



CENTRE FOR VOTERS INITIATIVE & ACTION

Austria

NGO Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee

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Introduction

1. The Centre for Voters Initiative & Action presents this report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee ahead of the 146th 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 the 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 Human Rights Committee, to promote civil society participation in the public affairs process.
3. The Centre submits this ahead of the sixth periodic review of Austria under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. Recognising the complex and evolving nature of the challenges Austria faces regarding civic space, gender equality, and the treatment of minority communities, the Centre hopes to provide valuable information to the Committee regarding the State's compliance with issues affecting Article 25. This report is focused on the scope of Article 25, and we encourage Committee members to understand civic education as a foundational tool for addressing the violations outlined below.
4. The Centre has submitted this report to the Committee to focus on five specific violations: (1) systemic barriers to civic education and participatory access; (2) restrictions on freedom of assembly and civil society space; (3) persistent gaps in the participation of women; (4) institutional discrimination and data gaps regarding marginalised groups; and (5) barriers to the participation of disabled persons.

Systemic Barriers to Civic Education and Participatory Access

Social and Cultural Barriers: Educational Segregation of Minority Children and Restrictions on Religious Expression

5. Roma and Sinti children continue to face structural exclusions from mainstream education, frequently being channelled into special schools (*Sonderschulen*) or separated classes within mainstream schools.¹ During the UN Special Rapporteurs on contemporary forms of racism official visit to Austria in December 2025, it had been confirmed that civil society continues to report active patterns of educational segregation, indicating that this concern remains unresolved more than a decade after it was first raised.²

¹ COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, *Concluding observations on the eighteenth to twentieth periodic reports of Austria*, U.N. Doc. [CERD/C/AUT/CO/18-20](#), (23 October 2012), ¶17.

² ASHWINI K.P., *Ms Ashwini K.P to Austria 2 to 9 December 2025: End of visit statement*, OHCHR (9 December 2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

6. Civic inclusions are further restricted by legislative measures targeting religious expression. Under a 2025 federal law amending school regulations, girls under 14 are banned from wearing headscarves during recess and lessons from September 2026, with families facing fines of up to 800 euros for repeated non-compliance.³
7. Amnesty International said it would “add to the current racist climate towards Muslims”. Whilst IGGOe, the body officially recognised as representing the country’s Muslim communities, said the ban “jeopardises social cohesion”, saying that “instead of empowering children, they are stigmatised and marginalised”.
8. A near identical ban on headscarves for girls under ten was struck down by Austria’s Constitutional Court in 2020 on the grounds that it goes against the principle that the state must be religiously neutral.⁴ By conditioning a visibly Muslim girls’ presence in the ordinary classroom on the removal of a religious garment, this measure alienates young citizens from mainstream civic education precisely during formative educational years in which civic identity is forged.

Political Barriers: Absence of Mandatory Standalone Democracy Education

9. *Politische Bildung* (political education) is still not established as a mandatory, standalone school subject across Austria’s secondary curricula. Due to the lack of standardised teacher-training, it is treated as a cross-curricular principal dependent on individual teachers’ initiative.⁵ As recently as 2026 Austria’s own civic education professional bodies, the Austrian Society for Political Education (ÖGPB – *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Politische Bildung*) and the *Interessengemeinschaft Politische Bildung* (IGPB) were actively campaigning for the statutory creation of a standalone subject titled *Demokratiebildung*, itself an acknowledgement that no such structured subject currently exists.⁶
10. Consequently, a pupil’s exposure to structured democratic knowledge and participatory skills depends on which school, region and individual teachers they happen to encounter rather than on any guaranteed national baseline. Article 25 guarantees not only the right but the opportunity to take part in public affairs. This means that a system that leaves the transmission of that opportunity to chance undermines the foundation the right is meant to protect and does so most for students in under-resourced schools least likely to have teachers able or willing to take up civic education on their own initiative.

³ NEWS AGENCIES, « Austrian lawmakers pass headscarf ban for under-14s in schools », *Al Jazeera* (11 December 2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁴ MURPHY François, « Austrian government presses ahead with planned headscarf ban in schools », *Reuters* (9 December 2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁵ LUKSIK Sonja / GÜRSES Hakan, « Political education for adults in Austria: Historical developments and current challenges », *EPALE – Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe* (13 June 2019). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁶ INTERESSENGEMEINSCHAFT POLITISCHE BILDUNG (IGPB). Accéder à <https://igpb.at>.

Economic Barriers: Poverty Suppressing Civic Engagement Capacity

11. In 2025, 16.9% of the Austrian population remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with single-parent households, persons with disabilities, refugees, and migrants disproportionately represented.⁷ Austria's own 2025 PISA results, released in September 2026, confirm large and persistent performance gaps tied to socioeconomic and immigrant background, with disadvantaged students significantly more likely to fall behind in the foundational literacy and reasoning skills civic education depends on.⁸
12. Economic disadvantage therefore does not merely limit the practical opportunity to attend civic events or engage in political life; it measurably widens the baseline gap in the competencies Article 25 participation presupposes, well before students reach voting age. Materially disadvantaged families are also less able to absorb the time and travel costs civic participation itself requires, compounding the social, cultural, and political barriers aforementioned.

We urge the Committee to press Austria on concrete measures to establish a mandatory, standardised civic/democracy education subject with dedicated teacher training, and to press the delegation on how the 2025 headscarf ban complies with the Constitutional Court's own 2020 finding that a near-identical measure was discriminatory.

Restrictions on Freedom of Assembly and Civil Society Space

Non-Public Decrees Criminalising Political Speech

13. A non-public Ministry of Justice decree instructs law enforcement to treat the political chant "[f]rom the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" as establishing an initial criminal suspicion of "condoning terrorist offences" under §282a(2) of the Criminal Code (*StGB*). Relying on this directive, Austrian police prohibited and or forcibly dispersed at least seven peaceful assemblies in Vienna.⁹ An Austrian court subsequently ruled at least one such dispersal unlawful; nevertheless, fines for the same chant continued to be issued after that ruling.¹⁰

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⁷ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Amnesty International Report 2025/26: Austria*, 2026. Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁸ PREVIDELLI Amanda, « What Austria's latest PISA results say about schools, screen time and migrant pupils », *The Local Austria* (10 September 2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

⁹ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, « Austria: Crackdown on Palestinian solidarity has triggered significant chilling effect », *Amnesty International* (March 2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁰ See *supra* note 7.

Selective Restrictions and Consequent Effect on Civil Society

14. Independent human rights monitoring situates these restrictions alongside comparable crackdowns on pro-Palestinian expressions in the United Kingdom and Germany, indicating a content-based restriction on one category of political speech rather than a neutral, generally applicable public-order standard.¹¹
15. Civil society organisations reported to Amnesty human rights researchers that they refrained from organising demonstrations or engaging in public advocacy on this issue for fear of losing State funding or facing administrative retaliation, extending the restrictions practical effects from individual level to organised civic participation on the meso-level.¹²

We urge the Committee to press Austria on ensuring that any definition of antisemitism is aligned with international human rights standards and to remove restrictions on the work of civil society defending the rights of Palestinians and protect them from stigmatisation. Further, urging them to remove any form of undue restrictions on the work of human rights defenders and associations to be able to operate in a safe and enabling environment. Protect them from any form of stigmatisation and ensure their access to public funding without discrimination.

Persistent Gaps in the Participation of Women

Municipal Representation Deficit and Ineffective Non-Binding Quota Mechanisms

16. Whilst women's representation in Austria's National Council reached 36.07% by 2025, women remain severely underrepresented at the entry level of political life.¹³ As of March 2025, women served as mayors in 236 of Austria's 2,092 municipalities, representing approximately 11% of all mayors.¹⁴
17. Austria's 2019 CEDAW Concluding Observations explicitly recommended the adoption of temporary special measures to increase women's representation in Austria's nine provincial parliaments.¹⁵ Existing measures remain limited to a non-binding funding bonus under the Parliamentary Group Financing Act for parties exceeding 40% women, alongside voluntary party self-commitments, Austria's only binding legal quota applies solely to the supervisory boards of state-owned companies, rendering political office itself unaddressed.¹⁶

¹¹ XUN Tony, « Rights group warns Austria's response to pro-Palestinian groups restrict freedom of expression », *JURIST*, (20 March 2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹² CIVIC SPACE WATCH EU, « AUSTRIA: New report documents widespread crackdown on Palestine solidarity », *European Civic Forum*, (25 March 2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹³ FEDERAL CHANCELLERY REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA, *Core document forming part of the State Parties*, (November 2025). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ FEDERAL MINISTRY WOMEN, SCIENCE AND RESEARCH REPUBLIC AUSTRIA, *Women in leadership positions*. Accéder [en ligne](#). Also, see *Frauen.Management.Report* by Austrian Chamber of Labour, and the « Act on Equality between Women and Men in Supervisory Boards » (GFMA-G) (June 2017).

Economic Drivers Restricting Political Candidacy

18. Austria's persistent pay gap and the continued unequal distribution of unpaid care work reduce the financial independence available to women considering candidacy for political office.¹⁷

We urge the Committee to press Austria's delegation on *why* the binding gender-quota mechanism applied to state-owned company boards has not been extended to elected political office; and further, on concrete, time-bound steps to close the municipal-level representation gap identified above.

Institutional Discrimination and Data Gaps Regarding Marginalised Groups

19. Despite explicit commitments in successive government programmes, Austria has not adopted a National Action Plan Against Racism and Discrimination, and reliable census or demographic data on the Roma population in Austria still does not exist. It also notes that the size of Austria's Roma population is only roughly estimated, with estimates for the autochthonous Roma population ranging between 10,000 and 20,000, and that reliable data do not exist.¹⁸
20. A case in point being, May 2026, when a Burgenland police unit issued an official crime-prevention notice specifically naming "Roma and Sinti" as suspect groups. Austria's own Equal Treatment Commission found the notice perpetuated discriminatory racial stereotypes, prompting an internal review by the Interior Ministry.¹⁹ Institutional conduct of this kind directly undermines the trust-building necessary for minority communities to engage with State processes, including electoral ones, and no independent or State source reviewed provides statistics on Roma or national minority candidacy, election, or turnout rates.

We urge the Committee to press Austria on a concrete timeline for adopting a National Action Plan Against Racism, and to ask what data-collection mechanisms are planned to allow independent assessment of Roma and minority political participation.

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¹⁷ See *supra* note 7.

¹⁸ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Austria 2026 - Non-Discrimination Country Report*, (2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

¹⁹ PEKOVICS Michael, « Kritik an Polizeiaussendung zu Roma und Sinti wächst », *Kurier*, (8 May 2026). Accéder [en ligne](#).

Barriers to the Participation of Disabled Persons

Ballot Format Defects and Federal Implementation Deficits

21. Disabled persons' organisations in Austria have repeatedly criticised the illegibility of official voting materials, particularly the small font size used on official candidate lists.²⁰ In its September 2023 Concluding Observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifically criticised the lack of harmonised Convention implementation across Austria's nine federal provinces and municipalities, emphasising that accessibility obligations must apply across all levels of government without exception.²¹ During that review, the Austrian Ombudsman Board and the Austrian Disability Council gave joint testimony highlighting persistent gaps in legal capacity protection and accessible voting infrastructure.²²

Accommodation-Based Framework Vs. Universally Accessibility

22. Austria's electoral framework relies on alternative voting mechanisms – *inter alia* proxy voting, postal voting, and mobile ballot boxes – as accommodations layered onto an inaccessible baseline system, rather than a universally accessible default.²³ Full physical accessibility for all polling stations nationwide has been deferred to 2028, leaving voters with physical disabilities subject to unequal ballot access in the meantime.²⁴

We urge the Committee to press Austria on a binding timeline, earlier than 2028, for universal polling-station accessibility, and on how it intends to implement the CRPD Committee's 2023 finding regarding uneven implementation across the Länder.

Conclusion

23. To conclude, the human rights status quo in Austria regarding civic participation brings to light concerns under Article 25 of the Covenant. The centre hopes the Committee will find this information useful and will centre its concluding observations on the as outlined in this report.

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²⁰ RABITSCH Armin, « Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union », *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 30, pp. 535-553, (10 November 2023). Accéder [en ligne](#).

²¹ COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, *Concluding observations on the combined second and third reports of Austria*, U.N. Doc. [CRPD/C/AUT/CO/2-3](#) (28 September 2023).

²² INTERNATIONAL OMBUDSMAN INSTITUTE, « Press conference on official country review of Austria by the UN CRPD Committee », (22 September 2023). Accéder [en ligne](#).

²³ EUROPEAN UNION AGENCY FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, « Political participation of people with disabilities – new developments », (29 May 2024), <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/political-participation?page=5>.

²⁴ See *supra* note 22.

24. In particular, the Committee should concentrate its dialogue with Austria on: the persistent structural barriers to civic education facing Roma, Sinti, and Muslim children; the chilling effect of assembly restrictions on political expression and civil society engagement; the continued underrepresentation of women at the municipal level despite decades of voluntary measures; the absence of a national action plan against racism amid ongoing institutional discrimination; and the deferred timeline for accessible voting for persons with disabilities. These issues collectively undermine the core of Article 25 rights for Austrian civil society and are critical to the future of inclusive democratic participation in Austria.
25. This submission may be published on the OHCHR website or any other places necessary. For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact:

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