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EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – AUSTRIA
15 AND 16 DECEMBER 2015



European Economic and Social Committee

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In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited eleven EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practices of the various actors in the current refugee crisis with the final aim of providing input to EU policy making. The delegation to Austria was composed of Christa Schweng (Austria, Employers Group), Hans-Joachim Wilms (Germany, Workers Group) and Alfred Gajdosik (Austria, Various interests Group), supported by Judite Berkemeier, EESC secretariat.

Austria is both a transit country and a destination country for refugees. Since September 2015, 570 000 refugees have arrived and been attended to in Austria. The majority of them travelled on to Germany. Austria is currently providing basic services (principally accommodation and meals, but also legal assistance and language courses where possible) for 75 000 refugees. Several thousand currently need to be accommodated in emergency accommodation, even though they should already be in primary care facilities. These figures indicate that the main problem of this crisis is the lack of housing for refugees. Of the thousands of refugees in emergency accommodation (the figures provided do not tally with each other; some mention 6 000 people in this situation, others mention 8 000), half have lodged an application for asylum.

Throughout Austria, there is a lack of adequate housing and thousands of refugees must currently remain in temporary accommodation. The asylum procedure is complex and drawn out. It should be concluded after 6 months in the first instance, and after a further 6 months in the second instance, but the whole process currently takes well over a year. The number of asylum applications per month has increased seven-fold since 2013, from 2 000 applications in December in 2013 to 12 769 in December 2015. In 2015, a total of 90 000 applications for asylum were lodged in Austria, some 300-400 asylum application a day.

Public and private service providers are under a lot of strain and on 19 January 2016 Austria put a cap on the number of refugees it wants to accept: 37 500 this year and a total of 127 500 through 2019.

Summary of the discussions held with various parties involved in receiving, attending to, advising and integrating refugees: a government entity, a municipal entity, social partners and assisting non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Government entity – The Traiskirchen refugee camp

The visited facility has been used as a refugee camp since 1955. From 1993, the Federal Ministry of the Interior's Asylum Office has been located there. Since 2003, care has been privatised. Since the beginning of 2012, the company **Schweizer ORS Service GmbH** has been managing the camp under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of the Interior. The camp provides care for asylum seekers under the Basic Services Law 2005. This includes, among other things, providing accommodation, legal advice, health care, food three times a day, clothing, hygiene products, and the payment of a monthly allowance of EUR 40. This allowance is not actually required by the refugees and they therefore send EUR 20 EUR home.

Refugees have the possibility of receiving an additional income through ancillary activities (e.g. catering assistance, porter duties, lawn maintenance, etc.) for EUR 3 per hour, or as a "remunerated mother" (providing support for unaccompanied refugee minors) for EUR 21 per day. Jobs are usually swapped every two weeks. In order to perform these ancillary activities, those receiving payment must attend workshops to be trained. Refugees may also work for the Traiskirchen municipality (e.g. street cleaning).

The camp is large and well-organised: services include a medical station, a kindergarten, legal advice (mainly provided by NGOs, which have a contract with the camp), German courses and workshops to facilitate integration in the Austrian society, interfaith pastoral care, cultural activities, the use of sportsgrounds and recreational areas. The camp is orderly: there are no conflicts between nationalities, only small, isolated quarrels that are quickly resolved.

Due to the high level of media attention, Traiskirchen is publicly referred to as the "asylum capital of Austria". This has led to an increase in the number of asylum seekers making this care facility their target destination. During the period of overcrowding in the summer of 2015, only asylum seekers' basic needs (i.e. primarily accommodation and catering) could be dealt with. In December, 1 655 refugees were accommodated in Traiskirchen, most of whom originated from Afghanistan. 1 200 of them were unaccompanied refugee minors (URM - under 14 years old). The refugee camps are designed for short stays (six months). However, since services in Traiskirchen are perceived as good, many seek to stay there.

The main challenge for the refugee camp was thus the massive arrival of refugees in the summer, which hindered it providing the full range of services it had to offer.

Municipal entity – The Vienna Social Fund (Fonds Soziales Wien - FSW)

The Vienna Social Fund (FSW) ensures that Viennese citizens receive the social assistance they require. Approximately EUR 850 million per year from City of Vienna taxes go to social services. These comprise care and support services, as well as basic services for foreign nationals in need. This is based on the Basic Services Agreement 2004 between the Federal State and the *Länder*. Thanks to the FSW, there are currently about 3 400 residential places organised in Vienna that fulfil all quality standards, plus around 6 000 places in emergency accommodation.

The infrastructure of the FSW consists of a provincial central office (central management), a service facility (Caritas Vienna asylum centre), accommodation facilities (approximately 3 400 organised residential places), advice centres (legal, social, housing, medical, educational and employment advice) as well as mobile teams that visit emergency accommodation units in order to assist refugees on the spot.

Services include thus housing, care, monetary allowance, health insurance/medical services. However, there are disparities in terms of financial assistance for the different accommodation situations.

A good practice to be soon launched by the FSW is the Vienna Refugee Aid "service card", which will serve as proof of: 1/ identity, 2/ receipt of basic services, 3/ medical insurance and 4/ a valid

registration of residence, and is also due to be valid as a free pass for the Vienna public transport system.

Challenges faced by the FSW include: creating places in care facilities, providing housing for families eligible for asylum, insufficient funding for all the needs.

Social partner – The Austrian Economic Chamber (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich - WKÖ)

The Economic Chamber (WKÖ) is the statutory representative body for all Austrian businesses in the areas of craft trade, industry, commerce, banking and insurance, transport, tourism, as well as information and consulting. The Economic Chamber and its constituent organisations are set up as self-governing bodies. They are democratically elected and work thus as social partners. The WKÖ is carrying out a number of projects in the area of assistance for refugees: In 2008, the WKÖ set up a mentoring project for migrants in cooperation with the Austrian Integration Fund and the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS). This involves providing assistance with integrating into the labour market. The mentors are Austrians who are self-employed or well established in the labour market. The mentees are migrants and asylum seekers who have already completed professional training and are entitled to access the labour market. The WKÖ brings partners together and since 2008 has set up 1 500 pairs. The support provided involves simulating interviews and carrying out 'reality checks' (whereby migrants' perceptions are squared with the Austrian labour market). The apprenticeship scheme is a pilot project for young asylum seekers who are supposed to be matched with apprenticeships nationwide: 150 young people will be tested through a specifically developed WKÖ job profile (in Arabic and Farsi) and then sent to places in the provinces where there is a demand. Specific guidance for smaller businesses: as diversity management is not a very common management tool among SMEs, the WKÖ helps SMEs by providing specific guidance for individual target groups. According to the WKÖ, there was still no proper daily structure in refugee camps and the journey from asylum seeker to asylum should be much better managed. The WKÖ also suggested that voluntary returnees could work as multipliers to diffuse the biased information being spread by traffickers.

Social partner – The Austrian Trade Union Federation (Der Österreichische Gewerkschaftsbund - ÖGB)

The Austrian Trade Union Federation is a non-partisan body representing workers. It is constituted as an association and is divided internally into seven sectoral trade unions. Traditionally, it has been dominated by the Social Democratic Unionists.

In the area of assistance for refugees, in 2014 the ÖGB set up an association known as UNDOK. This association is made up of Chambers of Labour, four trade unions and NGOs. Its aim is to provide people who have limited or no access to the labour market with a point of contact. UNDOK receives the refugees via state advisory bodies. There are about 2-3 requests per week. In total there have been 200 cases since UNDOK was founded. UNDOK also tries to provide ÖGB training courses to employee representatives, in order to persuade them that people without papers should be treated as other colleagues. So far, refugees become seldom members of trade unions. The main challenge mentioned was the idea of temporary asylum, which hampers any motivation for integration. Refugees and asylum seekers need a quick recognition of their qualifications and an easier access to German

language courses and training opportunities. When working, they should be specially protected against social dumping. The ÖGB resolution on the issue of asylum, unanimously adopted by the federal executive board, stated that there should be no fences in Europe; otherwise the Dublin Regulation would not function.

NGOs - Austrian Red Cross (Österreichisches Rotes Kreuz - ÖRK)

The ÖRK operates at railway stations, helping refugees in transit. It has also the task of locating family members. 7 500 staff are active there full-time and a total of 70 000 volunteers provide food and shelter for refugees and are in contact with the authorities, in order to facilitate the onwards transfer of refugees. Of the 570 000 people attended to, the majority have travelled on. The task of the Red Cross is to give them the best possible attention within 24 hours. Best-practice includes:

- Team Österreich (*Team Austria*): people on standby in case of a disaster. Coordination with other NGOs and with each other via telephone conference. 2 weekly updates on requirements.
- "Helfen wie wir" (*Help like us*): call for monetary donations via the Austrian Broadcasting Company (ORF) (EUR 2 million distributed among refugee-assisting organisations) and donations in kind and time;
- "Projekt Exchange": 300 integration ambassadors, who visit schools and teach the pupils what life is like for someone who has just arrived in Austria – recognised refugees are now also participating.
- Migrants Care: mobilisation of persons with a migrant background who wish to work in the care sector;
- Buddy systems: volunteers who coach refugees as "buddies".

According to the ÖRK, the uncontrollable number of refugees arriving and passing through made the provision of assistance very difficult.

NGOs - Caritas Austria

Caritas assists, accompanies and advises people in difficult living situations, regardless of their social, national or religious affiliation. Large-scale use is now made of volunteers in the area of emergency aid. Additionally, 3 employees work full-time providing legal representation for asylum seekers.

Caritas offers free legal and social advice in asylum law and law on citizenship. Caritas carries out appeal procedures at second instance (approximately 450 appeals procedures per day), supports those returning home voluntarily and also helps them reintegrate in their country of origin. Caritas also organises accommodation for refugees: emergency accommodation is provided by the dioceses, basic utilities are funded by Caritas, and Caritas receives many notifications from private individuals regarding integration housing. Caritas organises educational and literacy measures: e.g. study cafés for young people. Additionally, there are also dialogue forums and information seminars before a refugee facility is opened. As others before, also Caritas found that the asylum procedure should be the same everywhere and the asylum status should be recognised everywhere. Caritas regretted that the European funds often paid late and that the focus of programmes changed frequently, hindering a

sustainable assistance. As NGOs were often selected based on the principle of the lowest bid, NGOs often competed against each other. Such principle affected the quality of service.

NGOs – The Diakonie Refugee Service

The Diakonie Refugee Service has been working on behalf of refugees and those seeking protection for more than 25 years. At the end of 2014, the Diakonie Refugee Service had 230 employees; now there are 500. The Diakonie Refugee Service works to ensure the equal opportunities, empowerment and participation of its clients in 8 Austrian *Länder*. Diakonie is financed through European funding and funds from the Ministry of the Interior. Diakonie's services include:

- Advice on legal and social matters;
- Managing 'integration apartments', where Diakonie is the landlord and refugees pay their rent from their basic services allowance on a pro rata basis;
- "Wohnberatung" (*Housing advice*) project: Austrians that take in asylum seekers privately at home receive EUR 200 per month for food and EUR 120 for housing for each person, or EUR 240 for each individual family, regardless of size (plus EUR 200 per adult and EUR 90 per child for food);
- German language courses and job-specific training courses;
- Psychological counselling for refugees.

As regards challenges, Diakonie mentioned the fact that it took too long for the asylum procedure to begin: three months lapse between registering names and the first interviews. The low number of housing places for the huge number of refugees who have arrived in Austria was the biggest problem, as the right to obtain social housing was not given until 5 years of stay. Unaccompanied refugee minors (URM) were considered to be a big problem too: 2 900 were currently living in federal basic care facilities. There was still insufficient compensation for services that ought to be provided by law.

NGOs - The Integration House Vienna (Das Integrationshaus Wien)

The Integration House Vienna is a private association, financed partly by the ESF and regional subsidies, partly through fundraising. It is a project centre for refugees and asylum seekers, but also migrants. The Vienna Social Fund (FSW) is responsible for distributing those who are to be attended to across Vienna. The Integration House Vienna is one of the contractors. It is a member of ECRE (European Cooperation on Refugees) and the Asylum Lawyers Network, as well as other associations such as Amnesty, Caritas and the UNHCR. The Integration House Vienna comprises 120 active staff, plus a few freelancers and 185 volunteers, who work either as mentors or training buddies or provide tuition.

This association provides accommodation and care for people with a high level of dependency (i.e. URMs, people with mental or physical disabilities, single parents, etc.) and "full education" for URMs (and has thus guardianship over them). Outside the "House", it has 39 apartments (110 beds) for refugees. In 2015, a total of 200 people were catered for in 110 places. On average, people stay for over 2 years and can even remain for as long as 5 years. 30 extra apartments in a new building at the North Station were rented to refugee families. This project is working very well: all tenants pay their rent and there are no significant problems. Moreover, the association offers a broad programme of

education and training: literacy courses, schooling, and apprenticeships. The "competences check" carried out was considered particularly positive. There are training programmes for mentors and buddies. The association also provides an independent advice service, but this is not publicly funded and must rely on donations. The Java mentoring project ensures that young adults are integrated into the labour market. Success rate: 83%. Moreover, awareness-raising events are also organised. Finally, many households receive the newspaper of this association (*Die Gute Zeitung – the good newspaper*), which has a print run of 1.2 million copies. The main challenge referred to were the new rules on municipal housing (access to housing in Vienna now took 5 years instead of 2). The provision of independent legal advice should be publicly funded and work with traumatised children required urgently special funding. FSW daily rates were currently EUR 95 per day, but at least EUR 120 would be required. Proud of its *Die Gute Zeitung* newspaper, the Integration House Vienna wished to know whether there was a European press subsidy that would enable it to bring *Die Gute Zeitung* to the European level.

NGOs - Helping Hands

Helping Hands is an association which has been providing legal advice since 1993, either at the last stage of the asylum procedure or following the rejection of an asylum application. 3 people work for Helping Hands on a full-time basis, plus a number of unpaid trainees. The association is supported by the Austrian Students' Union and is subsidised by Municipal Department 17 (MA17). Its services consist solely of legal advice, and only either at the last stage of the asylum procedure or following the rejection of an asylum application.

Helping Hands pleaded for the withdrawn of the Dublin Regulation, for the creation of a unified European documentation system and for clearer and quicker asylum.

Conclusions

The refugee crisis has put a significant pressure on the Austrian society. This pressure comes from the large number of arrivals, the sudden increase in asylum applications, the complex and lengthy administrative procedures in place to recognise the asylum status, as well as the multifaceted measures necessary to integrate refugees into society. Throughout Austria, there is a lack of adequate housing and thousands of refugees must currently remain in temporary accommodation. The asylum procedure is complex and drawn out. For integration to succeed language lessons must start as early as possible and the Austrian labour market must adapt to this wave of job seekers as quickly as possible.

The representatives of government (Traiskirchen Refugee Camp) and the municipal authority (Vienna Social Fund) presented a positive image of their efforts. The Traiskirchen site was indeed large, well maintained and it offered adequate initial assistance when not overcrowded. Since the beginning of the refugee crisis the Austrian Federal Government has spent EUR 15 million in the delivery of basic services to refugees and integration measures.

The social partners were in full agreement regarding the integration of refugees into the labour market, partly as a result of their agreement from 2011: they spoke in favour of easier labour market access for asylum seekers and those granted asylum, and were unanimous in their opposition to temporary asylum. Whilst the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKÖ) had set up more initiatives (mentoring and

apprenticeship projects, etc.) to integrate people granted asylum in the Austrian labour market, the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) expressed more concern with the danger of social dumping of employees with a migration or refugee background.

A much less positive image of the problems resulting from the refugee crisis emerged from the discussions with five (from the largest to the smallest) NGOs and associations. NGOs need more human and financial resources to continue offering their assistance, advice and concrete hosting and integration services. Competition between NGOs was considered a "shame". In conclusion, although it is true that many NGOs "live off" the refugee crisis, their supportive role has been paramount.
