

The Freedom Party of Austria and the Rise of Euroscepticism

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JAMIE SANDERS, JUL 31 2012

The Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs: FPÖ*) and the rise of Euroscepticism in this Alpine nation

“Let’s get into the red-white-red lifeboat before this European Union ship sinks”, Heinz-Christian Strache, Leader of the FPÖ (cited in Shields, 2012)

Austria is a country of contrasts; with natural mountainous landscapes and sprawling conurbations. The United Nations offices are located just 10 minutes away from the Hofburg Palace, which once housed the rulers of its imperial past. It is famous for being the birthplace of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, yet equally infamous for its other son, Adolf Hitler. It is diverse, with mosques and cathedrals sitting on the same street. A country that definitely benefits from membership of the European Union (EU) but which does not seem to realise it.

Euroscepticism is rife throughout the Member States with Latvians being particularly sceptical of EU membership. Support for EU membership stands at 25% with only marginally better results in the United Kingdom and Hungary where respectively 28% and 32% of citizens believe that membership is a good thing. In Austria, 41% of citizens are enthusiastic about EU membership but this is still well below the EU average (European Commission, 2009:91-93). As political integration between the Member States has increased, opposition to the whole ‘European project’ has risen too. These negative perceptions of the EU have been played upon and used by political parties to garner support – especially by those at the far-right of the political spectrum. In this respect, it is immediately clear that whilst ideology does play its part; scepticism of the EU is usually strategic (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002: 28). Paul Taggart defines Euroscepticism as “the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (1998: 365-366). This is the position of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Even though it does not propose Austria’s withdrawal from the Union, it does believe that changes should be made and is critical of the EU in its current form – mostly because the expectations that the country had when it joined have not been fulfilled (BBC, 2009).

The FPÖ is able to play on the patriotism of Austrians and use this to their advantage. “There are few examples in history of a small-state society forming an identity as quickly as did Austria, which had to cope in addition with the traumata of two world wars and the loss of its status as a major power. National pride in Austria, highly developed even by international standards, has never been more powerful than it is today...” (Rathkolb, 2010: 270). This national pride and the feeling of ‘being Austrian’ is what the FPÖ is dedicated to protecting as it believes that this is being gradually eroded (FPÖ, 2011).

This essay will look in-depth at the Party and how the ‘European issue’ has played out over time. It will also suggest some reasons for such a low level of public support for the EU amongst the Austrian public. Finally, this essay concludes by suggesting that Austrian opposition to the EU and the rise of the FPÖ are not anomalies – Euroscepticism is becoming more mainstream. This is a real threat to European integration as previously these attitudes had only been present within protest and single-issue political parties.

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From Outsider to Member of the EU Club

Austria became an official Member State of the EU on 1st January 1995 (Austrian Foreign Ministry, 2012); but this was not a simple process. After the Second World War had ended, Austria committed to remaining permanently neutral (Fallend, 2008: 204-205). Joining the EU, or its predecessors, would therefore have been a violation of its Declaration of Permanent Neutrality but this changed once international lawyers ruled that the two were compatible (Fallend, 2008: 205). During the 1980's Austria's economy was beginning to suffer and given that over 60% of its exports were going to countries in the European Community, consensus was reached amongst politicians and business leaders that the country would benefit from membership. So once this hurdle over Austria's compatibility with membership had been overcome, the Austrian National Assembly approved the decision to submit an application to Brussels (Müller, 2008: 8-9).

During the FPÖ's Party Congress in May 1993, opposition to Austria's accession was voiced through their "...yes, but' approach to EU membership. (For some, that spelled 'No, unless...')" (Höbelt, 2003:100). This represented a notable shift within the FPÖ as their MP's were amongst those who voted in favour of submitting the application to join the Union in the first place. This sudden shift however, had little to no effect on Austria's accession (Müller, 2008: 8). Before joining the Union, a referendum in Austria had to be conducted as a revision to its constitution was required. Rather surprisingly, 66.6% voted 'yes' to EU membership in this referendum (Fallend, 2008: 205). It therefore appeared that it was not only the large businesses that were in favour of membership, but the everyday Austrian too.

This positive feeling towards the EU was not long-lasting. In fact it has been suggested that the only reason for such a high 'yes' vote in the Austrian referendum was purely down to a well orchestrated campaign by all of the Parties involved – with the exception of the FPÖ and the Greens of course (Müller, 2008:8). Almost immediately after accession in spring 1995, support for EU membership dropped to 40%, and then to 29% in the autumn of that same year (Fallend, 2008: 206). In many ways this is to be expected as peoples' perceptions and expectations of the EU change in the run up and after accession, as was also seen in the case of Poland (Guerra, 2013). However, Austria was not just experiencing a lull in support for the EU. *Figure 1* shows how support for the EU has consistently been below that of the other Member States.

Figure 1: Eurobarometer survey – 'Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership of the European Community (Common Market) is a good thing?'

Austria
EU (Average)
May 1995
39%
56%
May 1996
27%
48%
April 1997
30%

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46%

May 1998

36%

51%

April 1999

36%

48%

June 2000

32%

49%

May 2001

34%

48%

May 2002

37%

53%

November 2003

34.6%

48.2%

April 2004

30%

48%

June 2005

37%

54%

April 2006

34%

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55%

May 2007

36%

57%

April 2008

36%

52%

June 2009

41%

53%

June 2010

36%

49%

May 2011

37%

47%

Adapted from: *European Commission (2012a)*

This data from the Eurobarometer surveys clearly shows that those who feel that membership is a good thing has always been lower than the EU average (European Commission, 2012a). However, data can be misleading, so it is useful to explore the reasons as to why Austria appears to be so sceptical of the EU. As an increasing number of competences are transferred to Brussels, then Euroscepticism also increases as a result of worries over the loss of sovereignty and a fear that Brussels will not be acting in their interests – these fears are magnified in Austria. “The Alpine regions in the center of Europe have always been skeptical of a distant capital they saw [as] unresponsive, if not actually alien to their interests and traditions” (Höbelt, 2003: 224). It is no coincidence that the mountainous Länder of Carinthia and Vorarlberg are where the FPÖ is most successful. These provinces are located at the most western and southern parts of Austria respectively, and the FPÖ cleverly uses this feeling of being misunderstood by the politicians in Vienna to their advantage (Höbelt, 2003: 224). If these alpine regions feel misunderstood by their own national capital then it is only natural that they do not trust Brussels, which is located even further away.

As previously discussed, a strong national identity has developed in Austria. This is not necessarily a problem as one can feel attached to both their country and Europe. In the most recent Eurobarometer from 2006, 44% of the respondents said that they “sometimes” felt both Austrian and European, which was 6% higher than the EU average (European Commission, 2012b). But for this feeling of being European to increase, education is key. “...In primary schools kids are treated to large helpings of the scenic beauty and the cleanliness of island Austria, where life is good and tourists turn up in their millions. In this basic grounding in national identity no reference is made to the hosts of migrants with other cultural backgrounds and national traditions, nor to the facts of Austria’s international networking

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and European integration” (Rathkolb, 2010: 270-271). This would suggest that Euroscepticism is high in part due to a lack of education and knowledge about what the EU actually does. These false perceptions of the EU work to the advantage of Eurosceptic political parties such as the FPÖ.

It was only once Austria's accession to the soon-to-be EU became a very real possibility that the FPÖ switched from being supportive to a strong opponent. This re-orientation was done for strategic reasons (Fallend, 2008: 210). Jörg Haider, then leader of the FPÖ and Governor of the state of Carinthia was himself more sceptical than many of the Party's supporters – mainly due to the large farming vote in Carinthia (Höbelt, 2003: 99). “Haider saw a chance to pick up voters disgruntled with any loss of Austrian sovereignty” (Höbelt, 2003: 99). As a result, the FPÖ took an unprecedented U-turn and expressed concerns about the direction that the EU was heading with regard to Brussels' centralism and the transferring of powers. As Peter Kopecký and Cas Mudde have argued, ideology can explain why some political parties are Eurosceptic (2002) however it seems very obvious that this was a strategic shift. Once Austria had become a fully-fledged member of the EU, the FPÖ knew that it could not reverse this decision and instead made clear that it was the party that disagreed with membership but did not continuously criticise the Union. “Indeed, blaming the EU for all the ills of the country soon became counterproductive for an opposition party because it exculpated the government of the day, which was quite happy to join in that chorus” (Höbelt, 2003: 103).

A Nation of Eurosceptics?

This dissatisfaction with the EU can be seen when looking at the party breakdown of votes in the European Parliament elections. *Figure 2* shows that the FPÖ managed to gain a respectable share of the vote in the first two European Parliament elections that Austrians were eligible to vote in. The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) are the two largest parties so as is to be expected, they are supportive of the EU. Nonetheless, the fact that a Eurosceptic party managed to also gain so many votes is significant.

Figure 2: Breakdown of European Parliament votes by political party

Year
Voter Turnout
ÖVP
SPÖ
FPÖ
GRÜNE
1996
67.7%
29.7%
29.2%
27.5%
6.8%
1999

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49.4%

30.7%

31.3%

23.4%

9.3%

2004

42.4%

32.7%

33.3%

6.3%

12.9%

2009

46.0%

30.0%

23.7%

12.7%

9.9%

Adapted from: *Bundesministerium für Inneres (2012a) / Pelinka and Rosenberger (2007: 182-183)*

The FPÖ's share of the vote decreased to a mere 6.3% by the time of the 2004 European Parliament elections; however, this was as a result of the furore caused by the 1999 Austrian National Assembly elections. Even though the SPÖ received the most votes during the National Assembly election of October 1999 (*see Figure 3*), the ÖVP decided to form a coalition with the FPÖ, despite the fact that Austria has consistently had an SPÖ-ÖVP coalition government.

Figure 3: *1999 Austrian National Assembly results*

Party

Votes

Percent

Seats

+/-

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SPÖ

1,532,448

33.15%

65

-6

FPÖ

1,244,087

26.91%

52

+11

ÖVP

1,243,672

26.91%

52

0

GRÜNE

342,260

7.40%

14

+5

Adapted from: *Bundesministerium für Inneres (2012b)*

In an attempt to minimise the controversy, the FPÖ's divisive leader Jörg Haider resigned from his position (Wheatcroft, 2000). Nonetheless, the government was met with a barrage of criticism from the EU Member States and as a consequence bilateral ties with Austria were reduced (Falkner, 2001: 14-15). "It is important to note that these actions against the Austrian government were not an EU action, but rather 14 bilateral, albeit co-ordinated, moves by these governments. Nonetheless, de facto Austria had overnight been made a pariah within the EU" (Mudde, 2001: 60). Ironically, this gave the FPÖ some leverage when justifying their scepticism towards the EU, which they saw as interfering in a democratic process (Fallend, 2008: 212).

"The evidence was mounting that instead of undermining the Austrian coalition government, the measures by the EU-14 led to a rally-round-the-flag effect and to widespread anti-EU sentiments in the country" (Mudde, 2001: 73). The so-called sanctions were swiftly dropped in September 2000, but instead of lambasting the EU, former leader

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Jörg Haider announced that the Party would attempt to reform it. He stated that “the structure of the EU has to be changed so that self-appointed bullies cannot trample over the smaller states” (cited in Leidig, 2000).

Without a doubt the FPÖ is Eurosceptic, but it is somewhat more difficult to apply Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak’s distinction of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Euroscepticism to the Party (2002). The difficulty lies with the fact that it is not a single issue anti-EU party – this position came much later. In this respect then, the FPÖ is different to other radical ‘hard’ Eurosceptic parties as it is not opposed to the EU for ideological reasons, which is a major signifier of ‘hard’ Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002:7).

Does this mean therefore that the FPÖ is a ‘soft’ Eurosceptic? As a right-wing party, one would not expect this to be the case. Taggart and Szczerbiak argue that ‘soft’ Eurosceptic parties have “...real scepticism about the way European integration is currently developing” (2002: 7). The FPÖ is not supportive of future enlargement of the EU, but does not call for Austria’s withdrawal from the Union (Fallend, 2008: 213). Consequently, the FPÖ can be described as a ‘soft’ Eurosceptic, even though as a far-right party it should in theory be strongly opposed to European integration (Marks et al, 2002:587). The FPÖ does have the expected ‘new politics’ cleavage as it is strongly defensive of the national culture. However, it is still supportive of the idea of the EU, just not with the direction that it is heading. In this respect, the question of whether political parties are Eurosceptic for ideological or strategic reasons becomes much more difficult to answer. As Taggart and Szczerbiak discussed in a follow-up working paper, it is much more difficult than first envisaged to label a political party as being ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ Eurosceptic. Likewise, a party’s position on the EU can actually be determined by both the party’s ideology and underlying issues within the Member State which may suggest that strategy is also partly responsible (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2003).

A Credible Threat to European Integration?

The FPÖ is a political party that Austria and the rest of the EU need to begin taking seriously. Not only has it been in power in the last decade but opinion polls would appear to suggest that at the next National Assembly elections in 2013, there could be another FPÖ coalition government (Zwickelsdorfer, 2012). In an opinion poll from January 2012 for the Austrian daily magazine ‘*Heute*’, the results showed that the FPÖ and the SPÖ would have both received 28% of the vote if the election been held that day. This is a potentially worrying situation for the EU, not least because it sets a precedent for the rise of far-right parties across Europe. The far-right National Front (*Le Front national*) in France is becoming more popular. This can be seen from the results of the first-round of the April 2012 Presidential election where one in five people voted for its leader Marine Le Pen (Chrisafis, 2012).

Consequently, the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt has voiced his worries about this rise of the far-right and that said he was “concerned at the sentiments we see that are against open societies and against an open Europe” (cited in Mock and Norman, 2012). The Swedish Foreign Minister has the grounds to be concerned as these extreme views are not compatible with the ideals of the EU. Perhaps rather more troubling for the EU is that Heinz-Christian Strache (*leader of the FPÖ since 2005*) has stated that “...if he comes into power, the country will no longer pay a cent for ‘bankrupt EU countries like Greece’ because, for someone like him, ‘the red, white and red shirt’ – a reference to the colors of the Austrian flag – ‘is tighter than the Brussels straitjacket’” (Sultan, 2011).

Heinz-Christian Strache has benefitted from positive media coverage in Austria’s top-selling tabloid, ‘*Die Kronen Zeitung*’. With such a strong anti-EU stance, it is often said that this tabloid “makes the [UK’s] Daily Mail look like a moderate paper” (EurActiv, 2009). It has a daily readership of 43% of the Austrian population and openly supports the FPÖ. The media can be a ‘friend or foe’ for far-right parties determining their success or failure (Mudde, 2007: 248-250). With so many people reading a newspaper that makes no secret of the fact that it is anti-immigrant, anti-EU and pro-Austria (Frey, 2008), it is therefore no surprise that we are witnessing a growth of the far-right in this Alpine country. With multiculturalism and closer integration being part of the EU’s identity, “...the FPÖ took the risky position of standing alone in Austria against deeper and wider European Union” (Williams, 2006: 174). The FPÖ’s gamble appears to have paid off.

The Party may be increasing in popularity but it certainly has a negative image, particularly as a result of overtly

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racist campaigns such as “*Mehr Mut für Wiener Blut*” – more courage for Viennese Blood. The next rhyming line goes on to say – too many foreigners does no one any good” (Skyring, 2010a). This is just one of many examples of the FPÖ’s controversial slogans. In a push to gain respectability in the European Parliament and to remove its negative image, attempts have been made to join the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) Grouping (Phillips, 2011). The FPÖ’s MEP’s have always been non-attached members of the European Parliament, which means that they did not sit in one of the political groupings. The majority of these non-attached members of the European Parliament belong to far-right parties and other parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum.

Looking back at *Figure 2*, one can see that after the FPÖ’s poor results in the 2004 European Parliament elections, five years later support for the Party had risen by 6.4%. Therefore, it would appear that the FPÖ will gain even more seats at the next European Parliament elections in 2014. Given their increasingly popularity, Heinz-Christian Strache and Marine Le Pen of the National Front announced that their parties would co-operate closer together, with the first step being to soften their far-right images through the joining of the EFD European Parliament Grouping (Phillips, 2011). The EFD states that “...the Group opposes further European integration (treaties and policies) that would exacerbate the present democratic deficit and the centralist political structure of the EU” (EFD Group, 2011). The Group’s Charter closely matches the aims and ideas of the FPÖ, but some politicians within the EFD are uncomfortable about being associated with a party that has a reputation for racism and xenophobia (Phillips, 2011). Therefore, the FPÖ’s MEP’s are still non-attached and part of no political grouping.

In the Three Wise Men Report following the sanctions that were placed on Austria after the FPÖ’s victory at the 1999 election, it was recommended that “...the introduction of preventive and monitoring procedures into Article 7 of the EU Treaty, so that a situation similar to the current situation in Austria would be dealt with within the EU from the very start” (Ahtisaari et al, 2000: 34). Should the FPÖ enter into a coalition with the SPÖ at the next election then this could trigger the Article 7 mechanism. If a majority of the Member States felt that the FPÖ being in power violated Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (*which was amended by the Lisbon Treaty*) because of its lack of respect for the rights of people belonging to minorities (2008:17), then sanctions and penalties could be imposed by the European Council (2008: 19-20). After the failure of the sanctions in 1999, it remains to be seen whether these penalties would work or just fuel Euroscepticism – especially as far-right parties begin a process of closer co-operation. The repercussions for Austria would be great, but perhaps even greater for the rest of the EU as those who sympathise with the far-right may feel that Austria is being unfairly treated. This would also act as perfect propaganda material for Eurosceptic political parties.

However, instead of second-guessing what might happen in Austria and across the EU if the FPÖ were to come into power, we should turn our attention back to why far-right Eurosceptic parties such as this one are increasing in popularity. Oliver Rathkolb has perfectly summed up the specific problem with Austria. “...What we see is a prosperous society that has lost its historical memory of the reasons for that prosperity” (Rathkolb, 2010: 90). Austria was successful in the past because of its empire, but following its breakup it developed a strong national identity which is typical of a small-state (Rathkolb, 2010:90). Although Austrians do not agree with every aspect of the EU, it is in their best interests to lose at least some of their scepticism, even if it is purely for the economic benefits that being in a union of 27 Member States brings – Eurobarometer data (*see Figure 1*) would suggest that the Austrian population have not yet realised this. Young Austrians in particular are highly sceptical of the EU in the wake of the austerity measures as a result of the Eurozone crisis (Skyring, 2010b) and this is proving to be extremely beneficial for the FPÖ. Instead of being a Party of the past with outdated views is the FPÖ in some ways ahead of its time?

Euroscepticism is becoming much more mainstream and it is now almost expected of all political parties to openly criticise the EU in some form or another. The FPÖ has some very disturbing policies but in terms of European integration, it would seem that a large proportion of the public agree with the Party’s stance on this issue. The Austrian case should be studied very closely over the next few years. Problems in the Eurozone and discontent with the way that the crisis is being dealt with plays into the hands of Eurosceptic parties. Rectifying the problems with the Euro is obviously a priority for ministers in Brussels as the collapse of this currency would be disastrous, not only economically but also for the future of the European Union. The collapse of the Euro would plunge EU Member States into recession and would most likely be enough ammunition for Eurosceptic parties to advocate withdrawal of

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EU membership – however, it is too soon to speculate whether voters would also agree. Heinz-Christian Strache once famously said “let’s get into this red-white-red lifeboat before this European Union ship sinks” (cited in Shields, 2012). Up until very recently, withdrawal of a country from the EU had been unthinkable but in these turbulent times and with widespread public dissatisfaction, there is a very real possibility that this could happen. Should this happen, it remains to be seen whether other Member States would follow suit.

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