

# Language learning policies and opportunities for migrants and their practical implementation in Austria

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This paper aims to provide an overview of current language policies in Austria. It examines the legal frameworks and current practices concerning migration, drawing on the historical development of and the current political discourse in Austria. The principal objective of the paper is to describe how language policies are operationalized through the implementation of language requirements, learning opportunities and language tests for migrants.

Based on a review of the relevant literature on migration and language policy, as well as regulations in the context of adult and young migrant education, this paper investigates the practical implementation of language policy in Austria. Despite a long history of migration and multilingualism, public opinion in Austria often remains critical of migrants. Austria was among the first European countries to define

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the language skills required of migrants using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels, and has increased the required levels over the last two decades. However, there has been no transparent discussion by decision-makers about the reasons for setting particular language requirements.

Course offers and language support are available for refugees to help them attain the required levels, accessible once they have successfully completed the, often lengthy, asylum process. In schools, measures to facilitate the learning of German include separate German Language Support Classes (GLSC), which have faced criticism from practitioners. The paper emphasizes the importance of evaluating and enhancing language policies to promote successful integration and support individuals of all age groups.

**Keywords:** Austria, language requirements, language policy, migration

## **1 Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen increasingly higher demands regarding the required level of language for residency and citizenship throughout most European countries (Schildt and Deygers, 2023). In countries where integration is primarily framed as a problematic issue, migrants' language skills and the assessment of these are particularly emphasized in public and political discourse (Wodak, 2012). This is also the case in Austria, where the introduction and tightening of legal requirements regarding language proficiency for migrants has gone hand in hand with a shift in public discourse towards a critical to negative view of immigrants and a rise of right-wing populism in politics (Aschauer, 2020; Rossell Hayes and Dudek, 2020).

Language proficiency is often regarded as critical for social integration. Language skills facilitate better communication and interaction within the host community, thereby fostering social cohesion and reducing cultural barriers (Esser, 2006; Hajek et al., 2024). Additionally, language proficiency is linked to improved employment opportunities and economic self-sufficiency. Immigrants who speak the dominant language of their new country are more likely to secure better jobs and

higher incomes (Carlsson et al., 2023). Certification of these skills by way of standardized language assessments is therefore often regarded as imperative.

However, researchers and members of civic society have expressed some concerns about the intentions behind language policies that stipulate certain proficiency levels as mandatory and require certification thereof (Harding et al., 2020). Language tests can serve as instruments of covert or undeclared policies to achieve unstated ideological goals (Shohamy, 2007), such as controlling the number of immigrants into a country (McNamara, 2010; Wodak, 2012). Carlsen and Rocca (2021) warn of the misuse of language tests in migration policies, arguing that while they were originally developed to measure communicative language ability, they might now be employed to “serve as a proxy for migrants willingness or ability to successfully integrate” (p. 478).

This paper aims to describe the status quo concerning language policies for migrants in Austria. After a brief overview of the history of migration in this country, we will outline the legal background in Austria and describe how these policies are implemented through language learning opportunities and tests. We will explore how legal regulations are put into practice for adults and school children, and situate these practices in the public and political discourse on migration in Austria.

In this paper, we define *migrants* as any person who has migrated, “including asylum seekers and refugees, minors, economic migrants and those who entered the host country for family reunion” (Rocca et al., 2020, p. 15). When relevant, we further differentiate within this group between a) *individuals entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection*, and b) *third-country nationals*, i.e. people who are not EEA or Swiss citizens and who immigrate to Austria for education or work, or relatives of such individuals coming to Austria for family reunification. This differentiation is important, as different regulations apply to third-country nationals and to persons entitled to asylum.

## **2 Historical background: migration in Austria**

Austria is a multilingual state with a highly diverse population, despite not officially recognizing itself as such (Herzog-Punzenberger, 2003). As a “linguistically extremely diverse country” (Newerkla, 2022, p. 151), it exhibits both internal as well as external multilingualism. Internal multilingualism is characterized by strong regional differences (e.g., Alemannic dialects in the western part of the country), differing levels of standardization of the spoken language within Austria, and tensions between Austrian German and Standard High German. External multilingualism has been influenced by the refugee and migration movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but originally traces back to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (Schjerve-Rindler and Vetter, 2007), a multilingual state with 14 officially recognized languages.

In 1900, Austria’s capital Vienna attracted people from across the empire. According to the 1900 census, the city had 1.7 million inhabitants. 103,000 of these were Czech or Slovak speakers, the largest linguistic minority in Austria. However, after World War I the Austrian Republic was established on the principle of an ethnically – and linguistically – homogenous nation-state, which led to the expulsion of non-Austrian citizens. By the early 1950s, the number of Czech or Slovak speakers in Vienna had decreased to 2,000 (Herzog-Punzenberger, 2003). However, this multilingual heritage is reflected today in Austria’s six officially recognized national ethnic minorities: Carinthian Slovenes, Burgenland Croats, Hungarians, Roma, Czechs and Slovaks. Special rights for these groups were established in the State Treaty of 1955 and the Ethnic Minorities Act (1976), and included, for example, the right to primary and secondary education in the respective minority language (Slovenian in Carinthia, Croatian in Burgenland), or bilingual place name signs.

Since the end of World War II over two million refugees have come to Austria, with roughly 700,000 of these individuals still remaining in the country (Kratzmann, 2016). Refugees came in the wake of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Prague Spring (1968), the Polish government’s declaration of martial law in 1981, the end of the Cold War, the civil wars in the successor countries of Yugoslavia in the 1990s,

and the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015, during which 88,098 people applied for asylum in Austria (Kratzmann, 2016). In early 2024, some 80,700 Ukrainian citizens were also living in Austria with temporary residence rights due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Statistik Austria, 2024).

A further source of Austria’s diverse demographics lies in labour migration. In the 1960s, there was a shortage of workers to meet the demands of the recovering post-war economy. In line with the approach taken by most other Western European countries, Austria implemented a systematic recruitment programme for workers, signing recruitment contracts with Spain (1962), Türkiye (1964), and the former Yugoslavia (1966). These guest worker programmes were conceived as temporary arrangements with the expectation that workers would return to their countries of origin once their labour was no longer required. Consequently, there was no perceived need to “integrate foreigners” (Godlewska, 2023). In reality, however, many of these workers remained in Austria and were joined by their families (Wiesbrock, 2013). The guest worker policy continued until the oil shock of 1973. By then, nearly 9% of the Austrian workforce (226,800) were foreigners (Herzog-Punzenberger and Schnell, 2019). To this day, first- and second-generation immigrants from Yugoslavia (or its successor states) and Türkiye make up the two largest groups of labour migrants in Austria.

Following the dissolution of the Eastern Block in 1989 and the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, a greater number of refugees and immigrants arrived in Austria. Public opinion towards migration had begun to turn at this point, and the discourse on migration had moved firmly towards issues of security (Godlewska, 2023). The right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) employed anti-immigration slogans prominently in its campaign rhetoric during the 1990s. A coalition of Conservatives and Social Democrats introduced restrictive migration legislation, which resulted in a significant decline in immigration from 1994 onwards (Herzog-Punzenberger and Schnell, 2019). In 2000, the FPÖ entered into a coalition with the conservative People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP), becoming the first right-wing political party in Europe to join a government, prompting widespread protest and the

imposition of temporary sanctions by the European Union (Rossell Hayes and Dudek, 2020). The tightening of legislation regarding migration and its effect on language policy accelerated. The FPÖ only remained in power for a year and a half at this time, until re-entering the government between 2017 and 2019. Still, its mark on public discourse was permanent, and migration is now viewed with a great deal of scepticism in Austria.

### **3 Current demographics and integration climate in Austria**

According to the latest edition of the Statistical Yearbook “Migration and Integration”, 27.2% of the Austrian population has a migratory background (Statistik Austria, 2024). This includes those who were born abroad (*first generation*) as well as *second-generation* migrants, who are defined as descendants born in Austria of parents who were both born abroad. The percentage of persons with a migratory background has increased by 7.8 percentage points over the last ten years, mainly due to refugees arriving in the country because of severe political crises, particularly in Syria, North Africa and the Middle East. By far the largest group of foreign nationals in Austria are Germans (233,000), followed by Romanian nationals (153,500). In 2022, 26.8% of all school children in Austria had an L1 other than German.

The number of asylum applications in 2022 was higher than in 2015, rising from around 39,900 in 2021 to around 112,300, with most applicants coming from Afghanistan, India, and Syria. However, while the number of asylum applications rose, the number of positive decisions decreased: in 2022, some 13,800 people were granted asylum in Austria, while 31,100 applicants were refused asylum. This represents a 128% increase in negative decisions compared to 2021.

The Integration Barometer (Hajek et al., 2024), an annual study commissioned by the Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichischer Integrationsfond, ÖIF), regularly surveys 1,000 Austrian citizens to measure attitudes towards migration and integration in Austria. According to the 2024 Integration Barometer, 69% of all respondents stated that the integration of migrants is not working well. According to another

study, over a third of Austrians consider social coexistence with migrants as “somewhat bad” or “very bad” (Statistik Austria, 2023). In contrast, 61% of immigrants perceive their social coexistence positively, although those who had lived in Austria for a short time gave higher ratings than those who had lived there longer (Statistik Austria, 2023, p. 12). The same source also reports that “Austrians who have frequent contact with immigrants tend as a rule to rate social coexistence as better than those who have less frequent or no contact” (Statistik Austria, 2023, p. 12). According to this survey, the language skills of migrants are a key concern for the general public: 48% of respondents consider a lack of knowledge of German as very problematic, and 28% regard it as problematic. When asked whether refugees should be required to learn basic German within a certain period of time, 85% of the respondents agreed (Hajek et al., 2024). These findings can be interpreted as an expression of Austria’s “monolingual habitus” (Gogolin, 2008), a concept that describes the tendency of societies or institutions (such as the school system) to operate on the assumption that everyone speaks only one language. Despite evidence of multilingualism, and a history thereof, as discussed above, this “monolingual habitus” is reflected in Austria’s language policies.

#### **4 Development of language policy regulation**

During the 2000s, most European countries introduced language requirements in their migration policies. In 2002, Austria was one of the first countries to introduce mandatory language courses for immigrants. Since 2005, all third-country nationals immigrating to Austria have had to sign an integration agreement upon arrival, which required them to reach A2-level German within five years. Following an amendment regarding the integration agreement in 2011, language requirements were also applied in the context of family reunification for third-country nationals, with A1 being required for entry visas, A2 within two years for residency permits, and B1 a prerequisite for permanent residency and naturalization within five years. There is no indication that the introduction of progressively higher language requirements was based on evidence rather than political considerations. In 2017, the Integration

Act came into force. Consequently, individuals with a right to asylum or subsidiary protection were also legally obliged to attend language courses, which included modules on “values and orientation courses”. These modules were incorporated into the curricula of the language courses offered and were assessed upon completion of the courses. In the same year, modifications were made to the education system. Students with minimal knowledge of German were now instructed in separate German Language Support Classes (*Deutschförderklassen*, GLSC), while students who were mostly able to take part in regular classes but still required additional German instruction were placed in German Language Support Courses (GLSCO) for six hours a week. This system has been classified as an assimilation model (Resch et al., 2023), and can be considered as one manifestation of the monolingual habitus within the Austrian school system (Bredthauer and Engfer, 2016; Flubacher, 2023; Resch et al., 2023).

A distinctive feature of the evolution of migration policies during the initial two decades of the 2000s in Austria is the multitude of changes and the speed and consequent lack of transparency with which they were introduced. In 2013, for example, Plutzar stated that the Settlement and Residence Act (*Niederlassungs- und Aufenthaltsgesetz*), formerly known as the Foreigners’ Act (*Fremdengesetz*), had been revised more frequently than any other federal act before, resulting in such complex regulations that even public authorities were not always able to consistently interpret or apply them (Plutzar, 2013). In the eleven years since this analysis was conducted the legal regulations have undergone further changes, and the communication surrounding them “has remained vague and unclear to this day” (Flubacher, 2023, p. 1166). Moreover, it has been argued that practitioners, researchers and experts were generally not consulted in the legislative processes surrounding changes in language policy (Flubacher, 2023). An overview of the most significant legislation governing Austrian language policies since the early 2000s is presented in Table 1, although it is not an exhaustive list of all the amendments.



**Table 1:** Timeline of Recent Austrian Legislature on Language Policies

Year	Legal Act	Content
2002	Integration package ( <i>Integrationspaket</i> )	Introduced the <b>integration agreement</b> , which required third-country nationals to attend a German language course within four years.
2005	Settlement and Residence Act ( <i>Niederlassungs- und Aufenthaltsgesetz</i> )	Amended the integration agreement by extending the duration of the language course, adding an introductory literacy module, and widening the scope of those obliged to sign the agreement.
2011	Foreigners' Law Amendment Act ( <i>Fremdenrechtsänderungsgesetz</i> )	Amended the integration agreement, requiring third-country nationals to achieve higher CEFR levels within a two-year period, as opposed to the previous five-year period.
2017	Integration Act ( <i>Integrationsgesetz</i> )	Introduced the <b>integration declaration</b> , requiring persons entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection to acquire language skills and participate in values and orientation courses.
2018	School Organization Act ( <i>Schulorganisationsgesetz</i> )	Introduced German Language Support Classes and German Language Support Courses.
2019	Welfare Act ( <i>Sozialhilfegesetz</i> )	Stipulated that full welfare benefits would only be granted upon demonstration of German at B1 or English at C1. The Austrian Constitutional Court subsequently repealed parts of the law as discriminatory.

## 5 Institutional and legal framework

As part of these complex regulations, the legal and political responsibility for integration in Austria is distributed across a multitude of institutions and governmental levels (federal, state, and municipal). Furthermore, civil society organizations play a pivotal role in facilitating practical integration measures. This results in a rather complex and occasionally overlapping framework of competencies and responsibilities.

At the institutional level, three major ministries are responsible for asylum, immigration and integration policies in Austria: the Federal Ministry of the Interior (Bundesministerium für Inneres, BMI), the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economic Affairs (Bundesministerium für Arbeit

und Wirtschaft, BMAW), and the Federal Chancellery (Bundeskanzleramt, BKA). In addition, there is an interdisciplinary Expert Council for Integration and an Advisory Committee on Integration with various stakeholder representatives, which serve as networking and exchange forums for matters pertaining to integration. At the time of writing, issues related to federal borders, immigration and emigration, return, citizenship, and asylum are the purview of the BMI, with the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl, BFA) serving as a subordinated agency. The BMAW is responsible for the issuing of work permits, which are processed by the Public Employment Service (Arbeitsmarktservice, AMS) as an administrative body. The BKA provides funding for the Austrian Integration Fund (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, ÖIF), an organization that aims to facilitate professional and social integration of people entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection and third-country nationals. The Austrian Integration Fund plays a key role in providing language courses and examinations and is responsible for providing language learning measures and support for persons entitled to asylum and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. It is the “main player in the linguistic integration of adult migrants” (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2019, p. 203), as other providers and funding organizations are scarce and require the approval of the ÖIF (Josipovic and Reeger, 2020, p. 30). The ÖIF provides services throughout Austria, with integration centres located in each federal province, and is a key institution in implementing the government’s language and integration policy.

The Integration Act of 2017 is the primary legal framework regulating matters of integration and migration (BGBl. I 68/2017). The Act encompasses legal regulations pertaining to both third-country nationals and individuals entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection. Third-country nationals, as previously stated, are required to sign an integration *agreement* (*Integrationsvereinbarung*), a document which stipulates that they must acquire language skills in German and values and orientation knowledge to gain knowledge of “Austrian values” within a period of two years. The integration agreement comprises two sequential modules. Some residence permits, such as the Red-White-Red Card (a residence permit for skilled employees) or the Settlement Permit for

Artists, require the completion of only Module 1, which encompasses language skills at A1 level and knowledge of the fundamental legal and social systems. Conversely, a long-term residence permit or citizenship is only granted upon the successful completion of Module 2, which entails language skills at B1 level and “advanced knowledge of the fundamental values of the legal and social system” (BMAW and BMI, n.d.). Third-country minors (younger than six years of age) who are not yet subject to compulsory education and third-country nationals in a permanently bad physical or mental health condition are exempt from the obligation to complete the modules (BMAW and BMI, n.d.).

Persons entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection are required to sign an integration *declaration* (*Integrationserklärung*). This stipulates an obligation to acquire language skills at B1 level and participation in values and orientation courses. The Integration Act (BGBl. I Nr. 68/2017) states that failure to meet these obligations may result in a reduction in social welfare benefits, although no timeframe for fulfilling them is specified.

## **6 Practical implementation of language policies**

The following section of the paper outlines current practices of Austrian language policies. Section 6.1 provides an overview of course providers, literacy and language courses, values and orientation courses, curricula for the acquisition of German, and exams, with a particular focus on adult education. Section 6.2 considers language learning opportunities for young migrants.

### **6.1 Adult education: integration programmes and language learning**

#### *6.1.1 Requirements for institutions to provide courses*

The ÖIF is tasked with the administration of German language courses for people entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection, or refugees fleeing Ukraine, and is responsible for ensuring the quality and accessibility of the courses provided.

Institutions providing language courses on behalf of the Austrian Integration Fund must be certified and adhere to the curricula for German courses (BGBl II 286/2019). Trainers and language educators are required to have completed training as a German as a Foreign or Second Language (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache/Deutsch als Zweitsprache*, DaF/DaZ) trainer and prove that they have gained teaching experience in the field. The Austrian Integration Fund also offers online training courses for literacy programmes and workshops for values and orientation courses (Austrian Integration Fund, 2023). In order to guarantee the quality of the language courses, providers have to report back on participants' language development after they completed half of the sessions (Austrian Integration Fund, 2023).

### 6.1.2 Literacy programmes (Alphabetisierungskurse)

The Austrian Integration Fund provides a curriculum for literacy programmes aimed at non- and low-literate migrants, aligned with international frameworks such as the CEFR companion volume and the LASLLIAM (Literacy and Second Language Learning for the Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants) Reference Guide. Although the CEFR was conceptualized for literate learners, the pre-A1 and A1 descriptors define relevant goals for literacy programmes (Austrian Integration Fund, 2024c). The LASLLIAM Reference Guide extends these descriptors for non- and low-literate learners and supports language educators in designing curricula tailored to their needs.

The curriculum for literacy programmes offers guidance on course administration, content and pedagogy, and suggests using placement, diagnostic and final evaluation tests (Austrian Integration Fund, 2024c). There do not seem to be any regulations on whether migrants have to prove basic literacy in German before being allowed to attend further language courses. In addition to the curriculum, the Austrian Integration Fund further provides a one-page document<sup>16</sup> that lists the language skills required in different stages of the literacy programme. Although the audience and use of the document are not further

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16 [https://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Alpha-OEIF-Einstufungsmatrix\\_modular.pdf](https://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Alpha-OEIF-Einstufungsmatrix_modular.pdf)

specified, it likely should aid placement by describing various literacy skills, ranging from reading and writing simple characters and sentences to reading and writing all characters and being able to understand short authentic texts such as forms and text messages.

### *6.1.3 Language courses*

Courses for migrants are provided in three main areas: values and orientation courses (completion is mandatory according to the Integration Act of 2017), German language courses and German courses for healthcare. Before attending a language course, learners are encouraged, but not legally required, to sit a placement test to facilitate appropriate allocation to a course that aligns with their language skills.

As of the age of 15, persons who are entitled to asylum and subsidiary protection are eligible to register for German courses that are fully financed by the ÖIF. These courses are subsumed under the title *Starter Package German & Integration* and include a range of German language courses from A1 to C1. Attending language courses that are not part of the Starter Package is possible but requires participants to (partly) cover the costs themselves. Those who are entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection, refugees fleeing Ukraine, and asylum seekers with a high chance of recognition who are not entitled to other funding can apply to the ÖIF for individual funding (Austrian Integration Fund, 2024a). The website My Language Portal (*Mein Sprachportal*), which is provided by the ÖIF, offers an overview of (online) courses at different levels (A1–B2), including online lectures, job specific courses and exam preparation.

Third country nationals who apply for the Red-White-Red Card or other residence permits are not eligible for pre-paid courses, but they can apply for a partial refund after having attended language courses. The Federal Government grants refunds for 50% (up to a maximum of €750) of the costs of integration courses if certain prerequisites are met (BMAW and BMI, 2024).

#### 6.1.4 *Values and orientation courses*

According to the Integration Act, the completion of a values and orientation course is mandatory for all migrants. In the context of this paper, the term *values and orientation knowledge* is used to refer to the concept of Knowledge of Society (KoS) which includes the history, economic, and political features of a country (Council of Europe, 2022). It further comprises citizens' rights and duties in the country relating to topics such as health, education, and administrative procedures (Council of Europe, 2022).

The values and orientation courses can be completed at the integration centres of the ÖIF or partner institutions that follow the guidelines of the ÖIF. The three-day courses aim at informing and educating migrants about the basic principles of living together in Austria. The topics include: the importance of learning German, education and the job market, voluntary engagement and cultural aspects of living together, policies and legal integration. The course language is German, but translators for various languages (Arabic, Dari/Farsi, Pashto, English, Somali – as outlined on the Website of the ÖIF, which is not necessarily a complete list of the languages offered) will support learners and language educators and facilitate successful communication between all parties (Austrian Integration Fund, 2024b).

By being held in German, these values and orientation courses are also partly language courses, just as the mandatory values and orientation exams rely heavily on migrants' knowledge of the German language. The learning objectives outlined in the curriculum (Austrian Integration Fund, 2024b) partly require advanced language skills that might go beyond B1, but this depends heavily on how language educators view those objectives and what language learning materials they use.

#### 6.1.5 *Exam regulations for language and integration exams (Prüfungsordnung)*

Exam regulations for language and integration exams at A1, A2/B1, B2, and C1 are publicly available on the ÖIF website<sup>17</sup> and provide detailed information on the structure, content, and requirements of the exams.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.integrationsfonds.at/sprache/pruefungen/pruefungsordnungen/>

The regulations also outline the required pass scores, the duration of each section, and rules for exam conduct, and contain information regarding any violations of the exam regulations. Full-length exam regulations are only available in German, although a one-page summary in simplified German is provided.

The language, values and orientation exams that are part of the integration exam can only be administered by certified examiners. In order to receive an examiners' licence, language educators have to attend a training course for examiners. For the purpose of avoiding biases, examiners are not allowed to assess test-takers who took part in their language course prior to the exam (BGBl. II 286/2019). Online materials, mock exams, explanatory videos, and a mobile phone app are provided by the ÖIF to support exam preparation, albeit some at an additional cost.

### ÖSD Certificates

The Austrian language diploma for German (*Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch*, ÖSD) offers certificates that can be used as equivalents to the integration exams provided by the ÖIF. It comprises certificates ranging from A1 to B2 (*Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch*, 2024), and the equivalent exams offered by the ÖIF are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2:** *ÖSD Certificates and their Equivalents to ÖIF Exams*

<b>ÖSD (Austrian language diploma for German)</b>	<b>ÖIF (Austrian integration fund)</b>
ÖSD certificate A1/Austria	A1 – Fit for Austria
ÖSD certificate A2/Austria	ÖIF-Test new (2011)
ÖSD integration exam A2	Integration exam A2
ÖSD integration exam B1	Integration exam B1
ÖSD certificate German Austria B1	German-test for Austria (DTÖ)
ÖSD certificate B2/Austria	B2 – ÖIF-Test

#### 6.1.6 Exam format

The integration exam consists of two main parts: a values and orientation exam and a language exam. The values and orientation exam requires test-takers to tick the correct answers. The first half of the exam (nine statements) consists of true/false statements, the second half

(nine questions) consists of multiple-choice items with three answer options (a–c). The test-takers are given 40 minutes to complete the exam, and need to get at least 25 points to pass. The B1 integration exam (as required for the integration process) includes all four skills and can be completed in a paper-based setting.

To receive a certificate as proof of German language skills at B1 level, test-takers have to achieve a B1 rating at speaking and at least one other subskill (Table 3). Test-takers can have several attempts at completing the exam as a whole, but the successful completion of individual parts is not taken into consideration if test-takers have failed other parts (telc gGmbH, 2019).

**Table 3:** Results Required in Subtests to Receive a B1 Certificate

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
1 Listening/Reading	B1	B1	B1	A2	Below A2
2 Writing	B1	A2	Below A2	B1	B1
3 Speaking	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1

## 6.2 Language support for children and adolescents: integration programmes and language acquisition

The language learning opportunities for children and adolescents in Austria differ considerably from those available to adult migrants, as young migrants are still embedded in a formal educational framework. Regardless of the legal status or citizenship of their parents, children and adolescents who are permanent residents in Austria have the right and obligation to receive formal education. From the age of six, children are subject to compulsory education for nine years. Adolescents are obliged to participate in vocational training or further education (e.g., by completing an apprenticeship or studying at university) until the age of 18. However, teenage asylum seekers are excluded from this regulation, which limits their access to further training or educational institutions (Siebert and Pollheimer-Pühringer, 2023). The obligation to attend school only applies to adolescents who are entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection (BMAW, n.d.; Siebert and Pollheimer-Pühringer, 2023), which can be problematic if the asylum application procedure stretches over a longer period.



### *6.2.1 Curricula for fostering the acquisition of German in Austrian schools*

In 2018, the curriculum for primary and secondary schools was amended to include regulations on German Language Support Classes (GLSC) to foster the acquisition of German in Austrian schools. In 2019, amendments for “upper secondary” education followed. The main objective defined in both curricula is to support pupils whose language skills do not enable them to follow regular classes (BGBl. II 230/2018, BGBl. II 235/2019). By providing language support early on, learners should be able to transition to regular classes as soon as possible. The intention is to start with one semester of intensive language support and expand it to two semesters if needed. In total, language support in German classes cannot exceed a maximum of four semesters. The use of diagnostic instruments for dealing with heterogenous learner groups is also encouraged (BGBl. II 230/2018, BGBl. II 235/2019). The allocation to the GLSC is made on the basis of the MIKA-D test.

### *6.2.2 Competence analysis measuring instrument – German (Messinstrument zur Kompetenzanalyse – Deutsch)*

The MIKA-D serves as a placement test to assess the child’s language skills in German for participating in classroom activities (BMBWF, 2024). It was compiled for primary and secondary level. The 30-minute pen and paper test functions as a diagnostic assessment tool. An information sheet for parents and legal guardians about the purpose and administration of the test is available online in 22 languages. As outlined in the guidelines (IQS, 2022), MIKA-D is used when:

- a child is enrolled at school (at the age of six) and the school administration suggests a MIKA-D assessment,
- when a child is new at an Austrian school and their first language is not German,
- or when a child already attends GLSC. In this case, the child’s language skills in German will be reassessed every semester.

Depending on the results of the MIKA-D, students will receive a “regular” or “non-regular” status (Table 4). Non-regular students are only graded in subjects in which they can achieve positive results (BGBl. I 140/2023). Subjects in which limited German skills may prohibit them from following the course content are not graded. Students can hold a non-regular status for up to two years (four semesters). After that period, they will receive a regular status regardless of the MIKA-D result (IQS, 2022).

**Table 4:** Overview of the Three Different Results of the MIKA-D and the Subsequent Support that Pupils Receive

	Language skills to participate in regular class activities		
	Insufficient	Sufficient	Adequate
Child attends	mainly GLSC + regular classes (e.g., physical education, music)	German Language Support Courses (GLSCO) in addition to regular classes	regular classes (language support within regular classes)
Weekly hours of GLSC	primary level: <b>15 hours</b> secondary level: <b>20 hours</b>	primary and secondary level: <b>6 hours</b>	none
	non-regular status		regular status

The MIKA-D Primary Level includes four sections in which pupils are asked to name items in a picture (vocabulary knowledge), answer questions about this picture, tell a story about three different pictures and show their understanding of a sentence by matching it with the appropriate picture. The MIKA-D Secondary Level adds the dimension of filling gaps in two short texts. The other parts are equivalent to the MIKA-D Primary Level (BMBWF, 2024). The test mainly uses verb position mastery as an indicator for German language skills (BMBWF, 2020).

To be authorized to administer the MIKA-D examination, teachers must complete an online training course covering basic linguistic and test theory concepts, as well as practical aspects of test administration and scoring. A shorter, additional version of the test is available (MIKA orientation) that may be used to get a first estimation of the child’s language skills in German.

To complement MIKA-D, the USB DaZ (*Unterrichtsbegleitende Sprachstandsbeobachtung Deutsch als Zweitsprache*) is a diagnostic

instrument to assess pupils' language skills in German as a Second Language within lessons. It serves as an instrument to observe the language development of pupils over a longer period. For non-regular students, the use of diagnostic and supporting instruments is mandatory, while their use for regular students who learn German as a Second Language is highly recommended but not compulsory (BMB-WF, 2019).

USB DaZ can be used in primary schools and in lower secondary schools. The three main components of the USB DaZ tools encompass an observation grid, a documentation grid and guidelines on how to use the tools. In addition, teachers also have access to an overview of all observation areas, three additional versions of the documentation grid, and a template for a support plan.

### *6.2.3 Provisions for teachers*

A review of multilingualism studies in Germany and Austria has found that teachers, despite being in favour of multilingualism and appreciating its advantages, have their teaching approaches shaped by monolingual beliefs and often do not allow students to use languages other than German (Bredthauer and Engfer, 2016). To support pupils in developing language skills, it is vital to include language sensitivity in teacher education and training to support teachers in employing a language-sensitive approach in the classroom (Rossner and Bolitho, 2022).

Different institutions provide materials to aid teachers of linguistically heterogeneous classes (Bredthauer and Engfer, 2016). Resources for language-sensitive teaching in classrooms can be accessed via the Austrian Language Competence Centre<sup>18</sup> (Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum, ÖSZ) or the Centre for Language Education in the Context of Migration and Multilingualism<sup>19</sup> (Zentrum sprachliche Bildung im Kontext von Migration und Mehrsprachigkeit, BIMM). The European Centre for Modern Languages also provides guidelines for developing language-sensitive teacher education

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.oesz.at/material-center/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://bimm.at/bimm/>

curricula (Bleichenbacher et al., 2023). However, it remains unclear to what extent these provisions have found their way into pre-service teacher education programmes.

#### *6.2.4 Evaluation of measures for fostering the acquisition of German in Austrian schools*

In 2021, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research convened stakeholders – including school experts, administrators, and ministry officials – to define indicators for the successful implementation of GLSC in schools (Spiel et al., 2022). They addressed undesired effects such as stigmatization and group separation, and discussed strategies to mitigate these issues. The indicators defined by the group included immediate language-related goals and indicators for student achievement, as well as broader goals to support foreign language acquisition, such as maintaining focus and following lessons. Additionally, the societal and cultural impacts of GLSC were operationalized to measure goal achievement effectively. Suggestions for improvement concerned three areas: classroom implementation, teacher training and professionalism, and structural organization. The stakeholders also discussed possibilities to improve the MIKA-D diagnostic instrument, and raised concerns about aspects relevant to assessing students' language level that are not included in MIKA-D.

Based on these indicators, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research evaluated the implementation of measures to promote the acquisition of German in Austrian schools from November 2021 to October 2022 (Spiel et al., 2022). A total of 693 participants from 93 schools took part in the survey, in which schools with similar frameworks but differing success in implementing GLSC were compared. Depending on the length of time their students stayed in the GLSC, schools were categorized into two groups: group 1 (shorter stay, equalling successful implementation) and group 2 (longer stay).

A majority of school administrators (98% in group 1, 79.3% in group 2) and GLSC teachers (90.6% in group 1, 85.2% in group 2) recognized the need for improvements in the GLSC (Spiel et al., 2022). Most suggestions focused on organizational changes, including smaller

groups, increased autonomy, flexibility, and additional resources for individual schools. All three stakeholder groups – school administrators, GLSC teachers, and primary school teachers – supported allowing students to remain in the non-regular status beyond the current maximum of two years to provide ongoing language support. Teachers stressed that “support measures cannot simply end after two years” (Spiel et al., 2022, p. 11) since some students require more time to reach the target language level. Additionally, school administrators reported a shortage of trained teachers for GLSC.

Overall, the evaluation of the MIKA-D diagnostic instrument was ambiguous. Some participants reported that they used it as a tool for compiling a support plan, while others stated that the results were only stored without any meaningful use. When asked about how useful MIKA-D was in evaluating the success of the GLSC, the participants’ opinions were mixed and inconclusive.

## **7 Discussion and conclusion**

A number of foreign language teaching experts have criticized the current segregated approach that singles out individual students for support classes and removes them from their regular classroom environment (Erling et al., 2021; Flubacher, 2023; Schwab et al., 2024). Schwab et al. (2024) found that the practical implication of such policies partly deviates from the related legal frameworks due to the school environment and the individual needs of learners. They call for more autonomy of school administrators to minimize the constraining impact of universal policies that might not meet individuals’ needs on academic, social, emotional and linguistic levels (Schwab et al., 2024). Erling et al. (2021) maintain that with regard to teacher education, instructional practice and the promotion of inclusion and socio-emotional development of young migrants, GLSCs do not deliver the intended desirable outcomes. An increased need for teacher education and training was also highlighted by Resch et al. (2023). They analysed teachers’ views of GLSC by means of a questionnaire. The 1,267 teachers who participated in the study were asked about the positive and negative aspects of GLSC. The results showed the teachers were

mostly concerned about the exclusion and marginalization of migrant students. They stated that the separation of these students deprives them of having language role models apart from the teacher. The most commonly mentioned positive aspects, on the other hand, were the opportunity for individual support of students, the creation of a protected space and the rapid learning of German. Further studies on the implementation of language support measures are required to evaluate their impact and should include the views of the students and parents involved (Erling et al., 2021).

Aside from (scientific) discussions on GLSC and MIKA-D, public discourse also addresses language policies for migrants and their implementation. This public discourse regularly portrays immigration as a problem, and many Austrians would tend to agree with this. A lack of German skills is perceived particularly negatively (Hajek et al., 2024). Against this backdrop of a critical integration climate and restrictive migration legislation, the introduction and subsequent tightening of language requirements for migrants seems to have largely happened without the involvement or consultation of experts (Flubacher, 2023). This raises the question whether these language requirements are based on the actual level of German skills needed to successfully integrate, or on political agendas (Erling et al., 2021).

Apart from language requirements, the integration exam features content that test-takers have to be familiar with. In evaluating the content and formulations of this part of the exam, the challenge is to address topics that are relevant for everyday situations (e.g., jobs and economy, health, etc.) while keeping the language level at B1. The use of closed items might reduce the risk of letting language skills interfere with test-takers' values and orientation knowledge. However, altering or omitting technical terms or jargon for the sake of simplicity might be inauthentic, as test-takers will encounter specific terms when dealing with bureaucratic entities. Regular updating of the exams, for instance to address the changing nature of communication through the use of digital technologies, will be warranted, as will be an increased research endeavour to further improve and systematically investigate the validity and consequences of the use of all tests and exams employed to operationalize these language policies for migrants.

In some regards, the integration process for young migrants is easier than that of adults, as compulsory school education embeds them into a system in which there are already many language learning opportunities. However, the obligation to attend compulsory education, and thus the provision of any language-related support through formal education, only applies to adolescents entitled to asylum or subsidiary protection (BMAW, n.d.; Siebert and Pollheimer-Pühringer, 2023). The length of the asylum processes can thus be problematic, as it is difficult for adolescents to remain in education during this period. This highlights the necessity for the implementation of regulations during this transitional period, ensuring that adolescent asylum seekers are not left without access to education and German language courses.

To support migrants in their integration process and in ultimately passing these language assessments, a number of measures are in place to facilitate language learning and integration for adults: (1) conceptual frameworks for German language courses (curricula based on the CEFR), (2) access to off- and online language courses, (3) financial support (in the form of the Starter Package German), and (4) attempts to make language exams accessible and transparent (by providing test preparation materials and online access). These measures are essential prerequisites for enabling adult migrants to successfully integrate into society. However, the system is currently not universally accessible, and asylum seekers are largely excluded until they receive a positive decision, which can take several months or even longer. These individuals can apply for funding, but have no right to access fully funded language courses. Opening up language learning opportunities to this group would facilitate the integration process prior to the successful completion of the asylum process.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to provide an overview of current language policy measures in Austria and to situate these in a wider historical and political background. It highlights the challenges and complexities of Austrian language policy in relation to migration and integration, and raises questions about the effectiveness and inclusivity of language requirements, the need for accessible language learning opportunities for all migrants, and the impact of policy measures on children and adolescents. The discussion underscores that language policies need to be evaluated and improved if their aim is to ensure successful integration and support for individuals of all ages.

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## Politike in priložnosti jezikovnega učenja ter njihovo praktično izvajanje v Avstriji

Namen tega prispevka je pregled trenutne jezikovne politike v Avstriji. Preučuje pravne okvire in sedanje prakse v zvezi z migracijami, pri čemer se opira na zgodovinski razvoj in sedanji politični diskurz v Avstriji. Glavni cilj prispevka je opisati, kako se jezikovne politike udeležujejo z izvajanjem jezikovnih zahtev, učnih možnosti in jezikovnih testov za migrante.

Na podlagi pregleda relevantne literature o migracijah in jezikovni politiki ter predpisov v zvezi z izobraževanjem odraslih in mladih migrantov ta članek preučuje praktično izvajanje jezikovne politike v Avstriji. Kljub dolgi zgodovini migracij in večjezičnosti je javno mnenje v Avstriji pogosto kritično do migrantov. Avstrija je bila med prvimi evropskimi državami, ki so zahtevano jezikovno znanje migrantov opredelile s stopnjami Skupnega evropskega jezikovnega okvira (SEJO), v zadnjih dveh desetletjih pa je zahtevane ravni zvišala. Vendar pa odločevalci niso pregledno razpravljali o razlogih za določitev posebnih jezikovnih zahtev.

Beguncem so na voljo ponudbe tečajev in jezikovna podpora, ki jim pomagajo pri doseganju zahtevane ravni, in sicer po uspešno zaključenem pogosto dolgotrajnem azilnem postopku. V šolah ukrepi za lažje učenje nemščine vključujejo ločene učne ure nemškega jezika (GLSC), ki pa so se soočili s kritikami praktikov. V prispevku je poudarjen pomen ocenjevanja in izboljševanja jezikovnih politik za spodbujanje uspešnega vključevanja in podporo posameznikom vseh starostnih skupin.

**Ključne besede:** Avstrija, jezikovne zahteve, jezikovna politika, migracije