



HOUSING NEWCOMERS IN COVID-19 EUROPE:

PERSPECTIVES FROM FRANCE,
GERMANY, GREECE, AND ITALY

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DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In times of crisis, disadvantaged groups tend to be disproportionately affected compared with the wider population. This assertion became evident during the health emergency brought about by the COVID-19 virus. For the past year, the public health, social and economic implications of the pandemic have been extensively discussed in a variety of contexts. However, little scholarly attention has been dedicated to the consequences felt by asylum seekers and refugees in Europe or, more generally, by Europe's newcomers.

This report focuses on newcomers' access to and conditions of housing. Not only does adequate housing constitute a fundamental step towards newcomers' inclusion into host communities, but it is also a necessary condition for remaining safe during the pandemic. Through an exploratory, comparative study of policy changes and frontline responses in France, Germany, Greece, and Italy, during the so-called 'first lockdown' (from mid-March to mid-May 2020), the research examines three central and interrelated questions: 1) How has the existing policy framework on housing for newcomers changed in the face of the pandemic? 2) How have these policy changes affected newcomers on the ground? 3) How have the individual actors implementing policy at the street-level played a role in shaping policy outcomes?

The report finds that, while the four countries already had national policy frameworks in place for securing newcomers' housing access and conditions, their respective governments adopted several emergency measures in response to the new needs arising from the pandemic. The measures adopted by France, Greece and Italy prioritised the protection of groups without adequate housing and/or provided flexibility to administrative procedures and lengths of stay at shelters. Germany, by contrast, did not adopt new measures at a national level but left local authorities, contractors and NGOs to manage centralised accommodation halls.

Street-level actors (caseworkers, social workers, administrative employees, etc.) played a key role in materialising the policy response in all four countries. In the cases of France, Greece

and Italy, their use of discretionary power had more positive than negative effects for newcomers, as it often ended up covering (existing or newly-created) gaps in public policy and state services. In Germany, street-level actors' discretionary decisions often led to the creation and enforcement of rules for newcomers (e.g. quarantine) that were conspicuously more restricted compared to the local population. Yet, in all cases, even the actors most positively predisposed towards newcomers were frequently restricted by a mismatch between supply and demand of housing services, inadvertently leaving some subgroups of newcomers out (e.g single men in France and Greece or those outside 'the system' in Italy).

Overall, this report brings to light how the pandemic accentuated some of the gaps and weaknesses of existing national and regional housing systems. Additionally, the implementation of emergency policy responses to COVID-19 did not always lead to expected policy outcomes and heavily relied on ad hoc decisions from implementing actors. The report recommends that policymakers create emergency plans for responding to a potential sudden increase of housing demands in times of crisis and provide affordable long-term housing solutions for the population groups most in need, including all subgroups of newcomers. Finally, in light of the salient intermediary role of street-level actors, emergency policies should also aim to support policy delivery on the ground, both in terms of resources and training.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and housing policy for newcomers in Europe

Over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of lockdown measures on different groups can now be investigated. From the start, it transpired that the impact on disadvantaged groups would be proportionally greater, in Europe and globally. Reports and studies have already shown that, particularly in the beginning of the pandemic, poverty correlated with COVID-19 infections, and minority communities were often the most affected in Western societies (Washington Post, 2020). One reason identified for this trend concerned the lesser potential for social distancing in densely inhabited, though smaller, housing spaces. In addition, disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately more from the economic crisis compared to the rest of the population. They are more likely to be employed in precarious working conditions, to lose their jobs as a result of lockdown measures and, in some countries, to have limited access to health care services (ibid.)

In light of these inequalities, this report examines the impact of COVID-19 on a section of the population that often lives in particularly precarious conditions in Europe, namely asylum seekers and refugees, or Europe's newcomers. Apart from being excluded from the social fabric of the local society, their access to the labour market is also compromised, leaving them with few economic means to weather the implications of the pandemic. In this regard, they are amongst the most vulnerable population groups. Until now, the impact of COVID-19 and its implications on asylum seekers and refugees has not been at the centre of either public or scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 virus does not discriminate and can be transmitted through anyone, regardless of legal or residence status. It is therefore crucial to mitigate its impact on the most vulnerable, who are both more likely to contract it and less likely to receive the treatment they need.

This report focuses on access to, and conditions of, housing for asylum seekers and refugees during the early period of the pandemic. When describing more than one affected group, this report will unify the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seekers' under

the umbrella term 'newcomers'. 'Newcomers' has been widely used in migration studies because of the common issues faced by these communities in areas such as political participation (Schmidke, 2011; Otjes & Krouwel, 2019) and the broader question of socio-economic integration (Klarenbeek, 2019). While we acknowledge that this somewhat homogenises the varied experiences and migration statuses of these groups, there is enough commonality in the housing issues encountered by the exogenous shock of COVID-19 to justify the use of a common terminology in this study. Yet, when an observation refers to a group with a specific legal status, such as those in the asylum application process or those who have already received refugee status, the relevant terms will be used.

The policy area of housing is of particular importance in an environment of stay-at-home orders and social-distancing rules and so is its implementation process. In a plethora of complex and frequently-changing rules and policies, those tasked with implementing them play a critical role. Not only do they have some room of discretion when carrying out relevant policy tasks, but the way they make use of this discretion shapes both policy outcomes and the daily lives of the beneficiaries (Lipksy, 1980). This report examines the change of policy in the face of COVID-19, while it also looks at the role of various individual actors who implement relevant policies during this time of crisis, such as social workers, case workers and administrative employees.

More importantly, this report aims to assess the impact of such policy changes on those affected the most, namely newcomers themselves. In doing so, it employs an intersectional analytical lens (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005), accounting for newcomers' multiple identities, and the implications of these identity intersections, on newcomers' access to and conditions of housing.

A key finding of this report, for example, has been the paradoxical impact some identity categories, such as gender, have on newcomers' conditions of living. Even prior to the pandemic, single men and teenage boys were less likely to

be considered 'vulnerable', which practically meant they were the last to receive access to housing when resources were scarce. While COVID-19 has not necessarily exacerbated the extent of this phenomenon, the de facto vulnerability of men and boys who are homeless or live in particularly precarious conditions has undoubtedly increased, accounting also for health and economic circumstances.

It is important to note that this report does not cover the entire length of the pandemic (which is still ongoing at the time of writing this report), but rather focuses on the period of the so-called 'first lockdown' in Europe, from March 2020 to May 2020. Employing a qualitative research methodology (see below), this study looks at government and ground-level responses in four countries: France, Germany, Greece, and Italy. This case selection accounts for both long-term host countries for migrants in Western Europe (Germany and France) and more recent host countries in Southern Europe (Italy and Greece). This overall approach allows for an exploratory orientation and the observation of how changes unfolded during a time of crisis in different contexts, both at the policy change level and in terms of policy outcomes.

Findings of this study generally corroborate the observation that Europe's newcomers were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Existing migrant housing policies in all four countries were not sufficiently equipped to address the health emergency and provide adequate living conditions for newcomers under lockdown. In terms of policy response, there were significant differences across countries. France, Greece and Italy adopted emergency measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on newcomers' housing, with various degrees of success in practice. In Germany, crisis mitigation differed across federal states, local authorities, and individual accommodation halls, as the absence of national policy guidelines provided those actors with increased autonomy and discretionary power. In effect, in all four cases, the impact of COVID-19 was largely addressed by street-level actors, whose discretionary decisions had either positive or negative effects for newcomers. This practically led to a patchwork of implementation approaches

and policy outcomes between and within countries.

In the two sections directly below, this report introduces the theoretical framework and the methodological approach employed for this study. After that, the four cases under examination are presented: France, Germany, Greece and Italy. Each country section begins with a layout of pre-COVID-19 housing policies for newcomers, followed by the presentation and discussion of policy changes during the early stages of the pandemic. The second half of each country section focuses on the impact of these policy changes on newcomers as well as the role of street-level actors' discretionary decisions in the implementation and, ultimately, the outcome of these policies. The report closes with a concluding discussion and a list of policy recommendations aiming to ameliorate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the access to and conditions of housing on Europe's newcomers.

Conceptualising Discretion and Policy Implementation in COVID-19

The theory of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) provides a useful analytical lens through which we can better understand the implementation of public policy, including housing policy for newcomers. This theoretical framework highlights the importance of the 'human factor', meaning the role of individuals who deliver services on the ground and their daily discretionary decisions when they carry out their tasks. By virtue of their professional role prescriptions (e.g. social workers, care workers, etc.), they operationalise government dictates and accord practical meaning to ambiguous policy (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 1980). In that regard, they are considered de facto policy makers.

In today's reality of contracting, privatisation and subsidiarity, however, public policy is not only delivered by public servants but also by non-state actors, whether private or third-sector employees (Brodkin, 2011; 2012). In the context of migration policy especially, diverse street-level actors are responsible for granting newcomers access to social and economic provisions,

such as shelter and housing. In doing so, they become the intermediaries between the state and the newcomers (Glyniadaki, 2021). They are therefore uniquely positioned, through individual interpretation and enactment of policy, to meet beneficiaries' needs. With their judgments and actions, street-level actors directly affect service beneficiaries, while also shaping policy outcomes (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012).

More generally, street-level bureaucracy theory provides that organisational and contextual factors heavily impact how workers exercise their functions. Particularly under pressing conditions of limited resources and time or policy uncertainty, street-level practitioners use discretionary behaviour and create informal strategies to respond to their work demands and to the needs of the situation (Brodkin, 2011; Evans, 2011). Discretionary behaviour may therefore be exercised either as a coping mechanism to further support service recipients (Belabas and Gerrits, 2017) or as a way to uphold state demands rather than the recipients' interests or needs (Alpes and Spire, 2014). For the purposes of this research, the notion of discretion is acknowledged as the willingness or reluctance of street-level workers to 'go the extra mile' to address newcomers' housing needs in a context of resource deficiencies, policy restrictions and unprecedented social pressures.

This research framework is indeed highly suitable for understanding policy implementation under conditions of crisis. Recent theoretical contributions observe that emergencies disrupt policy and service delivery (Brodkin, 2021), which renders the work of those operating at the street-level particularly salient (see also Glyniadaki, 2020). In terms of newcomers' access to housing, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted street-level actors' role as the state's operational arm, tasked with delivering housing and temporary accommodation alternatives. At the same time, the health emergency has provided an opportunity to expand their discretionary space to respond to the urgent needs of the most vulnerable, in this case newcomers with compromised access to housing.

Against this background, this report seeks to address three central, interrelated research questions: 1) How has the existing policy framework on housing for newcomers changed in the face of the pandemic? 2) How have these policy changes affected newcomers on the ground? 3) How have the individual actors implementing policy at the street-level played a role in shaping policy outcomes? These questions are particularly important when considering the pressure under which governments were to respond to a health emergency of unprecedented proportions, at a time when the demand for adequate housing availability and conditions rapidly rose.

Methodological Approaches to Housing and COVID-19

This is a qualitative cross-country comparative research project, designed to assess the impact of COVID-19-related policies on newcomers and their access to housing in France, Germany, Greece, and Italy. Case study research serves a number of functions in the social sciences (Ylikoski and Zahle, 2019). This report employs an exploratory case study design which allows the exploration of complex phenomena in context to describe in depth particular cases (Yin, 1984).

Greece and Italy were chosen because they are considered new host countries, whereas Germany and France are traditional migration destination countries. As this research took place during an unprecedented global pandemic, and therefore during a time of crisis, there were not clearly defined expectations with regards to anticipated findings. By contrast, the goal was to observe the ongoing dynamics, as these were unfolding, while taking into account the unique idiosyncratic characteristics of the four contexts (Locke and Thelen, 1995). As such, the findings are not intended to be a comprehensive account of all aspects of people's lived realities. Rather, it was only a small portion of the world studied, representing some aspects of access to accommodation and refugee camp realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Data collection was conducted from June 2020 to January 2021. It was divided into two areas to allow a) the measure of policy outputs that come from policy makers and b) policy outcomes, how the policies were implemented on the ground. Firstly, documentary evidence of both the existing housing context for newcomers and policy changes during COVID-19 were used. This required the collection and analysis of legal documents and official reports from each case study. It enabled thus the report to construct in-depth case study profiles of both existing pre-COVID-19 policy contexts and changes that resulted from the health emergency. It constructed a rich empirical context into which the results from the interviews with practitioners in the field can be contextualised and contrasted in terms of policy implementation.

Secondly, 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone or video calls in English, Greek, Italian, French, or German at the choice of the participant. The participants were selected through the use of purposive and snowball sampling (Berg, 1988). They were initially selected based on their professional profile (e.g. case workers, social workers, administrative employees, etc.) working directly with newcomers in the context of housing) and they were then asked to identify and recommend others with similar profiles. In order to triangulate the findings, some migration experts were also interviewed (academics and government representatives).

In terms of the profiles of participants, the large majority of them worked for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a few of them were private professionals (e.g. lawyers) and a few others were volunteers and activists (Table 1 in Appendix). As such, most were members of the civil-society, which usually denotes a degree of self-selection into such roles as well as a pro-migrant political stance. While this profile was rather representative of individuals delivering housing services to newcomers at the street-level, it is worth noting that the interview data of this research is not likely to represent the point of view of local or national governments.

The interview data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke,

2006). Emerging ideas and concepts grounded in the accounts of the participants were manually coded. The coded data was then reviewed to explore emerging patterns and meanings in relation to the research study's aim, namely how the COVID-19 policy responses impacted newcomers and practitioners in the field of migration management, and the policy area of housing in particular. These two steps took place iteratively, through several rounds of data analysis and theory development.

1. FRANCE

1.1 Pre-pandemic policy framework on newcomers and housing

France faces a severe housing deficit, which has led to a sharp rise in homelessness over the last decade. With a limited social housing stock, rising rental costs, and scarce long-term housing alternatives, impoverished French citizens and newcomers often lack adequate housing (OHCHR, 2019; Fondation Abbé-Pierre, 2021a). However, the national policy framework comprises several mechanisms to guarantee access to adequate housing for both nationals and newcomers, aiming to reduce homelessness.

France is the only EU country to have an enforceable right to housing (OHCHR, 2019). The DALO Law (Droit au Logement Opposable), adopted in 2007, accords priority access to social housing to people living in vulnerable situations, namely the homeless; people at risk of eviction; people in temporary or emergency accommodations; and people living in unsanitary, indecent, or overcrowded accommodations (Housing Europe, 2010). Moreover, to tackle increasing homelessness and a congested housing market, the government adopted a 5-year housing strategy in 2017 closely targeting people without shelter, especially people living on the street and asylum-seekers (ESPN, 2019). The plan specifically intended to decrease the dependency on emergency accommodation schemes and provide regular housing first, by reducing the emergency shelter stock and increasing the social housing stock.

While the right to adequate housing is irrespective of administrative status, newcomers can access housing and other services through the National Reception System (Dispositif National d'Accueil), managed by OFFI (French Immigration and Integration Office). The OFFI is responsible for admission in accommodation places for migrants once an asylum application is submitted. Asylum-seekers may reside in temporary housing facilities

known as CADA, emergency accommodations (HUDA, PRAHDA, CAO)¹, or special reception and administrative examination centres (CAES). The State funds these facilities and sub-contracts non-profit organisations or semi-public companies to manage them locally (Forum Réfugiés-Cosi, 2020a).

If these alternatives became inaccessible due to failed asylum applications or prolonged lengths of stay, newcomers could access homeless services (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2016), or provisional accommodation centres (CPH). The latter responds to concerns related to housing alternatives for refugee status-holders who exit the reception system without secure accommodation. In that regard, the national housing framework incorporates policy provisions to facilitate pathways to durable and regular housing managed at the local level (Forum Réfugiés-Cosi, 2020b).

However, to address the shortages of the migrant reception capacity, which predates the 2015 increase in arrivals, the French government has considerably and gradually expanded its reception and temporary accommodation infrastructures since 2012 (ECRE, 2019). As a result, the use of emergency shelters is entrenched within the national reception system and remains a predominant response to housing shortages, despite long-term strategies.

More importantly, despite the comprehensive national policy framework, the French government has not been able to guarantee proper accommodation to newcomers seeking protection (AIDA, 2019). By the end of 2019, less than 50% of asylum-seekers eligible for reception conditions were effectively accommodated (Forum Réfugiés-Cosi, 2020a). Similarly, the European Observatory

¹ These acronyms stand for different emergency accommodation schemes for asylum seekers. They serve similar purposes but differ in capacity and are managed at different governmental levels.

on Homelessness estimates that approximately half of the users of homeless shelters are migrants and expects the number of homeless migrants to continue to increase (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). Reports from non-governmental organizations also show that migrants who fail to access reception or housing facilities, may have no alternative other than to resort to the streets or informal camps (Forum Réfugiés-Cosi, 2019a; AIDA, 2019).

1.2 Policy change during the pandemic

The health crisis brought to light the severity of the housing deficit affecting people without adequate housing (mal-logées), such as the homeless or people living in makeshift accommodation, hotels, or CADA (Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2021b). However, according to official statements, the protection of citizens, including the homeless, was the government's priority from the onset of the health emergency (Gouvernement, 2019). Therefore, government officials responded with the adoption of several emergency and temporary measures, or ordonnances, mainly focused on preventing social, economic, and health distress.

Two sets of actions had a direct impact on newcomers' access to adequate housing. First, the ordonnances published in the Official Journal on 26 March, 23 April, and 14 May accorded suspensions or extensions of various administrative procedures concerning the rights of third-country nationals (La Cimade, 2020). In the specific case of the processes of asylum, residence permits, and access to social rights, government measures led to the closure of the several OFFI's services, hindering asylum-seekers ability to exercise their right to accommodation. Namely, the one-stop service for asylum applications known as GUDA (guichet unique pour demandeurs d'asile), and the first reception facilities, or SPADA (structure du premier accueil).

Potential asylum-seekers not having registered their application before lockdown did not get material reception conditions, such as access to the National Reception System or economic support. These procedures resumed from 5 May (France Terre d'Asile, 2020).

However, the 26 March ordonnance extended the duration of long-term and provisional residence permits for 180 days and the validity of asylum application certificates for six to ten months (La Cimade, 2020). This meant that migration authorities would provide material reception conditions until the end of the health emergency state (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2020). These measures also extended the protection period for unaccompanied foreign minors who would turn 18 during the lockdown period (France Terre d'Asile, 2020).

Second, the government released an emergency package of €50 million to extend the network of emergency accommodations across the country (Gouvernement, 2019). In that regard, it extended the Trêve hivernale, the period during which eviction decisions are suspended, until 10 July, and kept the 14,000 accommodation places created exceptionally for the winter. Additionally, it created 5,467 places in hotels, as well as 40 'quarantine sites' for the homeless with COVID-19-related medical needs. This action was meant to strengthen the existing emergency shelter scheme, with 157,000 beds available for people without adequate housing (France Terre d'Asile, 2020).

Finally, to address the issue of informal camps and settlements, whose density and unsanitary conditions posed a public health threat, the government mobilised local authorities, with the support of local NGOs, to move the residents to temporary accommodations, such as repurposed cultural centres, hotels, and gymnasiums. However, these operations only took place until mid-April.

1.3 Impact on the ground

Despite the implementation of emergency measures to support the accommodation network's capacity, the health crisis reduced access to housing and, in some cases, worsened the living conditions of newcomers. Certain groups, such as elderly persons, women and single mothers were in vulnerable situations (FR3, FR4, FR5, FR10). However, findings suggest that single men and unaccompanied minors were inadvertently the most affected during the lockdown period (FR3, FR4, FR5, FR7, FR12).

Service saturation reduced the number of spaces available at shelters, which had to decrease their capacity to abide by COVID-19 related measures. A shelter worker illustrated the situation: During lockdown we had a reduction [in spaces]. Usually, there was still one week of waiting, given that the list is quite long. During lockdown everything stopped, really, in a very brutal way. (FR10)

This affected beneficiaries mostly based on their administrative status. Those who were already placed in state-sponsored housing or emergency shelters could prolong their stay. However, irregular migrants, unsuccessful asylum-claimants or those evicted from camps were rendered homeless and faced severe financial, food, and health insecurity (Forum Réfugiés-Cosi, 2019a; Gauriat, 2020). Moreover, organisational adjustments to NGOs' operating frameworks resulted in the unintentional neglect of unaccompanied minors, young adults, and single men.

Young, and single adult men were practically left out of any housing alternatives, either state-sponsored emergency shelters, or non-governmental support: "the most excluded were single male newcomers [...]" (FR5). Commonly recognised as less vulnerable, this group was de facto left out in favour of other more vulnerable groups as several interviewees

observed (FR3, FR4, FR5, FR10, FR12). This group was not perceived as particularly vulnerable to the virus. Additionally, they may lack exacerbated vulnerabilities (family dependants, gender-related risks). Under ordinary circumstances this does not justify priority access to services, in comparison to single women, families or persons with disabilities, medical or age-related concerns. Under extraordinary circumstances, such as a health emergency, the lack of access to services ironically exacerbated the vulnerabilities of young and adult men by increasing their exposure to the virus (MSF, 2020) and decreasing their chances to receive support.

Similarly, unaccompanied migrant minors were most affected during the health emergency due to adjustments in national or organisational policies and overwhelmed services across the regions. "It was a big battle for minors during lockdown [...] they were not sheltered at all" (FR3). The Mechanism for the Assessment of Isolated Foreign Minors managed by the Red Cross suspended operations during the lockdown period from March to May (Croix-Rouge, 2020; Gisti, 2021). Additionally, administrative delays affected the procedures to determine minority status, which placed children in limbo and limited their access to safe and adequate accommodation. In consequence, in March, approximately 200 minors were at risk (Gisti, 2021). Moreover, NGOs and practitioners reported that young people and children were sent to the streets without an accommodation solution or access to food, thus facing a severe deterioration in their physical and mental health (HRW, 2020; InfoMie, 2020).

1.4 Discretionary decisions

Discretion in local policy making has long been identified as an important part of policy implementation across a number of areas in France, including diversity policy (Downing 2016; Downing

2019). The governmental response to the pandemic intended to target and prioritise vulnerable groups based on administrative procedures and medical needs. However, interviewees generally stressed the fact that the suspension of public services increased the burden on non-governmental organisations (FR3, FR4, FR6) forcing them to adopt coping mechanisms: “the saturation of all public services and associations [was a problem]. You know that the withdrawal of public services placed the burden on associations [...]” (FR6).

With a lack of clear information about the operationalisation of COVID-19-related measures and accommodation, street-level actors adopted discretionary strategies, which resulted in inconsistencies across implementing actors. The most revealing inconsistency is how organisations prioritised who received access to accommodation and under which circumstances. The findings show three general prioritising approaches adopted by implementing actors: a) based on administrative or asylum procedures (FR6, FR11, FR12); b) based on exacerbated vulnerabilities due to the health crisis (FR4, FR10); c) based on empathy towards beneficiaries, beyond institutional guidelines (FR4, FR5).

In the case of governmental actors, evidence indicates that the first approach remained the norm. When asylum-related activities began to resume in a limited capacity, the OFII assured that special 'attention would be paid to vulnerable people' (France Terre d'Asile, 2020; Pascual, 2020). However, there was a lack of a clear definition of what constituted a vulnerability, which led workers to follow a common course of action. For example, a government worker mentioned that, following asylum-related policies, migrant and refugee groups were prioritised according to the stage of their asylum procedure, which automatically provided clear differentiated access to services:

What is their administrative status? [...] If it is an asylum seeker, he is supposed to have accommodation, he is eligible for CADA [...] the dublinés (for whom France was not ruled their first point of entry under the Dublin Regulations and are awaiting relocation to the first EU state they are ruled to have crossed into), the rejected, they have fewer rights, they are not the priority. (FR11)

This suggests that the vulnerability of beneficiaries was informally assessed according to conditions related to the stage of the procedure, regardless of how their needs were affected by the state of emergency.

By contrast, non-governmental actors' response was quite the opposite. As they became the first responders in the absence of public services, they tended to address the vulnerabilities arising from the health emergency or from an empathetic reaction to the crisis. Members of the interviewed organisations followed a first-come-first-serve assessment of vulnerabilities, such as age, gender, disabilities, or visible medical needs. For example, a shelter targeting elderly men adopted a queue-based system to accommodate potential beneficiaries but ultimately prioritised health emergencies:

We put in place a waiting list based on their arrival date. We move down the list, and they must wait for their turn [...] When a vulnerable person comes, and it physically shows, they will automatically become priority because their health justifies it. (FR10)

The prioritisation of newcomers accorded based on the level of empathy felt by street-level actors was a general theme across interviews. It seemed to be more of an unintentional influencing factor resulting from the nature of their work in the wake of a crisis, rather than an institutionalised approach.

For example, an NGO worker noted that putting herself in the place of beneficiaries would move her to provide support:

[...] people who have no resources, who do not know anyone, who do not speak the language [...] they are sometimes very young [...] that could be me, or someone I know [...]. (FR4)

Overall, the interviews highlighted that operating under these unprecedented circumstances generated feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Street-level actors wanted to help but did not have the means to do so. One worker put it bluntly: "it's terrible to see this [situation] with young people and tell them there is no choice [...] Sometimes, I feel remorse about it." (FR4). Ultimately, this shows that despite the workers' ability to implement discretionary actions to deliver services, a lack of resources and a saturated housing system hampered any possibility for success. To this day, thousands of newcomers remain mal logés (in poor or non-existent housing conditions).

2. GERMANY

2.1 Pre-COVID-19 Housing

In Germany, the responsibility and competences for housing vulnerable newcomers such as asylum seekers and refugees that are in the process of applying for protection status lie with the regional state administration (Länder). Länder governments are the competent bodies for defining housing standards in the areas of migration and asylum. That said, some national guidelines do exist.

First, asylum seekers and refugees should be preferably accommodated in shared, centralized accommodation facilities (§53 | 1 AsylG), a policy that was pushed for by the Minister of the Interior, Horst Seehofer, who is a member of the Bavarian centre-right wing party (CSU) and was the greatest opponent of Angela Merkel's relatively liberal approach during the beginnings of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. This legislation remains nevertheless a guideline. It is still up to the Länder and Communes to choose centralized or decentralized accommodation. A second national guideline defines that establishing accommodation halls shall be in the public interest and meet needs of asylum seekers and refugees (§53 | 1 AsylG). Third, asylum applicants must stay in their allocated accommodation for the duration of their asylum process. They are only free to leave when their asylum application has been approved AND when they can demonstrate that they found another flat so they do not create additional costs for the public (§53 | 1 AsylG).

In addition, in 2016 the Ministry for Youth, Women and Family started an initiative to ensure the protection of vulnerable groups in centralized accommodation (with UNICEF and welfare non-governmental organisations). The ministry has been funding several projects and programs to prevent violence and maltreatment in centralized accommodation halls. Since August 2019, the Länder are also obliged to ensure the protection of

vulnerable groups (women, children, people with disabilities, minors, bi-, trans-, homosexual people, people with mental or physical health issues etc.) (§44 | 2a AsylG). Apart from the later two strategic papers, those guidelines were already implemented before the pandemic.

In practice, a nation-wide allocation key distributes asylum seekers and refugees across the 16 Länder (§45 AsylG). The Länder are responsible for providing sufficient accommodation places for allocated asylum seekers and refugees (ibid.). Nonetheless, all Länder have a general clause on the accommodation of newcomers which remains very general. It essentially states that asylum seekers and refugees shall be treated humanely, and their good health must be guaranteed (e.g. § 3 | 1 Hessisches Aufnahmegesetz). Since these minimum standards are prescribed by every Land individually, there are no national minimum standards.

In this regard, every Land does develop its own minimum standards. These can consist of legal obligations, general guidelines, and, in some cases, Länder do not have any regulations on how to accommodate persons in the asylum process, which means that minimum standards do not exist. The following table provides a brief overview of regional provisions.

Accommodation halls are run by welfare organisations (AWO, German Red Cross), private contractors, or the communal administration, that function as competent administrative bodies and operate the accommodation halls. The largest contractor is European Homecare, which has also been steadily criticized for benefiting financially from keeping living conditions for newcomers low (e.g. Schink 2017).

Since the existing legal framework has never provided precise implementation guidelines, there is a lot of room for discretionary application

| Provisions on Housing Conditions | Länder |
|--|---|
| No minimum standards | Hamburg, Bremen (only provision: 70-180 inhabitants/accomodation), Hessen, Niedersachsen, Saarland, Nord-Rhein-Westphalen |
| Binding provisions | Berlin, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Sachsen, Thüringen, Baden-Württemberg |
| Some Guidelines and Provisions Guidelines on equipment and room sizes Guidelines are being negotiated Non-binding guidelines | Bavaria Brandenburg Sachsen-Anhalt |

Table 2.1 Provisions of Housing by Länder

Table created by authors

of the broader legal framework by street-level actors and local authorities. A multi-layered set of decision-making actors, both public and private constitutes a multi-layered system where decisions and competences lie with different levels of policy making, from national to local. This, in turn, allows for a chain of discretionary decisions during the policy implementation process.

As Germany is primarily seen as a final destination country, almost all new arrivals register formally in the system. With a rigid allocation for all those registered, homelessness among asylum seekers and refugees is not an issue. Rather the migrant group most affected by homelessness are economic migrants from Eastern European countries, who cannot officially enter the asylum system (GE6). Therefore, although centralized accommodation remains criticized, living conditions for asylum seekers and refugees can be overall evaluated as higher than in other European countries since homelessness barely exists.

2.2 Policy Changes during COVID-19

Despite the implementation of lockdown measures, major policy changes in the area of housing for asylum seekers and refugees were not introduced. This may be a result of the fact that not many policies existed in the first place. This is an interesting observation, as almost all other policy areas experienced policy changes, while several measures were taken to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the people and economy. For instance, large recovery plans were launched to support livelihoods, from small- and medium businesses to large enterprises (Bundesministerium der Finanzen 2020).

The only national policy change that slightly affected housing concerned the movement of asylum seekers and refugees across Germany. Although the nationwide allocation key was still in place, they were not moved. However, this did not create overpopulated accommodation halls and so it did not impact living conditions.

The absence of clear policy guidelines on how to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown measures on centralized accommodation led to a patchwork of different policy responses across Germany. The services and rights of an asylum

seeker was dependent on the rules and concepts that were implemented by those actors to mitigate the crisis: “It depended on the local authority... How they handled work-from-home policies for social workers” (GE8). As a result, some accommodation halls provided areas to quarantine for people who were tested positive for COVID-19 whilst other centralized housing blocks were in full confinement for months.

Differences between a state accommodation hall in Ellwangen, Baden-Württemberg and a state accommodation in Neumünster, Schleswig Holstein exemplifies this trend. In Neumünster, an employee developed quarantine and hygiene procedures at an early stage, before the first COVID-19 cases had appeared in Germany. Thus, cases were identified in time, those affected were quarantined separately, therefore the remaining inhabitants could leave the property as national COVID-19 restrictions allowed. Moreover, extensive health care, including examinations from doctors, was provided.

In Ellwangen, by contrast, many cases remained unnoticed, which led to new cases being registered on a daily basis (Henzler, 2020). As asylum applicants were not separated, in time, obligations to quarantine for all inhabitants kept being prolonged over several months, even when they were not in contact with anyone infected. In the end, some of the asylum seekers in Ellwangen were removed to another accommodation hall to provide more space for social distancing. Overall, these two cases exemplify the distinct experiences asylum seekers and refugees have had with regards to housing.

2.3. Impact on access to and conditions of housing

In the case of Germany, access to housing and living conditions inside accommodation halls for asylum seekers and refugees were impacted to different

extents. Whilst the former was barely affected, the latter aggravated gravely during the first wave of the COVID-19 lockdown.

To be precise, asylum seekers and refugees’ access to housing was not interrupted. Newcomers who arrived in the country and entered the German asylum system were distributed across centralized reception facilities across the different Länder. Nonetheless, nation-wide as well as international allocation schemes, including the Dublin procedure and the Länder allocation key, were temporarily halted to reduce the movement of people (Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bau und Heimat 2020). In addition, asylum procedures were put on hold.

These policy changes had mixed outcomes for asylum seekers and refugees. First, and on a positive note, their access to accommodation in general was not impacted. Thus, COVID-19 did not fuel high levels of homelessness across newcomers that were still registered and processed in the asylum system. Second, during the lockdown, the suspension of Dublin caused higher levels of insecurity and anxiety among asylum seekers and refugees, while also preventing them from integrating and moving to decentralized accommodation provision, whether in Germany or elsewhere² (GE7). Third, because asylum procedures were prolonged, asylum seekers and refugees stayed potentially longer in centralized accommodation halls and reception facilities instead of moving to decentralized and/or smaller accommodation arrangements on the local level. Again, the prolonged stay in centralized accommodation did not have an impact on access to

² However, a final decision by the EJC on the transfer of asylum seekers who were not moved during the 6-months period due to COVID-19 is awaited and may be fortunate as asylum seekers may be granted the right to stay in Germany (MacGregor 2020).

housing though it gravely affected living conditions of asylum seekers.

In terms of COVID-19's impact on living and housing conditions, a major difference between asylum seekers and refugees in centralized and decentralized accommodation arrangements was identified. "Newcomers in decentralized accommodation had the same lockdown experience to Germans of similar socioeconomic background", a participant noted (GE1). Although the suspension of relocation mechanisms did not cause an increased overpopulation in reception facilities, COVID-19 again exemplified that large accommodation centres are unsuitable for housing asylum seekers and refugees as living conditions aggravated drastically in comparison to all other living arrangements in Germany (GE2, GE3, GE4, GE5, GE6, GE7, GE8, GE9). Centralized accommodation halls did not provide room for social distancing, hygiene standards were often not respected, and newcomers and their families were locked up in four-bed dorm rooms, which they were not allowed to leave all day. In some accommodation halls, hoardings were used so inhabitants could not leave the property.

Although living conditions aggravated for inhabitants of accommodation halls across Germany, the modalities to which they worsened was dependent on the individual that managed the accommodation (Geschäftsführer). Since regional and national authorities did not provide any guidelines on policies on how to handle the crisis, responsibilities and discretion on how to implement distancing and hygiene rules, and how to deal with COVID-19 cases was left to managers of each facility. However, due to structural realities of centralized accommodation halls, asylum seekers and refugees as well as their rights and living conditions were violated and aggravated more in comparison to other groups in Germany (GE6, GE7, GE8).

The different treatment of newcomers in

comparison to the rest of the population becomes apparent by the different treatment of newcomers in accommodation halls with regards to quarantine obligations. In many housing facilities across Germany. As mentioned above, an accommodation hall was entirely "locked up" in Ellwangen, meaning that inhabitants could leave neither their rooms nor the property, as soon as a single case of COVID-19 was registered within a building complex. Hoardings were used to force asylum seekers and refugees to stay inside. Such a policy constitutes a severe restriction of movement and has not been implemented for any other group in Germany. "Restrictions to the freedom of movement as such usually need to be comprehensively justified" an interviewee observed (GE7).

Moreover, adequate COVID-19 hygiene standards and social distancing could also not be guaranteed when accommodation halls were under quarantine, as they were structurally overcrowded, which increased the residents' likelihood of catching the virus by 17% (RKI 2020). Whereas some Länder rented hotels for homeless people, similar approaches that would aim to distribute asylum seekers in accommodation halls and increase hygiene and social distancing opportunities were not used more widely. Therefore, different treatment between asylum seekers and the local population were visible with regards to violations of personal freedom and health security.

Due to the absence of adequate protection policies, limitations of movement and limited access of social workers to accommodation halls, some subgroups were especially vulnerable. An increase of domestic violence was registered across accommodation halls which victimized women and children in particular. Besides direct violence, children were also vulnerable because their right to education was violated to a larger extent than other children. If an entire accommodation hall was shut down, the children were not allowed to go to school when the

latter reopened. As the quarantine of some accommodation halls continued and was prolonged for multiple times (every time a new case appeared), some children ended up out of school for several months. Finally, people whose right to stay in Germany depended on employment (Duldung) found themselves in a similar situation, as they not leave the accommodation facilities to go to their job, which meant they were potentially laid off.

2.4 Policy implementation and the role of discretion

The mitigation of the impact of COVID-19 on newcomers' housing situation was characterized by informality and discretion. Actors who exercised discretion included: local and regional governments that decided on (de)centralizing accommodation and on whether their employees worked from home, volunteers who decided whether they access the accommodation halls (at times despite COVID-19 restrictions) and managers as well as contractors of accommodation halls who dealt with the crisis in each accommodation. Therefore, "discretion existed for sure" (GE8) as many felt "there were no guidelines" (GE10).

Because the government, whether on national, regional or local level, did not provide any specific guidance or policies on how to accommodate inhabitants in centralized accommodation centres, this decision was left to contractors and hall managers. This, in turn, triggered ad-hoc decisions and made an asylum seeker's experience highly dependent on which accommodation hall they were placed in and who was responsible for addressing the health crisis. In a case where major outbreaks and quarantines could be prevented, the responsible staff stressed, "If someone else would have sat in this place, things would have been worse/not as smooth" (GE2). In this particular case, discretion was even used in a positive way, as responsible staff

organized regular doctor visits and extensive testing. "Health care for inhabitants was better than for the rest of the population" an employee noted (GE2).

Yet, as mentioned above, there were also cases in which accommodation complexes were hoarded for long-term periods sometimes with the support of the local police. In such cases, people were not allowed to leave their four-bedroom dorms for weeks at a time, something that the street level actors attribute to the absence of protection policies and public neglect (GE6).

Although national policies recommend accommodating asylum seekers and refugees in centralized facilities, the decision on whether to provide centralized or decentralized accommodation remains in the discretion of local authorities. Therefore, it depended on them to provide more living space for refugees during the lockdown, and enable social distancing, as "there are opportunities to create more space" (GE9). A main criterion for the decision to prioritize centralized accommodation related to costs. As it is financially less costly to provide mass accommodations, centralized accommodation was preferred. Moreover, in terms of political costs, a local government's decision to run against the recommendation to provide centralized accommodation on national level could risk running against party politics on national level as well as a backlash of right-wing populists (GE8).

Another area with significant use of discretion concerned the social services that were provided in accommodation halls. Interviews with members of the Regional Refugee Councils illustrated how the mitigation of the COVID-19 crisis, and consequently the impact on newcomers' housing situation, differed across accommodation halls:

"It was arbitrary. Partly dependent on the contractor/agency, partly dependent on the commune if social workers were available in

person or not.” (GE7)

“It differed by region how social workers continued working. In some places, social workers just continued working. In other places, they were not present at all and only reachable via phones.” (GE8)

“There are accommodation halls with 40 people in the middle of nowhere where maybe a maintenance man shows up once a day. Then you have accommodation halls with a lot of social workers.” (GE8)

Besides social workers that usually are employed by the state, volunteers also tend to provide care and support in accommodation halls. Under these circumstances, however, there were cases where volunteers used their personal discretion to reach refugees and asylum seekers in accommodation halls:

“I know from many places that volunteers said that information on COVID-19 only reached accommodation halls through them. They still went to the accommodation halls, although it was illegal.” (GE8)

These examples show both the positive and negative nature of discretionary behaviour in practice. In the case of volunteers, discretion was used to not comply with COVID-19 measures and to continue supporting asylum seekers and refugees. In other cases, social workers were barely available. While the residents' access to services was effectively dependent on street-level actors' individual discretion, the availability of social workers in accommodation halls had a critical impact on the living conditions of residents, especially on the most vulnerable of them. The absence of support systems is indeed detrimental in places where domestic violence increases and help cannot be provided, as well as in cases where children who

are already disadvantaged in school do not receive the regular extra tutoring from volunteers possible pre-COVID-19.

3. GREECE

3.1 Pre-pandemic policy framework on newcomers and housing

Until 2015, Greece's migration policies reflected those of a transit country. Any form of housing offered to newcomers was only for asylum seekers and only for a short period of time, until they continued their journey to their destination countries (Spyropoulou and Christopoulos, 2016). As a result of the increase in flows in 2015 and the closure of the Balkan Route in 2016, thousands of people have been stranded in Greek territory (ibid). Under these extraordinary circumstances, Greece was 'forced' to develop housing policies for asylum seekers for the first time. To date, this has been accomplished in two ways: firstly, by providing hospitality in state accommodation centers, known as camps, and, secondly, by providing hospitality in social apartments.

In line with these developments, in 2017, the Ministry of Migration Policy announced that they were committed to shifting the focus of housing support from camps to social housing (Kourachanis, 2019). The most basic initiative for hosting social apartments came from the UNHCR's Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation (ESTIA) Programme. The objective of ESTIA I and, now, ESTIA II has been to ensure adequate living conditions for the beneficiaries by moving them from camps to social apartments. This social housing programme, however, remains a minor social intervention in terms of numbers actually moved into social housing (Kyvernitis, 2017).

Moreover, during the previous years and in 2019, a number of efforts have been made to provide a transitional period to recognised refugees who have already been accommodated under an accommodation scheme, such as ESTIA II. Following the July 2019 elections, the new Greek government amended the national legislation in early March 2020, ordering beneficiaries of international

protection who resided in accommodation facilities to leave these facilities within 30 days of receiving international protection. This affected residents of the ESTIA II apartments, open reception facilities, etc. (Amnesty, 2020). Within the 30 days of receiving notification of the decision granting the status, all cash and in-kind benefits were now to be suspended (ibid). At the end of 2019, the UNHCR scheme provided accommodation in apartments to 6,822 international protection beneficiaries (UNHCR, 2019), while 15,500 persons received cash assistance (UNHCR, 2019b). The March 2020 amendment had a direct impact on these individuals.

Currently, those in need of shelter in Greece who do not have the financial means to rent a home either remain homeless or find refuge in abandoned houses or overcrowded apartments (GR2, GR4, GR6). Furthermore, the number of places to stay for homeless people is limited in general, and there are no shelters dedicated to international protection beneficiaries, nor is financial assistance providing for living expenses (Greek Council for Refugees, 2019). Despite efforts to increase Greece's reception capacity, poverty and homelessness continue to be a source of concern (ibid).

In addition to the above, as has been widely documented, reception facilities on the mainland and islands have still remained below standard (R.S.A., 2020; AIDA, 2020; GR7, GR11). Street-level actors with direct experience at such camps describe conditions of chaos (GR6). Overcrowding and a lack of basic services such as medical care and sanitary facilities, as well as violence and a lack of security pose serious security risks (GR6). On the mainland, even though site capacity has increased, a nationwide shortage of hosting is increasingly causing overcrowding in many mainland camps, causing tension, and increasing protection risks for residents (AIDA, 2020).

3.2 Policy change during the pandemic

Since 2019, newly arrived persons, including vulnerable groups have continued to rely on temporary housing or have remained homeless in urban areas, primarily in Athens and Thessaloniki, due to a continuing lack of adequate accommodation capacity on the mainland (R.S.A., 2019). This was exacerbated by a Ministerial Decision issued on 7 April 2020, which gave recognized refugees until 31 May 2020 to leave the accommodation facilities due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Amnesty, 2020).

Beginning of the pandemic outbreak, civil society organisations began urging the Greek Authorities to evacuate the Greek camps on the islands urgently. As they noted, “camps, especially on the Aegean islands, suffer from severe overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitary facilities, making it impossible to ensure social distancing and hygiene conditions for both residents and employees. This poses a major threat to public health for both asylum seekers and for society at large” (Greek Council for Refugees, 2020).

While the Greek government was quick to impose early nationwide public health restrictions, newcomers in Reception Identification Centres (RICs) and Reception Sites (RS) were subjected to especially stringent lockdown measures and mass quarantining for longer periods of time (GR8). According to recent reports:

Management of COVID-19 outbreaks in camps and facilities by the Greek authorities follows a different protocol compared to the one used in cases of outbreaks in other enclosed population groups. The Greek government protocol for managing an outbreak in a refugee camp, known as the ‘Agnodiki Plan’, details that the facility should be quarantined and all cases are isolated and treated in situ. (Carruthers, Veizis, Kondilis

and Orcutt, 2020).

Despite no positive COVID-19 cases in the RICs, the government declared these targeted measures to be in the public interest, with the aim to “limit the spread of COVID-19 in areas of overcrowding” (Cossé, 2020). As one of the participants explained:

On the mainland, some of the camps were in lockdown, like Malakasa [Attica region] and in that case people were not allowed to go out and this also had an impact because the camps were put under mass quarantine which was against ECDPC. This [mass quarantine] can’t stop further transmissions... this reinforced discrimination using the excuse of COVID-19. (GR4)

Accommodation facilities on the mainland where COVID-19 cases were found were placed in quarantine for 14 days, with all residents, including COVID-19 cases and those who had not been identified as such. Following the 14-day quarantine in Malakasa (Attica region), Ritsona (Evoia region) and Kranidi (Peoponeese) beginning in April 2020, the lockdown was successively extended until 7 June 2020. This was contrary to the lockdown on the general population which had ended on 4 May 2020 (Joint Ministerial Decision).

These extreme lockdown extensions were also in violation of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDPC, 2020) guidelines restricting people’s movement in such conditions where basic COVID-19 preventative measures were unlikely to be followed. An interviewee (GR3) described the government’s decision to extend the lockdown as “degrading for human beings” because of the conditions they were forced to stay in. “They legalised living in inhumane conditions [for those who are in the process] to get a refugee status” another participant said (GR4).

3.3 Impact on the ground

In practice, containment measures for COVID-19 disrupted social support systems for newcomers, slowed down the operation of asylum services, ruined income and livelihood opportunities and increased newcomers' fears of becoming ill. The following participants' accounts illustrate these observations.

The asylum centre was closed for 2 months. Nobody could book an appointment to apply. It was extremely difficult, extremely difficult. The procedure in Greece is always difficult but because of COVID-19 it became really really difficult. (GR2)

It's been difficult for them in the lockdown because they've been isolated. This is the season [summer season] when they could potentially have work, but they are not able to do that. This has been tough for them and there was way more tension inside the camps because of the lockdown. Some of the camps are terrible. They can go without electricity, sometimes for days, some days they can go without [running] water for 6-7 days. (GR7)

Although physical distancing has been a critical containment measure against the outbreak, an asylum seeker's ability to adhere to this practice is closely linked to the density of their living conditions, whether in camps, makeshift settlements, or hotel accommodations. Approximately 60,000 people are currently housed in nearly 40 refugee camps across Greece. As of March 2020, the majority of these 42,000 people lived on the Aegean islands, with approximately 35,000 of them living in camps with a capacity of only 6,095 people (General Secretariat for Information and Communication, 2020). These are often cramped and offer poor living conditions, as the following quotes indicate.

When you go to the refugee camp, you can see that those are not containers, we call them 'rat holes'. Those are massive [...] tents that are hosting more than 150-180 people. This is not housing; this is just a tent. It's not a container, it's not something that can host a family for two years... This cannot be considered as decent housing. This is not enough... It is not appropriate. (GR3)

Forced migrants living in shelters, shared housing and overcrowded housing with shared kitchens and toilets are unable to self-isolate, putting their health at risk and increasing their fear of getting the virus. (GR4)

In addition, the government's decision to begin closing hotel accommodation in August 2020 and to discontinue all basic support and cash assistance through ESTIA has left displaced newcomers facing poverty, hunger, and homelessness. The government's decision in March 2020 to reduce the grace period after a positive decision from 6 months to 30 days became an additional burden. While this policy change is not directly linked to the pandemic, its introduction does coincide with the grim economic and social conditions the pandemic has caused, making the newcomers' transition to private housing accommodations nearly impossible in practice.

It's not clear how in 30 days, living in a tent [at a camp], you're supposed to get a bank account, AFM [tax registration number], AMKA [social insurance number] and all the necessary documents that you need to benefit from the Greek social welfare state. Even if you speak Greek you cannot do it in 30 days, so most people ended up homeless... This means that people are forced to leave Greece, to find their own irregular way to go out of the country. This is favouring exploitation, putting people at risk for their life, their health, and their well-being in

general. And today we have thousands of people in this condition. (GR4)

Indeed, thirty days is simply not enough time for newly recognised refugees to establish themselves, let alone during a pandemic, when services are severely limited, if not completely unavailable. To better contextualise these observations, one should also keep in mind that Greece, as a 'new' host country, has already had a shortage of necessary social services and programmes for newcomers.

In Athens, it's important to highlight the current evictions; the so-called 'exit' from their current accommodations. In May, the Ministry of Migration said, more than 11,000 people will be 'exiting', [meaning] evicted from their accommodation. The problem, for many years, is that there is no real integration. They have never really addressed: 'what will happen when the person receives their refugee status?' How is this person going to enter the job market in Greece? How would they enter the social welfare system? Get the subsidies in Greece? ... Now we have [effectively] forced them to be homeless. (GR4)

As it appears from these interview extracts, COVID-19 has not radically changed newcomers' access to housing in Greece, but it has added to the existing bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers and other difficulties newcomers have already been facing.

3.4 A matter of discretion?

While, in principle, there should not be differential treatment of newcomers depending on their individual demographic characteristics, when it comes to access to housing, the gap between demand and supply for services leads street-level actors to prioritise some candidates over others. The

criteria according to which this prioritisation process takes place are based on newcomers' vulnerability, as defined by Laws 4375/2016 and 4540/2018. In practice, and as also noted elsewhere (Glyniadaki, 2021), this often leads to the de facto exclusion of young healthy men:

The worst thing that can happen to you is to be a healthy man from 18 to 55 years old, single, with no health issues. (GR3)

I've seen so many cases of young healthy men totally destroyed by homelessness. People who are healthy when they arrive and then you see them 6 months later and they are destroyed by homelessness and yet they don't get [access to] housing. They have psychological problems, they have depression, they have suicidal thoughts, they are not healthy, they don't sleep. The list is very long. And though they have medical certificates from IOM, they still don't get [access to] housing. Housing always goes to families, single women with children, elderly people. And I don't question that. This is a matter of priority... but then there is so much misery in the homeless community that at the end of the day it gets difficult to agree with the system of prioritizing vulnerable people. What criteria? At the end of the day everybody is vulnerable. (GR8).

In addition to the foregoing, and given the scarcity of available housing structures, respondents to this research stated that the UNHCR's ESTIA II programme has become increasingly concerned with targeting vulnerable asylum seekers who have no choice but to remain and settle in Greece, as well as asylum seekers awaiting reunification with family in other countries (GR3, GR4, GR8).

In this context, the role of street-level actors who implement housing policy and exercise discretionary power while carrying out their work tasks is of critical importance. Not only do their discretionary

decisions shape policy outcomes, but they also shape the beneficiaries' lives in significant ways. Faced with the moral dilemma of who is considered 'deserving' enough to receive access to housing and who is not, street-level actors have to develop their own individual patterns and response strategies to address the needs of the situation, meaning the gap between the demand and supply of housing for newcomers (see also Glyniadaki, 2021).

Indeed, although referrals are made from institutions, in the case of ESTIA II, for example, it is up to the social workers' discretion to choose who will be the accommodation beneficiaries from the waiting list. This decision became more difficult during the pandemic. Even more than before, "priority [was] given to vulnerable applicants, single women with children, people with disabilities, people with health issues, elder asylum seekers, in general everyone who [was] more fragile" (GR3). During the pandemic, asylum seekers were essentially divided into two distinct sub-categories, vulnerable and non-vulnerable, based on their social needs, as these were judged by street-level actors. While this practice indirectly legitimises asylum seekers' residence status in camps or on the streets as a tolerable situation, it also highlights Greece's severe housing shortage.

With regard to the COVID-19 context more specifically, one of the grassroots organisation responders conveyed that many people living in urban and camp settings felt there was not enough accessible and consistent information on the virus. The limited information concerned not only the most recent COVID-19-related regulations, but also people's rights regarding asylum claims, adding to the confusion of their experience.

Nonetheless, while the state's offices remained closed, some grassroots organisations navigated the space and took risks. Even in difficult conditions of restricted space and movement, various NGOs

provided assistance in novel ways, such as by leaving food outside of camps and accommodation doors, offering online lessons, or translating state policies, legal, and asylum questions, so as to meet some of the basic needs of newcomers.

We tried to stay connected with people by doing Zoom calls, but not everyone has good internet connection. In some camps it's better than others. (GR7)

We created English written leaflets of the government's new policies regarding COVID-19 and distributed them, otherwise people would get fined if they violated the policies. (GR1)

As these quotes indicate, the discretionary behaviour of front-line actors came to complement – if not cover for the lack of— policy responses at the state level. This comes to show that discretionary power may also have positive effects for beneficiaries.

Overall, the discussion here shows that the policy changes that took place during the pandemic did not cause a major shift in the implementation of existing housing policies for newcomers in Greece, but they did exacerbate further the access to and conditions of housing that newcomers already faced. In this COVID-19 conundrum, street-level actors played an important role in carrying out policy tasks, at times materialising policies that lead to the exclusion of certain migrant categories (e.g. young healthy men) and other times taking action to mitigate the individual isolation and exclusion of the anti-COVID-19 state policies.

4. ITALY

4.1 COVID-19 Housing Policy and Conditions

Defined as the availability of a suitable space to guarantee the harmonious psycho-physical development of individuals, the Italian Constitution refers to the right of housing in article 47 which provides for the recognition of the right to an adequate standard of living sufficient to guarantee a home (Senato della Repubblica, 2009; Fra noi, 2018). While this reference should contribute to a better implementation of such rights, it does not include any minimum definition of the content of the right to housing. Consequently, the provision of article 47 is to be understood as a programmatic norm, which only outlines a programme for the legislator, from which the specific and directly binding norms will then be issued (Sapere.it., 2021). In order for it to be implemented, a subsequent legislative and administrative intervention is necessary, subject to the actual availability of public resources allocated (Fra noi, 2018).

This first section focuses on the framework in place before the outbreak of COVID-19, to better understand the policy change that took place with the spread of the virus. Here, newcomers' legal immigration status plays a crucial role (Citti and Bonetti, 2009). In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, EU and national legislation consider these individuals to be in a vulnerable situation that deserves special protection. Therefore, the legal framework stipulates that public authorities should supply family accommodation within the framework of overall reception measures (Citti and Bonetti, 2009).

As explained by the Italian Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI, 2011), the relevant legislation differentiates between two different phases concerning access to housing for third-country nationals: first and second reception on the one hand, and social integration on the other. In the case of first and second reception, the objective is to

provide for the immediate and temporary housing and subsistence needs of non-EU foreigners, either legally residing - for reasons other than tourism - or, in some cases, without a regular stay permit (ASGI, 2012). Social integration refers to the case where regularly staying, non-EU born individuals can have access to all forms of support from access to public housing, to the private rental market or to the purchase of the first house, under the same conditions provided for Italian citizens (Citti and Bonetti, 2009).

However, provisions on paper are not always reflected in practice and there remains significant implementation gaps in the Italian system. The involvement of the local and regional level in housing policies results in disparities across the national territory, depending on availability of resources, administrative competencies and the housing market itself. Some interviewees (IT6, IT8, IT9) have identified a scarce availability of suitable housing units, the existence of marginalised districts and several administrative aspects in the housing system as weaknesses affecting especially marginalised people. Interviewees have also identified the specific situation of the housing system in the capital, highlighting problems such as existing scarcity in public housing and a long standing chronic housing shortage (IT6, IT7, IT9).

The housing emergency of the capital was defined as “a dilemma”, a “huge problem” with “an historical housing emergency” where “the COVID-19 was the straw that broke the camel's back” (IT7) and a “suffering denounced for years” (IT6). Indicatively, interviewee IT7 – representing an organisation working in the capital - explained how the situation evolved over time. The interviewee referred to the agreement between the organisation and the municipality, according to which newcomers could use the organisation's headquarter as a “fictitious residence”, which was vital in enabling homeless newcomers to access administrative processes

important to their social wellbeing. However, with the Decreto Sicurezza (Gazzetta ufficiale, 2018) this was no longer possible, with one of the consequences being the increase in newcomers being forced to access housing through the more precarious and unregulated black market.

Homelessness was also an acute issue for foreign nationals, including prior to COVID-19. According to Fra noi (2018), 58.2% of homeless people in Italy are foreign nationals, 8.9% of foreigners live at their place of work and 7.3% stay with relatives or other compatriots. Only 19% live in their own home. On top of this, the Cittalia Fondazione ANCI (2013), a foundation working on social policies for reception, integration and citizenship, estimated that one out of two foreign-born in Italy lives in a situation of housing deprivation, including overcrowding and difficulties covering housing costs (De Maria and Lagravinese, 2013).

A further weakness is identified in the transition out of emergency housing assistance into the regular housing market. Some interviewees (IT6, IT9, IT10) have pointed out that the foreign-born struggle more often to get out of precarious situations. This is exacerbated by discrimination in the private housing market and absence of a strong public housing policy. Public housing lacks resources and is not expanding to meet demand in addition to strict eligibility criteria which can include requiring proof of a number of years residence in Italy. As such:

When the reception process ends there is a big problem, because some [newcomers] manage to find a job and a room to rent, but even this is not certain. Because some are expensive and because in some cases there is mistrust on the part of the landlords in renting to foreigners, even with permanent contracts. (IT10)

In many cases, the personal network of compatriots is the only way out from a precarious

housing situation:

The most popular and accessible solution is to resort to compatriots who offer opportunities that are not available elsewhere. The families have many problems, remain in reception projects for long periods, and often leave with the support of the municipalities, because they cannot manage on their own. (IT10)

To conclude, while the right to housing is enshrined in the Italian Constitution, operationalisation is rather weak as it this remains, in some cases, only a programmatic norm, which outlines a programme for the legislator (de Agostini, 2021), but for which there are often not enough resources to put policy fully in practice. Several factors emerged as relevant, from the issue of discrimination in the housing market to the resources' availability of the municipality, while the network of compatriots appeared to remain everywhere an important resort for newcomers.

4.2 Policy change during COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, Fra noi (2018) explained that the housing policy in Italy had a strong legal framework but lacked operationalisation and implementation. COVID-19 exacerbated existing problems (IT7, IT9, IT11), while it also created new ones, such as large numbers of carers of elderly COVID patients suddenly being left without housing (IT11). In this context, swift action was needed to limit the disruptive consequences of COVID-19, especially for the more vulnerable. In a situation where stay-at-home orders were used by governments to limit the spread of the virus, authorities had to provide more flexibility in the accommodation arena. Several measures were undertaken – out of which interviewees referred to three main ones relevant for the issue of housing: a) support for the most vulnerable, including the

homeless, b) flexibility for the newcomers in the accommodation system and c) the regularisation of irregular workers in agriculture and domestic sectors (EWSI, 2020).

In tackling homelessness two initiatives emerged. Firstly, the “Cura Italia” (Heal Italy) (Gazzetta Ufficiale, Cura Italia, 2021) decree foresaw that prefectures could requisite hotels in order to accommodate persons under medical supervision and fiduciary isolation or in subject to stay at home orders. There have been cases of empty hotels or bed & breakfast used (Cavestri, 2020) to accommodate also marginalised and homeless people (RomaToday, 2021). Second, shelters for homeless people extended their opening time from being operative twelve hours per day to working full time (Fassia, 2021; IT11). For example, interviewee IT5 explained that in the region of Trieste they “decided not to have a winter emergency plan, but to expand ordinary reception places, on a 24-hour basis”. He also observed that those accessing this service “have often a migrant background.” In a similar vein, interviewee IT7 referred to the situation in Rome in particular, explicitly talking about the difficulty of staying at home for those without a stable home.

Concerning newcomers in the accommodation system, foreigners were allowed to stay in facilities until the end of the state of emergency, although the conditions for their stay established in the relevant legislation were no longer met (Camera dei Deputati, 2020). In addition, applicants for international protection and holders of humanitarian protection undergoing a period of active quarantine could be hosted in those facilities ordinarily intended for refugees and unaccompanied minors only. In terms of second reception, the projects for the reception of newcomers due to expire on 30 June were prolonged until 31 December 2020 (Camera dei Deputati, 2020). These measures helped newcomers in the reception system, but did not serve those already out of it.

Following on from this, discrimination in the private housing sector hamper the ability of foreign nationals to find housing, made worse by COVID-19. As one participant put it, “now this situation and its economic impact on areas where many newcomers ended up is creating many problems” (IT10). Several interviewees also explained that COVID-19 arrived in a particular legislative and policy context (IT7, IT9, IT11). Interviewee IT9 explained that:

COVID-19 came at a particular time in terms of immigration and asylum legislation, as we were in the midst of the effects of the security and immigration decree. We had already seen this in 2019, a spike in expired, non-renewable and hardly-convertible residence permits. The consequences of the COVID-19 were aggravated by this impending condition of irregularity, which afflicted people both psychologically and in practice in the impossibility of maintaining regularity. (IT9)

In a similar manner, interviewee IT7 referred to the effects of the security and immigration decree, explaining that many newcomers found themselves in a vicious administrative cycle, where work permits, the need to have a residence to work, and having a residence permit are all interrelated and thus an expired residency permit becomes an especially important problem.

Finally, the “Relaunch Decree” (Decreto Rilancio) (Gazzettaufficiale, Decreto Rilancio. 2021) launched a targeted regularisation process of newcomers who had previously worked in the agriculture, fishing, care and domestic work sectors. This measure had different purposes - from tackling the labour shortage to ensure the safety of migrant workers employed in informal settlements (EWSI, 2020), and was differently welcomed by the organisations (IT4, IT9). For example, both interviewee IT9 and interviewee IT11 recognised the potential of such measures but also referred to their limits as they did

not address the target groups they aimed to benefit.

4.3 The impact of policy on newcomers

For many people, newcomers or not, COVID-19 has caused major socio-economic consequences and has shed light on their precarious situation:

The panorama of the city is changing. The city centre is now something else, we realise that social discomfort is growing. (IT12)

However, the social discomfort particularly hit specific groups of people. Primarily, the pandemic increased the vulnerability of homeless people, out of which more than half are foreign citizens (Fra noi, 2018). Short-term emergency measures, such as the extension of working hours for shelters, shed light on the shortcomings of certain services, specifically dormitory conditions where social distancing is impossible (IT3). The emergency provision of hotel accommodation during this time was not adequately operationalised in hard hit urban areas like Rome, where hotels had given their availability to the prefecture yet no bookings were made nor reasons for the lack of bookings given (IT9).

In addition, this research found that families (IT6, IT7, IT8, IT10), minors (IT6, IT7, IT8), women (IT1, IT7, IT9, IT12), and people who have recently left (IT6, IT8) or generally outside (IT11) the reception facilities as the most affected groups. Concerning the last group, authorities have shown the necessary flexibility in extending the right to stay for foreign citizens residing in the accommodation centres during the state of emergency. However, less attention seemed to be paid to migrants already living independently, outside the accommodation systems provided either by the State or NGOs. In other words, those who were not in the reception centres were more exposed to difficulties coming from the lockdown. In addition, many more newcomers who had

previously succeeded in becoming 'established' in society were pushed by COVID-19 to seek assistance once again (IT7, IT8, IT11, IT12):

Those who were in the structures found themselves in a favourable situation and the facilities for night-time reception were also transformed into operating 24 hours a day. An attempt was made to make precariousness less precarious. Those who already had a house, because they had left the reception process, had difficulties due to the lockdown that led to their exit from the labour market - because they were irregular or in a precarious employment. This resulted in problems to pay rent. [...] For those in situations of housing irregularity (without contract), this went out of any control. They could not assert their rights; otherwise they would lose their housing. (IT8)

Another observation on the impact of policy changes concerned the awareness - or lack thereof - of public authorities of the reality on the ground, especially on homeless and the housing state newcomers. While interviewees generally acknowledged that the authorities launched initiatives to support the vulnerable, participants IT2, IT7 and IT9 considered that the specificities of the target group were not fully taken into account, for example in terms of providing information to third country nationals in a language that they could understand (IT2).

In particular, some of them referred to the lack of information and the type of procedures to access support measures (such as payments for groceries or financial support for the monthly rent). They considered that such measures did not fully meet the goal of reaching out the most in need. Authorities did not consider the precarious situations of people living without regular housing or employment contracts. Additionally, with the move to online service provision, newcomers who lacked digital competencies or information

technology resources found themselves excluded from the system. Here, these social issues remained overlooked (IT12).

Finally, it seems that the pandemic has reinforced the cycle of marginality and exclusion that takes place once out of the system (Fra noi, 2018), but also hit those newcomers that had established their place in the society for some years already (IT11). A mix of circumstances increased the uncertainty for people: the uneven implementation of initiatives, the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, the targeted regularisation – which left out a wide range of people – and the effects of the security and immigration decree.

4.4 Heterogeneity and discretion

Italy is an economically heterogeneous country (Istat, 2015). This resulted in different levels of responsiveness and service provisions for the vulnerable before and during COVID-19, especially in terms of housing (IT3, IT4, IT6, IT7, IT10, IT12). For example, interviewee IT3 acknowledged that “there was a heterogeneity of problems and solutions” and interviewee IT10 recognised that the resources at disposal of each municipality could make the difference in positively or negatively responding to COVID-19.

In light of this diversity, participants IT1, IT2, IT9 and IT11 have highlighted the importance of the work of organisations on the ground who acted in three main ways. Firstly, civil society supports and complements the action of the state on the immediate needs of beneficiaries, from collecting food (IT1) to funding accommodation in the hotels (IT2). Second, as part of an extended network of public and private entities, organisations fill in the gap in terms of accommodation for vulnerable people.

As explained by several interviewees (IT5, IT11, IT12) operating staff from different organisations know each other and, through informal channels of communication, are often able to find spots in accommodation centres and shelters for those in need, thus highlighting the importance of a well-functioning network of contacts across organisations. For example, when asked about the procedures, IT11 explained: “It is a network on the ground where we all know each other”. Also participant IT7 explained that different organisations communicate on an ongoing basis, saying that “every project tends to have a person in charge and a coordinator, and it is the coordinator who takes care of establishing the necessary links with other services in the area. Sometimes we call Caritas, Sant'Egidio, etc. and say look, we have this situation but we don't have anything [to offer at the moment], do you have anything to help?”

Finally, organisations participate in funded projects that benefit beneficiaries in the long term, which offer a type of support that goes beyond the immediate need of a place to stay or a warm meal. Also in such projects, there is a degree of discretion in the choice of participating newcomers. Interviewees explained that projects have a clear target already identified in terms of personal characteristics (type of status -refugee, holder of international protection, etc. - gender, and age) (IT5, IT7, IT12)

Generally, interviewees explained that the call for proposal already identifies the potential beneficiaries of a project; in other cases, it is also the ‘nature’ of the organisation itself that limits the type of participants to projects (for example, an organisation focussing on refugees). Overall, these delimitations could already restrain the type and number of beneficiaries. However, it does not prevent street-level actors from showing flexibility where needed. In the words of a participant:

We don't exclude based on a residence permit that may not exactly correspond to the characteristics of our target group. I listen to everyone, and I have also helped people who had Italian citizenship but were former refugees. (IT12)

In addition, it was explained that it is not organisations that seek for beneficiaries, but newcomers reaching out to the organisations. In this way, organisations become aware of certain situations and, if appropriate, allocate newcomers to specific projects. What seems an a priori delimitation of the target group, does not exclude some flexibility. While trying to help everyone, organisations have highlighted the limits in their resources: "The difficulties we have are linked to the capacities of the institutions, so many people on the street and so few places for reception" (IT12).

If put in front of a choice, street-level actors would often base the selection of the target group on their health conditions (IT11) and vulnerability (IT12), which for example characterises women with children. However, the empathy, experience and discernment of the operating staff remains central to service provision. This clearly transpires in the words of interviewee IT7:

The personal situation [single mother with children, young guy with a job but no accommodation, etc.] is the determining factor. It [the impossibility to include everyone in need in the project] happens and unfortunately it happens a lot. (...) Operators [street-level actors] are forced to make a choice and understand which situation requires more attention. It's not always the most critical [the most vulnerable situation]. Having in mind the objective of fully integrating the person in the territory, very often we are torn between the critical situation (...), and the one who already has a job and lacks a small step to be fully integrated.

To conclude, the analysis of the interviews highlighted that two main factors can affect the support provided to third country nationals in a situation of economic and housing distress. First, a different amount of resources correspond to different regions and cities. In times of crisis, this might result in a more or less effective implementation of policy changes aimed at helping the most vulnerable. Secondly, the determinant work of the civil society is not exempt from heterogeneity and the capacity of discernment of street-level actors, who are often called to make a decision on the spot. Finally, while the willingness to help emerged both from the authorities as well as from the side of the civil society, the allocation of resources heavily determined the heterogeneous crisis responses and their outcomes for newcomers.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The unprecedented emergence of COVID-19 and its indiscriminate spread at a global scale has come to remind us of the truism that no one is invincible. More obvious than ever has become the idea that differentiating between “insiders” and “outsiders” is no longer serving society, not only because it is normatively problematic, but also because it is strategically impossible in the face of a fast-spreading, deadly virus. Furthermore, at a time when social distancing is the necessary evil and economic contraction the inevitable result, the housing conditions of one social group matter for society as a whole.

With these considerations in mind, this study has focused on the impact of COVID-19 on newcomers in Europe, specifically asylum seekers and refugees, who are more likely to suffer the negative effects of the pandemic, both healthwise and economically. The study concentrated on newcomers’ access to and housing conditions, across four European countries: France, Germany, Greece and Italy. It researched the following questions using a qualitative methodological approach and the theoretical lens of street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1980): 1) how the existing policy framework on housing for newcomers has changed in response to the pandemic, 2) how these policy changes have affected newcomers on the ground, 3) how individual actors implementing policy at the street-level have played a role in shaping policy outcomes.

In response to these questions, this report brought to light a number of corresponding findings. Prior to COVID-19, all four countries had a policy framework in place that supported – to varying degrees – newcomers’ right to housing. Not surprisingly, the arrival of the pandemic accentuated some of the gaps and weaknesses of the existing national and regional housing systems. Whether having to do with lack of available housing structures, poor housing conditions, or coordination challenges, these issues became more prevalent with the arrival of COVID-19.

For newcomers, this meant their existing problems exacerbated, including conditional housing access, compromised educational opportunities and complicated bureaucratic procedures.

The national, regional and local authorities had to adapt to the new circumstances. They did so by announcing a number of emergency and temporary measures to help those most in need, demonstrating a good level of flexibility where possible. France opted for emergency measures that prioritised the access to housing for vulnerable groups, regardless of administrative status. Similarly, in Greece, emergency housing prioritised vulnerable groups. In Italy, flexibility mainly concerned allowing newcomers to remain longer in temporary accommodation facilities, expanding the shelter operating times and increasing the places available in new forms of accommodation, such as empty hotels. In contrast, nothing changed on the policy level in Germany, and the issue of social distancing and quarantining in centralized housing was left to the local level or with accommodation contractors to both decide and implement.

Overall, these measures have aided groups such as homeless people and newcomers in reception centres. At the same time, however, they have partially overlooked the challenging situations of various specific subgroups. One such group consisted of newcomers who were already living independently outside of the housing systems, particularly in the case of Italy. Another such group was that of young adult men and teenage boys, particularly in Greece and France. As demand grew and continued to outstrip supply in all cases, allocating scarce resources by vulnerability criteria meant that single men and boys often found themselves at the back of the line and were excluded from housing provision with significant detriment to their well-being.

This research has highlighted the critical role of

implementing actors, such as NGO employees who facilitate newcomers' access to housing services, in mitigating the negative effects of the crisis on newcomers. In the face of sudden and significant changes, they responded with faster reflexes and greater flexibility than a state mechanism possibly could. At times, this meant making discretionary decisions with negative effects for newcomers, such as stricter lockdown rules for newcomers compared to locals, as it was the case in Germany and Greece. Other times, in all four countries, it meant filling gaps of the state and compensating for public policy and administration shortcomings. This was accomplished, for instance, by tapping into individual street-level actors' informal networks to find additional accommodation spaces or by setting up on-line classes for children in quarantine.

Both in relation to housing access and conditions and more broadly, street-level actors acted simultaneously as extensions of the state and as representatives of newcomers. According to street-level theory, street-level actors indeed operate as intermediaries between state and beneficiaries, and their discretionary decisions have significant implications for both beneficiaries and policy outcomes (Brodkin, 2011; 2012; Lipsky, 1980). Lack of recourse availability or ambiguous policy prescriptions constitute known difficulties for those who deliver services at the street-level. However, operating under conditions of crisis meant that carrying out their work tasks became (even) more difficult than usual. Furthermore, discretionary decisions made during a crisis had a particularly significant impact on service recipients, whether positive or negative.

Overall, the study concludes that, while governments, national or regional, responded to COVID-19 with emergency policies, the implementation of these policies was neither without problems, nor did it always lead to expected policy outcomes. Various factors influenced this

process, such as pre-existing housing policies and conditions, availability of resources and centralised versus decentralised systems of governance. Against a background of ad hoc responses, constant changes and high uncertainty, the role of street-level actors who implemented housing policies on the ground became particularly important, as their discretionary decisions had more direct and pronounced effect on newcomers' access to and conditions of housing. This is something future studies could investigate further, both in relation to the global pandemic and beyond.

Table 2. Findings Summary Table

| HOUSING POLICY COMPARISON PRE AND DURING COVID-19 | | |
|--|---|--|
| FRANCE | | |
| | POLICY | PRACTICE |
| PRE-COVID-19 | A comprehensive policy framework provided various mechanisms through which migrants could access accommodation | A severe housing deficit renders decent housing alternatives inaccessible to migrants. |
| DURING COVID-19 | Emergency measures prioritise the protection of vulnerable groups in inadequate housing, regardless of administrative status. | The emergency accommodation network is overwhelmed, and migrants' access to services is considerably reduced. |
| GERMANY | | |
| | POLICY | PRACTICE |
| PRE-COVID-19 | Nation-wide allocation scheme to distribute asylum applicants across the Länder, that are mostly responsible for defining and implementing housing policies. They remain broad, and provision by the Länder range from non-existing to binding regulations. | The system was implemented, although due to broad/barely any policy guidelines, discretion often lied with the local level and contractors. |
| DURING COVID-19 | On policy level, nothing has changed. The competence to address the issue of social distancing and quarantining in centralized accommodation was left to the local level, or with accommodation contractors. | In times of crisis, when many decisions need to be made, a lot of discretionary power cedes to implementing bodies if no clear guidelines/ decisions are made on policy level. Thus, it was mostly up to contractors and local governments to respond to the crisis. |
| GREECE | | |
| | POLICY | PRACTICE |
| PRE-COVID-19 | Policies mainly entailed minimum provision on emergency housing. When receiving a positive answer, a refugee had 6 months to arrange new housing and leave the housing programs/camps. | Inadequate housing to meet demand and poor camp conditions. |

| | | |
|------------------------|---|--|
| DURING COVID-19 | As of March 2020, newly recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection must leave their housing within 30 days. Emergency housing prioritised vulnerable groups. Extended confinement in refugee camps. | These policies left hundreds homeless who were unable to afford suitable alternative homes. |
| ITALY | | |
| | POLICY | PRACTICE |
| PRE-COVID-19 | The Constitution provides for the recognition of the right to an adequate standard of living sufficient to guarantee a home. Different rules in place on accommodation of migrants, depending on their legal status. | There are not enough resources to completely operationalise and implement the housing policy, which sums up to some concerns related to issues such as discrimination in the housing market. |
| DURING COVID-19 | Flexibility in rules determining first reception and second-line reception. Support for vulnerable people (including homeless) through specific measures, such as financial support, flexibility to access shelters. | Migrants already in the accommodation system were more protected. Migrants outside the accommodation system found themselves abandoned. |

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish clear minimum standards for housing availability and conditions for all those residing within the EU territory, regardless of status.

2. Develop emergency plans for responding to a potential sudden increase of housing demands during a crisis, especially in and around large urban centres.

3. Develop and establish affordable long-term housing solutions for the most vulnerable population groups, while maintaining an inclusive approach to the notion of vulnerability and implications of intersectionality

4. Create new and improve existing communication channels between authorities of different levels (EU, national, local, etc.) in relation to housing provision for newcomers.

6. Provide tangible solutions and

necessary means for independent living for newcomers in the asylum process.

6. Improve support for those who implement housing policies on the ground, both in terms of resources and training.

7. Aim for more homogenous implementation of measures against COVID-19 across regions of the same country, while acknowledging potential heterogeneity.

8. Take necessary measures to avoid situations where newcomers “fall out” of the state housing system without having secured any alternative housing solutions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. List and Profiles of Participants

| Interview | Type of Organisation | Role within Organisation | Interview Date |
|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| FR1 | Administrative Jurisdiction | Lawyer | 30 July 2020 |
| FR2 | Administrative Jurisdiction | Lawyer | 3 August 2020 |
| FR3 | Legal and social aid for migrants | Activist | 6 August 2020 |
| FR4 | Social and labour integration for refugees | Activist | 9 August 2020 |
| FR5 | Legal aid and shelter | Activist | 11 August 2020 |
| FR6 | Legal aid, social assistance, French lessons | Volunteer | 14 August 2020 |
| FR7 | Legal aid | Volunteer | 31 August 2020 |
| FR8 | Medical clinic | Infectologist | 2 September 2020 |
| FR9 | Social and labour integration for refugees | Founder | 1 October 2020 |
| FR10 | Shelter and integration support | Volunteer | 5 October 2020 |
| FR11 | Paris Town Hall | Worker | 6 October 2020 |
| FR12 | International Organization | Coordinator | 8 October 2020 |
| GE1 | Lose Network of Volunteer | Responsible for organizing volunteers | 4 August 2020 |
| GE2 | Accommodation Hall/Welfare Organisation | CEO | 14 August 2020 |
| GE3 | Accommodation Hall/Welfare Organisation | Officer for COVID-19 mitigation | 14 August 2020 |
| GE4 | Regional-based NGO on refugee issues | CEO | 22 September 2020 |
| GE5 | National NGO on Asylum and Refugees | PR Officer | 10 September 2020 |
| GE6 | Welfare Organisation/NGO | Worker | 11 September 2020 |
| GE7 | International NGO on Development and Refugee Children | CEO | 22 September 2020 |
| GE8 | Regional-based NGO on refugee issues | Policy Officer | 23 September 2020 |
| GE9 | Regional-based NGO on refugee issues | CEO | 25 September 2020 |
| GE10 | Regional-based NGO on refugee issues | CEO | 29 September 2020 |
| GE11 | Regional-based NGO on refugee issues | Deputy CEO | 1 October 2020 |
| GR12 | Social aid and integration services | Lawyer | 16 August 2020 |
| IT1 | Foundation | Researcher and Project Manager | 10 August 2020 |
| IT2 | Grassroots association | Coordinator and President | 18 August 2020 |
| IT3 | Italian Federation | Communications Officer | 19 August 2020 |
| IT4 | Academia | Researcher/lawyer | 20 August 2020 |
| IT5 | International NGO | Project Manager | 16 September 2020 Follow-up 19 September 2020 |
| IT6 | National authority | Migration and Asylum policy expert | 29 October 2020 |

| Interview | Type of Organisation | Role within Organisation | Interview Date |
|-----------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| IT7 | Religious refugee aid | Project Coordinator | 29 October 2020 Follow-up 30 December 2020 |
| IT8 | Religious refugee aid | Director | 3 November 2020 |
| IT9 | Civic & Social Organization | Coordinator of legal support on migration, asylum, and citizenship | 3 November 2020 |
| IT10 | Italian NGO | Funding member | 11 November 2020 |
| IT11 | Social cooperative | Legal consultant/project manager | 16 November 2020 |
| IT12 | Religious refugee aid | Social worker | 14 November 2021 |

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