# Did it Stick? Where Pro-Refugee Communities did and did not Develop

In this chapter, I explore whether the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 led to the development and survival of pro-refugee communities in Lauda, Loburg, Altenau, and Neheim. Each subchapter is devoted to a specific case, allowing for an in-depth examination of the unique developments after the pro-refugee mobilization. Through careful analysis, I explore where pro-refugee communities developed between 2015/16 and 2020/21 and where not. As noted in the introduction, pro-refugee communities are a case of local civic action communities, a concept I developed drawing on Staggenborg's (2013, 2022) social movement communities. Local civic action communities comprise of collective actors, ranging from small pro-refugee groups and church congregations to community organizations and more professionalized welfare organizations. They are a community of actors that engage in civic action, meaning they aim to address specific local problems they have identified. Instead of working in isolation, they interact, creating networks among the various actors involved. I measure the development and survival of pro-refugee communities by exploring the interaction between organizational and group actors. In particular, the analysis examines the changing patterns and forms of interaction between actors active during the pro-refugee mobilization and the quality and strength of relationships. In other words, the study analyzes the interaction dynamics at the local level and how they manifest in network changes among the investigated organizations and groups.

In this chapter and the following chapters, I will distinguish between formalized and more informal connections. More specifically, formal ties include relationships rooted in projects or financial arrangements that are formalized through formal agreements between two or more actors. On the other hand, informal ties revolve primarily around non-formal connections that stem mainly from personal ties between group members, like volunteers,

activists, and employees. These personal ties were typically forged during routine interactions, such as recurring summer parties, protests, or Migration Council meetings.

Below, I outline the potential for the development and survival of pro-refugee communities in 2015/16, comparing the development of such communities in Lauda and Loburg with the divergent outcomes in Altenau and Neheim. Central to this analysis is the pro-refugee mobilization in the four cases in 2015/16. This mobilization provided a favorable opportunity for the development of pro-refugee communities. However, as the mobilization waned from mid-2016 to mid-2017, developments diverged. Thus, I explore the interaction dynamics in Lauda and Loburg, where I observed sustainable pathways that materialized in the development and survival of pro-refugee communities. I then examine and outline developments in Altenau and Neheim, where communities failed to develop and sustain themselves after mobilization.

In the first subchapter, I examine the case of Lauda and its surrounding district, where the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 resulted in the development and survival of a pro-refugee community. This community consists of self-confident volunteers and activists and is characterized by a hybrid structure between formalized structures and very informal ways of interaction. Notably, establishing *Asylum with Us* as a registered association that functions as a volunteer-network and forming expert groups for integrating immigrants and refugees were important steps toward continued interaction and strengthening networks between different organizations and groups.

In the subsequent subchapter, I analyze the development and survival of a new pro-refugee community in Loburg. This community is characterized by the involvement of two self-confident key activists, the absence of highly professionalized organizations, and conflictual but close relationships with local government agencies. Events such as summer parties and café meetings significantly kept interaction going. In addition, more formalized forms of interaction, such as the Civic Council on Migration, which connects all relevant actors in refugee support, served as a constant meeting platform over several years.

In the third subchapter, I provide an analysis of the developments in Altenau, where I did not find new a pro-refugee community. Although there was a significant mobilization of individuals, organizations, and groups during the refugee reception in 2015/16, civil society actors involved in refugee support did not establish lasting interaction routines that manifested in new and strengthened networks. In particular, the dominance of professionalized organizations

such as welfare organizations and the lack of trust between local civil society actors and the local government hindered the development of a pro-refugee community.

Finally, I analyze the developments in Neheim, where the pro-refugee mobilization did not lead to a new pro-refugee community. While there was an unparalleled solidarity with refugees in 2015/16, sustained routine forms of interaction did not evolve. I find that mistrust between local government officials, volunteers and activists, and the highly professionalized civil society response in 2015/16 hindered their sustained development and survival.

## Lauda: The Development and Survival of a Pro-Refugee Community

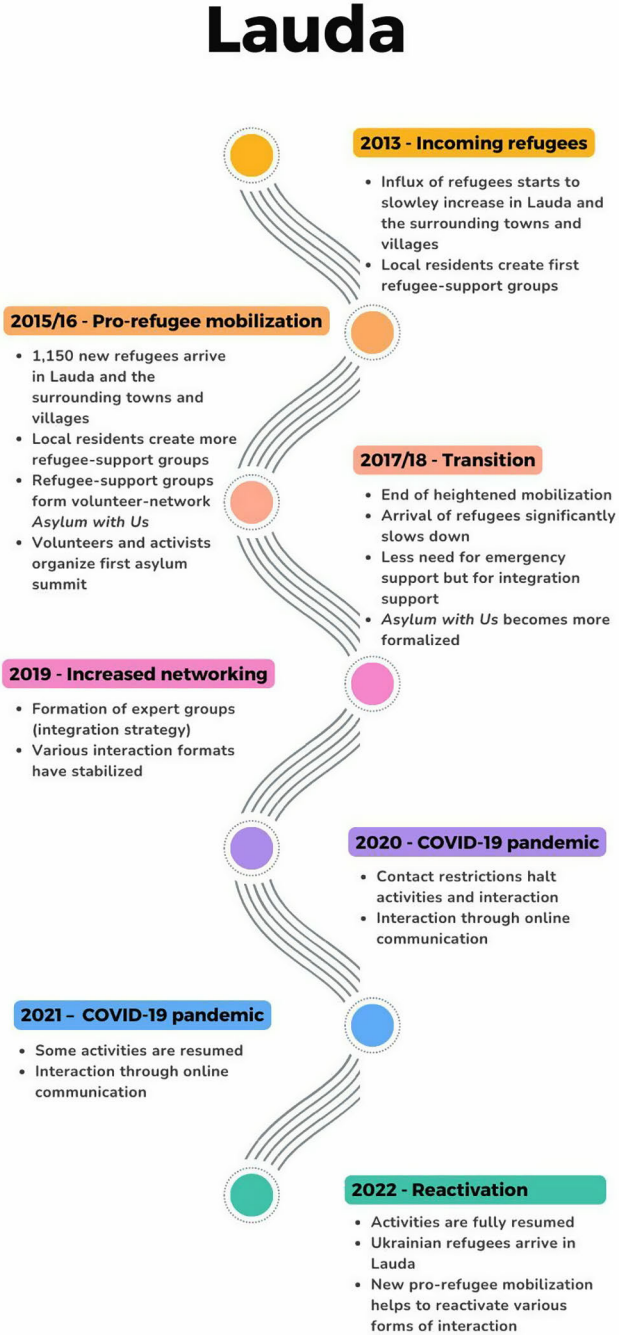
In this subchapter, I explore the effects of the pro-refugee mobilization in Lauda. Specifically, I show how the pro-refugee mobilization catalyzed the development and survival of a new pro-refugee community. In the following, I first outline the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. Second, I discuss how organizations and groups interacted during that period and how these loose interactions became more structured routine forms of interaction and networks over the six years. Note that the timeline in Figure 1 illustrates developments between 2013 and 2022. Table 4 provides an overview of the key players.

### Refugee support and interaction dynamics in 2015/16

The influx of 1,150 refugees around 2015/16[1] resulted in significant activity in the civic landscape of Lauda and surrounding towns and villages throughout the district (Destatis, 2017, 2019). Interviewees described this support as a response to the state of emergency that many refugees were in when they arrived in the district. There was an urgent need for various support, including medical appointments, immigration procedures, language classes, financial assistance, and trauma support.

1 Interviewees in Lauda made clear that most of the influx happened around 2015. However, the number is based on a data set that provides data for 2014 and 2016.

*Figure 1: Timeline Lauda (2015–2022)*



The large increase in refugees in Lauda and the surrounding towns and villages began as early as 2013 and reached its peak in 2015. The district of Lauda experienced an initial surge of refugee arrivals in 2013 and 2014, which led to the formation of seven volunteer-led refugee-support groups throughout the district. Lauda's refugee-support group, founded in 2013 by approximately 15 volunteers, had approximately 180 active participants by the spring and summer of 2015/16, making it one of 28 such refugee-support groups spread across the district. A prominent volunteer named Luisa shared her amazement at the remarkable turnout at the group's first meeting, attesting to an unexpected surge of interest and support.

She and other members of the refugee-support group organized a large informational meeting for interested volunteers and were glad that so many people showed up. Luisa found it amazing that so many people were interested: "[…] In our town and in the neighboring towns, there were actually more people than you would have thought. […] depending on the size of the town, we set up maybe 20 chairs and then 60 people came." She recalled that she had never seen so many people wanting to help in her town.

These refugee-support groups operated in a self-organized manner, with no formal membership, established leadership, or set guidelines. As Pastor Stephan, one of the founders of Lauda's refugee-support group in the district, aptly noted, the only tie that bound them together was an email list. In Lauda, the new refugee-support group was disconnected from the more established organizations and groups. Luisa explained that they were hardly involved in helping refugees:

> "The established associations, like the fire brigade or the football club or musicians, members of traditional costume associations, were not involved and were not represented in our group. I don't know how it is with the others, but the members of these really established associations were in our group."

While Lauda's refugee-support groups took primary responsibility for providing direct aid and relief, some organizations became involved in the cause. Select sports clubs, for example, welcomed refugees to their teams by offering free memberships to refugees who temporarily occupied their gymnasium in 2015. Although this support proved temporary, the sports club subsequently continued integrating refugees into their teams. Markus, the chairman of one prominent sports club in Lauda, recalled that he and other club members met the volunteers who had been involved in supporting refugees for a few years:

> "These volunteers started offering recreational activities for refugees. And that's when the sports club was asked to help. Our members were asked if they wanted to get involved."

This support did not last long, but the sports club continued to include refugees in its teams in the years that followed.

*Table 4: Overview of key actors in Lauda*

| Name[2] | Role | Affiliated Organization/Group |
|---|---|---|
| **Luisa** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group, Lauda |
| **Stephan** | Volunteer and Pastor | Refugee-support group, Lauda/ Volunteer-network "Asylum with Us"/ Protestant Church |
| **Daniel** | Staff | Protestant welfare organization 2 |
| **Markus** | Chairman | Sports club |
| **Anne** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group (neighboring 3 town)/Volunteer-network "Asylum with Us" |
| **Maria** | Volunteer and Activist | Refugee-support group (neighboring town 2/ Volunteer-network "Asylum with Us" |
| **Jana** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group (neighboring town 2) |
| **Bettina** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group (neighboring district) |
| **Dieter** | Activist | Organizer of first Asylum Summit |
| **Tobias** | Director | Protestant welfare organization 1 |
| **Ellen** | Former volunteer, now staff | Asylum with Us |

The local branches of the major Christian welfare organizations initially stayed on the sidelines. The local government initially took over the care of the refugees and later transferred this task to the welfare organizations due

2 Names are anonymized.

to the increasing demand. Daniel, an employee at a Protestant welfare organization, recalled that local government officials provided most of the services to refugees. They only later transferred these responsibilities to the welfare organizations:

> "So, in the beginning, in 2015/16, most of the formal migration counseling was still done by people from the city or the local government. And gradually the burden became so heavy that the officials said 'We can't do all this anymore'. And so, they transferred the migrant counseling services to a few welfare organizations with local branches in the district."

As a result, the local branch of the Protestant welfare organization opened a shelter for unaccompanied minor refugees.

Network development in Lauda and the district followed a dual path: First, refugee-support groups pooled their efforts by creating the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us*, consisting of all 28 refugee-support groups of the district. Second, by organizing state-wide Asylum Summits, Lauda's refugee-support group expanded its connections with other volunteer and activist groups in refugee support beyond the district. Before 2015/16, interactions had been sporadic, often through Pastor Stephan.

When the number of refugees peaked in 2015/16, and the refugee-support groups in the district of Lauda grew significantly, the groups began to reach out to each other. Previously, they had no real contact with each other, except for some very informal relationships through Pastor Stephan, who had initiated the formation of three different groups in the district.

That changed in 2015. Within a few weeks, they shared some best practices on how to deal with local labor and immigration authorities and shared knowledge on asylum law. Based on these initial experiences, the volunteers and activists from the different groups decided it was time to create a more formal network. Maria, one of the volunteers, recalled that Stephan, the pastor who had initiated the creation of the first group in Lauda and some groups in the district, had supported the idea of joining forces. Other interviewees, such as Bettina were happy about his networking efforts: "This changed so much, we finally got to know each other."

Thus, in 2015/16, all groups met in Lauda and founded the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us*, first as an informal network and later as a registered association – in German "Verein" – for funding reasons. Since the 28 refugee-support groups were repeatedly in conflict with the local government, exchange

was needed. The volunteers thought they would have more power if they joined forces.

Volunteers in the new *Asylum with Us* volunteer-network organized regular coordination meetings. Each group had two volunteer coordinators who met every other week. Anne remembered how the coordinator roles were created:

> "These refugee-support groups are quite heterogeneous. They all have the motivation to help, but they do it differently. So, there were tensions very quickly and it became clear that we needed one or two people per group in the district to be the contact person. That's how the coordinator positions were created. […]. We discussed what was going well and what was going badly, how many refugees there were in each town and what countries the refugees came from."

Regarding the role of the coordinator, Pastor Stephan said in a self-published report that a coordinator identifies ideas and seeks individuals to bring them to life. The role also includes facilitating connections among people and providing motivation and support (Anonymized 2018: 08)[3]. In other words, a coordinator was the kind of informal leader that many grassroots movement groups have. At the biweekly coordination meetings, the volunteers exchanged information about the latest developments in German asylum law and about individual refugees who needed specific support, such as legal or medical assistance. In addition, their awareness of the shared struggles with local government agencies rose. Overall, the collaboration between the 28 groups emphasized their struggles.

The refugees who had arrived in the district of Lauda since 2013 suffered from various insecurities, including difficulties in finding adequate housing and in establishing a life. The main reasons for these struggles were the pressure of future deportations and the lack of work permits provided by the regional state government. This problematic situation also affected many volunteers who had developed close friendships with refugees and put so much effort into this work. These efforts included daily visits to refugee shelters, group and family homes, and crisis meetings.

As a result of these deep struggles experienced by refugees, volunteers, and activists at *Asylum with Us*, a small group of volunteers and activists created

3 This quote is from an online report that Pastor Stephan published on his website about *Asylum with Us*. That is why I anonymized the author.

the first Asylum Summit, a political organizing meeting, in 2015. While these Asylum Summits were initially organized at the district level and took place in Lauda, they soon expanded their scope to include the entire region. Luisa, one of the first volunteers in a neighboring village of Lauda, recalled how the refugee-support groups created the first Asylum Summits at one of the coordinator meetings:

> "At one of the coordinators' meetings of Asylum with Us, we decided that next time we would also invite other refugee-support groups that are not in the district of Lauda, but nearby."

At the first Asylum Summit, the coordinators of *Asylum with Us* met other volunteers in the region who had also started to expand their networks. Luisa told me one of them was Dieter:

> "Dieter had already started to network in his district [a neighboring district of Lauda district]. He had created this homepage to map all the refugee-support groups in the whole state."

Luisa said that the participants were excited about creating more regular meetings with volunteers and activists beyond the district of Lauda:

> "So, at the summit, he (Dieter) collected the addresses of our groups. Then we had the idea that we really should network more continuously beyond the district. That was actually the first asylum summit in Lauda, which we developed further, because we then invited more and more groups, until now we have invited groups from the entire region."

This is how the regular Asylum Summits in the region came about.

By creating the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us* and the regular Asylum Summits, the refugee-support group in Lauda and the groups throughout the district built new connections among themselves and with similar groups throughout the region. These new connections were based on the shared experience of fighting for refugee rights and supporting and getting to know refugees in their everyday lives. In contrast to the extensive networking efforts with other refugee-support groups, the Lauda group developed few loose connections with other organizations around 2015. These connections developed between individual volunteers and some employees of the welfare

organizations who had just started to work in the refugee support field for a few months in 2015. In the next part, I will explore the further development of these connections and focus more on the secondary actors who began engaging with the issue around 2015.

## Exploring the development of the pro-refugee community (2017–2019)

In the following, I examine the further development of the network connections between civil society organizations and groups. I show how the interactions among the refugee-support groups and with other civil society actors turned into more routine interactions and more formalized ties.

Around 2017, the arrival of refugees slowed down significantly. While there was less urgency for initial emergency assistance in 2017, interviewees who were still actively involved in helping refugees referred to this phase as the integration phase in contrast to the emergency phase in 2015/16. During this new integration phase, many volunteers withdrew from groups. The reasons for shrinking volunteer groups were varied. Some volunteers wanted to become more involved in another area or felt their support was no longer needed. Others were exhausted by the often frustrating and challenging nature of volunteering. Our interviewees reported experiences of frustration, particularly about how local government authorities dealt with refugees. For example, one of the volunteers, Anne, told me:

> "A lot of people said, 'I can't take it anymore, I'm frustrated, I'm going to quit.' There are really a lot of people who have thrown in the towel because we're all tilting at windmills because the asylum policy has become so strict in our region."

Given the dwindling number of volunteers, the conflicts with the local government officials, and the general disappointment with the national asylum policy, the hardcore of volunteers and activists decided to formalize and professionalize the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us* further. This formalization and professionalization mainly consisted of transforming *Asylum with Us* into a registered association and acquiring the resources for a small staff. At the same time, the volunteers and activists insisted on maintaining many of the informal structures that defined the network.

The volunteers and activists of *Asylum with Us* created this hybrid association because they were first confronted with the fact that many volunteers were

withdrawing from refugee support work. Against this backdrop, they knew they needed more resources to fund a small staff to take over some of the coordination tasks that volunteers had been doing, sometimes for years. Second, they wanted to be able to rent space, apply for training from social service agencies, and apply for project funding from social service agencies and churches. All this was only possible if they made *Asylum with Us*, a registered association. While many registered associations have a more institutionalized framework of a formal membership association, the volunteer-network remained very informal regarding membership and formal responsibilities. None of the volunteers and activists became members or took on formal roles in the associations. Instead, they were still primarily connected through email lists.

Shortly after *Asylum with Us* became a registered association in 2017, the volunteers and activists worked on getting funding for a full-time position and some projects they had wanted to pursue for a while. Pastor Stephan, the volunteer of the first hour, discovered that the regional government was promoting a new funding line that would provide funds for paid volunteer coordinators. He told me in an interview that he knew about the latest funding line from other regional districts. He also knew that the welfare organizations in the district had some funds available for smaller projects. In the interview, he said:

> "I just put one and one together and thought, 'Let's put these funds together and create one or even two [volunteer coordinator] positions out of them'. When I suggested it, everyone was on board."

By "everyone", Pastor Stephan meant the four Christian welfare organizations working in the district that he already knew from his work with refugees. He also suggested that the local government had to request funding from the regional government formally. Stephan convinced all these actors that the local government would apply for the funds, and the four welfare organizations would each contribute additional funds to pay for a second paid volunteer coordinator for *Asylum with Us*.

While there was no disagreement on whether to provide funding for two volunteer coordinators, there was disagreement on whom the two coordinators would report. The local government officials involved in the negotiations initially wanted to employ the two volunteer coordinators directly. However, this proposal created considerable tension. The idea that the local government could supervise the two volunteer coordinators caused alarm and resistance among the volunteers. For them, this was an impossible proposal. They told me

that they felt that they had built up a great deal of independence over the years, which they did not want to give up under any circumstances. In any case, they often felt that the local government viewed them as henchmen. For example, Ellen recalled that she and other volunteers feared that this direct connection to the local government would keep political involvement low if the local government directly employed the coordinators. Since *Asylum with Us* had been a registered association for a few months, they could have hired the volunteer coordinators themselves, but the local government vehemently opposed this idea. After some debate, the compromise was that two welfare organizations hired the two volunteer coordinators. Funding for the positions came from regional and local government resources and the four welfare organizations.

According to the interviewees, it is clear that this joint venture intensified the relationship between *Asylum with Us* and the four welfare organizations. After the volunteer-network got to know the representatives of these organizations through the mobilization in 2015/16, the contact remained very informal and limited to individuals. Yet, according to several interviewees, the formalization of the connection in 2017 also created more trust. For example, Pastor Stephan said:

> "Over time, we have become very grateful that they [the four welfare organizations], which previously had no contact at all with the issue of migration, took on so much responsibility and invested their own money in us."

The representatives of these welfare organizations were also enthusiastic about the project. Tobias, the director of one of the two Protestant welfare organizations, emphasized in the interview that the joint project was an excellent opportunity to build a more robust civil society network and share resources. In particular, he stressed the need for local civil society actors to speak with a solid and confident voice on the issue of asylum:

> "If we, the welfare organizations, speak with one voice, then the local government cannot simply ignore us. That's why the joint project is such a great opportunity to share our resources. Not only our organizational resources, but also the resources of Asylum with Us and the volunteers. We all have to work together."

Overall, the joint project was successful in the eyes of those interviewed. Pastor Stephan assumed one of the volunteer coordinator roles after funding was

secured, taking a two-year break from his pastoral ministry. In addition, the welfare organizations hired another volunteer coordinator.

These two volunteer coordinators relieved some of the most dedicated volunteers whose involvement had become almost a full-time job. They also developed many projects where volunteers could provide concrete support to refugees. For example, they offered cultural interpreters to institutions through their website, advertised for participation in the Integration Advisory Board, or organized the cross-district project Vocational Training Support for refugees who were starting an apprenticeship and needed support. *Asylum with Us* also has rooms for the weekly café and language classes.

In addition to the bi-annual Asylum Summits that were constantly organized between 2019 and 2022, various civil society actors established an integration strategy for the Lauda district. This endeavor was motivated by the lack of a comprehensive integration strategy for the district at that time. Volunteers, activists, and staff members at *Asylum with Us* took the initiative in 2019 to establish expert groups that would eventually develop such an integration strategy. While it is typically the responsibility of government authorities to formulate official integration strategies, *Asylum with Us* successfully persuaded the local government to collaborate with civil society actors in developing such a strategy.

Over the subsequent three years, a diverse array of actors contributed to developing this integration strategy. Although a smaller core group played a pivotal role in steering the process, the participation of several hundred individuals was instrumental in providing input and insights. These expert groups encompassed various action areas and crafted specific measures to enhance the integration of immigrants and refugees in the district's future.

The composition of these expert groups was notably diverse, encompassing volunteers, activists, employees from welfare organizations, local government representatives, refugees, and individuals with migration backgrounds. Seven expert groups were established, each dedicated to distinct topics such as society, religion, mobility, education, and health.

One coordinator from the group focused on society and religion and shed light on their discussions, particularly regarding Muslim funerals. They convened meetings that included imams and pastors to address the issue of why Muslims in the district were still sending their deceased loved ones to Turkey for burial rather than being interred locally following Islamic traditions. Through their deliberations within the expert groups, they discovered that there was only one cemetery in the entire district where Muslims could be

buried according to Islamic law. Consequently, this expert group was determined to include a policy recommendation advocating for additional Muslim cemeteries within the new integration strategy.

## Stress-test: The pro-refugee community during the pandemic (2020–2022)

In the following, I briefly outline how the pro-refugee community in Lauda dealt with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and survived this immense stress test. As discussed in the introduction, civil society in Germany experienced significant challenges during the pandemic, as personal contact was at times reduced to a minimum, and activities were suspended. Since I began to conduct the interviews during the pandemic, the topic of the pandemic and its impact on refugee support and advocacy activities were naturally part of the interviews. The interviews in Lauda clearly show that the pro-refugee community survived the stress test of the pandemic, as the follow-up interviews in 2022 highlighted the community's survival and continuation.

Let me first outline how the effects of the pandemic manifested in activities and interaction dynamics of the pro-refugee community in Lauda before I briefly discuss how they dealt with these challenges. The contact restrictions imposed on all residents in Germany meant that members of the pro-refugee community were no longer allowed to meet in groups. As a result, central locations such as the community café remained closed to their activities and interactions. Group German classes, the annual summer festival, and meetings with local government officials were suspended in 2020. This new situation was very tragic for many people who had been involved in the community for several years and for refugees who were still dependent on support. This is how Anne, founder of a small refugee-support group near Lauda remembered it in the follow-up interview in 2022:

> "That was a real turning point. You have to say that […]. For example, we had to stop our German courses. […] This technical German is very difficult, especially for the trainees. The training is not so easy. They [the refugees] need a lot of support."

While the contact restrictions imposed by the pandemic severely limited the community's activities and interactions, especially during the first year of the

pandemic, community members also found ways to cope. The use of digital communication and expanding activities were critical.

First, many volunteers and activists at *Asylum with Us* just as for the expert group members used online tools such as Zoom to keep in touch. While some interviewees acknowledged that online communication was not a substitute for face-to-face meetings, they felt these online tools were necessary for maintaining contact. Jana, a volunteer from a refugee-support group in a neighboring town, told me that she hadn't met her friends from the community in 2020. She said: "We only met on the phone or through Zoom. WhatsApp is also very important to communicate with the refugees […]. That was our communication for the time being." Against this backdrop, the expert groups for developing the integration strategy for the entire district continued. The monthly online meetings felt more exhausting for their participants but proceeded as planned. Similarly, the region-wide Asylum Summits that developed around 2015 continued to occur online. When I participated in one of these Asylum Summits online in 2021, there were approximately 150 people for 6 hours in one Zoom call.

Second, in 2020/21, two employees of *Asylum with Us*, along with volunteers and activists, expanded the services offered by the volunteer-network. The project aimed to help children and adolescents from socially disadvantaged families in the district who could not participate in online classes due to a lack of access to a laptop, regardless of whether they were from refugee families or not. According to Ellen, a former volunteer and current *Asylum with Us* staff member, laptops were needed. She stated: "Our computer project was initiated to provide children with access to computers at home" As a result, *Asylum with Us* began collecting laptop donations, and through their campaign, they recruited new people interested in the work of *Asylum with Us*. Ellen told me they were interested in getting more involved in the refugee issue, something some of them had not considered before.

The pandemic-related contact restrictions were burdensome for volunteers, activists, and employees in the pro-refugee community, as their main activities came to a halt or changed drastically in 2020. However, many adapted to the restrictions after a few months and began using digital communication tools. They addressed local issues, such as the lack of laptops for children and adolescents who needed them for online school work.

When I interviewed community members again in 2022, they resumed their activities. They transferred many activities back to their original in-person formats but conveniently kept some online meetings. The community

café was reopened, the German classes retook place, and activists were planning another Asylum Summit, this time in person. Pastor Stephan expressed excitement about the expert groups completing the integration strategy for the district after two and a half years of collaboration. They convinced the local government to establish an integration advisory board for the district. This was a direct result of the expert groups whose members emphasized the importance of such an advisory board to address topics such as racism and integration as significant local policy issues.

Overall, the pro-refugee community in Lauda faced significant challenges during the pandemic. Despite these obstacles, they persevered and emerged stronger from the pandemic. One contributing factor was the increase in Ukrainian refugees, which heightened the demand for refugee support and advocacy in the district. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this book and will only be addressed in the concluding chapter.

## Insight into the network structure

In the previous sections, I described the formation of a pro-refugee community that emerged in Lauda from the pro-refugee mobilization around 2015. As detailed in the last section, this community's development and survival is characterized by the evolution of loose and more structured interaction routines. These interactions manifested in new and strengthened networks between the organizations and groups in refugee support. In the following section, I offer another perspective on these network dynamics by presenting them as network maps. With the network maps, I want to illustrate how the network ties of key actors were affected by their involvement in the mobilization six years after the mobilization in 2015.

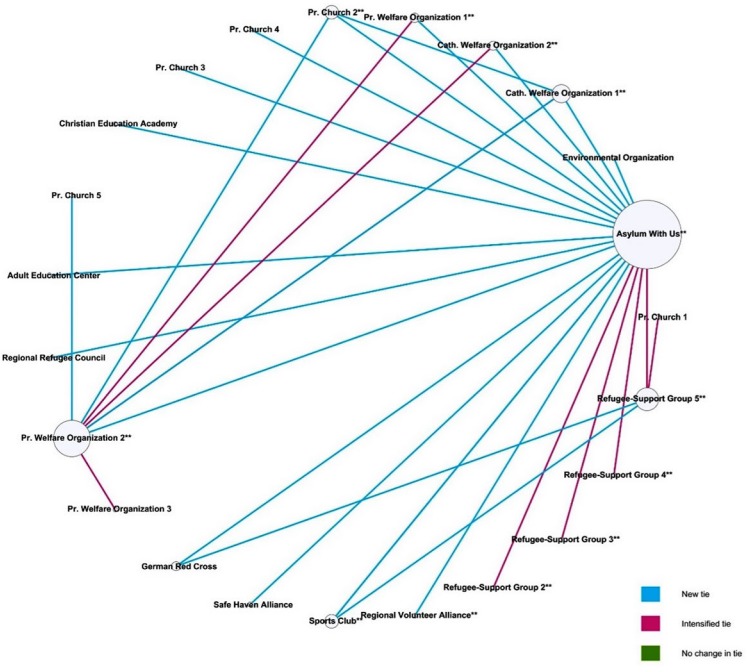
The network map in Figure 2 shows all the key actors that are part of the pro-refugee community (marked with two asterisks **) and their links to other organizations and groups that they are connected to through their work in support of refugees. The network map shows that most ties between organizations and groups are new, with some intensified ties here and there. New connections are those that did not exist before 2015. In other words, these are ties between organizations or groups that developed due to interactions during and after the pro-refugee mobilization. In addition, intensified ties mean that the organizations and groups were already connected before the pro-refugee mobilization. Still, their ties intensified during the mobilization period and in the

years that followed. New and intensified ties represent the community that developed between 2015/16 and 2020/2021.

The volunteer-network *Asylum with Us* shows precisely this dynamic. While *Asylum with Us* started as a network of all 28 refugee-support groups in the district of Lauda, *Asylum with Us* became an independent actor with its group of core volunteers, a small staff, and a meeting space. As you can see from the map, this organization developed a variety of connections with different organizations and groups in Lauda, the district, and the region.

In addition to the network effects, the visualization in Figure 2 shows that the pro-refugee community includes different types of actors. In this respect, the community consists of refugee-support groups, welfare organizations, church congregations, a sports club, an environmental group, a refugee council, a regional volunteer alliance, and a few other actors. What is unique about the pro-refugee community in Lauda compared to the one in Loburg is that the community is not only rooted in the city of Lauda. On the contrary, the community extends to the neighboring districts and even to the regional level. For example, the community includes all the refugee-support groups that have sprung up in the district and are organized in the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us*. I only included the three refugee-support groups I interviewed in the network map. In addition, this community includes organizations and groups that have worked with both *Asylum with Us* and the local government to create the first-ever integration strategy for the district. The community also includes the faction of refugee-support groups from neighboring districts that meet at least twice a year for the Asylum Summits.

*Figure 2: Network changes in Lauda*




## The pro-refugee community in Lauda prevailed

To summarize, this subchapter explored the development of the pro-refugee community in Lauda and its district six years after the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. The increase in the number of refugees in Lauda encouraged the creation of volunteer-led refugee-support groups throughout the district. These informal groups initially provided emergency support, which included medical care, language classes, financial support, trauma counseling, and more. When the volunteers and activists reached their capacities, they combined the efforts of the 28 refugee-support groups and created the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us*. While the connections between the groups were initially very informal, creating *Asylum with Us* formalized these connections to some extent. By 2017, the situation had changed. Due to volunteers' and activists' fatigue, support efforts were shrinking. A core group of volunteers and activists turned *Asylum with Us* into a registered association to stop the

decline of refugee support activities. In terms of its structure, *Asylum with Us* became a hybrid due to its formal status and still a very informal organization with flat hierarchies. In 2017, *Asylum with Us* partnered with local welfare organizations and the government to secure resources. By 2019, key activists at *Asylum with Us* launched expert groups in collaboration with the local government to develop an integration strategy. These groups included diverse participants and aimed to improve the integration of immigrants and refugees. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic severely challenged the survival of the pro-refugee community, the members of the community were able to push through this stress test and take up their activities once the restrictions were lifted. In summary, this subchapter highlights the development and survival of a pro-refugee community in Lauda driven by the efforts of volunteers and activists, the collaboration between informal groups and professionalized organizations, and the opportunities for co-production with the local government.

## Loburg: The Development and Survival of a Pro-Refugee Community

In this subchapter, I discuss the evolution and survival of a new pro-refugee community in Loburg and the dynamics that led to its development. This analysis highlights the emergence of initial interactions around 2015/16 that evolved into more routine interactions and more formalized network structures over the six-year period. First, I outline the situation during the pro-refugee mobilization around 2015/16 and how different groups and organizations interacted. In a second step, I shed light on how these initial interactions during the heightened mobilization evolved into persistent networks. Note that the timeline in Figure 3 illustrates developments between 2015 and 2022. Table 5 provides an overview of the key players.

*Figure 3: Timeline Loburg (2015–2022)*

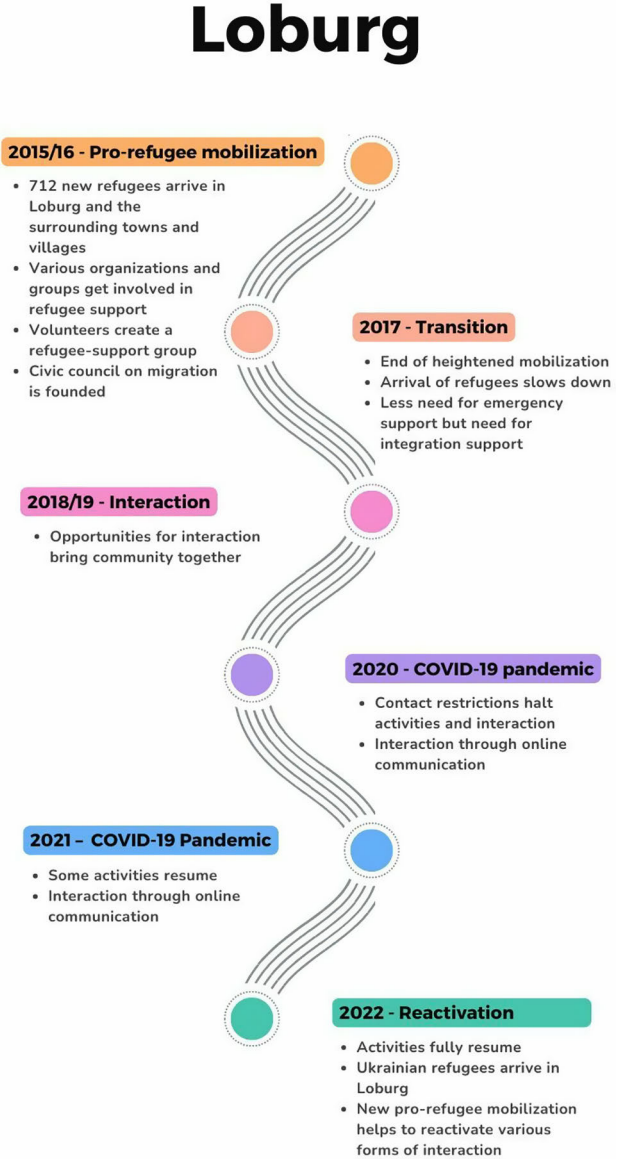


*Table 5: Overview of key actors in Loburg*

| Name[4] | Role | Affiliated Organization/Group |
|---|---|---|
| **Lukas** | Volunteer | Local business network |
| **Thomas** | Activist and Spokesperson/ Manager of refugee shelters | Civic Alliance "Unified"/Regional management of refugee shelters |
| **Lisa** | Activist/Director/Trained Lutheran pastor | Grassroots association "In Action" |
| **Daniela** | Volunteer | Refugee-Support group "Solidarity 4 Refugees" |
| **Amir** | Volunteer and Café manager | Community café |
| **Herbert** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group "Solidarity 4 Refugees" |
| **Ali** | Volunteer | Muslim prayer association |
| **Peter** | Chairman | District sport association |
| **Christian** | Chairman | Local sports club |
| **Anna** | Social worker and Volunteer | Loburg's refugee shelter |
| **Jacob** | Staff | Grassroots association "In Action" |
| **Johannes** | Staff | Regional anti-racism organization |

## Refugee support and interaction dynamics in 2015/16

In the following section, I will discuss the impact of the pro-refugee mobilization around 2015/16 on the network connections between the groups and organizations active in refugee support in Loburg. In doing so, I emphasize how the first interactions between the groups came about that would develop into closer networks in the following years. Before discussing network changes, I describe the overall situation in the civic landscape during the mobilization. The influx of 712 refugees around that year[5], constituting a 180% increase compared to previous periods, caught local authorities and citizens in Loburg unprepared (Destatis, 2017, 2019).

4 Names are anonymized.

5 Interviewees in Loburg made clear that most of the influx happened around 2015. However, the number is based on a data set that provides data for 2014 and 2016.

Similar to developments across Germany, the influx of refugees in Loburg posed considerable challenges. The local government struggled to manage the housing and welfare needs of the new arrivals. Although the government had delegated the management of refugee shelters to a regional entity, local agencies, including immigration and employment offices, remained responsible for refugee services. The challenges identified by my interviewees encompassed inadequate family housing, insufficient public transportation and access to shelters, and local residents' skepticism and opposition towards refugees.

Civil society responded to these challenges by providing essential support and addressing the growing skepticism of the local population. Their efforts entailed furnishing refugees with necessities, fostering interpersonal connections, and engaging in political advocacy to counter skeptical or even xenophobic sentiments, particularly with the emergence of the far-right party called Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Volunteers and activists exhibited remarkable dedication, offering substantial support to fulfill refugees' basic needs during 2015/16. Lukas, a volunteer from the local business network, was astounded by the wave of support: "I was so impressed by […] how many people were willing to take a stand and actually get involved in supporting refugees." He thought this level of support might be expected for a natural disaster but not for a surge in immigration: "In a flood, it would have been normal for people to help. But in 2015/16, many people could have avoided the problem. It would also have been possible not to seek contact with the refugees." While such levels of support might have been expected during a natural disaster, their presence during the immigration surge was remarkable. Thomas, a prominent figure in Loburg's civic landscape, shared this sentiment. As both the district's refugee shelter manager and a spokesperson for the Civic Alliance *Unified*, Thomas interacted extensively with the first volunteers. In the interview, he recounted that people came to the refugee shelters to do something: "At the very beginning, in 2015/16, a lot of people suddenly had so much motivation and drive and went to the refugee shelters". He further underscored that during 2015/16, the ten refugee shelters in the district of Loburg became hubs for volunteers and activists.

Overall, there were two ways to get involved in helping refugees: either volunteers formed informal refugee-support groups, or they supported refugees through existing association and alliance activities. Many volunteers spontaneously decided to go to the ten refugee shelters in the district and see where help was needed. In an interview, Lisa, the managing director of the Grassroots association *In Action*, estimated that there were about forty volunteers

per shelter in the district. Initially, the volunteers offered clothing donations, playgroups, homework help, and sponsorships. This support was informal.

These efforts resulted in the permanent group at the refugee shelter in Loburg. The volunteers in Loburg, who had met at the local refugee shelter, decided to start a refugee-support group called *Solidarity 4 Refugees*. They started the group just a few weeks after meeting at the shelter. When Herbert and Daniela, the group's two founders, initiated the first meeting, they were amazed at the level of interest in the new group:

> "After our first official meeting as a group, we received a lot of encouragement. By that time, we must have had thirty people who wanted to be on our e-mail list."

They left that first meeting with thirty people on their e-mail list and ten people who would later become part of the hard core of the group.

Many of the volunteers and activists in the group belonged to the two churches (a Catholic church and a Lutheran church) in Loburg. Initially, they expected the churches to become more professionally involved in supporting refugees. Daniela, one of the group's founders, recalled that they soon realized that the pastors were also overwhelmed, so they decided to organize the volunteer support themselves: "The pastors were overwhelmed by the situation, and so were the other workers. So, I thought, we just have to do something on our own."

Since she and a few other volunteers in the group were already well connected through previous alliance work in Loburg, they quickly contacted Lisa, the managing director of the small Grassroots association *In Action*, and the city's Lutheran pastor. Since *In Action* had been working on issues like migration for some time, Lisa gave the new group some advice on what services the group could provide. Regarding resources, the group asked the pastor to provide church space for their weekly meetings. In addition to meeting space, the group received some church funds for the first summer party at the refugee shelter and a cooking night. Daniela recalled how *Solidarity 4 Refugees* celebrated the first summer party with the church funds and other donations:

> "Our pastor at the time often donated part of the church's funds to our group. For the first big summer party, we received 550 Euros from the church's donation pot [...] In addition, the church donated ten cakes! [...]."

In addition to the new refugee-support group *Solidarity 4 Refugees*, several existing groups and organizations became involved. Two actors, in particular, emerged as key players. These were the Civic Alliance *Unified* and the Grassroots association *In Action*. The Civic Alliance *Unified* was formed in the mid-2000s and consisted of a broad range of civic actors, the mayor, and some local businesses. *In Action* was a small Grassroots association with some paid staff. In addition to these key actors, volunteers from two large sports clubs and the local business network, as well as staff from the women's aid organization and the regional sports association, became involved in supporting refugees.

This group of actors helped in very informal ways: *In Action* expanded its programs for migrants to include the new refugees. The alliance *Unified*, and the refugee-support group *Solidarity 4 Refugees* became involved in volunteer work in refugee shelters. At the same time, *Unified* organized demonstrations for refugee rights and against the new far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). The sports clubs organized a small bus service to transport refugees from the refugee shelter to the sports clubs and integrate them into various teams. The women's aid association provided support and advice for women and families. The regional sports association organized swimming lessons for girls and tried to resolve conflicts in sports clubs when anti-refugee tendencies and tensions arose. The business network expanded its student sponsorships to provide school supplies for refugee children. Welfare organizations were hardly active in refugee support during that time and did not become part of the key actors. Interviewees told me that welfare organizations did not play a significant role in Loburg and were generally not among the key actors in their local civic landscape.

Initially, the connections that developed between these actors working for refugees around 2015/16 were very informal. The two coordinators of the refugee-support group, Daniela and Herbert, the executive director of *In Action*, Lisa, the spokesperson of the Civic Alliance *Unified*, Thomas, and several other people active in refugee support already knew each other in part before 2015. For example, they had met at protests and rallies organized by the alliance to combat the rise of right-wing extremism in the district. Some of the volunteers from *Solidarity 4 Refugees*, who were also involved in the city's Lutheran congregation, knew *In Action's* managing director, Lisa, through church work. She was also a trained Lutheran pastor and had previously taken on some minor roles in the church.

Lisa also engaged in anti-far-right activities together with Thomas, the speaker of *Unified* and manager of the district's refugee shelters. They wanted

to find a way to deal with the increasing skepticism and rejection of some residents. Thus, they organized several town hall meetings in 2015/16 and 2016 to deal with these worrisome tendencies. In 2015/16, Lisa, the managing director of *In Action*, was one of the first volunteers to connect with some refugees who arrived at the first shelter in the district. This shelter was set up in a village outside of Loburg. Among the residents that lived near that shelter, Lisa recalled that opposition and skepticism spread: "Since there was opposition to the shelter, I decided to go and see what was happening. Many people did not want refugees in their village." In response to this local opposition to refugee shelters, Lisa and Thomas decided to organize town hall meetings. In addition to being an activist with *Unified*, Thomas also became the manager of the district's refugee shelters in 2014, before the peak of refugee reception. In this dual role, he wanted to create a positive, refugee-friendly atmosphere around the refugee shelters. Therefore, the town hall meetings served as information sessions to inform "concerned" citizens about the refugee housing and care plans and eventually calm the tense atmosphere that had developed over a few weeks. Thomas recalled that the overall atmosphere was not hostile. One of the reasons, in his view, was that the public debate in Germany in 2015/16 was quite welcoming to refugees: "The whole mood of the time was dominated by Angela Merkel's famous sentence ['We can do it']." Thomas believed that roughly one third of the population did not openly support this pro-refugee mood, but it was not opportune to rebel against the refugees. He continued: "Later, we realized that this positive mood may have been on thin ice [in the 2017 federal election, the AfD received about 20 percent of the vote in the district of Loburg]." While these town hall meetings may have had only a short-term effect, Thomas and Lisa believe they contained some initial opposition.

## The evolution of the strengthened network (2017–2019)

In the following part, I describe how the network contacts of the groups and organizations developed further when the mobilization period flattened out again in 2016/17. The period between 2016 and 2019 can be described as the institutionalization period. After some groups and organizations interacted with each other during the pro-refugee mobilization around 2015/16, these contacts were still very informal. Most of the contacts were based on personal networks that either already existed in other contexts or were established, for example, in the refugee shelter. While new routines of interaction were

developing within groups and organizations, interaction between groups was more episodic and spontaneous.

Interaction between the various actors became more structured over time. Central to this transformation was establishing the Civic Council on Migration at the end of 2016, led by Thomas. Working at the intersection of government (as the manager of the refugee shelters) and civil society (as a volunteer spokesperson for *Unified*), Thomas wanted to take advantage of his unique dual position. His goal with the council was to regularly bring together the various civil society actors and local government officials. As a conduit between civil society and local governance, the council aimed to reconcile differing perspectives and conflicts.

This format allowed routine exchanges, providing a dialogue and conflict resolution platform. As in Lauda, volunteers and activists often felt overwhelmed and frustrated. From their point of view, the scope of the activities and, thus, the personal burden was enormous. They often felt abandoned by the government. Lukas, a volunteer in a business network, said, "When Merkel said 'We can do it' […] it went a little bit in the direction of 'You can do it.'" Another interviewee, Christian, a chairman of a local sports club, had a similar impression: "In the end, the politicians of the time put a lot of the burden on the volunteers and let them do the work."

In addition to this general frustration, specific conflicts arose, for example, over the lack of housing. The president of a local sports club, Peter, expressed his frustration at the slowness with which the authorities responded to this problem: "[…] the authorities responded so slowly and the paperwork took so long. For us, it was not about some governmental act, but about very intimate personal fates of real people (deep breath)". A social worker who worked and volunteered at one of the refugee shelters, Anna, would have expected much more support from the authorities: "Housing has always been a problem. We would have needed more support in communicating with the local housing associations."

Thomas recalled the tensions between civil society representatives and local government officials. He said those tensions sometimes built up during the week in the refugee shelters before everyone came to the council on Friday: "The interactions were not always consensual. Sometimes sparks flew." He felt that the regular council meetings helped keep the climate between local government and civil society cooperative:

> "Sometimes during the week, when we were stressed and, on the phone, we would say unkind things to each other, and on Friday, when we were together [at the council], we had to put things right. Most of the time it worked out that we looked at each other and said, 'I apologize for my slip the other day. We all want the same thing.' And that's how we always resolved [conflicts]."

Overall, the council became a format for routine interactions between civil society and local government actors. These routine interactions were not free of conflict, but they created opportunities to stay in touch and resolve problems before they escalated.

In addition to these interactions between the state and civil society, the establishment of the council allowed people involved in refugee support to interact more frequently. Johannes, a staff member of a regional anti-racism initiative, recalled that around 2016, the council was important for many people involved in refugee support because it was the only format for them to interact. He described the activities around 2016 as quite flexible but effective:

> "There were so many processes going on between all the actors that were not yet regulated uniformly, but where everything was constantly in flux and being reconsidered. If you wanted to find out something, you had to go to the council meeting and discuss it. For example, council members would ask, 'Who's doing the counseling next week? What about the clothing donations? Do we still have toys? I need a 5-room apartment [for a refugee family]. Can anyone help?' and so on."

While the term "council" makes these meetings seem quite formal, the above quote illustrates how informal and unstructured the meetings were at the beginning. The council was a relatively flexible network without a set list of participants.

By inviting a wide range of actors, the council meetings brought together volunteers and small refugee-support groups, professional welfare organizations, and public officials representing the local government to attend council meetings. In an interview, Anna, the social worker at Loburg's refugee shelter, told me that the council was a very open circle where everyone active in refugee support and advocacy could voice their opinions:

> "Everyone is invited to the monthly council meetings. Associations, companies [that employ refugees], volunteers from our local refugee-support group, [welfare organizations] – everyone was welcome from the beginning

> and it has remained that way. It's an open meeting where everyone can say what's on their mind."

In the interview, Anna repeatedly emphasized that the meetings were open to all individuals and organizations who wished to attend.

Over the years, the group of participants changed. While around 2016, several volunteers and refugee-support groups attended the meetings, since 2017, more and more full-time employees of organizations have participated in the meetings. Volunteers have attended more sporadically since then. At the same time, when Daniela from *Solidarity 4 Refugees* wanted to discuss something with other people in the council, she felt welcome to attend.

In addition to the Civic Council on Migration, from 2017 to 2019, people also strengthened their contacts through regular meetings at the new café, the annual summer parties at the refugee shelter, and the rallies and demonstrations in the city. The café was started by Lisa and some volunteers from the Grassroots association *In Action*. Trained as a pastor in the Lutheran church, Lisa used her church network to get space from the local Lutheran church. The space included a large lounge and kitchen. In 2016, and in the years since, the café, which was open several times a week, became essential for refugees and volunteers. One of the volunteers who kept the café running was Amir. He fled Syria for Germany in 2015. He first came to the café as a refugee to meet other people. In 2018 he started to run the café voluntarily. In 2021, *In Action* received some government funding for the café and hired Amir as a staff member for the café. The events held at the café were essential for the volunteers and the refugees. These events ranged from dinners and religious celebrations to political lectures and discussions about German asylum laws. In the café, volunteers and refugees could talk to each other. More intimate relationships, such as friendships, could form in these casual gatherings. For example, interviewees reported a strong sense of joy and togetherness at celebrations and informal dinners. However, they also noted the great frustrations of working within a restrictive asylum and migration system that was unbearable for many refugees. While the interactional routines at the café differed greatly from the council meetings, the café has a similar networking function. In particular, volunteers from the refugee-support groups *In Action*, *Unified*, and *Solidarity 5 Refugees* made new contacts and strengthened existing ones. In addition, many Muslim refugees have networked and formed their own Muslim prayer association in 2018.

Another recurring point of interaction was the summer parties, which have been held annually since 2015. As mentioned above, the volunteers and activists of *Solidarity 4 Refugees* organized the summer parties to bring all the groups and organizations together for a party. The parties also allowed the group to maintain its networking contacts with many people over the years. Not only were the main actors from 2015/16 (In Action, Unified, Solidarity 4 Refugees) present, but also a much wider range of actors. Herbert, one of the founders of *Solidarity 4 Refugees*, told me in the interview how the summer parties usually took place and who participated:

> "[…] at these summer parties in the refugee shelter, the whole spectrum of actors was always present. So, all the district officials, the social services, and many other associations and people. One person would play the music, another would provide the tents. There was always a welfare organization present, as well as the fire department, the police, and the district sports association."

Herbert emphasized that the summer parties were joyful and welcomed various groups and organizations.

## Stress-test: The pro-refugee community during the pandemic (2020–2022)

In the following, I briefly discuss how the pro-refugee community in Loburg coped with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and survived this immense stress test. As mentioned in the previous subchapter about the pro-refugee community in Lauda, civil society in Germany faced significant challenges during the pandemic. Personal contact was often limited, and activities were suspended. As I conducted most of the interviews during the pandemic, the topic of the pandemic and its impact on refugee support and advocacy activities was naturally part of the interviews. The interviews in Loburg in 2020 and the follow-up interviews in 2022 highlighted that the pro-refugee community coped well with the stress of the pandemic.

First, I will discuss the impact of the pandemic on the community's interaction dynamics, followed by an outline of how community members coped. In 2020, the pandemic suspended many interaction opportunities created since the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. The contact restrictions significantly impacted both community members and refugees in Loburg. One problem was

that people in groups and organizations could no longer meet as usual. Ali, the founder of a Muslim prayer association, expressed his sadness over the fact that Friday prayers were scarcely being held anymore, as "nobody comes to the mosque anymore".

The pandemic brought about a significant challenge in refugee shelters: visitor restrictions. Volunteers and activists from Grassroots associations like *In Action* and the local refugee-support group were no longer allowed to enter the shelters, making it difficult for them to maintain contact with the refugees still residing there. Thus, they were unable to establish relationships with newly arrived refugees. Herbert, one of the founders of *Solidarity 4 Refugees* lamented: "The corona pandemic paralyzed everything". As a result, the group lost their primary location for activities and interaction with refugees and among themselves.

In addition, many of the interactions that became routinized since 2015/16 stopped in 2020. The summer parties at the refugee shelter, meetings and celebrations at the community café, and protests in the city center were all put on hold. Although the intercultural week took place, the party that usually occurred during the week did not happen that year due to the pandemic. Thomas from *Unified* emphasized: "There will be no party this year at the refugee shelters, as it has happened every year before".

However, the community also coped with pandemic-related restrictions by switching to online communication tools and meeting outside. For instance, participants of the Civic Council on Migration, founded in 2016, transitioned from face-to-face to online meetings. They were able to maintain their collaboration during the pandemic. Jacob, an employee of the Grassroots association *In Action*, emphasized: "It really depends on the technical requirements of the people." In 2021, I participated in one of the monthly online sessions with 21 attendees from civil society and the local government.

In 2021, activists organized protests against the difficult living conditions of refugees in Greece. Many volunteers, activists, and employees of organizations attended. In a follow-up interview in 2022, Herbert from the refugee-support group said, "It was nice to finally meet everyone again at the demonstration." Protests against the so-called "Querdenker" movement, formed in Germany against pandemic-related political measures, were organized by members of the pro-refugee community. The members of the Querdenker movement regularly protested against contact restrictions with around 1000 people, including far-right figures. Approximately 300 to 400 volunteers and activists from the pro-refugee community and other progressive groups par-

ticipated in counter-protests. The Querdenker protests since waned following the complete lifting of pandemic restrictions in Loburg.

After pandemic-related restrictions were lifted in early 2022, community members eagerly resumed many of the activities that had been put on hold. Herbert from the refugee support group noted that the influx of refugees from Ukraine was one reason these activities resumed quickly. In a follow-up interview in 2022, Herbert expressed his gratitude for the overwhelming support residents provided to Ukrainian refugees.

Others I interviewed again in 2022 also felt a renewed sense of purpose when the influx of refugees increased rapidly. Therefore, one of the contributing factors to the reactivation after the pandemic and passing the stress test was the new need for refugee support and advocacy in 2022. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this book and will only be addressed in the concluding chapter.

## Insights into the network structure

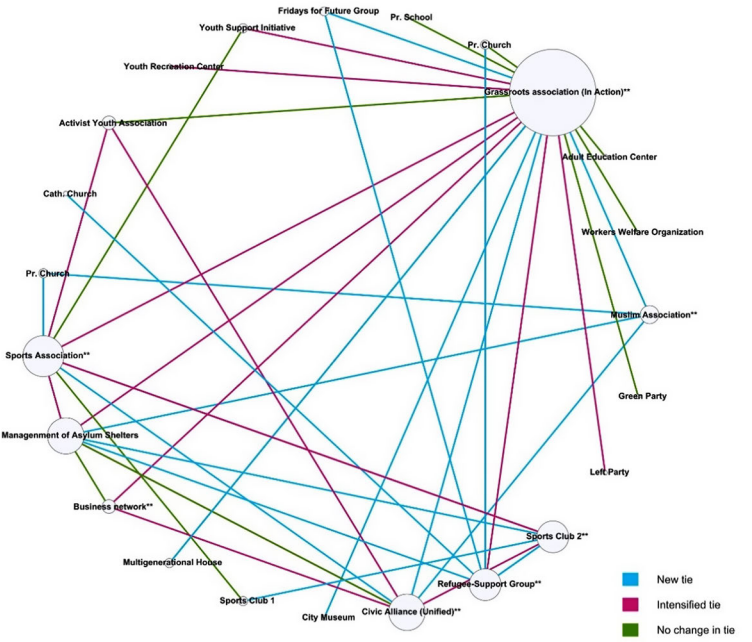
As described in the previous analysis, the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 led to the development of a new pro-refugee community in Loburg. The development of this community is first characterized by the development of either loose or more structured routines of interaction and, as a result, relationships between key actors that were strengthened by the heightened mobilization period and the six years that followed. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of these network changes in a more structured way and compare the networks of key actors before 2015/16 with the networks I examined in my qualitative interviews.

The network map in Figure 4 illustrates the lasting network effects of the pro-refugee mobilization for the involved actors. Specifically, the network map shows all the key civil society organizations and groups involved in 2015/16 (marked with two asterisks **) and their connections to other civil society actors with whom they have interacted on refugee support and migration since 2015. This means that the network map represents a composition of the key actors, as well as several other actors, who are part of the new pro-refugee community in Loburg at the time of the interviews in 2020/21.

As illustrated in the network map, significant connections between organizations and groups grew stronger between 2015/16 and 2020/21. Strengthened network ties refer to those in place before 2015/16 but intensified during and after the pro-refugee mobilization. To put it differently, these ties among

organizations or groups were strengthened due to interactions during and following the pro-refugee mobilization. New network ties did not exist before the mobilization but grew during and after the mobilization. Lastly, there are also network ties between actors unaffected by the mobilization in 2015/16. In this case, no effect means that the actors interviewed did interact with another actor during the mobilization. Still, this interaction did not lead to lasting network tise. The network map overall underscores that many connections that actors built in 2015/16 and the six following years became the threads that united the pro-community that emerged in Loburg.

*Figure 4: Network changes in Loburg*




Regarding key actors, it is clear that the Civic Alliance *Unified* and the Grassroots association *In Action* had established a significant number of connections before 2015. This observation is underscored by the fact that most of these connections were strengthened rather than newly developed in 2015. This con-

trasts with the case of the refugee-support group *Solidarity 4 Refugees*, which emerged in 2015/16 and consequently established entirely new connections. Beyond these network connections, it is equally noteworthy to emphasize the diverse spectrum of actor types interlinked within the pro-refugee community. For example, the Civic Alliance *Unified* has connections with key actors in refugee support and with welfare organizations and religious institutions, including various churches. This multifaceted network pattern is also evident within the Grassroots association *In Action*. The refugee-support group *Solidarity 4 Refugees* has also established links with various actors within the broader civic landscape.

## The pro-refugee community in Loburg prevailed

In this subchapter, I explored the impact of the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 on the development of a pro-refugee community in Loburg. The increasing number of incoming refugees in 2015/16 created significant challenges for local government officials and civil society who were unprepared for this situation. Civil society responded by providing emergency support, addressing skepticism, and countering xenophobia. Initiatives such as town hall meetings organized by the Grassroots association *In Action* and the Civic Alliance *Unified* played a crucial role in addressing skepticism and resistance to refugees. These interactions built the foundation for developing and surviving the pro-refugee community in Loburg.

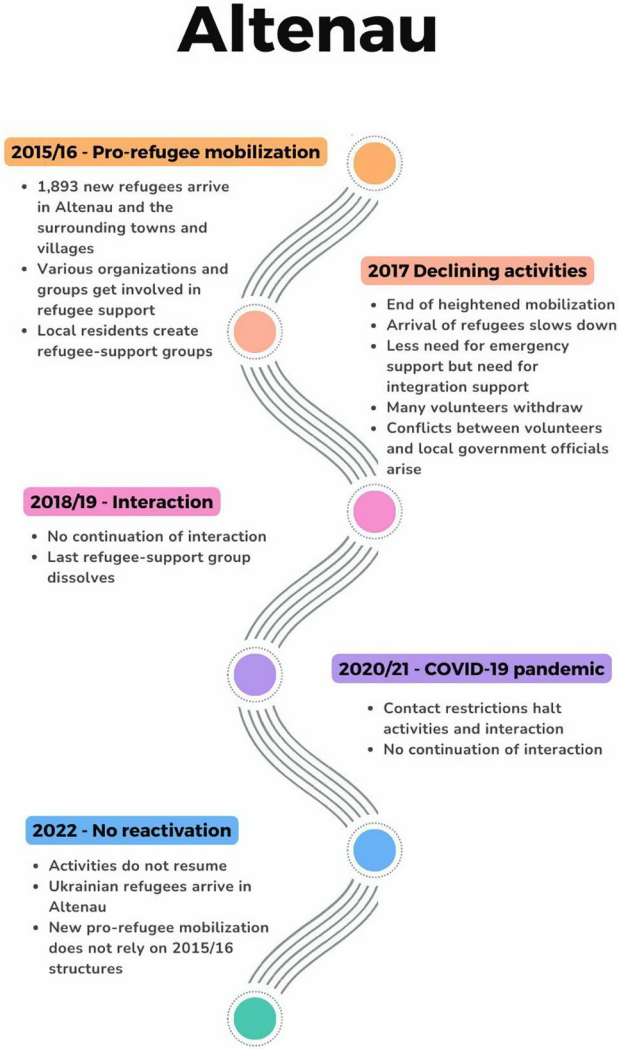
Central to this development was also the establishment of the Civic Council on Migration in 2016. This council served as a bridge between members of civil society and local government. It facilitated important interaction routines over the six years and became a platform for dealing with conflicts. At the same time, the café initiated by *In Action* and the annual summer parties at the refugee shelter became essential hubs for networking.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant challenge for the community, as many activities and group interactions came to a halt due to contact limitations. However, some interactions were transitioned online, and all activities were re-activated once the restrictions were lifted in early 2022. The increased influx of refugees from Ukraine was also essential for re-activating the community's activities because it highlighted the need for refugee support and brought many of the community members together.

## Altenau: Missed Opportunities for Creating a Pro-Refugee Community

In the following subchapter, I discuss what happened in Altenau during the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 and its effects on developing a pro-refugee community. I show that despite a strong mobilization, the organizations and groups that were mobilized in 2015/16 did not develop enduring sustained networks and forms of routine interaction that characterize a pro-refugee community. Note that the timeline in Figure 5 illustrates developments between 2015 and 2022. Table 6 provides an overview of the key players.

*Figure 5: Timeline Altenau (2015–2022)*



## The heightened mobilization and networking efforts

Much like in the other cases, the increase in the number of refugees by 1,893 around 2015/16[6] sparked an intense mobilization of support in Altenau (Destatis, 2017, 2019). This support mainly responded to the local government's lack of preparedness to handle this sudden increase. Altenau faced substantial difficulties in accommodating and supporting the influx of refugees. Conversations I held with people involved in refugee support already showed people's deep sense of pride when talking about the year 2015/16. One of them was Sophie, an employee at the Youth migration service. She shared her surprise about the extent of the support in 2015:

> "2015 was of course surprising for everyone [...]. There were a lot of volunteers who immediately got involved and really picked up the refugees from the bus and even from the train station and then made sure that they were accommodated. So, there was really a lot of positive energy, which was perhaps not so typical for our sleepy Altenau".

She expressed her surprise at the positive response to the challenging situation.

Other interviewees also fondly recalled the broad support volunteers and employees of various welfare organizations and churches provided. Birgit, the director of the Family center who got involved, recalled that various groups and organizations established new initiatives:

> "There were definitely many new meet-ups and groups of social and church institutions that tried everything to help the refugees. Whether it was the international café here or the international youth meeting."

When she thought back to 2015, she got excited about the new climate she experienced in Altenau: "The word 'international' was suddenly everywhere again. It was so beautiful. Here for small province Altenau it was just really nice." Both Sophie, the employee of the Youth migration service, and Birgit from the Family center perceived Altenau as quite province-like. Yet, both women thought Altenau's residents were mainly excited about the fresh air

6 Interviewees in Altenau made clear that most of the influx happened around 2015. However, the number is based on a data set that provides data for 2014 and 2016.

and the new international feel. While this sentiment was shared by other interviewees, Bianca, the co-founder of the refugee-support group *Refugees Welcome*, also emphasized that refugees also experienced harsh racism, and the volunteers involved in the support activities experienced rejection by people they knew.

*Table 6: Overview of key actors in Altenau*

| Name[7] | Role | Affiliated Organization/Group |
|---|---|---|
| **Sophie** | Staff | Youth migration service |
| **Birgit** | Director | Family center |
| **Harald** | Volunteer | Catholic welfare organization 2 |
| **Sabrina** | Migration counselor | Catholic welfare organization 1 |
| **Katja** | Director | Adult education center |
| **Niko** | Pastor | Protestant church 4 |
| **Bianca** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group "Refugees Welcome" |
| **Helen** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group "Refugees Welcome" |
| **Leo** | Volunteer | Yezidi cultural association |

The pro-refugee mobilization was visible across the local civic landscape. It resulted in forming numerous informal refugee-support groups and the active involvement of already established organizations and groups. Among the groups was the refugee-support group *Refugees Welcome*, which was particularly prominent during that time.

The already existing organizations that became active around 2015/16 can be divided into three types of actors: welfare organizations, recreational organizations, and religious organizations. In the following part, I describe how these different organizations and groups were involved, and to what extent and how they interacted during this time.

First, I will outline the support of the welfare actors who were well represented and much more involved in Altenau than Loburg and Lauda. One reason

7 Names are anonymized.

for their strong involvement was that many welfare organizations, such as the various Christian welfare organizations, had already been active in the field of migration before. As explained in the research design chapter, the proportion of the migrant population is higher in Altenau than in the other two cities, so services such as migration counseling were already established beforehand. Sabrina, the migration counselor of a Catholic welfare organization, underscored that the organization gained many new volunteers in 2015/16: "In the beginning, of course, there was a lot in 2015. We had the main staff and the migration-counseling centers. We also had very, very many volunteers who were very active." Thus, for these organizations, this was also a great recruitment opportunity.

Particularly central in Altenau was the local branch of a large Catholic relief organization. In a fly-by-night operation, the Catholic relief organization was commissioned to establish an emergency camp in the city. This Catholic relief organization became one of the key players in refugee support in 2015/16. Harald, a long-time volunteer at the organization, shared his amazement about how quickly the employees of this relief organization set up Altenau's first of such emergency refugee shelters:

> "They got the assignment to build the refugee camp on a Friday. And Monday morning the refugee camp stood and could take 1,000 people. In the beginning, there were only 700 in there, but the number kept increasing. And the camp was gradually expanding to accommodate up to 1500 people at some point."

Tasked by the local government with setting up tents for up to 1,500 refugees, the organization gathered around 200 volunteers over a few weeks. While some had already volunteered for them, many were new to this engagement and came just because they heard the tents had to be built up in only a few days. Overall, they set up tents, organized food distribution, offered recreational activities for children and young people, and set up clothing stores with donated clothing.

Quickly after that, other welfare organizations began to expand their work. One Catholic welfare organization was responsible for about 100 families in 2015/16. Another Christian organization had already been responsible for youth migration services before 2015/16 and scaled up its projects in this area with state funding.

Like other welfare organizations, the Adult education center successfully applied for state funding for beginner German courses. The center's director, Katja, told me in the interview that she decided to apply for these funds because volunteers were asking for help with German classes and professional counseling because they were overwhelmed providing all of these services on their own. Others also noticed that she got these funds for the Adult education center. For instance, Birgit, the director of the Family center, noticed that the Adult education center substantially improved their funding situation during that time:

> "[…] There was the adult education center, which of course also got good funding from the federal government for one German course after another. So, I think they expanded their offerings by 300 percent."

The case of the Adult education center in Altenau was representative of other welfare organizations that also significantly improved their funding as they benefited from increased government funding.

The interviewees working for the different welfare organizations in Altenau said their interaction had increased during 2015/16. At the same time, they emphasized that these contacts had existed before and had worked together with these actors on other occasions. They had already participated in a round table on migration at the district level. As Altenau already had a high proportion of people with a migration background before 2015/16, such round tables had developed years before, bringing together all professional organizations working on migration. In 2015/16, another round table was created at the city level. Several interviewees emphasized that the same actors participated in this round table as in the round table at the district level.

The second type of actors involved in refugee support were a few informal refugee-support groups. These groups often did not have a name or formal structures. Interviewees usually referred to them as friendship-based circles that wanted to "do" something by collecting clothes and donating them to a refugee shelter nearby.

Besides these highly informal groups, there was also one larger refugee-support group *Welcome Refugees*. This group emerged when residents saw the enormous need for emergency support that the local government and the welfare organizations setting up the first emergency camp could not handle alone. The local government had previously invited citizens to a few information sessions about the increasing influx of refugees to Altenau. At the information

sessions, fifty residents decided to form a group. While some volunteers were helping the Catholic relief organization in the emergency camp, most of the group wanted to support refugees at the city's new Central contact point. The Central contact point was an institution the local government had established in 2015/16 to coordinate their refugee reception efforts. The Central contact point offered refugees advice on various topics, particularly housing, income, health, education, work, and social issues. The refugee-support group *Welcome Refugees* attracted around 100 people in total. Initially facilitated by local government staff, the group later operated independently, focusing on fostering encounters, companionship, and education. Helen, one of the first volunteers, recalled that *Welcome Refugees* developed several working groups in only a few months:

> "There was a working group called 'Encounter', which was more of a meet-up café, and I took part in that. Then there was the group 'Guidance', which accompanied people on their way to the authorities and so on, in other words a form of sponsorship. And the third working group was called 'Education', which offered basic German lessons."

There were ten to twenty volunteers in each of these and other working groups.

However, the group's prominence waned by 2016 due to the professionalization of migration services and the loss of meeting facilities at the Central contact point. While the group was active in these working groups for roughly one year, volunteers increasingly left the group because different welfare organizations and the Adult education center had started offering more professional services in similar areas like education and legal counseling.

Some volunteers, including Bianca, who had coordinated most of the activities at *Welcome Refugees*, wanted to keep the group alive. Thus, Bianca and a few other volunteers contacted the local mayor, who was looking for volunteers to run an information hub in one of the neighborhoods where many refugee families were moving around in 2016.

After a few meetings, the mayor allocated a dedicated space for *Welcome Refugees*. In a neighborhood that had a high concentration of refugee families but historically low migrant presence, the mayor suggested converting an empty building into a space for the group. This space aimed to foster interaction among volunteers, refugees, and residents, serving as a hub to mitigate potential conflicts and promote understanding between new and old res-

idents. One of the group members, Bianca, recalled how glad they were when they got this building:

> "We started quite promptly in February. This house was officially handed over to us by the mayor, with the keys and the words 'You can do what you want here'".

In 2016, *Refugees Welcome* had around forty volunteers who regularly met at the new information hub.

In addition to the activities of more professionalized organizations such as welfare organizations and more informal refugee-support groups, three religious institutions were among the third type of actors that actively began to participate in refugee support in 2015/16. The first initiative to support refugees by a religious institution was a Protestant congregation involved in setting up a bike yard to repair and distribute bicycles to refugees, fostering mobility and forging close relationships among volunteers and refugees. Volunteers in that congregation organized a free bike shop in the courtyard of the main church building. The bike yard offered to repair donated bicycles and then give them to refugees. When I interviewed Niko, the congregation's pastor, he proudly told me about this unique set-up:

> "People came to us and donated their bicycles, which were then repaired together with two mechanics who work for us on a voluntary basis. And this offer then exploded, so to speak. We were open almost every day and we had a lot of people coming and going in our inner courtyard. We collected bicycles, old bicycles, we made them into good condition. We then gave these bicycles to refugees, because we thought it was easier to explore the surroundings on a bicycle than on foot, so to speak […]. We then trained refugees as mechanics, who then worked here in teams themselves. So, we had, I don't know, to put it mildly, maybe 50 to 60 people outside in the churchyard every day."

In 2015/16, according to Pastor Niko, about 100 to 150 refugees came to get a bike. He went on to say that the commitment of his congregation came "*from the bottom up*". It was not he who had started the bike shop, but volunteers. These volunteers also organized themselves to a large extent. In the interview, Pastor Niko raved about this time: "*We were like in a frenzy for two years*".

During this time, the community networked here and there with other groups. For example, with two catholic welfare organizations, the vocational

school, and various local businesses. Significant at the beginning of 2017 was the festival of cultures in the city, where the church connected with multiple local associations. At the same time, there was little networking with other churches or congregations of different religions. From Pastor Niko's point of view, competition between the church congregations was the main reason for this:

> "There is always an underlying competition between churches. The distribution of funds. It all plays a role. I totally pulled out of that, because I don't want to do that."

The second initiative was founded by the Family center of Altenau, which involved an intensive language program for refugees, a program to help with documents, and a summer vacation program for children and young people. For Birgit, the director of the Family center, the period between 2015 and 2017 was a collaborative moment. She believed many actors moved closer together due to 2015/16 and that "Not everyone was doing their own thing." The different actors had to cooperate to cope with the situation because before 2015/16, many actors were focused on their work and concentrated on acquiring funding.

The Yezidi cultural association of Altenau led the third initiative. Since many refugees were Yezidi, they felt a special responsibility to support people of the same religion. This is what Leo, one of the organization's leaders told me in an interview. During this time, the organization also established contacts with other organizations, such as the Catholic relief organization, the Castle theater, the Youth center, and the Art association. However, the members of the association could not continue these contacts. In the interview, Leo said it is often difficult to find people in the association who actively promote cooperation: "We often lack the people who sit down there and promote such cooperation". Finding the financial resources and volunteers to commit to such initiatives was challenging.

## Activities and enduring interactions (2017–2019)

The pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/2016 was characterized by a collaborative spirit among various actors, resulting in increased interaction. However, despite the pro-refugee mobilization in response to the refugee crisis, Altenau's actors lacked the enduring networks and interactions observed in Lauda and Loburg. While the key actors I interviewed emphasized that interaction with

other organizations and groups increased between 2015 and 2016, almost none of these relationships were affected in the years after the heightened mobilization.

Unlike in Lauda and Loburg, the empirical analysis of Altenau showed almost no persistent interaction routines established among the different organizations and groups involved in supporting refugees during 2015/16. In the interviews, I observed some exceptions where actors did establish such routines. However, these routines either did not last or were quite exclusive. A few examples of interaction routines that did not last revolved around the refugee-support group *Refugees Welcome*. As previously described, *Refugees Welcome* was founded with great enthusiasm in 2015. After having to move their meeting spot several times, the group finally set up their roots in a building that the then-mayor rented out for them free of charge. Helen, one of the group's founders, shared how they interacted with many other civil society actors in the neighborhood:

> "Once a month we organized neighborhood meetings. There was a local welfare association, the church community, the local council and we from our group Refugees Welcome. We also invited a woman from the debt counseling service, the social worker from the youth welfare office, and so on. It was actually a coffee party. So, people brought their own home-baked cakes. The normal residents of the neighborhood were also invited, a poster was hung in front of the door, and we did a lot of advertising. And then completely different people and completely new people came."

However, two years after the mayor had provided the building for the group's use as a hub for their activities, the local government terminated the agreement. As a result, the group had to leave the building. This closure was a significant blow to *Refugees Welcome*, as the volunteers had long-term plans and had built relationships within the group and with residents, including many refugee families and civil society actors in the neighborhood. Consequently, many volunteers associated with *Refugees Welcome* resigned, ending their involvement with the group. Thus, the weekly café meetings and monthly meetups with a group of civil society actors from the neighborhood stopped instantly. The exact reasons for termination could not be determined in the interviews. Ultimately, however, the reason was probably that in 2018, the new mayor of the city wanted to relocate the refugee families living in the neighborhood. From his point of view, there was no longer any reason to keep the

volunteers of the group *Refugee Welcomes* in the building. All municipal buildings occupied for refugee accommodation and the activities of *Refugees Welcome* were supposed to be used again for other purposes. As a result, the interaction routines that had grown after the heightened mobilization in 2015/16 waned in 2018 when *Refugees Welcome* had to move out of the neighborhood. I will go into more detail about these dynamics in a later chapter.

Another routine interaction with the potential to become an anchor for a new pro-refugee community also emerged in 2015/16. As described above, the city established a city-based migration roundtable for civil society organizations working on refugee and migration issues. However, this roundtable, which was still taking place in 2021/2022 when I conducted the interviews, did not contribute to developing and surviving a pro-refugee community like in Lauda and Loburg. This is because the roundtable was like an exclusive membership club with only professionalized organizations, mostly welfare organizations. This means that other civil society actors, such as refugee-support groups, sports clubs, or more minor associations, were not an equal part of the roundtable meetings. Helen from *Refugees Welcome* acknowledged that volunteers supporting individual refugees were sometimes invited to the meetings. However, she felt they were not involved in the exchange and were instead informed about new developments or legal changes. They could also listen to what welfare organization representatives had to say. But they wanted to be included and seen as the experts in refugee support that they felt they were. Bianca told me about her frustration with these roundtables:

> "As volunteers, we also received invitations to the meetings, but the main topic was the passing on of information by the social workers. At the end of the meeting, there was always an opportunity to talk again, but not in such a way that we could put our experiences in the foreground, but rather that we were told something. Then people from other areas were always invited, from different welfare organizations, who presented new reports. This was of course also interesting. But it was not possible to talk about individual problems and challenges somehow."

As Bianca pointed out, the volunteers from *Refugees Welcome* did not just want to sit quietly and receive information from staff and officials but instead actively contributed to the discussions.

The second reason why the roundtable did not contribute to the development of a pro-refugee community relates to the meaning of the roundtable.

Interviewees from welfare organizations that participated in the roundtable emphasized that their relationships with other members were not affected. This is because most roundtable members knew each other quite well before 2015. They were already in close contact through the very similar district-level migration roundtables.

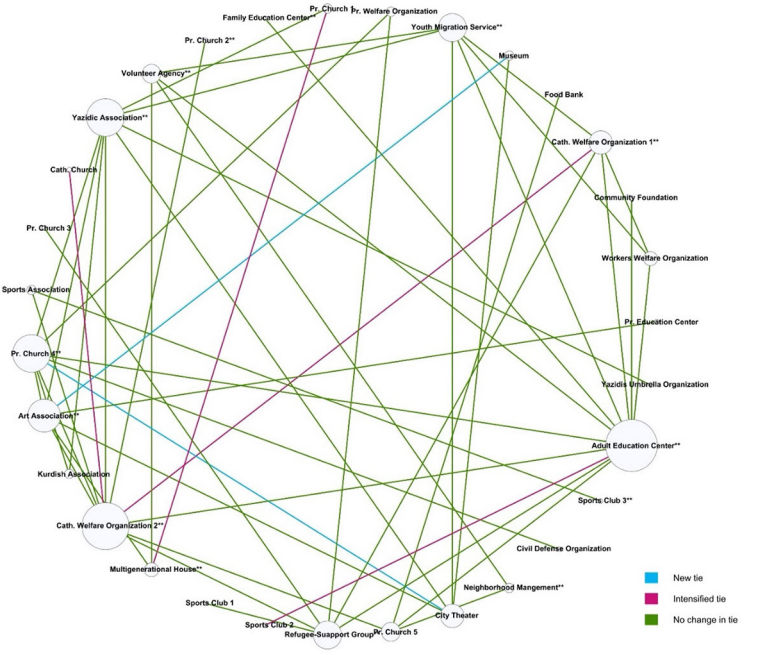
Finally, it is worth mentioning that Altenau's local government developed an integration strategy in 2018. According to an interview with an official, no civil society actors were involved in the development. While in Lauda, for example, the development of the integration strategy became an important part of networking between civil society actors and between them and state actors, Altenau's local government may have missed this opportunity

## Insights into the network structure

As described in the previous analysis, the increased mobilization in 2015/16 did not have a lasting impact on establishing a new pro-refugee community in Altenau. As outlined above, the formation of such a community can primarily be characterized by the development of loose and more structured routines of interaction. It also depends on the relationships between key actors that were either newly cultivated or strengthened during the period of heightened mobilization and the years that followed. In the following section, I present an overview of the network perspective in a more systematic way.

The network map in Figure 6 illustrates the network effects of 2015. Specifically, the network map shows how the network connections of key actors involved in refugee support in 2015/16 (marked with two asterisks **) were affected. The network map highlights that, as of 2020/21 (interview period), most actors did not experience any network changes due to the increased mobilization in 2015. This means the key actors interacted with the other actors they were connected to on the network map but did not develop an intensified connection with them in the following years.

*Figure 6: Network changes in Altenau*




However, there are some exceptions. For example, Catholic welfare organization 2 intensified its connection with the Catholic welfare organization, and the Arts association developed a new connection with the City museum. Recall that an intensified tie is a tie that existed before 2015/16, but not to the same extent. A new tie is an entirely new connection that did not exist before 2015. Nevertheless, the overall picture reflects the developments I described in the first part of this chapter. That is, the organizations and groups that were mobilized to support refugees in 2015/16 did not get involved.

## Lost momentum: Altenau's struggle with growing a pro-refugee community

Despite the unprecedented pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16, this subchapter shows that the organizations and groups involved in the mobilization did not develop lasting networks and sustained interactions characteristic of new

pro-refugee communities. Altenau, similar to the other cases, experienced a pro-refugee mobilization when the number of refugees starkly increased in 2015/16. This mobilization led to the formation of numerous informal refugee-support groups in the city and the active involvement of pre-existing organizations, such as welfare organizations, recreational associations, and religious institutions. My analysis showed increased interaction between the different groups and organizations during the heightened mobilization.

Despite this increased interaction from 2015 to 2016, these actors did not develop new and strengthened networks and continued forms of interactions, as I observed in Lauda and Loburg. Few sustained forms of interaction were established, and those either did not last or were exclusive. In addition, the refugee-support group *Refugees Welcome* lost its meeting place and many volunteers, eventually resulting in declining interaction. The city's migration roundtable also did not contribute to the development and survival of a pro-refugee community because it was exclusive and based on pre-existing relationships not strengthened by the roundtable meetings. In this sense, the network map in Figure 7 above also helps to visualize these findings. The map shows that the connections between key actors in 2015/16 did not intensify significantly in the six years after the mobilization. Although the pro-refugee mobilization in Altenau was significant, the period did not lead to the development and survival of a new pro-refugee community.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly impact the actors' interactions regarding refugee support and advocacy. Notably, no interaction routines or intensified networks were developed that could have been affected. During follow-up interviews in 2022, interviewees reported that when the influx of refugees from Ukraine increased in Altenau, residents formed new support groups instead of relying on the short-lived structures built around 2015/16.

## Neheim: Missed Opportunities for Creating a Pro-Refugee Community

In this subchapter, I aim to describe what happened in Neheim during the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 and examine the implications of this period for developing a new pro-refugee community. As I show, Neheim's civil society did not experience such a development. I discuss what prevented a new pro-refugee community from evolving. Note that the timeline in Figure 7 illustrates

developments between 2015 and 2022. Table 7 provides an overview of the key players.

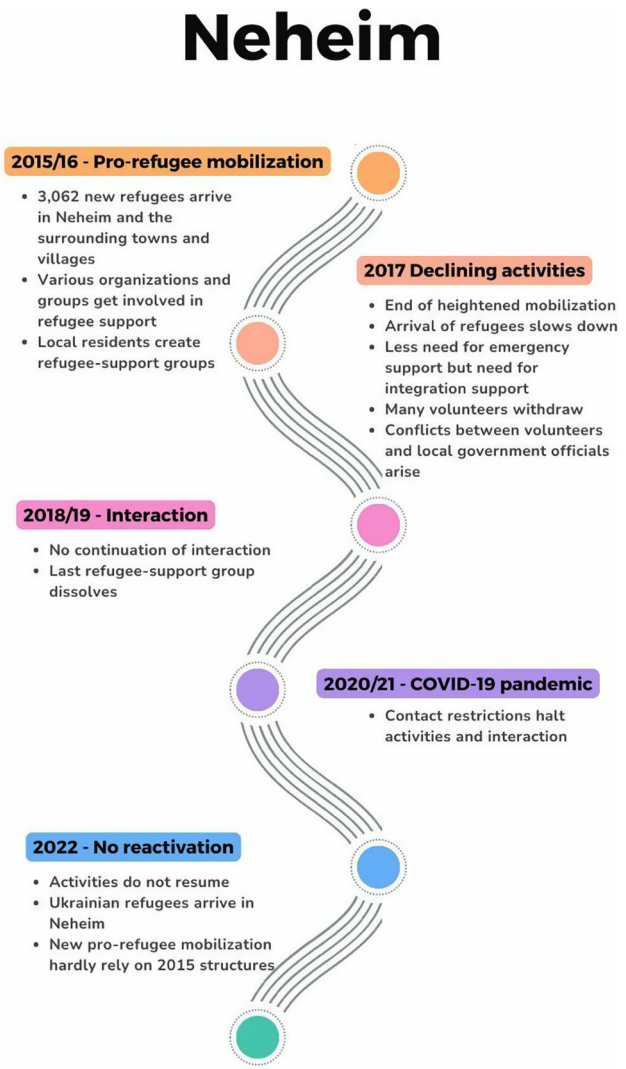
## The heightened mobilization and networking efforts

The increased influx of refugees in 2015/16 catalyzed a profound surge of volunteerism and activism in Neheim. Between 2014 and 2016, 3,062 refugees arrived in the larger district of Neheim (Destatis, 2017, 2019). As interviewees told me, most came in 2015/16. Please recall that the district is much larger than the district of the other three cases, which explains the higher number of refugees in the district. Responding to this upsurge in the number of refugees, various organizations and groups rallied to provide emergency support.

The response manifested through new informal refugee support and established organizations and institutions such as the *Multicultural House* and the Adult education center. Church congregations fostered cross-cultural interaction by establishing an international café, and the local *Refugee Council* saw increased volunteer engagement.

Residents of Neheim formed small groups to address emergent needs and navigate the complexities of supporting the refugees. Several interviewees estimated that around 100 to 200 volunteers and local activists were involved in refugee support in 2015/16. Two volunteers, a married couple, Christine and Luis, who belonged to a small, informal refugee-support group, described this period as follows:

*Figure 7: Timeline Neheim (2015–2022)*



> "In the beginning, we were completely overwhelmed when the first refugees arrived in 2015. And they came in such large numbers. When it came to very practical things, it was very good that we met in small groups, but on the spot and very local, to share ideas. One volunteer had this advice, and another had that advice about teaching German. That was really helpful."

Christine and Luis emphasized the value of small groups of volunteers where immediate exchanges could occur.

*Table 7: Overview of key actors in Neheim*

| Name[8] | Role | Affiliated Organization or Group |
|---|---|---|
| **Christine** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group |
| **Luis** | Volunteer | Refugee-support group |
| **Hamza** | Chairman | Integration Council |
| **Henrik** | Social Worker/Neighborhood Manager | Multicultural House/former Neighborhood management |
| **Susanne** | Director | Multicultural House |
| **Matthias** | Activist | Refugee Council |
| **Annette** | Activist | Refugee Council and Women's Network |
| **Johannes** | Pastoral advisor | Catholic Church |
| **Patricia** | Pastor | Protestant Church |

The refugees were initially placed in decentralized, makeshift accommodations. For instance, empty buildings of two former middle schools and a hotel were spontaneously converted into refugee shelters. The local government in Neheim only created the most necessities, and even these were sometimes missing. Thus, the different civil society organizations and groups shouldered the responsibility of addressing shortages in essentials such as accommodation, food, and clothing. Yet, the local government's unpreparedness and deficient infrastructure posed considerable challenges. Responding to the situation's urgency, many volunteers acted independently or cooperated through

8 Names are anonymized.

established organizations to provide immediate support. The chairman of the integration council, Hamza, recalled that many refugees wanted to learn German quickly. Still, not enough classes were available: "When the first young people came to us and said they wanted a language course. […] But in [Neheim], there were no offers." Hamza noted that essentials such as German language classes were unavailable in Neheim around 2015/16.

Henrik, a social worker who worked as a neighborhood manager around 2015/16, remembered this support very well. As a neighborhood manager, he was responsible for weekly neighborhood meetings and youth groups. Through his work, Hendrik was constantly in exchange with many people. When one of the new refugee shelters opened up in his neighborhood, he experienced everything firsthand:

> "There was an incredible amount of civic engagement in a variety of places. There was everything from concrete help with clothing, furniture, general equipment to food and care packages. It was really a culture of welcome, a very broad welcome culture."

Among the key players in 2015/16 I identified were the *Multicultural House*, the local *Refugee Council*, two church congregations, and the *Women's Network*. The *Multicultural House* was founded in the late 1990s by three welfare organizations in the city. The aim was to unite their efforts in migration and asylum, as previously, each of these organizations offered migration support services. Since its establishment, the *Multicultural House* has become the central institution dealing with migration issues in Neheim. Since the staff at the *Multicultural House* had previously worked on migration and asylum issues for many years, in 2015/16, many volunteers reached out to them. Susanne, the director, recalled: "People came to us and asked 'what can we do'? For example, people came here and had plastic bags with clothes. Others asked where they could donate money." Since they had coordinated volunteer work in the field of migration before, the local branch of a large humanitarian organization that had set up the first emergency camp in the city asked the *Multicultural House* to coordinate the volunteers again. The humanitarian organization staff did not have capacities on their own but believed volunteers needed some form of coordination. In 2015/16, the *Multicultural House* staff and around 50 volunteers organized a café for refugees and volunteers to meet. They also organized language classes and helped deal with government agencies and obtain documents.

During this time, the *Multicultural House* and the *Refugee Council* interacted closely with each other. Since these actors had worked together before and interacted in the city's Working Group on Asylum, they tried to exchange information on the legal situation of refugees and divided duties regarding accompanying refugees to job centers, immigration agencies and other public institutions. Unlike the *Multicultural House*, the *Refugee Council* was volunteer-run since its formation in the mid-1980s. The group of around 15 volunteers has been primarily advocating for better and more just asylum policies. In 2015/16, they also started to work more with individual refugees who needed legal counseling by cooperating with an asylum law firm.

Another important initiative in refugee support was the welcome café that the Catholic and Protestant Church in Neheim created in 2015. Situated near a new refugee shelter, the two church congregations organized monthly café gatherings for residents and refugees. The idea to create a café was born at a community party close to the shelter, where some initial interactions between residents and refugees occurred. Recognizing the need for ongoing connections, the pastors of the two congregations envisioned a dedicated space for interaction. Pastor Patricia from the Protestant Church and Johannes, a pastoral advisor from the local Catholic Church, told me that this was when they realized that they needed a place where residents and refugees could meet regularly:

> "It was a very nice community festival and refugees had just arrived in the neighborhood. Some of the refugees wanted to see what was going on. The music was blaring over to the refugee shelter, and then some of the refugees joined in and mingled with the crowd. This was in 2015/16, in September. And that's when we realized, 'Oh, there's a need there. They want to get into contact with some residents. […] It would be nice if they could connect a little bit in the neighborhood'".

Patricia and Johannes thought about how refugees could connect with residents in the neighborhood and decided to open up a little welcome café. The gatherings took place at a nursing home due to limited available space at the churches. Despite the constraints, the pastors arranged various activities, including coffee, games, crafts for children, mimes, and bobby car races. For about five months, the café thrived, run by a group of roughly 20 to 25 loosely organized volunteers affiliated with the local Catholic and Protestant church.

The café's success was evident in the consistent turnout, as individuals from the refugee shelter and the neighborhood met regularly. However, after a year of these gatherings, they abruptly dissolved. The reason behind this interruption was the dissolution of the nearby refugee shelter, rendering the café's initial purpose obsolete. From Patricia's and Johannes' points of view, this was a shame because they had just routinized the café meetings: "Just when we were so well established, the shelter disbanded". Just as the café was gaining stability, the shelter's closure disrupted its operations. Some volunteers continued to work with refugees, while others shifted their focus. Those who wanted to continue their work began volunteering at the *Multicultural House*.

The accounts of engagement and support for refugees in the period around 2015/16 demonstrate a significant pro-refugee mobilization in Neheim. In addition, the different organizations and groups were interacting with one another around 2015/16. However, after 2016, I could not find any records regarding lasting forms of interaction. In contrast, I could even observe some institutionalized interaction formats being destroyed around that time.

One issue that came up repeatedly in the interviews was the breakdown of the Working Group on Asylum. The Working Group was created in the mid-1980s and ended in 2016. In the 30 years of its existence, the various members came together regularly to discuss issues related to asylum policy. Members represented various welfare organizations, the local government, religious congregations, and the *Refugee Council*. Then, in 2016, the regular meetings of the Working Group ended quite abruptly.

Matthias, a long-time activist of the *Refugee Council*, was angry when he told me about the abrupt ending of the Working Group. He expressed frustration and sadness because, in his eyes the group had done so much good for the refugees in the city:

> "This exchange [in the working group] then completely collapsed over the change of mayor. The structures that existed until then have been eroded. And the basis of trust that we had built up over the years is largely broken. So, all it takes is a few acting individuals in politics or administration to destroy such structures."

Since the end of the Working Group meetings, he told me that all the structures around the Working Group had been broken.

Since the breakup of the Working Group in 2016, members did not come together anymore. In the years before 2016, the group had, amongst other things, worked on a care strategy for refugees that the local government approved. They also had successfully fought for a resolution to take in more international civil war refugees.

Matthias, the activist mentioned above, was convinced that the new mayor had decided to stop the Working Group. The mayor moved the refugee issue to another department of the local government, so other government officials were now responsible for the problem. These were officials who had never been part of the Working Group before. They suddenly expressed great concern for the refugees' privacy regarding data protection and decided that the Working Group could no longer discuss individual cases. Since discussing individual cases was 2015/16 the group's main business, this decision brought about many conflicts between civil society actors and local government officials. Ultimately, the officials stopped convening meetings of the Working Group in 2016. This marked the end of the Working Group. Matthias told me that in the view of many civil society representatives of the Working Group, the data protection issue was just a means to end the influence of civil society organizations and groups on the topic of asylum:

> "Everything we did in the area of refugees was a thorn in the side of the new mayor. Under the guise of data protection, he made sure that individual cases could no longer be discussed in the working group. Then the immigration authorities, who were usually present at our meetings, also withdrew. As a result, we were not able to talk about legal developments."

Susanne, the director of the *Multicultural House*, who had worked on asylum and migration issues for many years, expressed a similar sense of grievance about the end of the Working Group. She, too, believed that the issue of refugees' privacy was only an excuse: "That was an absolute killer argument with data protection".

Another activist from the *Refugee Council*, Annette, recalled being shocked to learn of the Working Group's demise: "He [the mayor] put us out of business from one day to the next with the argument of privacy. That blew us away." She also said that the *Refugee Council* tried to get the Working Group going again, but since they were dependent on the local government's invitation, they could not meet again. She said there was no point without the government's approval because otherwise, the staff of the Immigration Office and the Employment

Office would not attend the meetings. However, these agencies were of central importance to the Working Group because they had much information about the work permits and immigration status of the refugees that the civil society actors were assisting.

## Activities and interaction ceased after the heightened mobilization

As in other cities, engagement in Neheim declined sharply after 2015/16. According to the interviewees, this was because the refugee shelters were being dismantled, and fewer newly arrived refugees needed emergency care. In Neheim, however, it was also because people found the often lengthy and challenging involvement and interaction with authorities stressful and unpleasant. The people who continued to be involved in individual cases said they enjoyed the work but were also working at the edge of their limits. While there were interactions between different actors during the mobilization period, such as between churches, informal volunteer groups and churches, or between the *Refugee Council* and the *Multicultural House*, these interactions did not last. These interactions did not turn into routinized forms of interaction. Opportunities for interaction between the various actors active around 2015/16 were relatively scarce after the mobilization period.

Only one such opportunity developed in 2016 in the context of the refugee reception strategy. Many interviewees reported the development of the strategy, which aimed to provide integrative counseling and support for the refugees coming to Neheim. Special attention was to be given to vulnerable groups such as children, people with disabilities, and others. The strategy was intended to provide a framework for this and the structures and processes needed to get this done. When Susanne and Matthias told me about the development of the strategy, they were excited about the idea. Matthias said that a broad coalition of representatives of political parties, welfare organizations, the local government, and the *Refugee Council* worked on the strategy for a whole year:

> "In 2015/16, together with the Social Democrats, the Multicultural House and the local government, we developed a strategy to improve the reception of refugee in [Neheim]. We really looked at all aspects, from sports to housing, education, work, training, health, and so on. And we wrote down the key points."

During that year, the actors involved outlined steps and procedures to deal with refugee reception in housing, education, and health. All members of the coalition agreed on the strategy in 2016. But, as Matthias told me, "unfortunately, it did not come to life". Like Matthias, who expressed his immense frustration with this situation, Susanne, director of the *Multicultural House*, was also quite annoyed at the local government. When she told me about the development of the strategy, she said: "It's all stuck there [at the local government] again."

What did Susanne mean by "stuck again"? Before talking about the refugee reception strategy in the interview, she told me about the Working Group on Asylum and how the new mayor had been counteracting the Working Group since 2016. Thus, she referred to the breakdown of the Working Group. In the eyes of several interviewees at the *Refugee Council* and the *Multicultural House*, the refugee reception strategy, like the Working Group on Asylum, was not something the new mayor was fond of or wanted to pursue.

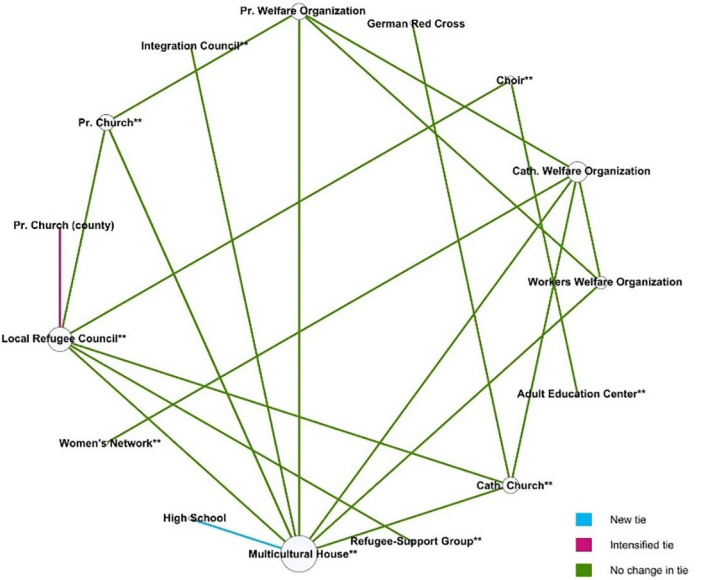
## Insights into the network structure

As outlined earlier, the development and survival of a pro-refugee community depends primarily on the development of loose and more structured routines of interaction and the relationships between key actors that were newly created or strengthened during the period of heightened mobilization and the years that followed. In the next section, I offer a brief overview of this network perspective in Neheim.

As depicted in the network map in Figure 8, various civil society organizations and groups actively supported refugees in 2015/16. This network map outlines the organizations and groups that were actively involved. In addition, it shows whether the network connections between key actors and others (notably marked with two asterisks **) have shifted due to the pro-refugee mobilization over the subsequent six years.

The network map highlights that the connections among the actors that were mobilized in 2015/16 were primarily not affected by that time. The map also shows that these key actors had already established these connections before 2015/16, and the interactions during 2015/16 failed to notably intensify these connections in a manner that would endure over time. Instead, these actors stressed their pre-existing familiarity with one another, highlighting that the pro-refugee mobilization did not substantially sustain their connections.

*Figure 8: Network changes in Neheim*




## Lost momentum: Neheims's struggle with growing a pro-refugee community

In this subchapter, I showed how the initial prospects of a new pro-refugee community did not materialize. The pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 was characterized by an unprecedented solidarity in Neheim with various organizations, grassroots groups, and institutions supporting refugees. While these organizations and groups interacted during the heightened mobilization, these interactions diminished over time. The dismantling of refugee shelters and the declining refugee population in Neheim seemed to reduce the urgency of emergency assistance for many volunteers. In addition, burnout and fatigue became key struggles for many people actively supporting refugees as bureaucratic challenges intensified and refugees' needs seemed to shift from a state of emergency to a state of integration that included finding jobs and housing.

The case of Neheim also highlights the problematic relationship between members of civil society and local government. The dissolution of the Working

Group on Asylum in 2016 broke off years of collaborative efforts and emphasized the importance of trust. In addition, I visualized these developments in a network map by showing that key connections remained largely unchanged over time. This visualization again illustrated that the mobilization did not significantly change pre-existing relationships between organizations and groups involved in refugee support during 2015/16.

Finally, it should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted the activities of organizations involved in refugee support, such as the *Refugee Council* and the *Multicultural House*. However, due to the lack of a pro-refugee community in Neheim, there were few interaction routines and networks that could have been disrupted or reactivated after the pandemic. The influx of Ukrainian refugees also led to a new mobilization in Neheim. However, networks like the Working Group on Asylum were not re-activated.

## Conclusion

The empirical analysis of the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 and its lasting impacts on civil society provides unique insights into the challenges and successes in developing and sustaining pro-refugee communities. In the following, I explore the overarching themes that emerge from the subchapters and shed light on the driving factors and obstacles factors to the development of such communities.

In this chapter, I examined whether this heightened mobilization resulted in the development and survival of pro-refugee communities. The results of my analysis indicate that pro-refugee communities developed in two cities, Lauda and Loburg, according to the concept of local civic action communities that I defined in Chapter 2. In contrast, pro-refugee communities did not develop in the other two cities, Altenau and Neheim.

A common thread across the four cities is the initial pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. All four cities witnessed a significant influx of refugees that year and volunteers and activists engaged in civic action, showing remarkable commitment to immediate refugee support. A common perception in the four cities was the recognition that collective action during that period was urgently needed to address the various challenges of refugee support. Many interviewees highly valued the increased interaction among the different civil society actors during the mobilization.

Despite similarities in the peak of mobilization, pro-refugee communities developed only in two of four cities. While the organizations and groups involved in refugee support built new pro-refugee communities in Lauda and Loburg, I did not find similar effects in Altenau and Neheim. Initially, interactions and efforts did not result in lasting community building.

As I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, two main characteristics define the development and survival of pro-refugee communities. First, initial interactions developed into continued interaction, such as regular gatherings, celebrations, or protests, and more formalized forms, such as roundtables and council meetings. Second, these interaction forms manifested in new and strengthened network connections between the organizations and groups involved. While both of these characteristics apply in Lauda and Loburg, in Altenau and Neheim, the interactions from 2015/16 did not expand, and the relationships of the actors involved did not develop or strengthen between 2015/16 and 2021.

Factors and conditions that drove these different outcomes are related to the respective local context, the relationships and tensions within the civic landscape, and the strategies used by key actors. In Lauda, the central role of key volunteers and activists, the institutionalization of the volunteer-network *Asylum with Us*, and the cooperation between the volunteer-network, welfare organizations, and the local government significantly contributed to the stabilization of the pro-refugee community. In Lauda, most actors developed new ties because a majority of them did not know each other or collaborate before. This was different in Loburg, where, through a shared history of local activism, most actors knew each other before but still intensified their ties through the ongoing interaction opportunities. In Loburg, the new Civic Council on Migration and recurrent events were crucial in strengthening the connections of individual organizations and groups. In both cities, the COVID-19 pandemic and the related contact restrictions severely minimized the opportunities for interaction within the pro-refugee community. However, the communities did not dissolve. Instead, the activities and interaction formats were re-activated once the restrictions were lifted. When the influx of refugees from Ukraine increased starkly in the spring of 2022, new and old volunteers and activists came together and built on the existing structures of the community.

The case of Altenau, on the other hand, highlights that lasting community building was not a natural outcome of the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. Despite increased interaction between groups and organizations during the mobilization period, these actors did not develop continued forms of interac-

tion and network ties. Similarly, in the case of Neheim, solidarity and collective action were evident during the initial mobilization in 2015. However, sustaining these interactions was challenging. The reasons behind the absent development and survival of pro-refugee communities in Altenau and Neheim are manifold. Still, they can be explained by conflicts and loss of trust between civil society and local government members. In addition, the dominance of professionalized organizations in both cases and the different strategies and interaction cultures between these organizations and more informal refugee-support groups proved to be an immense challenge to community building.

In the following three empirical chapters, I will highlight the factors and conditions that were either drivers or obstacles to the development and survival of pro-refugee communities in each case. I will dedicate each chapter through paired comparisons to one factor or a closely linked set of factors and conditions that can explain the varied outcomes.