

# CO-OPERATION IN MANAGING THE MIGRATION FLOW IN AUSTRIA 2015 AND 2016

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## Abstract

In 2015 the migration movements reached an unprecedented peak in several European countries such as Austria since the period after World War II. Involved stakeholders such as national authorities or NGOs were overstrained with the number of displaced persons reaching their borders. Limited information exchange and insulated operational pictures turned out to be major challenges of involved authorities, NGOs and grassroots movements. This paper provides relevant basic insight into the development of migration movements since 2010 and analyses the requirements for different types of stakeholders from Austria and Germany expressed in order to improve future management of refugee flows.

## 1. Introduction

In the second half of 2015 several European countries, including Austria among several others, were confronted with considerably larger migration flows compared to other movements that took place in precedent decades. One indicator for the extremity of developments is the number of

asylum seekers. In 2015, about 88,300 persons applied for asylum in Austria, a three times higher quantity compared to 2014 (BMI, 2015). Many stakeholders, including the authorities and NGOs, were overstrained with the number of displaced persons and the density of the migration wave and several other facets of these developments. In one of the hot phases of the mass movement of persons seeking refuge in October 2015 improvement of information exchange was declared as a priority to be tackled (EC, 2015). Leaders representing the countries located at the Western Balkans Migration Route agreed on managing the migration flows together and on implementing a permanent exchange of information via contact points among other measures in order to facilitate the support of refugees and to provide necessary shelter and rest. In 2015, approximately 600.000 persons were travelling through Austria (Medien-Servicestelle, 2015) in pursuance of reaching their final destination and their envisioned country of asylum application in Europe.

A multitude of measures encompassing political agreements as the one stated above with states along the so-called Western Balkans Migration Route as well as controls and barriers at federal border crossings led eventually to a reduction of the number of migrating people in 2016. As a consequence, 6,480 asylum applications were counted in Austria in the first quarter of 2017, a decrease of 55% compared to 2016 (Medien-Servicestelle, 2017). Nevertheless, the number of asylum seekers remained extraordinarily high. This is underlined by about 42,000 asylum applications in Austria in 2016 (BMI, 2016). In order to make this challenge faced by different European states comparable, we normalized the yearly number of pending applications of asylum seekers of selected countries (UNHCR, 2017) by the number of inhabitants (see Figure 1-1). As one can see the numbers of pending applications relative to the number of inhabitants were and still are not equal in the different countries. Sweden had approximately 16 pending asylum applications per 1,000 inhabitants and Austria about 9, whereas the majority of member states faced two or less pending applications per 1,000 inhabitants in 2015. For Sweden this was the year with the highest number of pending applications, but this was not the case for countries such as Germany. It can be seen that Germany needed to manage more pending asylum applications in 2016 compared to 2015. It has to be considered that the number of pending applications does neither reflect the number of new applications per year, nor the number of accepted asylum applications or the transit of persons (the transit number was specifically an issue at the beginning of the migration flow). The number of pending applications reflects parameters such of interest of asylum seekers in a host country and capabilities to manage the asylum applications.

The data on migration provided by UNHCR demonstrate the international dimension of this development (UNHCR, 2015). In 2015, 65.3 million forcibly displaced persons were counted on a global level, among them 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced persons and 3.2 million asylum seekers. Figure 1-2 shows the development of the number of refugees from 2010 to 2016 in the states that hosted the highest numbers of refugees worldwide in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017), it has to be noted that the 2016 data were taken from mid-year trends from June 2016.

When comparing the number of refugees that arrived in the first five host states Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Ethiopia in 2015<sup>1</sup> with the numbers of refugees hosted by European countries (according to UNHCR definitions, excluding Turkey), it becomes apparent that about 12% were hosted by European countries whereas the top five countries hosted about 43% of a total of about 16.1 million refugees worldwide. Management of migration flows was nevertheless a considerable challenge for European stakeholders in the past and can be expected to require substantial resources and initiatives both on national as well as European level in the coming years, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Comparison were made for 2015, because data from 2016 are based on mid- year analysis

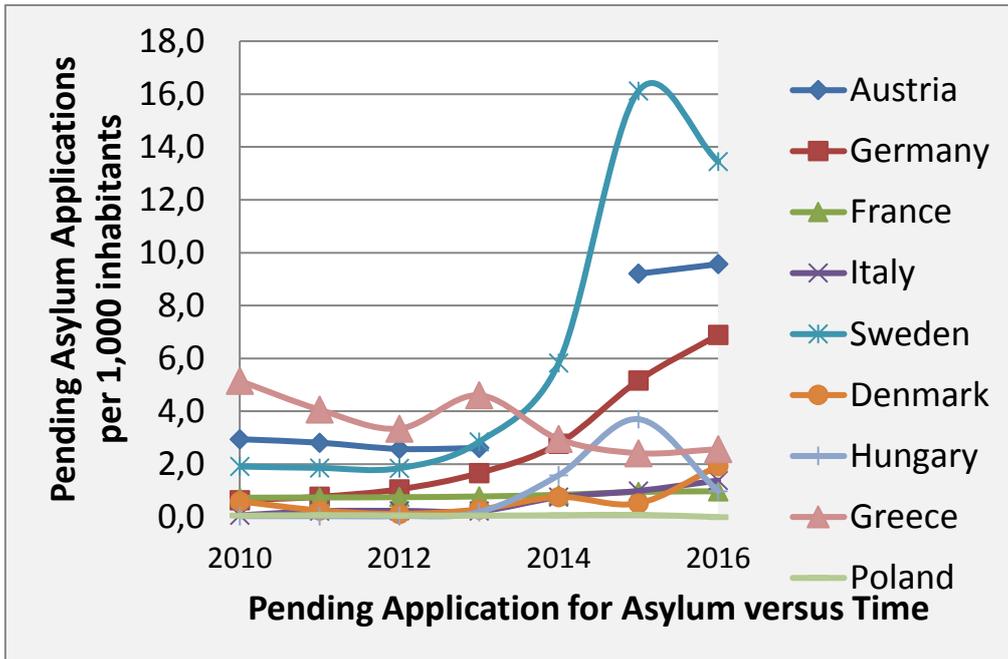


Figure 1-1: Normalized number of pending application of asylum per 1,000 inhabitants of selected European countries from 2010 to 2016 (UNHCR (2017), for Austria no data were available for 2014)

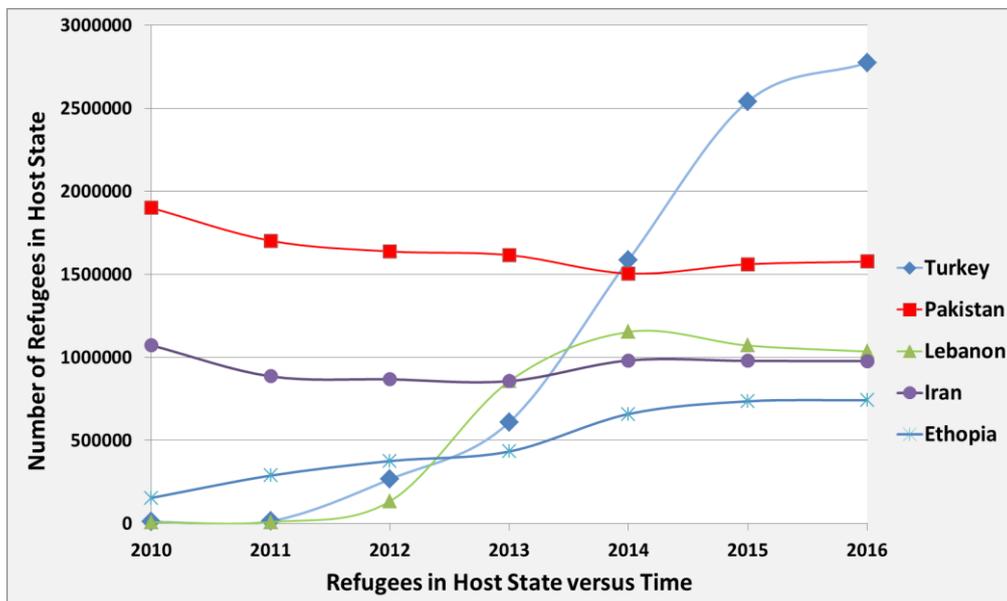


Figure 1-2: Absolute number of refugees from 2010 to 2015 in the countries hosting the highest number of refugees in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017)

## 2. Methodology

In order to identify and analyse problems and requirements related to the refugee flow in Austria and Germany, two types of interviews were conducted in the years 2015 and 2016. On the one hand, systematic, quantitative interviews were performed with formal organisations. On the other hand, a qualitative questionnaire was developed and applied to analyse activities of informal,

partially ad hoc created organisations involved in the handling of the migration movement.

## **2.1. The data models and the applied tool**

The quantitative part of the interviews was performed using the inventory developed in the frame of the FP7 project EPISECC (FP7-SECURITY, grant no. 607078, see also Neubauer et al, 2016). The purpose of the inventory is to provide information on the quality of the management of past crisis and disasters with focus on information exchange. This type of information was used to help developing an optimized architecture of a platform for information exchange (Common Information Space, CIS) between stakeholders active in the domain of crisis management encompassing also actors managing the refugee flow. The CIS proposes a new information sharing paradigm allowing stakeholders such as local emergency management authorities an automated sharing of information with other participating organizations in a machine readable way. Stakeholders are usually managing their processes with ICT tools of different kinds. The CIS can bridge the gaps between these different ICT tools what results in the situation that the organizations collaborating via the CIS can remain using the tools they are familiar with. The only prerequisite to take part in the CIS and get connected to any other participant is the onetime adaption of a CIS interface for the own ICT tool, the so called adaptor (see Zuba et al, 2017).

In order to ensure that adequate information will be available, a four step process was applied to set up the inventory. Basically, stakeholders were consulted to identify relevant questions on crisis and disaster management with focus on information exchange. In addition, a data model was developed. It is composed of multiple areas of information, such as processes, disasters or tools (Huebner et al, 2015). Such areas consist of substructures, ensuring that all relevant information from stakeholders can be integrated (for further details see Neubauer et al, 2016). This data model was the basis for the development of an online questionnaire.

In parallel to the structured interviews conducted using the EPISECC inventory, we enriched that quantitative data through more qualitative information. With impressions and effects of the (as of the time of this writing still ongoing) migration crisis fresh in the public consciousness, we conducted interviews with members of grassroots movements that evolved with the goal of helping refugees. Such emergent forms of self-organized initiatives have been observable since the wake of the first wave of refugees arriving in Central Europe during 2015. These interviews were of a semi-structured nature. This means that we defined a set of questions to be answered during all interviews, but allowed to deviate from these guidelines (in a reasonable manner) for the sake of the flow of conversation for limited time, before steering it back to the predefined questions. The order of questions was allowed to vary. Enabling participants to talk more freely provided us with the option to investigate emerging topics in detail in case they fitted to the theme of our guidelines and contributed to the research questions. With regards to these research questions, the parts of our interview guidelines relevant for this paper consist of the following general topics (paraphrased):

- 1) Handling of internal communication and collaboration, including necessary roles, communication tools, communication channels used as well as decision making processes and
- 2) external communication and collaboration, pertaining to their contact with other grassroots initiatives or formal organizations, including (again) their communication channels and tools as well as on how the contact was established and finally, the perceived quality of communication and collaboration.

Analysis of the resulting materials is still ongoing – however, we believe that even the preliminary outcomes of these interviews can shed further light on the information exchange between entities in refugee management by adding a new perspective: that of relatively new and recently formed organizations, consisting of volunteers rather than fulltime professionals.

## **2.2. Data provision - selection of types of interviewees**

The focus of the investigations performed by applying the EPISECC inventory was set on the performance of different types of stakeholders during the management of the refugee flow in 2015 and 2016. In this context, it is necessary to find criteria on how to distinguish between different types of actors in crisis and disaster management and in the management of the refugee flow. In short terms, one can differentiate between employment, formal volunteer engagement and informal volunteer engagement (for details see Neubauer et al, 2013). In case of the interviews performed with the inventory we investigated the challenges that were faced during the migration flow management of 2015 and 2016. In total, 55 interviews were performed with stakeholders from 18 countries using the inventory, more than 75% of the interviews with employees from governmental organizations. Out of these 55 interviews, 10 were related to the management of the refugee flow in Austria. 60 % of these interviews were performed with employees from governmental organization, 30 % with employees from NGOs and in one case with a representative of a company acting as contractor with an authority. In addition to the interviews performed with Austrian stakeholders some additional interviews with German stakeholders were performed, too.

In contrast to our quantitative interviews, the interviewees for our qualitative, semi-structured interviews were members of volunteer organizations that have emerged in response to the increased influx of refugees. Such emergent, self-organized communities of volunteers are not unusual in reaction to extreme events and are often the first to react. Our participants were board members of their respective communities and organizations, i.e. involved in one way or another, in the decision making process of the initiative. To identify and engage participants, we conducted a survey of news articles, online social media and online information platforms. Inclusion criteria for the selection of potential participants were

- 1) the initiative is concerned with supporting refugees,
- 2) the initiative (or at least one contact point thereof) is located in eastern Austria (to enable face-to-face interviews) and
- 3) the initiative is based on voluntary work and as such relies on the support of volunteers.

We contacted a total of 32 representatives of initiatives, 9 of which responded and agreed to participate. The participants that agreed to take part in the interviews were board members of their organizations or otherwise included in the decision making process. The interviews were conducted in the timeframe of July through October 2016. An audio recording was done of each interview (with the explicit permission of the participant) to be transcribed for analysis at a later point.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Requirements expressed by Austrian stakeholders**

The requirements expressed by Austrian stakeholders in late 2015 were mainly related to interoperability requirements. The problems described in 2015 are often caused by the lack of processes for information exchange between different organisations. Border crossing

communication turned out to be a main challenge, where border can mean frontiers between states, regions but also different type of organisations. Limited communication is one of the factors leading to an limited operational picture, in particular on the number and the time of arrival of refugees at critical locations such as border crossings. In addition, during the peaks of the refugee flow public communication networks' disposability was also limited on a local level due to the significant increase of communication and information exchange, leading often to network congestion. Significant problems arose in providing shelter for the large number of daily arriving fugitives. Apart from needs shown in Table 3-1, challenges related to waste management, unification of processes and co-ordination of ad hoc volunteers were expressed.

In 2016, the general situation changed substantially in Austria. In March 2016, the so-called Western Balkans Route was closed, therefore the migration flow moved to western routes (predominantly the „Brenner Route“ leading from Italy to Austria). Organisations adapted to the challenge, e.g. by establishing the position of a refugee co-ordinator in many organisations. Moreover, new processes to manage refugees were introduced. Several organisations active in 2015 were not involved in managing the flow of the refugees in 2016, anymore. Nevertheless, stakeholders still highlighted multiple areas where improvements are recommended (see Table 3-2)

Processes were adapted in 2016, nevertheless a lack of adequate cooperative tools such as platforms to exchange information and partially as consequence, a lack of communication and of a common operational picture was still pointed out. Taking into account the political decisions in the wake of the high tide of the migration movement in October 2015 and the call for fast implementation and optimization of communication and data exchange (EC, 2015), the interoperability on national level – but also cross border – was not yet installed or experienced on a practical, operational level. In case of new waves of thousands of refugees per day, some organisations expressed the need for tools allowing prediction of the number of incoming refugees. Such an operational picture might be based on the combination of data from sources such as satellite data or data from both conventional and social media. Short term prediction (with a horizon of approximately 2-3 days) is considered as one of the main requests.

In relation to these requirements, preliminary evaluation of qualitative interviews with volunteer initiatives have shown that the lack of adequate cooperative tools between organisations is also perceived among these grassroots movements. While internal information exchange and collaboration happens via well-known and widely adapted ICT channels such as online social networks (e.g. Facebook) or instant messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp) and appears to work well, communication with other initiatives or formal organisations was another matter. When it came to collaborating with formal organisations (both NGO and governmental organisations), interviewees most often stated unclear or frequently shifting points of contact in larger organisations with untransparent internal structures to be a problem for them, which lessened the quality of information exchange. For participants this appeared to be especially exasperating because they often had to rely on information from these formal institutions (such as some governmental offices). Regarding their exchange with other grassroots initiatives, statements varied. Some participants stated that they simply were not aware of other volunteer organisations in their area. Others stated that information exchange happened on an informal level or on a personal level between members of organisations, but was not coordinated with any board members.

Interoperability related requirements 2015
More efficient communication
Lack of information on number of incoming and outgoing refugees, operational picture
Requirements related to technical solutions 2015
Public communication system resistance
Software solution to manage location of refugees

Table 3-1: Predominant requirements expressed by Austrian stakeholders involved in the migration flow management in 2015

Requirements 2016 in Austria
Cooperative tools on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• border crossing level</li> <li>• for GO and NGO cooperation</li> </ul>
Network with international refugee managers to get an operative picture in early stages
Better information for potential refugees on situation in Europe – wrong picture exists
Better control of refugees and asylum seekers, more consequences related to their lack of will of cooperation

Table 3-2: Predominant requirements expressed by Austrian stakeholders involved in the migration flow management in 2016

### 3.2. Requirements expressed by German stakeholders

In Germany, interviewees from several authorities demanded especially for more personnel, since the workload reached alarming stages not only during the peak of the refugee crisis in summer/autumn 2015. Also in connection with that peak-period, the organizations involved indicated an incomplete operational picture lacking a prediction or at least a reliable estimation of the amount of incoming refugees and additional information such as age (adult, unaccompanied child or adolescents), gender, origin, religion, traveling route etc. The missing of this information is mainly caused by an inadequate information exchange beyond organizations and borders. Together with a short medical screening on the basis of the previous inhabitancy and route, this information would support the preparatory activities and processes at registration sites and intermediate camps in general. Moreover, on the basis of this information strategies for avoiding or harmonizing conflicts within the group of refugees could be elaborated in advance. For this purpose, mechanisms or technologies to identify potentially critical developments in groups (e.g. by analyzing trajectories and velocities for groups) would be beneficial. A short or mid-term prediction of incoming refugees would also allow for a more efficient coordination of transport means and accommodation.

For all interviews it has to be pointed that the requirements described above summarize the opinion of the interviewees and do not reflect the opinion of the authors, necessarily.

## 4. Discussions and conclusions

Both the results obtained by applying the EPISECC inventory as well as the semi structured interviews demonstrated a lack of cooperative tools and of information exchange between different types of stakeholders that are active in the management of refugee movements. Formal as well as informal organizations involved in the management of refugees expressed such needs. Apart from requirements related to information exchange and improved operational pictures several other requests were expressed from the Austrian and German stakeholders encompassing improved management of means of transportation, early medical screening and improved management of refugee camps. In spring 2016, the flow of refugees decreased in Austria as well in other European countries; this trend seems to continue in 2017. Since 2015, federal organizations set up procedures and measures on how to control the flow of refugees such as closing of the Western Balkan route and both governmental organizations as well as NGOs adapted their processes since 2015. Nevertheless, the lack of cooperative tools was still expressed in 2016. In general, concern related to the lack of an operational picture was stressed. Moreover, the need for solutions allowing short and middle term predictions of refugee movements was pointed out by formal organizations. One

major issue outlined shows that, in accordance with the given legal framework, data of migrating persons have to be secured and processed appropriately for logistics and security reasons (BMI, 2017). In addition, the optimization of organizational tasks for a basic support of refuge seekers in agreement with local governmental organizations and NGOs represents another priority.

Taking into account the multiple limitations of the prediction of political, economic as well as environmental developments (including effects arising from climate change or failure of political agreements, e.g. the agreements between Turkey and the EU) in the multiple crisis regions of the world such as Syria, Iraq, Eritrea or Somalia, European stakeholders need to prepare for potential future migration waves. The fundament for improved management of future movements of refugees and asylum seekers are adequate political agreements encompassing border crossing co-operations. In case such agreements are reached, specifically designed technical solutions such as platform for information exchange, command and control systems as well as prediction tools can support the implementation of such agreements.

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