



CENTRE FOR VOTERS INITIATIVE & ACTION

Austria

NGO Submission to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, & Cultural Rights

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Contributor contact: Anna MROCZKOWSKA

Contributor email: amroczkowska@cvia.ch

Website: www.cvia.ch

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Impact of socio-economic status on political participation and feeling of representation.....</i>	<i>2</i>
Lower income population not feeling represented within the system.....	2
Cost-of-living crisis deepening the gap within the population	3
Lack of mandatory standalone civic education.....	3
<i>Weak institutionalisation of civil society participation.....</i>	<i>4</i>
No statutory duty to consult affected right holders	4
Precarious NGO funding	4
No domestic or international remedy mechanism	5
<i>Structural barriers within formal channels of participation</i>	<i>6</i>
Digital-first administration outpacing accessibility safeguards.....	6
Absence of migrant/Roma representation in bodies that administer ESC-rights	6
No local voting rights for long-term third-country nationals	7
<i>Recommendations Summarised</i>	<i>7</i>

Introduction

1. The Centre for Voters Initiative & Action Presents this report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Ahead of the 80th session for the review of Austria. The Centre is a non-governmental organisation based in the Americas with an international focus. The Centre acknowledges there can be no secure tomorrow without ensuring civil societies have knowledge to vote, participate, and engage with democratic processes.
2. The Centre works with multiple international mechanisms to convey dialogue, conduct research, and bring awareness to the thematic issues of electoral engagement around the world. We closely follow and participate in the United Nations human rights mechanisms in Geneva and abroad, including the treaty quasi-judicial committees, to promote civil society participation in public affairs processes.
3. Considering the complex political and economic fabric of Austria, and notwithstanding more recent planned initiatives, programs and policies that potentially concern the following issues, the Centre aims to provide a supporting and nuanced view to how ESC-rights are either at risk of or actively being undermined within the scope of public/political participation.
4. The Centre has submitted this report to the Committee to focus on three specific issues: (1) impact of socio-economic status on political participation and feeling of representation; (2) weak institutionalisation of civil society participation; and (3) structural barriers within formal participation.

Impact of socio-economic status on political participation and feeling of representation

Lower income population not feeling represented within the system

5. According to a recent survey, most of the adult Austrian population does not feel heard in political matters. 33 % state that they do not feel heard at all, while another 47 % saying they feel rather not heard. This problem is even more visible for households affected by unemployment and people on low incomes where the rates of not feeling heard at all sit at 40 % for both groups.¹
6. However, the groups least likely to feel heard are those whose economic and social rights depend most heavily on public decisions. Article 2(2) requires that the Covenant rights are exercised without discrimination on grounds such as poverty or social origin hence a participation and representation perception gap along the lines of income and employment status is an indicator that Austria should examine.

¹ IHS, Statistics Austria, *So geht's uns heute: Die sozialen Krisenfolgen im 2. Quartal 2025 – Schwerpunkt: Politische Teilhabe*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

7. Secondly, the level of interest in political affairs also varies based on income. Overall, 11 % of Austrians say they are not interested in politics at all while 20 % say they are very interested. This stands in stark contrast to the same rates for people earning a low income: about 22 % of them are not interested at all and just 8 % are.²
8. Material insecurity limits the time, resources and trust needed for political engagement. Low engagement then reduces influence over the policies on work (Article 6-7), social security (Article 9) and an adequate standard of living (Article 11) that determine that insecurity, which then in turn may cause the low levels of interest observed.

Cost-of-living crisis deepening the gap within the population

9. In the second quarter of 2025 around 23 % of people in Austria stated that they had suffered a loss of income in the past year. This rate was even higher among household affected by unemployment (45 %) and low-income households (41 %),³ showing that the worsening economic conditions impact disproportionately the parts of the society already under stress. Additionally, in the same year 16,9 % of the Austrian population remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion.⁴
10. Hence, there is an increased risk of political polarisation and disassociation from political life as bigger part of the population falls into the categories which do not feel represented by the political system. This process can occur quicker as the economic burden falls on populations already underrepresented, limiting their will to participate in public life in the first place.

Lack of mandatory standalone civic education

11. In the Parliament's youth survey, 85 % of 16–26-year-olds said they learned too little at school about how to conduct political debates, and 57 % too little about judging the quality of political information.⁵ Among pupils in grades 8-12, satisfaction with democracy fell from 70 % in 2020 to 42 % in 2025.⁶
12. Following repeated calls from civil society organisations about the lack of standalone political education (*Demokrateibildung*),⁷ in July 2026 the Parliament passed a reform to introduce a new compulsory subject, “Media and Democracy” to the *allgemeinbildende höhere Schule* (AHS) that will be phased in from 2027, reaching the eighth grades in 2030. Nevertheless, the reform covers only AHS pupils, a group that is selected early: just 8,3 % of pupils leaving a *Mittelschule* move on to an AHS.

² See *supra* note 1.

³ STATISTICS AUSTRIA, *Press release: 14 013-206/25*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁴ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Amnesty International Report 2025/26: Austria*, (2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁵ FORESIGHT Research Hofinger GmbH, *Junge Menschen & Demokratie*, (2024). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁶ Jugendforschung, Pädagogische Hochschulen Österreichs (Hrsg.), *Lebenswelten 2025: Einstellungen und Wertevon Jugendlichen in Österreich*, (2024). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁷ INTERESSENGEMEINSCHAFT POLITISCHE BILDUNG (IGPB). Accéder à <https://igpb.at>.

13. Civic education is not only a matter of aims but a possible equaliser for participation, however Austria's reform delivers dedicated civic education first and fullest to the AHS stream, which skews towards better-off pupils, while pupils in other school types rely on integrated treatment of a principle that the evidence suggests is weak in practice.

We encourage the Committee to recommend that Austria extend compulsory, assessed civic and media education to all secondary school types, alongside the AHS reform, with common minimum learning standards and adequate teacher training, so that access to civic education does not depend on a pupil's educational pathway.

Weak institutionalisation of civil society participation

No statutory duty to consult affected right holders

14. Participation of CSOs is not formally protected in Austria and depends on the discretion of individual ministries or other political actors,⁸ due to the lack of a formal binding framework or legislation pertaining to their functioning. Additionally, the legal consultation right is held by the social partners, not by CSOs, and a UN meeting summary reports that the 2013 state report was not sent to NGOs for comment.⁹
15. If CSO participation depends on such political goodwill, it can narrow or disappear with each political change, which makes it hard to describe within the definition of appropriate means given in the Covenant's Article 2(1).
16. Furthermore, discretionary consultation tends to favour well-resourced, well-connected actors, so the voices of unemployed people, low-income households and minorities, who are already the least likely to feel heard are the least likely to be invited. Consulting organisations is not the same as hearing affected rights-holders directly, and the existing open parliamentary review procedure does not secure the voice of those groups.

Precarious NGO funding

17. Public money is the largest income source for Austrian CSOs. Over half of their income comes from performance-related payments by the public sector, with a further 16,5 % from other public funding,¹⁰ and a significant contribution tied to private giving (79 % of the population donates).¹¹

⁸ BÜNDNIS FÜR GEMEINNÜTZIGKEIT, *Civic Space Report 2026: Austria*, (2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁹ UN COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, *Report on the 52nd and 53rd sessions (28 April-23 May 2014, 10-28 November 2014)*, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/2014/3, (2015). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁰ Pennerstorfer & Schneider, *Der Nonprofit-Sektor in Österreich*, (2022), in Handbuch der Nonprofit-Organisationen.

¹¹ FUNDRAISING VERBAND AUSTRIA, *2025 Spenden Bericht*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

- 18.** Dependence on the state makes the sector exposed to political shifts, and conditions can vary with the stance of the government of the day. On 14 August 2025 the FPÖ submitted more than 2.000 parliamentary questions on over 700 organisations,¹² and on 26 August, the government announced a funding task force under the Ministry of Finance, aiming to lower the high funding level gradually and reduce the number of recipient programs.
- 19.** Much of what the Covenant protects, such as social services, counselling and anti-discrimination support, is delivered by NGOs on the State's behalf. Funding instability can therefore affect availability of rights for groups least able to access them. If cuts or political pressure fall more heavily on organisations in migration or anti-discrimination work, as the Civic Forum report claims, the effect could also be discriminatory in outcome.

No domestic or international remedy mechanism

- 20.** The ICESCR is not directly applicable domestically, and Austria has also not ratified the Optional Protocol, so no individual communications procedure exists. Moreover, a previous review by the CESCR (2013) found the mandate of the Ombudsman's Board too narrow, lacking a comprehensive mandate including economic, social and cultural right and competence to deal with ESC-rights violations occurring in the private sector.¹³
- 21.** Non-ratification of the Optional Protocol removes the option of ICESCR being invoked directly in court. This means that effectiveness of domestic implementing mechanisms becomes especially important. However, the Austrian Ombudsman's Office jurisdiction excludes certain ESC-rights violations, particularly those involving private actors, eliminating an important practical access point that could ensure that citizens can complain about the violation of their right under the Covenant. The gap then compounds previous points, as people who do not feel heard have no consultation right and no way to contest the outcome.

We encourage the Committee to recommend that Austria ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant and expand the mandate of the Austrian Ombudsman Board to encompass all economic, social and cultural rights, including violations involving private actors, so that individuals have an effective avenue to seek redress for violations of Covenant rights.

¹² CIVIC SPACDE WATCH, *Civic Space Report 2026*, (2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹³ UN COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, *Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Austria*, E/C.12/AUT/CO/4 (2013), ¶17. Accéder [en ligne](#).

Structural barriers within formal channels of participation

Digital-first administration outpacing accessibility safeguards

- 22.** Internet use among Austrians aged 65-84 reached 75 % in 2025, meaning roughly a quarter of that age group is still offline. The average hides sharp divides: use is 65 % among 75–84-year-olds, 58 % for people whose highest qualification is compulsory schooling (against 96 % for university graduates), and 69 % in rural areas (against 82 % in cities).¹⁴ Use is also not competence. Only 65 % of Austrians have at least basic digital skills, below the EU's 80 % target for 2030. Meanwhile the state has made digital channels the default. The ID Austria replaced the *Handysignatur* in December 2023, and ORF reported at the time that there was no alternative for using the state's digital services.
- 23.** Hence, the means chosen by the state are not accessible to everyone. Especially important is the fact that the offline group overlaps with the low-education, rural, female and older groups that already feel least heard. If digital-only access governs social security (Article 9) or housing support (Article 11), the State must ensure the rights do not depend on a skill the poorest are least likely to have and any removal of analogue routes should happen with equivalent safeguards in place.

Absence of migrant/Roma representation in bodies that administer ESC-rights

- 24.** Despite the existence of the national Roma strategy, as of 2025 there were no Roma working in the public institutions implementing this strategy and the advisory councils against antigypsism were never created. Only 36 % of Roma surveyed know of the strategy in the first place, skewed toward educated men.¹⁵ The Roma Dialogue Platform, the main participation channel, reaches mostly those already affiliated with established organisations, is full of hurdles such as language, time and location, and leaves the choice of content and formats to the Federal Chancellery, not those affected.¹⁶
- 25.** This is a question of participation in implementation, with the problem being tied to the design of the dialogue itself, as the platform separates 'those responsible' from 'those affected'. That makes it consultation without co-determination, and it reproduces the pattern of unequal voice.

¹⁴ See *supra*, note 3.

¹⁵ UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA 'SENSIRO', *Studie zur Evaluierung der nationalen Strategie zur Inklusion der Rom*inja in Österreich*, (2022). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁶ ROMANO CENTRO, *Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation in Austria*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

No local voting rights for long-term third-country nationals

26. Over 600.000 Viennese (more than a third) lack Austrian citizenship,¹⁷ meaning that despite the election turnout in the city council election in 2025 was 62,7 %, in reality this number equals to just 40,5 % of the voting-age population.¹⁸ Vienna districts with the lowest turnout also have more non-citizens, which further lowers their representation. Nationally, 19,7 % of the population lacks the vote because of citizenship, and in districts such as Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus more than 45 % are excluded, with Brigittenau and Favoriten at 44 %.¹⁹
27. While political rights are more closely tied to the ICCPR, the consequence of this phenomenon is that people who are tax-paying, often born in Austria, and affected by housing, social-aid and education decisions, have no say over them at the level where they are delivered. Article 2(2) and 2(3) of the ICESCR require non-discrimination, with limited rights for non-nationals permitted only in developing countries, meaning states like Austria cannot treat non-nationals' economic rights as optional. Article 4 allows limits on rights only to promote the general welfare in a democratic society if a state is able to show that a limitation does not impair the democratic functioning of society, however a shrinking electorate with a turnout of 40,5 % of residents is relevant to that burden.

We encourage the Committee to recommend that Austria extend voting rights in municipal and district elections to long-term resident third-country nationals, subject to a reasonable residence requirement, so that residents affected by local decisions concerning housing, social assistance and education can participate in their formulation.

Recommendations Summarised

28. Indeed, people whose economic and social rights depend most heavily on public decisions are often those with the least opportunity to influence them. Should these disparities continue, Austria risks reinforcing inequalities in the enjoyment of Covenant rights by income, education, age, nationality and social status. In response to the issues outlined in this report, we urge the Committee to do the following:
- I. The Committee should recommend that Austria extend compulsory, assessed civic and media education to all secondary school types, with common minimum learning standards and adequate teacher training.
 - II. The Committee should recommend that Austria establish a binding framework for consultation with civil society and affected rights-holders, including minimum consultation periods and particular measures to secure the participation of low-income, unemployed and marginalised groups.

¹⁷ STADT WIEN, *Wiener Bevölkerung: Daten und Fakten zu Migration und Integration 2025 – Fokus Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁸ BAUBÖCK, R and VALCHARS, G, « Wer ist das (Wahl-)Volk? », *Der Standard*, (11 May 2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁹ SOS MITMENSCH, *Wien-Wahl bringt neuen Rekord an Nicht-Wahlberechtigten*, (2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

- III. The Committee should recommend that Austria ensure stable, transparent and non-discriminatory public funding for civil society organisations, with safeguards against funding decisions based on an organisation's advocacy or the populations it serves.
 - IV. The Committee should recommend that Austria ratify the Optional Protocol to the Covenant and expand the mandate of the Austrian Ombudsman Board to encompass all economic, social and cultural rights, including violations involving private actors.
 - V. The Committee should recommend that Austria maintain accessible non-digital alternatives for essential public services and provide targeted digital assistance, so that access to social security, housing and other Covenant rights does not depend on digital skills or connectivity.
 - VI. The Committee should recommend that Austria ensure meaningful Roma representation in the institutions implementing the National Roma Strategy, establish the planned advisory councils against antigypsyism and reform the Roma Dialogue Platform to enable direct participation by affected communities.
 - VII. The Committee should recommend that Austria extend voting rights in municipal and district elections to long-term resident third-country nationals, subject to a reasonable residence requirement, so that residents affected by local decisions concerning housing, social assistance and education can participate in their formulation.
29. This submission may be published on the OHCHR website or any other places necessary. For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact:

Anna MROCZKOWSKA / NGO Representative
amroczkowska@cvia.ch

Samad QURAISHI / Executive Director
squraishi@cvia.ch

Centre for Voters Initiative & Action Inc.
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, P.O. 294
Washington, D.C. 20004