

# Role of municipalities in fostering integration process of people with migration background in Austria

MARIKA GRUBER\*

## Abstract

Integrating migration populations into settled communities presents a major challenge especially for municipalities. Consequently, this research project investigated how municipalities can support the integration process of people with a migration background in eight different municipal fields of integration. The examples of two Austrian cities (Linz and Dornbirn), which have many years of experience in designing and developing an integration process, activities and projects, have been analysed in order to further develop the integration process. The wide variety of integration practices and activities of Linz and Dornbirn demonstrate how broad the room of manoeuvre is to create the municipal fields of integration.

**Keywords:** Integration, integration policy, local politics, migration background, municipality.

## Introduction

Despite low birth rates, a strong demographic ageing trend and a persisting deficit of births over deaths in some Austrian federal states, the population in Austria is increasing. However, this growth is solely based on immigration. In Austria, 18.6% (average from the year 2010, Statistik Austria and Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2011:20) of the population has a so called “migration background”<sup>1</sup> (UNECE, 2006: 90). The integration of migrants is, particularly for municipalities and local politics, of central importance since municipalities are the closest administrative unit to immigrants. In addition, at a local level, we can observe the different challenges the integration process brings, such as reciprocal communication problems between migrants and public officials (e.g. due to insufficient command of the German language and the lack of multi-lingual information letters), intercultural conflicts within the neighbourhood, or the call for political rights. On the other hand, municipalities offer increased participation possibilities and can encourage a feeling of belonging. Consequently, municipalities and local politics play a key role in the integration process. A successful integration policy leading to an effective integration process is crucial for a positive municipal development. The core of such an integration policy instigates measures and activities which can support the integration process of migration communities.

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\* Marika Gruber, Carinthia University of Applied Sciences, School of Management, Public Management. E-mail: m.gruber@fh-kaernten.at.

<sup>1</sup> It was defined as persons who are born abroad and children born in Austria whose parents were born abroad by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE, 2006).



## Research

This paper is based on the findings<sup>2</sup> of a research project investigating how municipalities can foster the integration process of migration populations, by considering the legal framework and the political flexibility. In this study the integration measures and activities of the two Austrian municipalities, Linz and Dornbirn, have been analysed and compared. The municipalities Linz and Dornbirn have been chosen for this analysis because both have many years of experience in designing and developing an integration process and they show a wide range of integration activities in all of the analysed fields of integration.

Municipal activities and practical examples have been analysed for the following eight fields of integration: Political Participation, Public Administration, Language and Education, Housing and Accommodation Management, Municipal Labour Market, Culture, Religion and Municipal Health System. The selection of fields of integration followed two criteria: firstly, if these fields of integration could be designed by municipalities and secondly, whether special activities exist in order to support the integration process. The analysis followed the understanding of a holistic integration process.

When speaking of “integration” in this paper, integration is understood as a two-party process (see e.g. Reichwein and Vogel, n. d.:21; Bischof and Liegl, 2008:149; Fassmann et al., 2003: 12-13) which demands efforts from migration populations as well as settled communities. Furthermore, “designing the integration process” or “activities which can foster the integration process offered by the municipality” should not mean that one party in the integration process stipulates the procedure and the other party simply accepts and follows proceeding. Ideally, integration activities should be developed in cooperation with those concerned, that is to say not just those with migrant backgrounds but also public officials, teachers, or doctors. As it can be seen in Linz, many integration activities are developed in close cooperation with the migration and integration board “Migrations- und Integrationsbeirat Linz” (see Gruber 2010:137). Above all, it is a question of how Austrian society can provide equal opportunities for all people, e.g. equal opportunities in the educational system, in the labour or housing market (such as equal accessibility and entrance possibilities), and in general, how public services can be offered and delivered in a way that migrants are also able to use them.

## Methodology

Firstly, an in-depth analysis of secondary data was carried out. Scientific literature, party and election manifestos as well as the actual agreement between the ruling parties have been analysed in order to show political strategies and the political room for manoeuvre in Austria. Furthermore, in order to identify responsibilities and the legal framework which municipalities have to observe,

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<sup>2</sup> The findings of the research project are published in depth in Gruber 2010.

several laws on foreigners have been also analysed. In addition, statistical data and results of a current study of Austrian mayors and resolutions of the Austrian Association of Cities have been analysed. Secondly, an empirical qualitative research approach, using expert interviews and e-mail inquiries, was carried out. In Linz and Dornbirn, interviews were conducted with the heads of the integration departments and with employees responsible for the development and implementation of activities fostering the integration process. Additionally, in order to explore the local politics on the topic of “integration”, the municipal councillors of both cities were interviewed. In total, 23 interviews were completed and nine e-mail-statements were processed between May and August 2007. In 2010, the responsible persons for integration matters in both cities have been re-interviewed regarding the implementation status of integration projects which were planned at the time of the first inquiry.

The analysis of the measures and activities which could foster the integration process followed the three dimensions of politics:

- Polity: focussing on the political framework of political processes and protagonists as well as structures like laws, principles of the constitution.
- Politics: analysing the processes and ways of decision-making.
- Policy: focussing on the contents of politics, like party manifestos, social problems or possible solutions.

In addition, the four dimensions of integration (structure, culture, society, identity) were considered.

## **Local integration policy**

### ***Inter-relationships between local politics and integration policy***

The central importance of municipalities in the integration process results from several factors. Municipalities are the closest administrative unit to the citizens. As a consequence, the different needs of the municipal community – and also with regard to the integration process – appear at the local level first (see also Pelinka and Rosenberger 2002: 220). Municipalities offer many services for the citizens. In most cases they are also the first contact point for services of the local and the national government.

In addition, fields of integration are areas of particular municipal responsibility. A large part of the workload on integration matters is carried out by municipalities (Güngör 2008:136) which could be because the integration of migration populations concerns areas specific to local authorities e.g. accommodation management or pre-elementary education. However, regardless of whether integration activities are carried out at regional or federal state level, integration policy remains a specific task for municipalities.

Furthermore, municipalities can offer the people increased possibilities of participation (Wehling 1992:183) – which also applies to people with a third-

country nationality, such as membership of associations, participation in political parties or the articulation of requests and demands through civic action groups.

Municipalities can “profit” from a successful integration policy in different ways: integration activities can help to reduce social expenditures and social security contributions and they can also cultivate peaceful living together between people with and without a migration background. Moreover, a successful integration policy can strengthen the economic development of the municipality as well as of the region. Multilingualism and openness to other cultures has become a crucial factor for companies in their decisions about where they open a new enterprise or a new site (Landsberg 2004:1). Besides, immigrants can strengthen the local and regional economy as consumers and producers (Schäfer 2006:348).

On the one hand, municipalities are the places where people live together and the level which, most likely, can create a sense of belonging and a feeling of identity (Gruber 2010:84; see also Wehling 2003:244). On the other hand, the local level is the level which is confronted with many challenges. However, a successful integration policy is crucial for the positive development of a municipality. Therefore, municipalities and local politics play a key role in the integration process.

### **Challenges for municipalities**

The results of the latest study of Austrian mayors showed the importance of integration matters for municipalities. In the year 2008, the mayors of eight Austrian cities (114 member municipalities of the Austrian Association of Cities were surveyed; 71 of them answered the questionnaire completely, 43 partly) indicated integration as their biggest challenge (KDZ – Zentrum für Verwaltungsforschung 2008:6). A study done by the Europaforum Wien (all 256 member municipalities of the Austrian Association of Cities were asked for example about existing or planned integration strategy papers or municipal integration activities; 94 municipalities answered the questionnaire; Antalovsky et al. 2009:8) indicated for instance that in 2008, 15 Austrian municipalities had already developed a concept or strategy to design the integration process; twelve further municipalities were currently engaged in the development of such a strategy. In total, 51 municipalities stated that they already carried out integration activities or they planned to do so (Antalovsky et al. 2009:11-12). These figures show the growing importance of the topic “integration” for municipalities.

Cities and smaller municipalities face different challenges brought by the process of integrating migrants. Since immigrants tend to settle down in larger municipalities or cities, it is this government level which is confronted with a concentration of large numbers of migrants which make it necessary for larger municipalities and cities to introduce specific measures to manage these challenges. Cities, for instance, are confronted with segregation or ghettos in the

accommodation market. This leads, for instance, to a concentration of kindergarten children and pupils with a migration background at some pre-elementary and primary schools. Many parents from settled communities are discontent with this development and consequently search for other kindergartens and schools for their children (Fassmann 2007:3, Meinhart 2006:17). Smaller municipalities, on the other hand, barely mention problems in the integration process. Some municipalities are challenged by the accommodation problem of asylum seekers – especially those smaller municipalities which have to accommodate a larger number of asylum seekers e.g. as a result of an imbalance in the municipal's population due to the existence of an asylum camp in the municipality (Gruber 2010:88-89).

However, smaller municipalities and larger cities face one common challenge: the need for more financial resources to implement and manage integration activities. The Austria Association of Cities clearly described, in their resolution paper published on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> Austrian City's Day, the need for financial resources and support regarding the implementation of integration measures (Österreichischer Städtebund 2010:5).

### **Integration practices and policies in Austrian municipalities**

The following chapter shows examples of integration activities of the cities Linz and Dornbirn on how the process of integration migrant populations can be designed. The examples cover the three different fields of integration: Language and Education, Public Administration and Housing and Accommodation Management. The example initiatives and projects are based on the previously published analysis (Gruber 2010:141ff and 169ff).

#### **Language and education**

As a part of a holistic integration process Linz and Dornbirn implemented language and educational activities at the level of pre-elementary, elementary and adult education, as well as parental activities in schools. The examples of integration activities identified in Linz and Dornbirn cover, for instance, activities to acquire language competences (mother tongue and German) which are already begun before the start of the pre-elementary education or extra-curricular learning support with native speakers. At school level, parental initiatives in the children's mother tongue exist, such as basic language and orientation courses are provided for women especially.

Beginning with the first year of education, Linz, for instance, offers special language training at pre-elementary level two times a week. In some kindergartens a native assistant teacher (speaking e.g. Turkish or Hungarian, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian) works with the children. In Dornbirn, for example, children have the opportunity to learn German with their parents, before they attend kindergarten. This measure should make the entry into the kindergarten easier.

At elementary level, Linz offers special language training for new school pupils. The parents are informed about this offer in their mother tongue. During the regular school lessons pupils can get extra coaching if needed. In addition, Linz offers extra-curricular learning support for migrant pupils. Native speakers help the pupils with their homework and prepare them for examinations. Furthermore, in Linz there are parental initiatives in the parent's mother tongue which should enable the parents to participate in the children's everyday school life. The so-called "mother courses" which take place in the kindergartens and schools of the women's children should also enable the women to understand and participate in educational activities. In Dornbirn, the integration activities at elementary level are quite similar.

Dornbirn has special offers at the adult education level. They focus, in particular, on the integration of women in Austrian society and support the integration process with special language and orientation classes. These very basic courses should enable the women to handle different situations of day-to-day life. These courses take place at the children's schools. Since the women do not have to organise extra children's care, it makes it easier for them to attend such classes. Dornbirn also offers the possibility for informal learning sessions where the women can meet a fortnight in a cosy and relaxed atmosphere. These sessions offer not only the possibility to make contact with other women and to practise the German language but also to obtain information from experts about various topics of daily life like the nutrition of babies, the Austrian educational system or the bringing up of children.

### **Public administration**

Both, Linz and Dornbirn have implemented departments dealing with integration matters in their organizations. Since 1990, the "Integration Office" of Linz has acted as an information point on immigration and integration and is the first point of contact for questions and requests of the inhabitants with and without a migrations background. The aims of the Linzer Integration Office are to bring about an intercultural approach to the public administration as well as to sensitize the inhabitants of Linz to the potentials of cultural diversity (Präsidium, Personal und Organisation and AusländerInnen-Integrationsbüro Linz 2007; Inquart 2006a:4). Furthermore, the Integration Office speaks up for equal opportunities for migrants (e.g. for the possibility to participate in the social life, for the barrier-free use of municipal services or the right to participate in municipal elections) and works on anti-discrimination activities and the overall improvement of the living situation of migrant populations (Magistrat der Landeshauptstadt Linz n.d.) Similar to Linz, Dornbirn has also set up a department to deal with integration matters. In particular, this department should promote the implementation of integration activities defined in the developed integration strategy paper (for the integration strategy paper see Güngör and Ehret 2002). The integration department acts as a platform for know-how transfer and networking and coordi-

nates integration projects. In addition, the integration department informs and consults public authorities, private organisations and citizens on integration matters. Furthermore, it promotes positive publicity for migration and cultural diversity in order to raise awareness of the integration strategy paper as well as to endorse this integration process as a topic for society as a whole (Güngör and Ehret 2002:19).

As a further activity, Linz has compiled a list of about 80 interpreters, speaking 35 languages. This should help people with no or hardly any German language skills to be able to communicate with civil servants, as well as authorities. These interpreters are also used by the municipal hospital. Dornbirn has also compiled a list of interpreters who can be used by the various public administration departments as well as by the kindergartens and schools (e.g. on parents' evenings).

Also, in the field of public administration is the training of civil servants in intercultural soft skills as well as the provision of multilingual information materials. This should help people with little or no German language skills to find their way in Austrian society. Linz, for instance, provides multilingual information materials for different topics in up to seven different languages: general information about the integration office and its services, information material about the use of the public libraries in Linz, information material on offers in the field of adult education and a guide through the health system and its offers in Linz. Dornbirn provides parts of their municipal newspaper in Turkish (e.g. announcements of language courses) and has developed a leaflet which should inform parents in their mother tongue (available in Turkish as most of the migrants have a Turkish background) about the offer of language activities and extra-curricular educational support for their children. In both cities the website of the municipality provides further information about migration and integration.

In addition, Linz and Dornbirn organise training for their civil servants. These events deal with topics like "Interculturality in the public administration", "Africans in Linz" or Islam. Dornbirn also provides compulsory intercultural training for their staff.

### **Housing and accommodation management**

In Linz, the biggest public welfare housing organization (GWG - Gemeinnützige Wohnungsgesellschaft der Stadt Linz) allocates flats according to an EU directive (2003/109/EG) which authorizes third-country nationals with long-term residence permits in Austria to use flats of the public welfare housing market. In Dornbirn, the allocation of municipal flats and flats of the public welfare housing market is regulated by the Vorarlberg region. Also in Dornbirn, third-country nationals with long-term residence permission have access to the public housing market (Amt der Vorarlberger Landesregierung, Abteilung Wohnbauförderung 2010).

The biggest public welfare housing organizations in both cities (GWG in Linz and VOGEWOSI in Dornbirn) train their housing managers in intercultural matters. These courses should help to improve the quality of life of neighbours with different nationalities, cultural backgrounds and social or living situations. The housing managers of the GWG in Linz, trained to be professional “conflict guides”, should have the ability to apply special methods of conflict solving in critical conflict situations (GWG Linz 2004). In addition, the public welfare housing organization in Dornbirn (VOGEWOSI) provides multilingual rules for residents which should also help to prevent conflicts. Dornbirn and Linz support the process of finding proper accommodation for migrants. Furthermore, civil servants in Dornbirn follow the progress of people moving into new apartment houses. The aim is that the residents can decide on and influence the building project according to their wishes and that the potential new neighbours meet each other as early as possible. This should help to prevent neighbour conflicts. Linz, on the other hand, provides a list of addresses of estate agents and public welfare housing organisations (Ausländerinnen-Integrationsbeirat Linz 2005:14).

In order to foster and intensify contacts between people with and without a migration background, both cities organise intercultural celebrations and housing estate celebrations.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study confirm the importance of municipalities in the integration process. The necessity for activities supporting this (e.g. neighbourhood conflicts, the wish for a ritually correct burial or communication problems between migrants and civil servants or medical professionals) appears first on the municipal level. Therefore, municipalities and the municipal fields of integration play an important role in the integration process of migrants. An important factor in the implementation of integration activities are the integration departments, which are the engines of many activities fostering the integration process. The examples of integration activities in Linz and Dornbirn show how many opportunities there are to create the municipal fields with integration activities and measures.

Linz and Dornbirn have established activities and projects fostering the integration process in every municipal field of integration analysed. However, some of the fields of integration are more prominent than others. The different emphases in Linz and Dornbirn result primarily from the different needs of the municipalities with regard to the integration process. However, the municipal field of integration “Language and Education” builds the common main area of integration activities in both municipalities. Despite the broad variety of integration activities implemented by Linz and Dornbirn, it is not possible to draw a conclusion as to whether these integration activities really improve the integration process or rather lead to a successful integration of migration populations. However, the examples of the municipalities analysed



show that they can design the integration process if the political will exists to foster the integration process.

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