



The EU-Debate in Austria: Dynamic perceptions and ambiguous politics

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When Austria joined the European Union 21 years ago with 66.6 percent of the people voting in favour one could hardly expect the turn the public EU debate would take in the years to come. Mission accomplished, the nationwide information campaign, supported by the federal government and nearly all major societal players, abruptly came to an end. Nevertheless, the referendum had risen high expectations, which could not be met easily, and Austrian politics quickly adopted the comfortable blame-game with Brussels, even for some of the shortfalls of their own policymaking. Refraining from actively discussing the pros and cons of European politics, which admittedly can be quite technical, citizens' concerns often were left unanswered. EU-critics and the mass media used this information gap to shape an anti-EU rhetoric depicting themselves many times as the voice of the "ordinary people".

The bilateral measures imposed by EU-member states in 2000 as a reaction to the Austrian Freedom Party's participation in the federal government cast a shadow on the relationship with Austria's EU-Partners. Price increases in sensitive areas following the introduction of the Euro, as well as the Eastern enlargement of the European Union raised concerns about national sovereignty, increased competition and economic benefits. Discontent surrounding EU bureaucracy, imperfect democratic procedures at EU level and - finally but important - Austria being a net contributor to the EU budget further polarised the public debate. The perception that European integration is accelerating rather than managing the downfalls of globalisation also made space for increasing Euroscepticism. Despite Austria being an open and small economy and rated among the world's most internationalised countries, globalisation is still often regarded as a threat to long-term achievements such as the Austrian economic, social and welfare system or high environmental and social standards. An ever-increasing interconnectedness and digitalisation lead people to glorify a seemingly better past ignoring the shortcomings of pre-EU Austrian state structures.

Still today the image of the European Union suffers from the fact that it cannot meet the high expectations it itself creates. Divergent views fail to provide effective and sustainable solutions to overcome recent challenges. This held true during the economic and financial crisis when construction faults of the Eurozone became apparent. As a result, trust in politics dramatically decreased. The loss of confidence in the common currency was particularly alarming, because the Euro was widely regarded as a key to stability and an important element to shape a European identity.

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The missing link

Questions of European solidarity moved towards the centre of the debate, an aspect also stressed during the most recent refugee and migration dilemma. Whereas – especially in the summer and autumn of 2015 – humanitarian aspects dominated the public discourse, perceptions changed following the Cologne incidents in Germany. Mistrust towards politicians and the media peaked, as they were suspected of not communicating the whole truth. Uncertainty was fuelled by media reports stressing the helplessness of public institutions at national borders and the lack of strategies regarding the overall refugee-situation. Contradictory and often alarming statements, selective reporting of crimes committed by refugees and asylum seekers, growing criticism regarding Germany's refugee strategy and concerns about the effectiveness of pan-European plans also boosted mistrust. Moreover, some interpreted the permanent focus on refugees as if national governments were not paying enough attention to their “own” citizens' problems. In addition, anti-globalisation tendencies and scepticism towards foreign workers in general as well as a weak economic outlook also made for an explosive mix. In the meantime, the rhetoric focusing on European values was replaced by an ever-stricter security discourse. Whereas the Visegrad states were harshly criticised at the beginning for not showing solidarity by rejecting the integration of refugees and the implementation of quotas, bits and parts of politics and public opinion now openly demonstrate sympathy. Those who still proclaim a “Willkommenskultur” - a term which even was elected “word of the year 2015” - have continuously been pushed to the margins of the discussion deriding them as “do-gooders”.

Opinion vs. facts

The case of national and anti-globalisation sentiments is also palpable in the TTIP and CETA discussion. Politics again hesitated to lead the debate on potential benefits and risks of comprehensive free trade and international economic agreements. The topic was left to other players – especially NGOs and mainstream media. With no “official” governmental commitment, respectively a clear approach to address concerns and misperceptions, there was plenty of room for rumours which formed a diffuse sentiment of unease. An emotionalised public debate limited the readiness to compromise. Publicly demonstrated disagreement between the parties in power did not help to de-emotionalize the free trade discourse nor did last-minute attempts for citizens' involvement.

The question of more direct democracy is an ever-recurring element in Austrian EU debates. The Brexit case and others, e.g. the Dutch referendum regarding the EU-Ukraine association agreement, demonstrate though that national referenda on complex issues can turn into double-edged swords, which rather often cause overall protest than an evaluation of the issue at hand.

The Austrian Freedom Party is particularly eager to promote national referenda, using Switzerland as best-practice example. These claims are strongly interconnected with its criticism of representative democracy, the hope of permanent agenda setting, campaigning and mass mobilisation and the will to decelerate or reverse further European Integration.

Support for EU-membership

Notwithstanding these difficult dynamics, there is a clear – though rather passive – majority of Austrians in favour of the EU membership: A total number of 51 Austrian-wide opinion-surveys of the Austrian Society for European Politics since 1995 show that an average of 70 percent want Austria to stay in the EU, while 23 percent would prefer to leave. The highest support for EU-membership was recorded in June/July 2002 (80 percent), the strongest wish to leave the EU in June/July 2008 (33 percent). The turbulent political and economic times in the United Kingdom after the Brexit-vote also left their marks. The desire among Austrians to leave the European Union decreased instantly by 8 percentage points. With regard to the aftermaths of the British decision and changes in public opinion, politicians of the Freedom Party – at least for the time being – refrained from claims to hold a referendum about Austrian EU membership.

Austrians may wish for a different design of the European Union, but the majority of people shows no interest to exit. They might not have fallen in love with the EU-single market, but have a rather realistic and pragmatic view that EU membership is still the best option for an export-orientated country in the heart of Europe. Moreover, personal benefits such as free travel, the practical advantages of a common European currency, free

movement of goods and services, consumer benefits or European youth exchange programs are highly appreciated. The Austrian people are well aware that cross-border challenges can only be solved together and would like to see a strong Union that meets their expectations. The multitude of problems the EU is confronted with has clearly diminished trust in politics be it on national or European level. It is, therefore, up to political leadership to fill the gap and counter the populist seduction. A new and positive narrative combined with concrete action would indeed help to calm the waves.