



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

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When Austria joined the European Union 22 years ago, with 66.6% of the people voting in favour, one could hardly have expected the turn public opinion would take in the years to come. The remarkably high support for EU membership¹ was not least the result of a nationwide information campaign, supported by the federal government and nearly all major societal players. Mission accomplished, these efforts abruptly came to an end. Nevertheless, the referendum had raised high expectations, which could not be met easily, and Austrian politics quickly adopted a comfortable blame-game with Brussels, even for some of the shortcomings in their own policy-making. Refraining from actively discussing the pros and cons of European politics, which admittedly can be quite technical, citizens' concerns often were left unaddressed. Time and again, EU critics and mass media used this information gap to shape an anti-EU rhetoric depicting themselves as the voices of the 'ordinary people'.

In 2000, the diplomatic and political measures imposed on Austria by 14 EU member states in reaction to the participation in the federal government of the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) cast a pall over the relationship between Austria and its EU partners.² Price increases in some areas following

¹ In 1994 other referenda on EU membership were held in Finland, Sweden and Norway and showed considerably less support to join the European Union (Finland: 56.9%; Sweden: 52.3%; Norway: 47.8%).

² The measures were imposed on 4 February 2000 due to fears that a government with the participation of the FPÖ could breach fundamental principles of EU law and values. The governments of the 14 member states stated that they would not promote or accept any official bilateral contacts at political level with an Austrian government integrating the FPÖ. They would not support Austrian candidates seeking positions in international organisations; Austrian ambassadors in EU capitals would only be received at a technical level. These measures – commonly referred to as “EU sanctions” on Austria – were widely regarded as unjustified throughout the Austrian public and had a lasting negative impact on public opinion towards the EU. The bilateral measures were lifted on 12 September 2000.

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the introduction of the euro, as well as the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, raised concerns about national sovereignty, but also increased competition and economic benefits. Discontent surrounding EU bureaucracy, imperfect democratic procedures at EU level and Austria being a net contributor to the EU budget further polarised public debate. The perception that European integration was accelerating without managing the downsides of globalisation fuelled 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. The negative aspects of 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 in Austria of the European Union suffers, because the EU cannot meet the high expectations politics create. Divergent views fail to provide effective and sustainable solutions to overcome recent challenges. This was especially true during the economic and financial crisis when the structural defects of the Eurozone became apparent, and during the migration crisis that came to a head in 2015. As a result, trust in politicians dramatically decreased. An Austria-wide survey by the Austrian Society for European Politics (March 2017)³ shows that 73% of respondents described the EU as “weak” and 51% as “unsecure”. Only 31% of Austrians think that “carrying on” as it has been done is a good option for the Union while 69% want the EU to concentrate exclusively on certain policy areas (April 2017).⁴ 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 in shaping a European identity. After a peak in confidence in March 2010 (70% had very high/high confidence in the euro), confidence decreased to 38% in September/October 2012. Since then, confidence in the common currency has stabilised at around 50%.⁵

The missing link

Questions regarding European solidarity moved centre stage in the debate, an aspect also stressed during the recent refugee and migration crisis.

Whereas – especially in the summer and autumn of 2015 – humanitarian aspects dominated the public discourse, perceptions changed following sexual assaults on women in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve 2015/16. Mistrust of politicians and the media peaked, as they were suspected of not communicating the whole truth on the involvement of asylum seekers and migrants in these events.

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 exacerbated the lack of trust. Some even interpreted national governments' prolonged focus on refugees as neglecting their “own” citizens' problems. In addition, anti-globalisation tendencies, suspicion of foreign workers in general and a weak economic outlook made for an explosive mix. In the meantime, the rhetoric focusing on European values was replaced by an ever-stricter security discourse. Those who still proclaim a “*Willkommenskultur*” – the “2015 word of the year” – have continuously been pushed to the margins of the discussion and derided as “do-gooders”.

³ <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/2017/03/oegfe-umfrage-frauen-sehen-die-eu-heute-deutlich-positiver-als-maenner/>.

⁴ <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/2017/05/oegfe-umfrage-oesterreicherinnen-wuenschen-sich-eine-flexible-und-effizientere-europaeische-union/>.

⁵ <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/2017/01/oegfe-umfrage-15-jahre-euro-bargeld-oesterreicherinnen-sehen-euro-zukunft-durchausoptimistisch/>.

Opinions vs. facts

National and anti-globalisation sentiments are also palpable in discussions of TTIP and CETA. Politicians again failed to lead the debate over 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 to a clear approach to addressing concerns and misperceptions, there was plenty of room for rumours which propagated unease. An emotionalised public debate limited readiness to compromise. Publicly expressed disagreement between the parties in power exacerbated this, and last-minute attempts for citizens’ involvement did little to counter it.

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

The opposition Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which in recent years gained public support and is now in a close battle with the Social Democrats and the People’s Party to win the upcoming parliamentary elections, is particularly eager to promote national referenda, using Switzerland as an example. These claims are strongly interconnected with its criticism of representative democracy, hope of permanent agenda setting, campaigning and mass mobilisation and will to decelerate or reverse European integration. With its claims for national referenda, the FPÖ strives to present itself as the “voice of the people”; the governing parties, meanwhile, call for other means to strengthen direct democracy, e.g. by introducing a central voter registry, the possibility to support online petitions and greater inclusion of citizens in the legislation process via crowdsourcing.⁶

Support for EU membership

Notwithstanding these difficult dynamics, there is a clear – though rather passive – majority of Austrians in favour of EU membership. Since 1995, 54 Austria-wide opinion surveys conducted by the Austrian Society for European Politics have shown that an average of 70% of respondents want Austria to stay in the EU, while 23% would prefer to leave. The highest support for EU membership was recorded in June/July 2002 (80%), and the strongest support for leaving the EU in June/July 2008 (33%).⁷ The political and economic turbulence in the United Kingdom after the Brexit vote also left their mark. The desire among Austrians to leave the European Union decreased instantly by 8 percentage points. With regard to the aftermath of the British decision and changes in public opinion, Freedom Party politicians – at least for the time being – refrained from calling for a referendum on Austrian EU membership.

Austrians may wish for a different design of the European Union, but the majority shows no interest in leaving it. They might not have fallen in love with the EU single market, but they have a rather realistic and pragmatic view that EU membership, particularly when times are uncertain the world over, is the best option for an export-oriented country in the heart of Europe. Moreover, personal benefits such as passport-free travel, the practical advantages of a common European currency, free movement of goods and services, consumer benefits and European youth exchange programmes 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 EU’s many problems have clearly diminished confidence in the political process, whether on a national or European level. It is, therefore, up to the

⁶ https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2017/PK0580/index.shtml.

⁷ <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/2017/06/oegfe-umfrage-steigende-zustimmung-zur-eu-mitgliedschaft-aber-skepsis-gegenueber-vertiefter-euro-zone/>.

political leadership to fill the gap and counter populist arguments. A new and positive narrative combined with concrete action would indeed help to calm the waves.

To counter populist trends, Austrian politicians should engage more in actively shaping the debate on the future of the European Union, by honestly depicting the pros and cons to the Austrian public. Instead of promoting short-term and in the end counter-productive national solutions, we should strive to argue for common European solutions.

The Austrian (and French) presidential elections demonstrated that it is possible to prevail with an explicitly European agenda. A straightforward European perspective and confidence can help to show that the EU is a positive force.

On 15 October, Austrians will cast their vote in a snap election following the breakup of the coalition of the conservative People's Party and the Social Democrats. According to a recent ÖGfE survey, three out of four Austrians say the position a political party takes towards the EU is crucial to their voting decision. For 52% the topic of EU reform should play a prominent role in the election campaign.⁸ At this point, however, only the Green Party and the liberal NEOS Party promote a determinedly pro-European agenda, while government parties would like to win over from the Freedom Party voters who are not diehard EU opponents. Until the parliamentary elections take place, emotions will prevail over a factual debate on the future of Europe. A substantial discussion of European developments is likely to be postponed but not annulled.

⁸ <http://oegfe.at/wordpress/2017/06/oegfe-umfrage-steigende-zustimmung-zur-eu-mitgliedschaft-aber-skepsis-gegenueber-vertiefter-euro-zone/>.