

The Kurdish Diaspora in Austria and its imagined Kurdistan

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This paper intends to show how political changes and transformations in Kurdistan influenced the Kurdish diaspora in Austria. It analyzes the question of whether or not the imagined Kurdistan of nationalist diaspora organizations matches with the reality of the living conditions and references of the Kurdish diaspora communities. Therefore, the consumption and use of media by the Kurdish diaspora in Austria is analyzed. This article will present the Kurdistan imagined by these people, and the reality of their virtual Kurdistan by exploring their use of media and their political and social activities.

This article will first demonstrate the context of the development of the Kurdish diaspora in Austria. As the heterogeneity of the diaspora is a consequence of the heterogeneity of the land of origin and the different histories of Kurdish populations in the different national states, this article will start with an overview on the variety of Kurdish populations and their migration history to Europe.

After an overview of the Kurdish diasporas in Europe and the development of the Kurdish diaspora in Austria this article will demonstrate the heterogeneity of the Kurdish diaspora by a study of the use of media by Austrian Kurds and the relations between different Kurdish groups with each other. Finally, this article will demonstrate the gap between the presence of a common 'Kurdishness' and the social reality of the different groups in the Kurdish diaspora in Austria.

The national identity of Kurds is in many ways more fluid than national identities of existing nation states. For national identities created by existing national states the

“idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people and disseminated through the systems of education, schooling, mass communication, militarization as well as through sports meetings.” (De Cillia / Reisigl / Wodak, 1999: 153)

While Kurds don't have a state and – with the exception of the regional autonomy in Iraq, also no school system or military – Kurdish media are central for the formation of a national identity. However, there are different Kurdish media from different parts of Kurdistan and with different political backgrounds. Therefore, the question of whether or not there is one common field of discourse within Kurdish media is essential to answer the question of whether or not a common Kurdish national identity can emerge in the diaspora. Also, the question exists of whether or not particular regional, political, sectarian or tribal identities play a more important role in the social reality of the Kurdish diaspora.

1. Methods and research questions

This article consists of an introduction on the Kurdish diaspora in Austria and its context, but it also contains an empiric study.

To compare the nationalist imaginations with the social reality, the social integration and segregation within the Kurdish diaspora will be demonstrated through the example of the use of different media.

To match the nationalist pan-Kurdish claims of these organisations with the reality of the living conditions and references of the Kurdish diaspora communities in Austria, the consumption and use of media is analyzed. This demonstrates whether or not the claims of a united and homogenous Kurdish Community match with the social reality in the diaspora.

How do developments in the different parts of Kurdistan mirror themselves again in the diaspora, and how far are they transformed? What role does Kurdistan play, what role do states of origin play and what role does Austria play for the Kurdish communities in Vienna? The use and significance of media allows us to gain empirical indices for the real relationships of the Kurdish diaspora in their lands of origin as well as between Kurds of differing countries of origin within the Austrian diaspora. This approach allows us to critically challenge the Kurdish national movement with reference to a unified 'Kurdish Nation' in the sense of constructivist theories of nationalism (see Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990).

For the quantitative investigation, a total of 140 Kurds in Vienna were polled by means of a standardised questionnaire. Alongside country of birth and their parents' country of birth, individual related data such as age, education, mother tongue (German, Kurmancî, Zaza, Sorani, Gorani / Hawrami, Turkish, Farsi or Arabic) and gender were queried. In total, 55 people gave their land of birth as Turkey, 28 as Iraq, 13 as Syria, 9 as Iran and 5 as the Soviet Union. 30 people were already born in Austria, of whose parents 19 originated from Turkey and 11 from Iraq. In total this sample provides an accurate representation by corresponding to the variety of the Kurds in Austria. The largest group by far originates from Turkey, followed by Iraq. Iranian and Syrian Kurds provide a minority of Austria's Kurdish population while only a very small group originates from the former Soviet Union (mostly from Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan).

All interviews took place in Kurdish societies or at events by Kurdish organisations from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. As a result, a wide scatter of country of origin, gender and age were taken into consideration. However this means that only people that self-identified in some form as being Kurdish, or at the very least casually participate in Kurdish events were questioned. The sample is therefore representative for those Viennese that view themselves as being Kurdish, and not of all that speak a

Kurdish language or dialect. Consequently no Kurds are to be found in the sample that have a stronger association to Political Islam and that are more likely to be involved in Turkish, Arabic or Iranian Mosque societies as opposed to the secular Kurdish organisations. In order to include their perspective, the qualitative part of this study includes an interview with a Kurd within the circles of the Nurculuk-movement. However, this spectrum is not included within the quantitative investigation. Therefore, the quantitative survey is only significant for those Kurds that primarily relate to their Kurdish identity, with their religious identity being only of secondary importance.

For the qualitative part of this study, further qualitative interviews were carried out alongside a Kurd from the circle of the Nurculuk, which again provided a broad spectrum. As some of those interviewed wished to remain anonymous for political reasons, all participants remain anonymous. The 8 total qualitative interviews include a 50 year old woman from Iraqi-Kurdistan and a 40 year old man from Iranian-Kurdistan, who were both politically active and speak Sorani as their mother tongue; a roughly 40 year old Zaza-speaking lady and a roughly 30 year old Kurmancî-speaking man from Turkish-Kurdistan; and another roughly 30 year old man speaking Kurmancî from Syrian-Kurdistan. All of these people were politically active in their country of origin. A young Sorani-speaking woman and a young Turkish-Kurd-speaking Kurmancî were also questioned, both of which were already socialised in Austria. Finally, the seventh participant was the aforementioned Kurdish woman from the Nurculuk circle, a Zaza-speaker from Bingöl (Zaza: Çolig, Kurmancî: Cewlig) who has also lived in Vienna since childhood.

As well as the above, used throughout this study are longstanding participant observations made possible through intensive collaboration with various Kurdish groups in Austria from the mid-1990s onwards.

2. The land of origin: Kurdistan

Kurdistan is not a state, but the term ‘Kurdistan’ has been used for centuries to refer to the region predominantly inhabited by Kurds. Of course there are no exact boundaries of that region, but it includes huge parts of the southeast of Turkey, the northeast of Syria, the north of Iraq, and the northwest of Iran. Additionally, there are traditional Kurdish minorities in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

In the present Armenian-occupied territories of Azerbaijan between 1923 and 1929, a regional administrative unit called ‘Kurdistan Uyezd’ (Russian: Курдистанский уезд), often referred as ‘Red Kurdistan’ existed around the town of Laçın (see Müller, 2002). Other early attempts to establish a Kurdish statehood, like the ‘Republic of Ararat’ of 1927 or the ‘Republic of Mahabad’ of 1946 failed. Since World War I, when the modern national states in the Middle East were created out of the fallen

Ottoman Empire, different Kurdish opposition groups were fighting for a Kurdish state, or at least a greater autonomy from the national state. Several times this led to guerrilla warfare and repressive anti-insurgency policies of the national states, including the genocidal al-Anfal campaign in Iraq between 1986 and 1989.

However, from 1991 onwards the Kurdistan region of Iraq successfully established a Kurdish Para-state. The establishment of the Autonomous Regions of Kurdistan in Iraq and the political changes in the region are putting the Kurdish question back into the focus of regional politics in the Middle East.

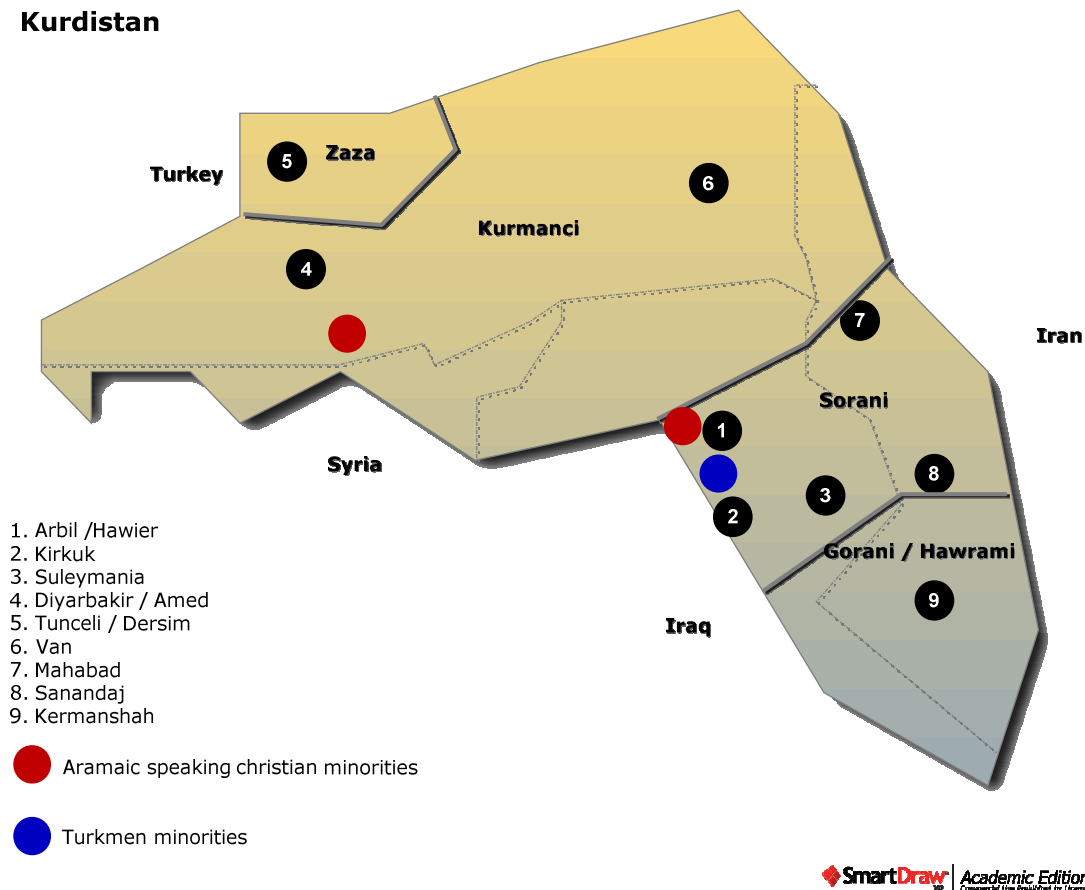
At least four important Middle Eastern states are affected by this Kurdish question. Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran share the territory of Kurdistan:



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But Kurdistan is not a region with a homogenous population. There are different linguistic and religious minorities, like Aramaic-speaking Christians, living in that region. But without a national state, the Kurdish language is far from unified. The following map gives a general outline of the most important Kurdish dialects or languages (Zaza, Kurmancî, Sorani, Gorani / Hawrami) and the borders of present national states that partition Kurdistan between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria:

Kurdistan



Many speakers of these dialects are not able to communicate with each other. Sorani-speaking Kurds from Kirkuk often use Turkish if they want to speak with Kurmanci-speaking Kurds from Turkey or Persian with Gorani-speaking Kurds from Iran. Many linguists and also some speakers of Zaza and Gorani consider those as independent languages and not just dialects of Kurdish.

A long history of political repression, persecution, and poverty forced Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan to leave their country of origin. This resulted in the development of large Kurdish diaspora communities in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Australia, North America, and Europe.

3. Kurdish diaspora in Europe

The Kurdish diaspora in Austria is part of the larger Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Therefore, I will give an overview of that larger diaspora here.

There are no reliable numbers of Kurds living in Europe. The censuses of European states never ask for the ethnicity of their inhabitants, only for their nationality. We know, for example, how many people living in Germany were born in Turkey, but not

how many of them are Kurds. For the year 1995, the prestigious Institut Kurde in Paris estimated the following numbers of Kurds in European states:

Germany: 600.000 – 650.000
France: 100.000 – 120.000
Netherlands: 70.000 – 80.000
Switzerland: 60.000 – 70.000
Belgium: 50.000 – 60.000
Austria: 50.000 – 60.000
Sweden: 25.000 – 30.000
Great-Britain: 20.000 – 25.000
Greece: 20.000 – 25.000
Denmark: 8.000 – 10.000
Norway: 4.000 – 5.000
Italy: 3.000 – 4.000
Finland: 2.000 – 3.000¹

These numbers are certainly underestimated. In all of these countries the Kurdish diaspora increased in the last 17 years. However, the proportions between the different states are still accurate. Germany is by far the country with the biggest Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Also France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, and Sweden have numerous Kurdish inhabitants.

For the Kurds from Turkey, Germany became the most important host country, with nearly one million Kurds living there. Meanwhile, the important Kurdish diaspora of Sweden mainly consists of Kurds from Iraq and Iran, many of them also politically active intellectuals.

While the possibilities for political participation in their countries of origin were limited, the diaspora became an increasingly important political field for Kurdish politics. Transnational identities of the Kurdish diaspora did not at all stop the efforts Kurds were taking to struggle for their own nationalist goals. Gabriel Sheffer argues that nationalism and ethnonationalism could even be strengthened in ethnonational diasporas:

“One of the main arguments in favor of considering ethnonational diasporas as distinct from all other transnational entities is that the new forms of transnationalism and globalization have by no means eliminated the perseverance, and even the strengthening, of ethnicity, nationalism, and ethnonationalism. Ethnonationalism continues to have a significant role and considerable impact in most states and among most of “their” dispersed populations living outside the national borders. In view of this persistence of ethnonationalism and of the ethnic revival worldwide, the

¹ <http://www.institutkurde.org/en/kurdorama/> [1/4/2011]

diaspora phenomenon should be separated from the general phenomenon of transnationalism and from discussions of that phenomenon." (Sheffer, 2006: 126)

The Kurdish diaspora in Europe is definitely an example for such a continuing nationalism within the diaspora. These diaspora politics were always interacting with the political developments in Kurdistan. The political scientist and social anthropologist Eva Østergaard-Nielsen describes the context of the Kurdish diaspora politics in Germany:

"Diasporas generally seek to find leverage in the foreign policy of their host country in order to target their demands for accountability and change. Host states, in their response to such homeland political lobbying, balance national interests, such as domestic stability and relations with the homeland with concerns for the legitimacy of the homeland political agenda associated, to cite one issue, with human rights. For instance, Kurdish organizations advocate recognition of ethnic distinctiveness in Turkey as well as in Germany. They formulate their demands in compliance with international norms of human rights. Some Kurdish organizations use the peaceful means of targeted lobbying and dissemination of information. Others stage large-scale and sometimes violent demonstrations. During the 1990s, there have been waves of attacks on Turkish properties and diplomatic representations throughout Western Europe and in particular in Germany. As a result, there is widespread sensitivity to the Kurdish issue within the diaspora as well as among policymakers in Western Europe. The German government has repeatedly called for a political solution to the Kurdish issue, being careful to choose their words in order not to upset an important ally in the fields of trade, security, and politics." (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2000: 33)

Although much smaller in numbers, the diaspora in Sweden plays an important role for the cultural and political development of Kurds in Europe. Martin van Bruinessen, one of the most important contemporary Kurdologists, characterizes the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden as follows:

"Sweden does not have a large Turkish workers community, but a relatively large and relatively highly educated Kurdish refugee community. Especially writers, journalists and other intellectuals chose Sweden as their place of exile. Sweden gives all immigrant communities great facilities for teaching, publishing and broadcasting in their mother tongues. The Kurdish writers found here a much more stimulating environment for developing Kurdish into a modern literary language than they would have found back in Turkey, even if the language had not been banned there." (Bruinessen, 1999: 10)

These different diasporas of Kurds in Europe have connections to each other. Many extended families have parts of their families in other parts of Europe. Given the example of other diasporas, the Kurds established different diaspora organisations (see Ammann, 1997) in most of the countries of Europe. These political and cultural organizations formed European umbrella organisations and political networks. In many ways the Kurdish diaspora in Austria is connected to these other diasporas in Europe, as well as with their countries of origin.

4. Kurdish immigration to Austria: The emergence of a diaspora

This chapter will explain the emergence and establishment of the Kurdish diaspora in Austria in the context of the Austrian immigration policy in the second half of the 20th century.

While most of the Kurds from Turkey immigrated to Austria as so called ‘Gastarbeiter’ (‘guestworkers’) who were not aware of a specific Kurdish identity and began to form a Kurdish political identity in the diaspora, a larger portion of the Kurds from Iraq, Iran, and Syria came to Austria already as political refugees and endowed with politicized identities. Particularly active Kurds predominantly settled in the capital, Vienna, which emerged as a crucial arena for exiled political activists for Iraqi and Iranian Kurds.

In his dissertation, Khabad Marouf cites the year 1949 as the date on which the first, albeit short-lived, Kurdish student union (not restricted to Austria) was established (Marouf, 2002: 54). The establishment of the politically heterogeneous union brought together two figures, Abdulla Qadir, the leader of the Jamiat al-Islam in Austria, an Islamic brotherhood originating in central Asia that came to Austria through Soviet Muslims who collaborated with the Nazis and had to flee to the US-occupation-zone of Austria in 1945 (see Krammel / Abdelkarim, 2008: 53f) and the future general secretary of the Partî Dêmkirati Kurdistanî Êran (PDKI), Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, (in Kurdish: Ebdurehman Qasimlú) (Marouf, 2002: 54). Despite the establishment of a longer-lasting union of European Kurdish students in 1956, which included students from Germany, France, England, and Austria, Kurdish activities in Austria essentially remained limited to a small number of persons until the 1970s.

However, since 1964 many Kurds immigrated to Austria as workers from Turkey who were hired by the Austrian industry. But most of these workers didn’t focus on their Kurdish identity and were seen as ‘Turks’. Only with the emerging Kurdish national movement parts of them later started to identify themselves as Kurds. These workers were neither intellectuals nor politicians. They came from rural parts of Turkey and were only later politicised by Kurdish politicians and activists who had to leave Turkey after the coup d’état of 1980.

In contrast to that, the small number of Kurds from Iraq and Iran were mainly educated intellectuals, had an outspoken Kurdish identity, and were highly politicised. Many of them actively participated as Peshmergas (kurd.: Pêşmerge, پێشمەرگه)² in the

² literally: “those who face death;” Kurdish Guerilla fighters in the second half of the 20th century most of the time allied with one of the Kurdish opposition parties. Since the establishment of an autonomous region in Kurdistan of Iraq, the term is also used for the armed forces of the Kurdistan

Kurdish uprisings of the 1960s and the war of 1975 in Iraq or in the revolution of 1979 in Iran.

In contrast to the majority of the Kurdish immigrants from Turkey, they saw themselves in exile and continued their political work for their political parties in Europe. While many of the Turkish Kurds discovered their Kurdish identity only in the diaspora (see Ceviz / Weiss, 2008) and became politically active in Europe, the political activities of the Kurds from Iran and Iraq became the main reason for their exile in Austria.

As capital of a neutral country in the Cold War, Vienna became an important place for exile-politics of Kurds from Iraq and Iran. It was in Vienna where parts of the initial discussions regarding the establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) were conducted in 1975. Proceedings between the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) and representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran took place in Vienna. The general secretary of the PDKI Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, as well as two other Kurdish politicians, were murdered by Iranian agents in Vienna in 1989. The persistent significance of Vienna as a place of diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the Kurdish question has most recently been demonstrated by numerous visits from the President of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq, Masoud Barzani, who has been a personal acquaintance of Austrian President Heinz Fischer for over 30 years. Vienna established itself as an important crossroad for Kurdish politicians with the direct connections to Erbil / Hawler, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

These diplomatic relations with Kurdish political parties and since 1991 with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, are a result of the long standing Kurdish diaspora that had emerged in the 1960s. Austria gained political significance from the Kurdish diaspora in 1976 when the Kreisky administration invited a group of 100 Iraqi Kurds to Vienna, who had been living in refugee camps in Iran following the failed rebellion under Mullah Mustafa Barzani. One of the participants of this first group of refugees, Ahmad Fatulla, described the political activities of the group as follows:

“Belonging to the good times of this was the establishment of the new Kurdish student organisation, AKSA, where likeminded students from all parts of Kurdistan came together. Just like the establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the old homeland. The new resistance against Saddam Hussein gave us hope again.”(Fatulla, 2006: 2)

Since the late 1970s, a multitude of Kurdish organisations developed in Vienna. With the politicisation of the Kurds in Turkey and the beginning of the armed conflict between the Kurdish workers party PKK and the Turkish Army following the 1980

Regional Government that took over the Peshmerga of the most important Kurdish parties PUK and PDK.

military coup in Turkey, a large proportion of Turkish-Kurdish economic migrants became increasingly politicised. Consequently, since the 1990s an array of Kurdish organisations was established that were predominantly supported by Kurds from Turkey. These developments are summarised by Harald Waldrauch and Karin Sohler in their work on the topic of migrant organisations in Vienna as follows:

“Also in Austria a range of unions for Kurdish students, academics, scientists and artists were established, among those, the union of exiled Kurdish artists (1992), the union of research and development of the Kurdish language, culture and history (1999) or the Kurdish-Austrian academic union for science and culture (1999). Most of these unions and societies devoted themselves to the scientific exploration of Kurdish history, society, culture of language.” (Waldrauch / Sohler, 2004: 266)

Like the associations of Iraqi and Iranian Kurds, the associations of Turkish Kurds essentially stood alongside the political parties in their country of origin. This includes the PKK and the Socialist Party of Kurdistan (PSK). Both have well-established societies (FEYKOM und KOMKAR) for their environment.

The youngest exile community, the Syrian-Kurds, were strengthened after the crushing of the Kurdish protests in Qamishli in 2004, which led to refugees coming to Austria.

All of these Kurdish organisations claim to be Kurdish national organisations. All of them are to some extent nationalist organisations who claim to fight for independence or autonomy for ‘the Kurds’ and see the Kurds as a unified people within the Middle East. In reality, all of their organisations are connected with a specific Kurdish identity as Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, or Syrian Kurds and with a more specific political identity connecting them to one of the Kurdish political parties.

5. Media usage in the Kurdish diaspora

The responses to the quantitative questionnaire to the use of media do not vary significantly in relation to the gender or age of the participant. However, in general television and the internet were shown to be the most important media for Kurds in Austria.

5.1. Journals

Whereas only a single person of the 140 asked was not in possession of a television and did not watch television, roughly 30% read a newspaper less than once a week. Only 10% read a newspaper daily, which most often is a newspaper in the German language. Only very few regularly read Turkish, Arabic or Persian newspapers from their countries of origin.

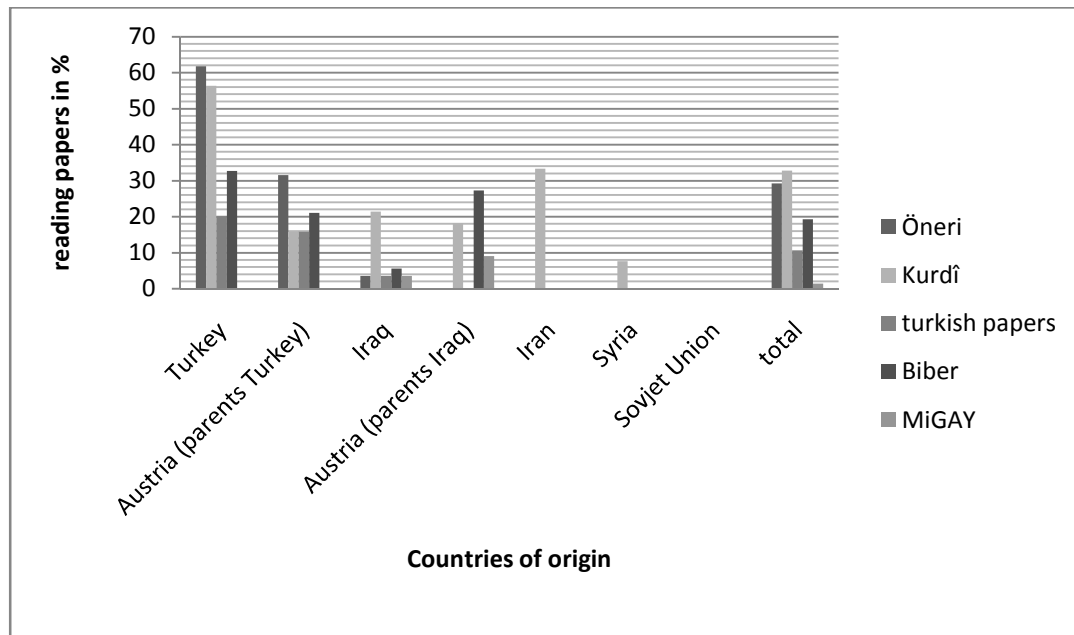
A somewhat different image was provided for journals published by migrants for migrants in Vienna. Despite these also only reaching a minority of Kurds, a large proportion of the Kurdish population from Turkey read several of them.

The listing of journals makes no attempt at completeness; it was more important to ask for different products of the immigrant media landscape. For example, Öneri is a bilingual journal in German and Turkish, produced by leftist immigrants from Turkey with various mother tongues. Many Kurds also sit on the editorial board. The content of the paper can be described as leftist and pro-Kurdish, without directly associating with the PKK or the PSK. Despite pro-Kurdish content, no articles appear in Zaza or Kurmancî, but rather solely in Turkish and German.

Kurdî is a multilingual newspaper established in December 2009, which publishes articles in Kurmancî, Zaza, and German and can be described politically as unaffiliated with any party and again as leftist and pro-Kurdish. In light of the fact that at the time of questioning the paper had only been published twice, with the third issue being released in autumn 2010, the readership of Kurdî being 33% of the entire group and 56% of those born in Turkey is particularly noteworthy.

The questionnaire further asked about the Kemalist-orientated Yeni Vatan Gazetisi and the Turkish newspapers originating from the various strands of political Islam such as Zaman Avusturiya and Yeni Hareket. These are included in the following graph as “Turkish papers.” Biber concerns itself with a project produced both by and for youth that are two or three generations independent from their origin and is written in German. Predominantly but not exclusively published in German is also MiGay, a journal established in 2009 for gay and lesbian immigrants originating from Turkey, Iran, former Yugoslavia, and Poland, as well as other states. This journal was scarcely known, although there were a few from Iraq that responded as having read it who were exclusively women. Due to the wide spread homophobia within the Kurdish community, it is possible that individuals aware of and reading the journal would not admit to doing so.

The following breakdown according to the country of birth of the questioned Kurds clearly demonstrates that these journals only play a large role amongst those Kurds born in Turkey. All answers are provided in the graph, illustrating all those either regularly or occasionally reading one of the above journals. With regard to the fact that the raw figures are of little significance, the results of this question will be provided in a graph.



While 61% of those Kurds born in Turkey and 31% of Kurds born in Austria to parents originating from Turkey regularly or occasionally read the Turkish language through Kurd-friendly Öneri, making it the most read newspaper produced by immigrants, only a tiny number of Iraq Kurds read it (3%).

This is easily explained by the language situation as a proportion of Iraqi Kurds (i.e. in the provinces of Mosul, Hawler, Kirkuk, and the Kurdish regions of the provinces of Salah-ad-Din and Diyālā until Xaneqîn) understand Turkish as a result of the Turkmen minority also inhabiting the area. In the other parts of Kurdistan knowledge of Turkish is rarely found. The multilingual newspaper Kurdî reaches the greatest readership amongst Kurds from Iraq (22%), Iran (33%) and Syria (7%). Most read amongst Kurds born in Austria whose parents originate from Iraq is the solely German language Biber, targeted at a young audience. Here MiGay sparks a significantly larger interest when compared to other groups. Among the Kurds from the former Soviet Union, no journal seems to spark any interest. Based on the entire sample, with a 33% readership of Kurds in Vienna, Kurdî is the most read immigrant journal. This is immediately noteworthy as only a mere two issues have been produced. Also, the spoken Kurdish dialects / languages of Kurmançî and Zaza are only used by those Kurds from Turkey and Syria, as well as those in the extreme north of Iranian-Kurdistan. Of the Turkish language journals, only Öneri plays a role; Kemalist or Turkish Islamist immigrant newspapers are hardly read.

Those Kurds who do not primarily define themselves against their Kurdish identity, but rather against their Islamic one must also be presented. As a result of this difference in focus, they are more likely to be connected to Islamic organisations as opposed to the more secular Kurdish Organisations. With this, other immigrant organisations also become of interest. For example, a Zaza-speaking Muslim woman from Turkey, affiliated with the Nurculuk-movement, reads hardly any of the same

newspapers as her Turkish speaking associates, preferring to read Zaman Avusturya over Öneri or Kurdî.

The small group of Kurds from the former Soviet Union apparently find none of the listed journals as read-worthy. Russian language media may be of greater interest.

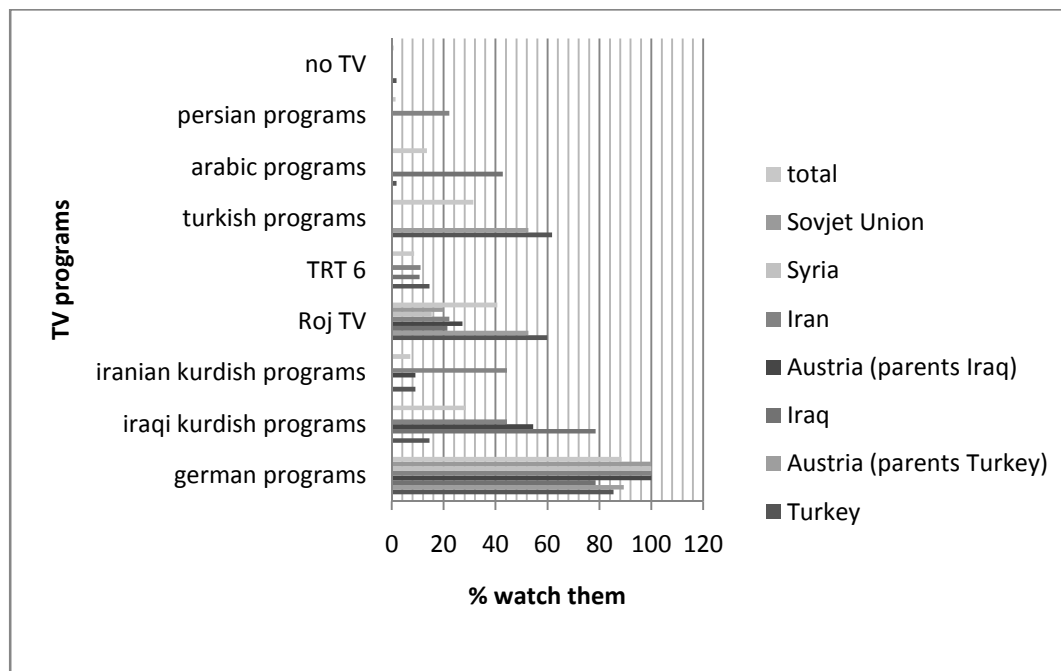
In other qualitative interviews more of the respondents emphasised the importance of written media in the various Kurdish dialects / languages and the according significance of Kurdish languages newspapers like Kurdî. One Zaza-speaking lady from Dêrsim stresses that she first learnt her mother tongue sufficiently here in Austria:

“I learnt to really read and write Zaza here for the first time. We always try to speak Zaza amongst ourselves, but there are still too few texts, so that we can’t really learn written Zaza. Apart from a few articles in Kurdi, nothing is ever written in Zaza here.” (C)

Zaza’s existence is without a doubt substantially in greater threat than Kurmancî, especially because significantly more newspapers and books are published in Kurmancî than in Zaza. This, as well as the relatively high number of Zaza speakers in Austria, resulted in an array of activities to maintain Zaza, which developed in recent years. In Austria there are debates within the Zaza-speaking diaspora about whether Zaza should be categorised as a Kurdish dialect or as its own language. The journal Kurdî already plays an important role in the written transmission of the language, just after its second issue.

5.2. Television

As in other sections of society, amongst the Kurds of Vienna, the television clearly represents the most important form of media. Almost all those questioned watched television regularly, the vast majority on a daily basis. Also queried was the use of individual television stations, which were arranged by origin and language in the following analysis. The generalisation of regular television watching based on the respondents’ country of origin, clearly shows that the television programmes watched varies greatly based on origin:



The Kurdish television programmes of Iranian and Iraqi origin were grouped together, though those from Turkey were separated, showing very different usage. While the PKK-affiliated channel Roj TV was very popular amongst the Kurds of Vienna and was watched by 60% of those Kurds born in Turkey, the Kurdish language state channel TRT, which has existed since 2009, receives fewer viewers with 15%. Roj TV represents the most loved Kurdish channel, followed by programmes from Iraqi-Kurdistan, particularly Kurdsat, KTC and KNN. It is apparent that amongst all groups questioned, the German language channels were dominant; otherwise channels from the country of origin were dominant. Turkish Kurds watch far more Turkish programmes than they do Kurdish programmes from Iraq or Iran. Iranian Kurds partly watch Kurdish programmes from Iraq, though mostly those from Iran. Iraqi Kurds prefer to watch Arabic programmes rather than Kurdish channels from other part of Kurdistan. In contrast, Syrian Kurds rather watch Kurdish channels from Iraq or Turkey, largely as a result of a lack of their own Syrian-Kurdish satellite channel. By all means, the television viewing habits of Kurds in Vienna is widely fragmented based on country of origin.

As loved as the medium of television is amongst the Kurds of Vienna, certain criticisms surfaced in the qualitative questionnaire regarding the quality of Kurdish programmes and the independence of Kurdish programmes from political parties.

In one of the qualitative interviews, a Kurdish woman born in Iraq stressed that for those reasons she would rather watch Arabic television channels from Iraq than Kurdish channels. Her favourite channel, al-Sumaria, has the advantage of being “politically neutral, intelligent and modernly made.” She explains:

“Al-Sumaria is very current. When something happens, you’re aware of it immediately. There are discussion programmes that are very strong and politically independent. Different participants and debaters are invited to the discussions and not only Arabs are involved but Kurds are included too. Depending on the topic, different people participate.” (A)

In contrast she has a considerably more critical view of the Kurdish channels from Iraq:

“All Kurdish channels are party political; there are no independent Kurdish television channels. Every channel broadcasts programmes that the financiers want. When you watch Kurdsat, you actually just see what the PUK wants you to; KTV represents the PDK and KNN Goran. Although KNN is more critical because Goran is in opposition, but ultimately the main concern is still making propaganda for Goran. Even that is not neutral, I’m glad that they report critically, so that we can also see the problems of Kurdistan, but it’s still not objective.” (A)

Kurds more directly connected to a politically party do not dispute that Kurdish television programmes are aligned with particularly political parties; rather they view it less negatively. A Kurd closely aligned with the PKK holds that:

“Of course RojTv is made by my party. But a single neutral reportage just doesn’t exist, if I really want to see what the others are saying then I just have to watch the other party’s channels.” (D)

For younger Kurds this alignment with political parties provides a reason to prefer watching German language television programmes:

“The news programmes on the Kurdish channels are all very politically coloured. I watch them occasionally but they cannot be compared to the Austrian channels. Apart from that they have few interesting programmes, I don’t need to watch dancing Kurds on TV all day long.” (F)

These criticisms of the Kurdish channels are largely directed towards the two channels of the large Iraqi-Kurdish parties, the PDK and PUK.

5.3. Internet

While the radio plays a minimal role and only 15% of the Kurds questioned listened to the radio at all, the internet is evidently of central significance. Almost all those asked under the age of 40 regularly used the internet, most not only to compose e-mails, but also to read the news. Through this, websites in various languages (German, Kurdish, but also Turkish, Arabic, Persian and Russian) are visited.

The use of the internet as an information source poses a particular problem for Syrian and Iranian Kurds, because the strict censoring on the dissemination of information in their home countries limits their access to information. A Kurd originating from Syria paints the following picture:

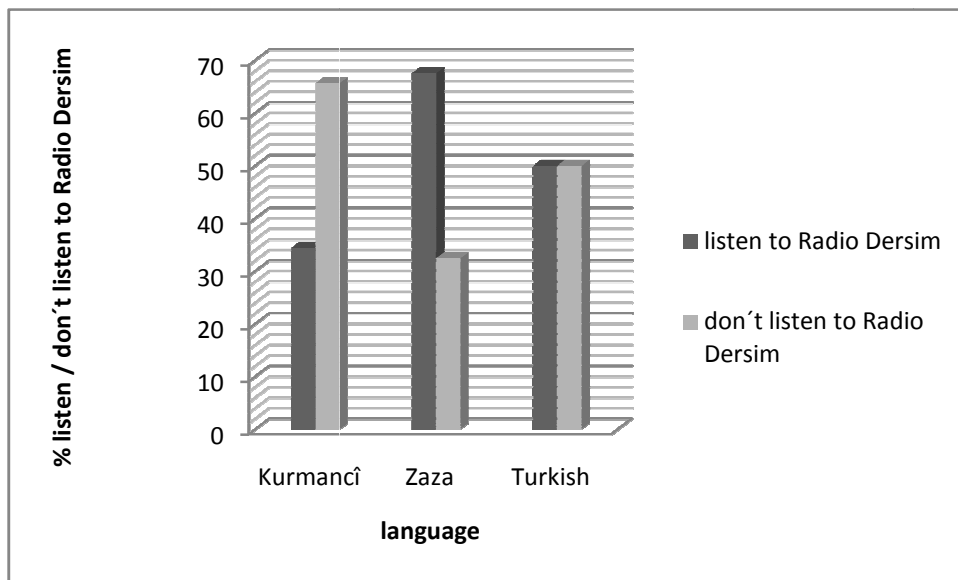
“You can’t say everything over the internet or telephone, it is only when people are personally together that we can exchange freely. Though there are many websites, much of what is written isn’t true, or is only half true. Only the information from my party is truly reliable.” (E)

Also, a Kurd originating from Iran believes that he receives his information from Iran quicker and more reliably through personal contacts and through the parties, than through Kurdish websites:

“Recently even less people are able to get information passed the censor and onto the internet in Iran. It is only until someone in exile writes about it, that I can also know.” (B)

5.4. Radio, citizen’s radio and television

As a result of the altogether minimal use of the radio, the Kurdish programme “Radio Dersim Dengê Kurdenli Vienna / Die kurdische Welle” on Free Radio Orange 94.0, plays a relatively minimal role. One exception is provided however by Zaza speakers, of whom at least 66% regularly or occasionally listen to the programme. The programme is primarily created by people from Dêrsim (turk.: Tunceli) and is consequently transmitted in Zaza. It is self-evident that this results in linguistic difficulties for Kurmancî speakers. Kurds from Iraq, Iran, or Syria hardly listen to the programme at all. The following graph respectively illustrates those Kurds from Turkey or those with parents from Turkey that regularly or occasionally listen to Radio Dersim (in %):



The graph clearly demonstrates that the programme is primarily listened to by those that speak Zaza but that Turkish-speaking Kurds, of whom there are many in the region of Dêrsim/Tunceli, also listen to the programme. This implies that a considerable proportion of the Turkish-speaking population from Dêrsim possesses at

the very least a passive understanding of Zaza, or has developed one (possibly only in Austria).

From Radio Dersim the television programme *So Be hervor* is also transmitted from citizen's television station Okto, which has existed since November 2005. The programme by Eren Kilic, who has been active in the support of Zaza for years, claims to "help the Kurdish languages threatened by extinction, Zaza and Kurmancî through the presentation of music, literature etc. enabling them to live on."³ As significantly less people possess the technical requirements to receive Okto, the viewer levels cannot be directly compared to the listeners of Radio Dersim. However, almost half the Kurds from Turkey stated that they watched the programme at least occasionally, while the programme was almost unknown amongst Iraqi and Iranian Kurds.

6. (Un)Organised diaspora

The consumption and production of media by the Kurds in Austria demonstrates that even in the diaspora no real collective Kurdish media landscape can be created. More often most Kurds consume the media from their country of origin. Often non-Kurdish media from their country of origin is preferred to Kurdish media from other states.

These divisions are also reflected in Kurdish organisations. Although some organisations, such as the Kurdish Student union YXK or the Kurdish women's society AVESTA, have a common Kurdish stated objective, they usually become de facto dominated by Kurds from one country of origin. Attempts by these societies to incorporate other Kurds collapse under the lack of a common language. One Iraqi student, who was elected for a period to the board of a student society dominated by Turkish-Kurds, was bitter that the students from Turkey always spoke Turkish amongst each other, a completely foreign language to her, and was also held as "betrayal" to the mother tongue.

6.1. Linguistic differences

Even when Kurdish is spoken, the problem of understanding is present between the different dialects, at least in the case of Zaza and Hawrami/Gorani which are regarded as independent languages by many linguists (see Hennerbichler, 2004: 196).

These linguistic differences and similarities promote closeness between Sorani speaking Kurds from Iran and Iraq, who also use the same alphabet, whilst separating those Kurmancî-speakers originating from Turkey and Syria.

³ <http://okto.tv/sendungen/>

Turkish is usually spoken in the PKK-aligned umbrella organisation FEYKOM. A woman active in the organisation does not attribute this to the differences with other Kurds:

“The language problem could be solved somehow. We usually speak Turkish but the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds cannot and will not understand why we always speak Turkish. They are partly right when they criticise us. Although many can speak Kurdish, through assimilation and force many are used to speaking Turkish. The Iraqi and Iranian Kurds also don’t try to bring us round to speaking our mother tongue or teach it to us. We should try to speak our own language but this is not the reason for our differences. The main reason is political; the different states have aimed at setting us against each other.” (C)

6.2. Political differences

More important than the languages are actually the political differences. Almost all Kurdish societies in Austria are aligned with a particularly political party, allowing the political parties to have a de facto control on the organisational life of the community. For the Iraqi Kurds it is the PDK (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan), PUK (Yekîtî Niştimanî Kurdistan), Goran and the Communist Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Komunîst Kurdistan). For the Syrian Kurds it is primarily the Azadî-Party, but also the PDK-Syria, the Partiya Yekîtî and the PKK-sister party PYD (Partîya Yekîtiya Demokratîk). For Iranian Kurds it is both fractions of the PDKI (Partî Dêmokratî Kurdistanî Êran) divided since 2006 and the PKK sister party PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê). Finally, for the Turkish Kurds it is the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), the PSK (Partiya Sosyalîst a Kurdistan), as well as a few leftist radical groups from Turkey, that do not only organise Kurds. The PİK (Partiya Îslamiya Kurdistan) has only a few members who are working together with the PKK. Not represented in Austria are the two rival split fractions of the Iranian-Kurdish Komalah and the Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist parties in Iran –Komalah.

Political disagreements in the countries of origin are reproduced within the parties in Austria. This is how the division of the PDKI (Partî Dêmokratî Kurdistanî Êran) occurred in 2006 into a faction of Mustafa Hijri and of Abdullah Hassanzadeh. In the first few years both factions hatefully stood against each other in such a way that it was impossible for Iraqi Kurds to organise an event with both groups. To this day events such as the celebrations for the Republic of Mahabad are organised separately. Also, the split between the PUK in Iraq and the establishment of the Listi Goran through Newşîrwan Mistefa in 2009 were reproduced in Austria. A large proportion of old activists in the PUK left the PUK-group and founded a Goran-Group in Austria. However, this split occurred with fewer problems and with less tension between the two groups compared to the split between the PDKI in 2006. Almost all these parties formed some associations as front line organisations.

Completely separate from these political organisations are those Kurds which do not view themselves as a part of the Kurdish national movement, identifying primarily through their religious identity. A Kurd from Bingöl, closely aligned with the Nurculuk movement, explains her relationship to the Kurdish organisations as follows:

“I view myself as a Muslim, above everything else. Of course I speak Zaza but after all it was nationalism that brought us into this repression. In the Ottoman Empire we were all simply Muslims and now the AKP is bringing in a completely different politics compared to the Kemalists.” (H)

The Political Islam of the followers of Fetullah Gülen, distances itself from belonging to the Kurdish national movement, which is of course not valid for all streams of Political Islam. Independent activities of this movement are not known in Austria; the PİK (Partiya İslamiya Kurdistan) seems to occasionally aide the PKK circle.

Secular Kurdish parties largely dominate the organised Kurdish diaspora. Political events, demonstrations and Newroz celebrations are carried out separately according to political party, although some unified blocks have emerged. Iraqi and Iranian Kurds more frequently organise events together. Syrian Kurds gain individual visitors to their demonstrations from Iraqi or Iranian Kurdish parties. The third centre is the PKK with its interface organisations and the followers of its Iranian and Syrian sister parties (PJAK and PYD), which rarely collaborates with the other Iraqi and Iranian parties. A long active Iranian Kurd explains the strong cooperation between Iraqi and Iranian Kurds as follows:

“We even had a lot more contact with each other in Kurdistan. The Iraqi Kurds already came to us in 1946 to defend the Republic of Mahabad; recently we are coming from the same political movements. These contacts have remained in Vienna; we simply never had any contact with Turkish and Syrian Kurds.” (B)

A Kurd, active with FEYKOM, confirms these lines of divisions but also sees the potential to overcome them:

“We have little contact between different groups, although this had gotten better in recent years because of a few individuals efforts at creating these contacts. For example there are now a few people from Iran, Iraq and Syria as part of FEYKOM, though in any case they are few. The reason they have little to do with each other is primarily a result of politics, involving the parties. Before PKK guerrillas and other Pershmergas had problems with each other. That is where the prejudice originates, rightly or wrongly. Recently however it’s become more positive as one has tried to create contacts.” (C)

The Kurdish parties play also an important role in the access to material resources, particularly for Iraqi Kurds. A long standing political activist from Iraq describes this as such:

“I have been here for 30 years. I left Iraq. I have received nothing and given everything up. Now I can go back to Iraq, get my house back, as well as also receiving a pension and a piece of land. If I went back as politically independent, if I went back as such and said I want 250 square meters of land, then I would be asked which party I belong to. If I didn't belong to any party I would receive nothing. If I belong to a party I can call from here and resolve it. That is why everyone is in a party. One needs them for the distribution of land and wealth, that is why everyone must be a member to secure their life. If you have no party anyone can do everything with you.” (A)

However not all Kurds have direct contact with the political parties. Primarily amongst the younger generations, many maintain a certain distance to the Kurdish parties. A young Kurd, whose parents originate from Turkey, shows a clear distance to the political parties and Kurdish organisations:

“They are all so focused on Kurdistan. I have completely different problems here in Austria. Of course they want to do something for back home, but I can't begin to do anything for that, at least not with the infighting between the parties.” (G)

6.3. Political participation in Austria

Other young Kurds become politically active in Austrian political parties and are able to find an escape from the Kurd-centric politics. Particularly in the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the Green Party, there are more and more Kurds becoming politically active. For the Vienna municipal council elections 2010, Şenol Akkılıç, a Zaza-Kurd from Dêrsim, campaigned for a seat for the Green Party and became the first Kurd in the parliament of the Austrian federal state. Following his example, Kurdish candidates of the SPÖ produced election campaign materials in different Kurdish dialects. Aziz Miran, a social democratic candidate for the Vienna municipal council from Kurdistan-Iraq produced election campaign materials in Sorani, Kurmancî, and Arabic. At the last presidential elections 2010, the successfully re-elected president Heinz Fischer also produced election campaign materials in Kurdish.

All Austrian political parties, including the extreme right wing Freedom-Party (FPÖ) have connections to Kurdish political parties. Supporters of the PKK march on the first of every May with their flags and pictures of Abdullah Öcalan, as part of the first of May parade of the Social Democratic Party. Each year, Austrian politicians of all parties are invited to monitor the Newroz celebrations in Kurdistan. These contacts to political parties are crucial for their influence in Austria. But as for organizing the diaspora, the Kurdish political parties still play a much bigger role than the Austrian parties.

7. Kurdish identity and its intersections with other identities

Despite the divisions alongside political-party-affiliations and countries of origin, most Kurds share an idea of ‘Kurdishness,’ or *Kurdayetî* in Kurdish. *Kurdayetî* is a term used by Kurdish nationalists to describe the national consciousness of Kurds.

The term is continuously used in political speeches in Kurdistan but also in the diaspora. This national consciousness in the diaspora is highly developed. However, it does not result in a common Kurdish diaspora and is not strong enough to overcome the divisions within the Kurdish diaspora.

Kurds do know about the suffering and the uprisings in other parts of Kurdistan. For example, Turkish Kurds also organize ceremonies to remember the gas attack on Halabja in 1988. For some survivors of Halabja, this was also seen as taking over their suffering for the political purpose of the PKK and PKK-affiliated groups. However, educated Kurds know about the sufferings and uprisings of Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan and see that as part of a common national history, though on a practical level, they are active only for the political goals of their own political party and the struggles in their own country of origin.

Consequently, the Kurdish diaspora has different layers of identity. Even if many see themselves as predominately Kurdish, their social realities overlap not only with the majority society, but also with other diasporas of their countries of origin. Kurds from Iran participate in some activities of Kurds from Iraq, but they also participate in activities of other Iranian diasporas. At the protests against the election fraud in 2009 Iranian Kurds participated together with Persians, Azeris and other Iranians at the weekly protests in Vienna. Kurds from Iraq played an important role in the exile-opposition of Iraqis and worked together with Communists and Shiite activists. After 2003, they reconnected with the new embassy, when an Ambassador of the PDK took over the Embassy from the former Baath Regime. Even the Turkish Kurds share a lot of their daily lives with many non-Kurds from Turkey. Even if they would never work together with Kemalist or Turkish nationalist groups, many restaurants or shops are visited by both Kurds and Turks. In the meetings, these groups normally use the Turkish language because many of them have lost the ability to speak Kurdish due to the forced assimilation in Turkey. Their Kurdish identity also intersects with class, gender, sexual orientation, and different religious identities. Religious Sunni Kurds pray alongside their Turkish co-believers in the same *Mescit*. Alevi Kurds celebrate their *Semah* in a *Cemevi* together with Turkish Alevis. Additionally, besides ethnically mixed religious associations, there is also a separate Alevi community consisting only of Zaza-speaking Alevis from Dêrsim in Vienna.

These religious identities play different roles in the individual lives of Kurds in the diaspora. This does not only mean that there are religious and less- or non-religious Kurds. For Alevi Kurds their Alevi identity often plays an important role if they are not religious themselves. For many of the secular left wing Alevis, their Alevism is seen as a tradition of resistance against the Ottomans, the Turkish Republic, and their 'official' Islam.

The diaspora-identities of Kurds in Austria are multi-layered identities where different ethnic, religious, linguistic, class, or gender-identities intersect with each

other. Being Kurdish is an important part of identity for most of them, but it is not the sole source of identity like it is portrayed by some nationalist Kurdish groups. Rather, it is an important part of a narration of common suffering, and a history of marginalisation and resistance, more than it is a social reality in the lives of Kurds in the diaspora.

8. Conclusion

In sum, the Kurdish diaspora in Austria is politically and linguistically fragmented. Regional origin, language / dialect, and especially political party identity are still playing a central role. In many cases this is also decades after the escape or migration to Austria. Only among part of the younger generation, already socialised in Austria, are these fragmentations and the significance of a Kurdish political and cultural identity dissolving somewhat. *Kurdayetî* is seen as an important part of the diaspora identity, but a collective unified Kurdish identity exists solely in the political ideals of the nationalist movements, not in the social reality of the Kurdish population. 'Kurdistan' exists only as an imagination and not as an 'imagined community' that produces social reality.

This social reality is formed by three different milieus that have little to do with each other on a day to day basis:

1. A predominantly Sorani-speaking milieu of Kurds originating from Iraq and Iran to which the smaller Hawrami/Gorani- and Lori- and Laki- speaking groups are connected, through their widespread Sorani knowledge as a second language.
2. A predominantly Kurmancî-speaking milieu of Kurds of Syria that has only formed in recent years as a result of the flight of Syrian Kurds to Austria.
3. A Turkish-Kurdish milieu, which is comprised of Kurmancî and Zaza speakers. Within this group there exists a tendency to form cultural organisations just for Zaza speakers. This numerically largest group is further differentiated between PKK followers and followers of the PSK, as well as other parties and groups. In the PKK circle, one can also find smaller groups of followers of PKK sister parties from Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Most Kurdish media in Austria is produced for and by this group.

The number of Kurds from the former Soviet Union is once again too small to form its own social milieu.

All these milieus overlap with the milieus of other diasporas from each country of origin. For all three social milieus, the political developments in the land of origin still

play an important role. Kurdish media play an important though not primary role; information is also provided through personal contacts or through the parties. Political developments within the land of origin are often also carried out in Austria. Amongst the Kurds already socialised in Austria such transformations take place that would warrant a further investigation.

‘Kurdistan’ as a unified nation does exist as an ‘imagined community,’ though due to the lack of a unified political entity, it exclusively exists only as an imagination. This state of affairs is also reflected in the Kurdish diaspora in Austria. However, some sort of a fluid Kurdish identity definitely plays an important role for most of the Kurds living in Austria. But a closer look at them would demonstrate that it would be more appropriate to speak about multiple Kurdish identities than about one Kurdish identity.

These different Kurdish identities intersect with other identities of religion, class, gender, generation, or sexual orientation. However, that does not make these different imaginations of *Kurdayetî* irrelevant, but puts them into the context of different Kurdish identities within the diaspora. Both the quantitative and qualitative studies demonstrate that a common field of discourse within Kurdish media exists only in a marginal way. The qualitative interviews underline the fragmentation of the Kurdish diaspora alongside political, linguistic, and religious lines, but also alongside the present non-Kurdish nation-states. A Kurdish national identity could be created only alongside other regional, political, sectarian, or tribal identities. Therefore, it plays one role, but not the only or major role, for the varying identities of Kurds in Austria.

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Qualitative Interviews:

A: A roughly 50 year old Sorani-speaking lady from Iraqi-Kurdistan (Province Kirkuk) who was active in the Iraqi communist party and has been active in the Kurdish and Iraqi communities in Vienna for many years.

B: A roughly 40 year old Sorani-speaking man from Iranian-Kurdistan (Mahabad), that was active within the PDK-I till its split in 2006. Since then he has pulled himself out of organised politics as a result of the fighting between the two factions of Mustafa Hijri and Abdullah Hassanzadeh that are also represented in Vienna.

C: A roughly 40 year old Zaza-speaking woman from Dêrsim who was already active in Turkey within the circle of the PKK. In contrast to the other interviewees, she is Alevi and not a Sunni Muslim.

D: A roughly 30 year old Kurmanji-speaking man from Turkish-Kurdistan, who was active in the PKK and now lives in exile in Vienna.

E: A roughly 30 year old Kurmanji-speaking man from Syrian-Kurdistan, who was part of a Kurdish opposition party that has lived in exile in Vienna for 5 years.

F: A young Sorani-speaking Iraqi Kurdish woman, who was born in Iraq but moved to Austria as a small child and grew up there.

G: A young Kurmancî-speaking Kurd, already born in Austria, who parents originate from Turkey. He grew up speaking three languages and is not involved politically.

H: A Zaza-speaking Sunni Muslim woman from within the Nurculuk circle originating from Bingöl (Zaza: Çolig, Kurmancî: Cewlig), who has lived in Vienna since childhood. Though not politically active herself, she can be found among the religious-political circle of followers of Fethullah Gülen.

All interviews took place in April and May 2010.