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"At first it was not very pleasant … Now it is different": Experiences and Challenges of Refugee Integration in Croatia

In observing the integration process at a local and neighbourhood level, this paper aims to analyse the integration experiences of asylum beneficiaries (refugees) in Croatia and their relationships with various stakeholders. The analyses are based on data obtained in 2018 by interviewing 25 refugees about their perceptions of living prospects in Croatia. The results indicated that most of the interviewees described their relationships and experiences with state institution officials as mostly negative or challenging, and in some cases discriminatory. Acceptance in local communities was predominantly assessed as positive, although it took a while for refugees to feel accepted.

Keywords: refugee, integration, local community, asylum, social cohesion, Croatia.

"Sprva ni bilo ravno prijetno … zdaj pa je drugače": Izkušnje in izzivi integracije beguncev na Hrvaškem

S proučevanjem procesa integracije na ravni lokalne skupnosti in sosedskih odnosov prispevek analizira izkušnje upravičencev do azila (beguncev) na Hrvaškem in njihove odnose z različnimi deležniki. Analize temeljijo na podatkih, pridobljenih leta 2018 prek intervjujev s 25 begunci glede njihovega dojemanja možnosti za življenje na Hrvaškem. Rezultati kažejo, da večina intervjuvancev svoje odnose in izkušnje z zaposlenimi v državnih institucijah opisuje kot negativne ali zapletene, v nekaterih primerih celo diskriminatorne. Sprejemanje v lokalnih skupnostih je večinoma ocenjeno kot pozitivno, čeprav je trajalo nekaj časa, da so se begunci počutili sprejete.

Ključne besede: *begunec, integracija, lokalna skupnost, azil, socialna kohezija, Hrvaška.*

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1. Introduction

Migrant integration is a relatively new phenomenon in most Central and East European societies with strong historical emigration traditions. The Balkan region has always been a vivid, dynamic, and culturally rich area, where the social fabric depended on interactions between heterogeneous linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups. The wars in Yugoslavia at the end of the 20th century implied dealing with numerous refugees and internally displaced persons. Over the last two decades, Balkan countries have slowly become reception countries for a relatively low number of recognised asylum beneficiaries. From the enactment of the first national Asylum Law in July 2004 until the end of September 2022, a total of 1,034 international protections were granted in Croatia, which counts for approximately 10 % recognition rate.[1] For those granted international protection, daily struggles persist in seeking livelihood beyond basic acceptance to stay and feel safe, although it is roughly estimated that not all of them stayed in Croatia for more than a few months and used the available integration services.[2] However, the reception and integration of refugees as a policy and practice are gaining more and more attention among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in the region, especially after the closure of the Balkan corridor in 2016 (Lalić Novak & Giljević 2019; Stojic Mitrovic 2019; Vončina & Marin 2019). Yet, little is known about how refugees perceive their life prospects, including the process of adaptation to local communities, their interaction with other members of society, and a sense of belonging in a new home.

This text focuses on analysing the integration of refugee newcomers into Croatian society using the fieldwork and empirical qualitative data obtained by interviewing 25 persons under international protection about their experiences of arrival and reception into local communities during the early integration process. This qualitative case study is part of wider research on refugee integration challenges by Ajduković et al. (2019), conducted in Croatia in 2018. Our critical assessment of dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity is partly entrenched in contesting the narrow view of a concept of integration only through its structural policy dimensions. However, we presumed that normative and institutional frameworks provide an important reference point in our informants' narratives, one that may influence their chances of becoming part of society and shape social cohesion within the community. Yet, we focus more on the assessment of daily relationships and interactions between refugees and the two most important stakeholders in the integration process: representatives of institutions and local residents in host communities. This institutional, as well as microsocial, focus will provide insights into the often-neglected perspective of both local actors and newcomers regarding their mutual encounters, interactions, expectations, and hopes, one in which integration is not only seen as a prescriptive policy, but rather as an everyday practice of mutual accommodation at the communal level.

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2. Theoretical Starting Points: Croatian Integration Goes Local?

Traditionally, the concept of integration was approached in two ways, as a process and/or as a final state, with a clearly normative connotation. According to Heckmann (1999, 3), who differentiates between structural, cultural, social, and identificational integration, integration refers to "the inclusion of new populations into existing social structures and to the kind and quality of connecting these new populations to the existing system of socio-economic, legal and cultural relations," which resembles a structural-functionalist perspective on it. Penninx (2019, 3) warns that the concept of integration has a different function and meaning in research and policymaking, noting that a "comprehensive, open (meaning non-normative), analytical concept is needed to study the process of settlement and integration" while integration policies are part of a normative political process in which integration is formulated as a problem within the normative framework, resolved by proposing concrete policy measures. Thus, being measured, standardised, and evaluated, mostly by indicators of their legal articulation, many national models of integration policies do, however, lack common ground for comparability of implementation successfulness (Gregurović & Župarić-Iljić 2018).

The meaning of integration has changed over time and, as Collyer et al. (2019, 1) stress, the individual- and societal-level policies designated for its implementation also changed and shifted towards a more instrumental designation, as "fixed and measurable set of requirements for the attainment of certain rights." Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up multi-level governance approaches to integration in many diverse policy areas (dimensions) (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017; Homsy et al. 2019). The institutional framework of integration on a governmental level only partly grasps the totality of social, linguistic, and cultural practices which unfold in mundane activities and in leisure time spent with neighbours. A presumption is that integration into a new, host society presents a great challenge for immigrants, particularly in dealing with institutions and navigating everyday situations in a new linguistic and cultural milieu. These processes are even more difficult when there are significant cultural differences between the country of origin and the receiving country, such as in the case of new-coming refugees from Asian and African countries to Croatia. But what is at stake, and what does it mean to become integrated, rather than assimilated?

While the concept of assimilation, widely used in US debates, revolves around the notion of the economic and social success of immigrants and/or ethnic groups blending into the "American mainstream", Schneider and Crul (2012, 2) remind us that immigrants may retain and celebrate their "own" cultural specificities. Furthermore, the departure from integration-assimilation equalisa-

tion is an important aspect of defining integration. Often depicted as the final stage of integration, assimilation is merely one of the modalities of the acculturation strategy (Berry 2005). Faist (2010) critically contends that while multiculturalism and assimilation emphasised migrants' societal integration in the host society, diversity is not only a condition of ethnic and cultural pluralism, but also a mode or management strategy for migrant incorporation, i.e. full inclusion in civil society.

Even though the integration of immigrants is a multi-dimensional process which is difficult to define unambiguously, we do not tend to use it interchangeably with other terms. We adhere to an intercultural policy approach that could also be understood as an "integration policy", following Guidikova (2015, 138) who defines intercultural integration as a

> [...] departure from ethnicity-based integration paradigms, which either build an ethnic prism by neglect (as in guest-worker approaches where ethnicity was not a factor since no integration policies existed), by default (in assimilation where the default objective was cultural assimilation) or by design in multicultural policies where empowerment, affirmative action, representation and policies were defined around ethnic lines.

While acknowledging these nuances here, we follow an open, non-normative definition of integration as a process of becoming an accepted part of society, which implies interactions between immigrants and their host (receiving) society within three distinct dimensions: the legal-political, the socio-economic, and the cultural/religious dimension[3] (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016; Penninx 2004). The relationship between the two main parties – immigrants and the receiving society – implies the known postulate of integration being a two-way process, which tends to lay in the domain of interactive and dynamic reciprocity, somewhat similar to the intercultural approach which is based on the idea of the importance of interaction among people from different backgrounds focusing, as Zapata-Barrero (2015) stresses, on three basic premises – (1) exchange and promotion of (positive) interaction, (2) equality and access to citizenship, and (3) diversity advantage. Therefore, cultural proximity, mutual trust, and, especially, meaningful positive social interactions play an indispensable role in integration seen as the mutual adjustment of two groups to each other.

Beyond understanding integration (only) as a governance technique, one should take a critical stance and scrutinise it as a dynamic process among different actors, negotiating policy categorisations of "*who* requires integration and *who* does not" (Mügge & van der Haar 2016, 77). Key integration stakeholders in Croatia are local and regional self-government units (counties, towns and municipalities),[4] as well as other local representatives (such as representatives of the Croatian Employment Service, schools, social and health care providers,

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etc.). Therefore, it is important to analyse experiences and assess integration needs and challenges at a local level.

When theorising the local turn in researching immigrant policies, Zapata-Barrero et al. (2017, 2) remind us that one should gain a deeper understanding of vertical and horizontal multi-level governance of integration on different levels, where "cities and regions, then, are becoming more and more active agents, drawing their own agenda, policy strategies and key questions/answers to challenges related to integration and diversity accommodation." This is a premise applicable to Croatia, where besides the capital city other (smaller) cities have become prominent reception and integration communities for newcomers. In analysing the case of Odense in Denmark, Romana Careja (2019) provides important insights into how the local authorities balance between the national-level integration framework and local-level implementation realities; the localist, sub-national mode of multi-level governance approach enables refugees not only to be passive beneficiaries, but also active agents of their integration into societal and economic spheres.[5]

In setting the context of the integration process at a local and neighbourhood level (Ajduković et al. 2019), we aim to analyse the integration experiences of asylum beneficiaries (refugees) in Croatian society while reassessing local integration as social (community) cohesion (Amin 2005; Daley 2007). Social cohesion is often conceptualised and measured in terms of social trust and common social norms, yet an important dimension of socio-economic emancipation, cooperation and sharing also has a crucial role in community cohesion and stability.

Ager and Strang (2008) also posit that the main characteristics of a cohesive and integrated community mean that the locals and new-coming population both feel secure from threats, create a welcoming, tolerant and friendly climate, and foster a sense of belonging and feeling of togetherness. This means that all community members perceive spatial and social determinants for enabling intergroup contact as necessary assets for social cohesion. Finally, we aim to tackle the sense of belonging that emerges through social encounters, interactions and relationships within the life of the neighbourhood as a relational, nuanced, and multifaceted process.

3. Contextual Background: Historical Trajectories and Local Realities

Discussing a path dependency for dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity in Croatian society means recalling the historical context in which Croatia has always been at the crossroads of external political conditioning and internal societal polarisation. In recent times, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Homeland War for Croatian independence have torn apart social trust

and cohesion, resulting in war atrocities and displacement for nearly a million people within or beyond Croatian borders. A parallel process of the state's ethnic homogenisation meant reducing the numbers and ratios of other ethnicities in multinational Croatia, most notably of Croatian Serbs, who fled. Deep structural changes and transition difficulties resulted in the reaffirmance of the nation through new lines of inclusion/exclusion and transformation of a citizenship regime, longing for the diaspora to return (Štiks 2010). This inclination of the state has also resulted a restrictive (im)migration regime, a rigid understanding of asylum policy, and a lack of political will for the coherent implementation of integration programmes, leading society to gain the disintegrative tendencies of low public trust in institutions and suspicion towards minorities and "Others" of any kind (Hameršak et al. 2020; Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020). Integration and disintegration tendencies are much like dialectic processes, influencing the daily lives of migrants, especially in the context of contrary forces taking place at the expense of newcomers seen as passive "beneficiaries" of a welfare state (Collyer et al. 2020). The social climate, which is far from "a welcoming culture", might then hold back future chances for equal treatment and inclusion. Moreover, disintegration tendencies could result in the rise of xenophobia, ethnic tensions, and racism, which all can be manifested through direct discrimination against those groups that are perceived as a threat to cultural, ethnic, or national identity, and to a social or state order (Scheepers et al. 2002).[6]

The same premises could apply to the context of integration into Croatian society. Newcomers are often exhausted by their liminal positions when waiting for protection and/or residence statuses to be determined, and *ad hoc* solutions for migrants' integration leave them in a tangle of bureaucratic procedures, without a clear vision of their life prospects in Croatia (Šelo Šabić 2017).

Although the Europeanisation process implied building and adjusting national migration, asylum and integration policies, it could not have prevented the new realities of high emigration rates once Croatia became part of the EU in 2013. Before then, asylum seekers' experiences and low recognition rates with many integration challenges had only captured the attention of a few state administrators, international agencies, and civil society actors. Balkan countries are still seen not as final destinations but mainly as transit territories for mostly irregular migrants moving to the more prosperous democracies of Western Europe.

However, the episode of the Balkan corridor was a game-changer when in late 2015 around 660.000 people passed through Croatian territory; it was a situation of closed, overtly controlled and securitised transit of Syrian refugees and other forced migrants to Western Europe (Šelo Šabić 2017). Soon after the closure of the corridor in the spring of 2016, harsh securitisation practices took place with ethnic and racial profiling of migrants stuck at various sites on the Balkan route, with dubious state-tolerated violence and organised push-backs of irregularised migrants on the borders with Serbia, and Bosnia and Herze-

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govina. In parallel, the criminalisation of migration and of citizens' initiatives in their solidarity with migrants and refugees resulted in the erosion of public trust and propensity towards migrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020).

With a population of less than four million, Croatia is still struggling to enable any real chance for the socio-economic emancipation of only a few hundred refugees who live there now, including 250 Syrian Kurds, resettled from refugee camps in Turkey in several phases between 2017 and 2019.[7] The novelty was that the majority of them were not accommodated (only) in the capital of Zagreb, but also in smaller cities, such as Zadar, Slavonski Brod, Sisak, Karlovac, cities which for the first time were placed in the situation of meeting people who needed protection and assistance. The primary criterion for choosing locations was a practical one; in smaller cities, there were state-owned accommodation facilities available and suitable for the imminent housing of refugees. Nevertheless, another significant factor within these towns was the noticeable presence of a national minority of Bosniaks/Muslims, whose organisations took a prominent role in integration, using local Islamic communities to provide general assistance and conduct projects focused on basic orientation into society (cf. Župarić-Iljić 2017). Moreover, some prominent local civil society organisations played the role of facilitators in early integration by providing free legal aid, assistance in communication with institutions, and help with entering the labour market.[8] This trajectory explains the setting of our case, one in which everyday encounters, narratives, and interactions are embedded in complexities of state practices and societal stances towards newcomers, which we analyse in the following sections.

4. Materials and Methods

Our analyses are based on the data collected in 2018 within an extensive study aiming to determine the needs and challenges of integrating refugees into Croatian society at the level of local communities in 30 socio-spatial units (Ajduković et al. 2019). A total of 168 interviews and four focus groups were conducted with 227 participants – representatives of various stakeholders[9] in the process of refugee integration, including a subsample of 25 people granted international refugee protection analysed in this paper. We conducted 10 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with 15 participants, concentrating on refugees' experience of admittance and integration in Croatia, addressing their experiences within the following dimensions of integration: accommodation, entering the labour market, education and language acquisition, health, etc. Besides the general perception of the integration process and refugees' notion of what a successful integration is, the goal was also to address relationships with various stakeholders in the integration process: the relationships between refugees and representatives of institutions and locals.

Refugees were offered the support of national and international NGOs involved in their reception and other local contacts in Croatian cities in which refugees settled (mostly in Zagreb, Split, Osijek and Sisak) during the late spring of 2018. The sample was purposive; all participants were fully informed of the research purpose and goals, and their participation was voluntary and anonymous.[10] The sample of interviewed refugees included 19 males and 6 females. The principle of maximising the variance of key informants was respected, since the refugees were of both genders, had completed various levels of education, and had varying degrees of experience of living in Croatia; accompanied or not by their families and originating from different countries. The data saturation was estimated not only on the interviews conducted, but also considering the results of previous desk-research. The interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, while the focus groups lasted around 90 minutes. Communication with approximately one-third of the refugees was carried out in English or Croatian, and interpreters were used in communication with others. Coding and thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006) were used to analyse collected data with MAX QDA software. The citations from the transcribed interviews are used to illustrate analysed segments referring to the perception of integration and the description of experiences in establishing contact with the local population.

5. What is Integration for Refugees in Croatia?

Following the proposed theoretical framework, in the analyses, we start from the position of the non-normative integration of refugees into the host society (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas 2016). Within the legal-political, socio-economic, and cultural/religious dimensions of integration, all stakeholders, including refugees themselves, emphasised learning the Croatian language as the key element of successful integration at all levels, i.e., for all other aspects of integration, simultaneously reflecting (normative) top-down as well as bottom-up and multi-level governance approaches to integration. A common language is also a precondition for refugees to be able to function in the new local communities, and a way of achieving independence (Ajduković et al. 2019). However, the development of a social network and the involvement of refugees in community life, usually used as indicators of societal cohesiveness, were rarely mentioned as indicators of successful integration, directing the analyses towards more latent indicators of cohesion.

Assessment of how well-integrated, normatively and non-normatively, refugees feel in a new social environment was covered by the question about their satisfaction with life in Croatia. Experiences with state institutions and with the local population were used to denote these concepts. In the positive sense, the

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interviewees mostly stressed the characteristics best fitting the cultural/religious dimension – cultural similarities and appreciation of religious differences – combined with a feeling of safety, as the most relevant aspects of life in Croatia:

> Looking for safety and a future for himself and his family, this is the most important here in Croatia. (FG-172-4)

In second place was the kindness of local people, especially compared to certain other European countries. The following is one of the reasons stated by an interviewee for staying in Croatia back in 2011:

> People are kinder than elsewhere, Germany for instance, so I decided to stay here even though I didn't hear about Croatia before I found myself here […]. The most satisfying for me is that people have quickly accepted me, they were not that rude to send me away. (I-122)

A sense of neighbourly acceptance was also mentioned as an important source of satisfaction and self-respect:

> Now often some of the neighbours call me to help them chop wood and do similar jobs, so they pay me. I am also satisfied with that because their invitation to do something for them and to pay me shows that they still trust me and that they appreciate me in some way. (I-064)

Several interviewees emphasised that Croats are simple people; they thought the local residents were good people and they respected them, which leads to mutual trust. Overall, the refugees contended that local Croatian citizens were inclined to generous and warm-hearted behaviour and being friendly and favourable towards refugees, which are some of the characteristics of a cohesive society.

In opposition, experiences within legal-political and socio-economic dimensions of integration were oftentimes sources of dissatisfaction, disclosing areas that should function as state-organised and coordinated processes of integration, but do not yet do so. The dominant answers given by the refugees were precarious work conditions, bad jobs, and low wages. The interviewed refugees believed they were paid less than locals for doing the same jobs. They stressed that their futures were uncertain and these factors jeopardised their possibility of being independent, and after two years of state-funded accommodation and poorly paid jobs, they felt insecure:

> It should not be limited to only two years, but until they have a job. Two years, three years until he finds a job that suits him so that he can advance in job-position. Now they are looking and just can't find a job. (FG-169-1)

In other words, the intention to stay in Croatia was connected to whether the interviewees were to succeed in securing appropriate jobs and stable living conditions. It turns out that a period of two years is crucial for such a decision. If they are left without state support, they are usually unable to make a living from poorly paid, precarious jobs, and would re-think the option of staying or continuing on to other (Western) countries that provide a better chance of a proper life. These results point towards the notion that local authorities do not balance well between the national-level integration framework and local-level implementation realities, where structural insufficiencies, the lack of social cohesion, and the increase of individual exclusion, specifically on a normative level, lead to refugees' decisions to leave the country.

Another source of dissatisfaction, confirming the negative perception of the general administrative setting, was the slowness of administrative procedures and the ignorance of officials:

> The most important thing is that everyone who must be informed about the rights of refugees gets informed. I know what I am entitled to, and they have to ask for information, and it takes a long time, if they get the information at all. (I-122)

Downsizing the concept of integration to the local level reveals that the general notion of significant stakeholders – especially local government representatives – does not seem to entail openness and perception in local communities for refugee integration. Most stakeholders express concern and believe some form of negative reaction from locals is expected, especially in small communities. Less resistance is expected in larger towns. Ajduković et al. (2019, 85) state that the reasons for expected difficulties are diverse and vary based on poverty and general difficulties experienced by locals in economically underdeveloped parts of Croatia where they feel discomfort caused by the mixing of the population, differences in religion, cultures and norms, and also by fear of the unknown. In the country's capital, which has the most extensive experience of integrating refugees, the interviewed stakeholders related negative attitudes towards refugees to fears of the local population, which were reflected in xenophobic comments and behaviours as well as the perception that refugees are privileged over the local population. However, a surprising result in the same study showed that Croatian citizens tend to support integration as an acculturation strategy for asylum beneficiaries in Croatia, as the majority of citizens participating in the national survey[11] (70.7 %) thought that refugees should both accept Croatian culture and maintain their own culture. Two other options – assimilation and separation – were the views upheld by 20 % and 4 % of participants respectively. This points to the conclusion that citizens generally support the cultural integration of refugees, which is closer to an intercultural and non-assimilationist approach and even slightly more optimistic about that cause than respective stakeholder informants.

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The reception of refugees on a local community level could be embedded in previous experiences and the legacy of taking care of Bosnian refugees in the 1990s, as well as the history of co-existence with national minorities, especially the autochthone Muslim minority which is well integrated on an institutional level and has well-established networks deployed in implementing integration measures for newcoming refugees in towns such as Rijeka, Karlovac and Sisak. The established local encounters point towards mostly positive experiences reflecting a cohesive society at a local level, however, they are mostly positioned within the private sphere, which we will discuss further in the following section.

6. Establishing Contacts: What Went Well, and What Went Wrong?

Established contacts and everyday situations reported by refugees in Croatia are the main focus of this paper. These everyday experiences are used to analyse the level of acceptance and strength of local cohesiveness in the integration process, i.e., translating local integration into interaction and community cohesion. The social interactions and private relationships established by refugees can be analysed dually regarding the context in which they occur: as institutional and private. Firstly, we analyse the relationships and experiences with state institution officials, which were mostly described as negative or challenging, referring to the slowness in communication and general ignorance of officials over asylum matters:

> And so when you go to institutions they don't really know, you have to instruct them, persuade them. (I-109)
>
> [...] they are slow, it takes years to solve something. They seem to be just making promises. (I-007c)

Furthermore, some cases recorded evidently discriminatory practices by institution representatives and perceived possible abuse of power, such as deliberate prolonging of procedures and unjustified detention:

> In the beginning, I experienced more embarrassing situations, because when I was informed about some rights, I walked around the institutions and asked for those rights. Somewhere they didn't even listen to me honestly, they said that I don't have the rights I state, that they don't know and that when they get what I say in writing [in a form of injunction], they will give me what I ask for. (I-064)

Several cases of communication challenges and problems were reported, such as insufficient Croatian language proficiency among refugees and insufficient knowledge of English among institutional officials or their reluctance to use it,

pointing towards possible institutional negligence and blockage. Even though some stakeholders are becoming more active agents in integration activities by adjusting their strategies and protocols to local realities, the general situation is saturated by the negative experiences of refugees in everyday encounters with institutions. These experiences imply that a deeper understanding of vertical and horizontal integration governance is still missing in the analysed communities.

On the contrary, the most positive reported experiences on the institutional level refer to those with the staff of social welfare centres and with schools, where one of the interviewees stated that people were nice to them and they treated them with respect. The majority of refugees were satisfied with their or their children's educational experiences; they perceived it as an opportunity to develop their social network and were happy that their children were accepted without any incidents. As Ajduković et al. (2019) stress, the significance of attending school is also attached to the participation of parents, since it allows them to meet other parents. Similarly, one of the interviewees emphasises: "Thus we established contacts with the parents of those children, and now we often spend pleasant times together" (I-064).

Experiences with civil society and humanitarian actors were also mostly positive. A very strong engagement of NGOs was recorded in the everyday activities of refugees – in the form of enabling and organising language courses, volunteering in providing homework help, and providing space for socialising with each other and with the locals. NGOs are also recognised as one of the important providers of information about refugee rights, and many of the activities carried out in the pre-COVID-19 period in reception centres were organised by NGO volunteers. Some of the interviewed refugees also noted their own experience of volunteering within several NGOs as positive, which could be observed as empowering and emancipatory practices. The role of NGOs is also acknowledged in providing help to job-seekers. However, the interviewed representatives of civil society organisations warned us that equal distribution of resources is necessary, since the locals could get the impression that refugees are privileged in exercising their rights in comparison to local residents (Ajduković et al. 2019).

However, when analysing the relationship between refugees and local residents, almost all of the interviewed refugees highlighted the positive experiences they had with acceptance, even though it took a while for them to feel accepted by their neighbours, i.e., their neighbours had to get to know them to understand that they were not problematic but normal people:

> At first it was not very pleasant. When we came to live in the settlement in which there is the house in which we still live, people were not very nice to us. The children did not have any friends either […]. Now it is different. I guess people got to know us and they stopped seeing us as some kind of danger. (I-063)

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Over time the perceptions of social distance/closeness changed, so these superficial and distanced relationships grew into closer and friendlier ones:

> […] little by little we began spending time together, having coffee, and somehow, they got to know us as people. Today even that one neighbour who at first didn't accept us at all spends time with us and has coffee with us. (I-063)

> Their interest in Arabian food is an incentive for expanding the circle of friends and for spending time together. (FG-170-3)

As shown, the varying self-narratives of nationals and newcomers might eventually converge in an unexpectedly positive manner, as in the case of a newly established friendship in Karlovac between a 50-year-old Croatian local who is a war veteran and an 11-year-old Syrian refugee boy.[12] Similarly, communal lunches held by the local Islamic community members for refugees in the city of Sisak foster interreligious dialogue and shared practices.[13]

The success of local-level integration again rests on the importance of speaking Croatian – language proficiency makes it possible to be accepted by the host population, otherwise, they feel isolated (Ajduković et al. 2019):

> As soon as you can speak the language, they accept you as their equals […]. If you can't speak, then you are somehow isolated. (I-109)

Besides language, cultural similarities were also indicated. The Syrian and Croatian cultures are perceived as similar, and this similarity contributed to the feeling of safety and acceptance, so in the refugees' opinion, there were no major cultural obstacles to their living in Croatia. Certain aspects of the refugees' culture, including wearing a headscarf or a specific cuisine, are interesting to locals, which was perceived as positive. Compared to Ager and Strang's (2018) presumptions on social cohesion, our results suggest that on a local, neighbourhood level, both the locals and the newcomers are getting to know each other, and to some extent share a welcoming, tolerant and relatively friendly atmosphere, which are important preconditions for a cohesive and integrated community. However, some examples show that we are still a long way off from achieving satisfying integration.

Aside from positive relations and contacts, there are specific prejudices when it comes to persons granted asylum, not necessarily when it comes to people coming from the Middle East, also indicating the preferred characteristics of migrants:

> […] when he tells people he gets to know that he is an asylum beneficiary, they avoid him, but when he says he came from Iraq to study here, they accept him. (FG-169-2)

> Croats trust asylum beneficiaries with families more than those who are single, in which case they seem to be slightly scared of them. (FG-169-3)

Furthermore, several interviewed refugees reported having negative experiences upon their arrival in the community, consisting mainly of unpleasant verbal comments and behaviour by individuals, and in three cases they also reported physical attacks – getting into a fight and being beaten by locals. Other negative experiences referred to situations when somebody spat at them in town (FG-171-3) and recreated a bomb attack: "[…] she put a plastic bag on a seat next to her in the bus, somebody yelled 'boom'!" (FG-171-1), while media reports on incidents involving refugees and asylum seekers caused negative reactions in their neighbours:

> […] after an asylum seeker attacked a woman in Dugave [Zagreb city quarter where the reception centre is located], the local population thought that all the refugees were like that, and the following day he felt that the neighbours started behaving differently towards him. (FG-169-2)

These quotes indicate the non-linearity and fragility of the integration process, which is constantly affected by contextual situations. The examples also point towards threat-perception and conflict theories, especially in the context of highlighted securitisation and populistic discourses, which have been evident in various social spheres in Croatia for quite some time.

The positively perceived aspects of social trust and common social norms, socio-economic emancipation, cooperation, and sharing, shape community cohesion and stability. The interviewed refugees, even though faced with great challenges on their way to being included and integrated, designated people's openness as one of the most satisfying aspects of their life in Croatia. On the opposite side, the attitudes of the general Croatian population towards refugees were neither positive nor negative. Ajduković et al. (2019) showed that on average, Croatian citizens expressed a neutral attitude towards refugees. Of the respondents, 15.3 % expressed clearly positive attitudes and 14.1 % expressed negative attitudes, and they, on average, rarely come into contact with refugees. The frequency of positive relationships and encounters reported by refugees set the grounds for successful intercultural dialogue and can serve as a means of reducing prejudice and negative experiences. Nevertheless, discontinuity in supporting effective access to public services along with community (in)stability leave space for further improvements.

7. Discussion

Croatia only has a few communities with any reception and integration experience prepared for refugee admittance. The preconditions in which integration

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practices are taking place refer back to a lack of political/governmental will, relatively scarce budgetary public investments, as well as a somewhat ignorant social climate within host communities. The insufficiencies of integration programmes stem from a highly fragmented public administration system and inadequate inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation between different ministries and departments involved in integration activities on national and local levels, as confirmed by other studies (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies 2016; Giljević & Lalić Novak 2018; Ajduković et al. 2019).

As an implementation practice, integration in Croatia remains a parallel structure between civil society and humanitarian actors, one that fixes the governmental gaps and insufficiencies instead of being a complementary and cooperative shared practice of the state, civil society and (im)migrants themselves. A shift from the state-centric to the poly-centric perspective of migration governance may include various sectors and multiple actors (Scholten et al. 2017), yet it leaves an open space for scrutinising integration beyond the oftentimes porous institutional setting of (miss)implementing practices. This was evident in our analysis of interviews with refugees; they saw no barriers to their participation in everyday life in host communities, yet, they criticised the institutions for often being too slow and inert in dealing with aspects of everyday life, or even being discriminatory and hostile towards their cause. This resembles the known phenomenon of "integration paradox", whereby we may witness two of its modalities here; one in which refugees have a relatively positive attitude toward the local population, and a relatively negative attitude toward state administration because of perceived discrimination and a lower level of acceptance in institutions. Furthermore, it seems that the state (not) dealing with integration policy adequately and systematically results in an opposite, disintegrative effect – exclusion and marginalisation rather than inclusion/incorporation of refugee population into society (cf. Mügge & van der Haar 2016).

The policy-driven debate could also discuss the interactive and dynamic perspectives of integration that analyse contact, interaction, and participation of different disadvantaged and minority groups with other members of society. Our analysis detailed an understanding of the concept and process of integration within the institutional context of the Croatian asylum system, within the public sphere, and in the social environment of host communities. Often the expectations coming from representatives of local communities are that refugees should fit in and be grateful, revealing a somewhat assimilationist perspective. The preferable and successful indicators of refugee integration are seen by institutional stakeholders as sufficient language acquisition as the basis for employment and financial independence of adults, their independence from the system's institutions, primarily from social benefits, and the enrolment of children in the educational system. This partly corresponds to the results of the latest 2022 edition of the Special Eurobarometer 519 Report (European Commission, 2022), where

right after considering speaking the host country language, finding a job, and contributing to the welfare system, cultural and societal factors are seen as important factors for the successful integration of immigrants.

Refugees themselves think they should be open to the local population. Isolation is not perceived as a desirable solution; however, it is common for refugees who do not plan to stay in Croatia and for those refugees who feel unsafe, insecure and threatened by the local community. Nonetheless, the representatives of local communities refer to isolation as an unwanted mode of settlement, leading to non-integration outcomes. Generally, they emphasise that refugees should be settled within the local communities to be accepted.

We contend that integration as a process is still mainly state-prescribed and a declaratory coordinated activity, with an institutional network that is not always well-managed, resulting in weakness regarding its implementation. Furthermore, what seems to be a novelty is a sort of local turn in understanding and implementing integration activities, picking up on daily interaction and community building through the work of local municipal, civil, and humanitarian actors in their assistance to refugees. Some of these actors, including faith-based and religious associations, are appointed and funded by the state as implementers of integration measures, oftentimes bridging the gaps of service provision for many of the beneficiaries.

But what is the role of local actors in this equation? Ager and Strang (2008, 184) emphasise that according to "the importance of continuity in supporting effective access to public services – it is clear that community stability is potentially an important facilitator of integration." In our previous study, we demonstrated the importance of well-implemented integration policies on the level of social cohesion in local communities. Previously, we contended that

> […] burdened socio-economic emancipation of refugees as well as other institutional problems with their adaptation may bring a social divide and a gap at the level of local communities. Citizens who perceive these problems with integration may undermine the process of social cohesion and communal trust towards asylum seekers and refugees as those who are left on the margins (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020, 199).

This is something that should be investigated further, especially in the new context of challenges with the acceptance of refugees from Ukraine.

The limitations of our research relate to the relatively constrained scope of analysing integration aimed at a specific group of persons under international protection without including other statuses and categories of third-country nationals, such as immigrant workers, who could also count as subjects of national integration legal and institutional framework. Finally, in our analysis, we have not extensively addressed the potential and actual transnational linkages and activities of our research participants, ones that connect them with families

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and friends in their countries of origin and in other European countries, which could be an important factor that may affect their integration trajectories.

Our findings were obtained with representatives of the local and regional government, public servants and NGOs, as well as in the context of a wider attitudinal perception of integration and acceptance of refugees and utilisation of the community and neighbourhood partnerships for fostering community cohesion. It seems, however, that local integration practices reflect the pragmatic approach of policymakers and practitioners to implementation activities and direct problem-solving. Yet, in the Croatian case, a lack of immigrant associations within the local host communities reminds us of mostly top-down logic with a centrally coordinated, to some extent assimilationist, approach of the government to disseminate policies to local levels, considering state and civic actors as accountable for the implementation of measures.

8. Concluding Remarks

We learn from the Croatian case that a rich historical multi-ethnic and multicultural setting, together with trajectories of national migration, asylum and border regime, resulted in a somewhat uncritical understanding of integration as the most desirable model of adaptation by our research participants. We have seen that an interactive approach to integration should include not only scrutiny of stakeholder-driven diversity management policies, but also a reassessment of social cohesion in the context of multiple social, political, and economic challenges. Expectations stemming from our refugee's interviews still provide hope that becoming an integrated part of society could mean coming together with locals, cheering on similarities and acknowledging differences, which calls for a more intercultural view on integration. For future researchers, this could be a starting point; checking whether contacts and joint narratives will foster social cohesion in local communities where they all meet.

We know that a lack of meaningful intergroup contact in a situation of deprivation lowers trust and cohesion (Daley 2007). However, the cultural pattern of communal life in relatively well-connected neighbourhood social networks is still present in Croatia, especially in smaller communities. Thus, as was emphasised in the conclusion of our study (cf. Ajduković et al. 2019, 105), the readiness of Croats to engage in neighbourly relationships with their new neighbours can be put to good and beneficial use, and activities can be implemented at the level of neighbourhoods to prepare micro-communities for the arrival of asylum beneficiaries. These community and neighbourhood partnerships could contribute to mutual adaptation by fostering community cohesion. In the same manner, the first neighbourly contact can play a key role in the development of future relationships, those that will be closer and friendlier, which is a well-known finding of contact theory.

Finally, although refugees in Croatia find that the integration system is not well organised and includes many contradictions, they generally do not see any major cultural barriers to their life in Croatia, which is an important asset for fostering communal cohesion. Moreover, as research in the UK context showed, social support, neighbourhood partnerships and community initiatives based on shared goals are needed equally for residents and newcomers to overcome divisions emerging from cultural differences (Daley 2007), which is also strongly relatable to the Croatian case. The cohesive potential of local communities for the acceptance of migrants and refugees can be seen in the answers of locals who understand integration as the most acceptable model of adaptation and incorporation of newcomers into the social matrix of Croatian society. Surprisingly, according to our findings, the majority of citizens have an intercultural understanding of integration as a preferable model of cultural adaptation to each other, rather than an assimilationist understanding of integration, as held by the state actors. This contributes to the discussion of divergence in state, society, and migrant understanding of what integration is and what it may be.

We found that systemic, structural, as well as societal factors and interactions all play a pivotal role in refugee acceptance and integration. Moreover, the integration of refugees into Croatian society may be seen as a continuous process that implies, first and foremost, creating preconditions for introducing citizens and newcomers to each other. This means the prevention and mitigation of possible negative phenomena related to the arrival of refugees and migrants in general, which asks for coordinated efforts of all stakeholders in the preparation and sensibilisation of citizens on the arrival and reception of people under international protection. Lastly, to integrate means to create equal chances for disadvantaged groups to become productive members of society while preventing discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation.

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Notes

[1] However, it is important to point out that one of the reasons for such a low rate of approved statuses is that a significant number of applicants leave Croatia before the procedure is completed, meaning that a large number of procedures are suspended (see Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, 2022).

[2] See ECRE (2021).

[3] The first dimension of integration (legal-political) refers to the ways and possibilities of attaining resident rights, rights to family reunion, political participation and attaining the right to citizenship; the second dimension (socio-economic) refers to the position of immigrants on the labour market and access to social rights and benefits such as the right to work, to health protection, and to education and housing; finally, the third dimension (cultural/religious) relates to cultural and religious rights of immigrants and particularly to their perceptions and the practice of difference in the host society (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies 2016).

[4] Even though there are three levels of local and regional self-government units (counties, towns and municipalities), the research targeted the ones that had, or were supposed to have, the experience of refugee integration, which ended in only including the level of town and county.

[5] Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) emphasise that shifting from supranational (EU) and national level to a more regional and local understanding of integration brings a perspective on integration experienced by practitioners, locals, and immigrants/refugees as "target groups" on a micro-level.

[6] Besides the general perception of racism and discrimination, an interesting phenomenon of "integration paradox" seems to occur when analysing the integration of specific groups: the higher-educated immigrants are the ones who are better integrated into the host society, but also the ones who perceive more discrimination (van Doorn et al. 2013, 382).

[7] However, even among those recognised refugees there are noticeable secondary movements towards Western Europe. The reasons for that are not investigated but it may be assumed that they are related to family and migrant networks, aspirations, and perception of better opportunities elsewhere.

[8] Lately, based on experiences from 2019 onwards, assistance to refugees admitted to the city of Sisak has been formalised through the opening of the Center for Integration of Foreigners in cooperation between the municipality council, the local civic initiative, and the Norwegian Refugee Council. See Civil Rights Project Sisak (n.d .).

[9] Besides refugees, those are representatives of local and regional self-government units, experts in the fields of education, health, employment and social care, and representatives of NGOs.

[10] Ethics Approval was provided by the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Zagreb) on 5 April 2018.

[11] The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,272 Croatian citizens aged 18 to 65, measuring the attitudes of the general public towards refugees (more in Ajduković et al. 2019).

[12] See KAportal.hr (2020).

[13] See European Platform of Integrating Cities – EPIC (n. d.).

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