Governing Under Pressure: Policy Failures, Blame Dynamics, and Adaptive Capacity in Swiss Refugee Integration. A case of multi governance under crises.

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Abstract: Switzerland provides a uniquely fertile context for studying service innovation and administrative adaptation in migration and integration systems. As a small but highly federalized country, it combines harmonized national frameworks with substantial cantonal autonomy, generating pronounced variation in governance structures, service models, and organizational practices. Public agencies, semi-public entities such as AOZ, private providers like ORS, and NGOs including Caritas operate under comparable regulatory conditions, creating a natural laboratory for comparative analysis of how governance type, funding mechanisms, and organizational culture shape innovation capacity and service effectiveness.
This research investigates how Swiss public administrations manage refugee and migrant integration under pressure, with particular attention to the large-scale arrival of Ukrainian refugees since 2022. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks Policy Failures, Blame Games the study examines how crisis-induced policy expansion interacts with administrative capacities, accountability dynamics, and frontline discretion.

The analysis explores when pressure leads to performance gaps and blame shifting, and when it catalyzes pragmatic problem-solving, organizational learning, and cross-sector collaboration.

RQ1: How Swiss integration and asylum service providers - public, private, and hybrid – operete and develop capacities and innovative practices in response to crisis ?
RQ2: What blame-avoidance and blame-shifting strategies emerge within Switzerland's multi-actor governance system (SEM, cantons, ORS, AOZ, municipalities)?
RQ3:How do these strategies shape subsequent decisions public policy?

Methodologically, the research relies on qualitative fieldwork including 15–20 semi-structured interviews with federal policymakers (SEM), cantonal authorities, NGO leaders, private contractors, and frontline social workers . Complementary data are drawn from European research infrastructures (e.g., ESS, CESSDA, SHARE) to situate Swiss developments in a broader comparative context.

Preliminary evidence indicates that the Ukrainian displacement crisis exposed long-standing tensions in Switzerland's multi-level governance system while simultaneously enabling experimental practices and accelerated innovation. Some cantons relied on state-led, standardized models that improved coordination and integration outcomes; others leveraged hybrid or NGO/ ForProfit organization -led approaches to enhance flexibility but risked fragmented accountability. Across cases, multi-actor cooperation, informal networks, and trust-based coordination were central to maintaining service continuity under pressure.

The study demonstrates how crisis conditions reshape administrative and political relations and behavior, alter intergovernmental relations, and influence the performance of integration systems.