Mixed policy signals in Austria: integration and non-integration in a time of uncertainty

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Introduction

Austria is among those EU member states where the share of the population that is foreign-born is particularly high, actually ranking fourth after outlier Luxembourg and the specific island cases of Cyprus and Malta. Austria has never officially called itself a country of immigration, but this can be derived from the Residence Act of 1 July 1993 (Aufenthaltsgesetz), signalling the start of a controlled immigration scheme containing rules on how to obtain permanent residence in Austria, including quotas. This Act has been amended several times but the possibility of immigration has never been completely abolished. Since 2011, a points system for the Rot-Weiß-Rot-Karte (Red-White-Red Card), which entitles the holder to temporary, fixed-term settlement and to employment with a specific employer, has been in force.

Austria has a long record of a humanistic and human rights-based immigration policy. In 1956, Austria was the country of first admission for refugees from Hungary as a result of the political uprising and subsequent repression; and in 1968/69 for refugees from Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. A strong inflow of asylum seekers from Poland was registered after the imposition of martial law in 1981/82; and from Yugoslavia in the late eighties, reaching a peak in 1991.1 Another wave started at the end of the 1990s, culminating in 2004 and then falling continuously until 2009; after this, it climbed again to reach a new peak in 2015 with the net migration of 113,100 people as a result of an influx of asylum seekers particularly from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

In response to this particularly large number of asylum seekers, the Austrian asylum legislation was subject to reforms in 2016, 2017 and 2018 making it more restrictive. One of the key changes refers to the duration of asylum proceedings, the period of protection (reviewed after five years) and access to welfare payments.

The inflow of refugees to Austria in 2015 required appropriate steps to facilitate their integration into the labour market. This has become all the more important as the majority of refugees are young and of working age. Thus, apart from the policies and practices pursued in the past, and mainly dedicated to migrants in general, measures tailored to the specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers have become necessary.

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1. Austria was the first country of admission for refugees from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, but the majority thereafter emigrated to other western European countries or overseas (EMN 2004).
This chapter is aimed at investigating these measures and their effectiveness and is structured as follows: after an overview of the number and characteristics of recent flows of refugee and asylum seekers and the population structure by nationality, it focuses on the policy approach of the authorities including as regards the welfare system and recent changes. Following this, it explores the legal framework for access to the labour market and undertakes an analysis of the main measures facilitating the labour market integration of this target group as well as the available comparative data on labour market performance. This is followed by an examination of the results of a survey of recent refugees, while the final section provides an evaluation of labour market integration outcomes and the main continuing challenges and debates.

1. National context of migration

At the beginning of 2019, Austria had 8.8m inhabitants, of whom 1.7m (19.5 per cent) were born abroad (for comparison, this share in 2002 was 13.8 per cent). Out of the total Austrian population, 739,579 people (8.9 per cent) were born in the EU-27, with 311,886 (42 per cent) coming from the EU-14 (those countries joining the EU prior to 2004) and 427,713 (58 per cent) from the EU-13 (those countries entering the EU since 2004). Third country nationals\(^2\) accounted for 926,609 people; 10.5 per cent of Austria's total population.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Austria has experienced three major migration peaks, as Figure 1 shows.

The first peak – in the mid to late 1980s – was due to a flow of asylum seekers from Poland and later from Yugoslavia, reaching its highest level in 1991 with a net immigration figure of 76,616. A second peak started at the end of the 1990s, culminating in 2004 with the net immigration of 50,826 people. In the following years, the net inflow of migrants decreased continuously, falling to 17,053 in 2009. This slowdown was mainly due to the transitional periods for new EU citizens’ access to the labour market, but also to the recession in the wake of the financial market crisis. The third migration peak was triggered by economic recovery but also by the lifting of labour market restrictions from 2011 for nationals of those countries entering the EU after 2004.

Figure 2 shows the composition of this third peak in immigration by foreign country group, broken down as EU member states before 2004 (minus Austria); EU member states joining from 2004; and non-EU third countries. A new height was reached in 2015 with the net migration of 113,100 people as a result of the influx of asylum seekers particularly from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. In the following years, net migration from EU countries as well as third countries has reduced gradually, reaching 35,301 in 2018. This was mainly the consequence of the erection of barriers to the entry of asylum seekers into Europe in general as well as in Austria in particular. Additionally,

\(^2\) Third country nationals are those who are neither EU citizens nor citizens of other EEA countries (from Iceland, Liechtenstein or Norway) or of Switzerland.
increased hostility towards migrants in politics, above all refugees, may have acted as a deterrent to entry (Biffl 2019).

Figure 1  **Net migration of Austrian and foreign citizens, 1980-2018**

![Net migration of Austrian and foreign citizens, 1980-2018](image1)

Source: Statistics Austria.

Figure 2  **Net migration by groups of countries, by citizenship**

![Net migration by groups of countries, by citizenship](image2)

Source: Statistics Austria.
2. Refugee arrivals in the last decade

2.1 Asylum applications and decisions

Since the end of the 1980s – with a short interruption in the mid-1990s – the average number of annual asylum applications has surpassed the 17,000 mark owing to the steady inflow from parts of dissolving Yugoslavia; war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq; as well as Russia, predominantly due to the conflict in Chechnya. The Syrian civil war led to a surge in first-time applications3 amounting to 28,064 in 2014 and 88,340 in 2015 (Figure 3). Subsequently, the asylum regulations were tightened and border controls with neighbouring countries intensified (Biffl 2019). Unilateral actions and border closures (e.g. by North Macedonia and Hungary) led to the de facto closure of the ‘Balkans Route’ that was also strengthened by the EU-Turkey Statement in 2016. In consequence, the inflow of asylum seekers fell in the following years, reaching 13,746 in 2018.

![Figure 3: Annual asylum applications, 1947-2018](source: Federal Ministry of the Interior (Bundesministerium für Inneres, BMI)).

From 2016 onwards, new asylum applications sharply declined, but the number which remain pending continues to be high. The share of positive decisions rose to over 50 per cent in 2016 but has since slowed somewhat. However, the process of granting refugee status has become increasingly longer, thus jeopardising the path to integration (Figure 4). The legal status of refugees is important for determining their path to integration and settlement in the host country.

As part of the reform of the asylum legislation, the earlier extension of the decision period for asylum procedures from 6 to 15 months for the Federal Office of Aliens and Asylum (Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl – BFA) and to 12 months for the

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3. Starting from 2014, the Federal Ministry of the Interior has reported the number of first-time asylum applications in addition to the total number of applications. The difference between these numbers is due to many asylum seekers filing an additional application in or outside the country after their first one has been rejected.
Federal Administrative Court (*Bundesverwaltungsgericht - BVwG*) has expired on 31 May 2018. However, it still applies to proceedings that were pending in first instance or in Court at that time.

**Figure 4**  
*Asylum decisions in Austria 2010-2018*

2.2 Profile of asylum seekers

Between 2015 and 2018, the influx of asylum seekers was dominated by Syrians, accounting for 25 per cent of the total annual inflow, followed by Afghans. The third most important group changed in this period, from Iraqis in 2015-2016 to Pakistanis in 2017 and Iranians in 2018. As depicted in Figure 5 in terms of gender distribution, almost three-quarters of all applicants were men in the years up to 2015, although this share decreased steadily afterwards, reaching 60 per cent in 2018 (Expertenrat für Integration 2018). The age structure has undergone substantial changes since 2015, with applicants becoming even younger (Figure 6). At the end of 2018, one-half of asylum seekers were younger than 18 while one-third were aged between 18 and 34 at the time of their application. This might be interpreted as promising due to the higher potential for integrating young people into the existing workforce (Martín *et al.* 2016).

Insights with regard to the qualification levels of recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection can be obtained from the *Kompetenzcheck* (Competence Check) carried out by the Austrian *Arbeitsmarktservice* (AMS – the public employment service). Information about the qualification levels of participants is obtained in qualitative interviews conducted in refugees’ own language during which statements may be checked for inconsistencies. The results are highly heterogeneous for the
different countries of origin of the largest numbers of recent refugees and asylum seekers (Figure 7): Syrian, Iraqi and particularly Iranian refugees are remarkably well-educated, with 57 per cent of Iraqis, 55 per cent of Syrians and as much as 83 per cent of Iranians having a level of qualification equivalent to or higher than the Austrian matura.

Only 17 per cent of Iranian and 41 per cent both of Syrians and Iraqis had a school education equivalent to or lower than that related to compulsory schooling and almost none were without school education. Quite different were the results for Afghans: 25 per cent of those in the sample had never attended school; 56 per cent had an education
equal to or lower than that appropriate to compulsory schooling; and only 19 per cent had a level of upper secondary qualification equivalent to or higher than the Austrian *matura*.

Interestingly, women were, in general, (much) better educated than men: 26 per cent had a university degree compared to only 19 per cent of men.

These wide discrepancies in educational levels have been confirmed by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD 2018) which has concluded that there are notable differences between countries, with applicants from Afghanistan making up the highest share of those who are illiterate or who have only low levels of formal schooling.

### 2.3 Reception and support

In the wake of the inflow and transit of asylum seekers during 2015, the Austrian government decided on a reform of the asylum legislation (April 2016, followed by further reforms in 2017 and 2018) (Biffl 2019). According to the new regulations, the period of protection/residence of recognised refugees (according to the Geneva Convention) is limited to three years, after which people may be expected to return if the country of origin can be considered safe for the person in question. Those with subsidiary protection status receive a one-year residence permit. Renewal has to be applied for at the Federal Office of Aliens and Asylum (*Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl* – BFA); if the need for protection continues to exist, the residence permit is extended for two years. Family reunion, particularly for people with subsidiary protection status, became more restrictive. In addition, an emergency decree permitted refusal of entry to potential asylum seekers at the border if a certain upper limit (in 2016: 37,500 asylum seekers) had already been reached (Biffl 2019; OECD 2017).

In 2017, an integration monitor was implemented by the Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs. As a result, ‘new’ administrative data has been made publicly available, first published in the Ministry’s 2018 Integration Report.
In May 2019, the Austrian parliament passed a bill on the establishment of a new Federal Agency for Supervision and Support Services (Bundesagentur für Betreuungs- und Unterstützungsleistungen – BBU GmbH), which will inter alia be in charge of (i) providing reception conditions (‘basic care’); (ii) providing legal assistance to asylum seekers; (iii) providing assistance for return; (iv) monitoring deportations; and (v) providing interpreters and translators during the asylum procedure. Its objectives are to increase the efficiency of reception at the federal level; provide asylum seekers with independent legal assistance; and promote voluntary returns through effective return counselling. The aim was for the Federal Agency to have carried out task (i) as of 1 July 2020 and all other tasks (ii to v) as of 1 January 2021.

During the consultation phase, the new law met with strong criticism from NGOs. UNHCR, the Association of Judges and the Chamber of Lawyers feared that independent legal advice would not be guaranteed under the influence of the Ministry of the Interior, especially as the Federal Office of Foreign Affairs and Asylum (BFA), the authority that decides on asylum applications, is also subordinate to it. The Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference also raised concerns while organisations currently providing legal advice – such as Caritas and Diakonie – also protested. Furthermore, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) called for the withdrawal of measures that severely restricted access to independent legal assistance.4

2.4 ‘Basic care’ for asylum seekers; ‘social assistance’ for recognised refugees

In Austria, asylum seekers have the right to ‘basic care’ which is a level of welfare benefit significantly lower than the ‘social assistance’ (the former needs-based minimum income benefit) to which recognised refugees are entitled (see below). Asylum seekers are entitled to basic care immediately after lodging an asylum application up until the final decision on their application has been made.

According to AIDA,5 the monthly amount an asylum seeker receives in basic care depends on the type of accommodation:

— in reception centres where catering is provided, asylum seekers receive €40 pocket money per month, while the care provider receives compensation for costs of up to €21 per day

— in reception centres where asylum seekers cook for themselves, they receive between €150 and €200 per month, mainly in cash. Alternatively, as is the practice in Tyrol, they receive €215 for subsistence (which equals the amount given for subsistence to those living in private flats)

asylum seekers in private rented accommodation receive €365 in cash. The benefits are lower in Carinthia (€290 – €110 for the flat and €180 for subsistence) to cover the daily expenses of a single adult. The allowance for a child is set at €80 per month.

All asylum seekers receive vouchers worth an additional €150 per year for clothes while pupils receive €200 a year for school materials, again mainly in the form of vouchers.

Since September 2018, asylum seekers can be requested to contribute financially to the basic care they receive during the asylum procedure. The maximum amount of this contribution is set at €840 per person, although asylum seekers are entitled to keep at least €120 as an allowance. They also have to contribute financially for family members.

In addition, asylum seekers have recently been compelled to allow the authorities access to the contents of their mobile phones to speed up identity checks. Furthermore, the duration of legal stay in Austria before becoming eligible for naturalisation has been raised to ten years for refugees (Biffl 2019; OECD 2019).

Following an ongoing debate about eligibility for Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung (BMS: the means-tested minimum income scheme) and the amount to which individuals are entitled, more restrictive legislation came into force in 2019 when BMS was replaced by social assistance. The main goal of the reform was to reduce the amount granted to large families and, in addition, to reduce social assistance for migrants with low language skills.

The law was passed in May 2019 in the face of NGOs’ heavy criticism of it, but was immediately brought to the Constitutional Court by SPÖ – the opposition Social Democratic Party of Austria. In December 2019, the Court declared several parts of the law unconstitutional, including the provision that language skills were a precondition for receiving the full amount of social assistance as well as the provision to set maximum levels for children (in percentage of the adult entitlement) in decreasing order by the number of children (i.e. to 25 per cent of adult entitlement for the first child; to 15 per cent for the second and to five per cent for every remaining child). The law as a whole was not abandoned, however, and the cancelled provisions have not been replaced (asylkoordination Österreich 2019).

3. Regulation of labour market access

Citizens of EU member states and EEA countries (Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein), as well as Swiss nationals, have free access to the Austrian labour market and therefore do not need labour market authorisation to work (they enjoy full free movement for workers). Austria was the only EU country to make full use of the transitional restrictions

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on labour market access for Croatian citizens envisaged within the accession treaty, i.e. for up to seven years following accession (up to 30 June 2020).

Third country nationals need a valid certificate of residence, such as a settlement permit (Niederlassungsbewilligung) or a temporary residence permit (Aufenthaltserlaubnis).

3.1 Work permits for third country nationals

Work permits are usually granted only to people qualified to fill posts in specialised fields for which Austrian nationals, or other EU nationals or EEA citizens, are not available. Spouses, dependants and unmarried partners are not permitted to work by simple virtue of their partner’s permit and must obtain their own work permits (family members of Austrian or EU/EEA citizens do not need a work permit). Residence and employment legislation and requirements are regulated separately.

There are four kinds of work permit in Austria:

- Employment permit (Beschäftigungsbewilligung)
- Work permit (Arbeitserlaubnis)
- Certificate of exemption (Befreiungsschein)
- Freedom of movement (Freizügigkeitsbestätigung)

The criteria-led immigration system of the Rot-Weiß-Rot-Karte allows qualified workers from third countries and their family members to immigrate to Austria permanently.

Recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection enjoy the same regulations regarding entry to the labour market as nationals. In contrast, the employment of asylum seekers is subject to the Foreign Labour Act (AuslBG). Accordingly, the only way for asylum seekers to access the labour market is via seasonal work, after a waiting period of three months starting from the date of submission of the asylum application and provided that no final decision in the asylum procedure has been taken prior to that date. Access is restricted by a special decree of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour (2004) – the so-called ‘Bartenstein Decree’ (Bartenstein-Erlass) – to selected occupations with quota-regulated work permits, i.e. in tourism, agriculture and forestry. These seasonal jobs are limited by a yearly quota for each federal state and can only be issued for a maximum period of six months. For those involved with the harvest, the validity of the permit is six weeks. In order to take up employment, the local Arbeitsmarktservice has to issue a work permit which is consequent on applications being submitted by the employer. The possibility of obtaining access to the labour market is restricted by a labour market test (Ersatzkraftverfahren) which requires proof that the respective vacancy cannot be filled by an Austrian or EU/EEA citizen or another integrated third country national (long-time resident, family member, etc.).

Until autumn 2018, there was also the possibility for asylum seekers up to the age of 25 to obtain an employment permit for an apprenticeship in a shortage occupation.

7. https://www.virtualvienna.net/working-in-vienna/
Asylum seekers may also become self-employed. Access to self-employment is granted three months after the submission of the asylum application; asylum seekers have to apply for a trade licence which, however, is very restrictive in its scope.

Asylum seekers may take up work in charitable and non-profit institutions as well as community services. Charitable work includes work in reception facilities for asylum seekers, such as in cleaning, cooking, transport or maintenance; while community services on behalf of the federal government, the provinces and municipalities comprise, for example, landscaping, maintenance of parks and sport fields or administrative support. Asylum seekers may earn €110 per month which will not be deducted from their welfare benefits (see above, chapter 2.3).

3.2 Work permits for asylum seekers – outcomes

Between 2015 and 2018, a total of 2,123 work permits for seasonal work were issued to asylum seekers, most of them in 2016. Some 43 per cent of this number were for jobs in agriculture and forestry, 20 per cent in winter tourism, 19 per cent in summer tourism and 18 per cent in the harvest. Women accounted for only six per cent of these permits. The number of work permits for asylum seekers varied considerably by individual federal state: a total of 1,032 permits were issued in Upper Austria between 2015 and 2018 (49 per cent of all such permits) while only 25 (1.2 per cent) were issued in Vienna, where most asylum seekers live.\(^8\)

A breakdown by employment category shows that the highest number of seasonal work permits were issued in Upper Austria to aid the harvest and summer tourism and, in particular, within the agriculture and forestry sector. Salzburg was the leader in winter tourism.

In 2018, 599 seasonal work permits for asylum seekers were issued in Austria, 327 (55 per cent) of them in Upper Austria alone. In Vienna and Lower Austria, on the other hand, only five and four employment permits were issued, respectively. No less than 96 per cent of the employment permits issued were issued to men.\(^9\)

4. Main policies and programmes for labour market integration

4.1 Policy framework

Following the increase in refugee applications in 2015, the Austrian government announced that September a level of additional funding (€145m) for the integration of refugees. A budget of €75m was directed towards the education system to help refugee children, the creation of housing or the development of reception centres, while €70m was earmarked for active labour market policy measures, be it German language

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8. https://www.migration-infografik.at/am_saisonarbeit.html
9. ibid
courses, education and training, Competence Checks, employment subsidies (e.g. support for taking up employment) and consulting and support (e.g. the recognition of qualifications). Two months later, in November 2015, the Minister of Foreign Affairs presented a Plan for the Integration of Persons entitled to Asylum or Subsidiary Protection in Austria (with 50 action points) which was elaborated in cooperation with the Expert Council for Integration.

In 2017, the budget for refugee integration was raised by an additional €80m for schools to help refugee children and also to provide German language courses; while a further €80m was earmarked for the labour market integration of refugees and people with subsidiary protection. These supplementary budgets were reduced in 2018 and terminated in 2019 (Biffl 2019).

In 2017, the Integrationsgesetz (IntG – Integration Act) came into effect, focusing on the right to language and orientation courses and the duty actively to pursue integration. Violations of these obligations are subject to sanctions under the law and result in the curtailment of state benefits such as social welfare benefits or social assistance, unemployment benefit or unemployment assistance; and/or may result in the curtailment of basic welfare support, depending on the regulations in force in the individual federal states.

4.2 Labour market integration programmes

In principle, refugees and people with subsidiary protection status are entitled to the entire range of support offered by the Arbeitsmarktservice, depending on their individual situation.

There are numerous ongoing projects related to the labour market integration of refugees, partly financed through the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Many of those are currently provided by NGOs such as Caritas, Diakonie and Volkshilfe and concentrate on the provision of German language courses, coaching, counselling or labour market access support. Apart from these well-known organisations, there are also numerous smaller providers offering integration programmes for refugees. In the following we refer to some selected measures in more detail.

Competence Check

Competence Check is a tool used to assess the skills, qualifications and language knowledge of recognised refugees whose competences are not apparent from their documents. This is offered in the native language of the refugees involved (e.g. Farsi/Dari, Arabic, Russian and French), or in German for those with sufficient German language skills, and takes 5-7 weeks to complete. The aim of the check is to recognise existing skills and qualifications and to define the need for additional qualifications. It also provides refugees with information about employment and the Austrian education system. Between August 2015 and December 2018, Competence Checks were carried out among 18,667 unemployed recognised refugees, out of which 14,362 were men
(77 per cent) and 4,315 women (23 per cent). Just over one-half of the interviewed persons originated from Syria, 20 per cent from Afghanistan, eight per cent from Iraq, seven per cent from Iran and 14 per cent from other countries.

Within the checks, the programme ‘Competence Checks for Women’ by AMS, in partnership with ABZ*Austria, received the ‘United Nations Public Services Award’ in 2019 in the Gender Equality category. The programme aims to remove gender-specific barriers and to ensure equal opportunities for female refugees, especially from the countries of the middle east, in order to give women equal access to work and training. Women often have good education – sometimes even at academic level – but have not yet worked in their occupational field. The Competence Check helps to give greater focus to career aspirations and shows the way in which women can be assisted to an Austrian educational qualification and into working life.

**Start Wien – Youth College**

Youth College is a project launched in 2016 by AMS Vienna, the Vienna Social Fund and the municipal administration responsible for integration and diversity. It has 1,000 places for young refugees and asylum seekers and other migrants between the ages of 15 and 25. The goal is to prepare these immigrant groups for subsequent access to compulsory education or entry into the labour market via a modular system. Apart from language courses, mathematics and ICT courses, special modules like completing compulsory schooling, workshops, educational and vocational guidance and socially integrative activities, etc. are offered. The budget amounts to €6m annually, half of which is financed by the ESF. By August 2018, 2,068 young people had been supported as part of the project.

**(Voluntary) Integration Year**

Starting from 2016, there was the possibility of a *freiwilliges Integrationsjahr* (FIJ – Voluntary Integration Year) for those who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, who have been in this status for a maximum of two years and who are beneficiaries of social assistance. Subsequently, the *Integrationsjahrgesetz* (IJG – Integration Year Act) made this obligatory from September 2017. The IJG focused on the provision of active labour market policy measures for refugees, while asylum seekers with a high probability of gaining asylum status were envisaged as being able to access labour market policy measures, including work training programmes and German language courses, from January 2018.

However, this legislative reform was swept away in August 2018 via the withdrawal of funding ‘indicating that integration is increasingly seen as an obligation of refugees and not of the Austrian host society as well’ (Biffl 2019).

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Step2Austria

Step2Austria offers professional counselling, coaching and placement services for asylum seekers, the beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and people with a migration background aged 18 and over, and registered with AMS Vienna subsequent to the Competence Check. Counselling is individually adapted to the needs of the participants (via linguistic, cultural and professional support). The focus is on the best possible application of existing skills and on mediation in line with acquired training and experience. In 2018, 635 recognised refugees and people eligible for subsidiary protection were provided with counselling under Step2Austria, with 185 of them being successfully employed. In addition to German, native language counselling is provided in English, Arabic, Farsi, Russian, Turkish, Polish and Slovak.

Apprenticeships for young asylum seekers in shortage occupations

The possibility for young asylum seekers up to the age of 25 to start an apprenticeship in shortage occupations – introduced in 2012 – was withdrawn in autumn 2018 since the scheme was seen by the Minister of the Interior as an incentive to apply for asylum in Austria (Biffl 2019).

In late 2017, Rudi Anschober, at that time a Green politician in Upper Austria, set up the platform Ausbildung statt Abschiebung (Training instead of Deportation) which was/is well received by representatives of most of the major parties (except FPÖ – the Freedom Party) as well as in business and academia. Signatories to the initiative appealed to the (former) federal government to implement the ‘3plus2’ model for asylum seekers, in line with the scheme in Germany in which ‘3plus2’ provides for apprentices not to be deported during their three-year training and the first two full years of work. During this time, the asylum procedure continues, but the model leads to tolerance for those involved and thus security during the period of training and the first two years of work.

The demand for the introduction of the German model has not yet been met, but a parliament decision in December 2019 has made it possible for asylum seekers to be allowed to complete the apprenticeships they have started in Austria even if they are threatened with deportation. All parties represented in the parliament, with the exception of the right-wing FPÖ, voted for the regulation. However, if a negative asylum decision has been issued, those concerned must leave the country after they have finished their apprenticeship. Asylum seekers are not allowed to start a new apprenticeship, as the regulation only applies to existing cases.

11. Under the current government coalition consisting of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Green Party, Mr. Anschober is Minister of Health and Social Affairs.
12. In May 2019, the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government was ousted after a no confidence vote. The decision on the apprenticeship of asylum seekers was made under the interim (expert) government in office between June 2019 and January 2020.
b.mobile – Nationwide job placement for apprentices scheme (AMS Vienna)

The Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection and the Public Employment Service started a pilot project in Vienna to offer young recognised refugees an apprenticeship in occupations and regions suffering from a lack of apprentices. In preparation, the competencies and interests of the young people involved must be tested (in German, Arabic, English, French and, later on, also in Farsi) in order to establish optimal matching with vacant apprenticeship posts. The young people will accordingly be prepared for their apprenticeship and supported during it by a coach/fixed contact person with regard to occupational and other questions. The apprenticeship coach also prepares the company for the young refugee apprentices.

In its initial phase, this pilot project will comprise about 100 young recognised refugees, with a focus on unaccompanied minors. Currently, there are 5,335 young refugees registered with the AMS, two-thirds of them in Vienna. Later on, the project could also be extended to young asylum seekers.

Courses in Austrian values and culture

Compulsory one-day training courses in Austrian values and culture are provided for recently-recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection entitled to social assistance and AMS support. In the case of non-participation, allowances are cut accordingly.

Additional services

The Austrian AMS also offers support through specialised counselling and assistance centres especially concerning the recognition of competences and skills to speed up the process of integration: e.g. all medical doctors with the need to have their degrees from universities outside Austria recognised, and who are registered with AMS Vienna, are supported by a counselling and assistance centre in Vienna (‘CHECKIN Plus’).

In view of the high share of (recognised) refugees on their books, AMS Vienna set up a central information centre for recognised refugees and people eligible for subsidiary protection in May 2017, providing initial consultation with the AMS. Consultation and information is offered there by native-speaking counsellors in Arabic, Farsi/Dari and Russian.

Job fairs for refugees are highly visible actions, but only partly successful. Out of 1,040 refugees – mainly Syrians and Afghans who had arrived in Austria between 2015 and 2016 – selected by AMS Vienna for a job fair in Vienna in January 2019, only about one-fifth had a job by the end of March. It turned out that one of the major hurdles for the target group in applying for a job was that the majority of firms conduct their selection procedure via online application portals and refer to these at the job fair. Most refugees do not own a computer.
5. **Labour market performance**

5.1 **Comparative labour market characteristics of the foreign-born population**

Austrian social insurance data do not indicate whether a registered employee is a recognised refugee, but only provide information on the citizenships of insured workers. Accordingly, in 2018, 752,900 foreign employees (i.e. wage and salary earners) were employed in Austria. This is 315,000 more than in 2008.

**Employment**

Between 2008 and 2018, the employment of Austrian nationals increased by 1.3 per cent, while the number of foreign workers rose by 72.3 per cent (Figure 8). Thus, foreign workers accounted for a 20.1 per cent share of total employment compared to 12.9 per cent in 2008. The strong increase in the employment of foreign workers was mainly due to EU enlargement and the subsequent liberalisation of labour market access for citizens of the new member states.

Out of the total number of foreign employees, 452,000 people in 2018 originated from EU countries, of whom 142,200 were from the old EU countries (EU-14) and 309,800 from the new member states (EU-13). Thus, 60 per cent of foreign workers were EU nationals and 40 per cent third country nationals.

The combined number of workers from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria has risen from 6,892 in 2008 to 28,490 in 2018, increasing their share in the total foreign workforce from 1.6 per cent to 3.8 per cent. Employment increases were particularly strong for citizens from Afghanistan and, even more so, from Syria from 2015 onwards (Figure 9). Within this group, workers from Afghanistan constitute the largest community, followed by Russians (mostly from Chechnya), Syria, Iran and Iraq.

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**Figure 8  Employment growth of Austrian nationals and foreign workers (per cent)**
The share of women in foreign employment differs by country of origin. In 2018, women from Russia (55.7 per cent) and Iran (37.4 per cent) had the highest participation rates in terms of foreign female employment. Iraqi females come next, but with a significantly lower rate (17.4 per cent). The lowest share of women in employment is amongst Afghans (10.5 per cent) and Syrians (9.5 per cent). It is interesting to note that the participation rate of foreign women fell for citizens from almost all of these five countries from 2013/2015 onwards; the only exceptions are women from Russia whose employment share continued to increase.

In terms of economic activities, in 2018 the majority of workers from the five main countries of origin of refugees are employed in the services sector, 13 per cent in industry and close to five per cent in construction, while the share of workers in agriculture is negligible. A more detailed breakdown shows that workers from Afghanistan are primarily employed in tourism, followed by other business services (e.g. cleaning, domestic services), trade, manufacturing and construction. Iranians work in trade, tourism and other business services, manufacturing and health and social work; Iraqis are employed in other business services, tourism, trade and manufacturing. Russians are mainly employed in trade, other business services and manufacturing with remarkable shares also in professional, scientific and technical activities. Syrian citizens are primarily employed in tourism, manufacturing, other business services and trade. In some of these service activities, the proportion of foreign workers is amongst the highest of any industry. Tourism takes the lead with foreign workers amounting to 49.4 per cent of the workforce, followed by cleaning and domestic services (40.2 per cent). The highest share of any industry is actually held by agriculture and forestry where the foreign-born workforce is close to 60 per cent, but this sector does not play much of a role with respect to the employment of immigrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria.
Statistics on the occupational structure of employees from these countries are not available but a study by ICMPD (2018), based on surveys of refugees, gives some insight.\textsuperscript{13}

According to the results of this study, one-third of employees (33 per cent) were working in an unskilled capacity, in particular as kitchen help, cleaning staff, in the manufacture of goods and packaging, transport and storage and other auxiliary activities. Almost one-quarter of respondents worked in service occupations such as sales people, waiters and bartenders, cooks or as security staff. About 16 per cent worked in craft trades, including mainly as mechanics and welders. Technical professions were mentioned almost as often (15 per cent), representing a highly heterogeneous group encompassing non-academic legal and social care professions as well as cultural and related professionals. The largest group of technical professionals were social workers, followed by materials and engineering technology professionals. Academic occupations were mentioned rather rarely (six per cent), mainly being interpreters/translators.

According to the survey, atypical employment, particularly in the form of part-time work, was frequent; 39 per cent of respondents worked part-time. Among women, the part-time rate was much higher than the average, at 70 per cent. Fixed-term contracts were more common among men (29 per cent) than among women (19 per cent) and accounted for 27 per cent of the total workforce surveyed. This was particularly the case among unskilled workers (44 per cent).

With respect to self-employment, the available statistics show a steady increase among Russian citizens in Austria since 2008, while a noticeable growth of self-employment for Syrian citizens started in 2015, for Afghans in 2016 and for Iranians and Iraqis in 2017 (Figure 10). The self-employment of citizens from these five countries is primarily concentrated in tourism, wholesale trade and transport, followed by construction and manufacturing – it differs, however, by nationality.

In more detail, the self-employment of Afghans is focused on trade, transport, site preparation and restaurants. Iranians are more likely to set up their own business in transport, accommodation, wholesale trade, restaurants and site preparation. Self-employment of Iraqis is concentrated in site preparation, building construction and postal and courier activities. Russians work in accommodation, manufacturing, trade and creative arts and entertainment activities, while the self-employment of Syrian citizens in Austria is concentrated in restaurants, wholesale trade, site preparation and other personal services.

As shown in Figure 11, in 2018 self-employment was highest among Iranians, being close to the average for Austrian workers (12.4%), while it was lowest for citizens from Afghanistan (4.2 per cent) and Syria (5.8 per cent). Across all five countries, the proportion of self-employed people (15.2 per cent) was, however, much lower than the share taken generally by foreign workers.

\textsuperscript{13} Face-to-face interviews conducted between August 2016 and May 2017 with 1,200 refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection of working age from Syria, Afghanistan, Russia and Iraq who had arrived mostly since 2006.
Summing up, the strong concentration in low-skilled jobs, the high numbers of part-time workers and those employed on a fixed-term basis and the low salaries of those in employment can be described as labour market segregation. Often, these are low-status jobs which are avoided by non-migrants (e.g. as kitchen help, cleaning staff, warehouse workers or security). Refugees therefore tend to work in atypical employment much more frequently than other migrants or Austrians, especially in their initial employment relationships (ICMPD 2018).
**Unemployment**

In July 2019, 28,374 AMS beneficiaries from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria were registered as unemployed (the majority, close to 60 per cent, living in Vienna). Among them, 18,074 were seeking work and 10,300 were in training. Syrians represented the largest group (13,156), followed by Afghans (6,279), Russians (3,195), Iraqis (1,973) and Iranians (1,921).

As stated above, Austrian social insurance data do not indicate whether a registered employee is a refugee and no official unemployment rates for refugees are available. However, employment data for citizens from the main source countries of refugees may serve as a proxy for the calculation of the unemployment rate. Accordingly, unemployment reached a peak in 2015 and fell steadily thereafter (Figure 12). In July 2019, the unemployment rate of Syrian citizens stood at 42.3 per cent followed by Iraqis (33 per cent), Russians and Afghans, both at about 26 per cent, and Iranians at 22.7 per cent.

However, unemployment rates remain well above average compared to other countries of origin. The improvement in the past couple of years is mainly attributable to the favourable economic environment, which has helped not only to reduce the overall unemployment rate but also the unemployment rate of ‘vulnerable’ groups (including recognised refugees). In addition, networking might also have contributed to rising employment/declining unemployment among refugees.

**Figure 12** Unemployment rates of citizens from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria (per cent)

![Unemployment rates graph](image)

Note: 2019 refers to July.
Source: Own calculations based on BaliWeb.

Within the group of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, however, many people are not covered by labour market statistics as they are not (yet) available to the labour market. Such people are particularly remote from the labour
market because, for example, they do not have sufficient knowledge of German in order
to pursue gainful employment or because they are not in a position to work or are not
available due to caring obligations. These people are, therefore, not included in the
number of registered jobseekers (Expertenrat für Integration 2019).

5.2 Evaluation of labour market success for refugees

The *Arbeitsmarktservice* regularly monitors the labour market success\(^{14}\) of refugees
within three control groups.

Of refugees who gained recognised status in 2015 and who were registered as
unemployed with the AMS or in training between January 2015 and June 2016,
10.1 per cent were in employment at the end of June 2016 and 44.1 per cent at the end
of June 2019 (this group is referred to as control group 1 and comprises 9,526 people).

Among refugees who received residence status in 2016 and were registered unemployed
with the AMS or who were in training between January 2016 and June 2017, 11.4 per
cent were in employment at the end of June 2017 and 39.8 per cent at the end of
June 2019 (control group 2, comprising 11,596 people).

Finally, among refugees who received residence status in 2017 and who were registered
as unemployed or in training with the AMS between January 2017 and June 2018,
18.6 per cent were in employment at the end of June 2018 and 35.2 per cent at the end
of June 2019 (control group 3, comprising 8,794 people).

A research report published by Forstner *et al.* (2019) examines the labour market
integration of foreigners including asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria and Russia
who came to Austria in 2007, 2011 and 2016. The report uses social security data,
comprising all those living in Austria who have a social security number and classified
according to pre-defined criteria (e.g. nationality, time of immigration, for asylum
seekers the provision of basic care, etc.) and their labour market integration at different
points in time (one, six and ten years after immigration).

The results indicate that, in 2017, out of the asylum seekers or beneficiaries of subsidiary
protection who were of working age and who had been living in Austria since 2007, 58 per
cent were in employment (defined as for at least ninety days in a calendar year). Of those
coming to Austria in 2011, 53 per cent were employed while, of those who had applied for
asylum in 2016 and were still in Austria in 2017, only three per cent had started to work.

The employment rate among the beneficiaries of asylum and subsidiary protection still
living in Austria varies widely by nationality. Employment is most likely for refugees
from Syria: in 2017, 69 per cent of the 2007 cohort and 63 per cent of the 2011 cohort
were in employment. The figures for refugees from Afghanistan are 65 per cent and

\(^{14}\) This type of measurement of integration success is relatively strict, as only those people who were actually in
employment at the end of the respective month are considered ‘successful’ here.
58 per cent, respectively. The group of refugees who have been least successful in the labour market are citizens from Russia, with employment rates of 33 per cent among the 2007 cohort and 20 per cent in the 2011 cohort. However, there are some gender-specific differences: the integration of men from Syria and Afghanistan into the labour market might be above average compared to the overall group, but women from these two countries are less frequently employed; while the employment of both men and women from Russia is significantly below average.

A study by Jestl et al. (2019), based on the same dataset and examining employment gaps between refugees, non-humanitarian migrants and natives, concluded that refugees, after a difficult initial phase, start a catching-up process with respect to both the other groups. After seven years in Austria, non-European refugees show approximately the same employment probability as non-European migrants, while differences across immigrant groups become smaller the longer immigrants stay in Austria. The labour market integration process differs, however, in terms of gender, age and education: women, older people and highly-educated refugees\(^\text{15}\) face long-lasting difficulties of integration into the Austrian labour market compared to non-humanitarian migrants and natives. Major reasons for the slower integration of the latter group is cited by the authors as the higher requirements for (host country) language competence in high-skilled jobs, as well as difficulties with the transferability of skills (i.e. in having professional and academic qualifications recognised).

6. **Survey results on the labour market integration of refugees**

The FIMAS+ INTEGRATION survey (ICMPD 2018) is a unique survey dataset whose intention was to capture various dimensions of the integration processes of recent refugees in Austria of working age (aged between 15 and 60) particularly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The survey was carried out between December 2017 and April 2018 in the five Austrian provinces of Vienna, Upper Austria, Styria, Salzburg and Tyrol. The survey comprised around 1,640 refugees, of which 55 per cent were from Syria and 21 per cent from Afghanistan, while 14 per cent were from Iraq. The majority of respondents were male (79 per cent) – which corresponded to the composition of the refugee population in Austria who were eligible for asylum or subsidiary protection and who came to Austria mainly in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

The information gathered through this survey allows us to answer important research questions about the integration programmes tailored to recently-arrived refugees in Austria, since a special section was dedicated to the evaluation of their participation in recently-introduced integration programmes and their effectiveness as regards integration – e.g. Competence Check, Step2Austria and Start Wien – Youth College.\(^\text{16}\) Information was collected not only about participation in these integration courses, but also about the opportunities offered through such programmes.

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\(^\text{15}\) However, if looking only at the group of recently-arrived refugees, labour market integration is more successful among the highly-qualified.

\(^\text{16}\) For further details, see section on Labour market integration programmes above.
Participation in language courses and how recent refugees fare

The complexity that refugee status implies means that refugees’ path to integration is more complicated than for other groups of migrants. In most cases, refugees face a number of barriers in terms of integration and finding employment because moving to another country was not a deliberate choice. Rather, it was an abrupt event which compelled them to interrupt e.g. education, employment, social contacts, etc. and take another life trajectory for which they might be unprepared. Therefore, the path to integration and labour market outcomes of refugees will be shaped by their involvement in different training programmes allowing them to acquire the language of the host country followed by other formation courses which supports them in rapidly entering the labour market and settling in the host society.

Through the FIMAS survey (ICMPD 2018), we can provide an insight into the situation of recent refugees in Austria, their level of participation in integration courses and the benefits of participation. First of all, it should be noted that almost 80 per cent of the refugees who took part in the FIMAS survey stated that they had no knowledge of German when they arrived in Austria. However, at the survey stage, 70 per cent stated that they had intermediate language skills (i.e. B1 and above). In fact, refugees have considerably improved their German language skills over time, and earlier cohorts have a much better knowledge of German than those who arrived more recently. Almost one-half of refugees who arrived in Austria in 2011 have language skills equivalent to B2 and above – upper intermediate level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Figure 13).

Figure 13  German language proficiency, by year of migration to Austria

Note: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL): A1 – beginner; A2 – elementary; B1 – intermediate; B2 – upper intermediate; C1 – advanced; C2 – proficiency.
Source: Own elaboration, FIMAS database (2018).
If one concentrates on recent refugees, the knowledge of German is certainly lower but, as the number of years in the host country increases, so does the proportion of refugees who know German. Younger age cohorts reported better German language skills, especially in the 25-34 age group where more than 75 per cent already had a command of the language at B1 and above. In terms of gender, men showed a slightly better command of German than women. Similarly, better educated and working people revealed a higher level of language skills. Nevertheless, differences in language skills are more pronounced at different educational levels. Only around 40 per cent of those with no formal education or only a primary level – ISCED-0 and ISCED-1 — had an intermediate level of German language of B1 and above; in contrast, almost 85 per cent of those with a high level of education – ISCED 4-6 – did so. Major differences can also be observed between those who are already employed and those still unemployed: almost 80 per cent of those in employment stated that they had an intermediate level of German language – B1 and above – while only 60 per cent of the unemployed did so.

The strategies undertaken by refugees for acquiring language skills apart from language courses are manifold: e.g. through education and work or media use, but also through social contact with natives, friends or their own partners. Those who have acquired German language skills through education and work show slightly better proficiency in the language than those who attend language courses. As expected, German language courses are mainly targeted towards supporting those who have a less good command of the language.

**Participation in integration courses and how recent refugees fare**

A command of the language of the host country is essential in order to make progress in various areas of integration: not only in terms of employment, but also in terms of social and cultural integration. Knowledge of the language of the host country will, in most cases, enable people to participate in other integration programmes which will subsequently improve their skills and employment opportunities. According to the FIMAS results, a significant number of refugees participate in other integration programmes in parallel to German language courses. As a result, both language and integration programmes for refugees have, to a certain extent, been used in a rather synchronised way. This is particularly true for the group of refugees who had taken advantage of the Youth College – an integration programme suitable for young people aged 15 to 21 years – since 61 per cent of the refugees participating in this programme also attended a German language course. As far as the other programmes are concerned, the use of integration programmes in combination with a language course accounted for more than 33 per cent of refugees who participated in other programmes such as Competence Check and Voluntary Integration Year, and even higher – up to 38 per cent – of those who attended courses on Austrian values and culture or other courses offered by AMS.

17. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 1997: ISCED-0 refers to formal education; ISCED-1 to primary education or first stage of basic education; ISCED-2 to lower secondary education; ISCED-3 to upper secondary education; ISCED-4-6 to post-secondary non-tertiary education, first stage of tertiary education and second stage of tertiary education.
Moreover, especially among refugees who participated in integration programmes where their skills, qualifications and language proficiency were tested – e.g. through Competence Check – the reported language proficiency was higher (see Figure 14 below). In contrast, the language skills of refugees who attended Youth College seemed to be slightly poorer than those of other refugees who participated in other integration programmes. This certainly had to do with the target group and purpose of this programme being young refugees and asylum-seekers aged 15-21 as a means of equipping them with the necessary language skills and meeting basic educational needs. In other programmes, too, where the focus was primarily cultural integration and the cultural values and attitudes of the host society – e.g. Step2Austria or courses on Austrian values and culture – those who took part in this programme proved to have a good knowledge of German.

Refugees who completed Competence Check found it particularly useful in obtaining a job that matched their previous qualifications (44 per cent) and for acquiring new skills (41 per cent), but also for finding a job (39 per cent). Attending Youth College was particularly useful in helping participants achieve a higher level of education (47 per cent) and find a job (38 per cent). Participants in the Voluntary Integration Year benefited the most from learning new skills (42 per cent) and finding a job (36 per cent) but also from finding a job in line with their qualifications (34 per cent). The same applies to those who participated in Austrian values and culture courses or in AMS’s other integration programmes. In the case of Step2Austria – a programme tailored to the individual needs of participants with regard to language, cultural and professional necessities – it was found that participants found the programme useful in terms of finding a job, and for finding a job according to their level of qualification, but also for

![Figure 14 German language proficiency and attendance on integration programmes](image-url)
acquiring new skills. Nevertheless, almost 28 per cent of participants did not find the programme useful.

Comparing feedback from participants for specific results across different programmes, the acquisition of new skills through ‘other’ AMS integration courses and the ÖIF’s ‘other programmes’ is particularly high – at least one-half of the participants who attended such programmes have confirmed this. Learning a new profession was achieved primarily through participation in the Youth College, but also in ‘other’ AMS integration courses and ‘other’ ÖIF integration programmes, as this positive result was between 20 per cent and 28 per cent in these programmes. Finding a job was effectively achieved through participation in Step2Austria and ‘other’ AMS courses, where the success rate in finding a job was almost 50 per cent. In contrast, refugees were more successful in finding a job that matched their skills or qualifications after participating in Competence Check. Improvement in the educational level or reaching a higher level of education was best achieved through Youth College and AMS courses. The recognition of prior formal education was achieved mainly through AMS and ÖIF integration programmes, being confirmed respectively by 15 per cent and 16 per cent of the participants in these programmes. Concerning the recognition of previous work experience, the best result was reported by participants attending Step2Austria, ÖIF integration programmes and Competence Check, although a positive result was the case only for between 10 per cent and 14 per cent.

Results from the FIMAS+INTEGRATION survey (ICMPD 2020)\(^\text{18}\) among 2,400 refugees and people with subsidiary protection from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, carried out in 2019, show that each additional year of residence in Austria increases the probability of being employed. Afghan people are more often in employment than Syrians, for example. This is due also to the differences in the demographic structure of these two groups: on average, Afghans are younger and, at the same time, have been living in Austria longer than Syrian refugees. Of those refugees already living in Austria for between three and five years, 40 per cent are already in employment, compared to only 17 per cent of those with a shorter length of stay.

However, the survey results indicate a relatively high proportion of atypical employment among refugees (57 per cent) compared to the Austrian population as a whole (32 per cent). Atypical employment affects both male and female refugees to a substantial degree. In addition to part-time work and sub-standard forms of employment such as temporary or non-existent employment contracts and forms of bogus self-employment (contract work and freelance contracts) also play a role. Meanwhile, about one-third of people are working in occupations for which they are formally overqualified.

\(^\text{18}\) So far, three survey waves have been carried out under the FIMAS research project.
7. Conclusions

The labour market integration of refugees was an important concern in Austria up to as far as 2017 and benefited from appropriate levels of funding. After the change in government from a grand coalition (between social democrats – SPÖ and ÖVP – People’s Party) to a centre-right coalition (ÖVP and FPÖ – Freedom Party), legislation and funding for recognised refugees and people with subsidiary protection became increasingly restrictive. From 2019, there has been no additional budget for the target group of refugees. The new government – a coalition between ÖVP and the Greens – in office since January 2020 has not yet set any decisive new standards.

The change of government from the centre-right coalition, which had pursued a deliberate policy during its period in office of the non-integration of refugees, to the ÖVP/Greens in 2019 has brought only minor policy changes. The human rights organisation SOS Mitmensch concluded in a recent report that more than one-half of the political announcements and measures of the current government may be assessed as ‘non-integrationist’ and less than one-third as ‘integrationist’. The repercussions of the non-integrationist measures of the previous government are clearly noticeable while the positive attempts of the current government are often still not set in stone. The Greens play a much smaller role in the government than ÖVP, so no far-reaching changes regarding the integration of refugees can be expected in the current legislative period.

The decision of the government not to allow asylum seekers to take up apprenticeships in shortage occupations shows, once again, the ambivalent attitude of the (conservative part) of the coalition towards refugees. At the same time, the government has sponsored job fairs aimed at bringing together Austrian firms and refugees to combat labour shortages. Overall, however, delays in the asylum procedure continue to hamper the integration of asylum seekers into the labour market; and, on top of that, there remains the issue of them having limited access to it in the first place.

Survey results on the impact of integration programmes show that the use of language and other integration courses has been beneficial to refugees in the sense that participants have been able to acquire new skills, improve their educational level and have their formal education or previous work experience recognised, but also learn a new profession and find a job. Participation in integration programmes is thus effective, although occasionally it has proved to be less useful e.g. for 28 per cent of those participating in Step2Austria. However, the survey also revealed divergent feedback within a particular programme. For example, integration programmes specifically designed to meet the individual needs of participants in terms of language, cultural and professional requirements – e.g. Step2Austria – largely helped participants find work that matched their existing skills and qualifications, or in terms of having their previous qualifications recognised, although negative feedback was, at the same time, noted among another group of participants.

However, the – relatively low – take-up of such programmes and inevitable question marks over the representativeness of the participants involved in any survey is also an important aspect to consider when interpreting such results.

Learning the German language is an important element in gaining a foothold in Austria as an asylum seeker or a person entitled to asylum and to be able to build a life here both socially and economically. However, the number of German language courses has declined significantly following the former federal government’s decision to stop financing German courses for asylum seekers in autumn 2018.²⁰

German language courses are, in the main, organised by the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), to which (primarily) only recognised refugees and people granted subsidiary protection have access. Asylum seekers can only participate in these courses if they are confirmed to have a high probability of their status being recognised which is the case for Syrians and Iranians, for example. In 2018, however, only 335 out of 20,000 course places went to asylum seekers.²¹

Some federal states have tried to fill this gap, but this has not been successful everywhere. In addition to the ÖIF offers, the federal states are also able to offer their own German language courses. Overall, Tyrol is comparatively well positioned, followed by Vienna and Upper Austria. In contrast, SOS Mitmensch reports that Lower Austria and Styria no longer offer independent provincial German language courses for asylum seekers.

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²⁰ https://www.sosmitmensch.at/deutliche-verschlechterung-bei-deutschkursen-fuer-asylsuchende
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All links were checked on 14 August 2020.