

Governing Asylum in Rural Areas: Law in Practice and Citizenship in Action

A RURAL ENTRY POINT: MUNICIPAL ASYLUM IN ALBERSCHWENDE

In the spring of 2015, the volunteer initiative ‘Wir sind Asyl’ (We are asylum) in Alberschwende, a rural municipality in Western Austria, invented and granted ‘municipal asylum’ to two asylum seekers, whom national authorities had decided to deport. The initiative carefully argued for its decision to protect the two men in a public manifesto time and again recurring to the Human and Fundamental Rights in order to legitimize its actions against the authorities.

The initiative thus challenged the Austrian state from within its own national borders through with the reference to the international legal frameworks. This example raises questions about how citizenship is both reconstituted and contested in a rural municipality within the national borders of a European receiving state.



Poster campaign of the initiative ‘Wir sind Asyl’ in Alberschwende during the spring of 2015.



Community hall of Alberschwende, spring 2015



Central square of Alberschwende, spring 2015

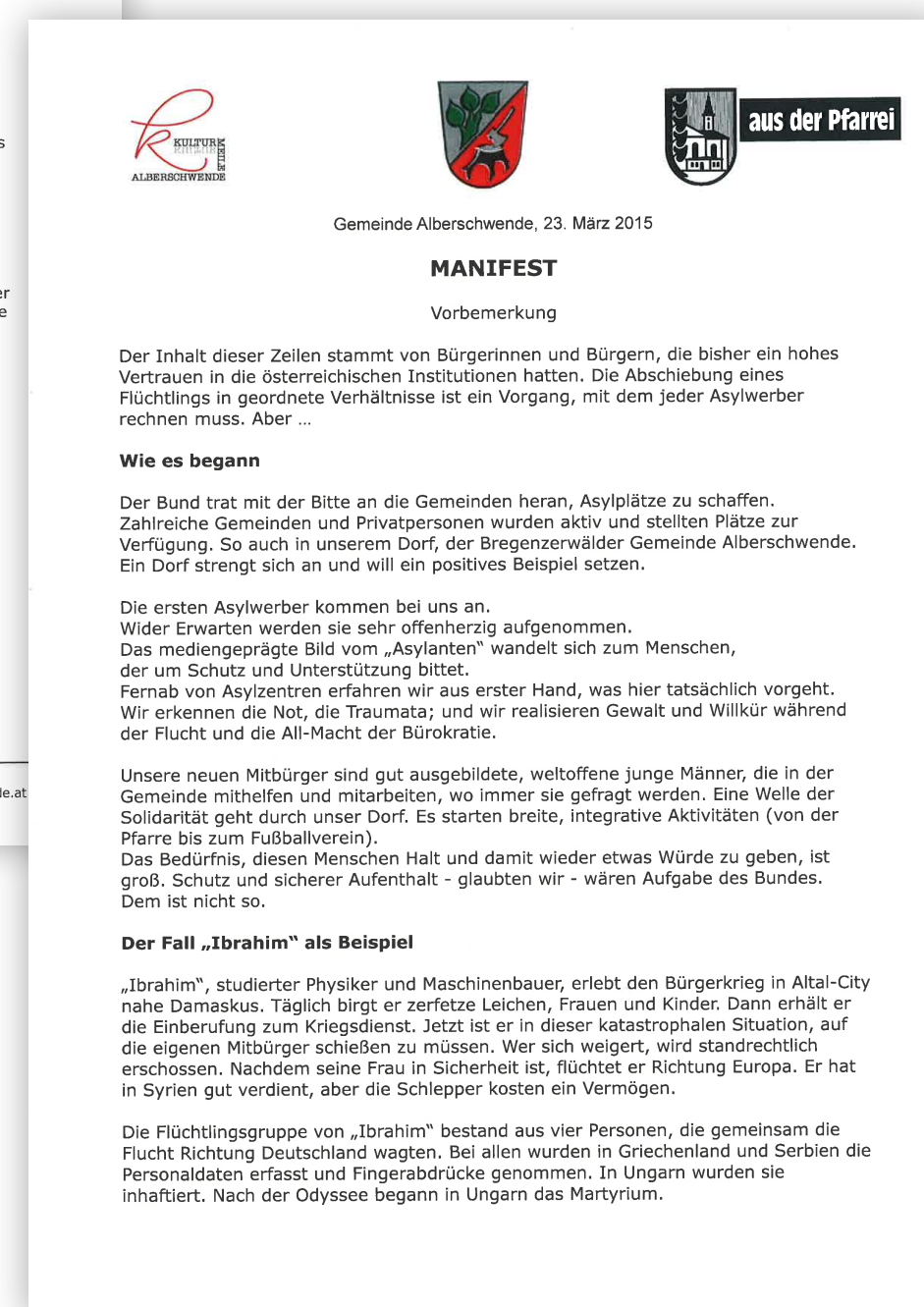
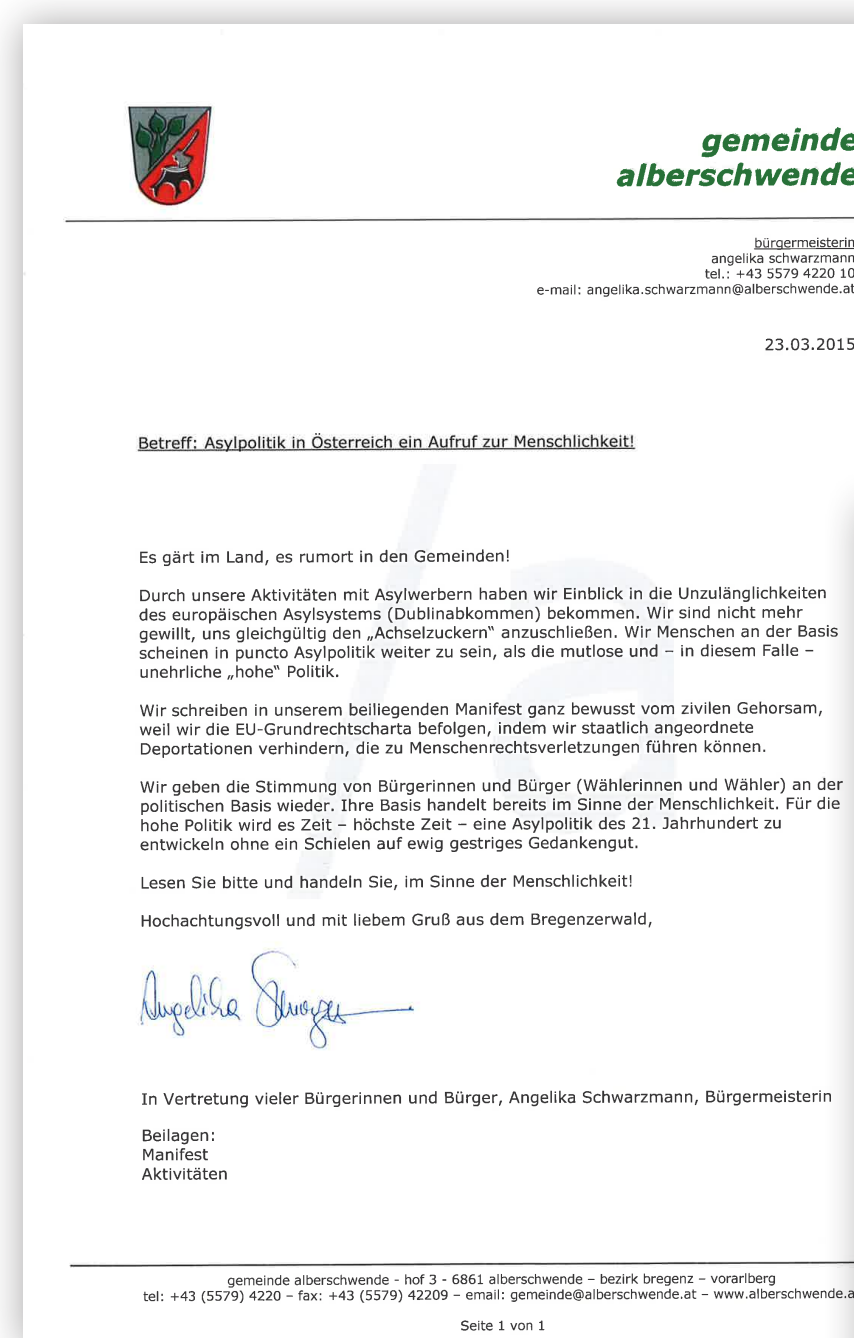
STATE OF THE ART AND RESEARCH GAPS

Cases like Alberschwende fail to get attention in (international and transnational) migration studies and rural studies literature. Due to an ethnic lens, migration studies mostly focus on migrants alone and do not sufficiently address migrants’ common actions for citizenship with non-migrants. Further, migration studies have a history of producing country-based analyses that draw their data from selective urban contexts only – rural areas of national territory escape their perspective, despite the increasing settlement of refugees in rural areas. Rural studies, however, do not engage with refugees and asylum seekers.

My suggested research aims to use rural areas as an entry point to explore multiscalar reconfigurations of the European asylum system in the context of neoliberal globalization. This agenda operates outside of rural-urban dichotomies and does not conceive of rural areas as essentially different from cities, but as parts of the processes that transform state territoriality and are to be taken seriously.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- I How is citizenship negotiated and contested through volunteering practices among refugees, asylum seekers and local residents in rural areas?
- II How, for what purposes, and to what effect is the law evoked by different actors in these processes of contestation and reconfiguration?



The first two pages of the manifesto, published in March 2015.

The manifesto was directly sent to the Austrian president, the Austrian parliament, government representatives, NGOs and the media.

METHODOLOGY

Multiscalar ethnography oriented by the logics of the extended case method. Qualitative data analysis using Grounded Theory tools.

STAGE 1

Reconstruction of the events in Alberschwende in the spring of 2015, narrative interviews and informal conversations with involved actors.

STAGE 2

Participant observation as an intern with the regional refugee coordinator in the region Bregenzerwald, narrative interviews with volunteers in the region.

STAGE 3

Contextualizing ethnographic material through studying archives, analyzing policy papers, etc.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Citizenship is not only negotiated and ‘in-the-making’ on the national scale, or in urban contexts, but also in rural municipalities. These municipalities are by no means homogenous entities, but tend to be overlooked in their heterogeneity.

While refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to exceptional modes of governance in the asylum system, they are embedded in and contribute to processes which also affect the wider population and thus, are not that exceptional at all. Reading volunteering practices of citizens and of non-citizens through a common lens offers a particular vantage point to look into dynamics of voluntarisation between subjects and the state in relation to the delivery of social services.

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