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AUSTRIA

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1 January and 30 June 2006, Austria conducted the rotating EU presidency – the second since 1998 following its accession to the EU in 1995. Austria hosted several informal EU Council meetings, an EU-Latin America summit, and the EU-U.S. summit, among other events. The presidency tried to end the “reflection phase” on the future of the EU; it involved itself actively in the Western Balkans; it coordinated the opening and closure of the first negotiation chapter with Turkey. Probably owing to the increased visibility of the EU in Austria in this period, Austrians’ strong Euroscepticism has been slightly alleviated. The EU saw its image improve by eight percentage points since autumn 2005, for instance. Also, Austrians now endorse EU membership and its advantages more strongly than six months ago.

Strongly attached to their homeland, Austrians are among the most satisfied EU citizens, counting on high degrees of stability in personal and general economic terms, and praising their country’s social, economic and environmental conditions. However, those polled raise concerns about the labour market and they tend to associate more negative aspects with the EU than their fellow Europeans. Euroscepticism, and general fears, are most strongly pronounced in Austrian cities of 5,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, and among older people.

Domestically, the forthcoming legislative elections in autumn 2006 have made their way on to the public’s agenda. At the same time, an unravelling banking scandal – Austria’s largest in recent decades – captured the headlines and raised questions about the future of the largest trade union and political transparency in Austria. Austrians are avid listeners to radio news, and keen readers of newspapers. Yet they score last in the EU regarding their consumption of television news.

GENERAL MOOD, ATTITUDES, AND TOPICS OF CONCERN IN AUSTRIA

► **Austrians draw a very positive balance sheet on living conditions in their country.** 75% think the social security situation is good (EU25: 48%). 74% say the environmental situation is good (EU25: 52%). 60% consider the economic situation to be good (EU25: 41%), and for 40% (EU25: 24%), this is also true for the labour market. This very positive assessment is challenged at the country’s very border with neighbouring Slovakia, where large majorities view their labour market and social security situation as bad (94% and 83%, respectively).

► **The fight against unemployment remains the first item on the Austrian list of domestic concerns** (61%, plus 4 PP*), followed by the *economic situation* (23%, minus 3 PP), *inflation/rising prices* (21%, minus 7 PP) and *crime* (15%, plus 1 PP). Fears regarding pensions dropped to 13% (minus 4 PP). Overall, concerns linked to the “enlargement shock” of 2004 — e.g. crime and immigration — have become less pronounced over the past two years.

► **Austrian fears in the context of European integration are slightly less pronounced than in autumn 2005**, and much less pronounced than in 2004, when 10 new countries in close proximity to Austria joined the EU. Austrian fears decreased in all seven top issues of concern. 69% fear the *outsourcing of jobs to low-cost countries* (minus 2 PP since autumn 2005), and 66% fear *rising payments to the EU* (minus 4 PP). 64% fear an *increase in drug trafficking and organized crime* (minus 2 PP). 59% (minus 4 PP) fear the loss of social benefits.

► **The fight against unemployment remains the first item on the Austrian list of priorities for Brussels** (52%, minus 3 PP), followed by demands for the EU *to fight against poverty and social exclusion* (40%, minus 5 PP), *to fight against organized crime and drug trafficking* (30%, plus 2 PP since autumn 2005, minus 12 PP since autumn 2004) and *getting closer to EU citizens* (22%, plus 4 PP since autumn). In general, Austrians’ priorities for Brussels also confirm the alleviation of their recent fears regarding negative effects of the 2004 enlargement round.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU IN AUSTRIA

► **Scorecard of the Austrian EU presidency.** A large majority of Austrians (79%, up from 71% in autumn 2005) say they heard about their country’s EU presidency. However, it slightly failed to meet the expectations among those polled: In contrast to autumn 2005, when 66 percent attached “importance” to the EU presidency in its run-up, only 60 percent reiterated this in the very midst of the six-month stint. Rising trust in the Austrian government (up to 55%), political parties (up to 38%), and parliament (up to 56%) suggests the EU presidency has been perceived more strongly as a national event, rather than a purely European task. While trust in the key EU institutions has also risen slightly since autumn 2005, trust in the European Parliament plummeted to 44% (minus 5 PP). Trust in the EU Council is at 40%, up from 36% in autumn 2005.

► **Scorecard of specific EU policy areas.** In light of Austrians’ reluctance to praise EU policies, applause from Vienna cannot be overestimated. In four out of 14 policy areas (up from two in spring 2005), relative majorities say the EU plays a positive role. These topics are

defence and foreign relations (44%), the fight against terrorism (43%), the fight against crime (38%) and the economic situation (34%). There is also some bad news: The Austrian scorecard on the EU is negative as far as *rising prices/inflation, immigration, the fight against unemployment, taxation, public transport and environmental protection* are concerned. Views on the EU's role are indifferent regarding *housing, pensions, public health and education*.

► **39% of Austrians see gains from EU membership**, up from 35% in autumn 2005. On average, 54% of EU citizens see gains from EU membership. In Austria, 24% say EU membership is "a bad thing", and 35% are indifferent. This lukewarm balance sheet means Austria scores last within the EU25. However, like many other EB questions, this issue reveals crucial regional and demographic differences. 51% of Austrians in big cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants see advantages from EU membership and 51% of 15 to 24 year-old Austrians say membership is "a good thing".

► **On average, European trust in the EU has been growing since autumn 2005** despite the debates over the constitution and future enlargement. 48% of EU citizens trust the EU, and 39% say they don't. 43% of Austrians (plus 2 PP) say they trust the EU, while a majority (45%) rejects the idea (minus 4 PP). Trust is higher among Austrian men (46%) than women (40%). Trust in the EU is down to 41% in both France and Germany, and down to 31% in the United Kingdom. All "big three" are thus below the EU25 average.

► **Austrians associate different aspects with the EU than other Europeans.** Austrians associate primarily the *Euro (52%), unemployment (43%), and the freedom to live, travel, and work everywhere within the EU (41%)* with the EU, followed by *a waste of money (41%), more crime (39%), and bureaucracy (32%)*. Young Austrians, however, associate primarily positive aspects with the EU, such as mobility, cultural diversity, and peace.

EU-KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SPECIFIC EU PROJECTS IN AUSTRIA

► **Austrians feel rather well informed about the EU.** Their subjective assessment of knowledge reaches a median point of 4,8 (level 10 means, "I know a lot"). The EU average is 4,5. It has been rising since autumn 2005. 44% say they think they understand how the EU works. Yet Austrians show limited knowledge of the EU parliamentary elections process and the EU's spending patterns. In a quiz, 50% incorrectly state that most of the EU budget is spent on administrative and personnel costs. Among 55 to 64 year-old men, 62% endorse this view. Among 15 to 24 year-old men, on the other hand, 46% know the EU's top spending item is not administrative and personnel costs.

► **60% of Austrians support the European Monetary Union (EU25: 59%).** Yet 52% say the EU plays a negative role on inflation/rising prices. This view is prevalent in urban areas.

► **55% of Austrians support a common security and defence policy (EU25: 75%),** down from 62% in autumn 2005. Despite falling support, however, Austrians assess the EU's role in this aspect much more positively than a year ago.

► **59% of Austrians support a common foreign policy (EU25: 67%).** 80% of Austrians say that EU foreign policy should be independent of that of the United States. This puts them exactly in line with the EU average. Austrian men (84%) and urban citizens (88%) support an independent EU foreign policy more fervently than women (76%) and suburban citizens (72%). In the EU, the Greek voice the strongest demands for an independent EU foreign policy (96%), followed by Germany (90%) and Finland (88%). Also in those eight countries which supported the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq in 2003, and which partly still have troops there, support for an independent EU foreign policy exceeds 70 percent on average. It is at 87% in the Czech Republic, at 80% in Poland, 74% in the United Kingdom, 71% in Italy, 67% in Spain, and 60% in Portugal, for instance.

► **Younger Austrians are more likely to support EU policies than older ones.** 25 to 39 year-old Austrians support most EU projects more strongly than other age groups. This is particularly true for the monetary union, supported by 66% in this group, a common foreign policy (65%), a common security and defence policy (59%), and EU enlargement (36%).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU CONSTITUTION AND ENLARGEMENT

► **44% of Austrians say "yes" to an EU constitution (EU25: 61%),** down from 49% in autumn 2005. This means Austria is 23rd in the EU25 ranking - ahead of the United Kingdom (42% support) and Sweden (39%). Although the Austrian parliament ratified the EU constitution in May 2005, those polled remain pessimistic about the outcome of the constitution process. 40 percent (EU25: 47%) think the constitution should be renegotiated, and a mere 19 percent say ratification should continue (EU25: 23%). A staggering 24 percent (EU25: 13%) say the constitution should be dropped. Interestingly, every fifth Austrian polled chose not to answer this question at all, which points to a rather subdued public debate on the EU constitution in Austria.

► **27% of Austrians (EU25 45%) support further EU enlargement,** which puts Austria last among the EU25. 61% are against future enlargement (EU25: 42%). Support for enlargement is highest among 25 to 39 year-old Austrian men (41%), followed by 15 to 24 year-old men (36%), 25 to 39 year-old women (31%), and 15 to 24-year-old women (30%).

* **PP** = abbrev. for percentage points