

Refugee Support in Switzerland – From Emergency to Integration?



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Summer 2015: The arrival in Europe of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa has disingenuously been called a “refugee crisis”. With the resurgence of nationalism and the rise of radical right-wing populist parties all over Europe, the ability of our societies to meet this and other emergency situations has largely been questioned in public opinion. Unjustly: many refugees have been met by volunteers who have helped and organizations and administrations that gave their best, even though their capacities were sometimes overstretched.

What has been done so far is impressive; the motivation to help can also be described as a successful micro-policy, or governance from below. However, aside from these initiatives to deal with the unexpected number of people who arrived the fact remains that many of the people who arrived in European countries are likely to stay. Hence, the issue of integration has increasingly become central to the public debate.

This question is also important in the context of Switzerland. The asylum system in Switzerland has been restructured, with the explicit objective of implementing shorter and more efficient procedures. At the same time, there are political debates about how to improve the situation of the persons – including

those who have been granted provisional admission – who are likely to stay in Switzerland.

In order to discuss the present and coming challenges, the nccr – on the move organized an Expert Exchange Roundtable in December 2016, where the most recent research of the National Center of Competence was presented and discussed in a dialogue with representatives of the practice, including the authorities and NGOs. Based on this event, the second issue of *highlights*, the NCCR E-magazine, offers an original contribution to the debate on integration in the field of asylum. Based on empirical data, all of the articles convincingly point to the need for faster decisions on asylum claims and integration policies that start early

on and respond to the actual needs of people who require protection.

The Contributions

Integration is a classical crosscutting theme that cannot be limited to individual policies. In policy debates it is understood as guaranteeing equal opportunities to all inhabitants in central areas of social life, particularly education, the labor market, health, and – last but not least – the political system. Studies show that successful integration is also dependent on existing institutional structures that do not specifically target migrants, such as education policy and social welfare legislation. The contributions in this issue, however, demonstrate that the specific situa-

Editorial

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tion of people in the field of asylum must be acknowledged.

In her contribution, Stefanie Kurt shows that, under current legislation measures favoring integration are highly correlated to a secure legal status. Only asylum seekers who have been recognized as refugees or granted provisional admission can access integration programs, a fact she criticizes. However, she also presents recent projects that nevertheless aim to strengthen the integration of asylum seekers on the labor market. While viewing them as welcome initiatives, she pleads for the inclusion of socio-cultural aspects, including language and civic knowledge training. Her arguments are based on statistical evidence that a significant share of all asylum seekers is likely to be granted some sort of protection and will therefore stay in Switzerland over the longer term.

Taking a similar perspective, Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, Duncan Lawrence and Alexandra Dufresne argue for faster asylum procedures. Based on innovative quantitative data analyses, they demonstrate the positive effect of a shorter waiting time before a decision is made on the subsequent labor market integration of persons having been granted subsidiary protection. Reducing the length of asylum procedure can therefore increase refugee employment rates, with important economic effects on public expenditures and tax revenues.

In his article, Philippe Wanner shows that the labor market participation of men in the field of asylum is not only substantially lower than that of the overall male population, but also of the resident foreign population in general. His original analyses of longitudinal data from the nccr – on the move also indicate that the income of people in the field of

asylum is lower on average than that of the rest of the foreign population, although the incomes of some long-established refugee groups are converging at these levels. Wanner's analyses highlight significant variations depending on the nationality but also other dimensions, leading him to plead for flexible labor market integration policies that take the diversity of this population into account.

In their contribution, Gail Womersley, Laure Kloetzer and Betty Gogukian Ratcliff focus on the harmful effects of long asylum procedures on the mental health of refugees. Based on two biographies, the authors illustrate how long waiting periods and uncertain life prospects may reinforce trauma and depression. While arguing – like most other authors – for faster decisions on asylum claims, they also demonstrate the need for a better integration in the labor market and social life after the granting of refugee status as a necessary condition for improving psychological wellbeing.

Constantin Hruschka is our guest author for this issue of *highlights*. According to him, a distorted public perception of asylum seekers characterizes the political debate and integration policies in this field in Switzerland. Policies and practice focus on control, deterrence and security, rather than integration. A real integration policy should be based on participation and address all persons in the field of asylum early on without the current paternalistic attitude. The focus should be on dialogue with the people directly affected by the policies in order to provide opportunities and prevent unwanted outcomes.

Conclusion: Returning to the Fundamentals of Constitutional Democracy

The recent arrival in Europe of large numbers of refugees has made the issue of shared values more important than ever. I am convinced that it is crucial to promote the strengthening of democratic values and constitutional ethics, but acceptance of these standards cannot be imposed. The prerequisite for this is involvement by everyone in a process where these values are practiced on a daily basis and not merely taught theoretically.

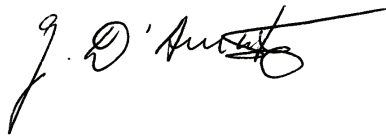
Former German Constitutional Judge Gertrude Lübke-Wolff once wrote, “Instead of counterfactually postulating homogeneity or naively denying conflicts, we should ask ourselves what the best conditions are within our political entities to ensure peaceful coexistence and cooperation given the heterogeneity of our societies.”¹ Her answer is: modern constitutions. Constitutions are the most important orientation for a democratic civil society. They are the “Bible of citizens”² and not only written for lawyers. Yet it remains true that many citizens are ignorant of our basic law. Clearly we cannot look down on the political culture of migrants and think we must simply teach them about democracy. Shared citizenship must be practiced by all of us and requires real interactions, including dispute and dissent.³ In other words, even beyond the issue of migrants or refugees, conflicts are part of any society's integration process: they are an existential feature of democracies, since simple solutions do not exist in complex societies. And if enduring arguments are resolved successfully, then the constitution and democracy are reaffirmed.

Editorial

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Intolerance is growing in our societies. The recent tragic terrorist events as well as the rise of populist radical movements, which reinforce old forms of exclusionary policies, are two aspects of today's intolerance. They imperil our liberties. But while it is important to fight radicalism of all sorts, we must also address what we share. We must resist attempts to erode solidarity because resistance can lead to new political options and create the conditions necessary for defending the achievements of constitutional liberal democracies and

human rights. Supporting integration, then, may only be the first step in finding convincing answers to our current challenges. In this sense, the many volunteers who responded to the "refugee crisis" can show us the way forward through the commitment they have demonstrated.



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- 1 Lübke-Wolf 2007
- 2 Paine 1987
- 3 Kleger 2017

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