

EUROBAROMETER 71

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2009

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUSTRIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR THE EUROBAROMETER SURVEY EB 71 SPRING 2009

General mood and attitudes

The Austrian people still define themselves predominantly in terms of their national identity (95%). Nevertheless, 78% of the Austrian people already see themselves as Europeans.

The Austrians evaluate their lives well above average. 85% are generally satisfied with their personal situation (EU: 77%). Despite rising unemployment in the first half of 2009, the Austrians rate their personal job situation as “good” (67%, EU: 52%). Also, the Austrians do not yet see the financial situation of their households in danger; 71% (EU: 65%) say their financial situation is good.

Assessment of Austria and of Europe during the crisis

When it comes to the assessment of national and European trends and situations, the Austrian people tends to be more and more pessimistic. Looking at different consumer statistics, the economic crisis does not appear to have yet impacted upon the day-to-day lives of many people. Nevertheless, the Austrians do notice that the situation is getting worse on a national and international level.

Only 36% (-24Pp) of Austrians judge the local economic situation positively, and 63% (+25%) judge it to be “bad”. It is mainly the elderly people in Austria who see the national economy in danger; the young 15 to 24 year olds are the most optimistic about it. The situation of the European economy is even worse: only 26% of Austrians believe that the situation can be described as “good”. Across Europe, the figure is even lower (23%). The situation of the global economy is seen in the worst light. Only 19% of Austrians and 15% of Europeans say that the global economy is doing well.

Like the local economic situation, the situation of the national labour market is seen more and more negatively. The international economic crisis has led to a rise in unemployment figures and Austrians clearly took notice of that. Last autumn 2008, 61% of the Austrians said that the national labour market was doing well; in July

2009, these numbers dropped to 30%. Nevertheless, Austria is still far above the European average (13%).

When looking at these results it is hardly surprising that Austrians cite the current economic crisis and unemployment as the two most immediate problems that the country is facing (43%). On a personal level, Austrians rate inflation/rising prices as the single most urgent problem (51%). The current unstable economic situation ranks as the second most urgent problem (25%).

Expectations for the next 12 months

When it comes to the next 12 months, Austrians are slightly more optimistic. In particular in the more personal areas “life in general”, “financial situation of the household” and “personal job-situation”, the Austrian people expect that nothing much will change and that everything will basically stay the same over the course of the next year. Unemployed people and students are those most likely to expect a change in these areas.

For Austria and Europe as a whole, Austrians clearly foresee more turbulent times. More than every third Austrian believes that the national economic situation will worsen over the course of the next twelve months (36%). Only 23% of the Austrian people believe in an economic upswing. A majority of the people believes that the economy will stagnate (39%). At a time of global crisis, that brings a high amount of uncertainties and instability with it, this is noteworthy.

41% of Austrians fear a worsening of the European economic situation in the next 12 months. Across Europe, only 28% of the Europeans share this pessimistic outlook; a majority of Europeans believe in the stable course of the European economy despite the crisis.

The development of the national labour market in the next year is generally seen negatively by most Austrians (45%) and, in particular, the self-employed (51%).

It is noteworthy that young Austrians are generally more optimistic about the next 12 months than the elderly people. Not only do the young 15 to 24 year old Austrians

judge their personal situation more positively, they also believe in an improvement, or at least a stabilisation, of the situation in the next 12 months.

Trust in national and international institutions

Austrians traditionally tend to trust their national institutions more than the EU average. The national justice system enjoys the highest confidence in Austria (73%, EU: 48%). 40% of the people in Austria place their confidence in the national political parties; this figure has increased slightly. Across Europe, only 19% trust the political parties in their country. More than half of Austrians (58%) trust the Austrian government and the Austrian parliament. Thus, Austria is, once again, above the EU-average in these questions too.

Trust in the European Union remains stable compared to previous surveys; it has even slightly increased (44%, +2Pp). Nevertheless, there is a relative majority in Austria who do not trust the European Union (49%). The countries in the Eastern European regions trust the European Union the most, namely Estonia (68%), Slovakia and Romania (65%). Across Europe, the level of trust once again reached 47%, which is surprisingly stable in spite of the current crisis and the European elections. Lastly, 57% trust the UN in Austria – a figure above the EU average (53%).

Austria's EU membership

It can generally be noted that the slight uptrend, which showed in the two key questions of the Eurobarometer survey in the two previous waves, continued to manifest itself in July 2009.

41% (EU: 53%) of Austrian respondents think that their country's EU membership is a good thing, 38% (EU: 28%) are undecided and only 19% (EU: 15%) say membership is a bad thing. Concerning the question of whether Austria has benefited from its EU membership, 47% of Austrians (EU: 56%) think positively, 43% (EU: 31%) think negatively.

It is noteworthy that both the Austrian and the European figures are surprisingly stable. The economic crisis and the European elections seem to have a smaller

impact on the general attitudes of the people towards the EU than might have been anticipated.

Also noteworthy is the downward linear trend in both key questions when looking at the age of respondents. A majority of 55% of the young 15 to 24 year olds think of Austria's membership as a good thing, whereas only 36% of the over 55 year old Austrians think the same way.

Furthermore, the image of the EU gets slightly better too: 34% have a positive image, 28% a negative one. In comparison, 45% of the Europeans have a positive image, 16% a negative one.

Not surprisingly, the two main associations that the Austrian people have when it comes to the European Union are the "euro" (55%) and the "freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU" (46%). Then again, 46% of the Austrians associate a higher crime rate with the European Union, especially the elderly.

Institutions of the European Union

Like the national institutions, the European institutions are also well known in Austria. 89% of the Austrian people know and have already heard of the European Parliament (EU: 89%), 83% have heard about the European Commission (EU: 78%) and 86% of the Austrians know the European Central Bank (EU: 75%).

In this year, a year of elections to the European Parliament, trust in the European Parliament is slightly above the EU average (50%, EU: 48%). 43% of Austrians trust the European Commission (EU: 44%), 45% do not, mainly the elderly Austrians and woman. In times of economic crisis, 58% of the Austrians trust the European Central Bank. Austria is therefore, once again, above the EU-average of 44%.

Democracy and the right to a voice that counts

A majority of the Austrian people have the feeling that their voice counts in their own country (67%) but not in the EU: only 37% agree with the statement "my voice counts in Europe". A relative majority fears that Austria's voice doesn't count enough in

Europe (48%). Only every third person in Austria believes that the European Union acts in Austria's interests.

Evaluation of key EU policy areas

Against a general trend of seeing the European Union as a technocratic and economic project, the Austrian people rate the European Union the best in the areas "research" (average value: 5,6 on a scale from 1 to 10), "democracy" (average value: 5,6) and "health" (average value: 5,3). Furthermore, Austrians rate the work of the EU similarly good when it comes to securing energy supply (average value: 5,3). However, Austrians rate the performance of the EU rather badly in the areas of "fighting unemployment" (average value: 3,9), "fighting crime" (average value: 4,3) and "ensuring economic growth" (average value: 4,5).

A majority of Austrian respondents (71%) are in favour of a European Monetary Union with one single currency, the Euro.

Lastly, the scepticism regarding future enlargements of the European Union remains at a high level: only every fourth Austrian could envisage the accession of new countries, while 67% tend to be fairly negative about it.

Future of the EU

Interestingly, the Austrians are generally in favour of greater discretionary competence for the European Union throughout all of the areas surveyed. In particular, regarding the fight against terrorism and crime, as well as cooperation on research and innovation, Austrians recognise and acknowledge more and more the necessity of joint, European collaboration. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the principle of subsidiarity: Austrians expect certain kinds of values and an effective reaction to their everyday concerns from the European Union, and they evidently want the EU to become active in those areas, where the single nation is no longer able to respond effectively. This has become even more evident in times of a global economic crisis.