INTEGRATION CONCEPTS AND INTEGRATION POLICY IN AUSTRIA

ABSTRACT

According to the 2001 census, the Austrian population is about 8 million. This number includes more than 730,000 (or 9.1%) foreign residents who at the time did not hold Austrian citizenship. Two-thirds of them were citizens of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia and of Turkey, the traditional countries of origin of the guest-worker migration. In addition, more than 300,000 Austrian citizens were born outside Austria. Altogether, Austria's proportion of foreign-born and foreign residents in 2001 was thus even higher than that of the United States, reaching a level of approximately 13%.

The discussion about migration policy, its implementation, and its execution are very relevant issues in the Austrian political debate. Elections can be won or lost on the answers to the challenge of the growing influx. All the parties in Austria present more or less substantial concepts of controlling migration in their respective programmes. Core elements of these concepts are the limitation of the migration flow and the distinction between desired and undesired migrants.

In the 1990s, a quota system was implemented linking the annual number of migrants to the need of the labour market and to the demographic development. In the following years, this system was improved and adapted mainly to decrease the overall amount of migration and to limit the number of low-skilled labour migrants. Special emphasis was put on family reunification and on the migration of skilled workers. However, due to other laws and regulations – the Geneva Convention, the legislation of the European Union concerning long-term third-country nationals and the family reunification of EU citizens – only a small proportion of the migration flow can be controlled exclusively by national regulation.

So, there is consensus concerning migration policy, but there is no concept of a consistent and comprehensive integration policy. Politicians at local and national levels and all party programmes emphasize the need for integration but avoid clear statements of what exactly they mean by this term. In fact, the term "integration" is used as a black-box which allows a consensus to be reached on a general level and defies political discussions in detail. Therefore it would be an oversimplification to talk of a consensual Austrian integration concept.

Nevertheless, we can identify a common denominator: the dominant integration paradigm is the idea of assimilation. The conservative parties as well as the social democratic party implicitly understand "integration" as a process of a one-sided adaptation to the Austrian way of life. Foreigners should learn to be Austrians – whatever that means –, they should learn the German language and adapt to the "Austrian" way of life. Cultural deviation is more or less regarded as a barrier on the necessary path of assimilation. Hence, most political parties and politicians unknowingly follow the ideas of the Chicago school formulated in the 1920s.

The only exceptions are the small Green Party and the city government in Vienna. The Greens represent approximately 10% of the voters and act as opposition in parliament. They oppose the idea of assimilation underlying the integration concepts of the other parties and instead promote cultural diversity and multiculturalism, which they regard as an added value in a modern society. However, the Greens avoid defining the limits of diversity and multiculturalism. Their programme does not address the daily and general conflicts between the values and norms of the host society, on the one hand, and of the society of origin, on the other. It is probably due to this vagueness that the multicultural concept of the Green Party is accepted only by a minority of the Austrian (and foreign) population.

The second exception to the rule of assimilation is the city government in Vienna. The city is governed by an absolute majority of the social democratic party that positioned the city government as a counter-model to the conservative federal government in several policy areas; integration policy is one of these. The cultural diversity of the Viennese population is increasingly seen as a

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strength of the city. "The diversity-oriented integration policy of the City of Vienna is committed to the principles of a pluralistic society and aims at equality and equality of opportunities of all residents irrespective of their gender, ethnic origin, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability or fundamental beliefs (*Weltanschauung*) (König and Perchinig 2005, 13). The explicit or implicit aim of the integration process is not assimilation, but the peaceful living apart of different cultures. However, again the concept of cultural diversity remains vague. Moreover, the political reality in Vienna does not seem to provide evidence that this concept engenders concrete policies. It might just be a slogan serving to counter the concept of assimilation.

Legislative base

Due to the lack of a consistent Austrian integration concept equipped with clear and explicit goals, there is not a single legislative or constitutional base. Several institutions deal with different aspects of migration and integration. "The integration debate is characterized by inconsistencies – there are inconsistencies between the positions of the federal and provincial governments, and inconsistencies within ministries. What is more, integration is only partly reflected in legislation, if at all, making this already complex topic even more complex in Austria." (König and Perchinig 2005, 11)

In the context of integration at least six different acts have to be mentioned: the *Settlement and Residence Act* (*Niederlassungs- und Aufenthaltsgesetz*) regulates the legal residence of foreigners who intend to stay in Austria for more than six months; the *Aliens Police Act* defines the authority and the duties of a special police (Fremdenpolizei) and the legal titles of foreigners who intend to stay in Austria for a period of three to six months. The access to legal employment is governed by the *Aliens Employment Act* (*Ausländerbeschäftigungsgesetz*), the asylum procedure by the *Asylum Act* (*Asylgesetz* and *Grundversorgungsgesetz*) and naturalization by the *Citizenship Act* (*Staatsbürgerschaftsgesetz*).

Without describing these different regulations in detail, we may identify one thread that all of them have in common. The idea of integration underlying them is an asymmetric and one-sided process of adaptation to the values and norms of the Austrian society. References to this idea can be found in the *Settlement and Residence Act*, which makes language training in German compulsory. All non-EU immigrants and those who have been residing in Austria since January 1, 1998 – except for "key personnel," children, the elderly and any immigrant demonstrating suitable knowledge of German – will have to attend such language courses. If the courses are not completed successfully within four years, the immigrant may lose his or her residence permit. Hence, good command of the German language is seen as a necessary prerequisite to be put on the integration track towards "austrianization."

If foreigners residing in Austria follow this track successfully and are assimilated at the end of the process, they are eligible to receive Austrian citizenship. Again, this proves that Austrian legislation on integration relies on the idea of assimilation. The *Citizenship Act* describes naturalization as the completion of the integration process, formally inscribed into the law by examinations in German and in basic knowledge about Austria and the European Union as preconditions for the granting of Austrian citizenship. Moreover, the *Citizenship Act* aims to reduce the possibility of receiving Austrian nationality prior to the ten years of residence laid down in the law and to avoid dual nationality. Both options contradict the concept of assimilation as a long-lasting process of adaptation to one society.

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Responsible institutions

Since Austrian ideas of integration are scattered in different acts, several institutions are responsible for delivering services promoting the integration process. To cite just some examples: the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for the integration of refugees (a specialized "Integrationsfonds" was founded) but not for labour migrants or family members of labour migrants; labour migrants fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Economics and Work, which executes the *Aliens Employment Act*; if the migrating family members are school-age children, the provincial boards of education are responsible for them; if they are older, they fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The situation becomes even more complicated when the different federal levels of competence are taken into account. In many policy areas the national level is responsible for setting the principal rules that have to be executed by the provinces. The *Citizenship Act* – for example – is adopted by the parliament at the national level and implemented at the provincial level. These split competencies further complicate the adoption of a comprehensive and consistent integration policy, especially when the ruling parties at the provincial and national levels have different ideas of what integration means and how it should be realized. The opposing interests between the Viennese and the State government mentioned earlier clearly illustrate this problem.

Finally, in order to understand the full complexity of the situation, we have to take into account another factor: the different organizational types of institutions acting in the area of integration. Apart from the ministries and public institutions (like school boards or housing agencies), the churches and many private institutions are active actors. The Catholic and the Protestant churches and their humanitarian associations such as Caritas and Diakonie act as advocates of immigrants' rights in public, and provide advice and language training courses for all migrants as well as shelter for asylum seekers and refugees. "Other important NGOs in the field include Helping Hands, a humanitarian organization associated with the Austrian Students' Union (the "chamber" of students with compulsory membership), which concentrates on giving free legal advice to immigrants and refugees; ZARA, an anti-discrimination watchdog, which gives legal advice, collects incidents of discrimination and publishes an annual "racism-report;" and the Austrian Asylum Coordination, an umbrella group of NGOs working in the field of asylum." (König and Perchinig 2005, 22). Most of these institutions rely on voluntary work, private donations and the enthusiasm of their collaborators. A lack of sustainability and professionalism are the consequence of these structures.

Major services

The list of public services that have long-term effects is rather short. They focus on the acquisition of the German language. Language training is mandatory for many migrants. Language capacity is seen as a first but central "gatekeeper" for societal inclusion. Proficiency in German is a precondition for higher achievements in education, which in turn equips immigrants to apply for more prestigious labour market positions offering higher incomes. These allow them to leave segregated living areas in the cities and to enter the middle class. Language training courses are provided by private or semi-private organizations and are certified and subsidized by public institutions.

Other services are rare or only rudimentarily developed. Migrants are expected to acquire the basic knowledge about Austria and the European Union, which is a precondition for receiving Austrian citizenship, independently. The relevant questions are listed in a booklet downloadable from the Internet. The recognition of foreign certificates is a difficult and long process without structured and institutional help. There are no mentoring programmes as a form of organized circulation of knowledge concerning the host society and ways of successful integration. Additional help for pupils in schools to compensate their language deficits is scarce and linked to the school type and varies from one province to the other.

The churches and private institutions offer short-term help. They provide shelter and food for short periods. These measures are mainly targeted at refugees or migrants in need. Notwithstanding their importance for these people, they are of no significance for the integration process of the majority of the foreign residents.

The role of citizenship

From a normative point of view, acquiring Austrian citizenship marks the completion of a long process of assimilation. The new passport certifies that the foreigner has become a German-speaking Austrian. From an analytical perspective, however, citizenship is not a dependent variable linked to integration but rather an independent variable facilitating integration. Austrian citizenship not only implies privileged entry to the housing market, it also allows its holders to apply for subsidies to build houses, to open a bank account or buy real estate without further examinations, and to vote in national and provincial elections and thus to become relevant for politicians. Citizenship can therefore be regarded as an instrument for and not as a consequence of integration.

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Outcomes

It is difficult to evaluate the current integration measures in Austria because they are not systematically monitored. Selected studies and a semi-official migration and integration report (Fassmann and Stacher 2003) offer overviews. These emphasize three main characteristics of the Austrian situation.

Integration (in terms of assimilation) happens, but it happens by accident. The newly arrived migrants are left to their own devices. Some migrants stick to their culture of origin, others assimilate very fast and others live in-between cultures. Many migrants do not know what the host society expects of them. They are kept in an ambivalent situation. Are they immigrants who can stay or guest-workers who will have to leave again at some stage? When you ask foreign residents whether they want to stay in Austria forever, their answers betray a high degree of uncertainty. Clearer signals from the political sphere are necessary.

Integration (once again in terms of assimilation) works differently in different groups. Indicators like interethnic marriage rates or labour market positions clearly show that migrants from Turkey marry within their own ethnic community and remain at the bottom of the employment system whereas migrants from Western and also from Eastern Europe are on the fast track to the middle class. These differences can be traced back to a

number of factors: a mixture of cultural behaviour and of structural deficits of the Turkish migrant population as well as prejudices of the majority population towards the Turkish migrants. Once again the differentiation between dependent and independent variables remains problematic.

Integration is a never-ending process. It means learning and adapting to new circumstances, not only for the migrant population. However, the majority of Austrian natives seem to believe that integration should be completed within a few months or a few years at the most. In reality, this process needs decades or even generations, especially in a society where ancestors, family names and titles are important to be accepted. But politicians have to show "success" within a legislative period. That is why they concentrate on migration flows, which seem to be easier to influence, rather than on developing a sustainable integration scheme – a trend observable not only in Austria!

References

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Journal of International Migration and Integration
Metropolis Research and Policy Review

Revue de l'intégration et de la migration internationale
Compte rendu de Metropolis sur la recherche et les politiques

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