

# Austria Report

## Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024

Ludger Helms, Rudolf Winter-Ebmer,  
Reimut Zohlnhöfer (Coordinator)



## Executive Summary

After a period of unprecedented turbulence in Austrian politics – including several major scandals and the creation of an all-technocrat government – Austria has more recently found its way back to the calmer waters of stable democratic party governance. However, the exceptionally high turnover rate among chancellors has also marked the years of the current ÖVP-Green government, formed in early 2020, with three chancellors: Sebastian Kurz, 2020 – 2021; Alexander Schallenberg, October – December 2021; and Karl Nehammer, since December 2021.

The first participation of the Greens in a federal government stands out as a genuinely new feature of Austrian party governance. This change in the party composition of the Austrian federal government, and the persistence of the ÖVP-Green government into 2024, has had a more substantive effect on Austria's public policies and its performance in sustainable governance than the transitions from Kurz to Schallenberg and Nehammer in the chancellery. This can be explained by the compartmentalized structure of the Austrian political executive, in which individual ministers, especially those not belonging to the chancellor's party, enjoy considerable leeway.

Still, the changes in the chancellery had some discernible effects as well. In particular, the handling of executive-media relations and the overall leadership rhetoric have changed significantly under Chancellor Nehammer and, previously, Schallenberg, both of whom have been much less extroverted than Kurz.

Except for a few issues, such as access to official information or media pluralism, Austria has maintained high, or even very high, standards of good democratic governance across the three levels of vertical, diagonal, and horizontal accountability.

In contrast, the wider field of “governing with foresight” features several less impressive scores. Specifically, the central government has fostered strategic foresight and anticipatory innovation within its organization only to a limited extent. Additionally, the involvement of various civil society actors in public policymaking leaves room for improvement. Although the Austrian social partnership has largely lost its former centrality in Austrian politics, the social

partners continue to play a more prominent role than many social welfare groups, particularly environmental groups. Despite a dense network of formal rules and regulations, there remains a strong element of informality in Austrian politics. However, this informality is not necessarily negative. Many unwritten rules have facilitated the emergence of a reasonably smooth and effective governing process, despite numerous centrifugal dynamics.

Regarding “sustainable policymaking,” Austria’s public policies toward migrants – reflecting a widespread latent xenophobia that cuts across different quarters of society – stand out as one of the country’s key weaknesses and challenges. Austria remains at the top of European countries where many migrants feel considerably less happy than the native population. In other areas, such as advancing gender equality and providing state-of-the-art digital infrastructure, the situation has improved in recent years, though there is still room for further enhancement.

As in many other countries, some of the most serious and enduring challenges in Austrian politics and society concern climate change and biodiversity issues. While the wider population is increasingly recognizing the importance of climate change, understanding the centrality of biodiversity to the overall cause of sustainability remains a key task for Austrian governments in the coming years.

## Key Challenges

Any future Austrian government must implement institutional reforms to adapt the country to ongoing and emerging challenges, expectations, and demands. Several key areas stand out: The first area, central to the governance structure, involves creating more effective planning units and additional interministerial decision-making structures. These are necessary to address complex and cross-cutting “wicked” issues that transcend traditional policy boundaries.

Second, sorting out the intra-power structure of the Austrian federation to facilitate more coherent policies and increased political accountability stands out as a case for institutional reform.

Third, safeguarding the sustainability and high standards of old-age pensions and health policies – particularly in terms of the population’s access to publicly financed treatment – will be another set of challenges for future Austrian governments.

Fourth, civic education, aimed at improving political knowledge and “democratic competence” to meet digital-age standards, stands out as another area in need of reform. Notably, the change in the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 years in 2007 was not followed by any significant reforms in civic education. Furthermore, the integration of migrant or second-generation migrant students into the regular school system poses an additional educational challenge.

Fifth, guaranteeing a reasonable level of media pluralism and defending “critical journalism” against “infotainment” and populist agitation will need to be high on the agenda of future governments and other decision-makers. Despite the well-known difficulties involved, this will also need to include attempts to establish a viable regime for controlling violations of human dignity in social media.

At the top of future governments’ priority lists will have to be the complex challenges of climate policy. More ambitious measures are needed to meet the self-set standards of climate and biodiversity policy.

Similarly, the fight against populism that threatens to erode democracy must figure prominently in the future. As is the case in many mature democracies today, populism, fueled by vague but widespread forms of discontent, is on the rise in Austria as well, shaking the decades-old pillars of liberal democracy.

Lastly, combating inflation remains a significant issue for Austria. Inflation in Austria has been considerably higher than in most other European Union member states. Early in 2023, Austria’s inflation rate exceeded 11%, and projections for late 2024 still show the country well above the EU average.

Beyond potential institutional reform in the narrow sense, a key factor determining the fate of sustainable policies in Austria will be effective government communication – effective less in terms of securing and maintaining power, and more in terms of generating genuine trust and legitimacy for possibly unpopular decisions. In terms of content, a stronger focus should be placed on issues of sustainability. There continues to be widespread confusion in Austria between a love of nature and extended outdoor activities, such as hiking and skiing, on the one hand, and nature and climate preservation, including all the sacrifices this may imply, on the other hand.

Several challenges are unlikely to be solved by sweeping institutional reform or simple changes in strategy. At this level, arguably the most important issue

concerns the idea of democracy among Austrians, which remains strikingly exclusive. A large majority of Austrian citizens favor keeping the acquisition of Austrian nationality – a prerequisite for full political participation rights – difficult and demanding. Additionally, a majority of Austrians strongly oppose granting equal political rights to long-term residents from other EU member states.

Given the changing patterns of the overall population living in Austria, it seems timely to expand the political rights of Austria's non-Austrian resident population. Relatedly, Austria's continued economic success will largely depend on its ability to attract young, qualified people and retain those who are already here. Among many other factors, achieving this would require overcoming Austria's latently xenophobic image among future potential migrants.

# Democratic Government

## I. Vertical Accountability

### Elections

Free and Fair  
Political  
Competition  
Score: 9

Registration procedures for candidates and political parties in Austria meet established standards of transparency and fairness, including specific requirements such as financial deposits, age, party affiliation, and petition signatures. No eligible candidates have been prevented from being elected or disqualified from registration by undue or questionable criteria or practices.

However, it is significantly easier for parties already enjoying parliamentary representation to register for an upcoming election than for genuine newcomers. For example, parties holding seats in the Nationalrat need the signatures of just three members of parliament to launch another candidacy, while parties lacking any parliamentary representation need the signatures of 2,600 citizens for a nationwide candidacy. To be considered eligible for the office of federal president, a candidate needs the signatures of 6,000 Austrian citizens.

The presidential election of 2022 – which featured an incumbent seeking reelection – was widely considered to demonstrate the openness of competition even for the highest political office. Six other candidates secured between 1.6 and 17.7% of the vote, with three of them obtaining 8% or more of the total vote.

Electoral Commissions operate at various levels of the Austrian polity (national, state, and regional), deciding on issues concerning the eligibility of potential candidates. Parties and individual candidates can object to an electoral commission's decision by taking their case to an administrative court. These courts have not hesitated to accept different types of claims and have ruled in favor of candidates.

While every Austrian citizen has an equal opportunity to run as a candidate – at a minimum age of 18 for all parliamentary elections and 35 for candidates competing for the office of federal president – there are significant de facto limitations reflecting the nature of a full-blown party government regime. Truly independent candidates tend to play no role in parliamentary elections at the national and state levels; Austrian parties hold an exceptionally powerful gatekeeper position.

Specifically, the Austrian electoral system requires parties to compete for votes and seats with party lists. Recent research on the composition of these lists has identified major shortcomings related to the under-representation of women, younger candidates, and particularly candidates “with a migration background.” In party list regimes, a latent form of discrimination against certain candidates involves their low ranking on a party list. The fact that this has not become a major issue in the public arena underscores the existence of unwritten rules of competition between different candidates, even within a given party.

Parties and candidates are required to maintain accurate financial records, disclose the nature and value of received donations, and publish their accounts regularly. In 2022, wide-ranging changes to the established party finance rules were introduced. These changes came into force on January 1, 2023, and January 1, 2024, respectively. In particular, parties now have several new obligations, such as publishing the names of their donors and the donations received. The threshold for donations not requiring public declaration has been lowered from €2,500 to €500 per year and donor. For funds received from membership fees, the name of the member must be disclosed for any amount exceeding €5,000 per year. Additionally, parties must provide the Austrian Court of Audit with a list of any debts exceeding €50,000 they may have with private loan givers, as well as a list of all organizations closely associated with the party (according to § 5 of the Party Finance Law). Furthermore, parties are required to disclose the exact size of shares they or any affiliated organizations hold in any company. Moreover, there is a new explicit duty for parties to store all records and files for potential inspection for at least seven years. Since January 1, 2023, parties must also report to the Austrian Court of Audit on a quarterly basis any individual donations exceeding €150, disclosing the name of the donor.

These recent changes have been urged and effectively triggered by the Austrian Court of Audit, which implies that Austrian parties have recurrently sought to exploit loopholes in the law to their benefit. The leeway of the Court of Audit has been expanded by recent reforms. Since 2023 the Court has not only the right to insist on a new report by a party if a report is found to be

unsatisfactory, as in the past, but also the authority to take the initiative if it suspects any possible violation of the established party finance rules.

There is also a particular agency (unabhängiger Parteien-Transparenz-Senat, UPTS), located in the Federal Chancellor's Office, that has the right to impose fines for violations of party finance rules. Fines can only be imposed after the Court of Audit has taken an initiative. However, the members of the UPTS – who are appointed by the federal president following a suggestion by the federal government – are independent and not subject to any instructions. The possible fines for certain violations have recently been increased. Delays in submitting accounting reports to the Court of Audit can also be fined.

Candidates and parties generally enjoy fair opportunities to access the media and other communication channels. Access to the media is neither restricted nor institutionally denied on the basis of ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, birth, or other status. Also, the media landscape as a whole generally offers fair coverage of various political positions.

In constitutional practice, some limits to the idea of “perfect equality” can be identified. During electoral campaigns, all parties with parliamentary representation have the right to participate in unbiased debates hosted by a public broadcaster. However, this may disadvantage new parties that are not covered by this guarantee. Similarly, while there is an established practice of giving many different candidates – not just the top candidates of the major parties – a platform by organizing “one-on-one discussions” between candidates from different parties, there has been a strong bias toward candidates from parties enjoying parliamentary representation.

Research on media coverage of women candidates during the 2019 election campaign concluded that: “Throughout the last decade, women politicians in Austria have struggled with the media ceiling and changes have been minimal. A real gender bias still exists in Austrian campaign coverage: Women are considerably less visible in media coverage (...), they have fewer opportunities to impact the political agenda than their male counterparts (...), and they are assigned more often to speak about soft issues” (Hayek et al. 2022). However, the same study suggests that when women are their party's top candidate – such as SPÖ-party leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner in 2019 – the observed gender-related differences tend to disappear.

There are no formal mechanisms in place that provide significant advantages to specific candidates or parties regarding media access and coverage. However, there has been a long-standing “special relationship” between some



top political office holders, or candidates seeking reelection, and the tabloid press. Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ, 2008 – 2016) was well known for enjoying biased support from Austria’s largest tabloid newspaper, Die Kronenzeitung, both as a chancellor candidate in 2008 and throughout his chancellorship. More critical in terms of violating the rules of fair political competition were the practices observed under the chancellorship of Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP, 2017 – 2021; see Wodak 2022). As revealed through both parliamentary and judicial investigations, Kurz and his inner circle apparently bought “fake survey results” and friendly coverage by the widely read free newspaper Österreich using public funds to enhance their status and disadvantage key competitors from other parties.

New media play an increasingly important role in Austria, with different candidates using them in fundamentally different ways. Political parties have started to use new media platforms, including social media, private-party TV channels, and YouTube channels, to spread their messages. These platforms are widely read and are becoming more important over time, but systematic attempts to manipulate political competition in Austria through new media have not yet been proven.

Free and Fair  
Elections  
Score: 10

Voting rights are granted to all Austrian citizens living in Austria. Since 2007, all resident Austrian nationals from the age of 16 have enjoyed the right to vote. Austrian residents do not have to register to participate in elections. By contrast, Austrian citizens living abroad have to register with the Austrian county where they lived before they left the country in order to participate in nationwide elections (Nationalrat, federal president, and European Parliament elections). Registrations are valid for 10 years and must be renewed after that.

Austrians convicted of crimes resulting in more than five years of imprisonment, or specific political crimes such as electoral fraud or terrorism with imprisonment exceeding one year, may lose their right to vote for the duration of their imprisonment. The loss of the right to vote requires an individual decision by a criminal court judge.

As Austrians aged 16 and older do not need to register, there is no disenfranchisement resulting from any flawed voter registry.

Non-Austrians have no right to vote in any nationwide election, regardless of the length of their residence, proficiency in German, or other qualifications such as paying taxes. The share of the resident population on Austrian soil has significantly increased over the past decades. Twenty years ago, 580,000 non-Austrian residents had no right to vote; at the most recent nationwide election, the presidential election of 2022, no less than 1.4 million non-Austrian

residents – 18% of Austria’s population aged over 16 – had no right to vote. However, with the exception of the state of Vienna, non-Austrians from other EU countries have the right to vote not only in European Parliament elections but also in local elections if their primary address is in Austria. Non-Austrians from non-EU member states do not have any voting rights in Austria.

Individuals who have been denied the right to vote can appeal to the administrative court at the relevant level. The most commonly raised issue involves the status of residence in a given electoral district.

All democratic elections in Austria must be assessed as free and fair. Impartial and effective electoral management bodies operate at the various levels where elections occur. The highest authority in this network is the federal electoral commission, which is reconstituted for each new legislative term and chaired by the federal minister of the interior. In collaboration with Austrian courts, these authorities have ensured high standards for free and fair democratic elections.

There are more than 10,000 easily accessible polling stations for an electorate of slightly less than 6.4 million, including 62,000 non-resident Austrians (figures as of late 2022). Since 2007, Austria has operated postal voting. There have been no incidents of harassment, violence, intimidation, or any other developments violating the principle of free and fair elections. The presidential election of 2016 marked an extremely rare case of a miscalculation of votes. However, the strict ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court – which ordered a repeat election of the second ballot – bore witness to Austria’s firm commitment to free and fair elections.

### Quality of Parties and Candidates

Socially Rooted  
Party System  
Score: 9

There are no legal barriers in the electoral system or other rules that would hinder the representation of relevant societal interests through political parties. There is a 4% threshold that parties must overcome to gain mandates at the federal level. Several states also have a 4% threshold, including Burgenland, Lower Austria, and Upper Austria. The majority of other states have a slightly higher 5% threshold, while Styria has no explicit minimum threshold for parliamentary state elections. However, by international standards, these rules cannot reasonably be considered to undermine the principle of democratic political competition and representation.

Austrian parties have a sophisticated organizational structure that reflects the federalist nature of the country as well as its lower regional units. The parties

elected to parliament can be considered to represent a reasonably wide share of societal interests. The share of women members of parliament has risen more or less continuously and is currently at 40.1% in the Nationalrat, elected in 2019. However, migrants have remained strongly under-represented in parliament due to both a lack of voting rights and a tendency of most parties to place migrant candidates low on the party list.

All parties in parliament have detailed and reasonably distinct party manifestos, which are available to the public and enable voters to make an informed choice.

Effective Cross-Party Cooperation  
Score: 8

With the FPÖ, the Austrian Nationalrat includes a major party that many consider problematic concerning some liberal democratic values, particularly respect for minorities and migrants living in Austria. In the most recent parliamentary election in 2019, the FPÖ won 16.2% of the total vote and secured 31 seats. Since late 2021, the party has consistently been identified as the largest party in public surveys. In those surveys, the FPÖ's support has hovered around 30%, with many supporters reportedly coming from the pool of former Sebastian Kurz backers.

The political rhetoric in Austria reflects the strong position of a party with limited respect for different minorities. However, the polarization at the programmatic-ideological level has not hindered the effective execution of public policies. Both the two governing parties – ÖVP and Greens – and the majority of opposition parties in the current Nationalrat (i.e., SPÖ and NEOS) are clearly democratic parties. The FPÖ's support is rarely, if ever, needed, even for constitutional amendments, which require a two-thirds majority.

Arguably even more importantly, a detailed analysis of voting patterns in the Nationalrat suggests that the FPÖ is not structurally isolated. Rather, depending on the issue, it usually aligns with one or several of the other parties (see Kontrast 2023).

A particular issue that has emerged since the FPÖ became the largest party in popular opinion surveys concerns the possible role of the FPÖ and its leader, Herbert Kickl, in a future Austrian federal government. Kickl, through his rhetoric, is considered one of the most extreme right-wing leaders of the FPÖ since the war. The FPÖ and Kickl have repeatedly cited Hungary's FIDESZ as a leading example, including its illiberal course.

While the largest party in a governing coalition is conventionally considered to have the right to fill the position of chancellor, a scenario with Kickl as chancellor has long been ruled out by all other major players. However, more

recently there have been signs that the ÖVP, which formed a governing coalition with the FPÖ from 2019 – 2021 (and between 2000 – 2005), has started to warm up to the idea of forging another coalition with a Kickl-led FPÖ. In this context, it is also worth noting that in 2023 two ÖVP-FPÖ coalition governments were formed at the state level in Salzburg and Lower Austria.

### Access to Official Information

Transparent  
Government  
Score: 7

Austria was the last EU member state without a freedom of information law. However, in October 2023, the ÖVP-Green federal government initiated a Freedom of Information bill (“Informationsfreiheitsgesetz”). In December, the largest opposition party, the SPÖ, signaled its support for the bill, which requires a two-thirds majority for legislative approval, after successfully negotiating several changes to the original draft. The bill was passed by the Nationalrat on January 31, 2024, following an extended parliamentary debate that highlighted the new legislation’s weaknesses and strengths (see *Der Standard*, 31.01.24).

The bill, which will come into force in 2025, was hailed by government ministers as a “transparency revolution.” However, a careful assessment suggests that several key issues are not really being resolved by this bill. The bill stipulates a proactive duty of the administration and other public agencies to provide reasonable information in an accessible way on any issues of general interest – however, importantly, only unless there is reason to keep this information secret. Moreover, the reasons for which it is possible to withhold information from the public have been expanded; they would now also include matters that would seem to bear the risk of inflicting major economic or financial damage to any administrative unit. This means that a minister has the right to refuse to provide any information if he or she feels they could otherwise be confronted with major damage claims.

Also, for municipalities with populations of less than 5,000, there is no requirement to proactively publish relevant information. This implies that citizens in these areas would awkwardly need to challenge local authorities to secure information pertinent to them. According to data from the Association of Austrian Municipalities (2019), exactly 1,843 municipalities out of a total of 2,096 would be exempt under this new regulation. Given that many decisions affecting residents most directly are made at the municipal level, such exemptions weigh heavily on this legislative proposal.

Further, the bill seeks to establish a specific procedure for citizens to request information, including the possibility of taking matters to the Constitutional Court. However, while the timeline is being tightened somewhat, the basic procedure has been in place since the late 1980s. Additionally, based on related experience, it must be assumed that the Constitutional Court, if invoked, is highly likely to leave matters to be settled by the administrative courts. Notably absent from the proposed rules is the creation of an ombudsperson for information matters. Finally, a significant issue is that, according to this bill, any single Austrian state could veto any amendment to the proposed Freedom of Information Act.

Despite all that, the recent developments undoubtedly mark a major step forward.

## II. Diagonal Accountability

### Media Freedom and Pluralism

Free Media  
Score: 8

Media freedom in Austria is guaranteed by the constitution. There is no censorship, and new electronic or print media organizations can be freely established. Limits on the freedom of expression in the media are defined by law, and the courts ensure these limits are enforced.

Some media outlets are not completely free of government influence. Both federal and regional governments have used public money to promote specific policies during election campaigns and beyond in various print publications. Public money has also been used to pay fines for violating established rules. This tradition, repeatedly criticized by the Austrian Court of Audit and media organizations, reduces the credibility and freedom of the media.

One of the defining features of the Austrian media landscape is the existence of powerful public media. The Austrian Public Broadcasting (Österreichischer Rundfunk Fernsehen, ORF) company dominates both the television and radio markets. The ORF is legally mandated to operate independently and submit comprehensive reports on its activities. All parties in parliament are represented on the ORF's oversight body, the Stiftungsrat. Compared to the situation in Germany, for example, the majorities in the Stiftungsrat strongly reflect the respective majorities in the Nationalrat, with significant changes occurring after parliamentary elections.

Several cases of alleged political influence over the ORF by various political parties have been reported. However, the ORF generally fulfills its mandate very well, especially by international standards. There is an imbalance between the ORF and other TV and radio stations. The ORF is primarily financed by public fees, which must be paid by everyone who owns a TV or radio device. In contrast, other TV and radio broadcasters generate revenue through advertisements. The ORF and the government justify this imbalance by citing the ORF's specific educational mission, which private companies are not required to fulfill.

There are other imbalances in print media that reflect an uneven regime of direct media subsidies. Subsidies for print journalism generally went to high-quality journals like "Die Presse" or "Der Standard." Public money from advertising was twice as high in recent years, mostly benefiting the yellow press. This advertising is problematic because it leaves room for rewarding favorable journalism. Thus, popular tabloid titles benefit disproportionately from the existing funding regime while regional weekly newspapers tend to face disadvantages (see Seethaler & Beaufort, 2022).

Many observers deemed the period of the ÖVP-FPÖ government to be the nadir for media freedom due to government intervention, highlighted by unusually aggressive attacks from the FPÖ on the ORF for being "not objective." However, the overall situation has not fundamentally improved under the new ÖVP-Green government, as evidenced by Austria's position in international press freedom rankings. In the most recent Reporters Without Borders 2023 ranking, Austria was placed 29th among 180 countries worldwide, down from 17th in the 2021 report and slightly up from 2022.

The past year has been particularly marked by the resignations of several renowned editors-in-chief who maintained unreasonably close relationships with individual senior politicians. Additional recent developments – such as a house search at the newspaper "Heute" and the transformation of the "Wiener Zeitung," the world's oldest newspaper, into an online-only publication – were not yet accounted for in this recent assessment. Furthermore, Austria's suggested involvement in the PEGASUS scandal, which concerns the distribution and use of spyware, has also cast an unfavorable light on media freedom.

In the Monitoring Report 2022 of the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom/EUI (covering the EU, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey), Austria is highlighted as a country where "journalistic profession, standards and protection" have deteriorated, shifting from a low risk to a medium risk classification (with only three other countries

in the same or a lower category). Regarding the sub-indicator on the “working conditions” of journalists, Austria is considered to be at a high risk (alongside thirteen other countries out of the 32 covered). Concerning the sub-indicator on the “legal protection of the right to information,” Austria, alongside Turkey, is the only country considered to be at a high risk.

At the same time, Austria is among the minority of countries (8 out of 32) that have rules aiming to ensure the fairness and transparency of political advertising on online platforms. Further, Austria is one of only five countries out of 32 that have a reasonably sophisticated and efficient regulatory framework designed to combat the spread of hate speech.

Pluralism of  
Opinions  
Score: 7

The Austrian media system has a distinct lack of pluralism in both the broadcast and print media sectors. The TV and radio markets are still dominated by the public Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), though its market share has been shrinking. ORF’s television market share in 2022 was 34.6%, down from 35.5% in 2021, while its radio market share was 68%, down from 72% in 2021.

The ORF is required by law to follow a policy of internal pluralism, which in practice translates primarily into a reflection of the various political parties’ current strength in parliament. Thus, interests and movements not yet established in the political system may occasionally face a disadvantage.

The print media sector is highly concentrated by comparative standards. For nearly 9 million inhabitants, there are just 14 daily newspapers, compared to Switzerland with a population of 8.7 million, which has more than 40 dailies, or Sweden, with a population of 10.4 million and more than 90 dailies. Regional monopolies also pose a threat to media pluralism in Austria. In some states, a single daily paper dominates the market.

One paper, the tabloid *Kronenzeitung*, dominates the print market, though its market share has been shrinking recently. The *Kronenzeitung*’s market share was 22.4% in 2022, or 1.7 million readers (down from 23.9% in 2021 and more than 40% in 2009). With a reach of 9.4 and 8.9%, the two daily newspapers “*Kleine Zeitung*” and “*Heute*” were the second and third most important papers in 2022, respectively. The *Kronenzeitung* carries particular political weight as politicians of various parties seek to please its editor and staff, eroding the fair and open democratic competition of ideas and interests. Further limits to media pluralism arise from close personal relationships between the chief editors of different major newspapers. For example, the editor-in-chief of “*Heute*” is the spouse of the editor-in-chief of the *Kronenzeitung*.

According to data published by the Media Pluralism Monitor 2022, media pluralism in Austria is at medium risk in all areas investigated, except for one – fundamental protection – which shows a low risk. The report indicates that risks to media pluralism in Austria arise primarily from horizontal and cross-media concentration, insufficient reflection on changes in the media landscape within competition law, threats to the independence of public service media governance and funding, endangered editorial autonomy, shortcomings in provisions on media ownership transparency, limited access to media for women and minorities, the lack of a policy or resources to promote media literacy, and a system of state subsidies.

There is a notable amount of news media concentration on online platforms. Those who control online news media also hold powerful positions in other sectors, such as Mediaprint, ORF, or Styria Media Group. However, for now, there remains a sufficient number of major digital, print, and broadcast outlets that are able and willing to consistently critique government policies and report on abuses of power.

### Civil Society

Free Civil  
Society  
Score: 9

Citizens in Austria can freely form or join independent political and civic groups, openly discuss political issues, and assemble without restrictions. The freedom of association and assembly is guaranteed by the constitution. This constitutional guarantee includes any religious, philosophical, or ideological position, with few exceptions, such as attempts to generate support for Nazi ideology.

The right to gather in public and hold a meeting or demonstration does not require a specific application. Authorities simply need to be informed about scheduled events no less than 48 hours in advance. Failing to do so can result in a fine, though this does not mean that an unregistered gathering will be automatically dissolved by the police. However, if the police have doubts about a particular gathering and suspect it might endanger public security, the event can be called off.

Recent events, especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, have seen an increase in such incidents. Planned demonstrations against Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip have been among these occurrences. The climate change protests, where young people adhered themselves to the floor, have also attracted significant public attention. Notably, key representatives of the Austrian state, including Federal President Van der Bellen, have sided with the demonstrators.



On some occasions, the courts declared government actions against groups that wanted to assemble as unlawful. The FPÖ, one of the harshest and most powerful critics of liberal democracy, benefited from these judgments, as seen in early 2021. This situation demonstrates that Austria is willing to face the challenging task of allowing public criticism against some of its most fundamental values, rather than simply keeping those groups at bay through legal means.

Different societal groups have played varying roles in the recent chapters of civil society development. Women have been particularly active in pandemic-related protests in Austria, while some observers believe that Muslims, or “political Islam,” have been gradually pushed to the sidelines of civil society by recent governments.

Effective Civil  
Society  
Organizations  
(Capital and  
Labor)  
Score: 8

The role of capital and labor interest groups remains notably strong in Austria (Karlhofer 2020). In many cases, these groups continue to formulate nearly complete laws independently, which parliament subsequently only needs to approve. Significant associations include the Austrian Economic Chambers (Wirtschaftskammern) and the Federation of Austrian Industry (Die Industriellenvereinigung) for businesses and employers; the Austrian Trade Union Federation (Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund) and the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labor (Arbeiterkammern) for employees; and the Chamber of Agriculture (Landwirtschaftskammern) for farmers. Membership in the various chambers is mandatory; the fees, amounting to 0.5% of the gross salary, are automatically deducted from it. Other membership fees to professional associations or donations to civil society organizations are tax-deductible.

The power of the major associations from the economic and labor sectors to shape politics and public policies may have been reduced as a result of Austria’s integration into the European Union, but in domestic politics their influence remains strong. Though formally independent of political parties, the groups have various individual links to the parties, especially to the Social Democratic Party and the Austrian People’s Party. Moreover, their influence is enhanced by their acting in a coordinated, neo-corporatist way through the social-partnership network.

These established patterns have begun to change in recent decades, particularly in the past few years (Paster 2022). The SPÖ’s closest allies have lost ground since the party’s fall from power in 2017. The formation of a new coalition government between the ÖVP and the Greens in early 2020

continued the post-2017 policies. The ÖVP-Green government was, in fact, the first national government that did not include any ministers representing the social partners (Sozialpartner).

The social partners have not only suffered from changing government complexions; compared to the peak of the Social Partnership, public trust and support have been shrinking. In 2022, just 35% of respondents declared they had much or very much trust in the social partners (i.e., employers’ and employees’ associations). By contrast, 24% of respondents had little or no trust at all (Statista 2024). Some of this distrust stems from the influence of the FPÖ, a party that is not represented in these organizations and is therefore fairly skeptical. On the other hand, employers’ and workers’ organizations have gained more access to public opinion through newly founded economic research and lobbying institutions like Agenda Austria and Momentum Institute.

Effective Civil Society Organizations (Social Welfare)  
Score: 8

Social welfare associations play an important role in Austrian politics. To some extent, the very nature of the Austrian welfare state reflects the major influence of these various groups. For example, the pensioners’ association enjoys a public status that no government has been willing or able to ignore (Ettinger 2016). Other groups, such as youth or family associations, have been able to express their views, but their impact on public policy has remained less obvious. In terms of intergenerational justice – and due to the strong influence of pensioners’ associations and demographic changes – such imbalances may be problematic.

Organized religious communities, particularly the officially recognized denominations, play a formal role in the decision-making process. The unique Austrian institution of the “officially recognized religious denomination” institutionalizes the participation of major religious groups in policymaking. Similar to economic interest groups, they are often – though not always – consulted before the cabinet approves the draft of a law. This is a critical stage of the process, as most cabinet-approved drafts are also approved by parliament.

Effective Civil Society Organizations (Environment)  
Score: 5

International organizations, such as Greenpeace or WWF, have long held an established place in Austria’s CSO landscape. Donations to these organizations are tax deductible.

While civil society-based environmental policy has long been dominated by established and well-known organizations rooted in the late twentieth century, new initiatives and organizations have emerged more recently. In 2019, a new alliance called “Klimaprotest.at” was formed, comprising new movements and

environmental CSOs. This alliance played important roles in building networks and coordinating protests (Simsa et al. 2021).

Since 2019, Austria, like many other countries, has witnessed major public protests against climate change and the government's climate policies. In late September 2019, up to 150,000 people across Austria protested against climate change and demanded new anti-climate change policies. This movement also sparked new organizational collaborations between different groups, leading to the creation of "umbrella organizations."

In recent years, new-style environmental or anti-climate-change movements, such as the Austrian branch of "The Last Generation," have drawn considerable public attention through various public protest activities. Despite demands for a "climate law" and immediate government action to combat climate change, there have been very limited tangible effects.

Many observers agree that environmental issues were largely sidelined by the pandemic and economic concerns. More specifically, many believe that the concrete involvement of environmental CSOs in drafting laws and governmental orders has been rather limited.

### III. Horizontal Accountability

#### Independent Supervisory Bodies

Effective Public  
Auditing  
Score: 10

There is an independent and powerful audit office. Formally, the Austrian Court of Audit (Rechnungshof) is an instrument of parliament. Its president is elected by parliament for a period of 12 years, without the possibility of reelection. This gives the president a high degree of independence. The Court has a well-educated staff of more than 300.

The Court of Audit reports regularly to parliament, which can order it to perform specific tasks. Consequently, the parliamentary majority determines how to handle audit reports and, in cases of doubt, the majority supports the cabinet. Thus, the primary means to compel the government to respond positively to audit reports is public opinion. The Court of Audit enjoys an impeccable public reputation, which affords it a powerful role in constitutional practice.

In several key areas, such as monitoring party finances, the Court’s competencies have been recently expanded, enabling it to play a more proactive role than in the past. Additionally, the Court’s frame of reference is not limited to financial or accounting issues. For instance, in August 2023 the Court criticized the government for lacking a comprehensive and coherent strategy for addressing violence against women (Ruep 2023).

Effective Data  
Protection  
Score: 9

Since 2013, the Austrian Data Protection Authority (ADPA) has existed, replacing the former Data Protection Committee. In 2018, the ADPA was restructured, and its staff has been continuously increased since then. The office is headed by a chairperson appointed by the Data Protection Council.

The office and its chairperson are not dependent on the government – they are not obliged to follow any specific government directive. The independence of the office has never been seriously questioned. In recent years, there have been several occasions on which the ADPA demonstrated its willingness to block planned government laws if deemed inappropriate, such as its veto against the use of algorithms by public authorities when dealing with job-seekers in 2020.

More generally, the ADPA has exercised its right to take positions in legislative processes widely and effectively. In 2023, it criticized various aspects of the suggested ORF reform bill (Der Standard 2023). The key focus of the ADPA’s annual agenda in 2023 was on the financial sector (Fonds professionell 2023).

The proliferation of anonymized administrative data for researchers in Austria remains underdeveloped. While the Austrian Micro Data Center (AMDC) at Statistics Austria provides a platform for accessing some of this data, most governmental administrative data have yet to be delivered to the AMDC.

**Rule of Law**

Effective Judicial  
Oversight  
Score: 9

The role of the various courts in Austria is notably strong, characterized by qualified personnel, autonomy, and public trust and support. The EU-Justice-Barometer 2022 ranked Austria in the top group of countries for the fifth consecutive year; 83% of Austrians had a “very good” or “fairly good” impression of the independence of the Austrian courts.

The entire sphere of politics in Austria operates under the principle of independent judicial review. The three high courts – Constitutional Court, Administrative Court, and Supreme Court – effectively oversee the legality of all government actions as stipulated by the constitution.

The established written and unwritten rules for selecting justices have so far proven sufficient to guarantee a high degree of judicial independence in constitutional practice. The 12 judges of the Austria Constitutional Court are appointed by the federal president, who acts on the suggestions of the federal government (nominating six judges), the Nationalrat, and the Bundesrat (each nominating three judges). The president and vice president of the Court are nominated by the federal government. The federal president is bound by suggestions from the executive and legislative chambers but does not have to accept individual nominations. The appointment procedures for judges to other courts have occasionally been criticized for the weak position of parliament and the widespread absence of any legal protection for applicants who have been passed over. However, the overall quality of the selection and appointment regime has been judged as good (see Vasek 2022).

Government actions can be effectively challenged by invoking the courts. Legislative minorities, and in some cases individual citizens, have the right to take matters to the Constitutional Court. Governments have been aware of this and acted accordingly. Court rulings have been independent, and governments have complied with court decisions even when they disagreed with them.

Universal Civil  
Rights  
Score: 7

Civil rights are guaranteed by the constitution, and Austrian governments have observed these rules. Systematic intimidation by authorities and unjust arrests or torture have had no place in Austrian postwar constitutional practice.

In the WJP Rule of Law Index for 2023, Austria ranks among the top 7% of the 142 countries surveyed. Specifically, Austria is in the top ten in terms of the effective enforcement of civil rights (10/142). Additionally, Austria is ranked among the top countries for keeping civil justice free from improper government influence (14/142). The country also received a favorable score for the low degree of corruption in civil justice, indicating a system free of bribery and improper influence by private interests (15/142).

The worst score (55/142 and 28/31 in the regional ranking) was received for the question of whether there were any alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that are affordable, fair, and efficient. The score concerning discrimination in civil justice – measuring whether the civil justice system discriminates in practice based on socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity – was also less than fully satisfying (33/142).

Other sources also suggest there remains room for improvement. The 2022 – 2023 Amnesty International Report on human rights points out that the use of

Strategic Litigation against Public Participation (SLAPPs) was “concerning” in Austria, as it is in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Greece. The same report notes that “at several protests in the capital, Vienna, police prevented journalists from observing and reporting protests or failed to adequately protect them from attacks by protesters.” High fees for accessing courts also create a significant obstacle to the protection of civil rights for many social groups.

Discrimination issues have figured prominently over the years. Cases documented by various NGOs have shown members of the Austrian police to have used cruelty and violence in interactions with non-citizens, especially migrants without a residence permit. The overall impression is that in recent years and decades, the Austrian security apparatus – police and the military – has drifted somewhat to the right. Right-wing populist parties, especially the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), instrumentalize social and economic anxieties among the broader population to blame migrants and refugees for various negative developments, ranging from crime to unemployment. Mainstream political parties have sometimes been reluctant to insist that the guarantees provided by human-rights declarations signed by Austria – for example, the Council of Europe’s Declaration of Human Rights – cover refugees and migrants and must be implemented without reservation.

Effective  
Corruption  
Prevention  
Score: 7

The 2021 Index for Public Integrity (Subcategory: Corruption Risk Forecast Report) ranks Austria 13th in the world for public integrity, showing significant change over the past 12 years: “Its good control of corruption showed in recent years when a new generation of politicians broke the established integrity norms, but they were eventually brought to account for their acts. Although in the past the country managed to control corruption despite low transparency and high reliance on networking, the limits of these past arrangements seem to have been reached. To prevent further abuse of office as seen in recent scandals, Austria needs more fiscal transparency, access to information and transparent monitoring of assets and interests of public officials.”

Other sources have drawn a considerably less favorable picture. In 2023, Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) criticized the state of affairs in Austria harshly, pointing to severe deficiencies regarding transparency and noting political influence exerted on staffing top positions within the police (Graber and Schmid 2023). Further, the same source criticized a notable lack of transparency, integrity, and quality standards at the level of cabinet ministers, cabinet staff, and general secretaries. It was even suggested to disclose the financial circumstances not only of the officeholders themselves but also of their spouses and other close relatives.

The branch of special prosecutors dedicated to combating political corruption (WKStA), established in 2011 and currently featuring about 40 prosecutors, is partially independent from the Ministry of Justice. However, the WKStA's independence is limited to certain aspects of its activities, leading some observers to argue that the possibility of political influence remains. GRECO inspectors also criticized that the established reporting duties to the Ministry of Justice are extremely time-consuming and may keep prosecutors away from other tasks (Graber and Schmid 2023). These reports were also seen as a potential gateway to indiscretions and interventions in ongoing inquiries. The WKStA continues to suffer from attacks by the executive branch.

A final fact worth noting is the alarming state of public views on Austrian authorities concerning corruption: In 2023, no less than 62% of the electorate considered Austria a “corrupt” or “very corrupt” country (Seidl 2023). The three major parties (ÖVP, SPÖ, and FPÖ), the ORF, and the building authorities were considered the most corrupt organizations, while the Austrian army (Bundesheer) was viewed as the least corrupt among 21 possible choices. Several recent corruption scandals involved local politicians who have considerable leeway in deciding on construction projects.

### Legislature

Sufficient  
Legislative  
Resources  
Score: 8

Members of the Austrian Nationalrat receive administrative support from the parliamentary administration (Parlamentsdirektion). Within this administration, a specific unit, the “Rechts-, Legislativ- & Wissenschaftliche Dienst (RLW),” provides legal, economic, and social science-based information to all MPs and the wider public. This service aims to ensure that MPs are informed about national and international media reporting at all times. In 2019, the parliamentary administration launched the EULE Media Monitor / 360° Topic-Monitoring system, which helps parliamentarians stay up to date by delivering information in an easy-to-access web-based form.

Further, the parliamentary staff members law (“Parlamentsmitarbeiter:innen-Gesetz”), which can be amended by parliament, provides all MPs with a monthly allowance for hiring support staff. In 2018, the amount available for such support staff was approximately €3,600 per month, gross (after deduction of other employers' costs for this personnel), which compares favorably with the situation in several other countries (see Rada for Europe, Assistants to MPs; [www.undp.org/sites](http://www.undp.org/sites)).

Effective  
Legislative  
Oversight  
Score: 8

Parliamentary assistants are typically responsible for preparing parliamentary meetings – both plenary and committee sessions – and maintaining contact with citizens and the wider public. These assistants can work for several MPs and can form working groups serving up to seven MPs. It is common to split financial resources and tasks among multiple assistants. Many MPs employ two part-time assistants: one serving in their constituency and another in Vienna.

All parliamentary committees of the Austrian Nationalrat have the authority to request any type of document. However, documents classified as “secret” can only be viewed in a special parliamentary room and cannot be copied.

The Nationalrat – similar to the Bundesrat as the second chamber – is entitled to examine the administration of affairs by the government, interrogate its members about all subjects pertaining to execution, demand all relevant information, and articulate in resolutions their wishes about the exercise of executive power.

Every parliamentarian is entitled to ask brief oral questions to members of the government during plenary sessions. The deadline for responding to an oral question tabled in the plenary sitting is the end of the same day. A debate takes place whenever it is requested. Parliamentarians also have the right to submit written questions to the president of the House and the chairpersons of committees. The individual to whom a question is addressed replies in writing. If they are not in a position to answer, their reply must indicate the reason. In practice, however, many questions are answered superficially or evasively, without any consequences for the officeholders obliged to respond.

When summoned, ministers, or their state secretaries, attend the respective meetings. The legal ability to summon ministers is, in practice, limited by the majority that the governing parties enjoy in all committees. As the majority party groups tend to follow the policy defined by the cabinet, there typically is limited interest in summoning cabinet members, at least not against a minister’s will. While this de facto limitation can be seen as part of the logic of a parliamentary system in which the government and the parliamentary majority are essentially a single political entity, this limitation is a major one in Austria given the established high level of party discipline.

The chancellor rarely attends the collective question time, sometimes less than once a year. As Serban (2022: 164) notes, “correspondence with officials indicated that this mechanism is considered perfunctory; instead, parliamentarians use urgent questions to summon the chancellor to answer questions on specific issues.”



Effective  
Legislative  
Investigations  
Score: 9

Since 2008, the creation of investigatory committees has been a minority right, allowing the opposition or any quarter of MPs in the Nationalrat to launch a parliamentary inquiry. In Austria, such inquiries have not only provided a showdown opportunity between government and opposition parties, but have also served as an arena for agreeing on political reforms considered desirable by all major parties.

However, the committees' power became particularly evident in 2021 when Chancellor Kurz's alleged false testimony to the Ibiza Investigative Committee led to his resignation shortly thereafter. In some of the literature, the Austrian system has been hailed as a role model for other parliamentary democracies, although without any comparative assessment (see Keppel 2023).

Actual proceedings in investigatory committees are often inefficient, as many questions go unanswered. The opposition has suggested that providing TV time for such committees might improve outcomes. However, even in its current format, investigation activities can lead to an unfavorable decision or report. The seriousness of the procedure was underscored by the conviction of Chancellor Kurz, who received an eight-month suspended sentence from a Vienna criminal court in February 2024 for making false statements to a parliamentary inquiry into alleged corruption in his first government.

Legislative  
Capacity for  
Guiding Policy  
Score: 9

The organization and operations of legislative committees in the Austrian Nationalrat are effective in guiding the development of legislative proposals, including the substantive review of government bills.

Although parliamentary committees outnumber ministries, their task areas are, with few exceptions, more or less identical to those of the ministries. The National Council's General Committee has a broad range of competencies, including determining the government's position within the European Council.

In the current lineup of legislative committees (as of early 2024), several committees have a cross-cutting policy profile, such as the Committee for Economics, Industry, and Energy. This structure does not neatly match the organization at the level of cabinet departments, which includes a Ministry for Labor and Economics (a result of a 2022 merger of two independent ministries for labor and economics) and a Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Mobility, Innovation, and Technology.

Several policy areas, which are combined into one portfolio at the ministerial level, face individual specialized committees. For example, the Committee for

Consumer Protection deals with a policy area integrated into the larger ministerial portfolio of Social Affairs, Health, Nursing, and Consumer Protection. Additionally, some legislative committees focus specifically on a single policy area that is not named in the titles of individual ministries, such as tourism.

Importantly, these committees are staffed for the entire legislative period. They bring together policy specialists from different parties and deliberate on bills behind closed doors, which promotes a highly substantive review of government bills. Additionally, some legislative committees, by convention, are chaired by MPs representing the parliamentary opposition.

# Governing with Foresight

## I. Coordination

### Quality of Horizontal Coordination

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms of  
the GO/PMO  
Score: 6

The Federal Chancellery can be considered the functional center within the Austrian political executive, responsible for coordinating the government's various activities. However, it lacks the specialized personnel to function as a comprehensive strategy unit and has no authority to issue instructions to other ministries. The Chancellor's Office focuses on coordinating line ministries' activities rather than monitoring them, thus possessing limited capacity to evaluate the policy content of line ministry proposals against the government's priorities.

Ultimately, these limitations are more political or constitutional than administrative. First, the federal chancellor, who chairs the cabinet, is only the first among equals (Binder 2016). He or she has no formal authority over the other members of the council (Müller 2003). Second, with the exception of the years between 1966 and 1983, Austria has been governed by coalitions since 1945. This further reduces the authority of the head of government, as another key member of the government – the vice-chancellor – is usually the leader of another coalition party. The result is a significant division, or indeed fragmentation, of strategic capacities. Responsibility within the government is distributed among highly autonomous ministers and among political parties that are closely linked by a coalition agreement but compete for votes independently. The Chancellor's Office's coordinative roles include overseeing the implementation of the coalition agreement.

The Federal Chancellery has a department called the Legal and Constitutional Service (Verfassungsdienst), which is responsible for checking the constitutionality of policy proposals from various ministries, rather than providing functional coordination.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (2017 – 2019; 2019 – 2021) introduced several major reforms to enhance the chancellery’s functional strategic potential as the government’s central hub. However, most changes concerned the public relations and outreach functions of the chancellery rather than the relations between the chancellery and individual government departments, with the exception of political communication issues. Possibly more important in terms of policy-related strategy was a newly formed strategic unit or think tank called “Think Austria.” This unit was, however, dissolved under Chancellor Nehammer (in office since late 2021) (Der Standard 2022).

Nehammer added several senior positions to his staff (to serve from 2024). However, it is unclear to what extent this step was motivated by a desire to strengthen the coordination capacities of the chancellery. The opposition criticized Nehammer, suggesting he was instead making “reward appointments” for loyal supporters (Der Standard, 31 October 2023).

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms  
within the  
Ministerial  
Bureaucracy  
Score: 7

There are formally established interministerial coordination mechanisms within the Austrian political executive. However, these structures or mechanisms are confined to specific areas, such as gender issues or youth issues. In some cases, it is subjective to determine whether existing structures should be considered formal or informal mechanisms (on the latter, see G1.3).

Arguably, the most prominent and important formal structure in the field of interministerial coordination is the Interministerial Working Group on Gender Mainstreaming/Budgeting, chaired by the federal minister for women, family, integration, and media in the Federal Chancellor’s Office. This group supports the process of implementing gender mainstreaming – accomplishing gender parity in all relevant areas – and gender budgeting across all government departments and governance levels.

The body’s tasks include organizing information exchange, examining best-practice examples from individual departments and abroad, and developing and evaluating current projects and laws concerning the adoption of central gender mainstreaming goals. Members of this working group include representatives from all government departments, the courts, the Austrian Ombudsman Board (Volksanwaltschaft), the Court of Audit, and parliament, as well as the trade union for public services and the states (Länder) (Schieder and Schmidt 2023).

Austria does not have a notable tradition of formalized digitized interministerial coordination, or if it does, little is known about it. However, much like in other countries, the coronavirus pandemic acted as a significant digitalization catalyst. Since early 2020, Austrian ministers and ministries

have used Zoom and other digital formats to host regular interministerial exchanges. With some exceptions, there generally exists a high degree of informal interministerial coordination at the level of civil servants.

Complementary  
Informal  
Coordination  
Score: 8

Before government bills can be formally considered at cabinet meetings, they need to be agreed upon by the governing coalition parties. These negotiations occur at different levels. Typically, the department primarily responsible for drafting a government bill collaborates with a department under the political control of the coalition partner (Schieder and Schmidt 2023). For example, in the current ÖVP-Green government, the minister of justice, Alma Zadić (Green), often cooperates with the minister for constitutional affairs, Karoline Edtstadler (ÖVP). If no direct counterpart exists for a given department, the department responsible for preparing the bill will coordinate with the coalition partner’s spokesperson for a particular policy field in the Nationalrat.

When most issues have been settled between the coalition parties, bills are forwarded to the coalition’s coordination group, which – as of late 2023 – includes members from the ministerial cabinets of Finance Minister Magnus Brunner (ÖVP) and Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler (Grüne). As this coordination process proceeds, other “pairs” representing both sides will be involved, such as the press spokespersons, the chiefs of the political cabinets of the chancellor and vice-chancellor, and the parliamentary party group leaders of both governing parties in the Nationalrat. Sometimes, the chancellor or vice-chancellor will personally attend meetings.

The coordination group typically meets on Mondays or Tuesdays. Both governing parties also convene separately for informal discussions behind closed doors immediately before scheduled cabinet meetings.

Overall, the informal elements of this coordination clearly tend to support rather than challenge or undermine the more formal coordination efforts.

**Quality of Vertical Coordination**

Effectively  
Setting and  
Monitoring  
National  
(Minimum)  
Standards  
Score: 6

In Austria’s federation, many policies are decided at the federal level. In areas where the federal government has the power to legislate through the Nationalrat, central governments can establish national standards. From a purely constitutional perspective, subnational governments have limited room to introduce significantly different public service standards. However, in practice, the central government – notwithstanding the strong constitutional and fiscal centralization that marks the Austrian federation – is remarkably weak when it comes to enforcing its political will against potential resistance from state governments (Eller 2023).

Subnational self-governments in Austria effectively utilize their constitutional scope of discretion. While the constitution limits the competencies and independent financial resources of the states (Länder) and municipalities, national administrative tasks are often carried out by subnational agencies. This gives the states considerable de facto political power.

Each state can largely defend its own way of dealing with certain issues by setting up its own legal and administrative regimes, resulting in a highly complex and opaque system of state and federal rules. This is particularly true in policy fields such as education, health, and construction. There have also been remarkably strong differences between the states in the overall amount of money paid to applicants in various areas of social policy. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the most glaring and dramatic examples of the large diversity of competing rules on Austrian soil. State governors (“Landeshauptleute”) have long been identified as exceptionally powerful political players beyond the national level.

A defining feature of the Austrian federation is that the states do not have to take significant responsibility for their own finances. Only about 2% of the states’ fiscal income is generated at the state level. The majority of the funds are provided by the federal government, and states can negotiate for additional funds if necessary, which is quite common in constitutional practice.

Effective  
Multilevel  
Cooperation  
Score: 7

Austria’s federal fiscal constitution is heavily centralized, yet a consensus-driven political system serves as a counterweight. While the national parliament has overwhelming taxing authority and decides on tax sharing, cost-bearing rules, and transfers, legislation is usually drafted on a consensual basis across government levels and amended every four to six years. Within this framework, each state (Land) or local government is responsible for its own budget. To coordinate budgetary policies, the Internal Austrian Stability Pact sets well-defined budgetary goals for each government and ensures compliance through potential sanctions. The intergovernmental framework does provide tax leveraging autonomy for state governments and municipalities; however, this is hardly ever used. States are traditionally financed mostly via federal tax-sharing and transfers.

The lack of accountability to taxpayers, as well as a lack of fiscal transparency due to federal co-financing, reduces efficiency, and the considerable political clout of the Länder leads to soft-budget constraints. In practice, the national government’s power over the states is conspicuously limited; specifically, there are no sanctions against states that do not comply with the political and policy agendas of the central government (see Bußjäger 2015).

In stark contrast to the situation in Germany, the Austrian Bundesrat (the second chamber of the Austrian parliament representing the states at the federal level) plays a noticeably limited role in cross-level political cooperation. Coordination between the individual states occurs in the “Landeshauptleute-Konferenz,” an informal yet firmly institutionalized gathering of state governors (“Landeshauptleute”) held twice a year (see Bußjäger 2018). These conferences have become events where senior representatives of the federal government, up to the chancellor, participate to resolve cross-level issues.

The Austrian system of local governance is characterized by an exceptionally high degree of homogeneity and notable limits on central government power. The constitution provides for a uniform model of municipalities and allows for substantial material influence from the federation on the municipalities, at least in areas of federal competence. More recently, the national government has launched the “Gemeindepakete” – financial resources dedicated to triggering infrastructure investments at the local level.

Ultimately, states rather than the central government are the key actors in local governance. The states’ close relationships with municipalities are structurally favored by the Austrian system of “indirect” federal administration. The mix of constitutional, administrative, and political factors has resulted in a considerable diversity of local government regimes within the federation (see Haller 2023).

## II. Consensus-Building

### Recourse to Scientific Knowledge

Harnessing  
Scientific  
Knowledge  
Effectively  
Score: 6

Recent Austrian governments have tried to create the impression that they are eager to benefit from the advice of accomplished experts. For instance, presentations by external experts marked the kick-off event of the ÖVP–Green government conclave early in 2023.

The role of experts in Austrian public policymaking has been generally limited and ambiguous. Governments may seek expert opinions when it is politically convenient, but they are not obligated to do so. Typically, they invite and listen to experts they are already aligned with. There is no formalized process to ensure strictly evidence-based governmental activities and public policies.

One existing agency, the Council for Research, Science, Innovation and Technological Development, is intended to provide expert advice to the government. However, its concrete impact has remained uncertain or even limited. Austria lacks an equivalent to the U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, a body institutionalized to provide scientific advice on economic policy. In contrast, Germany has formal standing scientific advisory committees at the ministries of finance, labor, and the economy. Austria has nothing comparable. A very limited role is played by the Staatsschuldenausschuss, a body concerned with advising on government debt issues.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new forum – the “Future Operations Clearing Board” – was established in the chancellery to facilitate the exchange between scientific knowledge and policymaking. Recent governments have also made a limited effort to provide scientific micro-data.

Different scientists, particularly concerning issues of climate change and environmental protection, have criticized governments harshly for failing to take necessary steps. However, it is worth noting that the relative weakness of scientific expertise as a source of public policymaking in Austria has been accompanied by a strikingly low appreciation for scientific research among the wider Austrian public.

### Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Development

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Capital and  
Labor)  
Score: 9

Labor and business organizations – or as they are commonly referred to in Austria, the “social partners” – have played an extremely powerful and important role in postwar Austrian politics. Considering their exceptionally prominent role in Austrian politics and public policymaking, it is remarkable that this role, and the desire to maintain it, was constitutionally acknowledged only in 2008.

Compared to interest group politics or interest group/government relations in many other countries, the top labor and business organizations in Austria – the Austrian Economic Chambers (Wirtschaftskammern) and the Federation of Austrian Industry (Die Industriellenvereinigung) for business and employers; the Austrian Trade Union Federation (Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund) and the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labor (Arbeiterkammern) for employees; and the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture (Landwirtschaftskammer) for farmers – are not mere pressure groups seeking to exert influence on political decision-makers from the outside. Rather, they have been directly involved in public policymaking, sometimes formulating



nearly complete laws themselves, which parliament then merely approves. This role has long been facilitated by the large share of MPs representing labor and business.

Further, the social partners have been involved in parliamentary deliberations of important bills at the committee stage. Additionally, like other interest groups, the social partners have had and used the opportunity to express their views during the institutionalized review in parliament, which marks a distinct stage in the legislative process in Austria.

To some extent, the notable power of the social partners has reflected the relative weakness – the internal split and disunity – of many Austrian governments (Rathgeb 2017). All else being equal, internally divided governments face a powerful incentive to share policymaking authority with the social partners.

While recent governments have not been significantly more divided internally than previous ones, the overall trend has been toward a long-term weakening of the social partnership as powerful players in the public policymaking process (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019). The reasons for this include the dramatically shrinking share of ministers with close personal ties to one of the social partners, the ideological distance to corporatist forms of governance of governing parties, and a shrinking membership of the trade unions. Still, while the long-standing special status of the social partners – or the social partnership for that matter – is largely gone, the recurrent recent crises facing Austria and many other countries have resulted in unexpected (re)gains in terms of influence.

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Social Welfare)  
Score: 8

As with other interest groups, the major social welfare CSOs have mostly had the opportunity to present their views on scheduled bills during the institutionalized review process in parliament. Most, but not all, bills are subject to public review, usually at the discretion of the government itself. There have also been strong ties between MPs and individual social welfare groups.

Given Austria's established tradition of an advanced welfare state, the agendas of such groups are very present in the public arena and cannot easily be ignored by political decision-makers. As a result, the interests represented by these groups are likely to shape government activities more generally, beyond individual key decisions.

Recent literature characterizes the collaboration between Nonprofit Human Service Organizations and different levels of government as a “welfare partnership” (Meyer et al. 2023).

However, even more than at the level of labor and business organizations, the political status and influence of social welfare CSOs have been shaped by the party complexion of governments. Different governing parties have advanced different policies, reflecting their broader views on society as well as strategic considerations concerning their likely supporters at the level of the electorate (see Fischer & Giuliani 2023).

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Environment)  
Score: 6

As with other groups, major environmental CSOs have the opportunity to present their views on scheduled bills during the institutionalized review process in parliament – if such a review occurs. A more natural method for these groups, however, is public protest, which implies a more diffuse and not necessarily less effective form of influence. Overall, the presence and influence of these groups in the policymaking arena tend to be considerably lower than those of social partners and many social welfare associations.

A particular challenge for environmental CSOs is that the environment and related issues are not as neatly defined as other policy fields. While this challenge is present in all countries, it is compounded in Austria by the complex multilevel nature of the Austrian polity, with split competencies across different levels. More specifically, some observers suggest that Austrian-style corporatism contributes to the intricate actor constellation and poses an additional obstacle to substantive policy progress. The predominance of other groups and their agendas tends to fuel the perceived conflict between economic growth and the job market versus climate change mitigation.

The recent chapters of government-environmental CSO relations have been shaped by the transition from SPÖ-led federal governments to ÖVP-led governments. In particular, the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, in office from 2017 – 2019, significantly influenced the relationships between the government and civil society organizations, both in the environmental sector and beyond. Some observers have referred to these developments, characterized by strong polarization and widespread defamation of many groups, as “autocratization” (Simsa 2019). The Greens’ inclusion in the government alongside the ÖVP in 2019 marked a positive change. However, the concrete impact on government-environmental CSOs and their role in public policymaking appears to have been more limited than expected.

**Openness of Government**

Open  
Government  
Score: 6

Until recently, Austrian governments have been notably reluctant to publish data and information that empower citizens to hold the government accountable. There has been an established tradition of “secrecy,” and some observers felt that even the latest legislative agendas of the government, particularly its launch of a Freedom of Information Act, will not change much (see above).

As early as 2012, the government launched a major data site, “data.gv.at,” with metadata of the decentralized data catalogues. By mid-2023, there were more than 44,000 data sets from nearly 2,400 organizations, marking a significant contribution to increasing the transparency of public institutions. Unfortunately, there is no information available to the public about aspects such as school quality or hospital quality.

Recent governments have also made efforts to facilitate the provision of scientific micro-data. In 2020, the AUSSDA (Austrian Social Science Data Archive) was awarded the CoreTrustSeal, certifying it as a “trustworthy data repository.” Established in 2016, AUSSDA is a data infrastructure for the social science community in Austria. It offers a variety of research support services, primarily data archiving and assistance with data reuse. More recently, the Austrian Micro Data Center (AMDC) was established as part of the wider infrastructure of Statistik Austria. The AMDC provides accredited research institutes and universities with more sensitive register data from the public sector.

**III. Sensemaking**

**Preparedness**

Capacity for  
Strategic  
Foresight and  
Anticipatory  
Innovation  
Score: 6

Strategic-planning units and bodies consisting of public officials exist within individual ministries. The Federal Chancellery can be considered the principal strategic-planning unit, as it is responsible for coordinating the government’s various activities. However, it generally lacks the specialized personnel that would enable it to function as a comprehensive strategy unit and has no power to issue instructions to other ministries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a new forum called the “Future Operations Clearing Board” (see Koenig 2020) emerged within the chancellery. It was designed to facilitate the exchange between scientific knowledge and policymaking. Until its dissolution in early 2022, the think tank “Think Austria” was a key unit in the chancellery dedicated to fostering strategic foresight. In September 2021, a new unit was established to coordinate foresight-related activities (Referat IV/10/a – Europakommunikation, EU-Gemeinderäte).

However, an in-depth study of foresight-related structures and activities in the Austrian political executive found little evidence of systematic coordination in this field, with various ad hoc activities shaping the overall picture (see Rat für Forschung und Technologieentwicklung 2021).

### Analytical Competence

Effective  
Regulatory  
Impact  
Assessment  
Score: 7

Since 2013, a regulatory impact assessment (RIA) has been mandatory for all primary laws and subordinate regulations, meaning RIAs must accompany every legislative proposal. A comprehensive threshold test, introduced in 2015, determines whether a full or a simplified RIA is required for draft regulations. Approximately two-thirds of all regulations undergo a simplified RIA.

The publication of draft laws for public assessment – while legally required in many cases – is commonly practiced before votes are taken. This allows public stakeholders to comment on proposed legislation, which occurs frequently. Trade unions, economic chambers, and other institutions are regularly invited to provide comments on draft laws.

Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) are not written by sectoral experts but rather by the ministry or department preparing the draft law. Consequently, the expertise may sometimes be limited to that of the body preparing the draft law.

Currently, there is no independent body that evaluates RIA quality. The Federal Performance Management Office (FPMO) at the Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, Civil Service and Sport (BMK/OES) reviews the quality of all full RIAs. The FPMO publishes opinions on RIAs for primary laws and can advise civil servants to revise RIAs if they do not meet the required standards.

Since September 2017, all draft primary laws have been available on the parliamentary website, along with a short description of the legislative project

and the respective regulatory impact assessment (RIA). Citizens can submit comments on the draft regulation or support comments made by others online. Since August 2021, citizens have also been able to submit comments on all legislative initiatives introduced in parliament – including government bills, as well as parliamentary and popular initiatives – during their parliamentary deliberation and support comments made by others online. Moreover, in 2018, an interactive crowdsourcing platform was launched to provide the public with an opportunity to express their views ahead of parliamentary initiatives. Nevertheless, no systematic public consultations are being held.

Effective  
Sustainability  
Checks  
Score: 8

The potential environmental effects of legislative proposals must be evaluated as part of RIAs, as must effects on employment. Various decrees require that financial and other issues be assessed. Analysis may focus on short-term, medium-term, or long-term effects according to specific RIA legal requirements, though the typical analysis focuses on a period of five years. In its annual RIA reports, the government explicitly commits to addressing the SDGs.

While Austria has an overarching sustainability strategy, there remains considerable room for improvement. However, the formation of a new government in early 2020, which included the Greens as a junior coalition partner to the ÖVP, has led to several improvements, even if some are partially symbolic. In 2020, the government published its first voluntary national report on the implementation of SDGs (Freiwilliger Bericht zur Umsetzung der Nachhaltigen Entwicklungsziele / SDGs). In 2021, for the first time, the government's budget included specific information about which SDG is to be accomplished by the respective legislative projects of each department. This means that legislative goals are now systematically linked to sustainability goals. Furthermore, efforts have been made to engage and involve Austrian civil society. In September 2021, the first SDG Dialogforum Österreich: Building Forward mit der Agenda 2030 took place. The forum used a hybrid format with participants representing various sectors and was intended to provide the basis for intensive collaboration between government, public administration, the science community, and civil society. This has been followed by an SDG Dialogue Forum 3.0 in October 2023.

In late 2022, the cabinet decided that Austria would present its second voluntary national report concerning the implementation of Agenda 2030 to the United Nations by July 2024. The plan was to use ideas and insights for that report gained from the 3.0 Dialogue Forum.

Effective Ex Post  
Evaluation  
Score: 5

A complex regime of ex post evaluation for legal measures of the federal government was introduced in 2013. Since then, monitoring and evaluation have been applied to various levels and formats of public governance. The key goal has been to allow the federal government to reflect on its activities, contrast its ambitions and outcomes, and use those insights to define future goals more reasonably. For this reason, some relevant bills and other measures are evaluated internally within different departments. These departmental internal evaluations are collected and combined into a major report by a cross-departmental agency and forwarded to the budgetary committee of the Nationalrat.

Some observers have criticized that these institutional innovations have not led to a shift in the public administration's commitment to higher quality standards. There is no policy mandating systematic external reviews by scientific institutions (such as the German Minimum Wage Commission). Additionally, there is no commitment or understanding that some public policies could be implemented experimentally, allowing for clear academic evaluation and potentially making it compulsory (Pichler and Steyer 2017).

The official 2022 review report on the ex post evaluations (see Budgetdienst 2023) lists 55 measures from 2015 to 2021 that were subject to internal evaluations. In 33 of the 55 cases, the expected effects were met or surpassed; most others achieved their set goals at least in large part. Only one project was considered a failure. However, as stated in the same report, most of these reviews were not carried out in accordance with the objectives and requirements of the "Bundeshaushaltsgesetz 2013."

The same source notes that those evaluations have hardly been considered by the responsible committee. Further, the report points out that many politically significant government bills were introduced in parliament as motions ("Initiativanträge") to which lower standards apply. This was true for much of the COVID-19 legislation and many measures aimed at combating inflation or the energy crisis. This also implies that these measures will not be part of future general assessments or official investigation reports.

Systematic ex post evaluation in Austria is also conducted by the Austrian Court of Audit, which focuses specifically on the financial aspects of government or government-sponsored projects. Additionally, ex post evaluation is a major objective for Austrian scientific bodies outside of ministries, such as the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO), the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna (IAS), and other Austrian university actors.

# Sustainable Policymaking

## I. Economic Sustainability

### Circular Economy

Circular  
Economy Policy  
Efforts and  
Commitment  
Score: 7

Recent Austrian governments have made efforts to gradually transition toward a circular economy. The official “Austrian Circular Economy Strategy” was developed and is being led by the Federal Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology (BMK). The ministry closely collaborates with numerous actors from economics, science, administration, and civil society. The content creation was overseen by the Federal Environmental Agency and the Austrian Society for Environment and Technology. Activities began with an online survey involving more than 400 participants, followed by a vision workshop and over a dozen in-depth interviews with selected early adopters from various sectors. A series of online workshops provided comprehensive input on the transformation focal points selected for Austria.

The circular economy strategy is based on existing national strategies and programs, such as reports on resource use in Austria, the bio-economic strategy for the switch to renewable resources in the waste prevention program, the federal waste management plan in the area of efficient use of resources, and others. Further, there are important synergies with the energy research and innovation strategy, the national energy and climate plan (NEKP), and the mobility master plan 2030. This underscores the dominant view among Austrian decision-makers that a circular economy is essential for achieving climate goals.

Austria’s resource consumption remains high by European standards. However, economic performance – as measured by resource productivity, or GDP per ton of material consumed domestically – has consistently improved over the past 15 years. This improvement is largely due to the country’s efforts to decouple economic growth from resource consumption.

According to Eurostat, Austria’s circularity rate was 12% in 2020. By 2030, it is projected that 18% of the material resources used in the economy will come from the circular-oriented return and reuse of materials. Despite some stabilization between 2010 and 2018, Austria’s resource consumption levels remain elevated. In 2018, domestic material consumption reached 167 million tons, or 19 tons per capita per year – 5 tons above the European average.

Austria’s material footprint is significantly higher than its domestic material consumption. In 2017, the per capita footprint was 33 tons, far exceeding the European average of 23 tons. One area where Austria performs well is in the recycling rate of all waste (excluding major mineral waste). In a recent comparative assessment, Austria ranked within the top third of more than twenty European countries.

The need to develop an effective monitoring regime to ensure reasonable progress across various areas has been recognized, leading to the creation of programmatic agendas. However, the effective monitoring of these complex processes remains in its early stages. In October 2023, a new “Task-Force Kreislaufwirtschaft” (circular economy), composed of scientific experts nominated by the federal government, held its constituent meeting. The task force is designed to survey and evaluate the implementation of a circular economy in Austria. Its tasks include reporting to the cabinet, allowing the government to assess progress in implementation and decide on additional measures deemed necessary based on these reports.

**Viable Critical Infrastructure**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Resilient  
Critical  
Infrastructure  
Score: 7

From a comparative perspective on 30 European countries, Austria’s overall infrastructure quality has been assessed as clearly above average (11/30; see World Forum data for 2019 and 2020). According to Eurostat, Austria has the second-highest share of trains in inland passenger transport, second only to Switzerland. However, these figures contrast starkly with the notably low high-speed internet coverage, both overall and in sparsely populated areas, where Austria fares near the bottom among European countries. Since high-speed internet is essential for economic development, it should be much higher on the agenda.

Recent Austrian governments have committed to a strategy and roadmap for updating and protecting critical infrastructure. In 2014, the federal government launched a new master plan designed to protect critical infrastructure, created



by the Federal Chancellery and the Interior Ministry (Bundeskanzleramt n.d.). This master plan was developed in cooperation with other relevant portfolios, the states, key interest groups, and major companies. It documented the progress made since 2008 and defined new goals.

The principles on which all parties involved agreed were cooperation, subsidiarity, complementarity, confidentiality, and commensurability of measures. The key goal was to provide reasonable support for strategically important companies in developing a “security architecture,” which includes risk management, business continuity management, and security management. The protection aspect involves identifying vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure and improving its robustness, recovery, and restoration capacity to guard against destruction or disruption by natural disasters, criminal activity, and terrorism. In 2016, the state governors decided on a new program designed to improve cooperation between state and federal agencies.

As a case study on critical infrastructure protection against electromagnetic threats suggests, Austria has generally pursued a cooperation-based strategy, relying on the self-assessment of strategic companies and organizations (see Jager et al. 2016). Further, the authors found that Austria’s particular cooperative nature has proven beneficial for addressing complex solutions at different levels, with responsible authorities willing to acknowledge the advantages of proactively engaging in dialogue with various actors (operators and owners). Scattered stocktaking exercises in different areas, such as those concerning electricity blackouts, suggested that Austria is “fairly well” prepared to successfully handle potential challenges. However, further efforts in certain areas, such as expanding the fiber optic network, are urgently needed.

Efforts to protect critical infrastructure have been high on the current government’s agenda. The most recent step marked the launch of a bill in late 2023 to improve the resilience of civil defense organizations and ambulances.

Comparative assessments across OECD countries (see OECD Reviews of Risk Management Policies, Good Governance for Critical Infrastructure Resilience) suggest that Austria, unlike several European countries, has addressed the ongoing challenges in a reasonably serious way.

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving a  
Decarbonized  
Energy System  
by 2050  
Score: 7

## Decarbonized Energy System

Austria has been heavily affected by ongoing climate change. The rise in temperature (+2.3 °C in 2022) was nearly double the global average (Umweltbundesamt 2023), and all serious projections anticipate this trend will continue. This will have significant consequences, particularly in economic terms, with specific impacts on winter tourism in the alpine region.

Austrian governments have been largely committed to transitioning to a decarbonized energy system, although with medium-strong success. Greenhouse gas emissions have remained strikingly high. An official report by the Austrian Federal Audit Office from early 2021 suggests that greenhouse gas emissions grew by 5% in Austria over the past 30 years – making the country one of just six EU member states that have failed to achieve any improvement – while during the same period, the average for all EU member states decreased by 24%. Energy and industry remain the largest contributors to carbon dioxide emissions (Umweltbundesamt 2023). Economic growth and cheap carbon market certificates for carbon dioxide are the principal causes of the increase in carbon dioxide emissions in this sector.

According to an estimate by Wifo-Institut, Austria invested between €4.1 billion and €5.7 billion in climate-damaging subsidies from 2016 – 2020 (Kletzan-Slamanig et al. 2022). During the recent “gas crisis” this amount allegedly rose temporarily to €4.5 billion.

The participation of the Greens in the government formed early in 2020 and the appointment of a Green climate minister have marked a tangible change in Austria’s performance. The ÖVP-Green government launched several ambitious national targets. First, 100% of domestic electricity consumption will be covered by renewable energy sources by 2030. Second, the government is committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2040. Whether the government will achieve these targets remains to be seen. Perhaps the most spectacular measure of the recent past was the introduction of an annual “climate ticket” in late 2021 (for about €1,100), which allows ticket holders to use all forms of public transport (trains, buses, trams and subways) across the country. The pricing of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, as stipulated in a major tax reform package introduced in late 2021, marked another important step forward.

Furthermore, in late 2023 the government suggested scrapping several subsidies, particularly those for commuters and on diesel. However, no concrete measures have been taken yet.

However, the temptation to compromise on agreed measures has remained a characteristic feature of Austrian energy policy. For example, the fees for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per ton were set to increase in July 2022, but that increase was postponed for several months to ease the financial burdens on an inflation-plagued society.

### Adaptive Labor Markets

Policies  
Targeting an  
Adaptive Labor  
Market  
Score: 8

The Austrian labor market's development over the past 15 years has been characterized by a substantial increase in labor supply and influenced by cyclical economic factors. Although the total hours worked did not rise, the number of employees did increase. Unemployment levels have fluctuated in accordance with economic trends. Despite a relatively developed active labor market policy, unemployment has increasingly concentrated on certain groups over time.

The overall number of employees in 2022 was 3.9 million, higher than ever in Austrian postwar history, with a 15.5% increase over 2008. Over the past 15 years, the labor supply increased more than labor demand, with certain groups specifically affected by this development. The share of long-term unemployed people increased from 21% in 2008 to 39% in 2022.

Politically, measures concerning active labor market policies, including the creation and maintenance of an adaptable labor market, have faced minimal contestation between different parties and social partners. All relevant actors have strongly supported a broad and inclusive set of measures, including qualification and support (see AMS 2022; BMAW 2022). Active labor market policies have been continuously expanded since the 1990s. Regarding public expenditures in this field, Austria has ranked No. 5 among OECD countries (see BMAW 2022).

Short-time work schemes have played a significant role in recent Austrian labor policy. They have had a notably positive impact on the employment rate during the COVID-19 pandemic (see BMAW 2022).

However, the Austrian Court of Audit noted the exceptional generosity of the various programs and highlighted the tremendous costs and the considerable danger of misuse by employers (Rechnungshof 2022).

In late 2023, the Chamber of Labor harshly criticized the government for wide-ranging cuts in active labor market policy. The reduction of about one-fifth of the resources previously devoted to this field was considered to

obstruct the necessary steps in qualifying the Austrian workforce to meet new challenges, such as social-ecological transformation, digitalization and artificial intelligence.

The Austrian industry benefits from a robust apprenticeship system that provides comprehensive vocational training for low-educated workers, both on and off the job. This extensive vocational system enables workers to remain flexible throughout their careers. The apprenticeship system should be systematically reformed to integrate new occupations.

Policies  
Targeting an  
Inclusive Labor  
Market  
Score: 6

Out-of-work benefits are easily accessible, and there is an established system designed to allow people to acquire new qualifications and skills and find a job. However, the high share of long-term unemployed people – nearly one-third of all unemployed – points to the limits of this regime.

Critics have further pointed out that a lack of infrastructure in some regions makes it extremely difficult to maintain or re-enter the labor market while also managing family-related responsibilities, which particularly affects women.

Youth unemployment has been a persistent issue. In Austria, approximately 140,000 young people aged 15 – 29 fall into the category of NEETs – those not in education, employment, or training. About half of this group is actively seeking employment rather than simply being inactive. However, by international standards, the proportion of Neets in Austria is quite low (see the 2023 OECD “Education at a Glance” report). Additionally, the percentage of unemployed individuals with disabilities has continuously increased, reaching the highest level on record.

Overall, the ÖVP-led governments since 2017 have been criticized by trade unions for putting increasing pressure on various types of unemployed individuals rather than investing in supportive measures.

Regional imbalances in labor supply and demand play a role. Jobs in the tourism industry in the west often cannot be filled by the unemployed in the east (Vienna). This issue particularly affects young people and individuals with a migration background or refugees, who predominantly settle in Vienna.

Policies  
Targeting Labor  
Market Risks  
Score: 8

A person may claim unemployment benefit (“Arbeitslosengeld”) if he or she loses a job and becomes unemployed. Someone may claim unemployment assistance (“Notstandshilfe”) if he or she has exhausted entitlement to unemployment benefit and remains in a situation of need.

The aim of unemployment benefits is to secure a person's livelihood while they are looking for work. To be entitled to unemployment benefits, a person must be unemployed, able and willing to work (to accept suitable employment), be at the disposal of the job office, and not have exhausted their entitlement.

The basic amount of unemployment benefit is currently 55% of daily net income. Depending on the amount of income considered, this can be increased to up to 80% through supplementary and family benefits.

Importantly, entitled persons must have a minimum period of insurance. This applies if someone has been covered by unemployment insurance for at least 52 weeks during the last 24 months or 26 weeks within the last 12 months for people under 25 years old.

Individuals earning above the marginal earnings threshold (Geringfügigkeitsgrenze) of €500.91 per month (in 2023) are covered by unemployment insurance. There is no option for voluntary insurance for employees. However, self-employed persons may join the unemployment insurance system on a voluntary basis.

Workers generally benefit from protection through effective representation by powerful trade unions and the Chamber of Labour. The Austrian trade union movement has addressed increased cross-border mobility by insisting on enforcing labor standards. Unions have primarily pursued this issue through the Austrian social partnership, which fostered a comprehensive regulatory response. However, incidents of noncompliance, especially involving cross-border subcontracting, remain a challenge under the radar of inclusive bargaining institutions. As a nationally bounded enforcement strategy necessarily reaches its limits in transnational labor markets, unions have increasingly complemented their partnership approach with more emphasis on transnational cooperation and initiatives geared toward including mobile workers.

It aligns with Austria's advanced welfare state regime that its population is considerably more concerned about social security issues than people in other European countries. At the same time, Austria has a significantly lower share of people who can imagine working abroad. Austria's contributory pensions and payments are disbursed internationally. Non-contributory benefits – such as specific supplements that may be paid to pensioners with small pensions and little or no other income – cannot be paid outside Austria. The rate of contributory benefits is linked to the amount of contributions and the final salary before becoming eligible for benefits.

**Sustainable Taxation**

Policies  
Targeting  
Adequate Tax  
Revenue  
Score: 7

The Austrian government receives reasonable tax revenues, sufficiently funding its comparatively generous welfare schemes. Currently, there is no legal minimum salary in Austria, so taking up an occupation might involve accepting a poorly paid job. However, as in other countries, very low salaries are not taxed, and most salaries have a lower bound due to collective bargaining agreements that cover almost all employees. In 2023, an annual salary of up to €11,693 was not taxed. Income taxes are particularly high in Austria, which is detrimental to employment in general. In contrast, taxation on wealth is almost nonexistent compared to international standards (Arbeiterkammer 2023).

The overall burden of taxes and other levies is very high in Austria, placing the country in the top tier of European nations (ranked 3 out of 29 countries, surpassed only by Denmark and France). The Austrian government is committed to addressing tax avoidance seriously, but the amount lost due to tax evasion has clearly exceeded €1 billion – nearly 4% of the country’s health budget or 5.6% of the education budget (Wirtschaftskammer 2023).

In a recent comparative study assessing different countries’ “capacity of tax administrations to collect and process data for investigating and ultimately taxing those people and companies who usually have most means and opportunities to escape their tax obligations,” Austria featured in the top tier of countries, with a score of 65 in 2022 compared to an average score of just 47 (see Tax Justice Network).

However, in its 2023 report, the Austrian Court of Audit criticized the serious lack of trained personnel in this field, which undermines the government’s declared ambition to avoid different forms of tax avoidance or evasion. Early in 2022, fewer than 200 of the scheduled 236 full-time positions had been filled. Additionally, newly planned IT resources were not considered to be functioning as intended (Rechnungshof 2023).

Policies  
Targeting Tax  
Equity  
Score: 8

In several critical assessments of both horizontal and vertical equity, Austria has been found to offer much room for improvement. Specifically, most of the state’s revenues come from taxes on labor and value-added taxes, while very little is generated by any form of wealth taxes.

Also, the Austrian practice of public and private employers paying 13th and 14th salaries per year – which are effectively less taxed – has been considered

to particularly benefit recipients of higher salaries (Reflektive 2018). Apart from that and relatively high value-added taxes, tax progression is rather high. The Gini coefficient drops significantly from pre-tax to post-tax income (Rocha-Akis 2023).

With an average rate of income tax and employees' social security contributions for single persons with no children at 31.19%, Austria ranked 24th out of 30 countries in a recent survey. With an effective average tax rate for companies at 23.10% in 2021, Austria ranked 19th out of 27 countries in a recent survey (OECD 2023; Mannheim Tax Index).

The most significant equity effects are achieved not by taxation but by redistribution, where Austria stands out among the countries with the highest levels of post-tax redistribution. Considering child-related benefits and tax provisions, the net average tax rate for an average married worker with two children in Austria was 10.7% in 2022. This rate is the 28th lowest in the OECD and compares with the OECD average of 14.1% (OECD 2023).

Policies Aimed at  
Minimizing  
Compliance  
Costs  
Score: 7

The Austrian tax system is comparatively complex but has become slightly easier to navigate over time. As always, complexity benefits high-income individuals or firms more than low-income individuals, and in the former case, relying on tax consultants is common practice.

In a World Bank survey on the ease of paying taxes indicator, Austria ranks 19th out of 30 countries, though its score has improved significantly over the past decades. According to a study by PwC (n.d.) for 2020, taxpayers spent 46 hours on corporate income taxes, 50 hours on labor taxation, and 35 hours on VAT. In comparison, taxpayers in Germany spent 41, 134, and 43 hours, respectively, while those in Switzerland spent 15, 40, and 8 hours, respectively.

In another cross-country comparison by the European Parliament focusing on tax compliance costs for businesses in absolute values, Austria ranked slightly below the European average.

On the two specific questions of whether “fast-changing legislation and policies are a problem when doing business” and whether “the complexity of administrative procedures is a problem when doing business,” Austria ranked slightly below the European average. This suggests the existence of a fairly workable regime in place.

Policies Aimed at  
Internalizing  
Negative and  
Positive  
Externalities  
Score: 7

The steering function of the Austrian tax regime – its ability to incentivize changes in economic behavior to preserve the sustainability of natural resources and environmental quality – has long been notably weak. However, the ecological-social tax reform passed by the government in October 2021 marked the start of a new era, including the pricing of CO<sub>2</sub>. The newly established CO<sub>2</sub> pricing regime has been criticized for being too lenient to make a significant impact on shaping citizens' behavior, and many issues remained unaddressed by the reform, such as lower taxation of diesel. Additionally, the scheduled incremental increase in fees has been delayed to mitigate the hardships of high inflation.

Ecologically harmful subsidies include subsidized commuting (Pendlerpauschale) and diesel for agriculture.

More recently, the government has significantly expanded subsidies introduced to internalize positive externalities. This has been particularly evident with incentives to replace older heating systems with new non-fossil options. In 2023, the government tripled the federal-level subsidies available, allowing up to 75% of costs to be refunded and, in cases of social hardship, even up to 100%.

Austria has an established regime for providing subsidies for basic research (“Grundlagenforschung”), but the resources have not been sufficient to fund all submitted applications deemed “excellent” by external and international peer reviews.

### Sustainable Budgeting

Sustainable  
Budgeting  
Policies  
Score: 7

As with most other European governments, Austrian administrations have committed to reducing public debt and pursuing strategies of sustainable budgeting. The years 2018 and 2019 were marked by relative successes in budgetary consolidation. However, the pandemic caused major setbacks, and in 2020, Austria witnessed a record level of public debt.

In late 2023, the Nationalrat approved the overall spending volume for 2024, which exceeded the government's original projection of more than €17 billion. The opposition parties in the Nationalrat (SPÖ, Neos, and FPÖ) unanimously criticized the government's budgetary policy.

Spending is largely skewed toward an aging population (pensions) at the expense of younger generations, which poses significant problems in terms of intergenerational justice (“Wie soll ich das bezahlen?”, Agenda Austria, 2020, <https://www.agenda-austria.at/publikationen/wie-soll-ich-das-bezahlen/>).



The 2023 annual report of the Austrian Fiskal Advisory Council (“Fiskalrat”) – an independent body responsible for monitoring the fiscal discipline of government entities in Austria, comprising 15 public finance experts mandated to act independently – concluded that Austria is on a good path toward a sustainable budget. “Unlike in its fall 2022 forecast, the Fiscal Advisory Council now considers a continuous improvement of Austria’s fiscal balance possible (...). Starting from 3.2% of GDP in 2022, Austria’s budget deficit will shrink to 2.5% of GDP in 2023 under this ‘no policy change’ assumption and is assumed to continue to decline, reaching 0.5% of GDP by 2027” (Fiskalrat 2023: 1).

Austria has no official debt brake, unlike Germany; this facilitates budgeting in complicated situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic or periods of high inflation.

In 2021, the national government introduced an SDG budgeting regime. However, this initiative is voluntary and, contrary to recommendations by the Court of Audit, not legally binding. The implementation experience since then suggests that the SDGs have not received higher priority. One reason, arguably, is that SDGs do not feature as independent budgetary goals but are subordinated to existing budgetary goals.

There have also been major differences in the prominence of various SDGs in Austrian budget planning. Gender (SDG 5) has been the most frequently addressed issue, whereas “no poverty” (SDG 1), “zero hunger” (SDG 2), “clean water” (SDG 6), and – interestingly – “affordable and clean energy” (SDG 7) have played hardly any role.

### Sustainability-oriented Research and Innovation

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Score: 9

Austria has committed to a future-oriented and innovation-friendly policy. Its Research, Technology, and Innovation (RTI) Strategy is considered the foundation of sustainable growth and the increased resilience of the entire economic system (see Federal Government Republic of Austria 2020).

Austria, as a research, technology, and innovation (RTI) location, has shown dynamic development in recent years, exceeding the 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) target set by the European Union. In 2020, Austria ranked second within the EU. The Austrian research landscape comprises 22 public universities, 21 universities of applied sciences, five central non-university research institutions, 3,489 research companies, and a total of more than 5,000 research-performing units, including many leading international companies.

The strategy is based on several cross-cutting issues, including Sustainable Development Goals, digitalization, strengthening gender equality in RTI, Responsible Science, Open Science, and Open Innovation. Strategic planning, achievement, and implementation of RTI aim to be optimized through scientifically rigorous evaluations – both internal and external – designed to improve government activities concerning their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and coherence.

This commitment is evident in hard facts. For example, Austria recently ranked fifth out of 30 Western countries in patents for environment-related technologies as well as patents related to recycling and secondary raw materials. Additionally, Austria is ranked eighth among the 27 EU member states by the European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS 2022). Furthermore, Austria is third in the EU on the Eco Innovation Scoreboard of the European Environment Agency (EEA 2022).

Still, innovation in universities is hampered by financial constraints; venture capital is too low.

### Stable Global Financial System

Global Financial  
Policies  
Score: 6

Austrian governments have been moderately committed to regulating and supervising the international financial architecture effectively. Specifically, Austria has shown mixed performance regarding the promotion and implementation of an EU-wide tax on financial transactions, originally established in 2013. The ÖVP-led governments since 2017 have largely obstructed any significant progress in implementing this new tax.

At the same time, the government has been careful to avoid the impression that it is complacent about the challenges of an increasingly complex global financial system. For example, the country has applied to host the European Union's new Anti-Money Laundering Authority (AMLA).

Regarding the Tax Justice Network financial secrecy score, which measures the contribution of each jurisdiction to financial secrecy on a scale from 0 (best) to 100 (worst), Austria received an average score of 54.6 among a group of other Western countries. Similarly, in terms of how a jurisdiction participates in international transparency commitments and engages in international judicial cooperation on money laundering and other criminal matters, Austria ranked in the middle compared to other Western countries, according to the same source.

This bears witness to the fact that Austria still cannot completely let go of its former “freerider” status as a rather secretive international tax haven, undercutting the stability of the global financial system, and has to make way for a serious – and most importantly fair – participant in the European Union and the international system.

## II. Social Sustainability

### Sustainable Education System

Policies  
Targeting Quality  
Education  
Score: 8

The overall situation concerning access to high-quality education and training leaves much room for improvement; however, recent trends in this area have been promising. The percentage of people aged 25 – 34 with tertiary education has risen from 36% (men) and 41% (women) in 2015 to 39% (men) and 48% (women) in 2022. It is worth noting Austria had the highest share of short-cycle tertiary degrees as their highest attainment, which cannot be compared to “normal” tertiary programs. This points to some effects of the Bologna reform introduced at the end of the last millennium. In terms of formal years of schooling, Austria falls below European and North American averages (16.0 versus 16.7 years on average in Europe and North America; Statistik Austria 2022).

Those features must be contextualized to be fully understood: Notably, deviating significantly from the general European pattern, the earnings advantage for workers with a short-cycle tertiary degree is higher than for those with a bachelor’s or equivalent degree (OECD 2023: 97).

Regarding the share of people aged 16 to 74 who possess at least basic digital skills, Austria ranks above the European average according to recent Eurostat data for 2021, placing 8th out of 22 countries surveyed.

Furthermore, Austria’s dual vocational education system has been credited with helping graduates transition smoothly into the labor market and maintaining a low overall share of NEETs by European standards. The transition from vocational training to employment or further studies has been particularly seamless in Austria.

Austria has also stood out positively in other established parameters of high-quality education. Alongside just a few other European countries, Austria has

made extensive use of teachers' aides in schools, resulting in favorable ratios of children to contact staff compared to teaching staff. The latest PISA figures, published in late 2023, show that Austria has largely resisted the downturn trends observed across the OECD, despite a notably poorer score in mathematics compared to previous PISA assessments. Overall, the country has defended its above-average position within the OECD, ranking 13th out of 36 OECD countries in 2023.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
to Education  
Score: 6

The Austrian educational system does not perform to its potential. Given Austria's economic position, the country should have a significantly higher number of tertiary graduates. According to research institutions and experts such as the OECD, the reason for this underperformance lies in the early division of children into multiple educational tracks, which occurs after the fourth grade. Despite some improvements and the increasing role of the Fachhochschulen (universities of applied science, polytechnics), the Austrian educational system remains highly socially selective. Parents' social and educational status heavily influences students' ability to access higher education, aligning with Austria's low score in the OECD PISA assessment regarding the socioeconomic background of pupils (23rd out of 30 in 2022).

Inequity has long been an issue in higher education, particularly within university systems. Access to the Austrian university system remains highly unequal, with children of parents holding tertiary education degrees and/or higher incomes enjoying better odds of graduating from a university. The new university reform bill, passed by the ÖVP-Green governing majority in March 2021, has further increased social inequity in higher education. Among other changes, the law introduced a new regime requiring students to earn a higher number of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points per semester to continue their studies, making it increasingly difficult to combine university education with employment in Austria.

The Austrian dual system of vocational training, which combines on-the-job training and classroom education, receives better marks. This system is primarily aimed at individuals who want to start working at age 15 but is accessible up to age 18. Despite its proven strengths, critics have identified several weaknesses in comparison with the neighboring German dual system and pointed to the continued limited public appreciation of this educational sector.

There is an established system of second-chance education opportunities for individuals with very low skill levels upon leaving school. However, it has been criticized for being overly traditional and less effective than it could be.

Early childhood education is still lacking, partly because of the resistance of the ÖVP government and the socially conservative preferences of Austrians compared to Northern Europeans.

### Sustainable Institutions Supporting Basic Human Needs

Policies  
Targeting Equal  
Access to  
Essential Services  
and Basic Income  
Support  
Score: 9

There is no explicit definition of “essential services” at the national or subnational level in Austria. However, services such as water, sanitation, and public transport are widely regarded as essential by the general population and political actors and, thus, are considered the responsibility of public authorities. There is also no official definition of people on low incomes in Austria. The monthly Equalisation Supplement Reference Rate (ESRR), defined under the statutory pension insurance scheme, regularly serves as a point of reference, though it is modified when applied in different systems of means-tested social provision (Baptista and Marlier 2020).

There is generally a high degree of equal access to housing, water, sanitation, energy, public transport, digital infrastructure, and financial services.

Municipal water supply utilities (“Wasserversorgungsunternehmen”) rarely disconnect services for unpaid bills, ensuring an uninterrupted supply and arranging mechanisms to find alternative solutions. Low-income households in Austria can apply for an exemption from fees associated with the introduction of the green electricity flat rate (“Ökostrompauschale”) and the green electricity promotional contribution. Additionally, these households may apply for a means-tested allowance for heating costs across all regions.

The main service provider in a given distribution network generally cannot reject customers due to financial difficulties. However, if payments are late or pending, the electricity provider may request monthly prepayments. In cases of further payment defaults, the power supply may be cut off. Additionally, there is a “telephone fee grant,” a special allowance covering parts of telephone and internet costs. People living in low-income households who receive at least one social benefit can apply for this grant (Baptista and Marlier 2020).

Austria and Portugal are the only two EU member states where national reduced tariffs exist for public transport for people with low incomes, and some cities and regions additionally implement tariff reductions that increase affordability for these individuals.

Austria is among the few countries where the application of the EU Payment Accounts Directive (PAD) has been specifically acknowledged as having a

positive impact on consumer rights to financial services at the national level. In the past – before PAD – banks often rejected potential clients with financial liquidity problems or over-indebtedness, and “black lists” documenting such issues were shared among credit institutions. The transposition of PAD into national legislation paved the way for the development of innovative and inclusive financial solutions.

The various measures in place to facilitate access to essential services did not stem from a closely integrated process of strategic political planning, resulting in considerable variation in implementation across different states and regions of the country (Baptista and Marlier 2020).

Policies  
Targeting Quality  
of Essential  
Services and  
Basic Income  
Support  
Score: 8

Existing essential public services and basic income support are largely aligned with the goal of satisfying basic human needs.

Austria ranks in the middle of OECD countries in terms of overall poverty rate, holding the 15th position out of 30 in a recent Eurostat survey. The same source indicates that Austria’s risk of poverty or social exclusion rate is slightly above the average for OECD countries.

The share of the population experiencing severe material or social deprivation, however, has been conspicuously small in Austria. The proportion of the population unable to keep their homes adequately warm has been very low by comparative standards, and the same holds true for digital deprivation.

That said, there has been widespread public concern that this status is likely to be challenged by future developments. More specifically, labor organizations, such as the Chamber of Labor, have demanded the introduction of official minimum salaries, higher unemployment benefits and more investments in social housing.

Social housing may become a problem in the future, as the construction rate in this sector has declined over the past few years. At the same time, housing prices have risen significantly over the last decade, with a notable spike following 2021 and 2022 (Statistik Austria 2023). Part of these developments is due to the abandonment in 2008 of the legal requirement that social housing benefits be dedicated to social housing projects.

Accessibility of banking infrastructure for poorer people, including cash machines in remote areas or small villages, is still adequate in Austria.

Policies  
Targeting Health  
System  
Resilience  
Score: 6

### Sustainable Health System

In terms of total current healthcare expenditures as a percent of GDP, Austria has consistently ranked in the top third of OECD countries, as confirmed by 2022 figures.

Recent developments in Austria regarding spending on preventive and health programs (as a percentage of current healthcare expenditure) are particularly noteworthy. According to figures provided by the OECD, at 10.3%, the share spent on such measures in 2021 was more than four times higher than the average for the previous decade (2.2) and about three times higher than in 2020 (3.4). This placed Austria second among OECD countries, surpassed only by the UK.

Austria has long been among the leading countries for the number of hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants. In 2022, it ranked third among OECD countries, behind Japan and Germany. However, like most other countries, the overall number of beds has slightly decreased over the past decade. Some even more impressive figures require further context: for example, Austria has had the highest number of physicians per 1,000 inhabitants among OECD countries, being the only country aside from New Zealand to ever exceed 5%, with a score of 5.48% in 2022. Nevertheless, a recurrent issue in recent political debates on healthcare in Austria has been the increasing shortage of physicians in some non-urban regions. More importantly, the share of physicians who were contracted partners of the public health insurance system (“Kassenärzte”) decreased from 4,213 to 4,054 between 2010 and 2020, and this trend has continued. According to a survey from 2023, more than two-thirds of Austrians were acutely aware of the increasing lack of “Kassenärzte” (Der Standard 2023).

In terms of state-of-the-art equipment, such as computed tomography scanners, Austria has been only in the middle field of OECD countries, even falling slightly below the average score. However, according to the “Health at a Glance” OECD report for 2023 (see Figure 5.24), regarding the use of CT, MRI, and PET diagnostic scanners, Austria was in the top group of OECD countries – alongside the United States, Luxembourg, Korea, and France.

No less importantly, Austria has recently experienced a shortage or unavailability of many standard pharmaceuticals. In 2023, approximately 600 pharmaceuticals were reported to be temporarily unavailable on the Austrian market (Kleine Zeitung 2023).

At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the Austrian healthcare system was tested to its limits. Life expectancy for people living in Austria decreased slightly, though less dramatically than in several other countries. A recent assessment of the government's and health system's performance, published in late 2023, found that mistakes were made, but the overall performance was fair (see Krutzler 2023). Some indicators suggest, however, that the long-term effects of the pandemic may have been underestimated. For example, the number of reported cases of depression increased significantly more in Austria than in many other OECD countries.

Despite several positive aspects mentioned earlier, many observers have assessed the prospects of the Austrian health system as deficient, particularly in its ability to handle the challenges of an aging population. In 2023, the Standard, one of the country's quality papers, launched a series of articles titled "The health system at its limits" (Springer 2023).

Apart from the lack of contracted physicians available to all insured patients, working conditions in Austrian hospitals have deteriorated over the last decade. Reports of personnel shortages and the closure of some hospital departments have surfaced (Krutzler and Müller 2023). In a representative study of nursing personnel in general departments of Austrian hospitals, almost one-third of nursing staff stated that their department is rarely or never adequately staffed to fulfill its tasks. Additionally, 84.4% of nursing staff reported at least one nursing intervention related to acute patient care was omitted in the past two weeks (Cartaxo, Eberl, and Mayer 2022). Waiting times for normally insured patients have increased in some regions.

The pandemic provided Austria with an opportunity to become one of the first Western European countries to develop an official electronic vaccination data system with electronic vaccination certificates. Meanwhile, digitalization has extended into other areas. Since mid-2022, there have been "e-prescriptions" replacing traditional paper prescriptions (see Digital Austria 2024).

The two-tier medical system has become a reality. Patients with private insurance have access to a wide variety of private physicians and clinics. In public hospitals, privately insured patients generally experience significantly shorter waiting times and receive better rooms and food.



One major problem concerns the rising costs. Although a specific agreement (“15a-Vereinbarung Zielsteuerung Gesundheit”) has been in place to reduce annual increases from 3.6% in 2017 to 3.2%, the agreed spending limits were more significantly exceeded in 2022 than in 2021 and appear poised to increase further (see *Parlamentskorrespondenz* 2023).

Policies  
Targeting High-  
Quality  
Healthcare  
Score: 6

Austrian health policy generally facilitates high-quality healthcare, though within certain limits. The increasing shortage of doctors across the country who treat patients with public health insurance (see P11.1) certainly limits the quality of healthcare in Austria – not only in terms of choice but also in terms of receiving medical treatment on reasonably short notice.

A survey from 2023 found that nearly one-fifth of medical practices, while obliged to accept new patients with public health insurance, were unwilling to take on these patients (see *Kleine Zeitung* 2023). Additionally, there have been long waiting times for those who eventually secure an appointment. In Vienna in particular, there have been exceptionally long waiting times for receiving medical treatment in hospitals, as has been publicly criticized by the city’s Court of Audit. According to other sources, the lack of sufficiently trained doctors in hospitals, particularly emergency surgeons, has reached a critical stage, with doctors themselves pointing to the growing risk of losing established quality standards (see *Der Standard* 2023).

Concerning most established indicators of effective preventive care, such as women receiving mammography screening, Austria has ranked in the middle among OECD countries. One of the major challenges has been the development of “integrated care” for elderly people. Integrating care both within the health system and between health and social care has been a significant issue over the past two decades. This challenge is mainly due to the fragmentation of responsibilities, information flows, and funding sources. With the rising number of people with chronic conditions and new patterns of care needs, such as dementia, problems between hospitals and community care have become evident. Consequently, several initiatives have been launched in Austria to adapt organizational structures and processes, such as information exchange, hospital discharge procedures, and education and training programs. However, to date, these reforms have been assessed as piecemeal, often discontinued, and not systematically evaluated.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
To Healthcare  
Score: 7

The existing policies and regulations largely ensure equitable access to healthcare. There are specific rules designed to support people with certain illnesses or, more generally, those with low incomes; for example, these groups do not have to pay any prescription fees for pharmaceuticals.

However, as mentioned above, the share of the population for whom swift treatment and free choice of doctors is always available is shrinking. This trend is due to an increasing shortage of registered doctors accepting patients with any kind of public health insurance. The lack of these “Kassenärzte” is particularly felt in rural areas. Additionally, there is a notable difference between individual states in terms of the number of hospitals, leading to certain regional disparities.

In 2022 it became known that the “Wiener Gesundheitsverbund” – which represents doctors and care staff in Vienna – had issued an internal directive instructing Viennese hospitals not to treat patients lacking primary residential status in Vienna, due to a lack of resources (Stepan 2022). This directive is not in line with laws that explicitly allow any resident of Austria to report to any hospital in the country.

People with private health insurance are generally admitted to hospitals more easily, receive more timely treatment, and sometimes even better care. For example, some medications, such as Sofosbuvir for Hepatitis C, are only available to those with private health insurance.

While a latent division exists between groups of the population dependent on publicly financed treatment and those able to pay for particular treatments from their own funds, this bias does not strongly correlate with other features such as gender or ethnicity. The group of resident migrants in Austria includes both poor and exceptionally well-off individuals. Additionally, unlike some other countries, such as Germany, asylum-seekers in Austria have full and immediate access to the Austrian health system (praktischarzt.at n.d.).

Furthermore, unmet need (see P11.8) is quite low in Austria, according to data from Eurostat.

### Gender Equality

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Gender Equality  
Score: 7

Generally, the issue of gender equality has figured prominently in Austrian public discourse. This has come to be symbolized by ongoing discussions about formal rules for adequately gendered language, which may be considered an evasion strategy.

Many agencies are designed to support women and provide emergency shelter. There are also several programs, such as scholarships, exclusively for women. Women’s issues are specifically acknowledged at the level of ministerial departments; however, there is no particular department for women’s affairs.

Instead, in the current Nehammer government, the responsibilities for women, family, integration, and media have been merged into one department, which does not prioritize gender equality.

The representation of women in the Austrian national parliament (Nationalrat) has increased significantly in recent years, reaching an all-time high of slightly above 40% after the 2019 national election, up from just 34.4% after the 2017 election. With this increase, Austria currently ranks 9th among 30 OECD countries covered in a recent study (World Bank 2022).

Similar dynamics can be observed at the level of female ministers. Between January 2020 and January 2021, the ÖVP-Green government (Kurz II) was the first federal government to include more female than male members. However, much like the representation of women in parliament, this trend has not been self-reinforcing and has faced setbacks. In late 2023, the current ÖVP-Green government, led by Chancellor Nehammer, included eight male ministers and only five female ministers.

Other indicators, such as the percentage of women in leading corporate positions, demonstrate that gender equality continues to be a major challenge. In 2023, women made up only 7.6% of directors on the boards of major Austrian companies listed in the Austrian Traded Index (ATX). This gives Austria the second-highest proportion of male directors on the boards of major companies in Europe, after Luxembourg (6%). Similarly, the gender pay gap across various occupations has been significant. According to recent OECD figures, Austria ranks 27th out of 30 OECD countries in terms of gender pay equity. Another closely related bias concerns average pension entitlements, with women receiving about 40% less than their male counterparts. These figures are all the more remarkable considering that, overall, women in Austria now lead in higher educational achievements, including academic qualifications.

The disproportionate burden borne by women within Austrian families can be seen as an aspect of de facto gender discrimination. Additionally, Austrian welfare transfers for mothers are designed in a way that keeps mothers out of the labor market. In numerous cases, legal provisions for the protection of parents, such as job protection for those switching to part-time work, are not respected by employers. Recent developments in this area include an increase in the employment rate of mothers in Austria from just over 64% in 2010 to nearly 68% in 2020, although this rate remains considerably lower than that for employed fathers at slightly above 90%. The – often involuntarily chosen – part-time occupation of women has also been significantly higher than for men (Schipfer and Wernhart 2022).

Recent Austrian governments have acknowledged and targeted some of these issues by introducing quotas for women in the civil service and semi-public companies or by exempting women, particularly mothers, from certain demanding jobs. However, progress has remained slow and patchy in many areas, especially regarding child care facilities for very young children.

### Strong Families

Family Policies  
Score: 7

Both the federal government and mainstream public opinion acknowledge that the traditional nuclear family model, defined by stable and clearly divided gender roles, does not represent the reality for all families in the 21st century. Still, family policies are often viewed as reflecting a decidedly “conservative” notion of families and the roles of women and men within them.

Public childcare centers exist but – despite some recent improvements – fail to meet demand. Childcare facilities for children aged one and under are often lacking outside the capital, Vienna, while facilities for children aged two to five fail to meet the needs of working parents. The overall share of children (age 0-2) in formal childcare or education for 30 hours or more has been very low, clearly below the OECD average. Remarkably, the share identified for 2022 is lower than that for both 2021 and 2015. The figures for children aged 3 to 5 in formal childcare or education for 30 hours or more have been relatively stable, without significant setbacks over time.

Access to the labor market for married women is not seriously disputed. Nevertheless, the provision of childcare is still overwhelmingly left to families, which effectively means that primary responsibility falls to mothers. The current length of paid maternity, parental, and home care leave for women is 60 months, slightly above the OECD average of 56 months. In terms of ranking, Austria is among the top third of OECD countries. However, the Austrian Chamber of Labour has recently highlighted numerous deficiencies in the day-to-day performance of this system, making it rather difficult for women to secure the funds they are legally entitled to (Mittelstaedt 2020).

There is a specific maternity leave scheme in place that covers 16 weeks – eight weeks before birth and eight weeks after. Taking this leave is mandatory. There is also a one-month paternity leave, known as “Papamonat.” However, the proportion of men taking advantage of this paternity leave has been slightly decreasing recently.

About 80% of sick and elderly people in need of regular care are being taken care of by their families – a task overwhelmingly met by women. Austrian governments have supported such activities by providing specific resources, known as “Pflegegeld.”

Austrian governments have continuously expanded the flow of resources directed to family policy. However, although overall entitlements for families rose by nearly 50% net between 2000 and 2020 (accounting for inflation), Austria still lags behind many OECD countries. The current Nehammer government has continued to improve the living conditions for families. In 2023, the Family Bonus Plus was increased from €1,500 per child per year to €2,000 per child per year. For births after December 31, 2022, the “family-time bonus” no longer reduces a later childcare benefit. Starting in 2023, the childcare benefit and the “family-time bonus” are automatically adjusted for inflation each January. Additionally, the government introduced a special bonus for family-based care if the person to be cared for is seriously or mentally ill.

### Sustainable Pension System

Policies Aimed at  
Old-Age Poverty  
Prevention  
Score: 7

Austria has long been considered “a haven for retirees,” especially among seniors from neighboring Germany, with average pensions about 80% higher in Austria than in Germany. A closer look, however, reveals that the whole system relies significantly on additional contributions by employed individuals and on additional tax money diverted to this sector.

As of 2023, one-fourth of the Austrian public budget is allocated to the old-age pension system. Of the €14 billion, €1.2 billion is dedicated to raising low pensions to a minimum level, while the rest goes to other pensioners. In 2021, the average retirement age was 60.9 years. According to public planning, the retirement age should be raised to 62 years by 2030 (Austrian Parliament 2022). A larger adaptation to rising lifetimes should be planned (Heer et al. 2023).

To combat the effects of recent high inflation on income, Austria – like several other countries, such as Germany, Portugal, and Poland – has implemented significant ad hoc payments for pensioners.

Given these figures, it is not surprising that Austria ranked conspicuously low in the 2023 Mercer report on the overall quality of its pension system, receiving an overall score of “C” on a scale from A to D (ranked 40 out of 47 countries). While Austrian pensions generally aim to prevent old-age poverty,

the report suggested measures such as increasing the minimum level of support for the poorest elderly individuals and introducing arrangements to protect the pension interests of both parties in a divorce. As in most countries, women tend to receive significantly lower pensions. However, the key problem with the Austrian pension system has been identified as its tremendous costs and effective unsustainability (see also P14.2).

Policies  
Targeting  
Intergenerational  
Equity  
Score: 5

Regarding public expenditure on old-age and survivors' benefits as a percentage of GDP, Austria has consistently ranked in the top five among OECD countries. Recent initiatives by the Austrian government include the creation of a new system allowing citizens to work beyond the standard retirement age in exchange for special pension benefits.

Still, as noted above, the de facto pension age is below 61 years and is projected to rise only in very small steps until 2030. At the same time, public expenditures to support the pension system are expected to increase. Given rising life expectancy, a gradual increase in the actual retirement age is necessary. The last government avoided discussing pension reform, and the current chancellor's election manifesto does not mention it either.

While specific projections, such as those by the Chamber of Labor, suggest that the key challenge of "intergenerational equity" is being addressed comparatively well in Austria, others point to the system's unsustainability in the medium run (see above).

In a report commissioned by the European Commission, the average elderly-to-non-elderly spending ratio in Austria increased from 1.71 to 2.10 between 2002 and 2017.

### Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants

Integration Policy  
Score: 5

Regarding the employment rate for the foreign-born compared to the native-born population (age group 15-64 years), Austria ranks in the middle among OECD countries. However, the share of migrants among the unemployed is significantly higher in Austria than in nearly any other OECD country except Sweden.

German language courses for migrants whose mother tongue is not German have been offered early on. There is also language training for older migrants. However, despite these efforts, the lack of proper language skills has remained a key obstacle to securing a suitable job among the foreign-born labor force in Austria, much more so than in most other OECD countries. Meanwhile, even recent conservative governments have come to consider the present measures

insufficient to ensure a smooth integration of migrants into the Austrian labor market (Kurier 2023). In particular, the share of working migrant women has been considered deficient. Additionally, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic hit both male and female migrants in Austria harder than the country's non-migrant population.

Regarding the labor market, the Austrian government is half-heartedly welcoming employees arriving from foreign countries. Its policies, including the “red-white-red card,” are neither well-received by economic actors nor successful in attracting highly skilled professionals. The indirect, undeclared alliance between organized labor – which defends the short-term interests of union-protected workers and is usually linked politically to the left – and the far-right – which exploits xenophobic resentments, especially the FPÖ – creates a political climate that sometimes breaks into open hostility, particularly against migrants from Muslim countries.

Education in urban areas, and to a lesser extent rural areas, faces the challenge posed by children of first-generation migrants within school systems with constrained resources. As a result, children from migrant families find it more difficult to qualify for higher education and are often placed in the lowest types of schools. This situation also significantly fuels the discontent of “native” Austrian parents with children in these schools, where achieving successful educational outcomes is becoming increasingly difficult. Special support policies for such children have recently been implemented, but it remains to be seen how successful these policies will be in the short to medium term.

Spouses, registered partners, and unmarried minor children are entitled to migrate to Austria for family reunification. The parents of minor children also fall within the scope of family reunification under the Asylum Act. Any marriage or registered partnership must, however, already have existed in the country of origin or prior to entry into Austria. The key requirements for family reunification include accommodation meeting local standards, adequate health insurance coverage, and a secure means of subsistence. Exemptions from these requirements exist for family members of persons granted asylum when family reunification is applied for within three months of recognition of refugee status (Lukits 2016).

Austrian laws concerning naturalization are extremely strict, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals living legally in Austria excluded from political rights. Cases documented by NGOs have shown that members of the Austrian police have used cruelty and violence in interactions with non-citizens, especially migrants without residence permits.

Overall, regarding the situation of migrants, political asylum-seekers, and refugees, Austrian society and the political system face a specific cross-pressure: integrating newcomers while defending the prerogatives of Austrian citizens. While Austrians have repeatedly been found to be among the happiest nations in Europe, various surveys indicate that migrants living in Austria are strikingly unhappy. A survey among expats, published in 2021, found Vienna to be “the most unfriendly major city in the world.” A more recent study suggests significant differences among migrants. Generally, “refugees who scored higher on host-country-specific language proficiency, social contacts, and a feeling of relatedness have significantly higher levels of life satisfaction” (Haindorfer et al. 2022).

The current ÖVP-Green government is the first federal government to include a full minister for integration. In general, the integration of migrants in Austria faces the challenge of needing labor migration while being one of Europe’s primary havens for refugees, who often lack the necessary skills for jobs in the country.

### Effective Capacity-Building for Global Poverty Reduction

Management of  
Development  
Cooperation by  
Partner Country  
Score: 5

Austria has long provided rhetorical support to agendas aimed at improving the global social balance. However, when it comes to actions such as spending public money to aid development in developing countries, Austria has been notably slow to fulfill its promises.

Recently, the government launched a new three-year Austrian development policy program for the period 2022 – 2024. According to the government, this program aims to open up sustainable life prospects for people in partner countries by fostering social and political stability, along with sustainable development in line with the 2030 Agenda. The program was designed to provide development policy responses to evolving global challenges, including the war in Ukraine. As a first step, the budget for bilateral development aid was increased by €12 million to a total of €137 million, and the budget for humanitarian aid was raised by €20 million to €77.5 million.

An OECD mid-term review, published in early 2023, acknowledged the government’s three-year program as “a welcome step toward a more coordinated approach,” but deplored the absence of “a whole-of-government strategy.”



According to a more recent CARE announcement, Austria's overall investments in this field – after reaching its highest-ever score in 2022 (0.39% of GDP) for Official Development Assistance – were set to fall to just 0.27% in 2024.

### III. Environmental Sustainability

#### Effective Climate Action

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Climate  
Neutrality by  
2050  
Score: 7

The Austrian government committed itself to achieving climate neutrality by 2040, rather than 2050.

The government's environmental and climate policy budget has been growing steadily in recent years. Several key measures underscore the government's seriousness about tackling climate change. Perhaps the most spectacular measure was the introduction of an annual "climate ticket" in late 2021, priced at approximately €1,100. This ticket allows holders to use all forms of public transport – trains, buses, trams, and subways – across the country. Around the same time, the government introduced a pricing scheme for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, with fees increasing annually. However, many experts consider these fees insufficient to motivate significant behavioral change among the population. In late 2023, the government ruled out any new gas and oil heating in buildings constructed from 2024 onward.

It is significant that the government has, to date, failed to renew the "Climate Protection Law," which expired in 2020 (Prager 2023). Critics have cited this failure as evidence of the government's lack of commitment to achieving its self-imposed 2040 target. Notably, the coalition parties in the ÖVP-Green government have been unable to agree on permissible emission levels across various sectors, such as traffic, agriculture, and buildings. Even the original 2020 law faced criticism, including from the Austrian Court of Audit, for its vague formulations regarding regulations in different sub-areas.

The hard facts speak clearly: Since 1990, Austria has barely reduced its greenhouse gas emissions. Emissions in the traffic sector have increased significantly. An empirical assessment by the Austrian Environmental Agency found that emissions decreased by 6% in 2022. However, despite this reduction, there are few other European countries with reductions as modest as Austria's (Umweltbundesamt 2022).

One explanation for the notable discrepancy between formal commitment and substantive accomplishment is Austria's early status as a forerunner, which then fell behind many other countries, including even many latecomers (Der Standard 2023). In the early 1990s, Austria was skeptical about joining the European Union, as some feared the country would have to compromise on its comparatively high environmental standards at the time.

Overall, Austria continues to fare in the middle of the international community. In the most recent Climate Change Performance Index, Austria ranks 32nd out of 63 countries (Laufer and Prager 2023), which together are responsible for about 90% of greenhouse gas emissions. This overall score is composed of several sub-scores in different areas. The worst sub-score was in the area of energy consumption, where Austria ranked 51st out of 63. Better scores were achieved in the areas of renewable energies, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate policy, with Austria ranking 19th in each of these areas.

As indicated above, climate change policies are being reviewed by the Austrian Court of Audit. However, as the court's remit is confined to financial issues, some experts have recently called for the creation of a Climate Court of Audit, specifically devoted to reviewing the government's climate change policies.

In a much-noted decision, the Austrian Constitutional Court dismissed a complaint by four Austrian citizens committed to suing the government for disregarding its own pledges and not seriously addressing climate change policies to avoid fatal harm to Austrian citizens. The Court argued that the government had more leeway in pursuing those goals than the plaintiffs contended. Shortly before, the Court had already dismissed a similar complaint by 12 young Austrians for formal reasons (Der Standard 2023a, 2023b).

### Effective Environmental Health Protection

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Minimizing  
Environmental  
Health Risks  
Score: 7

In terms of many established indicators, such as PM2.5 exposure or lead exposure, Austria has ranked in the middle range of OECD countries. However, for other indicators, particularly the quality of drinking water, Austria has consistently been among the top performers in the OECD.

According to the WHO 2023 country report on Austria, 15% of deaths from stroke and ischemic heart disease in Austria are caused by air pollution, and 18% of deaths from diarrhea are caused by unsafe drinking water, sanitation, and inadequate personal hygiene. (The latter data are remarkable as the same source indicates that just 1% of the population is without safe drinking water,

and 0% of the population is without safe sanitation.) Further, according to the same source, less than one out of 100,000 children under five die from poisonings every year.

Sanitation problems are particularly pronounced at the level of individual water supplies from house wells. These wells are still common practice outside metropolitan areas and larger municipalities. Public authorities do not monitor these supplies, which often results in unknown contamination of private water sources. Approximately 7% of the total population obtains their water from private wells (Ministry of Agriculture n.d.).

Air pollution is a significant problem in alpine valleys with heavy traffic, such as the Inntal, as well as in larger cities. Although recent improvements in air quality have been noted, the continued transport of goods on one of the main alpine crossings and the stringent EU directives limiting traffic continue to present major challenges in these areas.

Health protection has been acknowledged as a key responsibility of the government at the legislative level since the late 1990s, when the government introduced a health promotion law (“Gesundheitsförderungsgesetz”). A health promotion strategy has also been implemented to facilitate effective cooperation among the central government, states, and social insurance agencies. In recent years, special emphasis has been placed on various aspects of children’s health.

There has been a growing acknowledgment among political leaders in Austria that climate protection is essentially health protection. Several new measures have been launched to highlight this connection by linking the health sector to climate policies. For example, in 2023 hospitals and various other care units were assigned special resources to reduce their climate footprint.

### Effective Ecosystem and Biodiversity Preservation

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Preserving  
Ecosystems and  
Protecting  
Biodiversity  
Score: 6

Recent Austrian governments have been committed to protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, though their track record is mixed. In some areas, such as the adjusted emissions growth rate for nitrous oxides and grassland loss, Austria ranks in the middle among European and/or OECD countries. The status of Austrian forests has been relatively stable, with forested territory even growing slightly in recent years. This growth is supported by the fact that a significant portion of forests in Austria is privately owned (82%, a score only exceeded by Portugal).

However, regarding several other indicators, Austria has performed conspicuously poorly. This is particularly true for the use of pesticides banned EU-wide. According to figures by Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Europe published in 2023, Austria had the largest “emergency admissions” of banned pesticides among all EU member states. Between 2019 and 2022, Austria issued no fewer than 20 such admissions.

The situation is not better in the area of species protection. Recent figures from the European Environment Agency show that 83% of all species in Austria were not in good condition, placing Austria second to last in the EU.

Since joining the Austrian federal government in 2020, the Greens have driven several significant changes. In late 2022, Green federal environmental minister Leonore Gewessler launched a new biodiversity strategy, as foreshadowed in the ÖVP-Green coalition agreement. By 2023, 30% of the country’s territory should be designated as specifically protected areas, including the expansion of national parks and other highly protected zones. Additionally, by 2023, the “red list” of endangered species in Austria should be reduced by 30%, a goal to be achieved through measures like limiting pesticide use. Finally, 35% of Austria’s agriculture should be converted to organic farming by the same year.

The government’s biodiversity strategy has been sharply criticized by many experts, including members of the Austrian Biodiversity Council. While the existence of a Federal Ministry for the Environment in 2020 was seen as the only fully convincing aspect of the ÖVP-Green government’s environmental and biodiversity policies, most other features were considered problematic.

The creation of a Biodiversity Fund (with €80 million by 2026) was welcomed, but experts argue that the volume should be expanded to €1 billion. Additionally, the environmental protection budgets for the states were deemed inadequate. For example, in 2021, the state of Lower Austria had an environmental policy budget of just €15 million, compared to €450 million for road construction and maintenance.

The most pressing issue was the ongoing rate of land sealing, currently at 11.3 hectares per day. Experts insist this must be radically reduced to 2.5 hectares by 2025 and just 1 hectare by 2030.

Lastly, Austria’s performance in implementing international agreements, such as the EU’s Natura-2000 goals, has been conspicuously poor. A particular problem identified is the complex division of competencies between the federation and the states.

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Global  
Environmental  
Policy  
Score: 7

## Effective Contributions to Global Environmental Protection

Austria's approach to global environmental policy has long been marked by contradictions. Rhetorically, Austria – the government, political parties, and the media – has frequently portrayed itself as a frontrunner in global governance, from Kyoto to Copenhagen and Paris. In practice, however, the country has not fully lived up to this self-acclaimed role.

Austria remains proud of its 1978 decision to forgo nuclear energy, being one of the first countries worldwide to do so. This decision has become a national narrative, portraying Austria as a leader in enlightened environmental consciousness. However, in terms of net greenhouse gas emissions, Austria occupies an average position among OECD countries, although the reductions achieved over the past decade have been slightly more significant than in many other countries.

Austria's participation rate in global and regional multilateral environmental agreements has been below average (P20.4). The same is true for Austria's effective contributions to Green Climate Funds (P20.5).

The participation of the Greens in the new government formed in early 2020, and the appointment of a Green climate minister, marked a tangible change in Austria's international performance. However, the exact policy effects remain contested. At the Glasgow climate conference in late 2021, Climate Minister Leonore Gewessler (Green) went out of her way to present and position Austria as a future frontrunner, committing the government to increasing its contributions to the international Green Climate Fund from €26 million to €130 million by 2023. In mid-2023, Minister Gewessler announced that Austria would further increase its payments to the fund to €160 million for 2024 to 2027, or €40 million per year.

The current three-year program of Austrian Developmental Policy 2022 – 2024, agreed upon by major state actors, parliaments, and members from the economic and scientific communities and civil society groups, sets out the principles, goals, and priorities of governmental policy in this area. Bilateral cooperation strategies are being developed in close collaboration with recipient countries, taking into account different social and cultural settings and including technological advice and support. Particular emphasis is placed on the involvement of women and the protection of the specific rights of children and people with disabilities. There are also Regional Cooperation Strategies, which seek to develop collaborations between different countries in the same region, considering the bilateral engagement of various Austrian actors.

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## Address | Contact

### **Bertelsmann Stiftung**

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
33311 Gütersloh  
Germany  
Phone +49 5241 81-0

### **Dr. Christof Schiller**

Phone +49 30 275788-138  
christof.schiller@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

### **Dr. Thorsten Hellmann**

Phone +49 5241 81-81236  
thorsten.hellmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

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