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Refugee Migration to Europe – Current Challenges and Potentials for Cities and Regions*

Rainer Wehrhahn, Zine-Eddine Hathat

1 Introduction

“Europe’s migrant crisis: The year that changed a continent” (*Evans* 2020) is a contribution published in BBC news in August 2020. Whether one should speak of a crisis is a question of perspective. However, it is undisputed that European society has changed in many fields by the refugee movements that took place in 2015 and 2016. Since migration processes always materialise in concrete places, the spatial-local level, in which migrants are mobile and also immobile during a migration and at the (temporary) end of a migration movement, is omnipresent in research processes. Migration without space does not exist, neither in the imaginaries of migration nor in the practice of migration. All levels of space are addressed, from the EU level to the municipal level, for example, when it comes to political-administrative spaces, or neighbourhoods and individual flats of a household, when it is more the socio-spatial dimension that is addressed. In this respect, all spaces are also present in this Special Issue, with a particular focus on the regional and municipal levels with their concrete places of organisation and materialisation of flight. For refugee studies, the municipal level is also of great importance, because first, the basic necessities of life, from food to shelter, must be provided by local institutions. And second, integration processes, even under the restrictive conditions for refugees, e.g. due to the usual work ban in the initial phase, primarily take place at this level. In contrast to other forms of migration, this dependency of refugees on local authorities is significantly greater, as is the challenge for local offices to organise the financial and human resources to meet the obligation to secure basic needs. The fact that studies at the small-scale level are always linked to all other levels and thus determine the everyday lives of refugees as well as challenge research concepts is particularly evident in the study by *Bolzoni et al.* (2022) in this Special Issue.

* This is the Editorial on the Special Issue "Refugee Migration to Europe – Current Challenges and Potentials for Cities and Regions".

This introductory contribution examines recent shifts in research approaches to refugee migration from a social science perspective, with a special focus on the regional and municipal levels. It is organised as a detailed and comprehensive review section which also asks about new perspectives that have emerged. Social science research on refugees has been intensively conducted internationally for over 50 years. After the “long summer of migration” in 2015, new fields of research have emerged, especially in Europe, analysing refugee migration from different perspectives. In Germany, too, there are initial overviews of research on flight, e.g. on qualitative research approaches in the anthology by *Behrensen* and *Westphal* (2019) and especially *Kleist* (2019) in the same volume. In this Special Issue, we then ask what issues have been explored in Europe during and since the refugee movements of 2015 and 2016. Which new research approaches have emerged since then, and which theoretical gaps and which research fields remain open. And finally, we consider the question of where the contributions of the Special Issue are to be placed in the research landscape.

2 Processes and changes in research fields and research approaches

Although this article focuses on refugee migration to Europe, it should first be mentioned here that the vast majority of refugees worldwide are taken in by neighbouring countries. In terms of flight from Syria to Europe, Türkiye is hosting about 3.7 million Syrians (mainly due to the EU-Türkiye agreement), Lebanon almost 1.5 million and Jordan over 651,000 (*UNHCR* 2021, 2022a/b). These numbers are extremely high in relation to the population of Lebanon and Jordan and no comparison to the relatively few refugees that many European countries take in.

In Europe, more than 2.5 million people arrived in the course of migration movements in 2015 and 2016. Although the civil war in Syria and the related conflicts in the Middle East began as early as 2011 and it was predictable that many people would flee to Europe, European institutions were somehow surprised and sometimes overwhelmed by the quantity and permanence of the migration movements. Decisions often had to be taken quickly, mainly on the accommodation and distribution of migrants, but also on border closures and other concrete measures. Policies were developed and implemented at various levels, from the European Community to the municipal level and on the flight routes, to control and, above all, to stem mobility towards Europe. These migration politics are still effective today and are continuously renewed, and their effects can still be seen in 2021 in hot spot centres like Moria or in enclave outposts of the EU like Ceuta. Previous research on this topic has accordingly focused on these aspects of immediate policy responses. While in the main host countries Germany, Sweden and Austria, the focus was initially on questions of accommodation, from a pan-European perspective, the main questions were how migrants are distributed in the European Union, what measures are taken to limit refugee migration and what European migration policy as a whole should look like in the future.

2.1 Refugee migration and potential “crises”

The questions just addressed led to sometimes serious disagreements between European countries that lasted for a long time, so that the term “refugee crisis” was not only a central point of reference for political debates in media-political discourses again and again, but was also taken up in numerous academic publications throughout Europe (e.g. *Hatton 2016; Piguët 2020*). In this context, the socio-cultural effects of the supposed crisis and the related political responsibilities within Europe were the main topics of discussion (cf. e.g. *Ostrand 2018*). Only gradually did research focus on discursive construction processes of this supposed flight or migration crisis. For example, *Abdelhady (2020)*, with reference to *Foucault (1979)*, focuses on the (de)construction of the 2015 migration crisis in Swedish mainstream media. In doing so, she elaborates how the Swedish government’s ongoing political goal of disciplining the bodies of refugees through control mechanisms in the areas of housing, schooling and health care has increased the pressure on institutions to act in order to manage the perceived risks associated with refugees. The resulting failure of institutions to deal with refugees and asylum seekers then led, sometimes politically intended, to a “sense of crisis” in society (*Abdelhady 2020: 136*). This “perceived crisis” resulted in political agreements, such as the EU-Türkiye agreement and others with North African states, and thus in new de facto border demarcations. This was also associated with violations of European legislation, such as the ban on push backs (*Breuckmann/Wehrhahn 2021; Davies et al. 2022*). In a related context, the contribution of *Lorenz and Etzold (2022)* in this Special Issue shows how the fortification of European borders and the externalisation of control regimes produce “journeys of violence” of refugees and other migrants at the local level.

Hess and Kasperek (2017) also see the 2015/16 forced migration as a crisis in many European societies. However, they argue that it is rather a systemic crisis of the European Union and its migration and security policy, which is, among other things, due to the collapse of the European border regime in the Mediterranean as a result of the events of the Arab Spring in 2011. With reference to critical scholars in Germany, *Karakayali (2018: 607)* also draws on this argument when he writes that these same scholars hesitate to use the term “refugee crisis” and instead insist on speaking of a “political crisis”. He also uses the term “refugee crisis” in German to illustrate that the semantic relationship between the different parts of the term remains unclear: Is it therefore a crisis in relation to refugees, a crisis for refugees or a crisis caused by refugees (*Karakayali 2018: 607*)? The fact that the latter view has become the mainstream opinion in many European societies is partly due to media-driven discourses. A political crisis was thus turned into a refugee crisis, and for *Heidenreich et al. (2019)*, the complexity and duration of the supposed crisis created a climate of uncertainty, which provided ample space to influence public opinion on what the arrival of these refugees meant for the respective country. In the course of this study, national media discourses in Hungary, Germany, Sweden, the UK and Spain were analysed to uncover country-specific media frames and to trace the overall course of the refugee debate, as well as to reveal dynamics and shifts in discourses.

Avraamidou (2020) has also followed this theme by questioning how the New York Times and the Guardian have described the so-called European refugee crisis in their editorials. She argues that these media representations, while sympathetic to migrants, are inherently Eurocentric and contribute to reproducing the existing repressive global migration regime because they see the crisis as a rupture rather than a continuation of coloniality (*Avraamidou 2020*).

A similar postcolonial-critical perspective can also be found in *Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018)*, who has taken the so-called crisis of the migration in the summer of 2015 as an opportunity to develop the concept of a coloniality of migration. She uses this concept to discuss how European asylum and migration policies produce hierarchical categories of migrants and refugees and generate a terminology based on an imaginary that recalls the orientalist and racialised practices of European colonialism and imperialism. In this context, there is a racial differentiation between the “insiders”, who are considered members of a nation, and the “outsiders”, who are considered migrants. Thus, this dichotomy between citizens and migrants is embedded in a racialising logic that emerges in social relations shaped by the ongoing effects of colonial epistemic power (*Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018*).

2.2 Anti-refugee mobilisation and welcome culture

It is precisely this dualism between the “actual” citizens of the nation and the “other” citizens who have come from outside, as well as the associated creation of a climate of insecurity, that many right-wing political parties in Europe have used to push through their political interests. This led to the strengthening of these parties, for example in France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands. There are numerous publications on these political processes that address resentment and the overall debate on racism (e.g. *Sadeghi 2019*). An example of this is a comparative study on anti-refugee mobilisation, which provides an overview of the reasons for and the nature of mobilisation against refugees in Italy and France (*Gattinara 2018*). *Gattinara (2018)* argues that the perceived refugee crisis acted as a catalyst for far-right street politics, which has become an integral part of the broader anti-immigration movement. Overall, this has contributed to an increase in far-right mobilisations against migrants, not only in quantitative but also in qualitative terms (*Gattinara 2018*).

These processes are countered by many pro-refugee mobilisations, which in Germany, for example, led to the concept of welcome culture (cf. *Heckmann 2012*) taken up again in the second half of the 2010s. The tension between the German welcome culture on the one hand and the growing xenophobia on the other has meanwhile been widely researched. While *Jünemann (2017)*, for example, focuses on the influence of emotions on German reactions to the “refugee crisis” (cf. also *Bräuer 2022* in this Special Issue), *Hamann and Karakayali (2016)* understand the so-called “Willkommenskultur” as a set of collective practices of solidarity in many European cities. In doing so, they focus primarily on the volunteers who, through initial spontaneous actions, created the structures from which a welcoming culture could develop.

Fleischmann and *Steinhilper* (2017) offer an exciting perspective on this, arguing that it is precisely through the construction of this so-called crisis that many Germans have been activated to engage in practices of “apolitical” helping. This development has led to the emergence of what they call a dispositive of helping, which embeds solidarity with refugees in a humanitarian framework but avoids an explicit political, spatial and historical contextualisation (*Fleischmann/Steinhilper* 2017: 17f.). Thus, the question of the moral and political ambivalences of supporting migrants (*Schwartz/Steinhilper* 2021) is repeatedly negotiated between contested politics and (voluntary) humanitarian aid. In this context, *Saltiel* (2020: 67) emphasises the complex dialectical interrelation between political and humanitarian support and shows, using the example of Maximilian Park in Brussels, what spatial and representational consequences this dualistic interrelation can bring about. Based on two studies in 2017 and 2019, she shows how the park, where an emergency reception camp had provisionally been established in 2015, was sustainably transformed through a humanitarian approach involving different groups of actors, creating arrival infrastructures beyond the actual institutional structures, which in turn had positive effects on the treatment of refugees and their representation (*Saltiel* 2020: 67).

The questions about the accommodation and distribution of refugees in Europe discussed at the beginning of this paper thus not only led to a sense of crisis in various European societies, which in turn led to a negative attitude towards refugees. Rather, these processes activated groups of actors, some of which were very diverse, up to and including entire cities (e.g. “Sanctuary Cities”; “Solidary Cities” in Germany), which showed solidarity with the refugees under the label “refugees welcome”, strengthened pro-migrant activism and demanded and promoted humanitarian approaches in order to integrate refugees into European societies.

2.3 Integration and the labour market

Above all, the question of the integration of refugees played a central role in the European research landscape after the initial phase of acute reception and distribution. In addition to the aspect of language acquisition as a basic prerequisite for economic success, labour market integration was a central point of reference for social science research. For example, *Aksoy et al.* (2020) investigated the causal relationship between local labour market conditions, attitudes towards immigrants at the time of arrival and possible multidimensional integration outcomes. They find that initial unemployment negatively affects the economic and social integration of refugees. Positive attitudes towards refugees, on the other hand, promote these areas of integration. The labour market integration of highly qualified female refugees – as an example of the importance of gender studies with a focus on refugees – is the focus of a study by *Hillmann* and *Toğral Koca* (2021). Both in Berlin and in smaller cities in Brandenburg, gendered pathways of this group’s access to labour markets were analysed, with the role of intermediary actors and their power to influence access to labour markets as the central question. As this research

shows, a variety of recent research approaches have developed and a network of migration-related jobs has been created to support these women.

All in all, a large number of studies have been carried out in recent years on the connections between forced migration or forced migrants on the one hand and work/labour in various economic and social functions as well as labour markets on the other. These studies are not only available as small case studies, but have also been conducted systematically over longer periods of time, e.g. in Denmark in comparison with different immigration and integration policies over more than 40 years (*Nielsen Ahrend et al.* 2022). A very extensive quantitative analysis in 20 European countries on the chances of integrating refugees into the labour markets shows multifaceted, also contradictory results, but also overall a significantly better labour market integration of non-refugee migrants compared to refugees (*Fasani et al.* 2022). In this Special Issue, *Vanella et al.* (2022) have addressed the issue of labour market integration of refugees at the regional level and against the backdrop of the opportunities to compensate for population losses through the integration of refugees.

A different thematic focus is provided by *Easton-Calabria* and *Wood* (2021), who turn their attention to organisations and institutions in Berlin run by Syrian refugees in order to understand their role in the integration process for Syrians. In the field of enquiry of “bridging”, “bonding” and “linking social capital”, they argue that the types of social connections these organisations seek to foster influence the integration process for Syrian refugees, and that the process of establishing such initiatives reveals important components of integration in Germany. *Mencutek* (2021) also foregrounds refugee-led community organisations (RCOs) in her research, focusing primarily on civil society activism and demonstrating how RCOs gain a sphere of influence in the migration architectures of host countries. Building on research on migration governance and grassroots organisations of refugees, it is argued that RCOs can be crucial in strengthening the community and claiming rights for improving the living conditions of refugees. These publications exemplify the complexity of possible integration processes, whereby different actors with different goals and actions not only influence successful or less successful integration, but also bring about socio-spatial changes that in turn influence “European” societies themselves (e.g. also *Neis et al.* 2018: 101; *Førde* 2019: 44). In this context, a central research direction is decisive, which asks what role so-called arrival cities (cf. *Saunders* 2010) or arrival infrastructures play in the integration process (cf. also the contribution by *Kox* and *van Liempt* 2022 in this Special Issue). The anthology by *Franz* and *Hanhörster* (2020) should also be mentioned here, which focuses on numerous European spaces (Berlin, Vienna, Athens, Rome).

2.4 Regime concepts and actor constellations

These complex interconnections between the different groups of actors and their goals and needs, as well as the effects and repercussions of the modes of action on different spatial levels, which have emerged as a result of the migration movements of 2015/16, are increasingly being researched with the help of the migration regime

concept (*Rass/Wolff 2018; Cvajner et al. 2018*). This concept has been en vogue in migration research for a number of years, although it has always been understood and conceptualised in different ways (e.g. *Hillmann/Calbet 2019*). The debate on migration regimes and their possible methodological implementations are conceptually central in *Pott et al. (2018)* and are also frequently used in international scholarship in the context of refugee migration research.

Bernt (2019) points out that due to the increased interest in the intersection of immigration, localities and regulatory techniques, there is increasing talk of “urban” or “local” migration regimes (e.g. *Schmiz/Räuchle 2019*), and that the concept of “urban regimes” is gaining ground. However, he argues that “migration regimes” and “urban regimes” are two fundamentally different ways of analysing regimes, both of which have potentials and problems (*Bernt 2019: 1*).

For example, *Punter et al. (2019)* discuss the concept of distributional regime, which they understand as a structure that coordinates practices of movement and settlement control in a way that produces an ideal distribution of populations in space. Previously, *Horvath et al. (2017)* critically assessed the potential of regime theory for migration research. Although “regime” is not a unified concept, the authors argue that there are commonalities in analytical perspectives that are useful for migration research (*Horvath et al. 2017*). It is therefore not surprising that many studies on refugee movements to Europe in 2015/2016 now take the migration regime approach as a basis for analysing certain migration-specific questions. *Schneider (2022)* also uses the conception of migration regimes in this Special Issue to analyse the arrangements of refugee reception in rural areas in Saxony (Germany).

In addition to studies that explicitly refer to this approach, *Ambrosini (2021)*, for example, introduces a similar research concept with the “battlefields of asylum (and immigration) policies”, as he primarily examines the constellation between the differently cooperating and at the same time conflict-ready public and non-public actors at the “local” level and understands this as an extremely contested field. *Hinger et al. (2017: 443)* argue that with a perspective based on the assumption of migration regimes, the different practices of receiving and accommodating asylum seekers can be better understood without uncritically reproducing politically manufactured categories. Based on empirical observations, *Hinger and Schäfer’s (2019: 63)* contribution discusses an exemplary solution to a central research problem, namely the question of how to compare the diverse and changing practices and discourses of housing refugees in local migration regimes. To find answers to this question, they develop a five-dimensional comparative model that combines the relational re-scaling approach (*Glick Schiller/Çağlar 2009*) with the spatial constructivist considerations of Henri Lefebvre (*Hinger/Schäfer 2019: 63*).

2.5 Scales, locality and knowledge

The increasing interest of interdisciplinary social science research in the interface between immigration and regulatory processes, as discussed by *Bernt (2019)*, is already clear from the publications just discussed, whereby the “local” focus seems to play a special role (e.g. *Glorius/Doomernik 2020*). For example, *Glorius*

and *Nienaber* (2022) in this Special Issue discuss locational choices in the context of forced migration. But also local boundary practices of civil society actors and their transformative power vis-à-vis refugees in a specific urban space in Berlin are investigated (*Toğral Koca* 2019), as well as, for example, place- and space-making activities carried out by and around refugees are addressed, with a spatial focus on refugee accommodation in rural areas in Brandenburg (*Baumann* 2019). In this context, *Zill et al.* (2020) argue that “more open” forms of asylum accommodation can enhance the bond between asylum seekers and locals and promote the development of closer everyday social relationships, while “more closed” forms of asylum accommodation can give rise to feelings of foreignness, which can be reinforced by processes of categorisation and everyday demarcation. The authors distinguish between spatial, material and institutional dimensions of the openness of asylum accommodation and understand (un)familiarity as an expression of experiences, knowledge and perceptions of social distance.

Steigemann and *Misselwitz* (2020) also focus on knowledge, but here the term is associated with space. The question is which spatial knowledge is mobilised at the place of asylum in order to make the accommodation a home. How do spatial practices and spatial knowledge hybridise practices of the place of origin, experiences made during the flight, and the incoming and uncertain time of residence in a foreign place of asylum? How do spatial appropriation processes conflict with humanitarian logics and technocratic emergency management approaches at the place of asylum? In particular, it focuses on how refugees perceive their new urban environment materially and socially, how they adapt, appropriate and change the environment, and how they draw on existing and developing stocks of urban knowledge, urban experiences and social relations.

Wiest (2020) also discusses how the dynamics of social encounters in the city are shaped by specific migration histories, local discourses, economies and policies in her study of urban neighbourhoods in both West and East Germany, using a post-migrant perspective as a heuristic starting point. She is specifically concerned with understanding urban encounters in a migration society as contestations of social and class-specific recognition that take place on different scales and in specific urban locations. At the same time, she wants to show how urban coexistence is negotiated in everyday settings between routines and new conflicts.

2.6 Transnationalism and social interconnections between refugees

Using the example of Thessaloniki and the “transnational No Border Camp” organised by numerous local and international initiatives and with the participation of refugees from the camps, *Tsavdaroglou* (2019) illustrates how the struggle of migrants in crossing political and social borders inspires local solidarity movements to network globally and opens up new possibilities to re-imagine transnational common spaces. Inspired by the Lefebvrian idea of the right to the city, the autonomy of migration and approaches to common spaces, the study shows how the establishment of the transnational No Border Camp in the city centre challenges state policy. The actors involved (refugees, local and international initiatives and activists) demanded the

right to the city, formed direct democratic assemblies and organised a variety of direct actions, demonstrations and squats that marked the social body of the city with spatial disobedience and transnational practices of commoning. This paper reveals how complex the processes and interconnections that developed as a result of the 2015/2016 migration movements and how diverse the constellations of actors can be, what significance the different scales (local vs. global) can have and, finally, what socio-spatial, political and transnational implications can arise (cf. also *Hathat/Wehrhahn* 2021).

For a long time, the social relations between refugees and the host society in a particular place, area or country were at the forefront of research, but there are more and more studies addressing the social connections between migrants both in one place and across national borders. The basis for this shift in focus is the changed perspective on migration movements since the early 1990s, in which space and the borders associated with it are no longer understood as rigid constructs, and instead focus on social and transnational and local relationships.

An interesting piece dealing with similar issues from the regime approach from a transnational perspective is the one by *Steinhilper* (2018). He examines how marginalised migrants organise transnational political protest against all odds. Based on empirical fieldwork and drawing on studies of transnational migration and social movements, he argues that migrants mobilise within transnational social spaces where the relationships and emotions acquired en route are linked to the qualities of the place of arrival. *Steinhilper* (2018) introduces the term “transnational contested spaces” to refer to the politicisation of transnational spaces that emerge in this context and are transformed into specific social formations. *Nowicka et al.* (2019) deal with transnational solidarity, focusing on Polish-born migrants in Germany and their practices and attitudes towards refugee assistance. Transnational solidarity, they argue, must embrace the tension between cosmopolitan and particularist notions of belonging. The authors propose to define transnational solidarity as an outcome of socio-cultural and spatio-temporally specific interpretations of the norm of solidarity. As a heuristic tool, transnational solidarity helps to understand the changing alliances for and against refugees in Europe, according to *Nowicka et al.* (2019).

2.7 Social exchange and the role of digital media and communication

Borkert et al. (2018) make two contributions to the study of social ties among refugees. On the one hand, they offer substantial insights into the digital literacy, information needs and strategies of Syrian and Iraqi refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015. On the other hand, they seek to change the dominant perspective on migrants and refugees as passive victims of international events and policies by highlighting migrants’ skills and abilities to navigate the complex landscape of information and border regimes on the way to Europe. The work focused on 83 Arab refugees from the Za’atari refugee camp (Jordan) and in two centres in Berlin.

Following on from this, *Fiedler* (2019) asks about the subjective value refugees attach to different sources of information and investigates whether they made

informed decisions at different stages of their transit. Between November 2015 and April 2016, four focus groups and 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian and Iraqi refugees, as well as interviews with Iraqi experts from the media sector and civil society. Two key findings were identified: First, although mass media was consumed, the personal network was the most important source of information for the refugees. And secondly, although they felt sufficiently informed before and during their flight, they experienced an information deficit especially after arrival. Based on a qualitative case study with Syrians living in the Netherlands, *Udwan et al.* (2020) explore the impact of the withdrawal of the welfare state and the digital transformation taking place on the resilience strategies of marginalised people such as refugees. In doing so, they point to paradoxes of digital resilience as described by the emotional digital work refugees do in communicating with their families. In addition, they highlight the role of socio-cultural factors in refugees' adoption and use of information and communication technology for health promotion and describe the negotiation of different and contradictory identity axes online.

The importance of the smartphone for refugees has often been examined in recent years, either at the margins or very specifically (e.g. *Hathat 2019; Eriksen 2020*). *Eriksen's* (2020) detailed research on this aspect is primarily concerned with depicting how smartphones influence temporality, rhythm and gaps during indeterminate waiting times. With regard to the aspect of social networks, it is stated that with the help of smartphones, networking is accelerated and a new rhythm and intensity in social interaction is promoted. In addition, a number of multilingual apps developed to support refugees allow access to information about social services, NGOs and volunteer networks, meeting places, language courses, application procedures and local information in general. In the contribution of *Glorius and Nienaber* (2022) in this Special Issue the role of social networks, internet and social media in the search for refuge destinations is of particular interest.

Bayramoğlu and Lüneborg (2018) also focus on digital media. They work on the question of how digital media are used as self-empowering tools by queer refugees in the course of their migration from various Middle Eastern countries via Türkiye to Germany. Through their discussion, they seek to highlight the need to shift attention away from the vulnerability of refugees to the empowering strategies that queer refugees, for example, develop for themselves. The research was based on observations and interviews with queer refugees in Istanbul and Berlin. According to the authors, not only social media activism and interpersonal communication platforms such as social networks, but also dating apps open up the possibility for refugees to develop new coping strategies and a sense of belonging during migration. They also focus on the emotional and affective value of digital media for queer refugees. While translocal digital media embed refugees in transnational networks that provide both interpersonal/emotional support and useful tools for activism, this new research shows the restrictive power of such media. Digitally circulated affects can become regulating forces that integrate queer refugees into European regimes of racialised and sexualised difference.

3 Outlook: The relevance of broad disciplinary and interdisciplinary research on refugee migration for European societies

The aim of this introduction was to provide an overview of the influence that the refugee movements of 2015/2016 have had on research on refugees in the social sciences, which new perspectives have emerged and which topics have been prioritised. It should be noted that due to the extraordinary complexity of the topic, we can only refer to certain developments, concepts and publications that we consider central. For example, the gender aspect was addressed in two fields (cf. sections 2.3 or 2.7), which, in view of the increasing heterogenisation of flight and migration movements worldwide, seems to be taking on an increasingly important role not only in forced migration research, but is still too rarely placed at the centre of research. The same is true for a postcolonial-critical perspective, which was taken up in this article in section 2.1. Decolonisation in this context serves to take a differentiated perspective, historically linked to colonialism, on the production of “crisis discourses” and categorisations of “insiders” belonging to the nation and “outsiders” (refugees or migrants) not belonging to it. Although, in the authors’ view, this perspective significantly helps to break down these categorisations and to question, for example, “simple” constructions of identity, it has so far been taken up too rarely as a basis for research. Especially when integration processes are addressed, a postcolonial-critical perspective can lead to a changed understanding of migrant societies and, for example, make the “rigid” concept of integration obsolete both in political practice and in research.

Linked to postcoloniality, reference must be made at this point to the idea of a postmigrant society (*Yildiz 2016; Foroutan 2019; Wiest 2020*; see also section 2.5), which aims precisely at this changed understanding of society. The concept is not about declaring migration to be completed or past, but to understand it as a decisive structuring element of societies (*Karakayali 2015: 369*). In our view, this concept should also be given greater consideration in the future, although a more appropriate term would still have to be found for the semantically misleading term “postmigrant”. However, since it is still a rather young field of research, there is also a need for a more concrete examination of this basic idea in order to make it more fruitful for future research on forced migration. Especially the current right-wing populist tendencies, which can be observed not only in Europe but all over the world, make a postcolonial-critical perspective an essential tool for future research on flight and migration, as right-wing and anti-democratic parties use the idea of national identity, which often goes hand in hand with racial divisions of the population, to divide societies and achieve their own political goals. A postcolonial-critical perspective, possibly including the “postmigrant”, would not only reveal similar past racialising processes and explain current tendencies, but also open up options to better classify complex developments.

At any rate, these processes affect the spatial levels of municipalities and regions in everyday practice. Another central process, which also has and will continue to have serious effects on European municipalities and regions and which must be more strongly linked to refugee and migration research in the future,

concerns demographic change and the associated labour market mechanisms and recruitment of foreign skilled workers. Here, the selective differentiation between the “good”, i.e. desired refugees/migrants needed for the European labour market and the non-desired persons has to be critically questioned. Once again, this dichotomy is reminiscent of practices of colonialism and imperialism, which ultimately materialise in a highly restrictive European border regime and thus also have concrete effects on migrants’ flight routes and movements (cf. e.g. *Lorenz and Etzold 2022* in this Special Issue). Future research on flight must address this problem and find solutions to overcome the dichotomy of, among others, North and South. For the fact that refugee migration will continue to exist in the future and also in the global North as a central issue of societal further development is not only suggested by the contrasting demographic developments in – for example – Europe and Africa, but is also made clear not least by the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The processes outlined in the preceding sections may possibly be seen as very specifically interpreted processes in the run-up to arrival in or even on the way to a European country. However, they not only significantly influence the way, including the (spatial) path of flight, but also the integration process in Europe and are therefore to be understood as a necessary, integral part of an (interdisciplinary) research on refugees. This is not only scientifically necessary, but also politically promising given this open scientific view, by setting the conditions, which range from historical-emotional to structural-economic conditions on the individual level to the political, social and economic conditions in so-called host countries, as conditions for the (theoretical) options and thus the (practical) shaping of refugee policy on the ground. Cities and regions are particularly called upon to master the day-to-day challenges.

4 Contributions of the special issue

Following on from the research presented on the major themes, this Special Issue offers selected studies from human geography, sociology, anthropology and demography.

Mieke Kox and Ilse van Liempt’s contribution – “*I Have to Start All Over Again. The Role of Institutional and Personal Arrival Infrastructures in Refugees’ Home-making Processes in Amsterdam*” – is about refugees in Amsterdam and how they can develop a sense of home. Both personal and institutional infrastructures in material and affective terms are at the forefront of the study. *Kox and van Liempt* use the concept of arrival infrastructure (see section 2.3) as a theoretical basis to shed light on informal processes of participation and integration that might remain hidden in formal infrastructures. Methodologically, the authors draw on participatory ethnographic research in a refugee shelter in Amsterdam and also focus on different actor constellations. The study concludes that refugees become entangled in a web of reception/asylum seeker centres and civic integration requirements that simultaneously facilitate and constrain their process of finding

a home in a new place. Informal and personal infrastructures, in particular, make it possible for refugees to build social and affective ties in the city. At the same time, they struggle with social isolation and lack of participation because they have limited resources and Dutch society only partially engages with refugees. From these research findings, the authors argue that, on the one hand, the current organisation of arrival infrastructures for refugees needs to be questioned and, on the other hand, a multidimensional model of integration is needed that includes the role of (civil) society in the processes of refugee integration.

Kim Bräuer analyses in her contribution “*Five Years of Voluntary Refugee Aid in Germany. A Retrospective Analysis of Discourse, Local Organisation and the Emotions Involved*” the development of the welcome discourse and the organisation of voluntary refugee aid between 2015 and 2020, how the perception of it has changed and which emotions are involved. For this study, she not only analysed numerous newspaper articles on voluntary refugee work, refugees and refugee policy from various newspapers, but also conducted guided interviews with volunteers, full-time or voluntary organisers and refugees who received assistance in Berlin and Braunschweig. Theoretically, *Bräuer* draws on the concept of governmentality, combines it with the concept of performativity and completes it with an affect-theoretical approach based on the concept of immersive power, in order to be able to work with a critical power perspective in this way and to attach significance to affects and emotions in voluntary refugee aid. *Bräuer* finally states in her contribution that the welcome discourse and the local organisation of voluntary refugee work are valued differently by volunteers and refugees depending on their affective perception and emotional attachment. Depending on the level of involvement in voluntary refugee care, the relationship to the discourse and to the voluntary work itself also changes, whereby the emotional perception of volunteers and refugees is shaped by the lack of knowledge about their social environment. Overall, this contribution takes a critical look at the last five years of voluntary refugee assistance and considers the consequences for voluntary refugee support if emotions are indeed as significant as the authors point out.

The serious consequences that a change in policy direction at the national level can have on policy practice at the local level are exemplified by *Magda Bolzoni*, *Davide Donatiello*, and *Leila Giannetto* in their contribution to “*Sailing against the Law Tides. Implications of the 2018 Refugee Reception Reform in Small-medium Towns and Rural Areas in Italy.*” Based on three case studies in different rural parts of Italy, the paper uses a specially created methodology in a situated qualitative analysis to examine how a so-called security law enforced in 2018 by then Interior Minister Matteo Salvini affects the reception of refugees and local development opportunities at the local level. Funding was reduced and shifted from smaller to larger reception centres, resulting in a multitude of negative impacts for the refugees themselves as well as on the possibilities of supportive interactions with refugees on the part of policy makers at all levels, but especially in small and medium sized towns and rural areas. Well-functioning integration measures had to be discontinued and both on the material and on the symbolic level in relation to the concrete instruments – called “within” – as well as to the “around”, i.e. the positive

effects in the sense of the coexistence of refugees and the established population, which was strongly developed in various areas, were massively impaired. Further research on the effectiveness of regulating measures on a higher political level for all institutions dependent on it and thus also people and spaces directly affected by the regulation can benefit from this systematic investigation using an analytical tool that can be transferred to other studies. The contribution is of great value in terms of research methodology as well as in terms of revealing multi-scale impacts of political regulations.

Behind the conceptional background of migration regimes, *Hanne Schneider* investigates in her paper on *"Local Migration Regimes in Rural Areas: The Example of Refugee Reception in Saxony"* the modalities of the reception of refugees using a multi-method approach. Although the author herself identifies some limitations of her research concept, the questions of welcoming or rejecting attitudes toward migrants in general and refugees in particular, which are very rarely investigated in rural areas, are of value for subsequent studies. In the case studies of the districts of Bautzen and Nordsachsen, the questionable welcoming attitude towards refugees is not so much due to the rurality itself, but rather to the historical conditions of little or no contact with people from other cultural backgrounds in these areas, as well as the resulting political right-wing discourse on migration in the post-socialist period after 1990 and the societal phenomena of a "rural migration regime". Governance regimes with specific actor constellations and historical settings in these rural areas seem to be decisive for migration regimes in their function for the quality of society's willingness to accept refugees.

Birgit Glorius and *Birte Nienaber* use the concept of autonomy of migration in their study on *"Locational Choice and Secondary Movements from the Perspective of Forced Migrants"* in their country comparison of the destinations Luxembourg and Germany. The aim is to conceptually merge the separation of mobility studies and forced migration research and to make locational choice in the course of forced migration visible on the factual level by means of an aspiration-ability model. As a result, a combination of different information, which has already been acquired throughout the migration trajectories mostly by means of transnational social networks, will be recorded. In the case of a possible further migration within Europe, mainly economic reasons are decisive for the choice of the new destination. This improvement or consolidation of the socioeconomic situation would then be a classic motive for most migration movements within a country or a supranational entity such as the European Union. In this respect, it should be considered whether and when a forced migration transforms into a labour migration and how a possible overlapping of migration leads to a longer lasting process of migration itself could be conceptualised more appropriately in future research.

The opportunities that could arise from the labour market integration of refugees for regions in Germany particularly affected by population losses in the course of demographic change are examined by *Patrizio Vanella*, *Timon Hellwagner* and *Philipp Deschermeier* in their paper *"Past and Future Trends in Refugee Migration on the Regional Level in Germany – An Analysis and Projection of Labor Market Effects."* On the basis of principal component analysis and time series analysis,

they show differentiated patterns of correlations. They relate to known differences in labour market integration as a function of variables such as origin, education, language competence and gender, but above all it is interesting that and how differently situated regions in relation to institutional factors as well as their economic prosperity increase the chances for the labour markets there. Especially near large metropolises and/or in economically strong regions, in contrast to less successful, more peripheral regions, a compensation of lost workers by refugees can be expected. In addition to thematic results, the group of authors can also present new findings in methodological terms due to their complex research methodology as well as provide valuable suggestions for future empirical research concepts. The extent to which other, also socio-cultural structural conditions play a role in the different development opportunities of the regions, and not only economic and demographic ones, could be investigated in follow-up studies that also include qualitative approaches.

Rahel Lorenz and Benjamin Etzold's contribution "Journeys of Violence: Trajectories of (Im-)Mobility and Migrants' Encounters with Violence in European Border Spaces" focuses on the journeys of refugees and other migrants to and through Europe. In particular, the authors focus on the conditions of refugees' journeys in order to point out the fragmented mobility of refugees and to show how these journeys are shaped by experiences of violence. They use quantitative data and qualitative research methods to show that what they call "journeys of violence" are caused by a fundamentally unequal and asymmetrical global mobility regime. Refugees and other migrants are typically exposed to different forms of violence as they travel to and through Europe, *Lorenz and Etzold* argue. Among other things, this is related to the fortification of European borders and the externalisation of control regimes, which can be understood as facets of structural violence. The result of this structural violence is a systemic production of situations of protracted immobilities at multiple border locations. Moreover, mobility in the context of violence is highly selective and mobility trajectories are significantly dependent on the resources available to the fugitives or migrants.

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