylum process have changes over the time.*

- *For instance, having mental problems was considered to be an advantage in the asylum process application in the past, while currently, the situation is instead the opposite and having mental problems is considered to be a disadvantage.*
- *Currently, if an asylum seeker is from Syria and if he or she was wounded during the war, it can be an advantage for him or her and contribute to the positive outcome of the application.*
- *Having children who go to school in Austria and have good grades also can increase the chances of a positive assessment of the asylum application.*
- *The presence of a strong political motive of leaving the country of origin can play a mitigating role and have a positive influence on the assessment process of the asylum application. However, the existence of a political reason should be proved (e.g. the presence of a video of how he organized an anti-government protest and was taken in handcuffs by police).*
- *Being a homosexual, he or she is more likely to be granted asylum, as in some countries, homosexuality is punishable by death."*

The other discussion point is the conditions of life in a refugee camp. When talking about refugee camps, there are several aspects that we should address:

- Refugee camps are different considering their sizes. In some (e.g. in Traiskirchen - 22 km from Vienna) there can live 1000 people. While the others are small, with the capacity to host up to 20 people.
- Meals are served 3 times a day. However, the diet is entirely different from what asylum seekers have become accustomed to. A distinguishing factor for small camps (hostels) is that they can cook for themselves.
- They receive 150 Euros per month per person.
- They have German lessons every day.
- They undergo intercultural training (2 days for 8 hours).
- Arrivals to the camp as well as departures are monitored.
- At first, they cannot move outside the camp because they are subject to an identity check.
- They have secured the care and assistance of a psychologist.

Refugees must leave the camp within 3 months of being granted asylum. Given this rule, the living conditions of refugees after asylum become crucial. The role of NGOs here is essential, as they help refugees to get a job and find housing.



Accommodation in Vienna represents another problem, as renting a small room costs about 400 Euros per month. And that is in case of shared apartments.

However, it is important to highlight that there are some unemployment benefits for refugees, including:

- A payment of 900 Euros per month per person
- Family allowances for children

According to the interviews, refugees who were granted asylum in Austria do not want to leave it for several reasons: first of all Austria is a safe country and safety is a crucial factor especially for people who were forced to leave their country of origin because of safety issues; these people have already learned the language and are on their way to integrating into the Austrian society, so starting from zero in another country would be unreasonable. *According to M03 “refugees are generally satisfied with their life in Austria. Asylum seekers have to learn German if they want to get asylum so once we get asylum and we speak German we are not motivated to go to Sweden and start the asylum process in Sweden and learn Swedish.”*

Conclusion

The general trend in Austrian asylum policy is one that is progressively limiting, prohibitive, and often rises humanitarian concerns to national interests. The various amendments represent a strict trend towards national security and fighting alleged abuse of the asylum arrangement.

In terms of access to the Austrian labor market, the most striking features of the participation of migrants are discrimination based on restricted accessibility to high-wage sectors and pay gaps and discrimination in recruitment (Dianshuang, 2019, Ďurček, 2020).

On the other hand, the restrictive policy in terms of access to labor market creates the conditions for increasing the illegal employment, hence informal economy as a measure taken by asylum seekers to survive.

Our research showed that the majority of the children of asylum seekers de facto do not receive the minimum compulsory education and become a lost generation.

There is a strong discrimination against the refugees in the Austrian society. The roots of such discrimination may come from politics and false media reporting. Also, because of negative attitude towards refugees creates the need for increased numbers of police officers in asylum areas.

The primary problem the refugees face after asylum are the harsh working conditions for them, as women who wear the burqa are discriminated against, and on the other hand the Labor Office often offers a university-educated immigrant a low-skilled job.

As for asylum application process, the waiting time for interviews has considerably increased during the recent years reaching from several months to 2-3 years. Such an increase created additional problems for refugees in the labor market.

We have revealed several factors that may have a positive influence on the application outcome: if an asylum seeker is a homosexual, if the asylum seeker is from Syria, and if he or she was wounded during the war, if the asylum seeker has children who go to school in Austria

and have good grades, as well as the presence of a strong political motive of leaving the country of origin.

The analysis of the determinants of choosing Austria as their final destination shows that those who have been granted asylum in Vienna and are not interested in going to another country claim that:

- They consider Austria a safe country;
- They have already learned the language;
- They are satisfied with everything except the statements (attitudes) of some politicians about immigrants.

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