

# Waiting in the Austrian asylum system: the well-being of asylum-seeking children in a phase of liminality

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Child Migration and Integration: Trends and Challenges

Ljubljana, June 1, 2022



# 1. Aim & Research Question

- Research interest: Exploring the waiting conditions and experiences of asylum-seeking children in Austria and make evidence based suggestions for child-centered methods and policies
- Research questions:

How are waiting conditions and experiences shaped by various factors such as the length of the asylum process, family (non-/relations), housing conditions, school? How does the waiting time affect the well-being of the children?

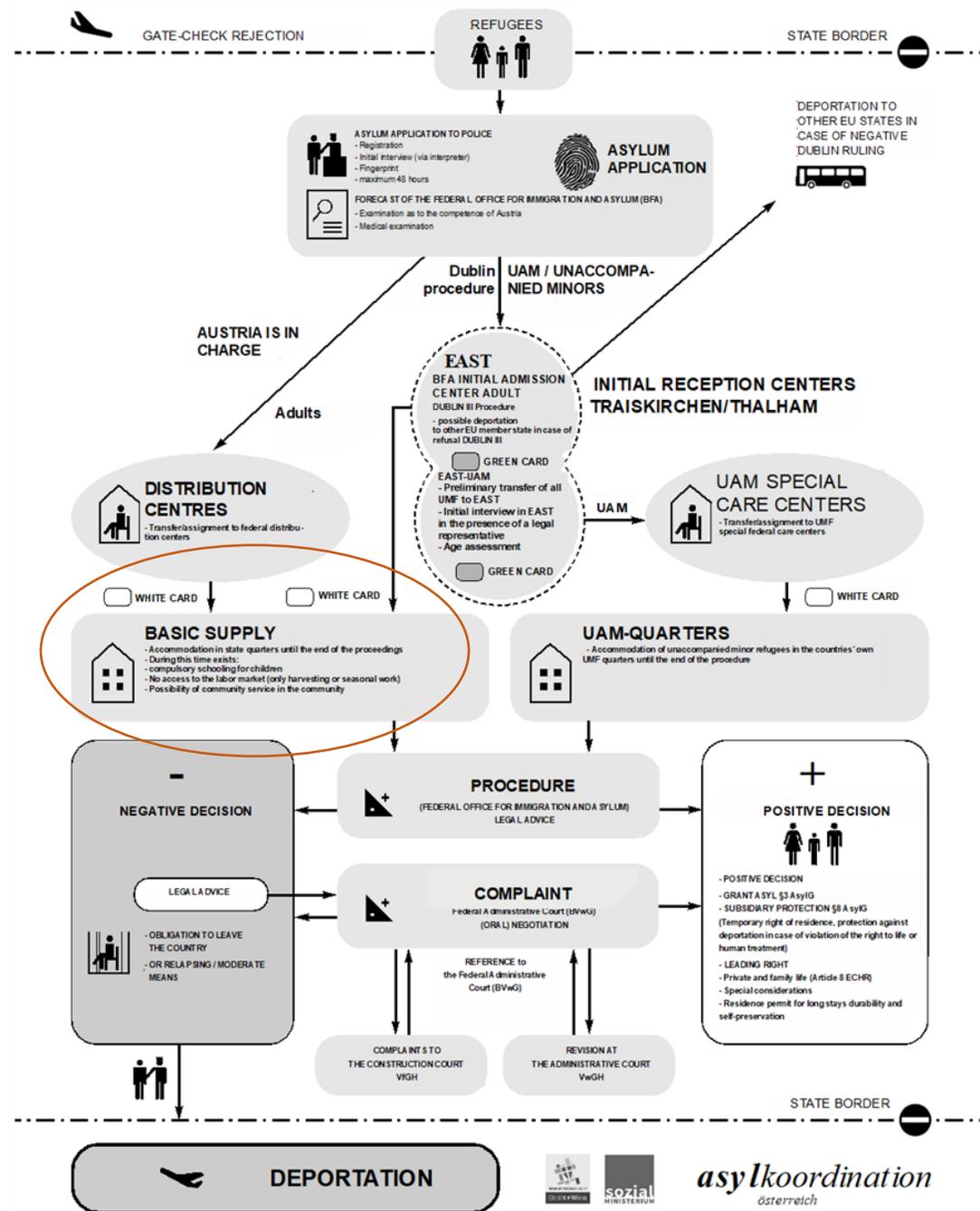
## 2. Asylum System in Austria

→ Six to fifteen months waiting period for asylum decision (Netzwerk für Kinderrechte 2019)

Austria's multi-level restrictive asylum system (supranational, federal, provinces):

- “Basic supply law” (federal level), “Basic Services Agreement” and “Vienna basic service act” (province level)
- Asylum seekers receive health insurance, counseling and transport costs to authorities (plus 21 Euros per day + 40 Euro pocket money per month)
- Only restricted access to the labor market (after 3 month waiting; Austrians are preferred)
- Children and adolescents have to attend regular schools until the age of 15
- Travel costs to school are paid and school materials are provided (Grundversorgungsinfo Wien 2020)

=> Children are in a paradoxical situation: being asylum seekers **and** children



# 3. Theoretical background/concepts

- waiting time = “**phase of liminality**,” i.e., an uncertain threshold period (Victor Turner)
- waiting time produces “**precarity**” (Judith Butler)
- **Well-being**: feeling happy, safe, and accepted, to feeling cared for and protected, to having own spaces and access to education, and being able to participate in decisions
- **Child-centered approach** (Gornik 2020):
  - a. Children as right holders
  - b. Recognize children’s knowledge
  - c. Participating and involvement of children in policy development and implementation
  - d. Participation of children in wider social contexts
  - e. Child-centered education: recognize children’s needs

# 4. Methods

## **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 displays analysis

→ Inclusion of children in feed-back loops of interview guidelines

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

Three „waiting zones“ of liminality which produce precarity:

- Family (e.g. siblings, father, mother, relatives)
- Basic services accomodation (e.g. apartment, friends in the basic services accommodation, neighbors)
- School (teacher, school friends, summer school, learning German)

# 5.1 Family

- Travelling: travel prevention → Asylum-seekers are not allowed to travel; they are not issued "convention passports" or "foreign passports" (BMI)
- Family reunification: takes a long time, is difficult without asylum status → Netzwerk Kinderrechte Österreich (2019) highlights that the family reunification process should be more benevolent, humane and expeditious in Austria
- Parents have only restricted opportunities for wage labour; language courses or education and training measures are not offered for adult asylum-seekers (ÖIF 2020: 51)

→ Children experience *precarity*

they miss family members outside of Austria

when their parents are not well, they do not receive psychological support

## 5.2 Basic Services Accommodation

- small space, often no privacy (→ UNHCR calls for the introduction of uniform nationwide quality standards; UNHCR 2013: 5-6)
  - harrasing neighbors (no policies that protect from racism) (Regierungsprogramm 2017-2022)
  - marginalization/segregation of asylum-seekers → accommodation can be classified as a marginal „waiting zone“ outside society (Agier 2002: 337)
  - house rules highlight the disciplinization of asylum-seekers → they find themselves in situations where they have to ask for permission
  - lack of social workers and psychologists (no standards for number of social workers and psychologists per asylum-seeker, no specification of qualifications)
- **Children suffer from the conditions of stay, the absence of autonomy, from discrimination and lacking possibilities to socially participate**

## 5.3 School

- problems to follow lessons because of their lack of German => anxiety and insecurity (K2/K3) → precarity is produced by an educational policy characterized by the introduction of disciplinary measures such as separate German language support classes
- children lack a quiet environment to study for school at basic service accommodation
- tutoring, which is necessary for some children, is difficult to finance with the amount of money available for asylum-seekers living in a basic services accommodation (maximum of 200€ per school year for school materials for school children (Grundversorgungsinfo 2020))

**→ Children suffer from inadequate inclusive measures and socio-economic support => experience of precarity**

# 6. Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

## **In general:**

- \*shorten the waiting time and the liminal phase
- \*include children in decisions at basic service accommodation and schools
- \*include children's perspectives in policy decisions

## **Family**

- strengthen possibilities to be in contact/unify with family members
- psychosocial support
- Opportunities of all family members for (social) participation (e.g. easier access to work)

## **Basic Services Accomodation**

- common standards (e.g. space)
- standards/training for social workers and psychologists

## **School**

- integration measures that adress well-being
- more (financial) learning support
- take into account the precarious situation in which the children live (especially during the Corona pandemic)

# 7. References

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Turner V (1967) *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY.

Wiener Grundversorgungsgesetz



Thank you for your attention! 😊