From Welcome to Restriction: The Evolution of Integration Policies in Austria (2010–2020)

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the evolution of integration policy in Austria between 2010 and 2020, with a particular focus on the key drivers behind policy changes during this period. It adopts a qualitative approach, combining discourse and document analysis of key legal frameworks, political statements, and media coverage. An empirical case study by Josipovic and Reeger (2021) is also included to explore the lived experiences of refugees and assess the real-world impact of policy changes. By tracing legislative developments before and after the 2015 refugee influx, the thesis highlights how Austria's multi-level governance structure, combined with electoral pressures, contributed to increasingly centralized and conditional integration measures.

Political actors, particularly from the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), played a central role in promoting securitized narratives that framed refugees as threats. These discourses were amplified by media outlets such as Kronen-zeitung, while Der Standard offered a more humanitarian perspective, although it became more politicized after 2015. Applying Securitization Theory and Discursive Institutionalism, the thesis shows that integration policies were shaped not only by institutional and public pressures but also by strategic political framing and media representation.

AUTHORS DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Masuma Sultani, candidate for the BA degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, declare herewith that the present thesis titled *"From Welcome to Restriction: The Evolution of Integration Policies in Austria (2010–2020)"* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Masuma Sultani

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Europe; it has long been part of European history. In the second half of the 20th century, migration was driven by post-colonial and labor mobility, particularly from Southern Europe, Turkey, and North Africa during the post-war economic boom (Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016). Therefore, migration was mainly viewed through an economic lens, with migrants who were needed for the labor force rather than as subjects for political and social discussion. However, these perspectives shifted with the economic downturn and rising unemployment from the late 1970s onwards, driving European governments to tighten migration policies (Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016). Over time, the focus moved from migration to complex issues such as asylum, integration, and national identity.

The 2015 refugee wave particularly marked this shift, when Europe became host to millions of asylum seekers fleeing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Austria, located along the Balkan route, became both a transit and a destination country, making it one of the top countries with one of the highest per capita asylum application rates in Europe (Rosenberger and Müller 2020). Initially, Austria responded with an open-door policy, but this approach changed to a more restrictive and security-focused one, implementing a series of reforms aimed at managing asylum seekers inflows and promoting integration that mainly targeted refugees (Rosenberger and Müller 2020). According to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are individuals who have been legally recognized in a host country as needing protection due to fear of persecution, such as race, religion, nationality, and political opinion (UNHCR, 2025).

This thesis focuses on the period between 2010 and 2020. This timeframe is highly significant for analyzing the evolution of integration policies both before and after the 2015 refugee influx. Additionally, the five-year span both before and after allows for a comparative perspective that shows how policy discourse, the political landscape, and media discourse changed in response to a pivotal event. The research question that will guide this thesis is: What are the key drivers behind the evolution of integration policy in Austria, and what role do the state, political stakeholders, and media play in shaping these policies? This thesis argues that the Austrian integration policy was significantly influenced by the political circumstances and strategic framing of refugees by political figures and the media.

The research will adopt a qualitative approach by analyzing policy documents including the Asylum Act (2005), Basic Welfare Act (2005), and Integration Act (2017), along with official government reports, parliamentary records, academic literature.

Additionally, I will analysis political discourse from key actors, media narratives drawn from ideologically contrasting newspapers such as Kronen-Zeitung and Der Standard. Finally, a case study by Ivan Josipovic and Ursula Reeger is used to assess how Austria's policy environment affected individual refugee motivation and perceptions of integration (Josipovic and Reeger 2021).

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how national identity politics, institutional strategies, and public discourse interact to shape refugee integration. Unlike economic migrants, refugees are particularly vulnerable, they often face significant barriers such as discrimination, cultural stereotyping, and restrictive government policies that may hinder their ability to integrate. By focusing on Austria as a case study, this thesis not only examines how such policies have changed over time but also sheds light on the broader societal and political dynamics that impact refugee inclusion.

In doing so, it offers insights into both recent developments and the potential future trajectory of integration efforts in a shifting political climate.

The thesis is structured as follows: The first section will present the theoretical framework, outlining the key theories that form the basis of this research. This is followed by a literature review of the current academic debates and identifying the research gaps. The second section provides a historical background of legal and institutional development in relation to migration and integration in Austria. The analysis then turns to an examination of institutional reforms before and after the 2015 refugee wave, noting the shifts in legislation and governance. The next section will focus on the key drivers of policy evolution, which include political context and media discourse in shaping public perception and political agendas. Finally, the last section uses an empirical case study, examining the effect of policy change on the ground experience of refugees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this research draws on three key theories: Multi-Level Governance (MLG), Discursive Institutionalism, and Securitization Theory. MLG theory developed by Gary Marks (1993) is commonly used in European policy studies and highlights the complexity of decision-making processes in an environment where authority is divided across multiple levels: local, national, and supranational. However, this thesis focuses on Austria's national context, where integration policy is shaped by centralized power and local implementation. This theory helps explain the tension between national rhetoric and local realities in integration efforts, particularly in the early 2010s.

Discursive Institutionalism introduced by Vivien A. Schmidt explains the role of language, ideas, and political discourse in influencing and legitimizing policy approaches. In the context of Austrian integration policy, discourse plays a pivotal role, particularly through political campaigns, party manifestos, and media representations of refugees. This framework helps explain how narratives, such as portraying refugees as either vulnerable victims or security threats, influence not only public opinion but also policy design and prioritization.

Building on this, Securitization Theory, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998), provides a powerful lens to analyze how political actors and media construct issues like asylum as existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures such as strict border controls, restrictive asylum laws, or surveillance practices. In Austria, post-2015, the political and media discourse particularly emphasized concerns about terrorism, cultural differences, and the abuse of welfare systems.

In sum, this thesis draws on a multi-theoretical approach to analyze Austria's refugee integration policy, addressing governance fragmentation, the power of discourse, and security-driven narratives.

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary context, integration is most frequently applied to third-country nationals, including former guest workers and, more recently, asylum seekers and refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines integration as a dynamic, two-way process requiring both refugee adaptation and host society support. This process spans economic, linguistic, social, cultural, and political dimensions and is measured by how well a migrant builds a fulfilling and autonomous life within the host society (Nicosia, 2014).

A key concept in recent integration debates is the "integration window," discussed by researchers such as Dr. Dominik Hangartner (Hangartner, 2019). This concept emphasizes the importance of early interventions such as access to employment, education, and participation in society during the initial stages of asylum. Delays in legal status or restrictions during the asylum process can lead to long-term disadvantages, with empirical studies showing that employment bans significantly reduce future job prospects (Hangartner, 2019) .

In the Austrian context, several scholars have traced the evolution of integration policy. Julia Mourão Permoser and Sieglinde Rosenberger (2012) examine Austria's historical approach, noting its emphasis on cultural assimilation and critique of its politicization. Along with Sandra Müller, and other authors Rosenberger has since published extensively on Austria's migration politics, including "Before and After the Reception Crisis of 2015 (2020) and Migrations- und Integrationspolitik (2023)," both of which highlight how integration policies have been shaped by political climates.

Similarly, Rainer Bauböck and Bernhard Perchinig (2006), in their chapter "Migration und Integrationspolitik," trace Austria's shift from labor migration to refugee reception. They argue that integration has often been reactive, driven more by electoral considerations than long-term planning. This thesis builds on their view, arguing that from 2010 to 2020, Austrian integration politics continued to be shaped by political competition, media narratives, and public pressure. While policies may be more developed and nationally unified today, they remain tools for electoral strategy rather than inclusive governance.

While the evolution of Austria's integration policy is well studied, this thesis contributes a fresh perspective by combining theoretical analysis with an empirical case study of refugee experiences. This approach offers insight into how national strategies and discourse translate into lived realities on the ground.

2. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF INTEGRATION GOVERNANCE

Although immigrant integration has become a central topic in political debates only in recent decades, Austria has long been a destination country for migrants (Permoser and Rosenberger 2012; Borkert, 2015). However, earlier forms of migration such as post-war labor migrants were seen as temporary laborers with no policies or expectations geared toward long-term integration (Permoser and Rosenberger 2012; Borkert, 2015). It is only in the early 2000s that the term integration has become central to both political discourse and policy design in Austria.

Historically, Austria has been recognized for rejecting its identity as a nation of immigration. Nevertheless, one of the initial major moves toward integration was the launch of the "Integration Package" by the Social Democratic Party in partnership with the Conservative Party in early 2000s. This reform sought to enhance the residence rights of immigrants and facilitate their access to the job market. Simultaneously, it was associated with attempts to decrease total immigration (Perchinig, 2012). The main aim was the integration was to reduce "integration before new immigration" (Integration vor Neuzuwanderung) (Perchinig, 2012). It was to balance two conflicting pressures: the appeals from humanitarian groups to improve immigrants' legal standing, and the urges from the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) to stop immigration completely (König & Perchinig, 2003).

In 2004, the Basic Welfare Support Agreement (Grundversorgungsvereinbarung, GVV 2004) introduced a multi-level governance (MLG) system that assigned the federal level responsibility for asylum procedures and initial reception, while provinces handled accommodation and basic services.

However, the GVV lacked enforcement instruments thus it led to uneven implementation and frequent disputes between federal and provincial actors (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020, p. 99).

Municipalities were tasked with on-ground integration but excluded from decision-making authority, creating a mismatch between responsibility and power. Additionally, the Asylum Act of 2005 (Asylgesetz 2005) set out legal procedures for asylum but left most integration measures such as language learning, labor market access, and social inclusion to provinces or civil society. As a result, integration remained fragmented, inconsistent, and weakly institutionalized.

This structural imbalance contributed to deep-rooted tensions and ultimately, a governance failure once the 2015 refugee wave happened. This lack of vertical coherence led to delays, blame-shifting, and inconsistent responses across regions, leaving many refugees without adequate housing or support (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020). Additionally, the inability to respond cohesively not only undermined public trust in state institutions but also fueled political narratives that portrayed integration as a failure. In the long term, this failure justified the central government's shift toward more top-down, restrictive, and conditional integration measures, emphasizing control, surveillance, and compliance, rather than mutual inclusion. Thus, the structural weaknesses of MLG reshaped Austria's integration model in a more securitized and assimilationist direction.

2.1 2015 REFUGEE ARRIVAL PERIODE

The 2015 large refugee arrivals marked a turning point in Austria's Migration governance. With over 80,000 asylum applications submitted that year, the system's fragility particularly by overcrowded Traiskirchen reception center was exposed (Rosenberger and Müller 2020).

These challenges did not arise merely from numbers but from deep-rooted governance weaknesses, particularly within Austria's multi-level governance (MLG) structure.

The main reason for this failure was a structural mismatch between responsibility and authority (Rosenberger and Müller 2020, Gruber 2017). While municipalities were tasked with practical aspects of reception such as housing and local service provision, they had no legal power or resources to influence federal asylum policy or long-term planning. As a result, coordination across administrative levels was inconsistent, conflicted, and deeply politicized (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020, p. 99).

Therefore, the federal government implemented the 2015 Accommodation and Distribution of Aliens Act, which allowed it to bypass local resistance and impose housing obligations. As many municipalities resisted participation, citing a lack of resources, local opposition, or political concerns (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020, p.101-102). While this Act was effective in the short term, this top-down imposition ignited legal challenges and political backlash, particularly from rural communities unfamiliar with multicultural populations (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020, p.101-102).

Furthermore, this period exposed a broader pattern of blame-shifting between federal, provincial, and municipal actors each seeking to deflect responsibility amid rising public scrutiny (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020, p.101-102). It also justified political actors to promote more centralized and restrictive migration controls.

Framing this shift through Scholten's governance typology, Austria's trajectory can be seen as a move from an early localist model in the 2000s, through a short-lived coordination phase through the MLG model (2009–2014), to a post-2015 decoupling and centralization under the ÖVP and FPÖ government (Lukešová 2024, Rosenberger & Müller, 2020).

The 2015 experience fundamentally redefined subnational actors not as partners in integration policy, but as implementers of centrally dictated mandates (Lukešová 2024).

Despite these institutional constraints, municipalities remained key actors in practice but without legal power. This disconnect contributed not only to fragmented implementation but also to growing political resentment at the local level, which was often exploited by far-right parties to delegitimize integration efforts more broadly (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020).

Finally, attempts to institutionalize cooperation through bodies such as the Integrationsbeirat a formal advisory council proved largely symbolic. Lacking decision-making authority or meaningful input from local actors, such platforms reinforced the perception that MLG in Austria functioned more as a legal fiction than as an operational reality (Lukešová, 2024). As this thesis will argue, the 2015 event was not merely a humanitarian challenge, but a governance crisis that revealed and, in some cases, entrenched fundamental weaknesses in Austria's integration framework.

2.2 POST-2015 REDEFINITION OF INTEGRATION GOVERNENCE

In the period following 2015, Austria moved away from the multi-level governance system towards a Centralized and conditional-based integration system. This change was mainly politically driven by the ÖVP and FPÖ coalition government (2017-2021) under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz. This shift was institutionalized through the Integration Act (Integrationsgesetz, BGBl. I Nr. 68/2017), which defined integration as the obligation and duty of refugees rather than mutual responsibility.

One of the main parts of this Act was the Integration Agreement (Integrationsvereinbarung), which made participation in German language and civic education courses mandatory for recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

Failure to meet these requirements could result in punishment measures, including reduced financial support or restrictions on residency status. This reflects a broader shift toward a disciplinary integration form that prioritizes control and conditionality over support (Bundesgesetz 2025).

This legal development aligns with securitization theory, where migration is treated not as a humanitarian or socio-economic issue, but as a matter of national security and cultural preservation. Sebastian Kurz for instance publicly justified the Act by portraying the asylum system as chaotic and uncontrolled, emphasizing the state's right to select who may integrate into Austrian society (Parlamentskorrespondenz, 2017). In parliamentary debates, he framed the legislation as a corrective measure to restore order and enforce societal limits, particularly distinguishing between "deserving" and "undeserving" migrants (Parlamentskorrespondenz, 2017). This discursive strategy not only reinforced a securitized narrative but also situated integration as a means of migration control, rather than inclusion.

Furthermore, centralization was reinforced with the monopolization of integration exams by the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF). Under the new legal system, only ÖIF-administered tests were accepted for fulfilling language and civic requirements, thus eliminating internationally recognized certificates as well as local authorities (Bundesgesetz, 2025). Additionally, funds for integration programs were reduced, even though local municipalities were responsible for integration. This created a paradox: while local actors were expected to carry out integration tasks, they were increasingly deprived of authority and resources leading to an implementation gap between federal expectations and local capacities (Rosenberger and Müller 2020).

Other reforms reinforced these changes, for instance, the asylum appeals process was shortened, reducing the time available for legal recourse (Rosenberger and Müller 2020).

Detention and deportation powers were expanded, and in 2016, the government implemented a numerical cap on asylum applications, effectively subordinating humanitarian obligations to politically acceptable limits (ibid p. 101). While these measures were framed as administrative improvements, they signaled a deeper redefinition of the state's integration objectives: from facilitating inclusion to managing and filtering mobility.

This control extended to asylum accommodations, often referred to as "campization" another form of restriction (Rosenberger and Müller 2020, p. 105). These centers, marked by curfews, isolation from local communities, and limited access to civil society organizations, were not just logistical solutions they were ideological symbols (ibid, p. 105). This physical and social marginalization directly contradicted research showing that early inclusion through contact with locals, access to language, education, and employment is essential for long-term integration. Additionally, it reflects the idea of securitization theory; by isolating them, the government portrays them as a potential risk to public order and national identity.

Furthermore, despite the Foreigners Employment Act amendment to formally open the labor market to legally recognized refugees, practical barriers such as credential recognition, employer reluctance, and bureaucratic delays continued to limit participation (Rosenberger and Müller 2020). These inconsistencies between legal intent and lived reality underscore a core weakness in Austria's centralized integration model: its emphasis on formal compliance over structural inclusion.

This physical isolation of asylum seekers and practical barriers for refugees aligns with securitization theory: migrants were increasingly portrayed not as rights-bearing individuals, but as potential threats to social order and national identity, which is a significant part of political debates that drive policymaking, as discussed in the next section.

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3. KEY DRIVERS OF INTEGRATION POLICY EVOLUTION

Having established the legislative development of integration and asylum policy in Austria, this section will examine the key drivers behind these policy changes and evaluate the method used to influence policies and push changes. While structural flaws in Austria's multi-level governance (MLG) system became especially visible during the 2015 influx of refugees, these institutional weaknesses were quickly instrumentalized by political actors particularly the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) to advance more restrictive, centralized integration agendas.

Simultaneously, media coverage that labeled the 2015 arrivals as a refugee crisis (Flüchtlingskrise and welle) contributed to a discursive environment in which refugees were portrayed not as individuals in need of protection, but as crisis that needed to be managed. This framing reinforced exclusionary political agendas and legitimized the shift toward a more securitized, performance-based integration model. Together, political stakeholders and media representations acted as key drivers in reshaping both the policy framework and public perception of refugee integration in Austria.

3.1 POLITICAL CONTEXT

The political circumstances in Austria are a defining driver for the evolution of the asylum and integration policy. Before the 2015 refugee movement, Austria was already a politically polarized country with regard to immigration policy. The three main political parties the FPÖ (Freedom Party), ÖVP (People's Party), and SPÖ (Social Democratic Party) each held distinct and often conflicting positions on migration and asylum.

Historically, the FPÖ played a key role in shaping anti-immigration policy, beginning with itsdenial that Austria is a country of immigration. Over time, it helped reshape political discourse in Austria by promoting anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and anti-multiculturalist narratives, which ultimately became the new normal and formed the political consensus in recent times (Hokovsky & Kopal, 2013).

In 2015, initially, Austria adopted a welcoming approach, and the government and civil society put a lot of effort into providing accommodation and basic services for refugees. However, due to continuous news of people fleeing to Europe and the large number of arrivals in a very short time, the fear of loss of cultural identity, economic competition, and national security started becoming a concern among the population (Josipovic et al., 2023; Rosenberger and Müller 2020). Before the 2015 event, a significant part of Europe and Austria had never been exposed to non-European immigrants (Steinmayr 2017). As a result, the sudden exposure to culturally distinct immigrants not only in cities but also in rural areas led to many public debates and policy challenges in Austria (Steinmayr 2016). In addition to changing demography and public opinion on immigration-related problems, the crisis also triggered political reforms.

Migration and, as an extension, asylum and integration policies have been continuously politicized and instrumentalized in the Austrian political party system. With the high influx of refugees, these people became a subject of political mobilization, more notably for the farright and conservative parties. During the Refugee influx the majority of European far-right groups capitalized on these concerns by presenting themselves as representatives of nation and advocating for restrictive migration laws and ideologies.

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Migration policy served a symbolic function by highlighting the divide between citizens and non-citizens, using restrictions on entry or rights to reinforce a sense of national unity (Bauböck and Perchinig 2006).

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has historically been known for its anti-immigrant rhetoric (Hadj Abdou and Ruedin 2022). As observed through a fierce anti-asylum campaign, FPÖ doubled its vote share in the state elections held in 2015 in Upper Austria, where a large number of refugees arrived first (Steinmayr 2017). Asylum policy, therefore, was less about humanitarian or foreign policy goals and more about advancing national interests and shaping a national identity.

The discursive change was especially clear in 2015, when Johannes Hübner (FPÖ) warned about 'millions possibly coming to Europe," resulting in what they called a 'migration crisis' claiming Austria had lost its sovereignty (Parlamentskorrespondenz, 2015). These assertions contributed to a securitized perspective that subsequently justified measures like border closures and temporary asylum. By the end of 2015, even centrist parties accepted the narrative of crisis. ÖVP proposal of an 8-point plan included border controls and combating asylum abuse echoing far-right narrative and setting the stage for legislative reforms of 2017 (Parlamentskorrespondenz, 2015).

The 2017 parliamentary debate on the Integrationspaket serves as a key case study for understanding how securitizing rhetoric was normalized within mainstream Austrian politics. While Social Minister Alois Stöger emphasized Austria's humanitarian traditions and cautioned against fear-driven legislation, Sebastian Kurz explicitly linked integration to national security and identity, arguing that Austria must be selective in determining "who may immigrate and who may not."

Kurz insisted that integration is only feasible if the numbers remain manageable and repeatedly stressed the need to distinguish between "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees (Parlamentskorrespondenz 2017)

The debate also underscored the symbolic use of cultural-religious markers in political rhetoric. The FPÖ, while supporting the Burqa ban embedded in the Integration Package, argued that the measure did not go far enough, proposing a headscarf ban in kindergartens, schools, universities, and public buildings. They claimed that headscarves represented not religious freedom but a rejection of Christian-European identity. Although this motion was voted down, it nevertheless sparked a public debate and contributed to the normalization of discrimination against people who wear headscarves (Parlamentskorrespondenz, 2017).

Through the lens of Discursive Institutionalism, these developments reveal how political actors, especially elites, construct, legitimize, and institutionalize new policy ideas. Policies are shaped by the discourse surrounding them. In Austria, a shift in dominant narratives, particularly those promoted by FPÖ and later adopted by ÖVP under Kurz, redefined integration as a conditional and monitored duty, rather than a shared social process.

Discursive institutionalism helps explain how and why this shift occurred: once exclusionary narratives gained traction in elite discourse, they were embedded into laws, bureaucratic practices, and public expectations. The Austrian far-right party FPÖ used strategic methods to increase its influence and the effect its position and statements had. One of the main strategies are elite cues, which are signals or messages political leaders or parties send to the wider population to help them form their opinions on issues or topics that are complex and unfamiliar to them (Rossell Hayes and Dudek 2020).

Refugees from third countries already being protrayed different and Austrian being new to them, Elit cue was very strategically used. These cues often promote extreme or exclusionary views, for example, nativism and anti-immigrants. For instance,

> We are in a coalition with the people. Because politics is there for the people and not the other way around. Our politics needs people who are honest and reliable and put Austria first at all times! Illegal migrants are not welcome here, and we have no place for them. If Austria does not change its immigration policy now, we, as a minority in our own country, will not only lose our culture but also our rights and the Austria of our parents will cease to exist.). Security comes first! Therefore, deport Islamists instead of monitoring them. The consequences of the illegal migrant flow to Europe are devastating for Austria. We will hit the asylum-stop button so that Austria becomes a safe island in Europe[1]. (Statements by Norbert hofer and FPÖ, 2017)

This quote embodies the function of elite cues by framing migration as an existential threat to national identity, culture, and public safety, thus shifting public discourse from humanitarian concerns to securitization. Through the lens of securitization theory migration is no longer treated as a normal political issue, but rather as a security threat that justifies extraordinary measures, such as border closures, deportations, or suspension of asylum rights.

The implications are significant: when elites repeatedly use such framing, they contribute to a radicalization of public opinion, especially among citizens with limited or one-sided information. Over time, these exclusionary views become normalized, shifting the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in mainstream political discourse. This normalization was clearly reflected in the 2017 Austrian national elections, where the FPÖ achieved a substantial electoral victory, securing over 25% of the vote and entering government as a coalition partner with the ÖVP (Steinmayr 2017). This also extended to other political parties; the logic of "if you can't change them, join them" became evident, as even traditional leftist and centrist actors embraced more restrictive positions to stay competitive.

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[1] Originally published in German; translated into English by the author

The ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz had shifted rightward by suggesting a protection center outside European Union and called for closure of the Balkan route and securitization of the EU external border (Rosenberger, Gruber, 2021; Josipovic et al, 2023). Similarly, SPÖ also pushed a restrictive stance proposing mandatory integration and reduced migration.

This coalition marked the turning point in the asylum and integration policies, as ÖVP and FPÖ implemented a type of integration system based on conditions and requirements as explained above (section 2.2). This was justified based on the argument that it prevented welfare "abuse" and concern over social cohesion (Rhendirf, Widak, 2018). Through various tactics, elite signals, and security theory, FPÖ achieved to find its way to the governing party in 2017 and took over the integration ministry under Karin Kneißl, striving while continuing the system of demanding and promoting integration but also with higher emphasis on the demand side (Integration report, 2018).

On the one hand, these restrictions may be justified on some level to perhaps strengthen the path to integration and encourage fast integration. Particularly, the concern about the integration of refugee women may be especially relevant. However, on the other hand, the justification and the way these people are framed to be different and cannot co-exist peacefully is driven by the narrative of national identify and security concern.

Also, the integration was very much driven by the idea of identification and adaptation with the host country, which is not in par with the definition of integration. Even after the FPÖ's exit from government in 2019, following a corruption scandal, their discourse around "duty" and "cultural assimilation" was internalized in the wider political mainstream and continue to shape policy reforms.

As explored in the next section, the media has played a critical role in sustaining and amplifying these narratives, often misrepresenting refugees through crisis oriented and culturally charged frames.

3.2 MEDIA DISCOURSE

Migration, and more specifically refugees and asylum seekers, is a defining issue in contemporary Austrian politics. It is not only a socio-political phenomenon but also a discursive one. The way refugees and asylum seekers are framed in the media shapes public perception and voting behaviour. One of the main ways politicians influence policy changes and increase their political support is through media discourse. This section will explore the role of media in the politicization of migration and refugee politics in Austria, particularly through the analysis of key newspaper such as Die Kronen Zeitung and Der Standard.

It should be highlighted that sharing news and information alone does not have a negative impact, but rather that the effect depends on how the information is expressed and what kind of tone it takes (Goldberger & Janík, 2025; Filzmaier et al., 2024). The type of language used is highly important, as words expressed with negative connotations can provoke negative emotions. This is reflected in media coverage, especially because refugee and integration issues are tackled from different angles and for different reasons depending on the newspaper (Filzmaier et al., 2024). This leaves a stronger impact on the public as the message is repeated in varied forms (Goldberger & Janík, 2025).

For instance, Die Kronen Zeitung is a well-known right-leaning tabloid newspaper that focuses on populist themes such as cultural threat and economic burden. In contrast, Der Standard is a left-leaning quality news outlet that focuses more on the structural challenges and limits of integration.

To systematically analyze the evolution of media discourses on refugee integration in Austria, I created tables for each news outlet, presenting quotes taken from online articles published between 2010 and 2020. The analysis relies on online articles due their accessability and broader range of articles. This outlines the trajectory of their reporting and allows for an analysis of differences in their coverage.

Additionally, I developed analytical framework categories, which are used to examine the articles of both outlets. The framework categorizes discursive elements into themes such as Securitizing frame[2], Elite Cue[3], Humanitarian frame[4], and Alternative Frame[5].

These categories capture how political, and media actors construct migration either as a security threat, a humanitarian issue, or a matter of institutional responsibility. This analytical approach allows for a systematic connection between each news outlet's reporting and the theoretical foundations of this thesis.

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[2] *Securitizing framing*: presents refugees as threat or dangerous to justify emergency or strict action *(national security, identify and culture)*

[3] *Elite cues*: Signal or message by important political actors that helps shape public perception on an issue in a certain way

[4] *Humanitarian framing*: focuses on people fleeing conflicts and needing protection

[5] *Alternative framing*: Portraying an issue in a different way that challenges the dominant narrative

Table 1 – Media Content Analysis: Kronen Zeitung (2010–2020)[6]

Year	Newspaper	Quotes
2013	Kronen zeitung	"All the measures presented for better integration of immigrants are nothing more than attempts to repair mistakes from the past, said Strache" (FPÖ member) - (Kurz 2013)
2014	Kronen zeitung	"These numbers once again demonstrate the prevailing abuse of the asylum system, because genuine refugees would not go into hiding. " (Krone.ar 2014)
2014	Kronen zeitung	Mario Kunasek, the FPÖ's top candidate in the 2015 state election, warned against a 'Traiskirchen II' in Styria: 'If border controls were reinstated, asylum procedures accelerated, regulations consistently enforced, and the Dublin Agreement actually implemented, the people of Styria could be spared new asylum reception centers, such as those apparently planned in the Graz area"(Krone.at 2014)
2014	Kronen Zeitung	"With a current quota overachievement of 241.81%, Austria ranks third according to the latest calculations."(Krone.at 2014)
2015	Kronen- zeitung	"Three months after the discovery of 71 dead refugees in a refrigerated truck used for human smuggling on the Eastern Motorway, almost all the victims have been identified by name. "69 out of 71 victims from the death truck identified." (krone.at 2015)
2016	Kronen-zeitung	"According to reports from refugees, significantly more people may have drowned in the Mediterranean recently than previously known." (krone.at 2016)
2017	Kronen-zeitung	"Integration only works when clear rules and obligations are in place. Kurz: Zuwanderung in unser Sozialsystem stoppen" (Hollauf 2017) "The number of non-german speaking students has significantly increased in middle schools"(krone.at 2018)
2019	Kronen-zeitung	"Regarding minimum social benefits, asylum seekers are disproportionately represented according to the report"(krone.at 2019)
2020		"When Austrian republic lost its sovereignity" (Stoimaier, 2020)

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[6] Originally published in German; translated into English by the author

The analysis of Kronen-Zeitung articles reveals two major shifts in discourse between 2010 and 2020. In the pre-2015 period, the reporting emphasized failures in the asylum system and financial concerns associated with refugee arrivals.

During the height of the 2015 refugee wave, the articles briefly adopted a more humanitarian framing, highlighting the number of victims and the difficulties they faced. However, this humanitarian emphasis can also be interpreted as a strategy to legitimize calls for stricter migration control by invoking sympathy while underscoring the need for regulation. In the post-2015 period, reporting shifted toward framing refugees as direct threats to Austrian sovereignty and the social welfare system. There was a notable increase in the use of far-right elite statements, with a strong focus on demands for obligations, strict rules, and conditional integration measures.

Table 2 – Media Content Analysis: Der Standard (2010–2020)[7]

Date/Year	Newspaper	Quotes
2010	Der Standard	"Integration should be a matter of state priority, not left to chance. Integration succeeds where people are given opportunities and where they seize them" (Lisa Nimmervoll 2010)**,**
2014	Der Standard	"Sense of belonging among immigrants has increased, integration climate has improved."(Integrationsbericht 2014)
2015	Der Standard	"Where asylum ends, integration begins. "It's not about exclusion, but preparation." (Sebastian Kurz) (Integrationsbericht 2015)
2015	Der Standard	"One in three people in Austria with a foreign qualification ends up in a job far below their skill level." "Pushing people into the labor market alone is not the solution, supporting measures are needed." (Sterkl 2015)
2017	Der Standard	"Excess asylum seekers […] should be parked in camps in Austria, which they may only leave to return home (Wolfgang Sobotka, ÖVP) 'Wartezonen' would result in the creation of mass camps across Austria (Hans Peter Doskozil, SPÖ) (Brickner 2017) Anyone who refuses faces cuts to social welfare or other benefits (Kurz) - (John 2017)
2018	Der Standard	"Those people who have found refuge in Austria over the past three years bring great potential for productive and skilled participation in our society." "Integration takes time. The fastest integration is not always the best, because it is not sustainable," appeals the AMS (Public Employment Service) board member. (Integrationserfolge am Arbeitsmarkt laut AMS "über Erwartungen" 2018)
2019	Der Standard	"Refugees are portrayed as 'different' and as a threat against which the (Austrian) population must be protected." Refugees were increasingly portrayed as a threat to the Austrian population. Natural disaster metaphors were employed ("refugee wave," "refugee crisis," "refugee stream"). (Lehner 2019)
2020	Der Standard	"Europe must not repeat the mistakes of 2015 and must avoid sending the wrong signals, Raab stated: "We must not convey the message that if you make it to Greece, you will also make it to Austria, Germany, or Sweden."(Integration der Flüchtlinge von 2015 für Ministerin Raab "Kraftakt" 2020)

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[7] Originally published in German; translated into English by the author

In contrast, the analysis of der Standard articles between 2010 and 2020 reveals a consistent emphasis on humanitarian framing and the structural challenges of integration. The articles range from expert discussions, and interviews with politicians to integration reports, providing a wide range of perspectives and information that allows readers to reflect and form opinions critically. The reporting generally highlighted institutional and societal issues rather than portraying refugees as security threats. While this framing remained stable throughout most of the period, a shift became noticeable after 2015, when greater attention was given to integration difficulties and systemic failures. Der Standard also began covering statements by political figures regarding policy changes and their justification. Although the newspaper largely avoided culturalization and securitization narratives, its post-2015 coverage increasingly acknowledged restrictive integration policies and emphasized the negative aspects of integration outcomes.

The analyses of both newspapers reveal a clear contrast between their portrayals of migrants and refugees within the time frame. While Der Standard maintains a certain level of consistency in its representation of refugees through the lens of humanitarian and alternative framing, Kronen-Zeitung on the other hand progressively intensified securitizing narratives. To understand the broad implication of these narrative shifts, I will interpret these findings through the theoretical frameworks of Securitization theory and Discursive institutionalism highlighting its effect on public perception and legitimization of political Responses.

DISCUSSION

Media narratives of refugees and asylum seekers as either a humanitarian concern or a security threat may directly affect public sentiment. When negative and alarmist terms are used concerning refugees and asylum seekers, it results in increased public scrutiny and thus pressure on political actors to adopt more restrictive measures to maintain legitimacy and electoral support. Policies are not only formed through institutional procedures but also through the dominant narratives circulating in public discourse (Goldberger & Janík, 2025; Filzmaier et al., 2024). Media act as arenas where political ideas compete and either gain or lose legitimacy. This narrative was particularly evident post-2015 during the election period when both far-right parties (FPÖ) and the center-right party (ÖVP) increasingly employed securitizing and populist rhetoric. These frames were then echoed and amplified by media outlets such as Kronen Zeitung. This discursive change is reflected in the media analysis above. Using the aforementioned discursive categories, this part will analyze Kronen Zeitung and Der Standard in both tone and framing.

In Kronen Zeitung, the two categories that dominate its reporting are securitizing framing and elite cue. Headlines and articles often presented refugees as a threat to national sovereignty, security, and the welfare system, particularly referring to the 2015 event as a crisis, which adds negative connotations and creates immediate fear in people.

This illustrates Buzan et al.'s (1998) idea of securitization, in which political figures reinterpret ordinary political issues as existential threats that need exceptional responses. These threat-oriented narratives were often presented via elite cues, especially remarks from FPÖ and ÖVP leaders, which were deliberately employed to indicate a state of crisis. Phrases such as "asylum abuse," "border chaos," or "threats to Austrian values" were cited prominently, frequently in an alarmist tone, and presented as obvious facts instead of political

claims. For instance, "Traiskirchen II in Styria," one of the headlines from Kronen Zeitung, was presented in a dramatic tone, referencing the overcrowding in Austria's main reception center in Traiskirchen. The phrasing evokes a sense of crisis and escalation, suggesting that the situation is spiraling beyond control and that similar conditions are now emerging elsewhere. Through this framing, the coverage not only calls for stricter regulation but also serves to justify such measures as necessary and urgent responses to a perceived crisis.

Another approach that is especially prominent in normalizing the securitization of refugees, thus legitimizing the restrictive political stance, is the use of echoes, which became highly evident post-2015. Kronen Zeitung reproduced political statements and slogans without any critical examination, facilitating the spread of these frames with increased legitimacy. The absence of alternative viewpoints in their coverage further justified the biased depiction of refugees as a problem, which could have heightened public perception. By uncritically repeating statements from Sebastian Kurz and other politicians, such as "asylum stop" or associating refugees with religious threats and national security, Kronen Zeitung not only normalized these narratives but also aided in legitimizing the institutionalization of restrictive policies.

In contrast to Kronen Zeitung, Der Standard at large took an alternative framing approach throughout, resisting the dominant securitizing move but rather emphasizing structural and humanitarian perspectives on refugees. Furthermore, most articles focused on institutional shortcomings, inequalities, and systematic barriers rather than cultural and security threats. It also talked about the role of civil society as opposed to a centralized system: "The integration of refugees can only succeed if civil society is involved."

Articles emphasized the willingness and skills potential of people to integrate rather than, for instance, talking about welfare abuse: "Those people who have found refuge in Austria over the past three years bring great potential for productive and skilled participation in our society." This approach not only challenges the dominant framing of the time but also promotes discourse on rights-based, inclusive, and participatory models of integration.

Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that the securitizing narratives seemingly took dominance and not only affected people but also other newspapers regarding the type of information they shared. For instance, after 2015, particularly after the election period, Der Standard changed their reporting. While still avoiding the highly alarmist tone, its articles started to address the challenges of integration and social tension. Another change observed after 2015 is that Der Standard increasingly reported on the shifting political stances of mainstream parties such as the ÖVP and SPÖ. While these parties were previously more lenient in their immigration and refugee policies, Der Standard highlighted how they began to adopt more restrictive positions, influenced by the broader rightward shift in Austrian politics and public discourse. Furthermore, there were more citations from political figures, including Kurz's statement: "Anyone who refuses faces cuts to social welfare or other benefits". Although the citation was used in broader analysis, it can still be interpreted as discourse echo, contributing to the normalization of these narratives. By emphasizing the shift in mainstream parties' position while slowly reflecting dominant narratives, Der Standard contributed to a more complex discursive landscape that neither fully resisted nor entirely reproduced securitized framings.

It is important to note that the influence of these narratives relies on many factors such as political affiliation, trust in the newspaper, and the overall media environment. In a polarized country like Austria, the same message may challenge or reinforce existing attitudes depending on the tone and framing, since tabloid and quality newspapers have different approaches and readerships. This thesis does not evaluate audience reception, but it analyzes how the discursive frameworks establish the circumstances that offer certain policy directions as more convincing and socially acceptable.

The analysis suggests a feedback loop where political elites use media to present and justify securitizing narratives, which the media then amplify, influencing public perception in ways that rationalize stricter and centralized political measures. This is particularly significant after 2015 and during the 2017 election period, when not only the information shared mattered but also the echoes and dominance across different media, which could have normalized and contributed to exclusionary trends both in policymaking and public expectation. The analysis of the political dynamic and Media discourse helps to explain how policies are shaped, but the impact of policies can be only understood through the lived experiences of refugee and asluym seekers, which will be the focus of the next section.

EMPIRICAL CASE STUDY: POLICY AND LIVED REALITIES

As this thesis explained throughout, the Austrian integration policy functions under a welldefined, institutionally organized system, yet there are notable structural flaws when examined through the lived experience of refugees. The civic integration model promotes multilevel integration, including linguistic, cultural, and labor market integration. However, as this thesis established, the model works under the logic of conditionalities: such as access to rights and benefits depends on successful integration efforts rather than comprehensive early support, which is recommended by many scholars.

One of the main flaws of Austrian integration politics is the systematic exclusion of asylum seekers from the integration system during their long waiting time for legal status. Most integration programs are only accessible to legally recognized refugees and not asylum seekers, segregating them from integration opportunities, which contradicts the concept of the "integration window." This means that their chance of successful integration is significantly reduced by the years of waiting without contributing to society.

Consequently, Austria's delayed processing and exclusionary practice during the asylum phase has unintentionally fostered the potential for future social exclusion, a contradiction embedded in the very structure of its integration policy.

Expanding on the research by Josipovic and Reeger, it becomes obvious that legal status alone does not guarantee effective integration. Their findings reveal three social conditions asylum seekers and refugees experience: initial relief and safety ("regenerative condition"), motivated attempts to demonstrate integration ("expressive condition"), followed by resignation and disillusionment when efforts remain unacknowledged (Josipovic and Reeger 2021).

However, even recognized refugees frequently end up pushed into unstable jobs, encounter institutional obstacles to credential acknowledgment, and suffer through persistent bureaucratic challenges.

The challenges refugees experience seems to be deeply rooted in the Austrian institutional and political structure. The highly centralized and bureaucratic system creates rigid pathways that often overlook the diverse backgrounds and qualifications of refugees. Municipalities tasked with the implementation of integration lack autonomy and tailored programs, leading to a "one-size-fits-all" approach, where both highly skilled and vulnerable individuals are placed in standardized programs that may not align with their unique qualifications or requirements.

I would argue that giving greater autonomy and decision-making powers to municipalities and provinces, which are closer to the practical realities of refugee needs, could have improved and increased the effectiveness of integration, especially in 2015. However, this approach is not without risks, since political climates vary across Austria. Some regions might have adopted a more restrictive approach, while other provinces might have invested more and offered more services, leading to inconsistent and unequal integration results. However, recent electoral patterns suggest regions with more direct exposure to refugees and migrant communities tend to develop more progressive and inclusive attitudes over time. In contrast, less exposed regions have stronger right-wing-driven views.

Moreover, as presented by this thesis, integration is shaped by both institutions but also dominant discourse, which frames integration as an individual obligation to fit a state-defined model of a good refugee and not a mutual process. The dominant securitizing narrative justified structural exclusion at the early stage of arrival, which is a highly essential time for integration.

By depicting asylum seekers as possible threats or liabilities, political dialogue justifies denying them access to work, education, and integration initiatives until they receive legal recognition. Austria's integration system is comprehensive in structure; it is weakened by political securitization, rigid bureaucracy, and a lack of early inclusion. Integration is often experienced as a conditional burden, rather than a supported pathway to empowerment. Future reforms should prioritize early access for asylum seekers, and balanced national coordination with local adaptability.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to analyze the trajectory of Austrian integration policy and identify the key drivers behind its evolution. To frame this analysis, I applied three theoretical approaches: Multi-Level Governance (MLG), Discursive Institutionalism, and Securitization Theory. By outlining the legislative and political development of integration and asylum policies, I demonstrated that Austria's shift toward a centralized, top-down integration model was significantly shaped by governance challenges during the 2015 refugee crisis. The mismatch between authority and responsibility within Austria's multi-level governance system resulted in a fragmented response, which ultimately led to increased centralization and conditional integration policies. However, I must acknowledge that this section of the thesis has primarily relied on a descriptive approach. While this helped establish a timeline and contextual background, it also represents a limitation, as a more interpretive or empirical method could have deepened the analysis.

In analyzing political discourse, I drew on statements from political parties, official parliamentary records (Parlamentskorrespondenz), and legal documents to demonstrate that political actors particularly from the far-right FPÖ and the center-right ÖVP were instrumental in shaping Austria's recent turn in integration policy. The use of elite cues and securitizing narratives appeared as central mechanisms in mobilizing public support, translating fear-based messaging into political influence and, ultimately, policy change. Still, the emphasis on far-right actors may suggest that the entire political space was dominated by these parties, which is another limitation of this thesis. A broader inclusion of other political perspectives (e.g., from Greens, SPÖ, or civil society) would offer a more balanced view. Additionally, this section would have benefited from greater use of primary sources and interviews for a richer understanding of political motivations.

Lastly, using research on the lived experiences of refugees in relation to integration by Josipovic and Reeger, I analyzed the effectiveness of Austria's integration policy from the perspective of those directly affected by it. Their findings provided valuable insight into how legal status, institutional barriers, and social conditions shape refugees' ability to integrate. If I were to conduct this research again, I would aim to carry out a longitudinal analysis by interviewing refugees myself and examining how their integration experiences evolve. This approach could provide a better understanding of whether this top-down approach to integration is effective on a long-term basis.

Another key driver identified in this thesis is the role of the media. I analyzed two newspapers Kronen Zeitung and Der Standard to explore how media discourse has shaped public perception and political direction. The findings suggest that Kronen Zeitung largely echoed securitizing narratives and elite cues promoted by far-right actors, often without critical distance.

This repetition helped normalize and legitimize exclusionary discourses. In contrast, while Der Standard maintained a more humanitarian and structural tone, it too shifted its narrative after 2015 by increasingly citing political figures like Sebastian Kurz and addressing integration challenges. However, this media analysis was based on a limited number of articles and sources, and a more comprehensive study would require a broader range of media content and platforms.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this thesis offer important insights into the interplay between governance structure, political discourse, and media representation in shaping refugee integration policy in Austria. The integration policy landscape did not evolve in a vacuum but was heavily influenced by how political and public narratives framed refugees as threats, burdens, or conditional subjects of inclusion. Additionally, this thesis adds to the expanding literature that aims to explore not just how integration policies are developed but also why they assume specific characteristics in distinct political and social settings. In the case of Austria, it underscores that securitized and conditional methods of integration are not just institutional but also profoundly discursive and politically tactical. This understanding is especially significant for growing policy discussions, as it highlights the necessity of inclusive and equitable governance frameworks and the importance of early and equal access to the integration process.

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