

EUROBAROMETER 63.4

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2005

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUSTRIA

The survey was requested and coordinated by the Directorate General Press and Communication.

This report was produced for the European Commission's Representation in Austria.

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► Compared with the autumn 2004 *Eurobarometer* survey, patterns of Austrian public opinion towards the EU have changed considerably. The spring 2005 round of polling was conducted at the same time as the majority of French and Dutch voters rejected the European constitution. The sudden Europe-wide agony over the current state of the Union and its future direction proved contagious. This was particularly true for the Austrians, who already held sceptical views regarding the EU and appeared ready to join the bandwagon of criticism with a sense of relief and legitimization. In the spring *Eurobarometer* survey (EB 63.4), 1,000 Austrians were polled in May and June 2005 by the Austrian Gallup institute. For the EB archive, see http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.htm

INTRODUCTION

► Key issues during the time of polling in Austria were: a) the future of EU financing, and b) the rejection of the EU Constitution by French and Dutch voters (Austria was the 8th country to ratify the European Constitution via parliamentary resolution on 11 May 2005.). The Austrian debate focused on Austria's contribution to the EU budget, EU enlargement, a new, stringent asylum law and rising unemployment. Due to controversial European headlines and an increasing number of public voices demanding stronger citizen participation in EU policy-making, Austrian trust in and perceived gains of EU membership plummeted. Despite previous ratification, the EU Constitution became a renewed issue of dispute. The *Social Democratic Party* (SPÖ), the junior-coalition partner *Bund für die Zukunft Österreichs* (BZÖ, a new party comprised of the majority wing of the former *Freedom party*, FPÖ), the remaining core of the current FPÖ, and, to some extent, the Green party, demanded changes to the EU Constitution, with some asking for an Austrian referendum. Some party members also called for the preservation of Austria's neutrality, more citizen participation in EU decision-making and a freeze on Austria's annual contribution to the EU budget. Common jargon referred to Austria's "net payer" role in the EU, and an "enlargement stop." Although the 2004 enlargement round is seen as an undisputed success, many government officials have begun urging EU consolidation, calling for a redefinition of EU priorities and policy-making mechanisms, and to a certain extent, curbing the speed of future enlargement.

Until publication of this report, the Austrian chancellor, the foreign minister, and the Austrian president have reiterated their commitment to abide by the 3 October 2005 start of accession negotiations with Turkey. Croatia and other South-Eastern European countries will definitely be a priority of Austrian foreign policy and enlargement policy in the run-up to the Austrian EU Presidency in early 2006. Despite populist rhetoric, the junior coalition partner, the BZÖ under Jörg Haider, has reiterated it will ratify the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in the Austrian Parliament.

The sudden surge of domestic and European criticism coincided with a peculiar period in Austrian politics. In May 2005, Austria took stock of 50 years of sovereignty (*Staatsvertrag 1955*) and of 60 years since the end of WWII. Also, 2005 marks Austria's first decade as an EU member. The governing People's Party (ÖVP) celebrated these anniversaries. The smaller parties, some opinion leaders, and voices of civil society (but not the business community), tend to assess Austrian EU membership critically, concentrating on the EU's shortcomings and its alleged obsession with top-down regulations. A majority of the Austrian population seems to perceive the alleged disadvantages of EU membership more strongly than the advantages.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU IN AUSTRIA

► **For Austrians, the EU means primarily the Euro** (50%) and *the freedom to live, study, and work anywhere in the EU* (48%), followed by more negative points such as *a waste of money* (43%), *more crime* (42%) and *unemployment* (36%). 35% mention *peace*. Most other Europeans see this differently. On average, the *freedom to live, study and work anywhere in the EU* (EU25 52%) tops the list, followed by *the Euro* (37%) and *peace* (37%). Only then follow *a waste of money* (22%), *bureaucracy* (21%) and *unemployment* (19%). For young Austrians aged 15 to 24, the top seven things coming to mind when the EU is mentioned are positive points, such as mobility, peace and democracy.

► **Austrian developments on EB key indicators.** Since autumn 2004, only one key indicator, enlargement, has seen rising support by the Austrian poll. Support is now at 31% (plus 3 percentage points, or PP), which still puts Austria last in the EU25 list of enlargement supporters. The largest changes in attitudes since autumn 2004 concern the European Constitution (minus 20 PP) and the possible EU membership of Turkey (minus 17 PP). 42% of Austrians display trust in the EU (minus 3 PP), which is roughly in line with the EU25-average (44%, minus 6 PP). Trust in the EU soured mostly in Spain, and has increased only in Latvia and Poland. 39% (minus 8 PP) of Austrians say they understand how the EU works. 27% (minus 9 PP) think their voice counts in the EU (EU25: 38%). In France, the Republic of Cyprus and Malta, nearly 60% think their voice counts in the EU.

► **A lukewarm balance sheet for EU membership and EU institutions.** 41% (minus 2 PP) of Austrians see gains in EU membership, moving against the European trend of increased perceptions of gains. 37% (minus 9 PP) see Austrian EU membership as "a good thing", which results in the second-weakest level of support after the British (36% "good thing"). On average, 54% (minus 2 PP) of Europeans see EU membership of their countries as "a good thing." 44% (minus 5 PP) of Austrians say they trust the European Commission and 45% (minus 8 PP) trust the European Parliament. In both aspects, Austria scores below the EU25-average.

► **Austrians feel rather well informed about the EU**, and score above the EU average in the EU quiz. Yet they show limited knowledge of the EU parliamentary elections and the EU's spending patterns. 34% (plus 3 PP) think most of the EU budget is spent on administrative and personnel costs. Only 12% (minus 2 PP) think it is agriculture, which is actually the top item. Austrians inform themselves about the EU via TV (70%), newspapers (61%) and the radio (46%). Newspapers and radio usage scores are considerably above their respective EU-averages (EU25: newspapers 43%, radio 32%). Also, Austrians inform themselves more than others via discussions with their friends (37%, EU25 23%).

A EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION AND ENLARGEMENT

► **Enlargement fatigue.** 31% (plus 3 PP) of Austrians support further EU enlargement (EU25: 50%). 21% support the EU accession of Bulgaria, 17% the accession of Romania and 10% the accession of Turkey. According to these figures, Austrians show the weakest support within the EU towards the accession of these three candidate countries. 45% support the accession of Croatia.

► **Young Austrians are more likely to support Turkey's accession than older ones.** 16% of 15- to 24-year-olds support the EU accession of Turkey. Support declines to 11% among 25- to 54-year-olds, and to a mere 7% among Austrians aged 55 and older. Accordingly, young Austrians' opposition to Turkey joining the EU is, at 75%, slightly weaker than that of older citizens. Opposition increases with age to 78% among 25- to 39-year-olds, 80% among 40- to 54-year-olds and, eventually, 82% among citizens aged 55 and older.

► **Support for a European Constitution.** 47% (minus 20 PP) support a European Constitution, and 41% support the actual draft European Constitution (which was already ratified by the Austrian Parliament). Austria and the Netherlands saw the strongest relative decline in support among the EU25 since autumn 2004. The EU25-average is at 61% (minus 7 PP). Support for a Constitution increased only in Italy (74%, plus 1 PP). The Hungarians (78%) and Slovenes (76%) display the highest levels of support.

► **Austrian support for European political union.** 40% (minus 9 PP) support a European political union, which means the strongest relative decline in the EU. Only the Finns (38%) and the British (34%) are more lukewarm than the Austrians. On average, 58% of Europeans support a European political union.

THE EU AS A GLOBAL PLAYER

► **Support for global role of the EU.** 46% of Austrians think the EU became more important globally (EU25: 62%). Austrian support for a common EU foreign policy (62%, minus 10 PP) and a common security policy (61%, minus 9 PP) remains high despite steep declines since fall 2004. Austrians assess the global role of the EU more positively than that of the U.S., especially in the realms of world peace, poverty reduction, and environmentalism. Yet the Austrians' image of the U.S. in the realm of global policies has improved since autumn 2004.

► **Majority of Austrians pledges support for international engagement of the EU.** 84% (plus 2 PP) of Austrians want the EU to promote human rights internationally, even if that faces opposition by other countries. 73% (plus 2 PP) favour a common EU immigration policy, and 69% (minus 1 PP) a common EU asylum policy. 60% (minus 6 PP) of Austrians want to see an EU foreign minister who presents a common EU stance. 65% (minus 3 PP) want to see an EU seat in the UN Security Council. 60% of Austrians say they trust the UN, while 29% say they mistrust the UN.

GENERAL MOOD, ATTITUDES, AND TOPICS OF CONCERN IN AUSTRIA

► **Level of trust in the Austrian government.** 49% (plus 4 PP) of Austrians display trust in their government, moving against the European trend of declining trust in national governments (EU25: 31%, minus 3 PP). While trust in national institutions has been increasing in general, political parties still face double the amount of mistrust than trust from Austrian voters.

► **Austrians' biggest concern is unemployment** (63%, plus 11 PP), followed by *crime* (24%), *the economic situation* (21%), *inflation* (20%) and *immigration* (16%). Concern over the education system has surged since autumn 2004, from a mere 4% to 10%. Unemployment is also the number one topic the EU should tackle, according to 53% of the Austrian poll. Other key issues are *the fight against poverty and social exclusion* (45%, plus 8 PP) and *the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking* (32%, minus 10 PP). 26% (plus 15 PP) want the EU to be closer to its citizens. Fears in the context of European integration are slightly less pronounced than in autumn 2004. *Outsourcing of jobs to low-salary countries* still tops the list (73%, minus 3 PP), followed by *an increase of drug trafficking and organized crime* (70%, minus 3 PP).

► **Wordrap: Majority displays "positive attitude" towards keywords such as social security, enterprise, competition, and public service.** 70% and more favour these four

concepts. 55% and more of the Austrian poll say *protectionism*, *monopoly* and *globalization* evoke a “negative attitude.”