Religious communities as Part of and Solution to the Policy Problem? The addressing of Religious Communities in Austrian, German and Swiss Immigrant Integration Policies

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Résumé

Migration inflows are one of the main reasons for religious diversification in contemporary European societies. At the same time, the relatively young policy field of immigrant integration became a central stage for political debates on religion, especially minority religion. Reasons for this interest in religion are manifold and reach from identity politics and value debates to practical aspects of state - religion relations. Amongst others, immigrant integration policies also address religious communities as part of the policy problem in concrete policy measures. The treatment and involvement of religious groups has implications on liberal democratic foundations as religious pluralization is, due to its robustness, a case of "deep diversity" which liberal democracies tolerate per definition. This foundation is challenged by both the politicization of Islamic presence in Europe, which partly results in illiberal policy developments, and the acts of violence that have been committed in the name of Islam. While religious communities are often objects of political debate, they become actors in policy development and implementation in the field of immigrant integration. According to relevant literature, such policy measures may aim to establish religious communities in legal and organizational terms or follow a "strategy of upgrading religion" by taking steps to regulate religious practices and fight unwanted normative concepts. Another motive for addressing religious groups in immigrant integration policies is the idea of "governing through communities". Here, policy makers utilize religious communities, authorities and infrastructures for the implementation of integration policy goals. Drawing on a qualitative empirical case study from German, Austrian and Swiss immigrant integration policy documents of the past decade, this research identifies different political strategies in the governance of religious diversity and reflects critically on their influence on both majority and minority religious groups.

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