

# Vienna: dealing with diversity

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The Austrian capital is home to tens of thousands of people of foreign origin, migrants and refugees, and has to ensure their integration in a political context dominated by the extreme right, populism and Islamophobia. Mirjana Tomic has authorized us to publish this article, originally published in *Jot Down*, the cultural supplement of the Spanish daily, *El País*<sup>1</sup>.



(Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The new President of the Republic of Austria, Alexander Van der Bellen, was sworn in on the 26 January 2017. The victory of the Green candidate, the son of Russo-Estonian refugees with Dutch and German roots, born in Vienna sixty-three years ago, was hard fought: a runner three times against Norbert Hofer, the right-wing candidate, he was finally elected on December 4, 2016. But with 53.8% of the votes, Van Der Bellen's victory is more symbolic than real. In Austria, the powers of the President are limited but the extreme-right's defeat has eased the concerns of European governments and given some respite to the current federal government, a coalition of Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Popular Party (ÖVP).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jotdown.es/2017/02/viena-gestionando-la-diversidad/>

The real electoral battle is expected to take place next year, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, against Heinz Christian Strache, the charismatic leader of the extreme right-wing party (FPÖ). In the meantime, the federal government is preparing to tighten, for the second time in a year, legislation relating to refugees. With Germany and Sweden, Austria is among the European countries that have hosted the largest number of refugees per capita in 2015. Most of them live in Vienna, a city whose ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, even before the arrival of Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi refugees, is a major political challenge.

## Diversity

I met Stephan Schimanowa and Aziz Miran in October 2016, during a seminar on the challenges of integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees in Austrian society, organised by the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ). Stephan and Aziz are social workers in the field of integration and we talked about Vienna and its diversity.

I chose to interview Stephan and Aziz because they had asked several pertinent questions during the seminar. Stephan highlighted the hostile attitude of young people of Serbian origin towards refugees: these young people, who are poorly educated, and often frustrated, hold Austrian passports but are only partially integrated into Austrian society, while being largely cut off from Serbian culture, and they are hostile to Muslims.

Aziz had expressed another concern: *"I know several Syrian refugee families whose values are close to those of the Islamic State. They are not willing to accept Western values, especially as regards the treatment of women. So what should we do?"*

The tabloid press, notably the popular daily, *Krone Zeitung*, have published countless news stories about Muslim men who refuse to talk to teachers or doctors because they are women; about children who refuse to sing in class, because it is sin; about girls who refuse to participate in physical education classes; about men who refuse to shake hands with women. Articles like this were already being published before 2015. The rest of the media have dismissed these stories, making it difficult to know if such cases are common or if they are isolated incidents.

However, in December 2016, the *Biber* monthly magazine, written by and for neo-Austrians (youth of immigrant origin studying in Vienna and having perfect command of the language), triggered the alarm and urged city authorities and religious leaders to take action to curb a new practice in schools - the terror exercised by young people who force their peers to comply with Islamic laws. The title of the cover, "Haram, Bruda!" (It's a sin, brother!), said it all: young men harass their peers, especially girls, to dress or behave according to principles they consider "pious". Several girls who were interviewed for the report admitted that they had to pay attention to what they wore to avoid problems with their classmates.

Stephan, who was born in a suburb of Vienna, met me at the Diwan, an elegant Turkish restaurant; Aziz, an Iraqi Kurd who has lived in Vienna for forty years, chose the Oberlaa, a typical Viennese café. A convivial but symbolic choice of venues: Diwan represents diversity, Oberlaa, tradition.

Stephan, a social worker who specialises in working with immigrants and young people of immigrant families, turned to history to denounce the fears of the extreme right, officially represented by the Liberal Party of Austria (FPÖ).

According to him, Vienna can absorb a very diverse population: in 1910, the city had two million inhabitants, compared to 1.8 million at present. More than 44% of the population belonged to different groups of the Austro-Hungarian Empire - Czechs, Hungarians, Croats, Italians, Serbs, Ukrainians, Slovenians, etc. Most of them did not speak German. *"Just look at the names,"* says Stephan. *"Many names in Vienna, as well as the dialect spoken in the capital, have Slavonic, Hungarian and Jewish roots."*

Half a century later, in 1956, came thousands of Hungarian refugees, and in 1968 many Czechs, both groups fleeing the Soviet regime. Some remained and Vienna welcomed them.

There was also another migratory flow: between 1961 and 1971, after the signing of an agreement with Yugoslavia and Turkey, Austria received some 265 000 "*Gastarbeiter*", meaning "guest workers". The idea was simple: work, earn money in Austria and then return to your village. Some of these workers did leave but many also remained and integrated by learning German.

Ljubomir Bratic, an expert in Yugoslav immigration history, recalls that the rejection of *Gastarbeiter* was so strong that their children had difficulty learning certain trades. Studying at the university was out of their reach. These children learned German but few progressed socially. Stephan agrees: the system did not allow social ascension.

In the early 1990s, 115,000 people fled the wars in Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia. Their level of education was higher in comparison to former migrants, and their children were more successful socially and professionally. However, both in the immigrant population and in the indigenous population, children do not succeed in being better educated than their parents, despite free schooling.

Refugees are just one more variable to this mosaic. Since 2015, some 125,000 refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have applied for asylum in Austria. More than half of these remained in Vienna. As for those in the rest of Austria, around 80% left for the capital when they obtained refugee status.



(Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

According to Stephan, it is important to fight fear, to work with people, to talk, to convince, to educate and to launch programmes to combat racism and exclusion.

Aziz shares Stephan's analysis but stresses another challenge: refugees must be able to learn the customs and habits of a society like Austria. *"Many do not know the rules and others do not want to know them. Their religious beliefs lead to conflicts but the Social Democrats do not want to talk about religion because it is not part of their values"*, he laments.

Hafis is an interpreter for Pashto and Dari (two languages spoken in Afghanistan). Having lived in Europe for thirty years, he concurs with Aziz: "People must learn European rules from the first day." Some thirty-five thousand Afghans have applied for asylum in Austria.

Zyada, a Syrian refugee, agrees: *"Everything is new to us."* This former finance director at Deir ez-Zor University, who fled a year ago with her two teenage children, talks about women. *"Many Syrian women ask for a divorce... There, it was impossible. My family was one of the most liberal in town, we all have university degrees and yet no woman would have dared to say that she wanted to divorce. How could I explain this to my father and my brothers?"*

Integration courses have recently been organised to explain how Western societies work: values, human rights, the primacy of the Constitution over religion, gender equality ... They teach people how to sort waste, explain the different types of work contracts... But some challenges will not be solved by integration courses: how to deal legally with women considered to be minors? And what about polygamy?

No one has tried to integrate the Turkish or Serbian *Gastarbeiter*, or the thirty thousand Chechens who have lived in Vienna for a decade and have little contact with the rest of society. The perception of Chechens is so bad (they are considered to be aggressive, criminal, isolated, religious radicals...) that several organisations have been created with the single objective of improving the image of this ethnic group.

*"When a family receives refugee status, it is obliged to leave the reception centre. They are on welfare but do not know how to organise themselves to find housing and work,"* says Maynat Kurbanova, a journalist and the only woman of Chechen origin known to the general public in Austria. *"Then Salafists offer them social services and influence their religious choices. Dozens of Chechens have gone to Syria to fight alongside ISIS."*

The integration of cultures has not happened in Vienna, and when the federal government finally became aware of the existence of parallel societies, the extreme right was already defending its anti-immigrant positions and its anti-Muslim discourse.

## **Integration**

In 2012, Austria adopted a national integration plan for the different generations of immigrants. The plan takes account of the mistakes of the past and the challenges of the present.

42% of the population of Vienna has foreign or immigrant roots (*"Personen mit Migrationshintergrund"*). By definition, they are both Austrian citizens and foreign residents (i.e. persons born abroad or whose parents were born outside Austria). This definition covers first and second generation immigrants, whether or not they speak German, as well as the newly arrived refugees, and includes the director of the Opera, Frenchman Dominique Meyer, and the staff of the many international organisations based in Vienna.

Out of the 1.8 million inhabitants of Vienna, 595,664 (27%) were born abroad. Most come from Europe, including Turkey; 11.7% come from the EU and 15.7% from other countries. Thanks to migratory flows, Vienna continues to grow: over the past two decades, its population has increased by 17%.

The majority of immigrants are Serbs and Turks, followed by Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Chechens, Kurds, Somalis, Nigerians and others. The latest arrived are Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis.

This diversity is visible and audible: you can hear dozens of languages on public transport at all hours of the day; Vienna has hundreds of ethnic restaurants, clubs, grocery stores and shops. Clothes also show the different backgrounds and beliefs. This goes from the latest Italian fashion to the many ways of wearing hijab, niqab and abaya<sup>2</sup>.

What is integration? The definition in the Integration Plan refers to mutual respect and respect for the rules guaranteeing social cohesion and peace. Successful integration, according to the plan, includes knowledge of the German language, which allows access to education, continuing education and the labour market, respect for the rule of law, application of the law and acceptance of the Austrian system and European values. The Constitution is placed above religion.

The *Biber* magazine published a mini-survey of young Austrian passport holders with foreign roots: "Do you feel Austrian?" Most responded negatively but stated that they considered themselves Viennese.

Integration is a word on the lips of all politicians, but their interpretation of it differs according to their orientation: the social democratic left favours dialogue; the right wants to prohibit niqab wearing. This dress, worn mainly in Vienna by Bosnians and Chechens, is not customary in Arab countries outside the Persian Gulf, Zyada told me. In Europe, it symbolises political Islam but its advocates say that free societies must allow it.

Aziz, a Kurdish Viennese social worker, argues that professional discrimination against migrants is mainly seen at the intermediate levels: "In international companies nobody asks you where you come from, but in medium-sized businesses, rejection increases when immigrants begin to climb the professional ladder". On the other hand, thousands of small service companies are managed by immigrants: plumbers, pizzerias, transport, hairdressers, beauty salons and so on. Foreign family names are also beginning to spread among high professional classes and some now appear in politics.

In 2016, with the migrant crisis, the rejection of immigration exploded. The 'Challenges of Nations 2016' international survey revealed that 66% of Austrians identified immigration as the country's biggest challenge. In 2015, 22% shared this view. Most foreigners and citizens of foreign origin live in Vienna. The countryside and small towns are almost ethnically homogeneous and, in general, vote for the far right.

The FPÖ believes that Muslims are difficult to integrate. At a symposium held in November 2016, about 300 elegant party members, including leaders who flirted with Nazism when they were young, rejected multiculturalism. Czech President Vaclav Klaus (2003-2013) summarized the decision: "On the one hand, we have freedom and on the other, political correctness, multiculturalism, Marxism and the arrogance of the elites." Some of these elites were present in the room.

## Law on Islam

Islam has been an official religion in Austria since the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1912, Vienna promulgated the Islamic Law, which grants

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<sup>2</sup> Hijab is a headscarf worn by Muslim women to cover their heads and sometimes their shoulders. Niqab covers women from head to toe. Only the eyes are visible. Women who wear niqab also often wear black gloves. Abaya is a dress that covers the body but without covering the face nor the feet nor the hands.

religious freedom to Muslims. The use of hijab is therefore not questioned: Muslim pupils go to school wearing it, Somali women wear the hijab from kindergarten; Muslim doctors treat their patients wearing a white hijab; Austrian Airlines Muslim employees wear a uniform that incorporates a white hijab. But this tolerance of Muslim women's attire does not mean that a covered woman will have access to employment, or will not be discriminated against or insulted in public.

Although no one is surprised by a hijab wearing woman, the increasing frequency of niqab wearing causes negative reactions. Tourists from the Gulf countries, who are regular customers of luxury boutiques, also wear niqab, but this does not bother anyone: these women stay in five-star hotels, spend a lot of money and are not seen in the social services or at the unemployment office.



*The Magdas Hotel in Vienna has adopted a positive discrimination programme (Photo: [Magdas Hotel](#))*

An estimated 600 000 Muslims live in Austria, the vast majority in Vienna. Since 2001, the city has not taken religion into account in its statistics.

*In 2015, Austria adopted a new law on Islam, which stipulates the primacy of national law. "Doctrine, institutions and customs may not contradict the law.... Muslims who aspire to become imams can study theology at the University of Vienna (...). The proper functioning of a religious society must be financed by Austria."*

These provisions prohibit the funding of mosques by foreign countries and the importation of imams, which have influenced the radicalisation of part of the population. According to a recent study commissioned by the City Council, 27% of young Muslims receiving social assistance defend jihad; 47% are anti-Semitic; 59% are against homosexuality. Each party has interpreted these figures in its own way: social democrats advocate de-radicalisation programmes, conservatives advocate various prohibitions. Nobody really knows what to do.

"The left does not understand Islam and the right engages experts who know about the issue. What they do with this knowledge is something else...", said Saïda Keller-Messahli, a Tunisian-born Swiss and president of the Forum for Progressive Islam. At a conference organised by the Greens in Vienna, Keller-Messahli was categorical: "No woman freely chooses to cover her head; she does so because of family and social pressure." And the activist also warned about the penetration of radical Islam in Europe through the funding of mosques and cultural associations.

## The city of well-being

With the exception of the Austro-Fascist (1934-1938) and Nazi (1938-1945) periods, the Social Democrats have governed Vienna for the last eighty-seven years. They have only shared power with the Greens in the last decade.

Social Democrat Mayor, Michael Häupl, and Green Mayor, Maria Vassilakou, of Greek origin, have reason to be proud: since 2010, the Austrian capital ranks first in the [Mercer World Rankings on Quality of Life](#). Imperial Vienna, which attracts millions of tourists who visit the Opera, museums, concert halls and majestic buildings is only one aspect of the capital. Quality of life is perceptible in every neighbourhood (there are twenty): an excellent and inexpensive public transport system, good health care services, free education, plenty of green space and playgrounds for children, many pedestrian streets, a rich and varied cultural life ... For some residents of Vienna, social policies are perhaps more important than cultural policies. Some date back to 1919.

The Red Vienna (*Rotes Wien*) of 1919-1934 was characterized by the development of social policy: social housing, public swimming pools, paddling pools for workers' children, crèches, wash houses, community gardens for growing fruits and vegetables, clothing for new-borns...

Many of these policies and social institutions still exist today: The city has about 220 000 social housing units, accommodating around half a million people. Some social housing projects have existed for 90 years and new low-rent housing is also under construction. Old swimming pools still work: in 1926, the Amalienbad was one of the largest public pools in Europe; it is still the most beautiful swimming pool in the city.

Unemployment benefits are the same throughout Austria but the amount of other social benefits is higher in Vienna than elsewhere in the country.

The sensationalist media, which are numerous and widely read, demonise foreigners, especially Muslims and refugees: they have many children, live on social welfare, despise women, commit crimes, receive more help than Austrians, have more benefits than unemployed Austrians, and cause crowding in the prisons.

Social assistance is currently the bone of contention between and within the political parties. Vienna has experienced higher unemployment, more unemployed immigrants, more refugees and higher social costs than the rest of the country. A person on low income or unemployment benefit, or a refugee, is entitled to some sort of basic income (*Mindessicherung*). For a single person, it amounts to €837, and €1 200 for a couple. There is also a €226 allowance per child, housing and energy assistance, a €17 per month pass for public transport, and a *Kulturpass* (free admission to all museums, many theatres, cinemas, music festivals and libraries). Initially intended to prevent extreme poverty and maintain dignity, this aid was designed to make it possible to get through a difficult period, but, with the arrival of the refugees, there is more long term dependency. Some Chechens have received it for years and, for large families, the amount can exceed €2,000.

The FPÖ argues that refugees and foreigners from Eastern Europe come to Austria to live on welfare. The SPÖ refuses to distinguish between refugees and other migrants (*Mindessicherung* does not currently require Austrian citizenship), and the Popular Party (ÖVP) seeks to reduce the

amount of aid. The FPÖ wants to limit it to Austrian citizens. For the moment, it is limited to €1,500 per family, but everyone knows that less help could mean more crime and, perhaps, more radicalisation.



(Photo: [Caritas & Du](#))

### **The cost of diversity**

Last summer, fifty Chechens and Afghans were invited, via Facebook, to fight with sticks and knives after a dispute online. Passers-by were shocked and eventually the police intervened and no one was killed, only wounded. The trial began in November 2016, but it did not last long because of a lack of competent interpreters in the two languages of Afghanistan: Pashto and Dari. One of the lawyers said he did not understand the interpreter, so the trial was adjourned. An Afghan interpreter explained that the interpreter was probably from Iran, as Dari and Persian are similar, but not identical. The lack of sworn interpreters for certain languages has become critical and the authorities are improvising. In 2016, the University of Vienna inaugurated chairs for simultaneous interpretation in Arabic, Turkish and Dari. Multilingualism is omnipresent in Vienna in hospitals and information on official websites is available in English, Turkish and Serbo-Croatian. In banks, Russian is common. The Vienna doctors' website, *Praxisplan*, specifies the languages spoken by each professional.

German courses - free of charge - bilingual teachers, multilingual social programmes, literacy classes, professional workshops in different languages, multilingual psychotherapy and other services offered, either together or separately, by the City of Vienna and the Austrian State for citizens of immigrant origin and refugees are expensive. Sometimes unforeseen expenses also occur: for example, reception centres have to pay their kitchen staff at the night rate during the Ramadan period.

The cost of social policies is public but its interpretation varies according to ideological points of view. In 2017, borrowings for the city of Vienna, for the third consecutive year, will be around 100 million euros, thus increasing its debt to 650 million euros. Social spending has increased significantly.

Although the figures for social benefits are published regularly, on the other side of the social spectrum the data are opaque. *"We don't know how many millionaires live in Vienna,"* said Klemens Himpele, the City's head of statistics.

The different Viennese communities intersect but do not always meet. Vienna has no ghettos, as urban plans have mixed social and non-subsidized housing, but some neighbourhoods have more immigrants than others. Two elegant Turkish restaurants have just opened in my street. They are always full. This is the first time I see women in hijab and abaya having a drink and a chat without a male presence. They feel more self-confident but we do not know whether their presence in public is due to integration policies or to a better purchasing power.

The beginning of integration or the founding of a parallel society?