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Title:
How institutional actors matter. The impact of governmental innovation on immigrant integration policies in Austria

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Abstract
Recent scholarly interest in the evolution of the policy area of migrant integration in Europe has granted most attention to the direction and contents of policies, less so to the role of governmental actors in shaping these policies. Addressing this gap, our paper applies an actor-centred approach, showing how the institutionalization of a new government actor can matter to policy outputs. It presents a case study on Austria where after decades of electoral polarization and repudiating the character of an immigration country, in 2011 a ‘State Secretariat for Integration’ was established as the first ministerial actor ever to address this topic explicitly. How did this institutional player impact on policy outputs and what do we learn for the role of institutionalization in new policy areas? To evaluate the impact we study three dimensions of policy outputs – policy narratives; policy measures and legislation; modes of policy making – before and after the institutional change. Our findings demonstrate how the institutional actor’s scope of action is shaped by its internal need for legitimacy and innovation, by the institutional opportunities and constraints in which it is created and, finally, by the non-institutional context provided by the policy area and the actor(s) driving its institutionalization.

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1. Introduction

Migrant integration policies are contested territory across Europe. They have emerged as a dynamic policy area, not only shaping political contention among parties but also turning into an object of growing political programs and regulation. Political scientists have granted most attention to the analysis of policies pursued by national governments (e.g. Heckmann/Schnapper 2003; Joppke/Morawska 2003; Freeman 2004; Zincone et al 2011) as well as to some of the instruments that ensure their implementation, such as integration tests (e.g. Carrera/Wiesbrock 2009; Goodman 2010; van Oers/Ersboll/Kostakopolou 2010). Yet another strand of studies put more emphasis on the analysis of “integration as a concept”, identifying dimensions and markers for integration that allow policy makers and academic scholars to monitor changes in integration after all (e.g. Ager/Strang 2008, Bijl/Verweij 2012). There is consensus that local authorities, NGO’s and care-organizations are crucial in the management of immigrant integration on the local level (Caponio/Borkert 2010) and that political parties have been instrumental in raising the issue’s salience to a national dimension (Triadafilopoulos/Zaslove 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008). Less scholarly attention has been granted to the question, how specific institutional actors shape the evolution of a national integration policy area (e.g. Marthaler 2008, Sainsbury 2012).

Addressing this gap, our paper presents an actor-centred analysis of how the institutionalization of a new government actor impacts on the policy area of migrant integration. More specifically we are interested, how a change in the organizational structure of the government may affect policy outputs in this area. To this end we present findings from a case study on changes of migrant integration policy making in Austria in the wake of the establishment of a State Secretariat for Integration (hereafter “SSI”). After decades of repudiating Austria’s character as a country of immigration, when in 2011 the incumbent coalition government agreed upon introducing this new institutional actor led by the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), it became the first ministerial player on the national level ever to deal with this highly politicized topic explicitly. Established halfway through the legislation period, it enables to study the immediate impact of a new ministerial actor in an otherwise consistent setting by contrasting policy outputs before and after the institutional innovation. The content analysis of text material (newspaper articles, press releases and parliamentary debates) and policy measures (governmental bills and ministerial directives) reveals an interplay of continuity and change in integration policy outputs. It demonstrates how the new institutional actor’s scope of policy outputs is shaped by its
internal need for legitimacy and innovation, by the institutional opportunities and constraints in which it is created and, finally, by the non-institutional context provided by the policy area and the actor(s) driving its institutionalization.

2. Theoretical background: Institutionalism and government organization

All schools of institutionalism share the belief that institutions matter for structuring beliefs, behavior and organized action of humans in social interaction (Peters 2012). Among the various disciplines invested in theories of institutionalism, political scientists have particular interest in the role of institutions that shape political regulation (March/Olson 1993). This paper investigates not only if but how institutions matter in shaping the policy outputs in an emerging area like migrant integration. In order to respond to this question we start by clarifying some theoretical conceptions and the terminology.

Beginning with the main object of analysis, scholarly literature features a plurality of understandings to the term “institution”, largely differing along the lines of academic disciplines and traditions. In its broadest meaning, it refers to any type of established rule system (formalized and informal) in the sense of “humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 2005: 48). Through a political science lens, definitions commonly address stable patterns of governance and power structures or – at the meso-level of analysis – formal organizations in general and specific organizations in particular (Hult 2003: 149f.).

Either way, institutions are perceived to provide “ex ante agreements about a structure of cooperation” that helps to organize joint actions, avoid social or political disorder and, eventually, optimize the cost-benefit ratio of governance (Shepsle 1986: 74). Accordingly, institutions need to be understood as both “products of human action and powerful constraints on actors” (Djelic 2010: 26).

As we are interested in the study of government structures and their role for policy outputs, we pursue an actor-centric, organizational perspective on institutions, defining it as permanent organizational structure that exerts governance in its assigned field of competence. To be more specific, we follow Cahn’s (2012: 199) distinction of “institutional actors” (legislative, executive and judicative powers of the state) from “noninstitutional actors” (such as political parties, interest groups, political consultants and the media). By separating institutional from non-institutional actors in the political system, “(p)olicy, then, is a result of institutional processes influenced by noninstitutional actors” (Cahn 2012: 203). It avoids the theoretical dilemma of the relation between institutions and actors (Jackson 2010) that has shaped scholarly debate in recent years under labels like ‘embedded agency paradox’
(Powell/DiMaggio 1991) “institutional entrepreneurship” (Garud/Hardy/Maguire 2007) or “institutional work” (Hwang/Colyvas 2011). Here, we follow Jackson’s (2010) argument, that actors and institutions “are mutually constitutive of one another” and that “institutions themselves are produced and reproduced” by actors inhabiting them. Thus, to understand the policy outputs resulting from an institution, we need to study not only its structure but the driving forces and conditions that shape its development. In this sense, we underline the classic notion by Selznick (1957) that in order to grow into an institution, an organization needs to acquire a distinct identity that includes a certain set of values, believes and behavior that are considered essential (Egeberg 2003: 118f.). Among other reasons, theorists usually relate this necessity to institutions’ intrinsic urge for legitimacy. In order to pertain, they have to be perceived as “desirable, proper, appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Accordingly, institutional actors will put every effort in establishing a clear-cut and convincing institutional profile to claim legitimacy for their nomination. This points to the fact that institutions are not simply given entities, rather they have a history and they grow in what has been referred to as “institutionalization”, another key term within institutionalism (Egeberg 2003: 118-9).

In a narrow sense, institutionalization is used to address the dynamics that are linked to a change in structures such as those of government, i.e. to the establishment of new institutional designs in response to pressures for institutional innovation (e.g. Stromquist 1998). However, in a wider sense it refers to “the process through which institutions are not only created, but are consolidated over time into being a structuring, and generally accepted, part of a regime.” (Smith 2003: 624). Either way, what both uses of the term have in common is their emphasis of an upgrade or an expansion that is tied to it, as institutionalization always implies a growth in institutional structure, never a reduction. In our analysis we decided to apply a narrow concept of institutionalization, as an act in which political responsibility for a policy matter is assigned to a (new) institutional actor. We argue that institutional change actually does matter for the policy outputs created by a new institutional actor, which is why our analysis investigates these outputs as the outcome of institutionalization. Especially in the context of emerging policy areas the establishment of new institutional responsibilities can catalyze changes in the way these policy matters are recognized, defined and processed (cf. Dorado 2005). But the strategies and choices of a newly institutionalized government actor are contingent on a number of external explanatory factors.
Various strands of institutionalism traditionally highlight the “embeddedness” of institutional actors, thus the context that shapes their actions (Granovetter 1985, Baum/Oliver 1992, Haxhi/van Ees/Sorge 2013). Focusing on modes of policy making and the directions of policy output by government institutions, literature suggests various contextual factors that need to be considered. Scharpf (2000: 767-773) argues that above all these choices depend on “non-institutional factors”, among which he identifies two broad sets, i.e. a) “the nature of the problems or challenges that policy is supposed to meet” and b) “the normative and cognitive orientations of the policy actors involved.” (ibd. 767):

The nature of the policy area and its challenges evidently shape the choices that institutional actors are able to make. Policy matters vary in a number of ways, but in the context of immigrant integration policy, some stand out most prominently. Firstly the novelty of the policy area (i.e. the question, whether traditional challenges or new policy challenges need to be tackled) (Massey/Huitema 2013), secondly its transversal character (i.e. does institutionalization face a bounded policy area or cross-cutting policy matters that demand for horizontal integration) (Boyle 1999; Peters 2006; OECD 2011), and finally its public controversy (i.e. whether it is a politicized and conflictive policy challenge or an uncontroversial issue of regulation) (May 2003: 226). Apart from the policy challenges, according to Scharpf, non-institutional factors also include ideological preferences of the actors involved in institutional actions. His concept relies on the assumption that institutions per se are contingent and that their design is highly dependent on the forces that give birth to and inhabit them. Accordingly, an analysis of institutionalization has to consider not only who are the responsible non-institutional actors driving the process but also their ideologies and their competitive pressures, in order to fully understand the role a new institution player.

In contrast to these non-institutional factors, there are also “institutional factors” shaping institutionalization as the history of previous institutional designs and policy choices provides the backdrop for any form of innovation. Even though institutional change can have different stages (Tolbert/Zucker 1996) or outputs (Streeck/Thelen 2005), we always need to consider the preceding situation to which the institutional innovation shall provide an alternative, as it is the yardstick against which institutionalization gains legitimacy (cf. Leca/Battilana/Boxenbaum 2008: 12). Moreover, institutional designs and actions are also dependent on “the institutional rules to which they owe their existence” as well as to the “institutional and cultural norms that define the criteria of their success or failure” (Scharpf 2000: 772f.). Thus, accounting for the current institutional setting into which a new institution is implemented is key to the understanding of its role and its scope of action. For example,
with regard to government organizations, actors are highly dependent on the horizontal division of ministerial competences, thus whether it equipped with an autonomous mandate to shape governance or only to coordinate between other institutions. But also vertical division of competences can be a factor, e.g. whether states delegate large shares of competences to the regional and local level or pursue a centralized organization of competences with national government actors at the core.

To sum up, in our aim at identifying factors that influence policy outputs of a new governmental player, we arrive at the explanatory framework outlined in Figure 1.

Fig.1: Explanatory framework for policy outputs created a newly institutionalized government actor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noninstitutional factors</th>
<th>Institutional factors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of the Policy challenge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Present institutional setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- “Novelty” of policy challenge</td>
<td>- “Horizontal division of competences”</td>
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<tr>
<td>- “Transversal nature” of policy challenge</td>
<td>- “Vertical division of competences”</td>
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<tr>
<td>- “Public controversy” of policy challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientations of Policy actors</strong></td>
<td><strong>Institutional &amp; Policy heritage</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- “Normative aspirations” of policy actors</td>
<td>- “Previous institutional designs”</td>
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<tr>
<td>- “Organizational self-interest” of policy actors</td>
<td>- “Previous policy choices”</td>
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3. Introducing the case: The policy field of migrant integration in Austria.

Migrant integration is a comparatively novel issue in public policy and has started to gain European policy makers’ attention only with some delay to the debate on, for example, immigration and refugee controls. Some intrinsic reasons have prevented it from climbing the ladder of public discourse already sooner:

Firstly, its transversal nature has kept it from being perceived as a distinct topic of political regulation (Guiraudon 2003). For the longest time integration was – and in many cases still
remains – organized as a cross-sectional agenda by a variety of state actors (who include it more or less systematically into their ministerial agendas) (Peters 1998). Moreover, in most Western European countries integration has emerged as an annex to immigration policy regulating the access to and settlement in immigration countries. It took considerable time for policy makers to learn that incorporation measures demand different approaches than the mere regulation of immigration – in particular if one considers the police and security orientation that is dominant among immigration authorities situated in Ministries of Interior (Huysmans 2000). Finally, during the post-war-period of economic growth, policy makers across Europe cherished the illusion of temporary migration according to which no long-term integration efforts were necessary. Only when immigration had unmistakably turned into a permanent phenomenon, when numbers of non-nationals had increased and when both public controversy as well as politicization had reached critical levels, those assumptions were put aside. Both on the national level as well as in a European Union context migrant integration became tackled more actively by policy makers (Heckmann/Schnapper 2003; Borkert/Penninx 2011).

The turn of the millennium brought about a growing dynamic in the perception of migrant integration as a policy area. At the European level, a number of steps were taken to put the topic on a common European agenda (Common Basic Principles, EU-Integration Fund, etc.). At the same time, many national governments started to increase their efforts for integration programs and measures, pursuing a trend towards civic integration measures (language tests, civic education). Moreover, among Western European Democracies there was an increasing willingness to institutionalize the policy area by establishing new organizational structures and actors on the level of national governments (Gruber 2015). Thus, it is fair to speak of a growing trend to organize migrant integration as a distinct policy area and gradually liberate it from its former subordination to migration control.

Austria is no exception to the abovementioned characteristics: Despite its significant history of immigration, until recently Austrian politics had widely refused to identify itself as a country of immigration (Kraler 2011). Originally, this refusal was tied to the guestworker-regimes and its assumption of temporary labor-recruitment. Accordingly, Austrian law makers not only rejected claims for long-term settlement of immigrants, but also didn’t promote any concerted form of integration policies whatsoever. Consequently, for decades migrant integration was no issue on the national government level and was largely left to local authorities as well as non-governmental actors (Perchinig 2009). Under these conditions,
economic marginalization of guest workers became a politically unchallenged problem. Up until today, newcomers and their offspring face educational deficits and unemployment, as do refugees in an anti-integrationist asylum regime.

Only as early as the 1990s this ignorance pattern started to change due to increasing numbers of immigration after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a wave of refugees resulting from the Yugoslav wars and growing politicization by fringe parties on the right and left (Strasser/Tošić 2013; Gruber 2014). Migrant integration climbed the political agenda, though largely in a negative tone stressing failures of integration on the side of newcomers. Accordingly, from there on the centrist grand-coalition government formed by Social Democrats (SPÖ) and People’s Party (ÖVP) began to introduce integration policies under a largely restrictive approach (Mourão Permoser/Rosenberger 2012). In institutional terms, immigration and integration competences remained only at a sub-departmental level in a ministerial section of the Austrian Ministry of Interior (BMI), thus without almost any visibility and influence. After the takeover of a right wing coalition government in the year 2000, the low key ministerial assignment was maintained, only the role of the “Austrian Integration Fund” (“Österreichischer Integrationsfonds”) was advanced from being an agency for refugee support and counselling to actively executing integration measures for all strands of immigrants. It became instrumental in the implementation of the so called “integration agreement” (“Integrationsvereinbarung”) which was introduced in 2003 and marked highly contested steps towards criteria the Austrian state considered necessary for migrant integration (mostly language skills as well as civic and historical knowledge of the receiving country) (Mourão Permoser 2010).

It took another seven years and a comeback of the centrist grand coalition government, before the first cohesive integration program was formulated on the national level. After years of consultation with government official from various levels, with non-governmental stakeholders and academic experts, in 2010 the government launched a “National Action Plan for Integration”. For the first time, a government program suggested a more systematic approach that included seven dimensions of integration and accounted for various government ministries, though its coordination still remained a sub-departmental task. While hitherto occasional claims for a Ministry or State Secretariat for Integration had surfaced mostly by parties on the left (SPÖ, Greens), apart from the nomination of an Expert Council on Integration no steps towards institutionalization had been taken. It was only in April of 2011, as part of a cabinet-reshuffle halfway through the legislation period, that the center-right ÖVP introduced a “State Secretariat for Integration”, the first high-level ministerial actor
specifically denominated for migrant integration on the national level. Assigned to the Ministry of Interior (BMI) it was still subjected to certain limitations as Austrian State Secretaries do not belong to the cabinet of ministers and are subject to directives of its superior minister. But depending on the leeway they receive from its superior, they can have a significant role in setting new agendas, establishing networks and channels of communication, increasing public attention for the policy area or ensuring inter-ministerial coordination.

The decision to situate the SSI within the BMI was shaped by various organizational reasons. In cabinet reshuffles, coalition parties only enjoy full authority over their assigned ministerial portfolios, limiting the ÖVP’s choice of contemplable ministries. As the BMI had exerted the competences for integration matters already since the 1980ies, in terms of institutional continuity it was quite a logical selection as the ministerial context for the SSI – despite widespread criticism of the police and security orientation this choice implicated. It allowed the new institution actor to gain traction in a familiar ministerial context and to establish a distinct profile until the end of the legislation period in autumn 2013. As it turned out, by then the SSI and its State Secretary had become one of the future promises of the ÖVP’s government team and, unsurprisingly, were rewarded with yet another upgrade in the following legislation period: Established as the government’s “the face of integration”, the State Secretary was assigned with a super-ministry, responsible not only for the integration agenda but also for Foreign & European Affairs (BMEIA).

These developments make Austria a highly fruitful case for an analysis. Not only does it provide a case of high-level ministerial institutionalization of migrant integration. As this innovation occurred halfway through the legislation period, it allows to evaluate the impact of the new institutional actor in an otherwise consistent setting (regarding government constellation, migration conditions and party competition). Moreover, the conditions for migrant integration in Austria provide an insightful context itself. The country features one of the highest shares of non-national population in Europe, yet it also ranges amongst the most restrictive integration policy countries (cf. MIPEX 2004/2007/2010). These conditions have been linked to the powerful presence of far right populist parties, who successfully put these issues atop the public and political agenda (Gruber 2014). In this highly politicized climate and critical public opinion vis-à-vis immigration (Rosenberger/Seeber 2011), the Austrian SSI represents a model case to study the effects of ministerial institutionalization of migrant integration.
4. Research framework

This paper addresses one major research gap in the relatively novel policy area of migrant integration. So far, political research on migrant integration has largely focused on the policy dimension, thus analyzing the elements and directions of integration programs, measures tied to different approaches and effects on the living-conditions for immigrants (e.g. Heckmann/Schnapper 2003; Joppke/Morawska 2003; Freeman 2004; Zincone et al 2011). What has gained less attention is the role that different types of governmental institutions play in shaping these programs, frameworks and policies. While there are studies dealing with the local level (e.g. Caponio/Borkert 2010), there is little systematic research on national government authorities pertaining to migrant integration (e.g. Marthaler 2008, Sainsbury 2012). Our paper takes an organizational, actor-centric perspective, studying the impact of changes in governmental responsibility on migrant integration frameworks. We utilize the institutionalization of the Austrian State Secretariat for Integration (SSI) as a case study, showing how the institutional upgrade of ministerial competences shapes and reshapes policy outputs. In order to identify continuities and changes we distinguish three dimensions of policy outputs: (1) narratives, (2) measures and legislation, and (3) modes of policy making. Based on these dimensions, three research questions guide our analysis:

a. Which policy outputs result from this ministerial institutionalization of migrant integration?
b. Which changes in direction of the policy output go along with this institutional innovation?
c. Which contextual factors influence the policy outputs initiated by the new institutional actor?

In our explanatory framework we presented a set of factors influencing the actions of new institutional actors. Firstly, we argued that the pressure for innovation forces new institutional actors to bring about change in policy output. Secondly, we pointed out that the need for legitimacy urges them to develop a distinct identity within the existing network of institutional and non-institutional actors in its policy area. These general demands for newly established institutional actors meet a specific context in the case of Austrian integration policy: Among the institutional factors, the SSI attempts to overcome a) the traditional subordination of competences to the BMI as well as b) an integration policy heritage that is both restrictive and culturally impregnated. Moreover, the SSI faces c) a horizontal division of competences that continues to feature strong stakes by other ministries and d) a vertical division with considerable roles for regional and local authorities as well as for non-governmental actors. Among the non-institutional factors, the SSI is confronted with e) a
comparatively novel policy area in Austrian policy making that f) poses strongly transversal policy challenges and g) is a highly conflictive element of public opinion and political competition. As the SSI is established and held by the ÖVP, h) it plays a vital role in the party’s plans to regain issue ownership in an area traditionally dominated by fringe parties like the FPÖ or the Greens and i) it is bound to the ÖVP’s ideology of Christian democratic liberal-conservatism. Combining these contextual conditions, we arrive at the following assumptions on how the institutional actor should impact governmental policy outputs.

H1: Considering the short time of action the SSI had available to foster innovation (two years) together with its assignment to the BMI, we expect changes to occur in dimensions that are easiest to adapt, such as changes in the narrative and in the modes of policy making rather than in actual legislation.

H2: In terms of the direction of policy outputs we expect a shift towards a more liberal and economic-oriented approach to migrant integration, that is in accordance with the ÖVP’s ideology and capable to oppose fringe parties’ issue ownership, to pacify the conflictive public discourse and to contrast the restrictive and cultural policy heritage.

H3: In order to ensure legitimacy we assume that the SSI and its representative, Sebastian Kurz will take up a mediating and coordinating role within the network of governmental and non-governmental actors, thereby acknowledging the existing patterns of horizontal and vertical division of competences as well as the transversal nature of the policy area.

H4: Considering the novel character of the policy area and the SSI, we expect the new actor to pursue a highly pragmatic mode of policy making that builds on available resources, such as the expertise provided by the Expert Council for Integration or initiatives by other governmental and non-governmental actors.

To answer our research questions, we rely on findings gathered in the research project GOVERNING INTEGRATION, funded by the Austrian Central Bank (Jubiläumsfonds). With regard to the three dimensions of policy outputs (narratives, measures and legislation, modes of policy making) it compared two phases of the Austrian parliament’s 25th legislation period (2008-2013), the so-called pre-institutionalization phase (2008-2011) and the SSI’s period of action (2011-2013). In order to reflect changes in all the dimensions, the project analysed policy outputs in different political arenas (Panebianco 1988): In order to reflect their presence in the media arena, we analysed media articles and press releases with statements by the major ministerial actors in integration (BMI, SSI, the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs as well as the Ministry for Education). Moreover, we considered the
parliamentary arena by coding parliamentary debates with references to the integration topic made by members of government parties. For all of these materials we conducted a narrative and claims analysis, amongst others coding integration narrative elements, the content of claims for integration measures, types of policy making instruments, and addressees of the governmental discourse. Finally, to capture legislative changes, we also conducted a qualitative content analysis of bills and directives passed by the Austrian National Council, using the same codes to identify the integration dimensions, the contents and the addressees of legislation. As we were interested in the changes of governmental policy outputs, our empirical results do not cover data on general public discourse or public opinion, nor do they contain the reactions of other political actors outside of government. However, we include references to these non-governmental aspects on the basis of literature and own inquiry. In addition, we conducted expert interviews with the leading public officials of the BMI, the SSI and the Austrian Integration Fund to validate the findings of our analysis and gain background information on the institutionalization of the SSI.

5. How institutions matter: Empirical findings from the case of the Austrian State Secretariat for Integration

The State Secretariat for Integration represented an institutional novelty with a strong need to justify its legitimacy and to satisfy the demand for innovation in a policy area that for years had suffered from the gap between public and political controversy on the one hand and limited government activity on the other. The following section presents and discusses five major policy outputs resulting from the institutionalization of the SSI. It starts by discussing the radius of operation and the target groups the SSI identified for itself and the consequences this has for its conception of migrant integration. Secondly, the section looks at the discursive strategies pursued by the SSI, claiming to take an objectified position within the debate and establishing a meritocratic integration narrative. Thirdly, we analyse the outputs in the legislation dimension, showing that it was largely shaped by continuity. After that we move on to the modes of policy making, fourthly, discussing the technocratic shift enforced by the SSI as well as, fifthly, its intensified use of political marketing and project oriented policies. In a final step, we summarise the findings against the background of the guiding assumption developed in the previous section.
5.1. Separating controversial from non-controversial tasks

Setting the course for the new ministerial actor, the first task was to specify the SSI’s general competence for migrant integration by identifying its radius of operation as well as its target groups. Soon after its inauguration, the new State Secretary Sebastian Kurz outlined its mandate the following way:

Integration is not immigration policy, you have to separate the topics of integration, asylum and immigration. My topic, the topic of integration, is about a positive coexistence of the majority population with the approximately 1.5 million people in Austria that have a migrant background. Thus, I’m responsible as soon as somebody legally resides in Austria and intends to stay here in the medium or long run. (Sebastian Kurz in Der Standard, 24.05.2011).

This quote exemplified the SSI’s aim to establish a clearly confined concept of integration, strictly separating it from the controversial tasks like immigration control and, above all, asylum management. In spite of the vast overlaps that exist between these tasks, the new actor tried to establish integration policy as an area of its own, in need of specifically designed policies. In fact, in the eyes of the State Secretary the lack of distinction was actually one of the key failures that had created an obstacle for successful integration policy in years past:

In the years to come, it is important to achieve a clarification in the area of immigration. We have to succeed in ensuring that more and more people are able to distinguish between integration, asylum and immigration. The intermingling that currently exists and that is permanently stirred up by the FPÖ for purely party political reasons, it doesn’t benefit our country at all. (Sebastian Kurz in Der Standard, 01.06.2011)

However, what was communicated as conceptual necessity by the SSI obviously was inspired by an underlying strategic consideration. The institutionalization of a specialized authority for integration matters allowed the SSI to focus on the “soft” policy question of integration while the BMI kept the responsibilities for the “hard” policy matters of immigration and refugee control – thus, the strategy of having “good cop, bad cop”. This separation of powers not only gave the SSI fertile ground to operate, it also ensured to serve a – party political – goal of the ÖVP: maintaining a restrictive stance on migration and asylum while at the same including more liberal stances in the area of integration, that way countering the issue ownership of fringe parties on the left and the right, like the radical right FPÖ and the left-libertarian Greens. Thus, all in all there remains little doubt that both, policy reasons and party politics motives equally shaped the polity choices that had been made in this regard.
5.2. Establishing an “objectivity”-frame and changing the policy narrative

Sebastian Kurz assumed office with a proclamation for “objectification” (“Versachlichung”) of the immigrant integration issue. Thus, from day one the State Secretary positioned the institution as a quasi-neutral, apolitical force between “dreamers on the left and agitators on the right” (OTS, SSI Date). This claim was a direct response to the conflictive history of competition between Austrian parties on migrant integration matters in years past, which arguably had fostered populist, anti-migrant debates. At the same time it was a reaction to the fact that both mainstream parties hitherto enjoyed no issue ownership in this question, since they had left the “hot potatoe” to the FPÖ and the Greens. Therefore, the strategists in the SSI now searched for a formula that allowed feasible answers to integration challenges without risking the muddy waters of a restrictive or even hostile approach vis-à-vis immigrants – the solution was the introduction of a meritocratic policy-narrative. The formula “What counts is a person’s merit, not his origin” became the new guiding mantra for the SSI’s integration approach (State Secretariat for Integration, OTS, 11.07.2011, see also Gruber/Mattes 2015).

Evidently, this narrative shift was not objective per se, as meritocracy is an ideological concept in itself and, in fact, was perfectly in line with the ideological aspirations of the ÖVP, the main agent in the institutionalization of the SSI. Meritocratic approaches have repeatedly appeared in the party’s political platform, thus its translation into the new policy area of integration was quite foreseeable. But the SSI presented it as an un-ideological approach, beyond being a matter of party contestation. Nevertheless, in the context of Austrian integration policy it indeed represented a push towards broadening the debate and making it more liberal, as it signaled a departure from a focus on ascribed integration failures, cultural and vague value-oriented, civic integration measures that had dominated the debate to this point. Moreover, the discursive shift towards meritocracy paved the way for a more pragmatic approach, as it focused particularly on those integration aspects that are most accessible for interventions by the state: i.e. incorporation of newcomers into the educational system and the labor market. Overall, this shift helped to satisfy the SSI’s need for innovation vis-à-vis its predecessors and for legitimacy as a new player in a complex network of integration actors.

5.3. Maintaining continuity in integration legislation

While the meritocratic narrative satisfied the demand for discursive innovation, on the level of legislation the SSI’s approach showed continuity. Thus, most of the legislative initiatives were either a continuation of already existing legislative proposals or additions that pursued the same legislative priorities that had existed before the SSI. In line with the new narrative,
the most important sectors of integration legislation were the labor market and the educational system. However, these areas have been the center of activity already for years. Moreover, most of the legislative measures actually took the same direction that had characterized the pre-institutionalization phase, e.g. promoting language training from early childhood to adulthood, enforcing compulsory school attendance, battling immigrants’ unemployment and low skills, facilitating the nostrification of academic titles or strengthening the existing criteria for citizenship acquisition (mostly language skills, self-sufficiency, integrity and voluntary work). In fact, what implicitly had been immanent in legislation already before, now was emphasized explicitly in line with the new integration narrative. Finally, none of the major civic integration regulations introduced in the years before the SSI were actually reversed, such as the integration agreements, or the criteria for long term residence, family reunification and citizenship acquisition (Mourão Permoser 2012). They rather were expanded by additional criteria or changes to the required levels (such as language levels or income requirements). Accordingly, there was no substantive shift towards more liberal legislation but a continuation of a civic integration policy focus including both cultural as well as economic elements (confirmed by MIPEX 2015).

Thus, there is a discrepancy between the innovative dimension of the “talk” and the continuity in “legislation”. Taking into consideration the political conditions for maneuver which a new institutional actor is confronted with, this finding is hardly surprising: Firstly, while discursive strategies are much easier to adapt in the short run, changing legislation is a lengthier process that is dependent on a variety of other actors, constraints and path dependencies. Thus, a new institutional actor looking for a feasible approach is highly likely to build on the existing legislative initiatives that feature a good chance to succeed. Secondly, in the context of the SSI this approach was catalyzed by the fact that both the State Secretary as well as the Expert Council (see below) were committed to the framework provided by the National Action Plan. Its guiding function ensured legislative continuity also after the institutional upgrade of integration, yet with a greater dynamic of action. And thirdly, since integration is a classic example of a transversal policy issue cross-cutting ministerial competences, even a new institutional actor is forced to build on existing activities by other ministries. In sum, these factors help to explain why continuity instead of a legislative overhaul characterized the SSI’s period of action.
5.4. Conducting a technocratic shift in policy making

Tied to the claim for an objectified approach, the SSI made unprecedented use of external expertise, a well-known practice in institutionalization processes (Lawrence/Suddaby 2006). Though, in the case of the SSI this strategic decision was catalyzed by two aspects, firstly by the almost lacking policy and political experience of the State Secretary, secondly by the novelty of the policy area integration itself. The crucial instrument for this approach became an Expert Council of renowned academic figures in the field of integration which had been introduced shortly before the SSI came into being. With the new institutional constellation, the Expert Council now started to assume control over the design of integration measures that should be pursued by the SSI. It built on the government’s National Action Plan for Integration (NAPI) which had been issued already two years earlier, and translated the different dimensions of action into clear-cut steps for political intervention. A few months into the institutional innovation, the Expert Council and SSI jointly presented a package of 20 measures for integration that soon became the benchmark for the remaining legislation period. Thus, while external expertise had always been an element of the government’s approach in the area of integration, the now drastically upgraded role of the Expert Council in fact represented a substantial change in the modes of policy making. Scholten/Entzinger/Penninx (2015) refer to this mode as a “technocratic model of research-policy relations”. It shifts significant policy making powers away from politicians, who rather focus on safeguarding the overall directions and on publicly promoting the outputs. Experts on the other hand “do more than just provide knowledge (…) they also frame policy problems and develop solutions; they come much closer to taking on the role of policymakers themselves”. This mode of governance is in clear contrast to “alternative approaches like the engineering model and the bureaucratic model, (which) hold a firm belief in the primacy of politics in policymaking.” (ibd. 4-5). In sum, the changes in of policy making towards an intensified technocratic approach not only helped to establish the legitimacy of the SSI but also gave new presence to the hitherto less utilized Expert Council. It also supported the abovementioned “objectivity”-frame and, thus, safeguarded the new ministerial actor from large parts of otherwise impending public criticism.

5.5. Intensifying political marketing and project orientation

The combination of these developments – i.e. the continuity in legislation, the need for innovation, the discursive shift towards meritocracy – paved the way for the increasing use of a non-legislative tool of policy making: project funding and political marketing events.
Thus, one of the most noticeable changes linked to the new institutional actor was its proactive use of communication strategies to ensure the publicity of its new approach. As Fig. 2 shows, the amount of media presence and the use of press releases by ministerial actors related to integration drastically increased after the SSI’s establishment. A similar increase occurred with regard to public events attended by the State Secretary, spreading the new dynamic even further. Together with the fresh and youthful presence provided by the State Secretary Sebastian Kurz, these steps ensured an unprecedented degree of public attention for migrant integration and signaled the need for a debate that includes society as a whole, i.e. minorities and majority alike. Although the SSI was not the only government authority invested in integration matters, it constituted a new focal point of attention for the media and the wider public that was endowed with the halo of governmental authority. This ensured a privileged position in media public discourse and helped to expand the potency of both, the claim for objectivity and the meritocratic mantra.

Fig. 2: Number of relevant plenary agenda items, press releases and media articles

Another element was the promotion of single and short-term integration projects, an instrument of policy making that leaves more flexibility to an institutional actor than does the long und obstructive legislative process. Especially the funding of external projects is a much applied instrument, as it not only liberates executive actors from developing and implementing activities on their own but also utilizes the expertise provided by stakeholders,
care organizations or other NGOs. With the introduction of the SSI this instrument gained a new dynamic. The SSI publicized numerous existing initiatives that already shaped the field of integration, a resource on which the SSI could build right away (without lengthy periods of planning and preparation). The utilization of a set of already existing projects, then, opened up institutional capacities for the development of an in-house flagship project labelled “Zusammen:Österreich” (“Together:Austria”). Six months after its inauguration the SSI started this multi-tiered project addressing young people and complemented it with new additions in each of the following two years. Among them were a presentation of successful migrants as role models, so called “ambassadors for integration” (“Integrationsbotschafter”), a promotion campaign for participation in voluntary associations and, finally, discussion circles with pupils on the role of education for successful individual careers. The project was prototypical for the way in which the SSI mixed its meritocratic narrative with traditional claims for identity and cultural cohesion:

The more than 100 ambassadors for integration that are going to visit schools over the next two years are the best evidence for immigrants living in Austria, that are highly committed and that contribute their fair share. Moreover, we throw a sharper focus on an ‘Austrian identity’ (‘Österreich-Bewusstsein’). Many immigrants experience a crisis of identity, they feel a stranger in Austria and in their countries of origin at the same time. Therefore, a new ‘Austrian identity’ can evolve only if one forges a new life, is successful, buys an apartment and strikes roots in Austria. (SSt. Sebastian Kurz, Die Presse, 04.12.2011).

In sum, the intensified promotion efforts helped to create new discursive opportunities for the integration agenda and entrenched the issue in a fresh and positive way. Apart from satisfying demands for innovation and overcoming the hitherto negative tone of integration failures, the increased public presence also helped to legitimize the SSI as an institutional actor as much as it contributed to the establishment of migrant integration as distinct policy area of its own.

5.6. Summary

The findings largely confirm the assumptions outlined in our research framework. First and foremost, the pressure for both, innovation and legitimacy proofed to be a key driver for the policy outputs stimulated by the SSI. In order to satisfy them, the new ministerial actor took action as far as its limited time frame of two years in the remaining legislation period allowed him to do. As a result, substantive policy changes indeed were made in those dimensions that were quickest to adapt: the establishment of a meritocratic integration narrative, the resort to a technocratic mode of policy making and the increase in political marketing and project orientation were the most obvious areas of change, whereas the measures suggested and the
legislation passed after 2011 largely pursued the path that had already been taken in the pre-institutionalization period (H1). Therefore, our second assumption of a shift in direction towards a more liberal and economic-oriented approach to migrant integration was only partly confirmed. While on the discursive dimension of the integration narrative the respective shift was clearly deployed, with regard to the claims for measures and the legislation, liberal-economic aspects did not substantially surpass the emphasis (on language education, schooling and labour market integration) that already had shaped the pre-institutionalization period (H2). It demonstrates that the policy innovation stimulated by the new ministerial actor, above all, was a change in the way integration was talked about, less in the way it was regulated.

However, the second major dimension of innovation concerned the modes of policy making, and they changed to a considerable degree: On the one hand, in light of the novelty of the integration policy area and accounting for the little integration experience of the SSI and its State Secretary, it was not only a pragmatic mode of policy making building on available resources that was pursued (which had been our original assumption). In fact, the role of resources such as the National Action Plan and the Expert Council for Integration actually was enhanced towards a new, “technocratic” mode of policy-making. This technocratic shift ensured innovation and legitimacy at the same time, not only vis-à-vis the media and the wider public but also for the SSI’s relation to other governmental and non-governmental actors (H4). As a consequence it increasingly fostered the SSI’s and the State Secretary’s role, which grew from a mediating and coordinating role within the existing network of governmental and non-governmental actors, to an increasingly self-confident appearance, that even led the open challenge of other ministries and the coalition partner SPÖ in cases of disagreement (H3). Thus, with regard to the modes of policy making, the findings actually indicate an even stronger innovation than the forms we originally expected in our framework.

6. Conclusions

How does the institutionalization of a new ministerial actors matter for the policy outputs in an emerging policy area, such as migrant integration? From our case study of the Austrian State Secretariat for Integration, we draw three major conclusions that help to answer this fundamental question:
Firstly, ministerial institutionalization has an immense potential to establish and delineate a novel policy area, such as migrant integration. Already the mere presence of an institutional actor with respective competences itself helps to foster the policy area, not only as an
autonomous policy matter within the organization structures of public administration, but also in its distinct identity vis-à-vis non-governmental political actors and the wider public. Yet, even more importantly, the continuous policy outputs of such a governmental authority play a huge part in shaping the contours of this policy area, thus, what is perceived as part of the policy area and what is not. As the case of the Austrian SSI suggests, this function is facilitated considerably if negative or conflictive aspects that might be tied to the policy area (e.g. the controversial aspects of asylum in the context of integration) can be conceptually separated and organizationally conveyed to another institutional actor. Secondly, ministerial institutionalization opens room for innovations in the policy output that would be harder, if not impossible, to come by when maintaining the previous institutional setting. New ministerial actors are, in fact, largely expected to bring about change in order to gain legitimacy as a distinct and necessary governmental institution. However, as our study clearly demonstrates, institutional actors are not completely free in the way the redesign policy outputs. To a certain degree they remain dependent to a path that has been set long before their own emergence, thus the challenge is to find those leverage points for potential changes that allow to maintain the right balance between innovation and continuity. In the case of the Austrian SSI, these leverage points were changes in discourse and the modes of policy making, while legislative innovation turned out to be harder to achieve. Finally, apart from the generalized conclusions on the potentials and pressures for newly institutionalized government actors, what our study has largely confirmed is the role of the ‘embeddedness’, every actor has to face. Thus, a ministerial actor is confronted with a distinct context of institutional and non-institutional factors that shape the opportunities and constraints in which it is able to redesign policy outputs. In the context of the Austrian SSI, four types of factors have turned out indispensable in order to understand the policy outputs stimulated by the new institutional actor. Apart from the specific characteristics of the policy area of integration, the horizontal and vertical division of competences as well as the institutional history and the policy designs inherited by the new actor drastically shaped the choices it was able to make from there on. However, as our analysis also clearly documents, despite claims to be purely objective and apolitical, institutional actors are always influenced by the ideology and the (party) political motives of their incumbents. Thus, policy considerations and motives of politics merge with contextual factors as the explanatory framework not only for the decision to institutionalize a new ministerial actor, but also for the nature of the policy outputs it is able and willing to produce.


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