

Austrian Executive Summary of the Country report on measures to combat discrimination by Dieter Schindlauer

1. Introduction

Austria is a wealthy modern welfare state with a population of about 8 million people. The majority of the population is white and German speaking. Autochthonous and recognised minorities are the Croats, Slovenes, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks and Roma. Starting in the late 1960s Austria became a country of immigration, predominantly attracting younger workers from former Yugoslavia and Turkey. These groups still form the majority of immigrants in Austria. During political crisis in neighbouring countries Austria traditionally accepted a considerable number of refugees. Hungary 1956, CSSR 1968, Poland during 1980s, Balkan Crisis early 1990s marked peaks of influx to Austrian territory. During the Balkan Crisis approximately 150,000 Bosnian de-facto refugees found protection in Austria. At that time the acceptance of these refugees in the overall population was remarkably high. The humanitarian duty to assist and protect those fleeing from ethnic cleansing and civil war was commonly accepted and perceived natural. At that time it was not a public concern or even reason for discussion that most of the Bosnian refugees were Muslims.

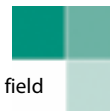
In the beginning and the middle of the 1990s the situation and perception of “foreigners” started to change. The political rise of the FPÖ (Freedom Party) started to dominate the political discourse and changed the political culture. The FPÖ’s success was originally based on attacking grievances in public administration but also introduced populist agitation against migrants and asylum seekers. “Austria First” became the political mantra for the FPÖ. Civil society reacted in 1993 with the “Lichtermeer” (Ocean of Light) – a demonstration involving more than 300,000 people carrying candles. Nevertheless, new restrictive immigration and alien legislation was passed and immigration issues started to be in the focus of political parties.

Although Austria is a predominantly Catholic country, other religious communities were well accepted for many years. It has been only in the last two years that this general situation of tolerance is shifting, especially with the Muslim community, which is facing a new atmosphere of hostility. After a period of longstanding acceptance and legal standing as a recognised religious community since 1912 the Islamic Faith Community was suddenly confronted with hostile agitation against them. Anti-Islamic activities reached a peak during the Provincial electoral campaigns in Vienna in 2005. In this campaign Muslims were explicitly presented as being dangerous unwanted immigrants.

Although public Anti-Semitism remains a taboo, research still finds a high degree of it in the population.

The situation of the lesbian, gay and transsexual community in Austria is ambivalent. On the one hand, during the last decade, the community has reached a high level of visibility and acceptance in public events like Pride Parades (Regenbogenparade) and the Life Ball as well as in the media. On the other hand Austria remains to be a very conservative, predominantly Catholic country where homophobic statements by politicians and high-ranking church officials are still quite common. Despite several attempts, there is still no possibility for same-sex couples to have a legally recognised partnership or marriage.

Age discrimination in the workplace remains a common experience while public awareness that this is unlawful is very low.



The political will to counteract discrimination on the ground of disability appears to be relatively high. The legal standard of protection against discrimination on this ground is considerably higher than the minimum requirements of the Directive 2000/78/EC. Nevertheless, disabled people still face a much higher unemployment rate and especially those with mental disabilities experience a high degree of exclusion.

Until very recently, there has been no noteworthy dialogue with NGOs about anti-discrimination issues, while the involvement of social partners in the political decision-making remained high compared to other European countries.

2. Main legislation

The Republic of Austria is a federal state. According to the Austrian Constitution, first enacted in 1920, legal powers are exercised either by the Bund (Federation) or the Länder (federal states or provinces, namely: Burgenland, Kärnten, Oberösterreich, Niederösterreich, Salzburg, Steiermark, Tirol, Vorarlberg, and Wien). Legislative powers are divided between the federal parliament called Nationalrat (acting together with the Bundesrat (2nd chamber) and provincial parliaments called Landtage.

Under the Constitution, neither the Federation nor the states have the exclusive power to regulate “anti-discrimination”. This leads to a very scattered legal framework with at least one Provincial piece of legislation in all Provinces and five main acts at the Federal level.

The most important Federal acts, implementing the Directives, are:

Equal Treatment Act (Gleichbehandlungsgesetz)

The Equal Treatment Act covers the private sector and protects against discrimination in employment on the following grounds: gender, ethnic affiliation (ethnische Zugehörigkeit), religion and belief, sexual orientation and age. Protection against discrimination on the ground of ethnic affiliation also extends to social protection, including social security and healthcare, social advantages, education, access to and supply of goods and services, which are available to the public, including housing.

Federal-Equal Treatment Act (Bundes-Gleichbehandlungsgesetz)

It covers public employment and protects against discrimination on the following grounds: gender, ethnic affiliation (ethnische Zugehörigkeit), religion and belief, sexual orientation and age and installs a Federal-Equal Treatment Commission, Officers for Equal Treatment and Contact Women.

Act on the Equal Treatment Commission and the National Equality Body (Bundesgesetz über die Gleichbehandlungskommission und die Gleichbehandlungsanwaltschaft)

It installs and regulates the functions of the Equal Treatment Commission and the National Equality Body.

Disability Equality Act (Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz)

It protects against discrimination on the ground of disability in access to and supply of goods and services, which are available to the public, including housing. This means that the level of protection goes beyond the minimum requirements of the Directive 2000/78/EC

Act on the Employment of People with Disabilities (Behinderteneinstellungsgesetz)

The Act inter alia protects against discrimination on the ground of disability in employment and occupation including the concept of reasonable accommodation.



3. Main principles and definitions

In general, all major principles of the Directives have been incorporated into the Austrian legal framework. The definitions of direct and indirect discrimination have been quoted literally from the Directives. Harassment and victimisation are also covered. Instruction to discriminate is deemed discrimination and outlawed. Discrimination by association is not explicitly mentioned in relation to most grounds, while it seems to be limited to those family members who have caring responsibilities for the ground of disability. So there is a need for clarification and improvement.

All grounds mentioned in the Directives are covered, but the scope of protection differs between the grounds.

The notion of “race” was taken out of the text in the federal legislation and “race and ethnic origin” are now both represented by the term “ethnic affiliation” (ethnische Zugehörigkeit). This does not change the scope but is an expression of sensitivity regarding language.

The exemption of genuine occupational requirements is also incorporated and it is made clear that it has to be interpreted in a very narrow way.

The concept of reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities has also found its way into the legislation. Employers are obliged to take the appropriate and necessary measures to enable persons with disabilities to enjoy access to employment or occupation, to promotion and to participate in vocational training as well as in-service training, unless such measures would pose a disproportionate burden on the employer. Such a burden shall not be deemed disproportionate if it can sufficiently be compensated by public aid funds according to federal or provincial regulations.

Multiple discrimination is becoming a more and more important issue as the developing practice shows that it is a very widespread phenomenon. The legislation so far does not give clear guidelines as how to deal with it. There are some hints that the legislation might be reviewed and amended in this respect in 2007.

4. Material scope

The Austrian Federal legislator has now managed to implement legislation covering the complete scope of the Directives. In the area of employment (public and private) all the grounds are protected while a broader scope of protection (access to goods and services, education, health and social protection/security) is only in place for the grounds of ethnic affiliation and disability (only employment and access to goods and services).

Most provincial legislations (not in: Lower Austria, Vorarlberg, Vienna) have, within the limit of their competences, broadened the scope of protection beyond the workplace for all grounds. The provincial competences are especially important in regard to housing, social benefits, health and education.

5. Enforcing the law

Despite the quite comprehensive legal framework, the enforcement of it is still deficient. There are a couple of reasons for this finding: Firstly, there is still an enormous lack of awareness in the overall population – even about the mere existence of the new legislation. The government has launched quite impressive campaigns in regard to the new regulations

on disability, including frequent spots in TV and cinema but kept silent on all the other “new grounds”.

Another reason is the very complex and scattered legal framework; - more than 20 legal acts could be relevant. Furthermore the Equality Bodies are also not able to bundle their efforts. Nine provincial offices, separate structures for the public service – and a completely separate system for disability are operating instead of a strong single body with strong visibility and powers.

The resources for the Federal Equality Bodies are far too limited. The National Equality Body is totally understaffed. The members of the Equal Treatment Commission are not being paid for this task but perform their functions in addition to their jobs on a voluntary basis. This allows for meeting of the senates in intervals of about six weeks and delays decisions. NGOs are not sufficiently integrated into the system and do not receive extra funding for their new tasks.

The enforcement procedures of cases on ground of disability are regulated differently from all the other grounds. Neither the National Equality Body nor the Equal Treatment Commission is responsible for such cases, but there is a compulsory conciliation process before the Federal Social Service, which usually functions comparably well. The sessions are organised and held very quickly and in the majority of cases a settlement is reached in due time.

Another problem in this phase of implementation is the absence of relevant case law. Victims of discrimination cannot be sure of the outcome of their proceedings. In case they bring a lawsuit, they have to bear the full risk and cost of the proceedings. Although NGOs try to accommodate victims in this respect, limited resources and the fear of victims to suffer another setback during court proceedings, make them shy away from judicial redress. NGO standing in court is limited to the possibility of intervention and this is only granted to the umbrella organisations “Litigation Association of NGOs against Discrimination” for all grounds except disability, while the “Austrian National Council of Disabled Persons” is entitled to intervene in disability cases and has a limited possibility to file a class action. The protection against victimisation is also only protecting against dismissal but states no sanctions for other forms of adverse treatment. One relieving factor for victims of discrimination is the shifted burden of proof provision, which allows them to gain at least some confidence.

To ensure proper enforcement of the new provisions it will be important to have good case law in the near future. At the moment, the majority of victims tend to initiate a proceeding before the Equal Treatment Commission before addressing the courts. The findings of the Commission – once published – might also have an encouraging effect for potential victims of discrimination.

As there is almost no relevant case law so far, it cannot be judged, if the sanctions applied can be regarded as being proportionate, effective and dissuasive and there is no experience on how the courts will handle the evidence – especially in respect to statistical data and the results of situation testing.

As to the pending cases the plaintiffs have not used such data. The legislation in principle allows the use of such evidence but as there is no such practice so far, it cannot be assessed, yet.

The sanctions in principle comprise compensation of material and immaterial damages. In regard to harassment, the law fixed minimum levels of compensation (Euro 700 for sexual harassment, Euro 400 for other grounds). It will be a very difficult task for the courts to decide

on the immaterial damages in an effective and dissuasive but still proportionate way, given the lack of legal tradition in this respect. In order to function as a dissuasive sanction, the existing practice of awarding only very low amounts for compensation for immaterial damage will have to be adjusted and changed by the courts. The sanction for discriminatory job-advertisements is not at all dissuasive, effective and proportionate (maximum administrative fine of as low as EUR 360, and exclusion of punishment for first-time-offenders [admonition only]).

6. Equality bodies

The Act on the Equal Treatment Commission and the National Equality Body establishes an Equal Treatment Commission and the National Equality Body. In transposing Art. 13 of the Race Equality Directive, Austria extended the functions of the present Equal Treatment Commission and the National Equality Body to deal with discrimination on the ground of gender and on all other grounds mentioned in Art 13 ECT except disability.

The fact that constitutional provisions are missing also makes clear that the institutions implemented can not be really independent. For independent structures without a minister's responsibility a norm at constitutional rank is needed under Austrian law. The coalition agreement of the new government contains the will to amend this problem by way of a constitutional provision.

Equal Treatment Commission

The Equal Treatment Commission at the Federal Ministry for Health and Women is divided into three senates, dealing with

1. Equal treatment of men and women in the workplace.
2. Equal treatment within the scope of directive 2000/78/EC excluding disability, including race and ethnic origin.
3. Equal treatment within the scope of directive 2000/43/EC for race and ethnic origin outside employment.

The functions of the chairpersons, who are part of the relevant of the three senates, are held by federal civil servants appointed by the Minister of Health and Women. The members of the commission are performing their functions on an unsalaried voluntary basis. The new structures started to work in May 2005.

Upon request of the National Equality Body, of one of the interest groups represented in the given senates or on its own initiative, the responsible senate of the Commission has to give an expert opinion on questions related to the breach of the principle of equal treatment. These expert opinions on whether a violation of the obligation to equal treatment had occurred have to be made public. The sessions of the senates are confidential and not open to the public.

The senate has to act in individual cases upon request of an employer or an employee, a member of a works council, of a representative of those social partners represented in the relevant senate or the National Equality Body.

Victims of discrimination can decide to be represented before the Commission by a representative of one of the interest groups represented in the responsible senate or by a NGO or by any other person he/ she trusts in.

If the senate comes to the conclusion that a violation of the principle of equal treatment has occurred, it has to issue a written proposal to the employee or to the person responsible for the non-employment related discrimination on how the obligation under the act can rightly be fulfilled. The senate has to call upon the person responsible to end the discrimination. In case the addressee does not follow the instructions of the commission, the institutions represented in the senate or the National Equality Body can file a civil action for a declaratory judgment concerning the violation of the obligation to equal treatment. The commission has the right to demand from the alleged discriminator a written report concerning the assumed discrimination. The Commission can also order expert opinions on any company concerned.

The first experiences with the Commission show that the structure is quite slow (average procedures last longer than one year)

For employment in the public sector an analogous structure, called the **Federal-Equal Treatment Commission** (Bundes-Gleichbehandlungskommission) has been set up.

National Equality Body (Anwaltschaft für Gleichbehandlungsfragen)

The National Equality Body, which has been set up at the Federal Ministry of Health and Women, is structured similarly to the Commissions' senates. The already existing institution, called "Gleichbehandlungsanwältin" (Office of the Ombud for Equal Employment Opportunities) will remain responsible for equal treatment of women and men at the workplace. Each of the two other so called "Gleichbehandlungsanwälte (Ombuds for Equal Treatment) are responsible for discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic origin, religion, age and sexual orientation in relation to employment on the one hand and for discrimination based on ethnic affiliation outside the working environment on the other hand. The National Equality Body is responsible for counselling and supporting victims of discrimination. To fulfil these functions, the Ombuds can hold consultation-hours and consultation days in the whole federal territory. Most importantly, they can conduct independent inquiries and surveys and publish independent reports and recommendations concerning all questions related to discrimination. The Body has no role before the courts and practice shows that they quite often manage to arbitrate between the conflicting parties so that they reach an agreement. This function is not explicitly mentioned in the legislation but often used successfully. Being heavily understaffed the Body has so far not made use of its powers to conduct independent inquiries and surveys and publish independent reports.

For the ground of disability a separate structure has been set up since 1.1.2006. The **Ombud for Disabled Persons** (Behindertenanwalt) has been appointed by the Minister of Social Security, Generations and Consumer Protection and is responsible for advice and support of people with disabilities. The Ombud can conduct surveys on the situation of people with disabilities and give and publish statements and opinions on this issue.