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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Austria

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1 Sceptical public opinion and a troubled relationship

Opposition to Turkish accession to the European Union (EU) has been at outstandingly high levels both in public opinion and amongst political actors in Austria. Eurobarometer and other surveys have constantly identified values of 65% to over 80% of respondents opposed to Turkish membership since 2005. In this context, the established government parties, the Christian-democratic Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), have been at best lukewarm in supporting the EU's accession negotiations with Turkey, short of torpedoing the procedure. In the case of the ÖVP, the reluctance to embrace Turkish membership mirrors a scepticism also present on the centre-right in Germany or France. The coalition between the ÖVP and the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) delayed the opening of accession negotiations with Turkey in 2005.

Strikingly, the social-democratic party has been less enthusiastic regarding Turkey's accession to the EU than its counterparts in other EU member states. In part, this can be explained by the influence of public opinion in Austria. Additionally, there is also a more fundamental concern within the Austrian labour movement regarding the expected labour market pressures following EU enlargement towards economically less developed countries such as Turkey.

The FPÖ, as well as minor populist parties with temporary parliamentary representation, have always voiced their opposition to the prospect of Turkey acceding the EU very clearly. The same applies to the influential tabloid newspaper *Die Krone*, which has a wide readership and frequently used this leverage to campaign for its preferred policy outcomes. The Green party has been the only established political force that in principle and under the condition of genuine reforms in the fields of civil rights, democracy and rule of law favours a Turkish EU accession. In a similar line of argumentation, representatives of a traditionally weak liberal tradition in politics and the media also support accession, considering it an instrument for the Europeanisation of Turkey.

In conclusion, the Austrian debate on EU-Turkey relations is closely intertwined with domestic politics and public opinion. Immigration is one of the most salient political topics, and the Turkish community of about 260,000 people represents one of the country's largest migrant populations. It is not difficult to see how the prospect of Turkish accession to the EU could be linked to the issue of Turkish migration. The uniquely strong and early rise of the populist right since the late 1980s has benefitted from the mobilization of such concerns linked to immigration.

¹ The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

1.2 Shifting Austrian narratives about Turkey: From identities to values

The main narrative in the Austrian conception of Turkey is an almost ideal-typical example of the notion of a cultural “Other”. This roots in the imperial period, in which the Habsburg Emperors faced the Ottoman Sultans in a confrontation between Christianity and Islam. The Ottoman sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683 are two of the most iconic events reported in Austrian history textbooks. These far-fetched historical references have been revived in the discourse on Turkish labour migration. Beginning with a bilateral agreement with Turkey in 1964, the Austrian government had invited Turkish workers to come to Austria to compensate for labour shortages. These so-called “guest workers” (“*Gastarbeiter*”) were initially intended to stay for a temporary period, but eventually many families settled and stayed. Today, the estimated number of Austrian residents of Turkish origin amounts to around 260,000. The populist anti-foreigner discourse often built on the reservoir of cultural animosities. One example was the 2005 campaign for the Viennese municipal elections, in which the Freedom Party’s slogan read “Vienna must not become Istanbul”.

It must be noted that both large mainstream parties have been careful not to frame their position in terms of identity. Instead, they have focused their reservations on utilitarian arguments. For instance, they have repeatedly voiced the warning that the EU in its current institutional setup was not ready to take in another member state of such large size. They have also pointed out that the EU’s external borders would be extended to the instable Middle East and that the economic divergences between Turkey and the EU were simply too large for full economic integration at this stage.

Over time, the explicitly cultural narrative receded into the background even in the discourse of the populist right, corresponding to a more general shift towards frames that centre on social and economic grievances since the financial crisis of 2008. With regards to relations to Turkey, the focus across the political spectrum has moved to argumentations based on the “European values” of democracy and human rights. The political mainstream sharpened its rhetoric in the context of the events of 2016, centred on criticism of the perceived authoritarian turn of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. It is however worth noticing that Austrian foreign policy usually adopts a position of dialogue when dealing with matters of democracy and human rights. From this point of view, it is all the more remarkable that Austria has been an outspoken defender of a hard line of the EU vis-à-vis Turkey.

1.3 A debate dominated by immigration

One of the main policy areas dominating the Austrian debates about EU-Turkey relations is evidently immigration in its various dimensions. One important aspect concerns the integration of citizens of Turkish origins into Austrian society, even though this is only indirectly related to the question of the EU’s relationship with Turkey. The discussion about the impact of Turkish EU accession on the labour market is also visibly related to the question of immigration. In addition,

security has been a recurring concern, for instance pertaining to Turkey's conflict-prone Eastern borders. In relation to the role of Islam and its compatibility with Western political systems, the area of democracy and human rights has also been touched upon occasionally. Finally, some specific EU policies, such as in the area of agriculture, were important for interest groups albeit less publicly salient.

2. Future of EU-Turkey relations

2.1 Shrinking prospects of cooperative relations

As regards the future of EU-Turkey relations, Austria has shown a clear preference against a revitalization of membership talks, and even called for their suspension in the latest phase in 2016. Surveys by the Austrian Society for European Politics have shown that in recent years, public opposition to enlargement in general, and Turkish accession in particular, has increased further. Only 10 percent would support Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU).

There are nonetheless divergences of views. One main criticism of the government position comes from the liberal defenders of EU enlargement policy as a tool for the Europeanisation of Turkey. From this perspective, the Austrian position for the suspension of talks is seen as a diplomatic mistake at a moment when cooperation and dialogue is needed. An underlying disagreement comes to the fore here, notably regarding the extent to which the government should follow public opinion rather than adapting to the complex necessities of international relations. From the latter point of view, it is more advisable to place Austria firmly in the European mainstream, and thereby contribute to an expanded international role of the EU. For instance, the outspokenly pro-European political scientist Anton Pelinka (Central European University) voiced sharp criticism of the government's course, which, in his view, attempts to accommodate right-wing populism and neglects the pro-European opposition in Turkey.

On the far-right, the populist FPÖ party continues to voice its hostility towards any closer relations between Turkey and the EU, including the cooperation on refugee movements agreed in March 2016. One of the main points of contention with regards to the joint statement that has become known as the "refugee deal" was the promise of accelerating the procedure of lifting visa restrictions for Turkish citizens travelling to the Schengen area. On the other side of the political spectrum, there has been growing scepticism of Turkey ruled by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in response to increasing authoritarian tendencies, and, most importantly, the collapse of the peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This attitude is reflected in parts of the social-democratic and green parties as well as a number of smaller left-wing groupings.

The business community takes an interest in Turkey as a partner of the EU. This is understandable given the fact that Austrian investors are strongly engaged with the Turkish economy. The Austrian Chamber of Commerce reports that from 2002 to 2015, Austria has been

the second largest provider of foreign direct investment with over USD 9 billion. However, it should be noted that the peak of Austrian investment activity in Turkey was reached between 2009 and 2011 and has since decreased. The business community does in any case not take a strong political position as to its preferences for future EU-Turkey relations. The long-time president of the Chamber of Commerce has made clear that the priority lies in the deepening of economic rather than political ties, for instance through a participation of Turkey in the European Economic Area.

2.2 Open-ended talks and privileged partnership

Austrian government representatives have repeatedly stressed that accession negotiations should not automatically lead to full Turkish EU membership but constitute an “open-ended” process. In this spirit, the notion of a privileged partnership between Turkey and the EU has been mentioned as a potential alternative to full accession at several times, in line with proposals put forward by German conservatives. However, this idea has today lost much of its credit in comparison to the 2000s, when a rapprochement between Turkey and the EU was observable – for instance, when Austria demanded that the option should be considered in the final phase before accession negotiations were opened in October 2005. While the debate presently focuses on navigating the acute tensions between the countries, the centre-right ÖVP party nonetheless presented a largely neglected paper on the future EU-Turkey relations. The proposal dispenses the notion of privileged partnership and calls for a “union of interests” instead. The main pillars of such a union would be cooperation in the areas of internal and external security, an extended customs union and further dialogue on human rights. At the same time, however, perspectives for full EU accession or complete freedom of movement were not included.

2.3 Recent events and the hardening of the Austrian position

The current debate was strongly influenced by the dramatic events of 2015 and 2016, concerning the refugee question as well as domestic Turkish politics. In this context, Austrian objections to Turkish membership have become even stronger and have led to a renewed conflict between the two countries’ governments. Already in the run-up to the open crisis in EU-Turkey relations in late 2016, actions of the ruling AKP party had antagonised Austrian politics. For instance, the visit of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, party leader at the time, to Vienna to give a speech to the Turkish community before the 2014 Turkish presidential elections led to criticism from across the political spectrum – a controversy that is at the time of writing to repeat itself in an even more heated climate before the constitutional referendum in April 2017. Indeed, since the AKP government’s harsh reaction to the Gezi park protests in 2013, also liberal observers have become more pessimistic about a Turkish EU perspective.

The year 2016, witnessing the EU-Turkey “refugee deal” in March, the attempted military coup on 15 July and a general souring of the EU’s relations with Turkey in its follow-up, marks a

breaking point. The refugee deal, including the promise of accelerated visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens, has called forth opposition from various quarters. Besides the usual right-wing concerns regarding immigration and hence visa liberalisation, there is now also a stronger case to make against cooperation with Turkey on the basis of human rights. The Turkish government's reaction to the failed coup attempt of July motivated the recently appointed social-democratic Federal Chancellor Christian Kern to conclude that Turkey was leaving the grounds of rule of law and to call for an end to the accession talks. In November 2016, all six parliamentary parties issued a joint statement that condemned the human rights situation in Turkey and called on the EU to suspend negotiations.

This was carried further by Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz in a December 2016 meeting of the Council of the EU. When his demand to freeze accession negotiations did not find any other supporters amongst the 28 foreign ministers, he blocked the adoption of the meeting's conclusions. The controversy over the failed coup attempt was largely amplified after Viennese residents of Turkish origin came together for spontaneous, unregistered demonstrations in support of the AKP government, which included reported Islamic chants and a violent incident at a Kurdish restaurant. This episode is yet another example for the interrelatedness of Austria's domestic politics and its position on the European stage in relation to Turkey.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

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3.1 Instability in the neighbourhood as further obstacle to rapprochement

Neighbourhood issues and global developments do not figure prominently in the Austrian debate on Turkey's relationship with the EU. As has been repeatedly argued here, much of the debate hinges on the dynamics of the domestic context. Nonetheless, Austria's generally sceptical stance towards enlargement of the EU towards the East and the South stems not least from the image of this European neighbourhood as a troubled area. It is not deemed desirable to extend the EU's borders into an area of instability. The impact of this view is even stronger now that the protection of Europe's external borders, especially as a consequence of the refugee crisis following the Syrian civil war, has become a highly salient issue in public debate across the continent. This suggests that Turkey's chances to receive Austrian approval for its EU accession ambitions have not improved.

Despite the recent strain on relations with Turkey, the Austrian government has stated its commitment to the agreement reached between the EU and Turkey to curb refugee movements over the Mediterranean – the so-called refugee deal of 18 March 2016. This is part of a wider recognition that cooperation with Turkey in questions of security and migration is indispensable. In light of the existing differences, this view is at present usually voiced in a subdued and vague manner, without specifying strategic options to move ahead. However, the need for close

cooperation with Turkey on security issues is an important element of the above-mentioned ÖVP proposal for a future EU-Turkey “union of interest”. It includes calls for deeper cooperation in justice and home affairs as well as in foreign and security policy.

3.2 The OSCE as a basis for new cooperation?

Austria took over the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for the year 2017 and defined three priorities in this regard: defusing existing conflicts, fighting radicalization and violent extremism, and rebuilding trust and confidence between the 57 participating states. This programme could help to identify some common ground on which fruitful cooperation between Austria and Turkey is possible outside of the EU framework. As to the first priority, Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood is affected by conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia, both within the realm of the OSCE. A second priority concerns the fight against radicalisation and violent extremism – an area in which both countries share overlapping interests and could benefit from closer cooperation. For instance, numerous young Austrians have in the past years allegedly travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS, possibly passing through Turkey. Closer cooperation between the relevant authorities could help shutting down this route. Finally, rebuilding trust and confidence within the OSCE is a more generally framed objective, but one that can easily be seen as an important measure in the specific relationship between Austria and Turkey as well.

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3.3 Uncertainty in the global arena and the Austrian debate

With regards to other global developments, the same mechanism as in the immediate neighbourhood applies. The Austrian public exhibits a strong aversion to risky international involvement based on concerns for domestic security as well as the country’s international status of neutrality. The current uncertainty about the international order only amplifies the unwillingness of Austrians to engage in external policy, be it within or beyond the European region. Outside of Europe this played a role when Austria withdrew its troops from the UN peacekeeping mission on the Golan Heights in 2013 in the context of the intensifying civil war in Syria. These concerns then also have an impact on public views of EU enlargement into a zone of instability, which easily translate into opposition to the accession of states in the Western Balkans and, above all, Turkey.

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