

# MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

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## Based on Local Agreements & Transnational Policy Guidelines

### Memorandum of Understanding

We, the SiforREF consortium, are concerned about developments in EU policies at its external borders, particularly given recent deterioration in public discourse towards refugees and asylum seekers. We are also troubled by policies in member states that do not correspond with the declared commitment towards a sustainable, social, and humane integration framework. The relevance of equal treatment towards all refugees, whether European citizens or not, has become regrettably real in light of the shocking aggression shown towards Ukraine by the Russian government. We strongly oppose any policy that differentiates those fleeing the same borders according to those that are “deserving” or “undeserving”.

We believe that all relevant stakeholders, in particular public actors, e.g., representatives of municipal authorities, should support a more inclusive and socially innovative integration policy. The aim should be to empower refugees in their path of integration and self-fulfillment. Furthermore, we hold the opinion that refugees enrich social and cultural life, and that they are an important and much needed resource for the European economy. Beyond these contributions that refugees can make to our societies, we believe that the countries of the European Union must commit themselves to guaranteeing refugees a safe place in which to rebuild a life path that has often been violently interrupted in their countries of origin.

This document summarizes the results and policy-relevant insights identified through the SiforREF Project, which has been administered across five cities (Berlin, Bologna, Ljubljana, Parma and Vienna) over the last two years. These relate to existing commonalities and challenges towards refugee integration through social innovation. The Memorandum of Understanding serves as both a positioning paper of the SiforREF Consortium as well as an advocative proposal towards relevant stakeholders and local politicians involved in integration policies and practices.

This agreement is entered into force on 08.04.2022 by and between:

Individually referred to as a “Party” or collectively as the “Parties”.

### Vision

All parties are united in their vision of a socially innovative, just, sustainable, and humanitarian integration framework. This is to be realized at the local, national and the European levels. The vision of all parties is to help create an open environment for human-rights based policies and innovative initiatives. All parties recognize that the sustainable integration of refugees is a regional responsibility with local, regional, national and international dimensions. Acknowledging the differences, we believe that many challenges and objectives are shared across Europe and call for a unified approach towards refugee integration.

We, decision makers at all levels of government together with organizations and networks of cities and communities of all sizes, believe that strong cooperation through multi-level governance in the European Union and co-creation with citizens are key to our mission of realizing our vision of better and socially innovative refugee integration. Many of the existing barriers and challenges for refugees can be addressed more effectively through better political frameworks, an approachable integration policy, and the relaxation of existing barriers towards refugees.



We strive for all refugees – women, men, and children – to be afforded their right to be protected, as well as appreciated for their valuable potential for our local societies. Policy measures should increase trust in the benefits of migration, not limit refugees' agency. Migrants and refugees should be treated with respect and trust by the receiving society.

Asymmetrical power imbalances and one-sided policies should be transformed and space should be created for an encounter on an equal footing. The emphasis needs to be on an open mindset, and a perspective in which tolerance and solidarity, founded on human rights, is a priority. Migration is not a temporal phenomenon that will be accomplished within a few years; it requires a sustainable, long-term strategy and acknowledgement of the scope and potential it has for the European Union. All parties concerned here recognize the need for a more comprehensive, holistic approach towards refugees. The aim should be to improve the implementation structures of the national and local integration policies and to be more inclusive towards newly arriving refugees. They also acknowledge the need for regular assessments on progress achieved. Continuous communication and knowledge exchange are key to all parties.

## **The Signatories agree on the following principles**

All parties have agreed on the following principles with respect to a more socially inclusive refugee integration policy.

### *The need for a comprehensive approach to refugee inclusion*

Although all four governments (Italy, Germany, Austria, Slovenia) have adopted legislation based on 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, actual practices all-too-often do not meet the legally mandated requirements. This discrepancy can largely be attributed to tensions between centralized legislation at the national level and fragmented implementation at the local level. One instrument to help solve this issue, specifically at the local level, lies in the concept of social innovation. This provides a shared normative direction, but differs between the regions and its local contexts. What is regarded as proven practice in one context might be regarded as innovative and new in others. Furthermore, the implementation of integration measures, which are frequently outsourced to third parties, has also helped to develop a wide network of stakeholders (such as charities) that contribute significant value to local integration initiatives. Yet these parties are often embedded into precarious structures with respect to funding and sustainability. Overall, better coordination and cohesion is needed between local and national government policies.

Many of the recommended best practice that form the basis of this Memorandum of Understanding rely upon the work of underpaid or voluntary staff funded for a limited time. Such arrangements often curtail the scope and sustainability of the projects in terms of scale and time. While the work and expertise provided by many civil society actors is crucial, too often the projects are not adequately financed in regards to their expertise, networking, their invested resources and their contributions to social innovation. To ensure the long-term success and sustainable outcomes for future projects, funding needs to be properly reflective of responsibilities and activities. In addition, internal communication between stakeholders (local, regional, national, and transnational) needs to be streamlined. They must also benefit from best practice examples from across Europe.

All parties confirm the need for better and more comprehensive health and medical support. In particular, psychosocial support has been identified as being essential for many refugees. Increasing the capabilities of trained personal and access to health-related services is crucial to ensuring the well-being of refugees, many of whom have experienced trauma, abuse, physical and psychological stress.

### *Easing the housing crisis*



Housing has been identified as a major challenge and point of contention in all cities of involved parties. Rising rent and a constant shortage of newly created housing, social housing or private entities contribute to the immense pressure on many refugees in finding affordable accommodation. Refugees often fall short of the competition due to low financial strength and lack of overall legal housing options. Discrimination is an ongoing phenomenon on the housing market, preventing refugees from equal access. The issue must be addressed more extensively at the level of the European Union, acknowledging the fact that the current housing crisis is a widespread issue (not confined to refugees). Accommodation of refugees in state-funded housing risks conflict and resentment within the underprivileged strata of the host society.

#### *Key Condition - Equal access to the labor market*

Many refugees' poor financial status results from highly restrictive access to the regular labor market in most partner cities. Berlin being the exception, where it is permitted to work at least under certain conditions. Employment barriers contribute to the dependency of refugees on government support or incentivizes them to participate in the irregular labor market and temporary employment. These dynamics greatly increase the risk for (self-)exploitation and abuse. This is particular acute for those persons who lack residence permits or are awaiting finalization of asylum procedures. Other hindrances are language certificates required before entering the regular labor market and long procedures of recognizing existing qualifications, which prevent many refugees from entering the regular labor market.

Across the evidence of best practice and pilots which build the knowledge base for this MoU, there is an identified need to put a stop to the "endless waiting and not belonging" phase and state of uncertainty that many refugees experience. The parties agree that asylum seekers should not have to wait so long and remain in a state of limbo during the asylum procedure. It has been shown several times that being held in a constant state of legal and social uncertainty has a detrimental effect on many refugees, both financially and psychologically. Furthermore, it contributes to a more difficult process of social integration, as refugees are deprived of contact with the larger society through labor related activities, often ending in long term precarious living environments. Also, refugees miss out on opportunities to earn respect and recognition by demonstrating their skills and abilities. As such, refugees need equal and rapid access to the regular labor market. This necessitates more efficient processes for recognizing their legal status as refugees, including faster and clearer responses on their residence permits.

Greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that refugees are not confined to low-qualification, low-wage job sectors. To avoid this trend towards precarious work sectors for refugees, it is important that training opportunities are not limited to basic orientation programs. Rather, funds in the European Union should be directed towards projects that support higher qualification programs and empower independent social business ideas by refugees. Better framework conditions need to be provided to address the specific needs of certain sub-target groups (such as women or young adults), like childcare facilities, thus ensuring their further qualifications and participation in the labour market.

Overall, the parties recognize varying initial conditions in the five European partner regions. However, those legislations and practices that support the self-reliance of refugees and other migrants through equal access to affordable housing, to the regular job market and social life prove to be the most favorable for refugee integration. Parties perceive this approach as a mutually beneficial situation. Refugees would have the chance to act independently and pave their own way. Host societies could benefit from cultural and professional resources while minimizing expensive and limiting bureaucracy.

All parties are to undertake and communicate ambitious efforts as defined in the goals of this Memorandum of Understanding.



Taking into consideration the different local and national circumstances, all parties agree to support, communicate and maintain the above agreements to work together for a sustainable contribution at their local level.

The original of this Agreement, of which the German, Italian, Slovenian, and English, texts are equally authentic, shall be deposited with

DONE at Venice this 08<sup>th</sup> of April 2022.

Signed for and on behalf of

[institution]

[signature]

[first name, last name]

[position]