



## Commentary

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# The Civic Engagement and Social Integration of Refugees in Germany

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**Abstract:** Civil society has played an important role in meeting the challenges of refugee migration in recent years. This commentary documents the importance of civic engagement for the integration of refugees by linking individual survey data on refugees to a regional measure of civic engagement in Germany. Using the density of newly established civic associations at the county level as a measure of civic engagement, we exploit regional differences in civic engagement in order to estimate its association with refugee integration outcomes. We find that in regions with particularly high levels of civic engagement, refugees have significantly more frequent contact to Germans, higher life satisfaction, and better German language skills. This correlation is robust to regional contextual factors such as the local population structure, economic strength, and the state of the labor market. In terms of language acquisition, women and refugees with a low level of education benefit the most from high civic engagement. Moreover, refugees with university degrees find significantly better-paying jobs in areas with higher civic engagement. However, no direct correlation could be established between civic engagement and the likelihood that refugees are employed. Nonetheless, the results suggest that support from civil society translates into improved access to government benefits. Our findings highlight that local civic engagement is an important complement to public assistance services and policy makers should give a high priority to partnering with the civil society to improve refugees' integration outcomes.

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# 1 Civic Engagement in the Context of Refugee Migration to Germany

Refugee migration to Germany soared in recent years: between 2013 and 2016, the total number of individuals seeking asylum in Germany rose from around 600,000 to 1.6 million—thus increasing the resident population by over one percent (DESTATIS 2020). The social integration of these refugees is a long-term challenge. Mastering this challenge not only requires political commitment, but also the support of civil society as a whole. While public authorities were temporarily overwhelmed with the registration, accommodation, and care of newly arriving refugees in 2015—the peak year of the immigration—Germany was swept by a wave of solidarity, with countless volunteers contributing to local initiatives (Karakayali and Kleist 2015). Not least because of this enormous civic engagement, by 2020, the integration effort could point to a large number of successes: about half of the refugees who arrived to Germany between 2013 and 2016 have found a job, and a similarly high proportion of refugees indicate they have a good or very good command of the German language (Brücker et al. 2020a; Schmidt, Jacobsen, and Krieger 2020). Drawing on representative survey data, this commentary explores the empirical relationship between local civic engagement and refugee integration in Germany. The outcomes of interest comprise various dimensions of refugees' social and labor market integration. The empirical analysis leverages the regional distribution of differences in the density of newly founded associations as an indicator of actual local civic engagement on behalf of refugees.

## 1.1 Support for Refugees by Civil Society

Civic engagement on behalf of refugees has been and continues to be widespread in Germany. In several representative surveys, more than 10 percent of the German population state they have performed on-site volunteer work for refugees at least once since 2014 (Jacobsen, Eisnecker, and Schupp 2017; Simonson et al. 2021). While these figures do not allow for an exact estimate of the actual scope of engagement, they do suggest that, for every recently arrived refugee, there is support from nearly 10 potential volunteers nationwide. In fact, this engagement was not only limited to the peak inflow in 2015, but lasted much longer. In 2018,

seven percent of respondents to the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP),<sup>1</sup> and in 2019, 3.6 percent of respondents to the German Volunteer Survey, reported that they were currently involved in supporting refugees (Schmidt, Jacobsen, and Krieger 2020; Simonson et al. 2021). Three to four years after the large influx of refugees in 2015, this still corresponds to three to six million volunteers when extrapolated to the total population.

Government benefits and counseling offers are not the only important factors for providing refugees with living arrangements and enabling their integration. Support from civil society is also crucial (BMFSFJ 2017; Gericke et al. 2018). According to a report of the polling agency IfD Allensbach (2016), Germany's public administration would have been extremely hard pressed to cope with the challenges posed by refugee inflows in the absence of volunteer support. Volunteers have been active in a wide range of activities, including the organization of leisure activities, language lessons, counseling on everyday issues, helping with government visits, and support with job applications.

Previous studies have documented the benefits of such volunteer activities. For example, volunteers with whom refugees have established a trustful relationship often help as guides to overcome hurdles to claiming social benefits (Bakoben, Rumpel, and Schlee 2019). Contacts with locals can also have positive effects on well-being and social integration when a focus is placed on joint leisure activities, such as playing soccer together (Lange, Pfeiffer, and van den Berg 2017), or on mentoring programs that promote language skills and enable social involvement (Krieger et al. 2020).

## 2 Newly Founded Associations as an Indicator of Regional Civic Engagement

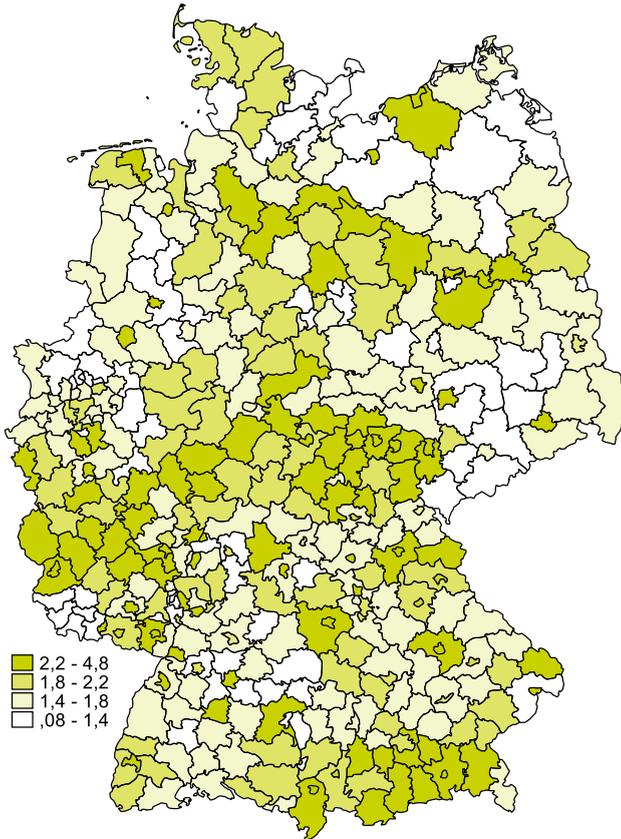
Existing civil society organizations have played an important role in coordinating and organizing support for refugees.<sup>2</sup> The ZiViZ Survey, a representative survey of organized civil society in Germany, found that in 2016, around 90,000 civil society organizations (about 15 percent of all organizations) were engaged in supporting

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<sup>1</sup> The SOEP is a longitudinal survey of private households in Germany that has been carried out since 1984 by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW, Berlin). It interviews some 30,000 people from 15,000 households annually.

<sup>2</sup> Associations are widespread in Germany and constitute the most common and popular type of civic organizations. They are fairly easy to establish, are registered at the local level, and ensure a sound legal basis for volunteer activities. Associations, also called clubs, are involved in a huge variety of activities, from sports and music to volunteer fire brigades and charities.

refugees (Priemer and Schmidt 2017). The vast majority of these organizations were registered associations that only temporarily spent time on refugee aid and are mainly active in the fields of education or sports.



**Figure 1:** Newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants between 2006 and 2016.  
Source: ZiviZ Survey 2017/Vereinsregister, authors' calculations.

In order to elucidate more formally the relationship between civic engagement and refugee integration, this commentary leverages regional variation in the density of civic associations. There are considerable regional differences in Germany in terms of civil society engagement and the number of people who volunteer (Simonson, Vogel, and Tesch-Römer 2017). As a measure of local civic engagement on behalf of refugees, we examined the density of newly founded associations. More precisely, we use as a measure the number of newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants between 2006 and 2016

(i.e. before and during the recent high refugee inflow period). Rather than examine the total stock of existing associations, in our view the number of newly founded associations is a better indicator of the *activity and dynamism* of local civic engagement and volunteering for refugees. In contrast to survey data, which is usually not representative at small regional levels, the register of associations provides precise and complete data, even for small-scale regions (401 counties and independent cities that are classified as NUTS3-regions according to the EU classification for territories). The map of Germany in Figure 1 shows that this indicator also varies widely between regions, as the number of newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants is significantly higher in both university towns and rural regions in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, Thuringia, and southern Bavaria. Furthermore, there is no obvious discrepancy between rural and urban areas.

Table 1 compares counties that have newly founded associations below (column 1) and above (column 2) the median for this variable. It shows that regions with above-median values of newly founded associations have on average a significantly higher per capita income, lower unemployment, a higher proportion of university graduates, and a younger population. Moreover, there is no significant difference in terms of refugee shares in 2015 between counties with above- or below-median values for newly founded associations. This suggests that refugees did not self-select into regions with high levels of civic engagement. Nevertheless, to prevent economic and demographic differences from distorting the relationship between associations and refugee integration, we controlled for the set of regional factors shown in Table 1.

Our numerous controls minimize the possibility that our findings are significantly driven by other regional differences between regions with higher or lower levels of newly founded associations. It can also be largely ruled out that the results are driven by particularly well integrated refugees self-selecting into regions with high levels of civic engagement. First, refugees are not free to choose their place of residence after arriving in Germany, and second, individual control variables such as education level, gender, and marital status are also taken into account in the analyses.

Even though the data do not allow a direct link to be established between individual civic engagement and refugee integration outcomes, the density of newly founded associations is indeed strongly correlated with actual civic engagement. Estimating this relationship with data from the SOEP, in which survey participants are asked whether they have been actively involved in supporting refugees in the last 12 months, shows a statistically significant link between both concepts (Figure 3 in the Appendix). This relationship holds even after controlling for regional and individual characteristics. This is a clear sign that the regional

**Table 1:** Comparison of counties with association growth above and below the median.

	(1)	(2)	Difference
Newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants	1.4	2.3	−0.9***
GDP per capita 2016 (euro thousands)	34.1	37.1	−3.0*
Unemployment rate in 2016	6.1	5.4	0.7***
Youth unemployment rate in 2016	58	5.2	0.6**
Share of university graduates (employees, %)	11.2	14.0	−2.9***
Population share over 65 (%)	22.1	21.6	0.5*
Population share below 25 (%)	5.9	6.4	−0.5***
Population density in 2016 (pop./km <sup>2</sup> )	502	561	−58
Women share (population, %)	50.6	50.6	−0.1
Foreigners' share (population, %)	9.6	9.5	0.1
Rural district (1/0 Dummy)	47.8	53.5	−5.7
Refugee share (2015, %)	0.96	0.99	−0.04
East Germany (1/0 Dummy)	19.9	18.0	1.9
Observations	201	200	401

The table shows unweighted averages for districts with (1) below-median and (2) above-median values for newly founded associations. Source: ZiviZ Survey 2017/Vereinsregister, Federal Statistical Office DESTATIS ( $p$ -values: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ).

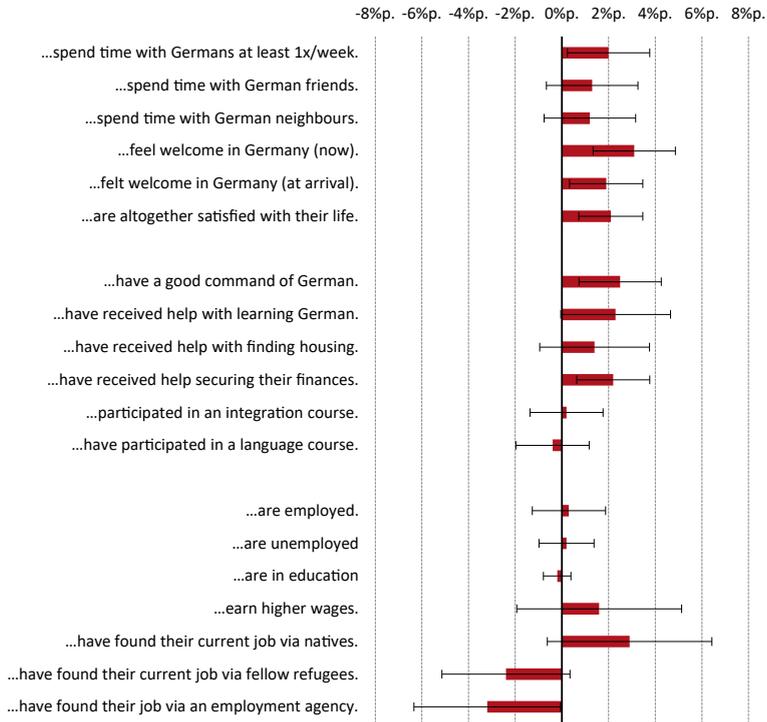
density of newly founded associations is indeed closely related to the actual civic engagement of individuals—and that this relationship is not mediated by socio-economic factors.

### 3 Relationship Between Civic Engagement and the Social Integration of Refugees

Comparing refugees in regions with more or less civic engagement in the most recent IAB-BAMF-SOEP surveys from 2016 to 2019,<sup>3</sup> association density is positively related to refugee integration (Figure 2). Among other aspects, civic engagement correlates with refugees' social contacts and personal life satisfaction. In regions with a high level of engagement (measured by the number of newly

<sup>3</sup> The IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey interviewed 7950 adult asylum seekers who arrived to Germany between 2013 and 2016. It is designed as an annual panel and to be representative of recently arrived refugees. Our results are based on the first three waves from 2016 to 2019. A table that explains the exact phrasing of the variables and a table with summary statistics are available upon request.

CORRELATION BETWEEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE PROPENSITY THAT ASYLUM SEEKERS...



**Figure 2:** Relationship between local civic engagement and indicators for social integration  
 Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey, 2016–2019, own calculations.

**Example:** A refugee living in a region with a more engaged civil society (measured as one additional association per 1000 inhabitants) is on average 2 percentage points more likely to spend time with Germans at least once a week compared to other refugees with identical individual and other regional characteristics.

**Methodological notes:** The figure contains the coefficients and 95-percent confidence intervals of the variable “newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants” in an OLS regression with the integration indicators as dependent variables (all coded as dummy variables except for [log] hourly wage). Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. The sample consists of working-age refugees (18–64) who immigrated to Germany from 2013 onwards. Surveys took place annually between 2016 and 2019. We control for both individual characteristics (age, education level, gender, years since arrival, nationality, marital status, dummy for children under four in household) and regional characteristics at the county level (GDP per capita, unemployment rate, population density, share of foreign population, share of asylum seekers). State and survey year dummies are also included in the regression. For a detailed description of the outcome variables, please contact the authors.

founded associations), refugees have significantly more regular contact to Germans. Consistent with closer contact to locals, refugees in these regions also state significantly more often that they feel strongly or very strongly welcome in Germany. The relationship between civic engagement and perceived receptiveness is even somewhat stronger at the time of the survey than upon arrival in Germany. Civic engagement is also positively and significantly related to the life satisfaction of refugees. These results show, on the one hand, that civic engagement can contribute significantly to establishing an exchange between different social groups and creating a positive climate for integration. On the other hand, they underscore that refugees are clearly impacted by regional differences in civic engagement and that there is a measurable positive correlation with their subjective well-being.

In places with higher civic engagement, refugees feel not only more comfortable overall, but the SOEP interviewers also report that these refugees have significantly better German language skills. In addition, respondents more often report having received help with language acquisition. It is likely that this support is directly related to volunteer work and closer personal contacts to natives. This supposition is underscored by the fact that refugee participation rates in language and integration courses do not differ measurably between regions with varying degrees of civic engagement. When it comes to learning German, refugee women and refugees with low levels of education derive a particularly strong benefit from civic engagement (Figures 4 and 5 in the Appendix). This suggests that those groups who otherwise find it particularly difficult to gain a foothold in the labor market or in the educational system (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Schuß 2020b; Goßner and Kosyakova 2021) may be better reached by volunteers than by public authorities. In the case of female refugees, for example, it could be beneficial that barriers for participation in informal support schemes are lower than for formal courses. Refugees without a completed school education, who have little experience with the written language or classroom environments, are also less likely to participate in formal courses. As expected, they benefit particularly strongly from the personal support and exchange provided by volunteers, who are better able to respond to their individual needs. In addition to its correlation with language acquisition, local civic engagement is also correlated with greater support in finding housing and helping refugees to obtain government benefits. This correlation supports the conjecture that volunteers are better at reaching certain populations, and can decisively improve access to social benefits and other forms of public assistance (see, e.g., Bakoben, Rumpel, and Schlee 2019).

In contrast to language skills and subjective well-being, no significant statistical correlation was found between local civic engagement and the likelihood that refugees are employed, unemployed, or in education. While refugees in regions with higher civic engagement seem more likely to find jobs through the help of locals and less likely to find jobs through the help of fellow refugees or public authorities, these relationships are not statistically significant. On average, no significant difference can be found in the quality of jobs measured by gross hourly wages either. Only refugees with university degrees find significantly better-paying jobs in regions with an engaged civil society (Figure 5 in the Appendix). This is also confirmed by the results of previous studies (Lancee 2016; Gericke et al. 2018). According to these findings, immigrants with high educational attainment benefit in particular from networking with natives, which tend to provide access to higher-paying jobs than networking within ethnic enclaves. Possible explanations for the lack of significant correlations between civic engagement and the likelihood of employment could be that potential labor market effects take more time than three to four years to materialize (because many refugees who are supported by natives first invest in language acquisition, for example). Alternatively, it is also plausible that labor market success depends more on other factors, such as local labor market specifics and local firms' labor demand, and less on engagement by volunteers.

## 4 Conclusions

Civic engagement can make a decisive contribution to overcoming current social challenges by creating personal contacts between different social groups. The work of local volunteers contributes in particular to strengthening the social integration of refugees. Representative survey data show that in areas with higher civic engagement (measured by the density of new associations), refugees receive significantly more support in the short term in various areas of life, feel more welcome, report higher life satisfaction, and have better German language skills, than in areas with lower civic engagement. This correlation holds regardless of regional economic strength, population structure, the state of the labor market, or personal refugee characteristics. Women and refugees with a low level of education, who usually report worse integration outcomes and are more difficult to reach via official assistance schemes, particularly benefit from local civic engagement in terms of language acquisition. At least in the first few years after arrival, the likelihood of taking up employment does not differ measurably. However, well-educated refugees find significantly better-paying jobs in areas with higher civic engagement. Since language skills,

contact with locals, and access to networks are important foundations for successful integration in the long term, the positive effects of civic engagement are likely to become more entrenched or even stronger over a longer period. In general, these findings highlight that, irrespective of socio-economic discrepancies between regions, there are significant regional differences in civic engagement that have a direct impact on the integration and well-being of refugees.

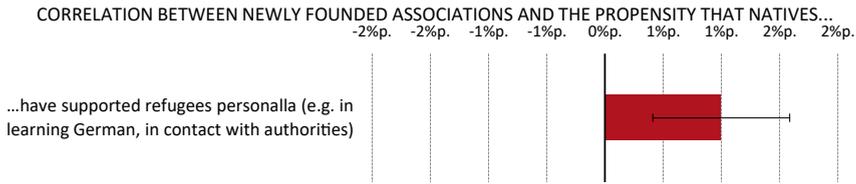
Our findings also show that an engaged local civil society can improve access to government benefits and thus the effectiveness of social policy. In this way, civil society and the public sector are not competing forces, but rather complement each other effectively. Accordingly, policy makers should collaborate with civil society to improve refugee integration.

Given the benefits of civic engagement for refugee integration, policy makers may aim to promote civic engagement. This applies especially to areas with low engagement. Easy access to public funds may alleviate pressure for associations to acquire funding, allowing them to spend more time volunteering and lowering the barrier to starting and running new associations.

Even though the data used in our analysis are limited to 2016–2019, the results suggest that refugees may have suffered particularly from the fact that personal contact was impeded during the Covid-19 pandemic (Entringer et al. 2021). This applies in particular to contact with locals, as both voluntary and professional support was limited by social distancing measures, and could only be transferred to virtual contexts to a limited extent. This could have had a significant negative effect on the language acquisition and general well-being of refugees. Against this backdrop, it is even more important to support civic engagement and develop new ways of providing support that compatible with social distancing measures, as well as to reactivate existing measures once the pandemic subsides.

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## Appendix



**Figure 3:** Relationship between newly founded associations and actual civic engagement towards refugees. Source: SOEP 2016 and 2018, own calculations.

**Example:** A respondent (with German citizenship) who lives in a region with a more engaged civil society (measured as one additional association founded per 1000 inhabitants) is on average 1 percentage point more likely to have personally engaged with refugees in the past 12 months (e.g., in dealing with authorities or language support) compared to Germans in other areas with identical individual and other regional characteristics.

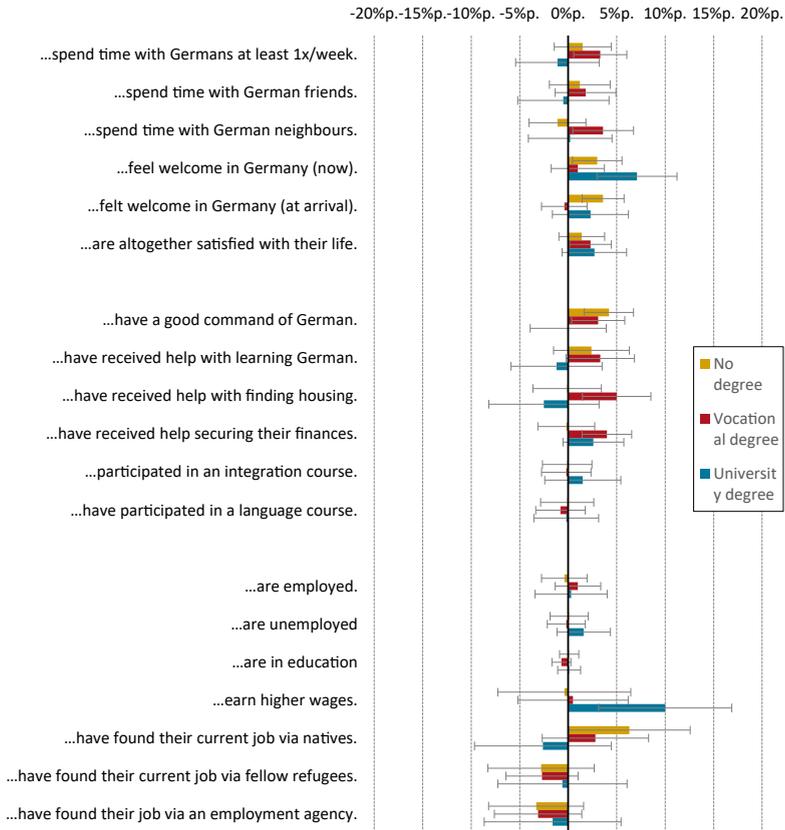
**Methodological notes:** The figure contains the coefficients and 95-percent confidence intervals of the variable “newly founded associations per 1000 inhabitants” in an OLS regression with a dummy as the dependent variable, which takes the value 1 if the individual reports having personally advocated for refugees in the past year and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. We control for individual characteristics (age, education level, gender, migration background, relationship status, employment status) as well as regional characteristics (GDP per capita, unemployment rate, population density, share of foreign population, share of people seeking protection in the county). State and survey year dummies are included in the regression.

CORRELATION BETWEEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE PROPENSITY THAT ASYLUM SEEKERS...



**Figure 4:** Relationship between local civic engagement and indicators for social integration by gender. Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey 2016–2019, own calculations.

CORRELATION BETWEEN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE PROPENSITY THAT ASYLUM SEEKERS...



**Figure 5:** Relationship between local civic engagement and indicators for social integration by education. Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey 2016–2019, own calculations.

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