



## **“Inclusive Democracy” – Migrant communities and their participation in democratic processes and institutions in Austria**

### **Key Points:**

- In democracies, the political representation of every member of society is of paramount interest. Yet a large number of migrants are not represented in our democratic institutions in Austria.
- In addition to access to political structures based on Austrian citizenship, many migrants feel excluded for a variety of reasons, including barriers to integration, language barriers etc.
- The general public discourse in Austria considers “integration” as a gradual act of adaptation to Austrian culture, without taking into account the transnational realities, experiences and relationships of migrants.
- The Austrian network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, in collaboration with the oiip, has reflected on this complex issue and developed a set of policy recommendations for a range of stakeholders in Austria, including the local and federal administration and policy makers, ALF network members, and other NGOs with a focus on migrant communities.

This Policy Brief is part of the coordination of the Austrian Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation. It builds on the insights gained from the Migration Ties Project “Einfluss der Milieu-Zugehörigkeit von MigrantInnen auf ihre transnationalen Verbindungen” and the Project of the Stadt Wien “Politische Teilhabe im transnationalen Kontext: Türkische und serbische MigrantInnen in Wien“



**Mag. Carina Radler, MA** ist wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am oip und u.a. im Projektmanagement für das österreichische Netzwerk der Anna Lindh Stiftung tätig. Nach dem Studium der Rechtswissenschaften mit Schwerpunkt Völkerrecht und Internationale Beziehungen an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz absolvierte sie das Masterstudium Public Policy and International Affairs an der American University of Beirut im Libanon.



**Dr. Cengiz Günay** is Director of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs –oip – and Lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences, the Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Department of International Development and the University of Vienna.

## 1) Introduction

The integration of migrants is an essential social and political task. Inclusion, participation and co-determination are essential for the functioning of the democratic system. Austria has been experiencing a growing deficit in democratic representation. Many migrants are, because of restrictive citizenship laws, exempt from democratic institutions and processes. In urban areas such as Vienna, already one-third of the population is exempt from democratic representation. Previous research on migrant communities, transnational spaces, and the question of political participation undertaken by the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) reveals that even migrants who own Austrian citizenship often feel excluded from existing political structures and institutions. The democratic deficit leads to a lack of belonging, a feeling of not being heard, and of being excluded. Against this background, in this policy brief the Austrian network of the Anna Lindh Foundation addresses the question of “inclusive democracy”. The policy brief entails a quick outline of the situation in Austria, and finally points out to recommendations, which also include suggestions and comments that have been offered by experts and participants in the online workshop “Inclusive Democracy” on 29 March 2022.

## 2) Assessment of the situation of political migrant participation:

### *Demographic data on migrants in Vienna:*

In 2021, almost half of Vienna's population has a migration background<sup>1</sup> (46.2%) (Statistik Aus-

tria, 2021a). Although the largest share of immigrants in the last 10 years came from EU member states, and the number of ex-Yugoslav and Turkish migrants has stagnated or declined (Stadt Wien 2020, 31), people with Serbian and Turkish roots represent the two largest groups of Vienna's migrant population (Stadt Wien, 2020, p. 35).

Historically, migration to Austria in recent decades can be divided into three phases:

- 1) In the first phase, immigration to Austria was forced by the so-called recruitment agreements. These formed the legal framework for temporary labor migration to Austria. The first recruitment agreement was signed with Spain in 1962. However, it had little effect. This was followed by those with Turkey in 1964 and the former Yugoslavia in 1965 (Bakondy, 2017, 115). Immigrant labor offset the negative birth balance of the postwar years (Stadt Wien 2020, 28).
- 2) The second major phase of immigration took place in the 1990s as a result of the fall of the Iron Curtain. This reached its peak with the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia (Stadt Wien 2020, 27).
- 3) The year 2015 is considered the peak of the third phase. In the context of the refugee movements, it was mainly people from Afghanistan and Syria who came to Austria (Stadt Wien 2020, 27).

Political engagement and the integration of migrants into political life in Austria are deter-

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Austria uses this term to refer to persons whose both parents were born abroad. This group of persons can be subdivided as follows: Into first-generation migrants (persons who were themselves born abroad) and into second-generation

immigrants (children of immigrants but who were themselves born in Austria) (Statistics Austria, 2021b)

mined on the one hand by the *personal motivation of individuals and groups* and on the other hand by the *legal, political and economic framework*.

*General framework for political participation:*

The majority of migrants can only participate to a limited extent in political decisions and help shape social developments. An important prerequisite for the social, cultural and political participation of migrants is the recognition of the transnational knowledge and experience that these people can contribute, or a culture of inclusion.

In Austria, the political participation of migrants - participation in political processes, such as the right to vote and stand for election, as well as integration into political structures, institutions and party organizations - is essentially limited by citizenship law. Austrian citizenship is based on the principle of *ius sanguinis*, i.e. citizenship by descent and not by birth in the country (*ius soli*). This makes it difficult for second-, third- or fourth-generation migrants who were born in Austria to parents with another citizenship to access Austrian citizenship.

Austria's citizenship law is considered particularly restrictive in an international comparison. Together with Bulgaria, Austria presents the greatest barriers to naturalization among the 52 countries included in the Integration Policy Index (Migrant Integration Policy Index (Mipex) 2020). In Austria, naturalization is seen as the culmination of a completed integration process. In addition to the resignation from the previous citizenship, at least 10 years of residence in Austria, sufficient knowledge of German, a positive citizenship examination and sufficient financial means are required. While the prevention of dual citizenship is an obstacle for many people to obtain Austrian citizenship, a study of the Austrian Academy of Sciences shows that the required financial security as

well as the costs for Austrian citizenship are a hurdle especially for lower income groups (Bauböck & Haller 2021).

### **3) Conclusions and recommendations for action**

The public debates on the integration of immigrants reflect neither the scientific discourse and findings of the last decades nor the realities of immigrants' lives. The dominant public debate assumes a gradual process in which immigrants gradually adapt to Austrian culture, structures and requirements. Since inherent in such a notion of integration is the assumption of the dissolution of all differences and the desire for uniformity and homogenization of migrant identities and lifeworlds, full integration can never occur. It remains for migrants a constantly demanded and at the same time unattainable goal. While the concept of integration demands the abandonment of all ties to the country of origin with regard to identities, ways of life, belonging and localization, transnational perspectives allow for the inclusion of interactions, hybrid or multiple identities.

#### **Policy recommendations:**

- Legal equality and easier access to citizenship (including easier naturalization of young people and the possibility of dual citizenship) are a key prerequisite for increasing the motivation, opportunities and possibilities for social and political participation of migrants.
- Austria is an immigration society. This should be recognized in the official political discourse in Austria. The discourse of "othering" or stigmatization of migrant groups, which is often very strong in Austrian politics, should be

countered by a discourse of inclusion in all areas of society.

- Austrian political parties should also face up to the country's character as an immigrant society and promote the opening of their structures to migrants. This applies to the internal structures of the political parties and their youth work, where opportunities and spaces for greater inclusion and participation of migrants should be created. Likewise, political parties should strive to create and support a public that advocates equal social and political participation for migrants.
- New organizational forms of migrants are the framework in which transnational identities and living spaces are lived as a matter of course. This should be supported by the City of Vienna as far as possible. Existing problems (such as the adoption of authoritarian political attitudes and patterns) in migrant communities should be addressed in a differentiated manner without blanket stigmatization of the entire community.
- With their commitment, migrant entrepreneurs highlight central problems and dilemmas, but also opportunities for greater social and political participation. This should be promoted even more intensively by the Austrian state.
- Transnational engagement with a focus on the country of origin should not be criminalized. Instead, a dialogue with such groups or activists should be sought in order to explore the motivations and migration experiences that play a role in transnational engagement.
- The transnational connections, experiences and know-how of migrants can also be utilized by the City of Vienna in many ways for urban policy, but also for the city's external relations.
- The Corona pandemic has shown that "migrants" are often stylized in political and media discourse as carriers of the virus and as a danger due to their allegedly risky behavior. Such a form of political communication deepens the rifts in society and has negative consequences for coexistence. The official institutions of the Austrian state or the City of Vienna should counter the stigmatizing discourse with an objectified discourse and work on creating an objective public sphere on issues of political and social participation of migrants in Austria and in Vienna with inclusive and authentic campaigns initiated and led by migrants (such as the [Coronafacts.at](https://www.kosmo.at) platform by Kosmo or the "Together Against Hate" initiative by Alpha Plus).
- Greater involvement of the Austrian host society in the lives and countries of origin of migrants: more diverse presentation of eg the countries on the Balkans and Turkey in the media (TV/radio/print) in order to achieve a broader understanding and differentiated picture among the Austrian population.

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