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Political Participation Among Refugees in Austria and the Czech Republic: Biographical Perspectives

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Abstract Text:

Our research centers on refugees waiting for a decision about their asylum applications in Austria and the Czech Republic. The asylum procedure creates specific constraints on political participation when people are deprived of voting rights both in the country of origin and in the country of destination. At the same time, it may stimulate new ways of being politically active. We consider the different opportunities and constraints for refugees' political participation in these two different contexts, which differ with respect to their history of asylum provision, receptiveness towards refugees as well as their popularity among asylum seekers. In this research, we also interrogate the very concept of political participation and seek to develop criteria and a working definition grounded in refugees' actual experiences. We explore their prior and/or ongoing involvement in politics in the country of origin as well as in their country of destination, acknowledging that seeking asylum is itself a political act. Looking at what we might call the "participatory habitus" prior to migration may or may not reveal a relationship to post-migration practices; indeed, the lines between "before" and "after" or "here" and "there" may be quite blurred. The potential of biographical research lies in uncovering ruptures in the lifelong narrative and its re-construction, so the narrative becomes coherent again. We focus on the reflexive project of the political self – how a change in living conditions and an uncertain future with regard to the place of settlement influence habits of political participation, such as voting and being voted for, following political debates, and expressing one's position towards the up-to-date political representation in the country/region a person lives in. Such a perspective on refugees' life conditions may present an important discursive shift, from victimization to social agency.

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