Chapter 1

All You Need to Know to Become an Austrian: Naturalisation Policy and Citizenship Testing in Austria

Bernhard Perchinig*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the introduction and implementation of ‘citizenship testing’ in Austrian nationality legislation. The first part gives an overview about the debate on naturalisation; the second part of the chapter analyses the content of the tests at federal and provincial levels and the dominant understanding of citizenship they reflect. Finally, the impact of testing on naturalisation behaviour will be discussed.

Several European countries have introduced compulsory language and civic integration courses and tests in recent years, as a precondition for either permanent residence status and/or naturalisation. Reflecting a shift from a rights-based understanding of integration to an understanding focusing on the duties of immigrants, this tendency has been criticised as ‘repressive liberalism’ (Joppke 2007: 14), shifting the balance of rights and duties of liberal contractualism decidedly in favour of duties. In this line of reasoning, the introduction of civic integration requirements should not be understood as a rebirth of nationalism or racism, but as inherent to a liberal understanding of society, which presupposes that, ‘…members of the polity possess the necessary reasoning powers or abilities to (…) plan for their future (King 1999: 8, cited in Joppke 2007: 14). In parallel to a Rawlsian style of liberalism focusing on rights, equality and protection from discrimination, a ‘liberalism of power and disciplining’ (Joppke 2007: 16) would soon coerce individuals into

* Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Urban and Regional Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and lecturer at the Institute for Political Sciences at Vienna University.
releasing their capacities for self-production and self-regulation. As in labour market policies, work-fare programmes have largely replaced welfare and unemployment payments, civic integration courses seek ‘...to make people both self-sufficient and autonomous by illiberal means’ (Joppke 2007: 16).

Joppke’s argument is based on the crucial assumption that language and civic integration courses genuinely do provide immigrants with the competencies needed for autonomy that they do not yet possess. With regard to naturalisation, naturalisation tests should thus function as a reliable measure of achievement in the competencies necessary to participate in political decision-making. After all, a stable residence status including the right to return, a passport allowing visa-free entry into most states of the world, and voting rights at all levels of the polity are the main privileges of citizenship of an EU Member State today. Access to civil rights has been extended to foreign citizens thanks to the development of human rights and the Long-term Resident Directive has granted stable residence and access to social rights, which remained closely connected to nationality until the end of the 20th century, to most resident third-country nationals in Europe. Nationality of an EU Member State today is much more focused on the political element than in previous years. Of the three dimensions mentioned, only voting rights may be meaningfully associated with competencies, which means that naturalisation tests should reliably measure the competencies needed to participate in politics and the exercise of voting rights.

Regarding language, Joppke’s assumption implies that knowledge of the lingua franca of the state of residence is a necessary condition for political participation and voting rights. Although it is true that politics is conducted in the vernacular (Kymlicka 2001) and that, in nearly all cases, it will be necessary to speak the language of the country of residence in order to participate actively in a party or NGO, this is not true of voting. A sound knowledge of English, the de facto lingua franca of the world, is sufficient in all EU states for obtaining sufficient overview of parties, their programmes and candidates. Nearly all parties nowadays have websites informing the public of their activities in English and some even publish their party manifestos in this language. In many EU countries, radio and even TV news programmes are available in English. Furthermore, many parties in countries with a large immigrant population also publish information material in the languages of the major immigrant groups. Finally, nationality – including out-of-country voting rights – is granted to descendants of emigrants living abroad in many EU Member States. Some Member States, e.g. Austria and Italy, grant nationality iure sanguinis without any residence conditions to all descendants of emigrants, so that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of emigrants,