



MAGYC

Migration Governance and Asylum Crises

Toward a Multi-Scalar  
Understanding of Integration:  
Kurdish Refugees between  
State, Diaspora and  
Geopolitics

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D5.6 Toward a Multi-Scalar Understanding of Integration: Kurdish Refugees  
between State, Diaspora and Geopolitics

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## **MAGYC [Peer reviewed journal article]**

### **Abstract**

The article draws attention to how transnational factors – including trans-state diaspora networks and geopolitical relations between European states and Kurdish refugee “homelands” -- have direct impacts on the integration possibilities and trajectories for newly-arrived Kurdish refugees in Europe. Based on over 200 interviews with newly-arrived Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers across seventeen sites in six European countries, our research suggests the need to move beyond local and national-level models of integration to one which is also transnational and multi-scalar, taking into account the enduring effects of homeland politics on integration processes, and facilitating a model of integration in which refugees are not expected to shed one identity for another, but can also live connected lives that are simultaneously rooted but also stretch across borders.

**Keywords:** Kurdish Refugees, Multi-Scalar Integration, State, Geopolitics, Diaspora

## Introduction

In May 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suggested that Turkey would not support Finnish and Swedish membership in NATO due to them being “guesthouses for terrorist organizations” - a clear reference to Kurdish organizations operating in Sweden (Toksabay and Lehto, 2022). The declaration exacerbated the already-widespread sense of fear, precarity and uncertainty within many sectors of Sweden's Kurdish refugee community – a community that is frequently caught between state and local migration, asylum and integration policies; transnational diaspora mobilization activities; and the vicissitudes of global and regional geopolitics.

The example provides an illustration of the extent to which refugee protection and integration – which has been classically theorized as a largely domestic process (see, e.g. Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010) – is also closely tied to, and frequently dependent on, a range of transnational and multi-scalar factors (Erdal 2020; Zentai 2020, 205; Carmel, Lenner and Paul 2021). Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the successful crossing of national borders does not necessarily lead to the escape of populations from the influence and reach of their state of origin, which may continue to exert an influence on their everyday lives in their new state of residence via policies of diaspora engagement (Gamlén 2019), transnational repression (Moss 2016) or migration and asylum diplomacy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Thiollet 2011). Questions of refugee protection and integration are thus always, to some

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extent, multi-scalar, transcending the local context, and subject to influences from a range of actors at multiple-levels.

In this article, we build on the burgeoning literature on multi-scalar integration to examine the case of Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe. Based on 236 interviews with refugees, asylum-seekers, precarious migrants and established diaspora members across six European states, we illustrate the extent to which the local and national integration contexts continue to be shaped by broader transnational and geopolitical factors. We argue that policy-makers in Europe need to take explicit account of these factors in designing refugee integration policies, with a priority on the granting of formal legal status as a means of lessening the potential for states of origin, reception, or nefarious actors in the diaspora to weaponize, exploit or target exiled and vulnerable populations.

In the rest of this article, we make our argument in the following manner. First, we discuss the growing literature on questions of multi-scalar integration, transnationalism and simultaneity, arguing for the need to bring a stronger geopolitical sensibility into such discussions by focusing on factors such as migration diplomacy, state-led diaspora engagement policies, homeland-oriented diaspora organizations and transnational repression. We then present our case study of Kurdish populations in Europe, discussing our research methodology and providing some background and context to the case before outlining how each of the above transnational and geopolitical factors are reported to impact on the everyday experiences of integration by self-

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identifying Kurdish populations in Europe. Finally, we conclude with some policy recommendations and directions for further research.

### **The Geopolitical Dimensions of Multi-Scalar Integration**

Refugee integration has classically been understood as a domestic political process by which newly-migrated individuals assimilate into the social, cultural, economic and political structures and networks of their new society of residence (Hoesch 2018; Solano and De Coninck 2022). Integration can include features ranging from obtaining employment to mastering the language of the new context (Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010). While classic studies of migrant integration have focused on the nature and type of national identity and policies in explaining differences in integration processes and patterns (see, e.g. Brubaker 2010; Ireland 2004; Joppke 2007; Alba 2005), more recent literature has examined integration as a multiscalar process in which a variety of actors, entities and scales beyond the state, such as cities, federal states, civil society actors and regional organizations (e.g. the European Union), all play significant roles (see, e.g. Ambrosini 2021; Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Dimitriadis and Ambrosini 2022; Glick Schiller and Çağlar. 2011; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017; Dekker et al. 2015; Fry and Islar 2021; Sigona 2005; Pardo 2018; Lentin and Moreo 2012).

Building on this literature, a number of scholars have argued for moving beyond nested understandings of multi-scalar integration to transnational approaches that also incorporate diasporic and homeland connections (Snel

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et al 2006; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Mazzucato 2008; Garcés-Mascreñas and Penninx 2016; Mügge 2016; Østergaard-Nielsen 2016; Six-Hohenbalkan 2022). As Erdal (2020) has noted, there is a need to better theorize the relationship between transnationalism and integration, based on an understanding that individuals inhabit multiple social fields and retain cross-border connections and affiliations, even when they move across borders from “here” to “there” (Waldinger 2008, 2017). Such an approach goes beyond a “methodological nationalist” understanding of integration (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), but also needs to be further differentiated based on the types of transnational ties, particular circumstances of migration, relation to the country of origin, and the broader geopolitical context.

These factors are especially crucial for understanding the integration needs and trajectories of refugees and asylum-seekers, whose positionality vis-a-vis their country of origin may differ somewhat from that of other categories of migrants (such as labor migrants who have primarily moved for economic reasons). Refugees escaping persecution, conflict and violence are seeking to escape the political context of their state of origin, but are nevertheless still likely to retain some level of social, familial or other ties with their state of origin. Yet, their relationship to the political context cannot be separated from their inhabitation of transnational fields, which in turn are embedded in larger geopolitical dynamics and state-to-state interactions and interests.

This geopolitical aspect of transnationalism often remains under-theorized in the literature on transnationalism – unsurprisingly, as the literature

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itself emerged from an attempt to move away from state-centric approaches to migration. Yet, for refugees and asylum-seekers, the geopolitical dimensions of migration remain key, and often do not simply remain “over there” following the crossing of state borders. Refugees and asylum seekers are likely to continue to encounter their state of origin abroad, via its official offices, institutions, representatives and other structures – and are likely to continue to have interactions with other actors inhabiting what are often quite politically contentious transnational social fields (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003).

The various scales of “local” “national” and “international” are in reality not just nested, but also entangled as states and state bureaucracies themselves are often transnational or are able to exert power and influence in ways that have transnational effects on populations beyond their borders (Collyer and King 2015; Lacroix 2022). States increasingly attempt to actively “embrace” populations outside their territories via state-led diaspora engagement policies (FitzGerald 2008; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Gamlen 2019; Böcü and Baser 2022; Böcü and Panwar 2022). This can extend as well to harassing, policing, surveilling or targeting particular populations abroad using tactics of transnational repression (Brand 2009; Ragazzi 2014; Moss 2016; Oztürk 2021; Tsourapas 2021; Craven 2022). Moreover, asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees are often the subject of political instrumentalization or “weaponization” by a range of actors, including both their state of origin and their new state of residence, as states use the granting or denial of asylum claims as instruments in their diplomatic toolboxes, as part of larger dynamics

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of 'migration diplomacy' (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Greenhill 2010; Micinski 2018; Micinski and Lindey 2022; Thiollet 2011).

These dynamics can further extend to non-state diasporic actors who are part of transnational fields that connect states of origin with states of residence, and who also play roles as agents of governance in general (Craven 2018), and of refugee and migrant integration in particular. Diaspora organizations are often multi-scalar in that they operate transnationally, thus connecting new and old migrants across different local and national contexts. In addition to providing information and social capital that can be crucial to understanding settlement patterns and migration choices, they are often key actors in service provision and in promoting integration. At the same time, by operating across different scales, diaspora organizations can bring the national-level politics of homelands into new contexts. This in turn can affect local dynamics that impact on integration dynamics in local communities.

More broadly, using a multi-scalar lens to study integration processes allows one to take account of the enduring effects of homeland politics on integration processes, and suggests the importance of developing models of integration in which refugees are not expected to simply shed one identity for another, but are also embedded in multiple networks and sets of relationships that operate at several scales simultaneously. Because diaspora organizations are transnational, in many cases they can help to facilitate multi-scalar forms of integration by acting as brokers for newly arriving refugees -- connecting them to resources and support necessary for integration into a new context,

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while also translating that new context through the lens of the “homeland.” Yet, at the same time, diaspora organizations that are politicized around “homeland” causes may sometimes form impediments to integration, if they primarily view new arrivals as potential recruits or even mimic states by themselves attempting to instrumentalize or weaponize new arrivals or engage in non-state forms of politically-motivated transnational repression (Adamson 2020).

### **Research Methods and Design**

The research design underpinning the analysis in this article aimed to capture a “bottom-up” understanding of the challenges facing Kurdish refugees across different contexts in Europe. We took a multi-sited approach based on our interest in the multi-scalar dimensions of integration for newly arrived Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers (Xiang 2013), using a variety of methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, ethnography and participant observation. Sites of field research were chosen in order to facilitate both cross-country and within-country comparisons. The overall research design aimed to capture variations across the different reception and integration experiences of Kurdish refugees in both urban areas (i.e. metropolitan cities), but also less populated regions (i.e. border towns). Overall, 236 interviews were conducted between March and August 2019, as well as participant observation across 17 sites in 6 countries: Berlin, Munich, and Landshut (Germany); Stockholm, Malmö, and Lund (Sweden); Bornholm

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(Denmark); Salzburg, Vienna (Austria); Paris, Nice, Antibes, and Cannes (France); Ventimiglia, Rome, Grosseto, and Bari (Italy).

Field research was conducted by the authors, with the interviews conducted by [author], an experienced researcher with a Kurdish background, who was able to draw on personal knowledge of the Kurdish refugee context. Interviews were conducted in Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani dialects), Turkish, German, and English. Interview subjects included both established members of the Kurdish diaspora community in Europe and recently-arrived Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees. Initial contacts were identified via different diaspora community organizations, online forums and social network sites. Subsequently, snowball sampling was utilized as the basis for arranging in-depth interviews and participant observation. In addition, the study also used a trial-and-error method to reach out to Kurdish refugees in isolated locations and populations who were not connected to other Kurdish networks, communities, or institutions (Beauchemin and González-Ferrer 2011).

Approximately 15-30 in-depth individual interviews and/or focus groups were conducted in each research site. Interviews were conducted with four different categories of individuals: established diaspora community leaders; refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas; refugees and asylum seekers in small towns and rural areas; and some focus groups that included both refugees/asylum seekers and established diaspora community leaders. For the selection of interviewees, we ensured a mix of characteristics of Kurdish refugees in relation to their legal status, age, gender identity, occupation,

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employment status and type, level of language skills, education level, housing situation, time of immigration, country of origin, their position within particular diaspora organizations, and their relationships with pre-established Kurdish communities in terms of political affiliation and/or kinship and transnational links with relatives or friends beyond their settlement location. We followed appropriate ethical guidelines in our study, including explaining the nature of our research to all participants, gaining their consent, and anonymizing all responses. In addition, we used ethnographic methods to engage in various forms of participant observation, including attending social gatherings, participating in collective conversations, and spending time in different social settings, including refugee camps, outside gatherings and in private homes.

Many individuals encountered in this research were in very precarious personal situations, as measured by their legal status, their lack of an economic support system, and their self-identification with a marginalized group. Moreover, some were engaged in political activities or organizations that may have put them at odds with majority refugee or migrant populations from their countries of origin. Given that governments in Europe keep no official statistics on specifically Kurdish populations in Europe, one of the key challenges was in delineating what was meant by “Kurdish” in our study. We largely used self-identification as a tool, which raises issues of selection bias. Nevertheless, we were careful to ensure that our sample size included a wide range of self-identified Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees, including many who did not identify with any particular political orientation or group.

### **Kurdish Refugees in Europe: Between State, Diaspora and Geopolitics**

Kurds represent a significant refugee and asylum-seeking population in Europe, especially in the 2010s at the height of the so-called refugee crisis. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany estimated that between 2014 and 2020 more than 30 percent of asylum applicants from Syria and 70 percent from Iraq were people who claimed a Kurdish ethnicity. According to data provided by Eurostat, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran are ranked amongst the top ten countries in terms of numbers of asylum applicants in European countries (BAMF 2021). Yet, Kurds are often invisible as a distinct refugee population because they are not generally included in official statistics, which usually categorize populations by country of origin or citizenship.

Due to the high level of politicization of Kurdish identity across their primary states of origin (i.e. Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) Kurdish refugees often face a specific set of integration issues based on their ethno-political identity; their relationship to state authorities and citizenship regimes in their countries of origin; the ways in which conflicts in their home countries intersect with the foreign policy interests of European states; and their membership in, or relationship to, broader diaspora networks that stretch across Europe. Our multi-sited research design allowed us to isolate factors that were context-specific vs. those factors that were transnational and geopolitical. Our interviewees reported integration challenges that are common to many

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refugee communities in Europe, and variation in access based on their legal status, education, networks and location, but also reported similar integration challenges that related specifically to their Kurdish identity, which forms the basis of the current analysis.

### Background

The most recent wave of Kurdish departure to Europe over the past decade and a half has been spurred by a number of factors, most prominently the Syrian civil war, the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the collapse of the peace talks between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state between 2013 and 2015, as well as Turkish military operations and ongoing conflict in northern Syria and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. This most recent wave comes on top of earlier waves of migration (Adamson 2019): a large proportion of economic migrants from Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s were identifiably Kurdish; the civil war in Turkey between the PKK and the Turkish state spurred another wave of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s, as did the use of chemical weapons in Iraq (Hiltermann 2007; Ammann 2000; McDowall 2005). In addition, there have also been waves of Kurdish migration from Iran since the 1980s. Asylum-seeking migration from the region to Europe continued into the 2000s due to state repression by the Syrian regime against the Kurdish population in Northern Syria; the on-going conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state; and unstable

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economic and political conditions in Iraq and Iran (Bozarlsan, Gunes and Yadirgi 2021; Schøtt 2021; Toivanen 2021; Özbek 2018).

### Formation of Diaspora

The history of Kurdish migration to Europe, combined with ongoing conflicts in the homeland(s), has led to the development of numerous Kurdish-oriented diaspora organizations across Europe, some of which are tied to different actors in the region, and some of which are more focused on integration activities and politics in Europe. The larger and more established Kurdish organizations are present in metropolitan cities across Europe, with a particularly strong presence in Germany, France and Sweden (Ammann 2000; Baser 2016; McDowall 2005; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Schøtt 2021; Toivanen 2021). They are highly networked with strong transnational connections. In regions where there are no established Kurdish organizations, there are often informal and unaffiliated network structures, based on self-help, kinship or other factors, which are established by refugees themselves. The types of Kurdish organizations can be loosely categorized into Moderate Broker, Politicized Homeland and Self-Organized and Unaffiliated (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Types of Kurdish Diaspora Organizations**

<b>Moderate Broker</b>	Work closely with local governments and officials Receive funds for integration programs Focused on Kurdish culture w/in country of residence Examples: KOMKAR, YEKMAL
<b>Politicized Homeland</b>	Highly politicized Linked to broader transnational governance structures Internal “diaspora governance” Associated with the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)
<b>Self-Organized and Unaffiliated</b>	Local and spontaneously organized Provide self-help, welfare, community, some governance Emerge in absence of established diaspora organizations Examples: Bari, Bornholm, Landshut, Malmö

Thus, when Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers arrive in Europe, they may also encounter established Kurdish organizations, although the type and extent will vary according to their area of settlement. Moderate Broker Organizations are more present in locations with established Kurdish populations and strong government refugee support policies. Self-organized and Unaffiliated are found in both non-metropolitan areas with strong social services and areas with weak social services. Politicized Homeland Organizations are found largely in metropolitan areas, but their networks also stretch across to other locales.

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### Homeland Politics and Geopolitical Factors

The combination of ongoing and active conflicts in the region, European geopolitical interests, and the prominence of homeland politics in many of the Kurdish diaspora organizations affects newly-arriving Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees to Europe in numerous ways. Of course, the impacts of these factors vary according to the circumstances of individual refugees and asylum-seekers, including their relationship to conflict dynamics in their country of origin, education level, and access to material resources and networks. Nevertheless, our interviews highlighted significant commonalities across the diaspora, moderated by variations in the relevant national and local integration and welfare regimes, as well as the nature and type of local Kurdish organizations.

First and foremost, the geopolitical context strongly affects the ability of individual asylum-seekers to secure a legal status in Europe – a factor which affects all other aspects of integration. For example, despite facing similar individual-level conditions, our interviewees consistently noted how foreign policy concerns affected their asylum cases. Kurdish asylum-seekers from Iran in Sweden argued that their claims to asylum were hampered due to the state interest in maintaining good relations with Iran.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Kurdish asylum-seekers from Turkey in Sweden claimed that they were being linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had been banned in Sweden under pressure from Turkey. One interviewee responded that his asylum application

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Kamuran (pseudonym) in Stockholm, 18 April 2019.

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had been rejected twice, and he suspected that a positive decision on his application would have created a foreign policy confrontation between Turkey and Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, most asylum applications from Kurds from Syria were granted refugee status or subsidiary protection.<sup>3</sup> Thus, despite all groups experiencing danger and persecution relating to the conflicts' cross-border and regional dynamics, including military operations by several state and non-state actors, individual chances of having one's asylum application approved vary strongly according to one's state of origin. This means that in the 2010s, asylum seekers from Turkey, Iran and Iraq often received negative decisions in their asylum processes, whereas Kurdish asylum seekers from Syria had a good prospect of having their asylum claims recognized.

Geopolitical considerations appeared to directly affect the chances of individual asylum applications being approved. For example, Turkey has been able to leverage its position as an EU candidate and NATO member, as well as a refugee-hosting and transit state, to demand concessions that impact on Kurdish populations in Europe. Our interviews indicated that individual asylum cases were also subject to geopolitical maneuvering.<sup>4</sup> An already-mentioned

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Araf (pseudonym) in Malmö, 1 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> This was noted by Kurdish advisors from the Association for Parents from Kurdistan in Germany (YEKMAL e.V.), (interview on 9 April 2019 in Berlin) and the Federation of Kurdistan Laborers' Associations (KOMKAR), (interview on 8 April 2019 in Berlin), as well as interviews with Kurdish language translators in Salzburg, 24 May 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews indicated that individual asylum cases were also subject to geopolitical maneuvering – for example, asylum claims from Turkey were more likely to be granted when governments were locked into a confrontation with Turkey. Kurdish translators in Salzburg and Berlin told us during interviews in April and May 2019 that the success rate of applications of Kurdish asylum seekers from Turkey, according to lawyers and advocacy groups, varies according to the relationship between the Turkish and European governments. Kurdish asylum seekers were less likely to be granted refugee status when there were good relations or when claims became entangled and linked with other foreign policy concerns.

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dramatic example of this -- which occurred after our field research, but which illustrates the dynamics -- was the Turkish state's 2022 leveraging of its ability to block NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland, resolved via a memorandum that included agreements to stricter vetting of Kurdish asylum-seekers and further provisions for extradition (Duxbury 2022). The on-the-ground impacts of such geopolitical maneuvering were in strong evidence in our interviews, with many interviewees experiencing ongoing marginalization, uncertainty and a feeling of being in limbo, which had serious effects on both their social circumstances and mental and psychological well-being.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the very process of asylum claim recognition in Europe is heavily subject to political dynamics in the countries of origin, as it relies on valid and legal identity documents and papers that are often unavailable to marginalized populations due to non-issuance; revocation or confiscation (see also Ferreri 2022). This means that asylum applicants are never free from political dynamics in their state of origin. One interviewee in Italy claimed that his asylum application had been on hold for years since he was not able to provide the Italian authorities with an ID document asserting his Turkish nationality, as it was unsafe for him to go to the Turkish embassy and request documentation due to there being an arrest warrant for him.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, states of origin can seek to block asylum applications or request extraditions based on documentation that seeks to link applicants to illegal activities. A common method is to link membership in legal pro-Kurdish political parties to

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mirza (pseudonym) in Salzburg, 26 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Serger (pseudonym) in Rome, 17 July 2019.

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membership in banned Kurdish military organizations such as the PKK. One interviewee in Sweden recounted that Turkish authorities had prepared a file on him based on fabricated documentation that linked him with the PKK, put his name on a “terrorist” list and requested his extradition from Sweden, thus delaying his asylum process for over two years as Swedish authorities were hesitant to make a decision on his case.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, state security actors from countries of origin operate transnationally in Europe and can continue to be a presence in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees even following their departure from the region. This has been an ongoing problem for Kurdish refugees from both Syria and Turkey. Our interviewees recounted incidents in which translators were provided who were affiliated with the Turkish embassy, or in which they were harassed or labeled as “terrorists” by German authorities with a Turkish background.<sup>8</sup> More broadly, many Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers get targeted by the transnational activities of Turkish intelligence agencies, or have been subject to the larger “global purge” that targeted members of the Fethullah Gülen religious group, but also Kurdish activists, following the 2016 coup attempt (see, e.g. Adamson 2020; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Schenkkan 2018).

### Impacts of Diaspora Organizations

Within this context, the various roles played by Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe is significant in multiple respects. They are vital to

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Araf (pseudonym) in Malmö, 1 May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Berxweden (pseudonym) in Berlin, 4 April 2019.

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understanding pathways to integration of Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees, although the way in which they promote (or, at times, impede) integration varies according to local context and individual circumstances (Alessio 2008). Kurdish populations in Europe exist on a continuum from situations of extreme precarity, such as those with irregular status who are disconnected from any support networks whatsoever, to well-established elite networks, who are at the forefront of Kurdish politics and cultural production (Dag 2022).

On one end of the spectrum are irregular and recently arrived populations located in areas that lack either state service provision or well-established formal Kurdish community organizations. Such populations are living under the radar and can be considered survival migrants that are eking out a living, often via undocumented and irregular activities. They frequently rely on self-help forms of organization that provide a modicum of solidarity, internal governance and welfare. Such populations can also become the targets of unscrupulous actors in the community and/or exploited by homeland-oriented actors due to their high level of vulnerability. Our interviewees included numerous undocumented and irregular migrants/asylum seekers without legal status, who were subject to extreme forms of exploitation, and were often reliant on the informal services of diaspora organizations to survive. Much of the exploitation facing undocumented individuals was intra-communal, including labor exploitation at the hands of Kurdish or Turkish individuals and companies. The lack of

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documented status and legal standing of individuals meant that they had nowhere to go if they did not receive payment for their work in the informal/grey economy – in some cases employers threatened to report them to police or other authorities if they pushed too hard for payment. Interviewees who had access to established diaspora organizations often turned to them to resolve such difficulties; however, individuals living in more remote areas without established diaspora organizations were often subject to ongoing and severe exploitation – this was particularly a problem for communities in France, Italy and, to some extent, Sweden. Interviewees indicated that having legal status would have allowed them to better defend themselves against exploitation on the labor market.<sup>9</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum are well-integrated Kurdish populations and elite or well-networked Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees who have strong pre-existing connections with established organizations in Europe. For example, our interviewees were aware that some asylum-seekers and refugees who had been strongly engaged in legal forms of Kurdish politics in Turkey, such as the pro-Kurdish HDP party, or who were active in governance structures in Northern Syria, were well-received by linked diaspora organizations in Europe due to their references and networks from their home countries. In such cases, they did not need the welfare or accommodation-related services of states of reception, as they were so well-served by the homeland-related diaspora organizations. Once they arrived in Europe, they

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Kerwan (pseudonym) in Antibes, 3 July 2019 and Murdem (pseudonym) in Salzburg, 27 May 2019. In France, the construction industry was a particular source of labor exploitation of undocumented migrants.

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continued to be politically active and worked to represent the agendas of their homeland compatriots and the interests of Kurdish refugees abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Such well-networked populations can be engaged in both integration- and homeland-oriented organizations, and both types of organizations may have interactions with newly-arrived Kurdish refugees, with the former focusing primarily on the provision of cultural activities and acting as a broker for government-funded services; and the latter focusing more on political mobilization around, and direct support for, homeland politics. The division between these two types of organizations is not complete, but their basis of legitimacy and transnational networks and connections are fundamentally different (although at times may overlap in particular contexts).

In the middle of the spectrum are the many ordinary asylum-seekers who are simultaneously navigating the legal and bureaucratic landscape of Europe, the political landscape of Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe, as well as the transnational reach of the bureaucracies, diaspora engagement policies and, at times, security regimes of their states of origin. Such populations may have access to some level of support structures and services, but are often living in situations of limbo, unable to travel, work, or move forward on the path to integration, and they may be highly dependent on community and informal networks for their survival.

Diaspora organizations are therefore frequently key actors in refugee integration processes, providing much-needed material, psychological and

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Mervan (pseudonym) in Paris, 18 June 2019.

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social support in situations of extreme precarity. They can also act as brokers that assist new arrivals in accessing existing state services and opportunities; provide them with access to essential information; and help them to navigate the legal and bureaucratic obstacles that newcomers inevitably encounter upon arrival to states in Europe. Our interviews found that diaspora organizations play important roles in processes of arrival, reception and settlement, as well as in the key milestones of refugee integration, including securing legal status; mitigating intra-community conflicts; acquiring access to employment, healthcare, education, housing and other basic necessities, including language training; and assistance in integrating socially and culturally into the new context.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, diaspora organizations, in combination with existing geopolitical dynamics and homeland conflicts, can also create challenges for new arrivals and at times impede integration. For example, precarious new arrivals without legal status and with little access to other forms of support are vulnerable to becoming dependent on, or even at times exploited by, some forms of diaspora networks and organizations. Similarly, the restrictive migration policies, overall structure, and legal-bureaucratic requirements of European asylum regimes may push some individuals into the hands of diaspora actors who seek to mobilize them for their own homeland-oriented political purposes, or for their own economic or personal motivations.

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<sup>11</sup> These services may also at times be utilized by non-Kurdish-identifying individuals who nonetheless may share political affinities with some of the diaspora organizations.

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In our interviews, we encountered Kurdish refugees who criticized some Kurdish organizations for their focus on politics over refugee support. One interviewee in Stockholm, a Kurdish refugee from Syria, argued, for example, that Kurdish organizations are biased towards refugees who support their own political agenda choosing to variously provide services to or neglect Kurdish refugees according to their political views and ties.<sup>12</sup> Interviewees in Berlin also raised the issue of Kurdish associations closely following the agendas of political actors in the “homeland,” noting that they often pressured refugees to toe their political lines.<sup>13</sup> Established diaspora organizations may have incentives to secure the loyalty and membership of newly-arrived refugees in order to sustain political mobilization around homeland agendas (see, e.g. Shain 2005). This pushes many refugees away from some of the established diaspora organizations, and can distract them from integration-related agendas.<sup>14</sup> Situations of precarity, legal limbo and dependency can provide underlying conditions for intra-diasporic forms of exploitation, and these can in turn become tied to broader transnational conflict networks and multi-scalar geopolitical dynamics that the majority of asylum-seekers are seeking to escape.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Heveal (pseudonym) in Stockholm, 23 April 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Azad (pseudonym) in Berlin, 6 April 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Such as learning the languages of the host societies, participating in educational programmes, understanding the cultural and political realities of receiving societies and interacting with citizens.

### **Conclusion: Multi-Scalar Dynamics and Integration**

The interviews we conducted strongly suggest that multi-scalar dynamics played a significant role in shaping the integration chances and trajectories of newly-arrived Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees. Standard measures of integration, such as access to education, employment, health care, and the development of social and cultural networks and ties, were shaped first and foremost by national and local policies, available resources and support networks, but were also heavily influenced by transnational and geopolitical factors. Many of our interviewees experienced trauma due to the ongoing impacts of conflict in their homeland, which was exacerbated by spill-over effects and political dynamics that affected their sense of security and stability in Europe.<sup>15</sup>

The most significant obstacle to integration encountered by our interview subjects was their legal status. While this is a common problem for all asylum-seekers in Europe, Kurdish asylum seekers faced some unique challenges relating to the broader geopolitical and foreign policy context of their homeland(s). This was particularly the case for Kurdish asylum-seekers originating from Turkey and/or Kurds displaced by operations in the Syrian-Turkish border region, who often get caught up in the foreign policy dynamics and bargaining process stemming from Turkey's role as a European Union

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<sup>15</sup> For example, a Kurdish refugee from Afrin, in Northern Syria, discussed how he was able to escape the armed conflicts and associated conditions of violence in the region, but his father and other family members could not join him. His father had been arrested by Islamic groups and Turkish military forces without any hints about his whereabouts. The situation of his father dominated his life in Denmark, making it hard to focus on his daily commitments. Interview with Shiyar (pseudonym) in Bornholm, 5 May 2019.

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candidate state, NATO member, and, increasingly, a state that has become key to the EU's overall external migration prevention and control strategy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). Such dynamics often had concrete effects on individual integration trajectories, in the form of delaying asylum case hearings or decreasing the likelihood of a successful application, with the aggregate effect of creating a pool of people who find it almost impossible to start on the path to integration.

The contrast between the situation of Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees from Ukraine can be seen clearly in the varying European-level policies to the two groups. For obvious reasons, geopolitical dynamics cannot be completely eliminated from the formulation of refugee and asylum policy, and the two cases are not directly comparable. The Ukraine example nonetheless demonstrates that a willingness to have an expansive and open policy of refugee reception makes it more difficult for refugee and asylum "crises" to be subject to geopolitical instrumentalization: open door policies can go a long way to safeguarding refugees from becoming weaponized by state and non-state actors in their regions of origin, thus easing their pathway to integration (Greenhill 2022).

In the case of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers, acquiring legal status is not only crucial for accessing services in many cases, but also provides some degree of protection against exploitation by transnational diaspora groups, as well as providing some legal protection and security in the face of home state attempts to engage in transnational repression and harassment, including

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extradition attempts. Indeed, experts recommend the provision of permanent legal status to vulnerable populations experiencing transnational repression, and have argued for amendments in asylum policies that could allow for asylum decisions based on group membership, and would take into account the potential use of spurious terrorism charges by states of origin (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022).

Moreover, our research shows that diaspora organizations – which are inherently multi-scalar – often play important roles as “brokers” and facilitators of processes of integration. They can connect newly-arrived refugees and asylum-seekers with existing resources, services and support. However, this only works when there are indeed state services and support available to new arrivals, and where there are established, service-providing diaspora organizations. In cases where state support for new arrivals is lacking, or there is a lack of established diaspora organizations that have a history of partnering with local policy actors, new arrivals can be in danger of falling into a situation of extreme precarity and/or being exploited by informal actors or diaspora organizations that take advantage of newcomers' extreme vulnerability. There are two ways to positively intervene in such dynamics: for states and local communities to provide new arrivals with greater and more open access to legal channels for reception and integration, so that services and assistance can be accessed directly and without fear; and for policy-makers to partner with and support diaspora organizations that have the capacity, expertise,

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experience and orientation to serve as reliable brokers for new arrivals in the process of integration.

Finally, our research suggests that processes of integration should be thought of as taking place within a multi-scalar context. The complexity of geopolitical relations, and the density of personal, social, political and media networks between states of reception and states of origin, means that individual refugees and asylum-seekers do not simply leave one context and start a new life in another context. Rather, they will continue to be influenced by developments in their homelands; remain embedded in broader geopolitical dynamics that affect their everyday lives; and be subject to the influence of a range of transnational actors, ties, and forms of diaspora politics. New arrivals can be expected to remain politically engaged with and interested in their countries of origin without this being a sign of lack of integration in their country of reception. Access to legal status and forms of support can ensure, however, that vulnerable newcomers can make their own choices about levels and types of political engagement, rather than being forced by necessity into situations of intra-diasporic forms of dependency in which they may be at risk of being exploited by predatory actors in the diaspora. Overall, this suggests that formal integration processes need to be designed in ways that are multi-scalar. In other words, successful integration processes should provide individuals with the resources and support to successfully function and flourish in their country of reception, as well as to

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engage productively with broader transnational, geopolitical and diasporic contexts.

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