

# Austrian Euroscepticism has grown markedly, but voters still show little support for leaving the EU

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*Austria is often cited as an EU state that could potentially follow the UK in holding a referendum on EU membership, but how have attitudes toward the EU changed in the country over recent years? **Paul Schmidt** states that while there remains a consistent majority among Austrian citizens for staying in the EU, criticism of European policymaking has increased substantially since the early 2000s. Nevertheless, survey evidence indicates that there was an immediate reduction in the number of Austrian citizens who support leaving the EU following the UK's referendum, and a so called 'AEXIT' remains an extremely unlikely prospect in the near future.*



When Austria joined the European Union 21 years ago with 66.6 percent of the public voting in favour, one could hardly have expected the turn the country's EU debate would take in the years to come. Following the referendum, there was a sense of 'mission accomplished'. The nationwide information campaign that had accompanied the referendum, supported by the federal government and nearly all major societal players, abruptly came to an end.

Nevertheless, the referendum had raised expectations, which could not be met easily, and Austrian politics quickly adopted a blame-game with Brussels, even assigning the EU responsibility for some of the shortfalls of their own policymaking. As key political actors refrained from actively discussing the pros and cons of European politics, which admittedly can be quite technical, citizens' concerns were often left unanswered. Eurosceptics and the mass media used this information gap to establish an anti-EU narrative, frequently depicting themselves as the voice of "ordinary people".

In 2000, bilateral measures were imposed by EU states against Austria as a reaction to the participation of the **Freedom Party of Austria** (FPÖ) in government, casting a shadow over the relationship between the country and its EU partners. Price increases in sensitive areas following the introduction of the euro, as well as the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, further raised concerns about national sovereignty, increased competition and the economic benefits of membership. Discontent surrounding EU bureaucracy, imperfect democratic

procedures at the EU level and – finally, but importantly – Austria's status as a net contributor to the EU budget have also polarised the public debate.

The perception that European integration is exacerbating rather than managing the downsides of globalisation has ultimately created a 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 has led people to glorify a seemingly better past, albeit ignoring the shortcomings of the Austrian state prior to its EU accession.

And today the image of the European Union suffers from the fact that it cannot meet the high expectations that it itself has created. Divergent views have nevertheless failed to provide effective and sustainable solutions to overcome recent challenges. This held true during the economic and financial crisis when structural faults in the design of the single currency became apparent. As a result, trust in politics has dramatically decreased. The loss of confidence in the common currency was particularly alarming because the euro was widely regarded as key to stability in Austria, and an important element in facilitating the growth of a European identity.

### **The effect of the migration crisis**

Questions of European solidarity have now moved to the centre of the debate in Austria, heightened by the recent refugee and migration policy crisis. While humanitarian issues initially dominated the public discourse, particularly in the summer and autumn of 2015, perceptions changed markedly following the large number of sexual assaults reported in Germany on New Year's Eve, notably in Cologne. Mistrust toward politicians and the media has spiked on the basis that they are suspected of not communicating the whole truth about the scope of the crisis.

Uncertainty has been fuelled by media reports stressing the helplessness of public institutions at national borders and the lack of a coherent strategy regarding the refugee situation in general. 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 Europe's approach overall have also boosted unease. Moreover, some have interpreted the permanent focus on refugees as proof that national governments are not paying enough attention to their "own" citizens' problems.

Another factor has been that anti-globalisation sentiments and negative attitudes toward foreign workers have combined with a weak economic outlook to create something of an explosive mix. The discourse around European values has been sidelined in favour of one focused more strongly on security issues. Although the Visegrad states were sharply criticised for closing their borders, in Austria, currently integrating more than 100 thousand refugees, public opinion has now partly shifted to show more sympathy with this perspective. Those who still proclaim a *Willkommenskultur* – a term which was so ubiquitous in 2015 that it was even voted "word of the year" – now find themselves pushed to the margins of the discussion, if not outwardly derided as 'do gooders'.

### **Free trade and direct democracy**

Away from the migration crisis, anti-globalisation sentiments in Austria have perhaps been most visible in discussions around the EU's proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States and the CETA agreement with Canada. Austrian politicians have once again hesitated to tackle these issues head on by outlining the potential benefits and risks of each agreement and free trade more generally.

The topic has largely been left to other players, specifically NGOs and the mainstream media. The lack of government commitment to present a clear case that can address concerns and misperceptions has left plenty of room for rumours to form and harden public opinion. The emotional character of the debate has limited citizens' readiness to compromise, while public disagreements among each of the two mainstream parties in Austria, who are currently in a grand coalition, have done little to help the situation.

The question of more direct democracy is an additional ever-recurring element in Austrian EU debates. From the government's perspective, the Brexit referendum, alongside other cases such as the Dutch referendum on the

EU-Ukraine Association Agreement earlier this year, demonstrate the peril that can arise from direct democracy, with referendums on complex issues quickly transforming into generalised protest rather than a limited evaluation of the issue at hand.

Unsurprisingly, the FPÖ is particularly eager to promote national referendums, using Switzerland as a best-practice example, and articulating a consistent critique of representative democracy. By doing so it hopes not only to halt or reverse European integration, but also to secure a stronger agenda setting role, while benefitting from the mass mobilisation that would accompany a referendum.

### Support for EU membership

So what does survey evidence say about public opinion toward the EU in Austria? Despite the developments outlined above, there remains a clear, if relatively passive, [majority of Austrian citizens](#) in favour of EU membership. No less than 51 surveys have been conducted by the Austrian Society for European Politics since 1995 on this question, with an average of 70 per cent of respondents wanting Austria to remain in the EU, and an average of 23 per cent in favour of leaving. The highest support ever for EU membership was recorded in June/July 2002, at 80 per cent, while the highest figure for leaving occurred in June/July 2008 at 33 per cent.

Most interestingly, there was clear evidence of a Brexit impact on Austrian public opinion. In the aftermath of the UK's referendum, support among Austrians for leaving the EU immediately declined in these surveys by 8 percentage points. The FPÖ, at least for the time being, has reacted to this shift in public opinion by refraining from calling for a referendum on Austria's EU membership, at least for the time being.

While Austrians may have a strong desire to see the EU reformed, this has not translated into support for an exit altogether. They may not have any great love for the EU or its single market in principle, but have adopted something of a pragmatic perspective, recognising that membership is still the best option for an export-oriented country in the heart of Europe. Personal benefits, such as easy travel, the practical advantages of sharing a single European currency, the free movement of goods and services, consumer benefits and the EU's youth exchange programmes are also viewed as positive factors.

Austrians tend to have an appreciation that cross-border challenges can only be solved together and they would like to see a strong Union that meets their expectations. The multitude of problems the EU is confronted with has clearly damaged trust in politics, both at the national and European levels. It is therefore incumbent upon the country's political leaders to fill this gap and counter populist narratives. A new, more positive approach to the European integration, combined with concrete reforms, would no doubt help calm the waves further.

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