

Governing Integration Policies in a Multi-Level Setting: Austria and Czechia Compared

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In migration studies, scholars differ in their emphasis on which level of government plays the central role in immigrant integration policies. There are voices drawing attention to a ‘local turn’, highlighting the rising power of local actors in immigrant integration. At the same time, other authors point to a ‘national turn’, connected to the introduction of civic integration policies – or even the Europeanisation of integration policies coming from the supranational level. In order to better understand how integration policies are governed, this article compares the Austrian and Czech governance of these policies, examining the relationship between the different levels of government involved. The analysis is based on Scholten’s typology of centralist, localist, decoupling and multi-level forms of governance. It asks how integration policies are governed in Austria and Czechia and how their governance changed with the implementation of civic integration policies. While centralist and decoupling tendencies appeared in the Austrian case, a multi-level governance approach emerged with civic integration in Czechia. These results disprove the assumption of a supposedly more likely multi-level governance approach in a federal state and a more centralised logic under the unitary regime, as suggested by the literature.

Keywords: migration, integration policy, civic integration, multi-level governance, Austria, Czech Republic

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Introduction

Although most European states have a long-term experience of immigrants, the search for an appropriate strategy on how to successfully integrate them continues to this day, resulting in a high multiplication of practices. The academic debate of the last decade discusses three contradicting phenomena in this regard. Firstly, the literature talks about a ‘local turn’ in immigrant integration policies (henceforth referred to just as integration policies), highlighting the growing role of local actors in the area of immigrant integration. Several studies show that local governments develop their own integration strategies (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Flamant 2020; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio and Scholten 2017). The second phenomenon points to an opposite trend – the ‘national turn’ in integration policies – uncovering the increase of state involvement in immigrant integration with the introduction of civic integration measures (Emilsson 2015; Gebhardt 2016). The third phenomenon of Europeanisation of the integration agenda via the EU’s immigration policies (Block and Bonjour 2013; Carrera and Wiesbrock 2009) renders the issue even more complicated, as it adds another layer to immigrant integration governance.

These separated discussions create confusion about how integration policies are governed in Europe. Who has the main say in immigrant integration? Local or national authorities? Or else, is there a multi-level kind of governing of immigrant integration, taking the EU level into account as well? Considering these general questions, the article works with two conceptual frameworks. The first is immigrant integration with a special focus on civic integration policies (CIP) that stand behind the most significant changes in integration policies of the last two decades in the whole of Europe. Multi-level governance (MLG) constitutes the second theoretical concept applied in the analysis, using Scholten’s (2013) typology of the relationship between various levels of government in a multi-level setting.

As Scholten argues, ‘[a]lthough much work is done on either national or local level migrant integration policies, much less research has been done on the relation and interaction between these two levels’ (Scholten 2013: 218). This study aims to contribute to this gap by offering a qualitative comparison of immigrant integration governance in Austria and Czechia. These two countries were selected because they are similar in many aspects but differ in their political regime, Austria being a federation while Czechia represents a unitary state. This is an important variable because, as the literature suggests, ‘at least some of the issues [of immigrant integration] are subject to multi-level governance’ in federal countries (Seidle and Joppke 2012: 3), while ‘[u]nitary states are generally assumed to have state-centric or top-down governance structures’ (Scholten 2014: 154). With regards to this discrepancy, the article assumes that, in Austria, the subnational level enjoys more space to shape integration policies than it does in Czechia, where subnational authorities have limited opportunities to step into integration policy-making. In the Czech case, the centralisation argument is then further endorsed by already existing scholarship which points to the leading role of the national authorities in the field of immigrant integration (Dohnalová 2021; Kušniráková 2014; Pořízek 2018; Zogata-Kusz 2020).

The article thus investigates how different levels of government cooperate in integration policy-making in these two countries and how the governance of integration policies changed following the introduction of civic integration. To answer these questions, I conducted a document analysis of various primary sources, including my own semi-structured interviews with actors involved in immigrant integration in both countries. The methods are described in more detail in the methodological section which follows the theoretical part of the article. The third section sheds light on the development of integration policies in both countries under study before coming to the main analysis of the types of immigrant integration governance as suggested by Scholten. Finally, the conclusions summarise the principal findings and identify possible future work to be done on the investigated issue.

Civic integration and governance in a multi-level setting: theory and literature

As mentioned above, the research builds upon two main theoretical concepts: civic integration and Scholten's typology of governance in a multi-level setting. This section takes a closer look at both approaches as well as it briefly scans the literature concerning these issues. Starting with the former, civic integration is embodied in the scholarly debate focused on immigrant integration and citizenship as, with CIP, 'integration arises through immigrants' acquisition of "citizen-like", or civic, skills' (Goodman and Wright 2015: 1886). As Goodman and Wright state, 'These might include speaking the host-country language, having knowledge about the country's history, culture and rules and understanding and following the liberal democratic values that underscore their new home' (Goodman and Wright 2015: 1886).

Immigrants gain such 'skills' through their participation in various introductory programmes, integration contracts, courses or tests offered by the host state. As Goodman observes, these measures may appear in all phases of the integration process, which she calls 'gates of state membership': entry, settlement and citizenship (Goodman 2010: 755). Civic integration does not concern all categories of immigrants but applies only to third-country nationals (TCNs), as other categories – such as refugees and EU nationals – follow different integration schemes. For this reason, this article concerns policies targeting regular TCNs only. Also, in contrast to the views of Goodman and Wright, the article does not see civic integration measures as 'uniquely applied as conditions in the process of obtaining citizenship' (2015: 1886), as many of these arrangements can be offered to immigrants voluntarily without elements of coercion.

Such an understanding stems from studies that show a considerable divergence in CIP use. Goodman, for instance, unambiguously demonstrates this diversity through her CIVIX index (Goodman 2010, 2014). Austrian and Czech cases also support the argument of divergent approaches to civic integration, as Austria represents one of the strictest CIP regimes in Europe, while Czechia belongs to the moderate group, applying a mixture of obligatory and voluntary measures (Mourão Permoser 2012; Simbartlová 2019). While such findings led some authors to the conclusion that the notion of national models of integration is still on the scene (Borevi 2014; Jacobs and Rea 2007), other experts point to a certain convergence (Joppke 2007) or even Europeanisation (Block and Bonjour 2013) in integration policies with CIP across Europe. The issue of the relationship between the EU and the studied cases in the immigrant integration agenda is also tackled in this article as this question relates to the typology presented by Scholten.

Scholten's typology of the relationship between various levels of government is the second theoretical approach of this study. It stems from the broader literature on multi-level governance (MLG), first introduced by Marks in the 1990s, followed by numerous other scholars (see Bache and Flinders 2004; Enderlein, Wälti and Zürn 2010). Marks defined MLG as a 'system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers – supranational, national, regional, and local' (Marks 1993: 392). The approach was first utilised to analyse just a few EU policies – especially those governing cohesion – but progressively entered into academic debates on other EU agendas. In 2006, Zincone and Caponio (2006) introduced this framework to migration studies too, pointing to the necessity of analysing the relations between different levels of government. At first, several studies examined the role of cities and local governments in the area of both migration and integration (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009). Full use of the MLG approach to study migration and integration policies emerged only later on (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Scholten and Penninx 2016).

Following Zincone and Caponio's suggestion, Scholten developed a typology of relations between various levels of government (Scholten 2013, 2016, 2019; Scholten and Penninx 2016). The author argues that, in the long term, MLG presents only one mode of interaction that emerges between actors operating in a multilevel setting. He subsequently demonstrates in his research that there are four types of governance: centralist,

localist, decoupling and multi-level. ‘Centralist governance’ is characterised by a top-down relationship between national and subnational governments, while international cooperation is managed through the intergovernmental approach. Thus, the state and the national government represent the key actor, whereas subnational authorities only follow national guidelines and their role is to implement the already designed policies.

The second type stands for the opposite. ‘Localist governance’ is present where a certain degree of devolution appears. A bottom-up approach accompanies the relationship between the levels, subnational authorities act as policy-makers and the horizontal cooperation of subnational governments is a common tool for sharing best practices. Although Scholten’s work emphasises the local-level policies, i.e. in terms of cities and municipalities, the recent literature sheds light on the growing role of regional authorities, also now regularly interacting with the national level of governance (Campomori and Caponio 2017; Manatschal, Wisthaler and Zuber 2020; Schmidtke 2021). As this research highlights similar proof – and because the political system of the cases studied differs namely in the governance of regions – the regional level enriches the original localist governance in this article.

As for the third mode, ‘decoupling governance’ means that subnational authorities either do not follow the national strategies or they contradict them; thus no effective cooperation occurs between the levels of government. Lastly, MLG corresponds to ‘some form of coordinated interaction between various government levels in the scope of a specific policy domain (...) where the multi-level character of a policy problem is explicitly recognized’ (Scholten 2013: 220). Such multi-level interactions are distinguished in particular by a depoliticised, functional and technocratic orientation of cooperation with weak institutional policy structures.

This typology of relationships between various governmental levels and actors offers a unique opportunity to contribute to the unclear debate about the ‘turns’ in integration policies – whether it be a local, national or supranational turn – connecting the two literature strands on immigrant integration and MLG together. While several works have already applied Scholten’s typology to study immigrant integration (Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt 2020; Rosenberger and Müller 2020; Scholten and van Ostaijen 2018; Spencer 2018), this article enriches the existing debate with a novel aspect of comparing two diverse political regimes, as discussed more in detail in the subsequent section.

Methodology

As this article analyses Austrian and Czech immigrant integration policies, a comparison is the main methodological approach of the research. Several aspects drove the selection of these cases. Firstly, both states are neighbours geographically situated in Central Europe – a region often omitted in the academic debate on immigrant integration compared to its Western counterpart. Although studies on migration-related topics in Central European countries have been increasing over the last two decades, the issue of immigrant integration still needs further examination. As the current state-of-the-art indicates, Austria and Czechia offer important knowledge in this area (both thematically as well as geographically speaking) (Kraler 2011; Kušniráková 2014; Mourão Permoser and Rosenberger 2012; Zogata-Kusz 2020). Furthermore, the countries have similar demographic and geographic sizes and share a long common history, together with cultural closeness based on Christianity, impacted on especially by Roman Catholicism. Austria and Czechia also represent states with the highest share of foreign citizens in their population in the Central European region (Eurostat 2022), which reflects both countries’ long-term experience with immigration as they accepted significant numbers of guest-workers before 1989 and tackled refugee flows both before and after 1989 (Drbohlav 2004; Kraler 2011). The two states also began to deal with the issue of immigrant integration at the end of the 1990s, eventually introducing

civic integration measures for TCNs – as the only cases in Central Europe mapped by scholars thus far (Kraler 2011; Lukešová 2022; Mourão Permoser 2012; Simbartlová 2019).

Nevertheless, there are divergent aspects which are also important for the comparison. Due to the separation by the Iron Curtain and the related different paths of political development, Austria has been impacted on by migration in larger numbers than Czechia. The country also acceded to the EU a decade earlier, which further influenced the diverse migration policy-making of these countries. Most importantly, however, Austria and Czechia represent countries with different political regimes, a federal and a unitary one, which is a crucial variable on which to focus when investigating the role of different governmental levels in integration policy-making. Such a comparison is missing in the current migration literature dealing with multi-level analyses, focused either on federal or unitary states or simply not taking this factor into account at all (e.g., Hepburn and Zapata-Barrero 2014; Joppke and Seidle 2012; Scholten 2019).

As for the methods, I conducted a qualitative document analysis, inquiring about various types of primary sources. Among the most important are 42 semi-structured qualitative interviews that have been carried out between 2018 and 2024 with diverse important actors involved in integration policy-making in both countries. The data collection took place as part of my PhD research, which was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and which triggered the need to complement the dataset more recently, especially in the Czech case. The interviewees represent various governmental levels and actors, identified through the analysis of official documents and snowball sampling while aiming to cover the most important stakeholders involved in immigrant integration in both countries. English was the language in which 22 interviews were conducted (except for one which was held in German) with Austrian representatives of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BMEIA), the Federal Ministry for Women, Family, Youth and Integration (BMFFJI), the Expert Council for Integration, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), the government or administration of 5 Austrian provinces, administration of 4 Austrian municipalities, 4 Austrian NGOs involved in immigrant integration and an international organisation involved in immigrant integration in Austria. As for the Czech case, 20 interviews were conducted in Czech with representatives of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), the Refugee Facilities Administration (SUZ), the administration of 6 regional integration centres (2 run by SUZ, 2 by regional administrations, 2 by local NGOs), the administration of 2 Czech regions and 2 Czech municipalities, 4 Czech NGOs involved in immigrant integration and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Prague. An overview of all the interviews conducted is shown in Annex 1.

Before the interview, the participants were provided with the set of questions, which focused on (a) the introduction of the institution being represented in the interview, (b) the development of (civic) integration policies in the country and (c) the role, activities and relationships of integration actors across various governance levels (international, national, sub-national, civil society). I also obtained informed consent from all interviewees, offering them information on the research project and treatment of the data collected, as well as the possibility to withdraw their participation if they so wished. Where an audio recording was made, the interview was later transcribed, while interviews with no audio recording were preserved as notes. Subsequently, the interviews were analysed qualitatively, distributing labels and sub-labels driven by the research theoretical framework to the relevant quotes. The analytical labels represent clusters of (1) introduction to the institution, (2) general information on migration and migration policy development in the country, (3) general information on immigrant integration and integration policy-making in the country, (4) concrete information on CIP implemented in the country, (5) analysis of the individual types of actors involved in (civic) integration policy-making in the country and (6) analysis of relationships between these actors as inspired by Scholten's framework. The use of concrete quotes in the text presented here serves as an illustration of primary data material supporting my arguments, while attempting to avoid excessive citing. For the sake of protecting participants' identity, the interviews are partly anonymised – revealing just the type of

institution which the participant represents – or fully anonymised, depending on the consent given. In addition, the analysis investigated various legislative, governmental, parliamentary, regional and other documents, mostly available online or provided by the participants.

The development of integration policies in Austria and Czechia

Although both countries experienced immigration in the long term, it took decades for the state administrations to recognise and reflect on this fact. The next section traces the development of Austrian and Czech integration policies as the basis for the main analysis of how different governmental levels cooperate in immigrant integration governance in the studied cases and how the governance of integration policies changed with the introduction of civic integration.

Integration policy-making in Austria

The year 1989 saw several transforming processes launched across the whole world, including changes in migration patterns and related governance as a consequence. During the 1990s, migration became highly politicised by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Green Party, promoting different views on immigrants settling down in Austria (Borkert 2015; Kraler 2011). The integration agenda appeared as a relevant public topic for the first time, being primarily linked to negative connotations of a failure of integration (Mourão Permoser and Rosenberger 2012). As a response, the Aliens Act reform of 1997 applied the principle of ‘integration before new immigration’ (Borkert 2015; Kraler 2011). The restrictive approach has thus accompanied Austrian integration policy since its very infancy.

The FPÖ celebrated the success of its anti-immigrant rhetoric in the 1999 elections, becoming the coalition partner of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) for the period 2000–2006 and contributing significantly to a further tightening of integration policies in Austria. With the 2002 reform of the Aliens Act, Austrian policy-makers introduced the first civic integration measures for long-term immigrants. Under the so-called Integration Agreement, immigrants became responsible for either proving their knowledge of the German language at the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) with an international Austrian language certificate or completing a language course provided by the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) within the first 4 years of their stay in Austria. In the case of non-compliance, a sanction system has been developed, ranging from financial to possible deportation penalties and placing Austrian integration policies among the strictest in Europe (Mourão Permoser 2012).

The same coalition managed to toughen integration policies even further with the 2005 reform of the Law on Residence and Settlement. While the reform increased the language requirement to the A2 level of CEFR, it also widened the scope of the ÖIF language course from 100 to 300 hours and complemented it with a final test (Anon 2005; Mourão Permoser 2012). In the same year, the amendment of the Citizenship Act added civic integration requirements for naturalising immigrants by implementing the obligation of having a long-term residence permit before naturalisation. Thus, applicants for citizenship became obliged to pass the Integration Agreement, which they needed for their long-term residence in Austria. Moreover, the Citizenship Act reform also introduced a new test assessing the applicants’ knowledge of the country’s history, political regime and the province of the applicants’ residence (Goodman 2014; Stern and Valchars 2013).

The elections of 2006 changed the political environment, bringing the Social Democrats (SPÖ) back to government. The new SPÖ–ÖVP coalition subsequently adopted a different approach to the issue of immigrant integration. First, it renewed consultations with NGOs which were halted during the ÖVP–FPÖ government (Borkert 2015) and launched the process of creating a National Action Plan for Integration (NAPI). To serve

as a basis for the overall integration policy in Austria, the policy-makers consulted several stakeholders – ranging from experts to citizens as well as migrant organisations (Interview No. 9) – and adopted the final document in January 2010 (Kraler 2011). Such cooperation resulted in the creation of two platforms of integration policy coordination. The first is the Expert Council for Integration (*Expertenrat für Integration*) which gathers together migration scholars and experts whose aim is to provide the federal government with expert know-how on integration (Federal Chancellery of Austria 2022). As for the other, the Advisory Committee on Integration (*Integrationsbeirat*) consists of representatives from all federal ministries, provinces, Austrian associations of cities and municipalities, federal social partners, as well as NGOs and an IO (UNHCR) and should serve as a multi-level exchange platform (Federal Chancellery of Austria 2023).

On the other hand, a restrictive attitude persisted, even despite the presence of SPÖ in the government. The Aliens Act reform of 2011 introduced a further tightening of integration conditions for TCNs. First, newcomers to Austria needed to prove their knowledge of German on the A1 level of CEFR *before* their arrival (Anon 2011). Next, the Integration Agreement has been reformed into two modules, the first serving long-term immigrants – during their first years of stay – with the requirement of an A2 level of CEFR; the second then requiring applicants for the EU long-term residence permit to prove their language knowledge on the B1 level.

To stabilise this highly politicised, controversial and sensitive topic, the Ministry of the Interior established a State Secretary for Integration whose aim was to centralise the integration policies' initiatives and to bring about a more pragmatic approach to tackling immigrant integration, with a meritocratic narrative replacing the previous focus on cultural and value-oriented aspects (Gruber and Rosenberger 2018; Mourão Permoser and Rosenberger 2012). Nonetheless, the institution operated only between 2011 and 2013 as, following the elections of 2013, its leader Sebastian Kurz was appointed as the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs. With this change, the integration agenda moved into his ministry, which was renamed the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (BMEIA).

Although the establishment of the state secretary aimed at a technocratic orientation and depoliticisation of the issue (Gruber and Rosenberger 2018), integration emerged again as a hot topic with the refugee crisis in 2015. Although the CIP examined here do not deal with asylum-seekers and refugees, the situation – which emerged in 2015 – fundamentally affected integration policies targeting regular TCNs in Austria. Aside from the adoption of the 50 Points Plan for Integration focusing solely on incoming refugees, a completely novel legislative piece dealing with the integration of TCNs was eventually approved in 2017. This new Integration Act introduced the final changes in the Integration Agreement arrangement, appointing an 'integration exam' secured by ÖIF as the only eligible means to prove immigrants' knowledge of the appropriate language as well as their civic knowledge for both modules (Anon 2017). The possibility of demonstrating this with a simple international language certificate was thus abolished.

Integration policy-making in Czechia

Although Czechoslovakia had already gained some experience with migration before 1993 – especially with guest-workers from other communist countries such as Vietnam, Cuba or Mongolia or refugees from Bulgaria and Greece (Drbohlav 2004) – the main migration boom started with the dissolution of the federation in 1993, with the numbers not dropping to below 200,000 since 1997 (Czech Statistical Office 2022). Czech policy-makers, therefore, launched a significant reform of migration policies, resulting in the adoption of new Aliens and Asylum Acts in 1999 and constituting the basis of Czech migration management in force still today. The question of immigrant integration went hand-in-hand with this reform: the Principles for the Concept of Immigrant Integration were adopted in 1999, followed by a more elaborate Conception of Immigrant Integration, approved in 2000 and altered in 2006, 2011 and 2016.

With this step taken at the turn of the millennium, Czechia admitted the long-term nature of immigration, which required sophisticated long-term integration strategies. Thus, integration measures have already been realised since the early 2000s through state financing dedicated to integration projects run by various NGOs (Čaněk and Čížinský 2011; Zogata-Kusz 2020). Aside from legal counselling and activities aimed at the majority population, NGOs also started to develop language and integration courses to help immigrants with their orientation in society (Tollarová 2011; Vláda ČR 2004).

A significant step in Czech integration policies was the introduction of the first civic integration measure in the form of proof of language knowledge on the A1 level in 2009 (Anon 2007; MŠMT ČR 2008) which was eventually raised to the A2 level since September 2021 (Vláda ČR 2021). With this requirement, the Czech government had to ensure an even distribution of Czech language courses in all regions, as NGOs had operated particularly in large cities up until then (Interviews No. 2, 4). Thus, the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for migration management, launched public funding calls for creating regional integration centres, financed by the European Integration Fund (MV ČR 2010). Subsequently, an interesting variety of centre operators emerged: NGOs, regional administrations as well as a state institution – Refugee Facility Management (SUZ) (MV ČR 2014).

Aside from language knowledge, foreigners' orientation in Czech society represented another main area of integration activities set up by the Updated Conception of 2006 (Vláda ČR 2006). The first integration courses appeared in the form of so-called 'courses of socio-cultural orientation', designed for long-term settled immigrants and consisting of around 2-hour-long meetings focused on specific topics of daily life (e.g., children's schooling, job-seeking on the Czech labour market, the pension system etc.) (Interviews No. 2, 5). The second, called the 'adaptation–integration course', was designed for newcomers as an 8-hour-long course offering foreigners the basic information needed for their orientation in the new environment (Interview No. 6). Alongside these courses organised in Czechia, immigrants could gain information even before going to Czechia through a 'pre-departure packet' distributed free of charge at Czech embassies and consulates abroad since 2013 (MV ČR 2014).

Another major step in developing Czech integration policies came with the new Citizenship Act of 2013, which introduced new conditions for immigrants' naturalisation: passing a language test on the B1 level and a civic knowledge test (Anon 2013) both of which were similar to the Austrian naturalisation process. The final changes in Czech integration policies then emerged in 2019, when the amendment of the Aliens Act introduced the issue of immigrant integration into the Czech legislative framework for the first time (Anon 2019). Firstly, the amendment anchored the existence of the integration centres and opened the way to financing them directly from the national budget without dependence on EU funds (Interviews No. 26, 33). The amendment also implemented obligatory participation for selected groups of newcomers in a shortened 4-hour-long adaptation–integration course, with a possible financial penalty in cases of non-compliance (Anon 2019).

Governing immigrant integration in a multi-level setting

After outlining the development of integration policies in both countries, this section aims to respond to the research questions on how different levels of government cooperate in immigrant integration governance in Austria and Czechia and how this governance changed with the introduction of civic integration measures. For this purpose, the following subsections analyse both case studies according to Scholten's typology of governance in a multi-level setting: the centralist, localist, decoupling and multi-level governance.

Centralist governance

The central government has played and still is playing a crucial role in integration policies in both countries under study, although in a different way. With regards to Austria, while the Ministry of the Interior took over the responsibility for the immigrant integration agenda in the 1990s (Kraler 2011) – introducing several integration reforms during the 2000s – it is actually with the NAPI process (2009–2010) and the establishment of the state secretary (2011) where the central government took the main initiative and institutionalised immigrant integration as an autonomous policy field on the federal level (Mourão Permoser and Rosenberger 2012). Although we can observe a certain kind of multi-level coordination in this period (more details in the MLG section below), the introduction and amendments of civic integration requirements have always brought a strong centralist tendency to governing immigrant integration in Austria.

The centralist governance in managing immigrant integration in Austria was affirmed not only by several non-federal interviewees – representing all kinds of governance levels and actors (Interviews No. 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 18) – but also by the BMEIA itself. Explaining the process of implementation of the Integration Act (2017), enshrining CIP into an individual legislative piece, the BMEIA's representative revealed the strong role played by federal actors in implementing national integration policies at the regional level:

The thing is, this is a federal law, and we are a federal state, but we have provinces as well (...). Although the provinces have their own competencies and are allowed to implement laws by the federal system by themselves sometimes, this one, the Integration Act, made it clear that there is a specific way that this needs to be implemented (...). There were several meetings in the provinces where the representative (...) from the Integration section [at the BMEIA], together with the people from the ÖIF, they went to each province individually, like a tour you could say, but the most important people, they came into dialogue, they showed them how to implement it, and this literally right after the law came into force, so in the same week actually. So it was a very tough time, the weeks after this came into force because... The philosophy of this law is also to help the provinces and not leave them alone to implement it by themselves but making them sure there is ÖIF in each province and they take care of it and this is how you can cooperate with them (Interview No. 9).

The increasing role of the ÖIF embodies such centralist governance the most intelligibly. Established in 1960 by the UNHCR and the Ministry of the Interior with the initial aim of supporting the integration of recognised refugees only, its target group widened, with the 2002 legislative reform, to include all TCNs, when the ÖIF became the main ministry's partner in implementing the Integration Agreement with its civic integration conditions (Mourão Permoser 2012). Up to 2017, TCNs could fulfil their agreement's requirements with a standardised international language exam and therefore were not dependent on the ÖIF. However, this changed with the Integration Act of 2017 where only the ÖIF integration exam became eligible to fulfill the agreement's conditions. The role of the ÖIF has thus risen to become the central agency executing federal integration policies in local practice.

The Austrian Integration Fund is represented in all 9 provinces. There is at least one integration centre of the Austrian Integration Fund, so this means there was, everywhere, one centre of the Austrian Integration Fund who made sure that, in that province, it [the Integration Act] was implemented by them. (...) Otherwise, it would not have been possible to achieve standardisation and to make sure that this was implemented in a correct way (Interview No. 9).

As various scholars demonstrate in their work (Dohnalová 2021; Kušniráková 2014; Pořízek 2018; Zogata-Kusz 2020), the national level of governance also occupies the central role in immigrant integration in the Czech case on a long-term basis. Since the end of the 1990s, the agenda has been driven by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), the only exception being the years 2004–2008 when this role was handed over to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Under MoI, the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy (OAMP) covers the whole migration issue, including immigrant integration. It is precisely here that all proposals for national strategies and measures for migration and integration are born, such as the Principles or the Conception, the legislative proposals, the subvention calls and so on.

Another significant actor on the national level, which is subordinated to the MoI, is the SUZ which, aside from managing refugee facilities on Czech territory, also administers some of the integration centres. When the MoI launched the creation of a network of such centres in 2009, only 2 regional administrations and 2 NGOs replied to this call. For this reason, the MoI secured the operation of the centres in the remaining 10 regions through the SUZ in order to cover the immigrant integration needs in the whole country (Interview No. 4). Nevertheless, as the MLG section here below reveals, Czech integration centres are governed in a decentralised manner which characterises CIP governance in Czechia more generally, while the centralist tendency is more extensive in the Austrian case, especially with regards to the implementation of civic integration measures.

Localist governance

While centralist governance seems to occupy a significant position in immigrant integration governance in both countries, a more profound look reveals the multiplicity of actors stepping into the process of immigrant integration and the relevant policy-making. In the Austrian case, the research analysis has revealed that localist governance characterised the main approach to immigrant integration during the 2000s. Whilst the question of immigrant integration was subject more to political discussions than real policy-making on the federal level, manifested only by the adoption of *ad hoc* civic integration measures in the 2000s, several regions and municipalities have already created departments focused on immigrant integration (Interviews No. 8, 12, 14, 18, 23) or even developed their own integration strategies (Interviews No. 20, 29):

The regions already had integration units when, on the federal level, there was nothing for this part. On the federal level, there was the Bundesministerium which dealt mostly with (...) the restrictions for people coming to Austria – and it was not about integration – and only several years after some of the regions already had integration units, only then did the federal level start to deal with this issue (Interview No. 22).

The governance of integration policies is thus firmly developed in most of the Austrian provinces on a long-term basis and existed even before the country, at the national level, started to establish its own systematic approach to immigrant integration. Today, provinces usually operate provincial integration platforms of exchange between all relevant stakeholders and seek to cooperate with other provinces and cities active in the field (Interviews No. 8, 14, 16, 20, 22). Another good example of horizontal cooperation is the Conference of Provincial Integration Officers (LIRK), which takes place once a year, gathering together representatives of all provincial integration administrations to exchange best practices.

Not only provinces but cities and municipalities also collaborate on the question of immigrant integration horizontally within their national associations (*Österreichischer Gemeindebund* and *Österreichischer Städtebund*) (Interviews No. 18, 23, 29). Although big cities such as Vienna, Innsbruck, Salzburg or Graz belong to the most active self-government units with steady integration departments and their own integration strategies (Interviews No. 8, 16, 18, 23), several smaller municipalities, such as Dornbirn, Bregenz or Hallein,

are representatives of good practice in immigrant integration on the local level as well (Interviews No. 12, 16, 18, 20, 29).

Regarding the Czech case, the research material revealed that regions and cities stay somewhat inactive in immigrant integration. Only 2 regions out of 14 represent an exception in this regard: the City of Prague, acting simultaneously as a region and a municipality – like Vienna – and the Region of South Moravia. Yet, their activity stems mainly from the invitation made by the MoI to create integration centres as the MoI's idea behind the establishment of such centres in Czechia was decentralisation, asking regional authorities to take an active part in immigrant integration through the management of such facilities. Only the Region of South Moravia administration reacted to the first appeal made in 2009, followed by the City of Prague in 2012. NGOs took care of the integration centres in 2 other regions but no reaction to the invitation came from other regional authorities (Interview No. 4).

Aside from the big cities of Prague and Brno, which dispose of more evolved local integration strategies, only a few smaller municipalities – such as Havlíčkův Brod, Plzeň or Pardubice – work on their own integration projects or strategies. Nevertheless, their active approach began only very recently due to the incentives offered by the MoI (MV ČR 2014, 2016, 2021). Yet, these represent exceptional cases in the Czech environment as other local governments take a rather inactive, even ignoring, stance towards the integration agenda, which holds for both the regional and the local levels.

While horizontal coordination works well in the Austrian case, no such cooperation occurs in Czechia. Only unofficial communication based on personal ties between individual officers takes place according to the interviewees (Interviews No. 27, 28). The research thus revealed no real localist governance in the Czech case, whereas this type of governance historically characterises integration policy-making in Austria, especially during the 2000s before the federal level started to involve itself systematically in the agenda with the NAPI process.

Decoupling governance

With the increasing interference of the federal government in immigrant integration governance, it is possible to trace a rise in decoupling relationships in Austrian integration policy-making. A different approach by subnational authorities, not following national strategies – or even contradicting them – has occurred, especially since the refugee crisis of 2015, which significantly impacted on the Austrian experience with migration (Interviews No. 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 22). To attract the FPÖ's voters, the ÖVP occupied the integration agenda (Interview No. 32) and introduced additional restrictions with the Integration Act of 2017, which moved the federal mindset further away from the local setting. Eventually forming a coalition with the FPÖ between 2017 and 2019 did not help to improve the already-existent decoupling trend.

The political environment plays an important role in the difference between the federal and the subnational levels in Austria. As provinces are federal states possessing numerous autonomous competencies, provincial politics represents a strong aspect of Austrian multi-level coordination. Thus, when the political environment of the federal government is distinct from that of provinces, disagreement in dealing with such a sensitive topic as immigrant integration emerges naturally. As confirmed by several interviewees from all governance levels and actors (Interviews No. 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22, 25), the diverging political setting constitutes the root of the conflict between the federal and subnational levels.

We try to look at things without (...) misusing the situation for political purposes, for getting votes from the people who don't like foreigners, we do what's necessary to be done. (...) The more and more radical way that the Austrian government went, the federal government, with this coalition of the ÖVP and FPÖ, not

allowing anyone else to come to Austria, trying to get them out of the country as soon as possible and so on, [our region] tried to go differently. Also other regions (...) try to go down this kind of pragmatic route of helping the people where help is needed (Interview No. 16).

While the federal representatives speak of the close cooperation between the federal actors and the provinces (Interviews No. 9, 11), the majority of non-federal interviewees referred to uneasy cooperation, no real discussion or no interest at the federal level in the local experience and needs (Interviews No. 8, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 25, 29). They especially criticise the ineffective use of *Integrationsbeirat*, originally meant to serve as an exchange platform:

We also have contact with the Ministry of the Exterior [BMEIA] because we are part of the Integrationsbeirat (...) but it's quite a formal meeting. So it's not really an exchange of thoughts or discussion where we decide anything, it's more that there are one or two topics which are very relevant at the moment and then there are some lectures (...) (Interview No. 25).

At the moment, they [Integrationsbeirat meetings] are quite boring, because they are a kind of... We are getting lectures there from (...) the Austrian Integration Fund (...) presenting, I would say, minor issues (...). Interviewer: So it's not like a roundtable discussion? No! Not at all. (...) For half an hour [at the end of the day], we are allowed to say things (...) (Interview No. 16).

We can thus trace clear signs of decoupling governance as described by Scholten in Austria, especially since 2015. By contrast, however, my research did not find such a disrupting element in Czechia, which corresponds with the missing localist tendency in this case. Contrarily, all three governmental levels agree about smooth cooperation (Interviews No. 4, 7, 27, 28, 33, 39). Such a different outcome between the studied cases stems namely from their distinct political regimes. While the federal system enforces Austrian provinces with strong local politics that can easily come into conflict with the federal level, Czech regional politics does not play such a significant role because of the limited competencies that Czech regions possess in the unitary state regime. Although the analysis revealed a sort of decoupling relationship of the national level of governance with some NGOs (Interviews No. 1, 4, 33, 34, 40, 41), this cannot be assessed as decoupling governance due to the substantial cooperation of the MoI with other NGOs, which is discussed in more detail below.

Multi-level governance

Several pieces of evidence indicate that an MLG trend appeared in immigrant integration policy-making in Austria with the NAPI process (Interview No. 9; Kraler 2011; Kraler and König 2014). Some interviewees, federal as well as non-federal (Interviews No. 8, 15, 25), confirm that there was real multi-level collaboration between 2009 and 2014:

So, it first started in 2010, (...) the basis of the integration policy was the National Action Plan for Integration (...). This was the key policy document, a guideline for the integration policy in Austria and it was created by having... More than 140 experts came, having dialogues with them, representatives from the migrant organisations, the citizens and a steering group, so actually many people were involved in this process, it was not only a process from the top down but from the bottom up too. This was very important

when you set up something like that, the National Action Plan, you have to have people from all specific... All partners, all stakeholders, otherwise, this is not sustainable (Interview No. 9).

At the time when it [Integrationsbeirat] was created, our former Prime Minister, Mr. Kurz, (...) was the integration minister – he was the integration state secretary at the beginning. And he really tried to use this structure for a real discussion at the beginning. (...) And the first time I was there (...), [Integrationsbeirat meetings] were lively discussions (...) (Interview No. 16).

Not only interviewees but also some experts have pointed to the MLG nature of cooperation during this period (Gruber and Rosenberger 2018). However, other scholars and research interviewees show a different point of view. For instance, Kraler highlights that several ‘NGOs as well as various municipalities and provinces – above all Vienna – were critical of how the [NAPI] process was managed and its resulting action plan’ (Kraler 2011: 48). Interviewees’ testimonies then also reveal a long-term difference in the mindset at the federal and the subnational levels:

We are working in really different ways sometimes, and it’s also a little bit in conflict between the national and regional levels. (...) [T]he cooperation between federal and regional level is not so good. (...) I would say it’s right from the beginning. (...) It was sometimes really difficult to work together because there were different ways of thinking about how to do [things] (Interview No. 22).

The interviewees also referred to the limited possibilities to influence the integration policy-making even in the case of the legislative procedure. Subnational authorities are endowed with no hard power in the legislative process as they can only comment on federal proposals – and these comments represent just an issue to be considered by the federal parliament. Although 2 non-federal interviewees from the regional level of governance expressed their positive view of a possible bottom-up influence (Interviews No. 14, 20), the majority agreed on its rather limited likelihood of really impacting on integration policy-making on the federal level. Such a view has been confirmed not only by the provincial representatives (Interviews No. 8, 14, 16) but also by the representatives of Austrian municipalities (Interviews No. 18, 23, 29) and NGOs or an international organisation (Interviews No. 10, 12, 25). It is therefore not straightforward to conclude that there truly was a multi-level mode of governance in Austria.

The Czech case, however, shows a different picture. Already with the Principles of 1999 and the Conception of 2000, Czech policy-makers emphasised the necessary involvement of subnational authorities in immigrant integration (Vláda ČR 1999, 2000). The most important incentives for such cooperation were launched in 2008 through the so-called ‘emergent projects’ for municipalities and the creation of integration centres in the regions (MV ČR 2009), both aimed at persuading subnational governments to take responsibility for immigrant integration in their constituency (Interview No. 4; MV ČR 2009, 2014). However, as only 2 regional administrations and 2 local NGOs responded to the call for the creation of integration centres, the MoI appointed the SUZ to be responsible for centres in the remaining 10 regions. While one could assume that this was a strong centralist move, the reason for handing the centres over to the SUZ was the inactivity of regional actors in responding to the call, not the centralisation efforts of the MoI (Interviews No. 2, 27). On the contrary, the integration centre run by the Region of South Moravia is considered ‘a miracle’ – an example of how the centres were supposed to work initially (Interview No. 4).

In addition, the testimonies of the representatives of regional integration centres (Interviews No. 2, 3, 5, 37) reveal a significant decentralisation of the centres’ work, as shown in the example of the socio-cultural courses:

It is absolutely up to us. (...) Nobody influences us in this. We can get inspiration from other centres but it is absolutely only up to us (Interview No. 2).

We choose the topics on the basis of the actual situation in the region, based on demand on the part of the clients, what they are interested in, what they need, what they are dealing with the most right now – for example, via legal and social counselling. We either arrange the topics ourselves or in cooperation with experts on the given topic (...) (Interview No. 5).

The adaptation–integration courses are another sign of an MLG approach in Czechia. While it seems that this course was launched by the MoI, my interviews revealed that the initiative came from the foreigners themselves working in the NGO Slovo 21 – and its design was developed in a cross-level expert group:

[The course] was established some 10 years ago – at least, quite a few years before, [there was] a need to do something like this, so that the foreigner gets something like a package of information which would help him at the beginning of the stay to orientate in society (...). As a first format (...), there was a lot of cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, other non-governmental organisations, Refugee Facility Management, the IOM (...) and also foreigners who knew what they encountered (...). Interviewer: And the idea came from Slovo 21 directly? Yes. Interviewer: Not from the Ministry [of the Interior]? No (Interview No. 34).

A weak institutional setting, constituting a part of the MLG as described by Scholten, also complies rather more with the Czech than with the Austrian case. Whilst there exists a well-developed framework for coordination across horizontal (LIRK, the associations of Austrian municipalities and cities) as well as vertical (*Integrationsbeirat*) levels, such a coordination framework does not exist in Czechia. Only the quarterly meetings of the integration centres organised by the MoI could be considered as a similar cross-level platform. According to the interviewees from both national and regional levels, this cooperation works well and the local reality is reflected in the national conceptions thanks to this platform (Interviews No. 4, 33, 37). It would just need a more coordinated approach of exchange with other actors as well, which does not exist in Czechia (Interview No. 28).

The role of the EU also constitutes an important part of the multi-level type of governance. The relation of the countries studied with the EU-level governance of immigrant integration varies greatly; it also highlights the MLG approach applied in Czechia, unlike in Austria. The basic difference lies in the distinct periods of accession to the EU club which gave the examined cases divergent positions, especially with regards to CIP implementation. As some scholars point out (Carrera 2006; Carrera and Wiesbrock 2009), it was Austria, together with Germany and the Netherlands, which strongly lobbied in the early 2000s for a provision in the Long-Term Resident Status Directive enabling the Member States to require TCNs to comply with but not limiting civic integration conditions applied by national legislation. Such an approach to supranational negotiations rather endorses the centralist argument in the Austrian case as the state played a crucial role in establishing a common approach to immigrant integration on an international scale.

Czechia represents a very different picture. As a new country which accessed the EU in 2004, the harmonisation of the national legislative framework with the EU *acquis* significantly impacted on the development of Czech migration and integration policies (Baršová and Barša 2005; Čaněk and Čížinský 2011). Czech integration policy-makers followed the European guidelines substantially, getting their inspiration for best practices through the EU networks or bilateral cooperation with the other Member States such as Portugal, Germany or Austria (Interview No. 4, 6, 7, 27, 28). This example further proves that, in Czechia, the MLG approach is applied, especially with CIP implementation, while the centralist argument appears stronger in the Austrian case.

Conclusions

This article set out to determine how integration policies are governed in Austria and Czechia and how the governance changed with the introduction of civic integration. To answer this question, my analysis was based on the typology of relations between governments in a multi-level setting introduced by Scholten (2013), thus composed of a centralist, localist, decoupling and multi-level kind of governance. Two aspects constitute important variables forming part of the investigation. The first is the implementation of civic integration policies and the second contends with the different political regimes of the selected cases, a federal and a unitary one. Taking influence from the literature, my research presupposed that, in the Austrian federal state, an MLG trend is more likely to occur – including the governance of new civic integration measures – than in the Czech case as a unitary state, where a centralised logic of integration governance is expected.

Nonetheless, the analysis carried out in the Austrian case has shown that, increasingly, the Austrian federal government took immigrant integration governance into its own hands more and more firmly, namely in connection with the implementation of the CIP. While there was some rather localist governance with only *ad hoc* civic integration measures applied in the 2000s, the rising federal power led to efforts for a multi-level type of governance between 2009 and 2014 with the NAPI process and the establishment of the state secretary. Nevertheless, several testimonies pointed to the long-term decoupling relationships between the government levels, which the refugee crisis of 2015 further underlined, as the visions on how to incorporate immigrants started to differ considerably between the federal and subnational authorities. While the division of powers and a multi-level network of coordination are more formalised in the Austrian case, this does not necessarily lead to cooperation but may also create a space for division and conflict. The politicisation of immigrant integration and the diverse politics of the federal and subnational levels play a further significant role in the relationships between actors across governance levels in Austria, preventing policy-makers from effective MLG cooperation.

Surprisingly, however, the analysis discovered a more efficient MLG process in the Czech case, especially in relation to the CIP implementation. While the national government has occupied the central position in integration policy-making since the end of the 1990s, the harmonisation with the EU *acquis* as well as efforts to decentralise immigrant integration governance to the subnational level characterise the cooperation of various actors across different governmental levels. With the introduction of the first civic integration requirement, the MoI initiated the creation of regional integration centres, giving them considerable liberty in organising their further activities, especially in the case of socio-cultural courses. With regards to the adaptation–integration course, applied uniformly in the whole country, a closer look also revealed bottom-up incentives and management of the course. The depoliticised manner of dealing with immigrant integration, the technocratic and functional orientation of cooperation together with the weak institutionalisation of this policy area further enable an MLG approach which matches Scholten’s description.

The overall conclusions stemming from this research are twofold. First, the results support Scholten’s argument that there exist more types of governance between different governmental levels than just MLG and show that the various modes not only shift over time but may also overlap, as the Austrian (centralist and decoupling modes) and Czech (centralist and MLG modes) cases reveal. However, secondly – and more importantly – the article’s main assumption has to be rejected in the end: there exists more MLG in the Czech case, representing a unitary state with a supposedly centralist tendency while, in federalist Austria, where a multi-level form of cooperation was anticipated, centralist and related decoupling governance were observed instead. Above all, these distinct approaches to governing immigrant integration emerged in connection with the CIP application in both countries. As these results do not conform with other research conclusions made thus far, such as the ‘local’ or ‘national turn’ in immigrant integration, a further examination of various cases using an

MLG analysis is needed to understand the real influence of civic integration on governing integration policies in Europe. What is more, as this article shows, adding diverging political regimes as an independent variable into the comparative analysis of immigrant integration governance helps to discover new findings enriching the literature on MLG in migration studies.

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Annex

List of Interviews Conducted

- Interview No. 1. Representative of a Czech NGO involved in immigrant integration (phone call).
- Interview No. 2. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
- Interview No. 3. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
- Interview No. 4. Representative of the Czech MoI (in person).
- Interview No. 5. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
- Interview No. 6. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Czechia (in person).
- Interview No. 7. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Czechia (in person).
- Interview No. 8. Representative of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
- Interview No. 9. Representative of BMEIA (in person).
- Interview No. 10. Representative of an Austrian NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).

- Interview No. 11. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Austria (in person).
Interview No. 12. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Austria (in person).
Interview No. 13. Representative of an Austrian NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).
Interview No. 14. Representative of an Austrian provincial government office (in person).
Interview No. 15. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Austria (in person).
Interview No. 16. Representative of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
Interview No. 17. Representative of an Austrian NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).
Interview No. 18. Representative of an Austrian municipal administration (in person).
Interview No. 19. Representative of an Austrian municipal administration (in person).
Interview No. 20. Representatives of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
Interview No. 21. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Austria (in person).
Interview No. 22. Representative of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
Interview No. 23. Representative of an Austrian municipal administration (in person).
Interview No. 24. Representative of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
Interview No. 25. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Austria (in person).
Interview No. 26. Representative of the Czech MoI (phone call).
Interview No. 27. Representative of a Czech regional administration (phone call).
Interview No. 28. Representative of a Czech regional administration (phone call).
Interview No. 29. Representative of an Austrian municipal administration (phone call).
Interview No. 30. Representative of BMFFJI (in person).
Interview No. 31. Representative of an Austrian provincial administration (in person).
Interview No. 32. Representative of the Expert Council for Integration (online).
Interview No. 33. Anonymous participant involved in immigrant integration in Czechia (in person).
Interview No. 34. Representative of a Czech NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).
Interview No. 35. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
Interview No. 36. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (online).
Interview No. 37. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
Interview No. 38. Representative of a Czech NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).
Interview No. 39. Representative of a Czech municipal administration (in person).
Interview No. 40. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).
Interview No. 41. Representative of a Czech NGO involved in immigrant integration (in person).
Interview No. 42. Representative of a Czech regional integration centre (in person).

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