

Pathways to Integration: The Importance of Language and Value and Orientation Courses in Austria

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Abstract

The successful integration of immigrants is an issue that has been at the forefront of political debate for decades and continues to be so. This thesis analyses Austrian integration policy and evaluates the measures contained therein against the standards of the Migration Integration Policy Index 2020. The analysis is based on the evaluation of Austria's main legal text, the Integration Act, and its implementation. The focus is on the language and value and orientation courses, which serve as a first introduction for newly arrived immigrants. The findings show that although the Integration Act offers good approaches and objectives, it is not implemented consistently at all levels. Certain measures, such as passing integration requirements by holding the 'Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte' and the school leaving certificate fail to fulfil crucial goals of the Integration Act, to provide immigrants with knowledge about Austrian society and the rule of law. In practice, this can lead to differences in the integration process of immigrants and contribute to a feeling of unease among immigrants living in Austria. Small changes in the implementation of certain measures can effectively improve the integration process of immigrants and contribute to successful integration by teaching the most important basic values and language skills for newly arrived immigrants. These changes might also have a long-term positive impact on other areas of integration.

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Introduction

Migration has been an omnipresent phenomenon ever since people have been building cities and settling down. Whether it was willingly or forced, people have always been moving to other places to escape a harsh life and search for new opportunities elsewhere. With globalisation and rapidly improving technology, migration has been extensively monitored and analysed, yet we live in times where opinions about migrants and integration policies could not be more contested. Many countries follow a strict migration policy, whilst others are more welcoming, but even within supranational institutions like the European Union, there is no consensus about how migrants should be integrated into society. This leads to important differences within national frameworks of integration policy and the actual implementation of these policies.

Migrants often face obstacles in their way to successful integration (Bartz and Fuchs-Schündeln 2012). These obstacles range from negative stereotypes people have towards different cultures and ways of living, to governmental decisions and laws that block the path to the successful integration of migrants. The policies issued by politicians are the backbone of successful migration in every country, yet the execution of those measures can differ from the set framework, leading to confusion that can jeopardise the coexistence of migrants and citizens.

This thesis deals with Austria's integration policy and the implementation of these laws. In 2023, 18% of people living in Austria had a migrant background, so measures that make it possible and easier for different cultures to live together are of great importance (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). Therefore, this thesis explores whether the integration measures taken by Austria promote the integration process or whether the current policies are not

sufficient to ensure a smooth and successful integration of migrants. I focus on analysing the Austrian ‘Integration Act’ and the implementation of the measures mentioned in the law. I concentrate on language and value and orientation courses because I believe that those are the most fundamental measures that lead to successful integration. Other areas are of great importance too, yet this thesis argues, that the long-term integration process will be easier and integration into other areas will be better facilitated if in the beginning of the process the values of Austrian society and the rule of law are communicated, and simple German language skills are taught.

The ‘Integration Act’ is Austria’s main legal document concerning integration policy. I also analyse the implementation of the measures prescribed in the law, with ‘German courses’ and ‘Value and Orientation Course’ taking centre stage. The Austrian Federal Chancellery describes the ‘Integration Act’ as follows: *‘The Integration Act regulates the central framework conditions for the integration of people who settle in Austria on a long-term basis: Clear rules are needed for social cohesion and social peace.’*¹ (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). With the current ‘Integration Act’, Austria places the greatest emphasis on language acquisition and the acquisition of Austrian and democratic values (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). Integration into the labour market is mentioned only very sporadically and of varying intensity. The integration of immigrants into the Austrian labour market is legally stipulated in other documents, such as the ‘Residence Act’, and requires further research, which can be addressed in the future. The ‘Integration Act’ states that one of its goals is the transfer of the necessary skills for immigrants to make it easier for them to enter the labour market. I find that this is not always the case in all areas presented in the Act, especially within those that fail to give an overview of core values and fundamental knowledge of Austrian society all immigrants should learn about.

¹ Original version: *‘Das Integrationsgesetz regelt die zentralen Rahmenbedingungen für die Integration von Menschen, die sich langfristig in Österreich niederlassen: Für den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt und den sozialen Frieden braucht es klare Regeln’* (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.).

Analysing the legislation and its implementation via the German language and value and orientation courses for migrants will provide an explanation as to why Austria performs poorly on rankings such as Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) (Solano et al 2020) and is considered unfavourable for a long-term stay of migrants. In evaluating legal texts and the implementation of policies I rely on the existing literature, but I also use more ethnographic methods and I draw on personal impressions, as I was able to attend a value and orientation course organised by the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF n.d.).

This thesis is structured as follows: it begins with a brief introduction to the various areas in which the integration of migrants plays a role. In Chapter one, I examine the relevant literature to list the areas in which integration of immigrants is vital. Next, I introduce MIPEX, and explain the associated definitions and comparisons. Chapter 2 gives a short history about migrant integration in Austria. With Chapter 3, the analysis part of this thesis begins with an evaluation of the ‘Integration Act’. Chapter 4 assesses the value and orientation courses in detail, which I find to be one of the most crucial implementations that can also path the way of successful integration in the other areas, such as the labour market. The final part of this thesis, Chapter 5, concludes by comparing the findings of the analysis part with the findings of MIPEX for Austria. I conclude with an overview of Austrian integration policy, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and I make suggestions for improvement.

1 The Framework of Integration

‘While the term ‘integration’ is one that is understood differently depending upon the country and context, it can generally be defined as the process of mutual adaptation between the host society and the migrants themselves, both as individuals and as groups.’ (IOM 2012). The integration process of migrants is a topic that has been dealt with in many ways in the relevant literature. Due to the complexity of the topic, it is necessary to differentiate between various areas studied by scholars. Many study labour market integration, which is particularly important for long-term integration (Krause, Rinne, and Zimmermann 2017). The motivation for emigration is often to obtain a better job and thereby a better life. Preventing migrants from participating in the labour market automatically worsens their overall living situation, which makes the integration process considerably more difficult (Bartz and Fuchs-Schündeln 2012). It should also be noted that immigrants often work in sectors that are not covered by the native population (Fratzscher and Junker 2015). In 2011, for example, only 4% of Austrians in Austria worked in the ‘care sector’. Immigrants, especially from Turkey and Middle Eastern countries, were represented in this sector with a percentage of over 60 percent (Riesenfelder, Schelepa, and Wetzel 2011). This shows that in times of globalisation, countries like Austria are dependent on immigrants to do the jobs for which they did not have to go through an excessive educational career and for which Austrians simply have no interest.

Adele Lebano and her colleagues, among others, study the healthcare of immigrants, which is an important part of the integration process (Lebano et al. 2020), as it provides immigrants with security and well-being. Non-EU citizens who immigrate to EU countries rely on the government to guarantee healthcare. If a country provides no or poor healthcare for migrants, this can severely hinder the integration process as immigrants are unable to adjust to their new

home due to the stress and complications that can be caused by illness or the lack of healthcare (Klein and Von Dem Knesebeck 2018).

Community building and social integration are components that enable different cultures to live together in the first place. Experts often consider these points to be among the most important, as they also facilitate the integration process in other areas (Phillips et al. 2014). Multiculturalism is a wonderful phenomenon, as different cultures can learn from each other and thus shape everyday life (Bartram and Jarochova 2022). On the one hand, it is the government's task to facilitate this exchange and coexistence through an ambitious and well thought-out integration policy; on the other hand, it is up to the immigrants themselves to openly present their different cultures and agree to work together with others (Berggren, Ljunge, and Nilsson 2023).

To enable the successful integration of migrants into society, a government must offer support in all individual areas of integration policy. The extent to which it is also responsible for motivating migrants to accept these offers by setting positive reinforcers or making the offers mandatory is another essential aspect of the integration question (Berggren, Ljunge, and Nilsson 2023). Community building arises on the one hand through the mixing of different cultures and working against segregation, but it is important to note that the other areas mentioned must be present to a certain extent in order for good social integration to occur (Opper 1983). Only when immigrants feel comfortable and secure, also regarding their future prospects, have a job that secures a decent life, benefit of healthcare, etc. will they be able to open up and successfully manage the integration process.

Education is an area that can be assigned to different levels of integration. The education of younger immigrants, whether first, second or even third generation, is particularly important. All children and young people with a migrant background must be offered a school education through which they can acquire the local German language, European and Austrian values and

a qualification (Cavicchiolo et al. 2023). This is particularly significant for the sense of belonging to the local community, but also to prevent discrimination and inequalities in future opportunities. Ayse Dursun and her colleagues warn of the consequences that the incorrect organisation of teaching in schools can have for migrant children if they are treated differently to Austrian children (Dursun et al. 2023). Simply offering school classes in the native language of immigrants, which in most cases is not German, is an initiative that can backfire if not implemented well, as this represents a clear segregation of Austrian and migrant background children. Equal access to education is important to pass on Austria's values and guidelines to immigrants at a young age so that social integration can work from an early age (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2023). To achieve this goal, it should be noted that in certain cases special assistance might be necessary to guarantee an environment in which Austrian and children with a migrant background enjoy the same opportunities for education.

The education of adult immigrants is also of great importance. This is often provided through orientation courses or value courses (Bauer et al. 2024). This type of education is essential, especially in the process of labour integration. Language and cultural content are taught in such courses in order to best prepare immigrants for everyday life in the destination countries. Of particular importance here is the content describing the values, norms and interaction with the local population, as this represents the first point of contact for migrants with the local population (Hudson, Sandberg, and Sundström 2023). If this content conveys the wrong image, it can have fatal consequences for the long-term integration process.

The acquisition of the language spoken in the destination country, which is made possible by language courses, is a point without which integration becomes almost impossible, that is why these measures are of great significance for successful immigration (Koch, Bernhard and Frick, Eva 2021). If the language of the destination country is not learnt, there is an automatic 'cluster' formation, places where migrants with the same language and culture gather (Gitschthaler,

Erling, and Schwab 2024). This drastically hinders coexistence with the native population as there is virtually no interaction between the two groups. The state can counteract this phenomenon by offering language courses and projects such as the ‘Gemeindebauten’² in Austria (Stadt Wien n.d.).

The acquisition of the nationality of the destination country by migrants is not only important for integration into society, but also with regard to the legal basis, as from the time of naturalisation, migrants as citizens have the same rights and opportunities as natives who have had citizenship since birth (Solano et al 2020). Naturalisation should be seen as the final legal step, meaning that on paper the immigrant is now an Austrian citizen. Whether this is enough is a different question, because just having a passport that says you are Austrian might not be enough to be seen as one, despite having passed all necessary steps to legally possess an Austrian passport.

Even if all areas are covered by measures and laws, integration is not guaranteed to occur. Host societies need to change too, adapt to the new situation and accept immigrants into their life. Educating immigrants through value and orientation courses or familiarize them with the host language via language classes are both measures that facilitate this integration process but are by no means guarantees that successful integration will happen.

1.1 Migrant Integration Policy Index

Given the complexity of integration, scholars try to come up with complex measures of it, the Migrant Integration Policy Index 2020 (MIPEX) is one of these measures. MIPEX ranks 56

² The ‘Gemeindebauten’ are buildings in which the apartments have fixed and relatively low rental cost, compared to normal prices in Vienna. Those buildings cannot just be found in one specific area in the city, but across the different districts. This also mixes people in districts where rents are very high, as people on lower incomes can now live there (Stadt Wien n.d.)².

countries from around the world based on eight policy areas that serve migrant integration (Solano et al 2020). MIPEX covers the period from 2007 to 2019 and provides a detailed analysis of countries' efforts to integrate migrants into society. The eight policy areas that MIPEX uses as the basis for the ranking are Labour market mobility, Family reunion, Education, Health, Political participation, Permanent residence, Access to nationality and Anti-Discrimination policies. Each policy area is assessed against specific indicators consisting of questions that assess the policy components against the highest standards of equality.³ I use MIPEX as a standard for integration, since it is an excellent tool that enables me to analyse Austrian policies in a sophisticated way, as MIPEX has also created detailed guidelines for assessment.

Austria receives a score of 46 out of 100 from MIPEX, a score that is below the average. Austria performs best in the 'Health' category, as the Austrian government covers the health care of immigrants relatively well (Anzenberger, Bodenwinkler and Breyer 2015). 'Family Reunion', 'Political Participation' and 'Access to nationality' are rated as 'unfavourable'. This way, integration in Austria is ranked 'Temporary', aimed at guest workers (Godlewska 2023). Countries such as Sweden, with a score of 86, or Finland, with an overall score of 85, are examples of how integration can work better, in terms of opportunities for migrants but also the perception and appreciation of locals towards foreigners. MIPEX sees Austria as a country whose policies supposedly give locals the impression that foreigners are 'different', in extreme cases even 'subordinate' (Solano et al 2020). MIPEX also sees 'labour market mobility' in Austria as only 'halfway favourable', also due to points such as '...non-EU migrant workers do

³ The highest standards of equality are derived by the European Union Directives, the council of European Conventions and in certain cases International Conventions, such as the UN Conventions. The answers to these questions are quantified with scores between 0 and 100, with higher scores meaning that a policy is closely aligned with these standards. To calculate a country's score for each policy area, the individual indicator scores are averaged. These average scores from all policy areas are then combined to produce the overall MIPEX score for each country, which is a comprehensive measure of how well a country's policies support the integration of migrants (Solano et al 2020).

not have the same opportunities for education, training or study grants as Austrian/EU citizens' (Solano et al 2020).

Although MIPEX provides a good overall picture with its categories and methods of analysis, it does not consider the details of integration policies that have a strong impact. MIPEX analyses and covers the legal aspects and government documents well, but rarely refers to the actual implementation processes of the measures mentioned in the policies. This thesis does exactly this and looks at not only the details of the law but how the law is actually implemented. This is important because important details are sometimes lost in the MIPEX ranking. The following pages will uncover the different legal requirements together with a discussion and introduction of certain topics in the value and orientation courses to thoroughly understand and improve the general framework of the integration process in Austria.

2 The History of Migrant Integration in Austria

Austrian Integration Law has been subject to change many times since the rebirth of the Austrian Republic in 1945 (Godlewska 2023). What is special about Austria is that not only the legislation has changed fundamentally, but also the relationship with immigrants, at least on paper. After the founding of the Republic, the first wave of immigrants were Hungarian refugees, that fled due to the violent suppression by soviet forces of the 1956 uprising. According to data from Austrian and Hungarian authorities, between 180,000 and 194,000 Hungarians fled to Austria in 1956 and 1957, viewing it mainly as a temporary stop. By January 1957, approximately 70% of these refugees had moved on from Austria (Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv and Wienbibliothek im Rathaus n.d.).

Austria saw an influx of immigrants from the 1960s onwards, which steadily increased in the years to come (Kraler 2012). This influx resulted among other things, because of Austria itself. The government actively decided to bring guest workers (Gastarbeiter) into the country for various reasons, including labour shortages and economic growth (Godlewska 2023). It is important to note that for a long-time, migrants were only seen as guest workers, people who lived in Austria temporarily to work, and left the country again after a certain period (Godlewska 2023). Legislation was therefore only geared towards this point of interest; long-term residence in Austria was not seen as possible and, above all, not necessary at the time. The integration of guest workers into society was also neglected. Legislators initially focused on the integration of political refugees with the ‘Passport Act’ in 1969; laws and regulations regarding immigrants, who were active in the labour market, remained quite limited (Bundesgesetz 2024).

This changed in the 1970s, the reasons for the change included the economic crisis and the resulting lower demand for labour. In response, Austrian lawmakers passed the ‘Aliens

Employment Act’ in 1975 to limit immigration and guarantee the ‘economic usefulness’ of migrants (Godlewska 2023). However, this law and its immediate successors once again neglected to introduce mechanisms that would have helped migrants to integrate, as the perception regarding immigrants was still that their stay would end after a given time (Kraler 2012). The biggest changes happened in the 1990s, when Austria realized that migrants would remain in the country for the long term and that there had to be measures for successful integration and these had to be enshrined in law (Bundesgesetz 2024).

In 1998, the new ‘Aliens Act’ expanded language courses and for the first time introduced courses that were designed to teach migrants Austrian and Democratic values (Bundesgesetz 2024). One of the main motivations for the new act was most likely the great influx of immigrants following the Yugoslav War. In 2002, the so-called integration agreement was introduced that made certain aspects obligatory for new immigrants. This integration agreement was proposed due to certain issues that arose within the naturalisation process, above all the fact that immigrants had to prove on a personal and professional level that they had integrated (Godlewska 2023). They had to take compulsory measures, including German language courses (Godlewska 2023). Disregard and non-compliance with these requirements could, in extreme cases, be penalized with expulsion from the country. In the years that followed, especially after the great influx of refugees after the 2015 Refugee Crises, the regulations were tightened, especially under the ÖVP-FPÖ government from 2017-2019. 2017 also saw the current ‘Integration Act’ come into force, which was subject to some changes but still forms the basis for the integration of migrants in Austria today (Kraler 2012).

Austria is a country that has been experiencing immigration for decades, but especially due to its accession to the EU, and the attempt to jointly overcome the refugee crisis in 2015, in which the number of asylum applications in Austria tripled, the integration of migrants is one of the most important and most discussed topics in politics of today. Let us now proceed to a more

detailed examination of the current legal acts and their implementation in order to be able to assess whether Austria has overcome its earlier conviction that immigrants are here for a temporary time, or things indeed changed to enable integration and recognize people as integral part of Austrian society.

3 Integration Act – Integrationsgesetz

Before introducing the key points of the Integration Act, it is significant to mention that when talking about integration, one must distinguish between Refugees and Migrants. Refugees are people, who seek asylum in Austria because they are fleeing persecution discrimination or violent conflict. Migrants come to Austria for various reasons, for example to better their life conditions or work, but they are treated differently than Asylum-Seekers and face different regulations that they must adhere to, when entering Austria (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). Migrants who come to Austria from Third Countries ‘Drittstaaten’ are referred to as Third Country Nationals ‘Drittstaatsangehörige’ (Bundesgesetz 2024). I only refer Third Country Nationals as Migrants in this thesis because those migrants with EU citizenship enjoy preferential treatment, established at EU level.

The ‘Integration Act’ attaches particular importance to two measures in particular: mastery of the German language and the basic values of the rule of law and society (Bundesgesetz 2024). The law consists of four parts, which are subdivided into main sections⁴. This paper will focus on the second part, entitled ‘Integration Measures’. It is divided into two main sections, the first of which deals with ‘Language support and orientation for persons entitled to asylum, subsidiary protection and displaced persons’, while the second focuses on ‘Language support and orientation for legally resident third-country nationals’. The above-mentioned distinction between immigrants is clearly visible here, and although both sections are similar in content, there are certain differences that are important in the integration process.

⁴ Part 1 ‘General provisions’, Part 2 ‘Integration measures’, Part 3 ‘Institutional measures’ and Part 4 ‘Penal and final provisions’

3.1 Integration for people seeking asylum and subsidiary protection

The first section sets out two measures that are mandatory for beneficiaries of asylum and subsidiary protection. Immigrants who fall into these categories must attend German courses as well as courses on values and orientation from the age of 15 (Bundesgesetz 2024). The Austrian Integration Fund is responsible for organising these measures. In addition, all persons have to sign a declaration of integration, in which they are responsible for the fulfilment of the measures that are compulsory for them. German courses must be attended up to at least B1 level; the curricula of these German language courses also include values and orientation knowledge (Bundesgesetz 2024). Beneficiaries of asylum and subsidiary protection are entitled to repeat the B1 exam if they fail it at their first try (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.).

In addition to values and orientation knowledge, the courses must also provide information on labour market integration for beneficiaries of asylum and subsidiary protection. One major point of criticism is that asylum seekers, i.e. people who are legally in Austria but have not yet been granted asylum status, cannot take part in these courses. Furthermore, the asylum procedure in Austria can take months or, in extreme cases, years, during which people cannot take such courses and live in Austria without any knowledge of Austrian language, history and the culture of coexistence (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.).

3.2 Integration for Third-country nationals

The second section has considerably more articles, providing a more detailed and complete description of the actions aimed at migrants. This section deals with integration measures for ‘third-country nationals legally residing in Austria’ (Bundesgesetz 2024); these measures are

known as the ‘Integration Agreement’. The Integration Agreement is made up of two successive modules, Module 1 and Module 2.

3.2.1 Module 1

In Module 1, German language skills must be acquired at the A2 language level as well as the basic values of the legal and social order must be learned. Third-country nationals have two years to complete Module 1 after having been granted a residence permit; it is possible to extend this period for certain reasons, but not to exceed 12 months (Bundesgesetz 2024). The Integration Act describes the purpose of Module 1 as follows ‘...Module 1 serves to acquire knowledge of the German language for in-depth use at language level A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and to impart basic values of the legal and social order’ (Bundesgesetz 2024)⁵.

The Integration Act stipulates that Module 1 can be completed in several ways. Module 1 is considered to be completed if the person has successfully passed the integration exam of the Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds) and provides proof of this (Bundesgesetz 2024). Integration exams can be taken at the ÖIF offices in the respective federal states, the syllabi of these exams are similar to those of the German courses and are described in detail in the ‘Integration Act Implementation Act’. The Integration Act also mentions Integration courses as part of the integration agreement. These are German courses specifically designed for the preparation for the A2 integration examination of Modul 1. They are offered by certified course organisers and are one condition to gain financial support by the

⁵ Original version: ‘...das Modul 1 dient dem Erwerb von Kenntnissen der deutschen Sprache zur vertieften elementaren Sprachverwendung auf dem Sprachniveau A2 gemäß dem Gemeinsamen Europäischen Referenzrahmen für Sprachen und der Vermittlung der grundlegenden Werte der Rechts- und Gesellschaftsordnung’ (Bundesgesetz 2024)

government, if you fall into the category of persons eligible for financial assistance. (ÖIF n.d.).

The government's financial support to the costs of the Integration courses is mainly granted to family members of legally resident third-country nationals up to a maximum amount of EUR 750, on the condition that the courses were held at certified course institutions, that the person concerned has attended 75% of the courses and that the courses were held within 18 months of the start of the duty to fulfil (starting with the first issue of a residence permit and lasting two years) (Bundesgesetz 2024).

In the 'Integration- Implementing Regulation Act', the framework curricula for the integration courses, at the Level A1, A2 and B1 is given. Appendix B, titled 'Framework curriculum for German courses with values and orientation knowledge at A2 level' is a ten-page document that gives a detailed explanation and list of necessary information, that must be taught in these courses (Bundesgesetz 2024). A participant who has no previous knowledge of German takes part in 300 lessons of 45 minutes each. The integration courses are, apart from the learning process, mainly seen as the main preparation for the Integration Exam, that must be passed, if choosing this method of completing Module 1. Concerning the values and orientation knowledge part, the courses cover six areas in detail: 'Importance of language and education', 'The world of work and the economy', 'Health', 'Housing and neighbourhood', 'Principles of living together - Legal integration' and 'Diversity of living together - cultural integration' (Bundesgesetz 2024). These areas give a good impression of Austrian society, and the content is also dealt with in a sufficient period of time, in which the participants have enough time to familiarise themselves with the course material and prepare for the integration exam. I therefore consider the Integration exam method of completing Module 1, to be very conducive to a good integration process, as the third-country nationals actively learn the German language and acquire the knowledge of values and orientations that are assessed in the integration tests. There exists of course the possibility that certain courses might not be conducted in a professional

manner or that instructors run the course incorrectly. If this is the case, it can lead to an undesirable reaction from the immigrants and the positive course objectives cannot be met. It is important to maintain a high standard of courses to avoid undesirable and negative consequences for the integration process of migrants.

The Integration Act also provides for targeted integration support. ‘The Austrian Integration Fund can conduct orientation talks with persons according to para. 1, identify specific integration needs and recommend concrete steps to improve integration’ (Bundesgesetz 2024). This support includes orientation courses and German language courses, but also other initiatives such as ‘joint events with Austrian citizens for the promotion of mutual understanding’ (Bundesgesetz 2024). This is a great initiative as it focuses specifically on individual needs and supports beneficiaries directly in their integration process through measures that predominantly focus on the core value that Modul 1 deems as important. The support is limited due to financial constraints, yet the idea is valuable in the path to successful integration as not every person might learn the values, ideologies and language as fast as others. The targeted integration support enables, at least in theory, that no one is left behind in the process of completing the integration exam.

The possession of the ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ residence permit is another way of completing Module 1 of the Integration Agreement ex lege. The Integration Act is silent on the acquisition of a ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ but the Settlement and Residence Act (Bundesgesetz 2024) deals with it. A ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ is issued to those persons who are recruited as skilled workers to Austria or they fill in labour shortages at federal and regional level (Bundesministerium n.d.). On the Ministry's official website, applicants can find a points list where they must reach a certain number of points out of 100 in order to apply for the residence permit. Points are awarded in different areas, such as work experience or language skills. For ‘language skills’,

knowledge of the German language gives you the highest number of points, but you can also enter other languages to achieve the required number of points (Bundesministerium n.d.).

This brings me to my next criticism, which is that although the ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot-Karte’ is a good method of attracting skilled workers to Austria, it does not offer any real support to help these people integrate. If one compares this method with the first one, unlike people who must pass the integration test, these people can have less intensive contact with the Austrian culture and above all with the national language. The potential holders of a ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ will sometimes have a poor or non-existent knowledge of the German language and will certainly not have received any ‘instruction in the basic values of the legal and social order’ (Bundesgesetz 2024), thus the ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ will not promote integration. In other words, the ‘Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte’ option only maintains Austria’s historical stance that qualified guest workers are welcome, but they are expected to leave the country once their work is over.

The same criticism can also be levelled at the next method of successfully completing Module 1, by the third-country national having a school leaving certificate that corresponds to the general university entrance qualification, or a qualification from a vocational secondary school (Bundesgesetz 2024)⁶. In this context it is important to know § 64 para. 1 of the Universitätsgesetz, which states that persons with a diploma from a foreign university or, under certain circumstances, with a diploma from a foreign secondary school are entitled to apply for admission to Austrian universities (Bundesgesetz 2024). Of course, certain degree programmes require a certain knowledge of German, which must be proven by a German course or a certificate. But in essence, this means that the actual objectives of Module 1 have not been

⁶ Original Version: ‘Das Modul 1 ist erfolgreich abgeschlossen, wenn der Drittstaatsangehörige über einen Schulabschluss verfügt, der der allgemeinen Universitätsreife im Sinne des § 64 Abs. 1 Universitätsgesetz 2002, BGBl. I Nr. 120/2002, oder einem Abschluss einer berufsbildenden mittleren Schule entspricht’ (Bundesgesetz 2024).

achieved, or only to a very limited extent, because a school leaving certificate is an indication of education, but not of having the knowledge necessary for a smooth integration into Austrian society and the rule of law. Migrants that possess a school leaving certificate might know the German language at given level, yet they most definitely will not be familiar with all the core values and ideas that are of great significance when it comes to successfully integrating into another society.

Module 1 can also be regarded as successfully completed by holders of the residence title ‘Settlement Permit - Artist’ who, pursuant to § 43a of the Settlement and Residence Act, pursue an artistic activity (Bundesgesetz 2024). Here, too, the question arises as to whether this person has a basic command of the German language or the values of Austrian society, but since only a few people receive this title, this is not of such great importance.

The Integration Act furthermore stipulates that only third-country nationals receiving benefits under the Basic Social Assistance Act (Sozialhilfe-Grundsatzgesetz) are required to attend value and orientation courses (Bundesgesetz 2024). The Federal Ministry for Social Affairs, Health, Nursing and Consumer Protection states: ‘Third-country nationals are generally only entitled to social assistance or minimum benefits if they have been living legally in Austria for more than five years’ (Bundesministerium n.d.). This is also confirmed by the ‘Sozialhilfe-Grundsatzgesetz’ (Bundesgesetz 2024). In 2022, a total of 22,500 third-country nationals were recipients of social assistance throughout Austria, which shows that the proportion of third-country nationals who are subject to a course obligation is very low (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). This means that only a very limited number of third-country nationals are obligated to complete the course, and those that must complete the course are potentially not even benefitting from it as much as newly arrived immigrants would, as they have been living in Austria for more than five years.

3.2.2 Module 2

The purpose of Module 2 is very similar to that of Module 1, except that the target level of German required is B1. In contrast to Module 1, Module 2 is not compulsory, but is required to obtain the right of permanent residence and Austrian citizenship (Bundesgesetz 2024). In this respect, Module 2 has this underlying duality of being a non-compulsory measure, yet realistically all immigrants that want to live in Austria as a permanent resident must complete it. In practice this means that while on paper, the Integration Act deems it as non-mandatory, immigrants must successfully complete Modul 2 at one point, if they desire to extend their stay in Austria. Therefore, Module 2 is another big step that immigrants must take to obtain naturalisation, which is why it is certainly one of the reasons why MIPEX rates the point ‘access to citizenship’ in Austria with only 14 out of 100 points.

4 Value and orientation courses

In implementing the mandatory requirements of the ‘Integration Act’, which are carried out by the Austrian Integration Fund, the Value and Orientation Courses deal in particular with those topics that are considered essential in Module 1, if integration is to run smoothly (ÖIF n.d.). The prioritisation of these topics is something I fully agree with because I see learning the language and, above all, the values of living together as the fundamental knowledge that facilitates integration into society and other areas. As a reminder, the value and orientation courses are not compulsory for most non-EU citizens required to complete Module 1 and for whom attendance is not possible, inter alia, due to capacity constraints (ÖIF n.d.). This can negatively impact integration prospects for many, extending the availability of such courses and simultaneously requiring other categories of immigrants to attend these courses could facilitate integration.

The value and orientation courses have been extended from eight hours to 24 hours in 2022, to be completed over a period of three days (ÖIF n.d.). This is a great change as it gives attendants more time to engage with the course material and learn the core values that are so important when integrating into a society that might be inherently different than the one the attendants grew up in. The courses are mandatory for people with asylum from the age of 15. In addition, the courses are also open to asylum seekers with a high probability of recognition. (ÖIF n.d.). A person is generally considered to be an ‘asylum seeker with a high probability of recognition’ if he or she comes from a country of origin with a high rate of positive asylum applications (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). This rate is statistically determined, and helps some people attend a value and orientation course. However, there are many other asylum seekers, who are denied access to these courses because they do not qualify as someone with a high probability of

recognition. This raises the already mentioned problem of access for these courses that future policies should try to address to facilitate integration.

The courses deal with the following topics: ‘Learning German, education and the labour market’ (ÖIF 2024). The participants learn how important it is to master the German language for the integration process and what opportunities there are to learn German. In addition, the possibilities and opportunities of education in Austria are discussed and the Austrian social system is explained. Some of the most valuable information is about the job market, how to find a job and how to apply to potential employers. This is something that is of great importance, especially in the context of long-term integration. Courses in which such knowledge is passed on to immigrants, and where there is also the opportunity for direct questioning, actively counteract feelings of insecurity.

The value and orientation course deals with topics that fall under ‘Constitutional values and legal integration’ (ÖIF 2024). The ÖIF gave me the opportunity to attend the second day of the Value and Orientation Course at the Vienna Integration Centre. The schedule was divided into seven parts: 1) Introduction, 2) Geography and History, 3) Legal Foundations of Coexistence, 4) Equality and Self-Determination, 5) Rights and Freedoms, 6) Integration vs. Segregation, and 7) Personal Integration Process. I attended the third and fourth part of the course.

The first part of the course was on ‘Legal Basics of Cohabitation’, an essential point because people who come to Austria to integrate well must at least know the basics to be able to integrate in other areas, such as the labour market. One of the positive things I noticed right away was that even though the instructor was not an Arabic speaker, he actively asked questions and had conversations with the participants with the help of the interpreter. This created a pleasant environment in which most of the participants responded to the questions. This allowed them to engage directly with the issues being discussed. This is important as it

made immigrants feel part of the course, active participants of the effort aimed at helping them learn about better cohabitation.

Four pillars were identified as the foundation of the Austrian state: Democracy, Republic, Federalism and the Rule of law. The instructor asked questions like ‘Who elects the government and who can vote in Austria?’. It was exciting to see how surprised some of the participants were by the answers to the questions, as things are very different in their countries of origin compared to Austria. One area where MIPEX is critical of Austrian policies for immigrants is ‘political participation’. ‘...they still have no voting rights, few local consultative bodies and weak support for immigrant organisations’ (Solano et al 2020). However, the instructor of the course explained to the participants how they could still get politically involved despite the limited possibilities. One of the possibilities are demonstrations, which can also be registered and organised by recognised refugees or third-country nationals from countries that are not members of the European Economic Area (EEA). The possibilities presented in the course are not a long-term solution to the problem of insufficient political participation by immigrants. However, the information provided at least gives immigrants an insight into how they can become politically active for their own future in the country, despite the strict requirements. This is something that MIPEX measures miss – while the possibilities are indeed limited, such courses can teach immigrants well about what alternatives they might have at their hands.

The Austrian legislative, executive and judicial branches were also explained to the participants. The emphasis was on explaining that Austria's constitutional state treats everyone equally. Even the President of the Republic must submit to the law, which once again came as a great surprise to some of the participants. The instructor explained that even police officers are not allowed to abuse their power. As many immigrants come from non-democratic countries where the executive cannot be held accountable, this is important information. For

immigrants to feel comfortable and to avoid possible misunderstandings caused by insecurity and fear, it is important to know that the police in Austria can be trusted and that they are looking after the welfare of all people living in Austria.

The interpreter also briefly shared his own experience of his arrival in Austria. He had not had the opportunity to attend a value and orientation course when he arrived in Austria more than fifteen years ago. He stressed the importance of these courses. At that time, he had felt lost, because he did not know what educational documents, what benefits or what support the state offered. The interpreter explained that most of the course participants were initially very sceptical about the need for the courses. However, they often gave positive feedback afterwards, saying that they now understood why these courses were compulsory and that they had also helped them greatly in the integration process.

When asked if he thought it was sensible to make such courses compulsory for all immigrants in Austria, the interpreter answered with a simple yet definite 'yes'. He said that these courses are a real help for all people coming to Austria, because they not only convey society's values and rules, but also list opportunities for immigrants in Austria that many participants did not know existed. Looking back at the purpose of Module 1 in the Integration Act for Third-Country Nationals, which states that 'Module 1 serves ... to convey the basic values of the legal and social order' (Bundesgesetz 2024), this aspect is best fulfilled in the value and orientation courses, in contrast to some of the measures for fulfilling Module 1 that I criticised above. Furthermore, it also supports the extension of the availability of these courses to more people as the knowledge and understanding of basic rules conveyed in these courses could largely benefit society overall: both immigrants and the local people.

The process of obtaining equal rights for both sexes that took long even in Austria, was explained in the part on 'Equality and Self-Determination'. The instructor summed up the current situation in Austria with the following words: 'Equal rights do not equal actual

equality’, thus informing participants that inequalities still exist in Austria, as shown by the Gender Pay Gap. It is important, however, to note that participants learned that women can and should also be in work in Austria. This is of great significance when one considers that in 2021, 73% of women with Austrian citizenship are working in Austria, but only 12,6% of women of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi origin who are living in Austria are active in the labour market (ÖIF n.d.). Again, the participants were actively asked why they thought these numbers were so low, and some were able to understand and explain that it could be because of cultural differences and that this change in mentality could be difficult to overcome. Once again, I was impressed by the commitment of the interpreter, who spoke of his own experiences and how happy he was when his wife started working, as it was only then that he realised how much of a financial relief this was.

The last day of the value and orientation course deals with the following topics ‘Cultural aspects of living together and volunteering’. On this day, other sensitive issues such as discrimination and anti-Semitism are discussed, while participants are given an insight into Austrian culture.

My two-hour visit to the value and orientation course was very positive. The values taught in the course, at least in the two hours I attended, were presented in a precise and understandable way to the participants. They also participated actively and gave the impression of being interested in the content. On the basis of this experience alone and the impressions given to me by the course instructors, I would recommend that this course be made compulsory for third-country nationals as well. A large part of the requirements of Module 1 could be fulfilled, at least to some extent, with these courses. For this purpose, a change in the law is not enough; the Austrian state must also increase the number of annual course places. To put this into perspective, in 2022 a total of 11,311 people attended courses on values and orientation across Austria (Bundeskanzleramt 2023). Comparing this figure with the 73,931 Syrians that arrived

in Austria in 2023 (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.), all of whom are likely to be asylum seekers, the number of courses on offer is far from sufficient and this means that many people must live in Austria for months or even years without having attended an introductory course that could largely enable their fast integration to Austrian society.

5 Conclusion

This thesis examines the Austrian Integration Act and its implementation measures to find out whether the policy is favourable to integrating immigrants into Austrian society. It also seeks to explain Austria's sometimes poor performance in the scores of the Migrant Integration Policy Index. The Integration Act provides for mandatory measures for beneficiaries of asylum and subsidiary protection, including courses on values and orientation. For non-EEA third-country nationals, requirements consist of two modules. Module 1 is mandatory, and Module 2 is required for long-term residency (Bundesgesetz 2024).

As the thesis demonstrates, not all methods for successful completion of Module 1 are optimal for achieving their objective. I have shown the integration goals set out in the Integration Act may not be achieved by measures such as the 'Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte' or the possession of a vocational school certificate because they aim at recruiting skilled labour rather than teaching the German language and the values of the constitutional state and society. I conclude that the alternative methods such as the integration test and the associated integration courses provide immigrants with a much better options to integrate. They can learn a good overview of Austrian culture and society as well as the German language. The 300-hour lessons cover essential areas ranging from labour integration to cultural integration (Bundesgesetz 2024). This not only efficiently prepares immigrants for the integration test but also promotes their successful integration into Austrian society.

While learning German is paramount to be able access any integration, I believe courses on values and orientation are a valuable and effective means to provide immigrants with an initial overview of the culture and everyday life in Austria. This is the reason why the range of courses should be expanded, and the state should provide asylum seekers with important information as quickly as possible, possibly from the start of their application instead waiting till legal status

is granted. Furthermore, I believe that making compulsories for all new third country immigrants to attend value and orientation courses would be beneficial to the integration process, as many of the topics covered in these courses are crucial for living in Austrian society. Of course, this is a very complicated situation, as mandatory measures by the state would infringe on the freedom of immigrants. Freedom is to be seen as one of the highest goods and criticism of compulsory participation is justified and understandable. However, I think that the enrichment through the content acquired in the courses justifies the restriction of immigrants' freedom in this area, as the immigrants gain valuable knowledge that will benefit them greatly in their integration process.

This thesis recognises that most of the criticisms conveyed by Austria's low MIPEX score can be most effectively addressed through legislative change. However, this is usually a lengthy process that can take years. In the short term, changes in the implementation of the law could provide quick and positive results. Reform of how Module 1 is administered, or the introduction of mandatory values and orientation courses for all immigrants, could significantly improve the integration chances of immigrants and thereby possibly contribute to an improved coexistence. These changes, which mainly focus on learning the language and values that represent Austrian society and bring immigrants closer to it, could even bring about positive changes in the long run, as they could accelerate legislative change by producing positive results. Changes in the implementation are of course an additional financial burden for the government, yet I believe that all of society would greatly benefit from this, as better educated immigrants will have greater chances to properly integrate.

I acknowledge that there are certain limitations to this work as it deals with only one legal document and ignores the analysis of other laws such as the 'Residence Act'. In addition, I had only very limited ethnographic experience with the courses for immigrants and other courses might have less committed instructors or participants. Further research could build on my work

and spend more time in the field conducting face-to-face research, for example in the form of interviews. In addition, issues such as prejudiced stereotypes of the host society, which could have a negative impact on the integration process, were not addressed in this thesis and require further research but I believe teaching immigrants more about their host society would ensure they find their place quicker and in turn this should also help reduce prejudices. The measures and implementations presented in this thesis mainly relate to the early stages of migrant integration, as various aspects or problems can hinder the process later. Yet, successful early initiatives make the process of integrating fundamentally easier. However, despite these limitations, this thesis shows that there are several ways in which even small changes can have a positive impact on successful integration.

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