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Andreas Steinmayr

Did the Refugee Crisis Contribute to the Recent Rise of Far-Right Parties in Europe?[1]

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Almost two million people filed for asylum in European Union countries in 2014 and 2015, compared to 1.6 million during the previous five years (Eurostat). As a result, significant proportions of the European population were exposed to refugees from culturally-distinct countries, not only in cities, but also in rural areas where exposure to non-European foreigners has traditionally been low. At the same time, far-right parties with anti-immigration agendas gained considerable support in many of the countries that experienced significant refugee inflows. Most recently, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), received 12.6% of the vote in the German federal election 2017, making it the third-largest party in the German parliament.

Political observers, the media, and politicians themselves have speculated that the refugee situation helped to fuel support for the far-right. The refugee situation may have affected voting for the far-right based on concerns driven by *macro*-level exposure (e.g., the salience of the refugee situation in (social) media and political rhetoric) and *micro*-level exposure (e.g., personal interactions with and observation of refugees). Both levels of exposure may have influenced voting decisions. However, this is not clear at either level, nor do the effects necessarily need to go in the same direction. For example, media reports about crimes conducted by refugees or concerns over the overall fiscal impacts of refugee immigration (macro-level) may increase support for far-right parties. Negative personal experiences may have a similar effect, but positive experiences could have the opposite impact. In a recent paper, I tried to disentangle these effects for the case of Upper Austria, an Austrian state that held elections in September 2015 at the peak of the refugee crisis. Upper Austria was exposed to the refugee crisis in three ways. First, hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed Austria in 2015 on what became known as the Western Balkan Route (see Figure 1). Most refugees wanted to reach Germany and were shuttled in buses from the southern and eastern borders of Austria to the German border. They then crossed the border to Germany on foot. Thus, Upper Austrian municipalities at the German border experienced the transit of a large number of refugees.[2]

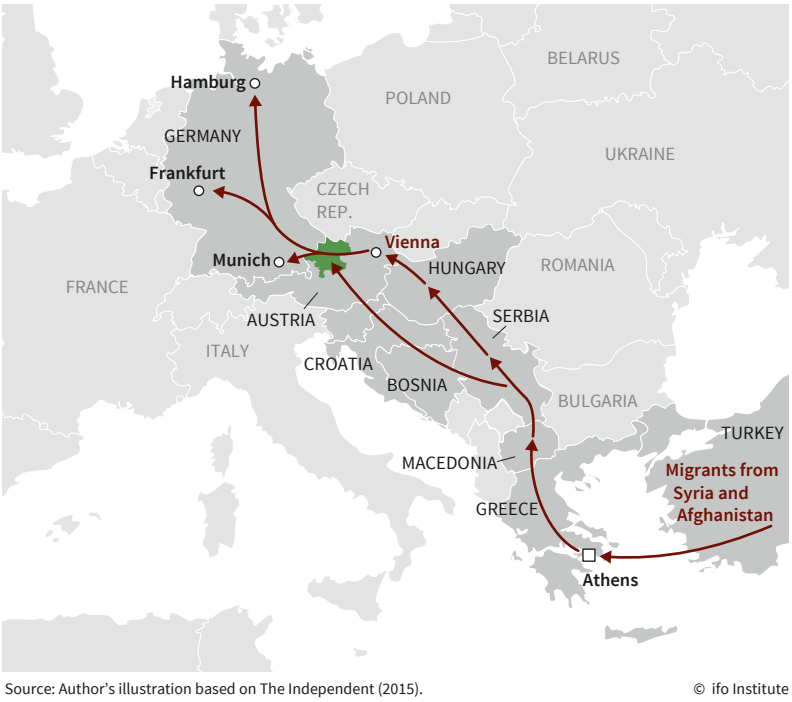
Secondly, over 116,000 refugees applied for asylum in Austria in 2014 and 2015 and were hosted in accommodation in Austrian municipalities. It is worth noting that local authorities and NGOs actively tried to facilitate interactions between natives and refugees. Many municipalities introduced the refugees to the population in official local papers and held welcome events to introduce refugees and natives to each other. On the contrary, the situation in municipalities at the border barely permitted direct and indirect contact between natives and refugees, since the refugees only stayed for a few hours before continuing their journey. Thirdly, the whole population was exposed to the refugee crisis at the macro-level given the high salience of the issue in newspapers, TV etc. All three types of exposure may have affected voting decisions, and possibly in opposite directions.

[1] This article provides a non-technical summary of the research paper Steinmayr, A. (2018): "Contact matters: Exposure to refugees and voting for the far-right". An earlier version was distributed as IZA Discussion Paper 9790 entitled: "Exposure to Refugees and Voting for the Far-right. (Unexpected) results from Austria."

[2] See, for example, an article in the Austrian newspaper Kurier: https://kurier.at/chronik/oberoesterreich/ober oesterreich-oesterreichische-flucht-hilfe-an-der-deutschen-grenze/156.977.219 (6 October 2015 - in German).

Figure 1

Upper Austria in the Balkan Route



Source: Author's illustration based on The Independent (2015).

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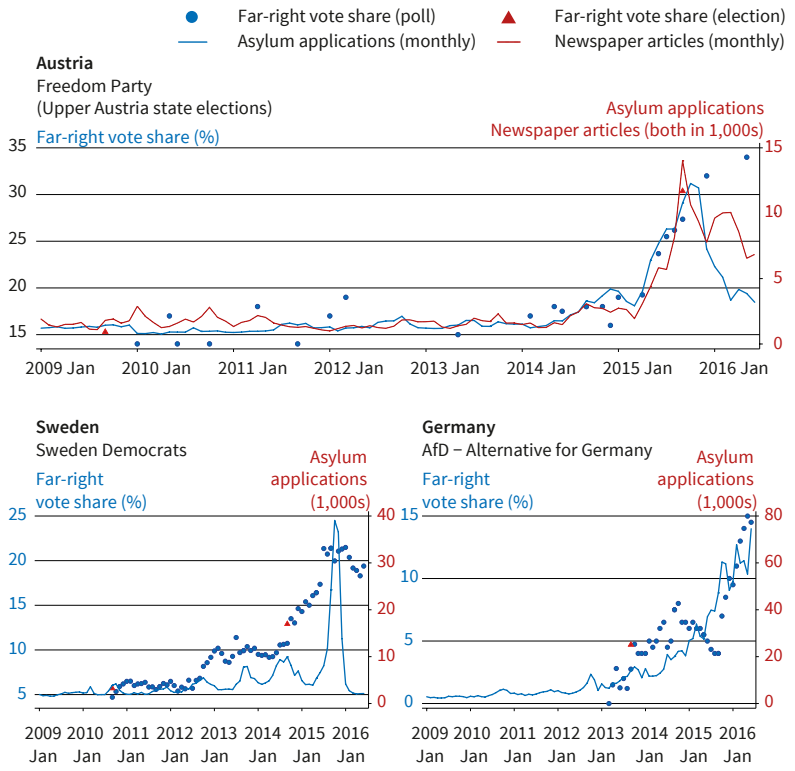
Figure 2

Number of Asylum Applications and Support for Far-Right Parties in Europe



Note: The figure shows the monthly number of asylum applications and support for far-right parties in Austria, Sweden, and Germany. The red triangles indicate vote shares of the far right-parties in parliamentary elections for Germany and Sweden and state elections for Upper Austria. The blue dots indicate monthly averages of poll results for the respective elections. The number of asylum applications obtained from Eurostat. The actual inflow of refugees might predate the application month due to delays in processing the asylum applications resulting from the large number of applications. 'Newspaper articles' is the monthly number of articles in Austrian daily newspapers dealing with immigration, refugees, and asylum.
Source: Author's calculations using data from Austrian Press Agency.

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SUPPORT FOR FAR-RIGHT PARTIES INCREASED IN PARALLEL WITH NUMBER OF ASYLUM APPLICATIONS

In the Upper Austrian state elections in 2015, the far-right Freedom Party of Austria doubled its vote share from 2009 and obtained over 30% of the vote with a fierce anti-asylum campaign. Polls indicate that support for the Freedom Party remained roughly at the level of the 2009 state elections until late 2014, but subsequently increased drastically in 2015 when refugee numbers started to grow (Figure 2, upper panel). The salience of the issue in the media, measured as the number of newspaper articles covering the refugee situation, increased almost in proportion to the number of asylum applications.

Upper Austria was no exception in Europe. The Sweden Democrats, for instance, obtained 5.7% of votes in the 2010 parliamentary elections in Sweden (lower left panel). After that, support increased parallel to the rising number of refugees, which increased earlier in Sweden than in other European countries. In parliamentary elections in 2014, the Sweden Democrats obtained 12.9% of the vote and polled around 20% in late 2015 at the peak of the refugee inflow into Sweden. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) was not founded until 2013. Polls show a sharp increase in support of up to 15%, along with growing refugee numbers (lower right panel).

These correlations over time do not necessarily reflect causal effects, but the close correlation in the timing suggests that a positive causal relationship between the number of arriving refugees and support for far-right parties is the most likely explanation.

VARIATION IN EXPOSURE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

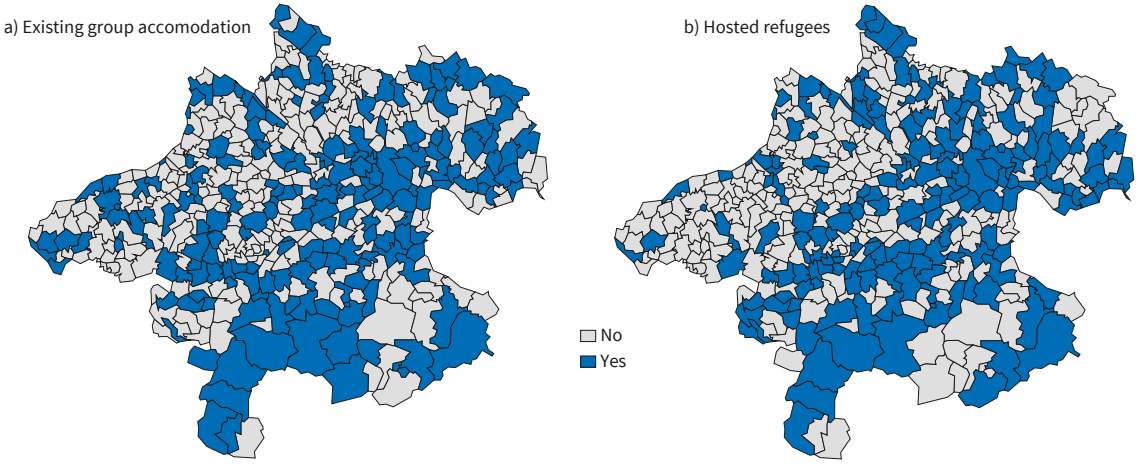
The overall positive relationship between arriving refugees and support for far-right parties may be the result of micro- or macro-exposure; or a combination of the two. We can learn more by looking at geographic variation in exposure to refugees. At the time of the election in September 2015, 42% of Upper Austrian municipalities accommodated refugees (Figure 3b). In these municipalities, refugees accounted for around 1.3% of the population, with relatively little heterogeneity between municipalities. A comparison of municipalities with and without refugees makes it possible to analyse how the presence of refugees in a municipality affects voting for the Freedom Party. A simple comparison of Freedom Party gains in municipalities with and without refugees shows that the gains were slightly lower in municipalities with refugees.

However, this comparison does not take into account that the distribution of refugees was not random but - among other things - the result of local political opposition. Municipalities that host refugees are different from municipalities that do not, and any simple comparison would thus mix these initial differences with a potential effect of refugee presence on voting behaviour.

To overcome this problem, I use the availability of buildings suitable to accommodate larger groups like homes for the elderly, disabled, or students, in combination with the sudden inflow of refugees. These buildings were built for purposes other than hosting refugees and their existence should thus be unrelated to changes in attitudes towards refugees. However, spare capacity in such buildings was used when the numbers of arriving refugees increased sharply in 2014 and 2015.

Figure 3

Availability of Group Accomodation and Hosting of Refugees in September 2015



Note: The left figure depicts the availability of group accommodations (Gebäude für Gemeinschaften) based on data from the 2011 building and dwellings census conducted by Statistik Austria. The right figure depicts which municipalities hosted refugees on 21 September 2015. Only individuals who filed for asylum in Austria are included.
Source: Author's illustration using data from Statistic Austria and the Upper Austrian Government. © ifo Institute

The existence of these buildings thus strongly increased the probability that a municipality received refugees, as a visual comparison of Figure 3a and 3b suggests. I can therefore use the existence of these buildings as an instrumental variable to identify the causal effect of refugee accommodation on voting behaviour.

EXPOSURE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL REDUCED FREEDOM PARTY SUPPORT

This micro-level analysis reveals that the presence of refugees in a municipality dampens the overall trend and causally reduces the vote share of the Freedom Party by 3.45 percentage points (pp.) in state elections. This suggests that 10.8% to 21.6% of potential Freedom Party voters change their vote as a result of extended micro-level exposure.

Votes predominantly go to the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), thus marking a shift in support from a far-right to a center-right party. Results for local elections are similar, but imprecisely estimated and less robust.

These results are in line with survey evidence collected about one year after the election. Hofinger et al. (2017) find that 68% of the population in municipalities with refugees stated that hosting refugees worked well or very well in their municipality. By contrast, only 58% stated hosting refugees worked well in the state in general. Thus, the perception of the situation at the local level was more positive than the perception of the overall situation.

The second type of micro-exposure occurred in the municipalities at the German border that experienced the crossing of refugees on their way to Germany. Exposure in these municipalities was of a very different nature since it was extremely short-term and did not allow for sustained interactions between natives and refugees. And indeed, the Freedom Party gains in state elections were 2.7 pp. higher than in the rest of the state. Related to these findings, Hangartner et al. (2017) show that ultra-short-term exposure to passing refugees on Greek islands worsened the local population's attitudes towards refugees, immigrants in general, and towards Muslims. Dinas et al. (2017) show that the same episode increased support for the extremist Golden Dawn Party. In other words, micro-exposure to refugees can also strengthen anti-immigrant sentiments and voting for anti-immigration parties if conditions for positive contact are not met.

CONCLUSION

Far-right parties gained considerable support in many European countries in the wake of the European refugee crisis in 2014 and 2015. These parties appeal to fears and anti-immigrant sentiments in the native population. The strong positive correlation between the number of arriving refugees and support for far-right parties over time suggests a positive effect of the refugee crisis on support for far-right parties. Refugee migration may impact support for far-right parties on the one hand through factors that only vary over time, but little over smaller geographical areas (macro-level). General fiscal concerns or the salience of the refugee situation in media outlets are examples of this type of factors. On the other hand, it may work through exposure that occurs if refugees are located in geographical proximity to voters (micro-level).

My analysis for the state of Upper Austria suggests a positive overall effect of refugee migration on support for the far-right Freedom Party in 2015. Macro-level exposure seems to be the primary mechanism. Direct exposure to refugees in border municipalities without interactions seems to further increase support for the

Freedom Party. However, hosting of refugees in a municipality combined with efforts to facilitate interaction between locals and refugees has the opposite effect; and the resulting micro-exposure reduces support for the Freedom Party.

While exposure to immigrants and refugees can have positive and negative effects on attitudes and relatedly on voting for far-right parties, the specific conditions that lead to one or the other effect deserve further investigation.[3] This paper highlights ways for policy-makers to create conditions whereby contact between a native and a newly-arriving population can reduce far-right voting.

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[3] Dustman et al. (2016) investigate the case of Denmark and also find that local exposure to refugees can increase or decrease anti-immigrant voting, depending on the local conditions.