

# Being in a liminal phase: Conditions and experiences of waiting for asylum-seeking children in Austria

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# Aim & Research Question

- Research interest: Exploring the waiting conditions and experiences of asylum-seeking children in Austria and make policy recommendations for child-centered policies
- Research questions:

How are waiting conditions and experiences shaped by different factors such as family, housing and school? How does the waiting time affect asylum-seeking children in Austria in general?

→ Evaluation of these conditions against the background of a child-centered approach

# Methodology

- **Secondary analysis of legal and policy measures**
    - since the ‚long summer of migration‘ in 2015 in Austria
  - **Fieldwork with asylum-seeking children (age 7 to 18)**
    - who live together with their families
    - in two different basic services accommodations in Vienna (Austria)
- Participant observation, interviews, informal conversations, visual display analysis

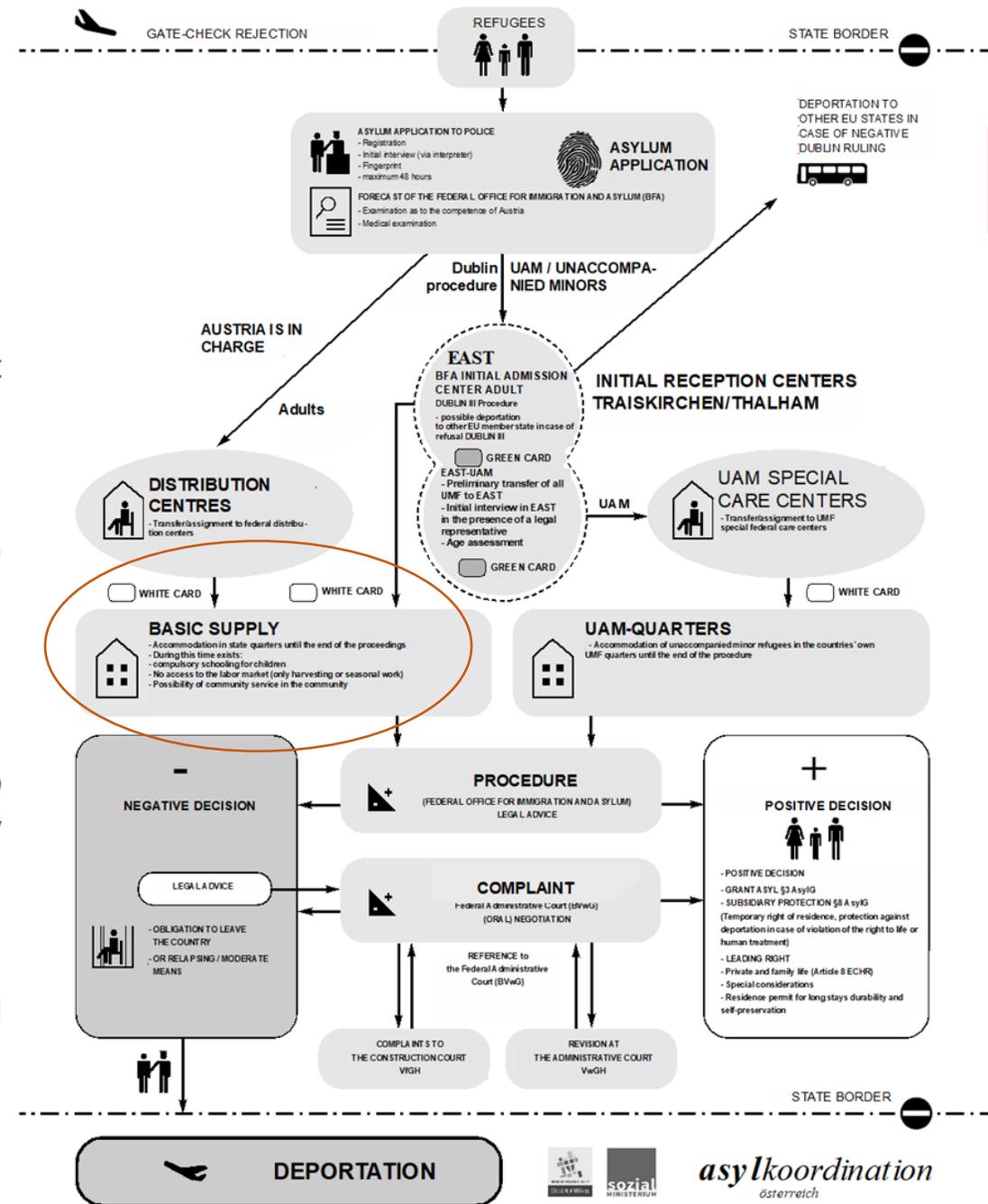
# Context: Asylum System in Austria

Quality and duration of asylum procedures vary considerably in Europe

→ Austria has with 15 (but also with six) months one of the highest waiting periods (Netzwerk für Kinderrechte 2019)

Austria case: multi-level analysis (supranational, federal, provinces) required

- “Basic supply law” (federal government), “Basic Services Agreement” and “Vienna basic service act” (province)
- People receive e.g. health insurance, counseling and transport costs to authorities are covered (plus 21 Euros per day + 40 Euro pocket money per month)
- Until the age of 15, children and adolescents attend regular schools
- Travel costs to school are paid and school materials are provided (Grundversorgungsinfo Wien 2018)



# Theoretical foundation: Liminality

- Turner bases his liminality analysis on the three stages of separation, liminality and incorporation of Van Gennep's (1981) rites de passage → A liminal phase is often shrouded in secrecy, uncertainty and ambiguity (Turner 1969)
- Waiting can be accompanied by feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and vulnerability → Sutton et al. (2011) stress that the process of waiting can be analyzed as a liminal phase
- Conceptualization of waiting for asylum as a liminal phase → the asylum-seekers experience an in-between situation of everyday life and do not have a residency status but are already (geographically) separated from their country of origin
- This experience of liminality contrasts with the multiple speeds, mobilities, and temporalities in society outside the asylum accommodation (Manpreet and Bandak, 2018: 7)

# Experiences of asylum-seeking children while waiting for asylum in Austria

- The experiences of asylum-seeking children during the waiting period in relation to their family, the basic services accommodation they live in, and the school they attend
- Examining how conditions during the waiting period, as well as the long waiting period itself, affect children's well-being
  - Investigate the structures and policies that "shape individual time" (Eule et al., 2019) and thus can influence children's experiences and create precarity

# Children's experiences of liminality in the family

- A passport is important for "*going to our country and see our people and then come back*" (K3) → Asylum-seekers are not allowed to travel; they are not issued "convention passports" or "foreign passports" (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2021)
- Family reunification, which in itself takes a long time, is made even more difficult by the circumstance of the lack of asylum status → Netzwerk Kinderrechte Österreich (2019) highlights that the family reunification process should be more benevolent, humane and expeditious in Austria (46-47)
- Integration measures, such as language courses or education and training measures, are not offered for asylum-seekers (Österreichischer Integrationsfond 2020: 51)

→ **Children suffer because they miss family members and when their parents are not well. There is a lack of psychological support!**

# Children's experiences of liminality in the basic services accommodation

- Children referred to the small space; they wish for a house for their family: “So it has many rooms and everything so nice (..) And four rooms for sleeping, so three for my sister, my two brothers with everything” (K4) → UNHCR calls for the introduction of uniform nationwide quality standards (UNHCR 2013: 5-6)
- Marginalization/segregation of asylum-seekers → The accommodation can be classified as a waiting zone outside society in the sense that they remain provisionally housed in marginal zones (Agier 2002: 337)
- House rules highlight the disciplinization of asylum-seekers → contrary to their usual autonomy, they now repeatedly find themselves in situations where they have to ask for permission (Goffman 2016: 45)
- “So there are neighbors who (...) say: Shit foreigners, for example” (K6) → immigrants labeled as ‘others’ (Regierungsprogramm 2017-2022); policies that protect from racism are not in place

→ **Children suffer from the conditions of stay, the absence of autonomy, possibilities to socially participate and discrimination**

# Children's experiences of liminality at school

- Interviewees pointed out that they have problems following lessons because of their lack of German, which leads to anxiety (K2/K3) → precarity is produced by an educational policy characterized by the introduction of disciplinary measures such as separate German language support classes
- "We just wanted to be alone. To study in peace and so" (K6) → children lack a quiet environment to study for school
- Asylum-seekers living in a basic services accommodation receive 40€ pocket money and a maximum of 200€ per school year for school materials for school children (Grundversorgungsinfo 2018) → Tutoring, which is necessary for some children, is difficult to finance with this amount

→ **Children suffer from inadequate inclusive measures and socio-economic support**

# Child-centered Policies

Children as right holders → important to problematize migrant children's well-being and participation

Needs to be considered (Gornik 2020):

- a. Knowledge obtained in line with child-centered approach
- b. Empathizes children's current well-being
- c. Participating and involvement of children in policy development
- d. Participation of children in wider social contexts
- e. Principles of child-centered education

# Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

*"What is your biggest wish?" - "That we get a passport so that we can stay" (K3)*

→ In general: shortening the waiting time

## **Family**

- Strengthen possibilities to be in contact/unify with family members
- Psychological support
- Opportunities for (social) participation for adult asylum-seekers

## **Basic services accommodation**

- More unified standards (e.g. space)
- Less disciplinary measures

## **School**

- Integration measures that address well-being
- More (financial) learning support
- Taking into account the precarious situation in which the children live (especially during the Corona pandemic)

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Thank you for your attention! 😊