

A REFERENDUM ON THE UNKNOWN TURK?

Anatomy of an Austrian debate



Turkish mosque in Telfs, Tyrol

**30 January 2008
Berlin – Istanbul**

Prologue: The Austrian Referendum on Turkey in 2015

It is one of the most talked-about events in global politics in years, and the thousands of journalists converging on Vienna to cover it reflect the enormous interest of a world-wide audience. CNN, the BBC and Al-Jazeera have sent teams of reporters to towns and villages across Austria, interviewing taxi drivers in Linz and mountain farmers in Tyrol, asking them “*What is it that you fear?*”. They are broadcasting live from the Kahlenberg hill overlooking Vienna where, they tell their viewers, the Turks were stopped once before in 1683.

Around the world, the quality press has been reporting for weeks on the run-up to the Austrian referendum on Turkish EU accession. In London, *The Guardian* writes: “In 1683, Turkey was the invader. In 2015, Austria still sees it that way.” A commentator in *The Financial Times* notes: “For many Austrians it is as though the Janissaries were even now aiming their cannon at the gates of Vienna.” The Austrian press (“Siege Mentality”, “The Return of the Turks”, “Bulwark Austria”) and the Turkish media (“The Walls of Vienna”, “Will Vienna fall?”) are awash with military metaphors.

Everywhere they go, foreign reporters are asking: *Why Austria?* It is a natural question. This is not Switzerland, and referenda are not part of the country’s normal politics. In fact, there have only ever been two previous referenda in Austria: one on nuclear power, and one to decide on Austria’s own accession to the EU. Nor have Austrians been asked in previous decades to vote on the accession of any other candidate for EU membership. Turkey is therefore an exception. And so is Austria, once France changed its constitution in 2010 to allow parliament to ratify treaties of accession. During the long years of negotiations, Austria and some other countries have secured permanent exceptions to protect their labour markets. Yet that hardly figures in this referendum debate in 2015.

Instead, what the media corps sees is a small, wealthy, overwhelmingly Catholic country voting on the fate of a large, less prosperous and overwhelmingly Muslim one. Political posters everywhere evoke the clash of civilisations: there are countless pictures of headscarves and minarets, references to the Sharia, Muslim hordes and terrorism. The right-wing Austrian Freedom Party and its blue-eyed leader have become household names from Jeddah to Jakarta. Its activists enflame tensions, accusing the Prophet of having been a child-molester. But they are not alone: the Christian Democratic mayor of Graz also tells the press: “Graz has a long history of fighting the Turks. Today, we continue this fight with different means.”

There has never been any doubt about the outcome of the referendum. For more than a decade, Eurobarometer polls have recorded no more than 10 percent support among Austrians for Turkish accession. With the exception of the Green party, all political parties represented in parliament have campaigned for a ‘no’ vote. It is the inevitability of the result which fascinates some (and shocks others). *Vienna 2015* will replace *Vienna 1683* as a global metaphor for the eternal confrontation between Christian and Muslim Europe.

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Introduction

Is a referendum on Turkey's EU membership where current Austrian politics is taking us? The leaders of Austria's two largest political parties have often promised such a referendum. The right-wing opposition and much of the press have demanded it as well. Given current trends in public opinion and recent election campaigns by the Freedom Party, the scenario outlined above is entirely plausible, even likely.

In this paper, we examine the history of Austrian attitudes towards Turkey's EU candidacy. Looking back over opinion polls of the past decade reveals a surprising finding: until 2002, there was very little difference between Austrian views towards Turkey and any other EU candidate. The current public mood does not have its roots in the distant past. Rather, it is a reflection of the recent behaviour of the Austrian political elite, and the direction in which they have chosen to take the public debate.

The turning point in this regard was 2004, and the decision by the SPO (Austrian Social Democrats), at the time in opposition, to attack both the Freedom Party (then led by Jorg Haider) and the OVP (Austrian People's Party) for 'going soft' on Turkey by failing to block the opening of accession talks. This was followed in December 2004 by the decision of the OVP chancellor to promise a referendum.

Until then, all the major political players had supported a sober discussion of the pros and cons for Austria of each individual enlargement decision. With these two steps, that consensus was destroyed. A new, cross-party consensus emerged in favour of deferring any serious debate in favour of an eventual referendum.

Since then, Austrian politicians have made little effort to explain their position on Turkey to the public. There were no visits by Austrian ministers to Ankara or Istanbul in 2006 or 2007. Austrian institutions have produced little serious research (compared to the Netherlands, Sweden or Germany) about contemporary Turkey. Nor has there been much exchange in other fields, from culture to academia, despite a new and very active Turkish ambassador in Vienna. This contrasts sharply with Austrian behaviour towards other accession countries, such as Hungary, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria.

The weaker the public debate on Turkey, the more likely it will end up with a referendum on Turkish accession at some point between 2014 and 2020, and the more likely that the proposal will receive a hostile reaction from the Austrian public.

For some, this may not be a cause for concern. But even Austrians who are opposed to Turkish accession should feel serious discomfort at the prospect of deciding such a question by referendum. If there is to be a referendum in Austria on Turkish accession, how about referenda on other accession candidates? Should Austrians also vote on Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina? A referendum would offer a global platform to the Austrian (and European) far right. It would leave Austria isolated within Europe and individually responsible for a major snub to the Muslim world.

In effect, Austria will have placed itself at the frontlines of a global clash of civilisations. But is a clash of civilisations really necessary, and do Austrians wish to be at the heart of it? It is to open this debate that this analysis has been put forward.

The Austrian paradox

Austrian behaviour often puzzles observers of the enlargement process. It is one of the wealthiest countries in the world (4th among EU members in *per capita* terms). Its economy has prospered since it joined the EU in 1995. With 4.2 percent it has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe. As *The Economist* wrote recently:

“Austrians love to complain, but when it comes to their economy even they admit that they are currently grumbling at a high level.” (*Economist*, 24 November 2007)

Austria has reaped tremendous economic benefits from EU enlargement. Austrian business has rushed to embrace the new member states in Central Europe. Austrians are the number one investors in both Romania and Bulgaria, and leading players right across the Western Balkans.

It therefore seems to be perversely against their own self-interest for the Austrian public to be so firmly opposed to enlargement. However, many different opinion polls show that Austrians are firmly against the accession of *any* country except Croatia – indeed, more so than any other European country. Sixty-two percent of Austrians oppose Macedonia, 73 percent oppose Albania, 59 percent oppose Bosnia-Herzegovina and 65 percent oppose Serbia (in 2006 still Serbia-Montenegro). In each case, this is the European record!

In Favour of Macedonian accession (Eurobarometer, 2006¹)

Austria	32 %
Luxembourg	36 %
Germany	40 %
France	53 %
Cyprus	58 %
...	...
Netherlands	64 %
Denmark	66 %
Sweden	71 %
Slovenia	74 %

Needless to say, the Austrian public is also more adamantly opposed to Turkish accession than any other EU member state. According to the most recent Eurobarometer survey (addressing the question of accession of individual countries) from late 2006, support for Turkish accession has fallen to just 5 percent. Just how remarkable this is becomes obvious when one looks at it in a comparative European perspective: 24 percent of Greeks supported Turkish accession in 2006. That is five times more support than in Austria.

¹ Eurobarometer 66, Public Opinion in the European Union, Fieldwork: September-October 2006, Publication: September 2007, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_en.pdf.

In Favour of Turkish Accession (Eurobarometer, 2006)

Austria	5 %
Germany	16 %
Luxembourg	17 %
Cyprus	19 %
France	22 %
...	...
Poland	40 %
Portugal	40 %
Slovenia	43 %
Sweden	46 %

Austria's political leadership has responded to these polls by becoming Europe's most outspoken opponents of Turkish accession – to the surprise of many, including the Turkish government.

In December 2004, Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schussel first promised to hold a referendum before any Turkish accession. At the EU foreign ministers meeting in November 2005, Austrian foreign minister Ursula Plassnik delayed the opening of accession negotiations with Turkey for a day by insisting that negotiations should be on something other than full membership. For this, she was celebrated in the Austrian popular press. Opposition to Turkey has also played a role in a number of recent Austrian election campaigns. The current chancellor, Social-Democrat Alfred Gusenbauer, continues to argue for an Austrian referendum on Turkish accession.

What is an outsider to make of Austrian opposition to enlargement? Austria was a prominent champion of Central European enlargement in 2004. The Austrian parliament was almost unanimous in its support for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. And today, Austrian politicians regularly repeat that they are in favour of *all* Balkan countries joining the EU. While there was no more popular support for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2002 than there was for Turkey, the accession of Bulgaria never became a political issue. It is also unlikely that current polls will affect Austrian policy towards the Western Balkans.

It is above all the choices made by Austria's politicians that dictate the agenda. Austria's "pro-European coalition", which lasted from Austria's own accession in 1994 through two rounds of eastward expansion in 2004 and 2007, has broken apart over Turkey.

Looking back: debating Central European enlargement

When accession talks with Central European countries begun in 1997, no country was more directly affected by enlargement than Austria, which shared 1,259 kilometres of border with four of the applicants. Public concern about the impact on Austria was therefore hardly surprising. Indeed, from 1996 to 2000, the polls revealed a rising fear. Soon Austria, together with Germany and France, ranged last or second-last in the EU15 in its support of enlargement.²

² Martin Lugmayr, *Österreich und die EU-Osterweiterung. Maximale Chancen – Maximale*.

In one survey, 47 percent of Austrian entrepreneurs opposed enlargement.³ In another, 62 percent of Austrians feared that enlargement would affect their personal safety.⁴ In November 1999, only 31 percent supported Slovak and Polish accession.⁵

This was both encouraged and exploited by the Freedom Party of Jorg Haider: having forged its political reputation by attacking the EU itself, it now turned against the enlargement process. Between 1996 and 1999, the FPÖ introduced 20 motions against enlargement in parliament. As a political move, it appeared to work. The party's share of the vote rose from 5 percent in the late 1980s to 27 percent in 1999. Meanwhile, Austrian support for enlargement reached an all-time low in 1999.

The Freedom Party also called for popular referenda on enlargement. Jorg Haider explained:

“The Austrian government commits treason against Austrian interests if it does not veto Eastern EU enlargement in Brussels. No government acts like this; only an occupying power... This project should be stopped immediately.” (Lugmayr, p. 147)

Ironically, however, it was the FPO's electoral success that brought a change in tune. When elections in 1999 brought the FPO into government as a coalition partner with the People's Party, the latter made support for the EU and its enlargement a condition of forming a joint government. From 2000, the FPO completely changed its position.

“The FPO will support the accession process of our neighbours. We are ready to support this integration process... It makes sense to accept Turkey as an accession candidate.” (Lugmayr, page 155)

From that point until the 2006 elections, no Austrian party campaigned against the eastward expansion of the EU.

Austria and the accession of Bulgaria

This cross-party political consensus held firm for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. In December 1994, before Austrian EU accession, only 20 percent of Austrians were in favour of Bulgaria joining the EU.⁶ In 2005, this figure remained the same.⁷ During this period, popular opposition to Bulgarian accession hardened – from 57 percent in 1994 to 69 percent in 2005.

In spite of public opinion, politicians from both major parties defended Bulgarian accession as in Austria's long-term national interest. Finance Minister Wilhelm Molterer said on 12 April 2006:

Risiken (Austria and EU Eastern enlargement – maximum chances – maximum risks.),
published in 2002.

³ Austrian Press Agency, May 14 1998.

⁴ Market institute poll quoted by Austria Press Agency, 6 November 1998.

⁵ Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, Die EU-Erweiterung aus der Sicht der Österreicher und unserer Nachbarn, November 1999.

⁶ Standard Eurobarometer EB 42, December 1994,
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb42/eb42_en.pdf.

⁷ Standard Eurobarometer EB 64, autumn 2005,
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb64/eb64_en.pdf.

“This enlargement will not only provide Europe with an important perspective, but also our own country. Enlargement will result in growth and security gains and, therefore, jobs for Austria.”⁸

In spring 2006, in a visit to Bulgaria, president Heinz Fischer fielded a question from a journalist as follows:

“Accession on 1 January 2007 is the right thing... When I consider that Bulgaria had to solve 146 problems just a couple of years ago, and now, only six are left, then I think this last sprint will also be possible by the end of the year.”⁹

Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel also praised the EU Austrian presidency in July 2006 for the way it had brought Balkan enlargement forward:

“Regarding EU enlargement, the accession date of Romania and Bulgaria has been finalised, and the first chapter of negotiations has been concluded with Croatia. Macedonia has candidate status. There have been successful negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro. A stabilization agreement was signed with Albania. In sum, the (Austrian) foreign ministry has managed to harvest a lot.”¹⁰

Throughout this whole period, neither of the two opposition parties – the Austrian Social Democrats and the Greens – exploited the opportunity to attack the government on what was potentially a highly unpopular policy. Nobody ever suggested a referendum on Bulgarian or Romanian accession. On 26 April 2006, the Austrian parliament ratified the 2007 EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania with only two dissenting votes.

Austria and the Western Balkans

Today, public opinion polls concerning Western Balkan enlargement are little more encouraging. In early 2007, only 28 percent of Austrians supported further enlargement of the EU. Across the enlarged EU, support was 49 percent.¹¹ (Eurobarometer 2007).

However, the pro-enlargement coalition among the main political players has remained solid. On 7 April 2003, then foreign minister Ferrero-Waldner explained the Austrian position, highlighting its support for Croatia.

“The goal is the accession of Romania and Bulgaria on 1 January 2007... Croatia... enjoys the full support of Austria, because its attempts... to approach Europe are not only in the interest of Austria, but serve the sustained stability of our whole continent.”¹²

On 19 October 2004, she repeated:

“it would be favourable from an Austrian perspective to start accession negotiations with Croatia early next year. This would also be an incentive for other South-Eastern European countries to continue their reforms.”¹³

⁸ Press release of the ÖVP, 12 April 2006.

⁹ 25 May 2006, Passauer Neue Presse.

¹⁰ Press Release of the ÖVP, 12 July 2006.

¹¹ Eurobarometer 67, spring 2007,
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb67/eb67_at_nat.pdf.

¹² Press Release of the Foreign Ministry, 7 April 2003.

In early 2006, the Austrian EU presidency reaffirmed the “European perspective for the Western Balkans”. Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik stressed:

“Three years ago in Thessaloniki, a clear accession perspective was opened for the countries in the region. Today we are sending a joint signal confirming this perspective, a signal of encouragement and of joint political will. The goal is Union membership for the countries of the Western Balkans.”

The influence of the Austrian elite in shaping public opinion is most obvious in the case of Croatia. From 2000 onwards, the Austrian government was steadfast in its support of Croatia. Yet initially, this was not a popular policy. Opinion polls from 2002 showed opposition for Croatian accession was almost as large as for Turkey.¹⁴ Yet by 2005, the weight of opinion had completely reversed, with a solid majority supporting Croatia, combined with a hardening of opposition for Turkey.¹⁵

Eurobarometer polls 2002-2005		
	2002	2005
Croatian accession		
- in favour	34%	55%
- opposed	51%	40%
Turkish accession		
- in favour	32%	10%
- opposed	53%	80%

By 2005, Austrian politicians from all political parties were lobbying for Croatia. In January 2005, Paul Rubig (a member of the European Parliament for the OVP) said that “especially Croatia is very close to us and I think standards are already more or less fulfilled.”¹⁶ In the same discussion, Maria Berger, SPO delegation leader in the EP, declared: “I say yes to Croatia, that one begins (to negotiate) here, and yes to an accession of Bulgaria and Romania as soon as they fulfil all criteria. I think that has a significantly higher priority... than the accession of Turkey.”¹⁷ Later, she underlined that “Croatia is for sure a genuinely European country.” In October 2005, the Austrian government successfully lobbied the EU to begin accession negotiations with Croatia.

¹³ 19 October 2004, Foreign Ministry Press Release.

¹⁴ Standard Eurobarometer 57, Spring 2002,
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb57/eb57_en.pdf.

¹⁵ Standard Eurobarometer 64, Autumn 2005.
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb64/eb64_en.pdf.

¹⁶ Oberösterreich heute, *10 Jahre EU-Mitgliedschaft – Bilanz*.

¹⁷ Oberösterreich Heute, ORF TV; 3 January 2005.

The Austrian debate on Turkey – pre-2004

It is worth recalling that, until spring 2004, the positions of both major parties on Turkey remained open. In December 1999, outgoing SPO chancellor Viktor Klima had supported the EU Helsinki Council's decision to grant Turkey candidate status. Two days later, foreign minister Wolfgang Schussel told the Austrian press that "the candidate status of Turkey is welcomed because closer relations of the European Union with Turkey enhance the stability and security of Europe."¹⁸ In 2002, the SPO's Caspar Einem praised the Copenhagen Council's decision on Turkey.

"We should accept that Turkey is now on its way towards Europe. We have already lost a lot of chances in our neighbouring countries, because we (Austrians), once it came to the crunch, turned into fearful sceptics rather than friends... We should do it better this time. Let's develop a special and close partnership with Turkey. This will also help once Turkey has joined the EU."¹⁹

Since the Helsinki summit in December 1999, when Turkey was granted candidate status, two different Austrian chancellors, two heads of state and three foreign ministers have supported EU decisions on Turkey (Helsinki 1999, Copenhagen 2002, Brussels 2004, Luxemburg 2005). In 2002, chancellor Schussel stated before the Copenhagen summit that:

"the (European) Council should not overrule the Commission out of political reasons... One should stick to the existing procedure, with the Commission regularly presenting progress reports and allowing for judgment whether the political criteria were fulfilled according to objective status reports... The principal question whether Turkey shall become an EU member was already decided upon, since that country had been granted candidate status."²⁰

On 4 May 2004 *Die Presse* wrote that, in Austria, all the main parties were internally divided over Turkey. According to a *Hürriyet* article from 28 June 2004, even SPO leader Alfred Gusenbauer sent supportive signals to Austrian Turks:

"Gusenbauer says the SPO has always supported Turkish EU accession... While he still thinks the EU is not ready at this point, this would be no obstacle to start negotiations which would only lead to membership in ten years."²¹

Until June 2005, the FPO's Jorg Haider also argued in favour of Turkish accession. For this he was attacked by his own party, who dismissed Haider's view as an "isolated voice."²²

¹⁸ *Enlargement/Agenda 2000 Watch*, Institut für Europäische Politik in Co-operation with the Trans European Policy Study Association, February 2000, p.41, (quote there is from *Kurier*, 12 December 1999).

¹⁹ *Austrian Press Agency*, 14 December 2002.

²⁰ *Parlamentskorrespondenz*/02/10.12.2002/Nr. 728, www.parlament.gv.at.

²¹ *Austrian Press Agency*, 30 June 2004.

²² Ewald Stadler described Jorg Haider as an „isolated opinion“ and noted that no one else in the FPO would support „such a dangerous course of action.“ *Austrian Press Agency* 5 August 2004.

What the polls tells us

By July 2006, the political volume around Turkish accession had reached such a point that 80 percent of Austrians reported to have heard “often” of EU negotiations with Turkey, compared to only 54 percent for Bulgaria and Romania.²³

Looking more closely at the opinion polls reveals a number of striking realities. There are two polls that warrant a closer look: the regular Eurobarometer polls, and polls commissioned from Eurosearch by the Turkish embassy in Vienna at the end of 2006 and early 2007.²⁴

According to Eurobarometer, in 2005 73 percent of Austrians (compared to 54 percent across the EU25) believed that cultural differences between Turkey and the EU were too significant to allow for Turkey’s accession.

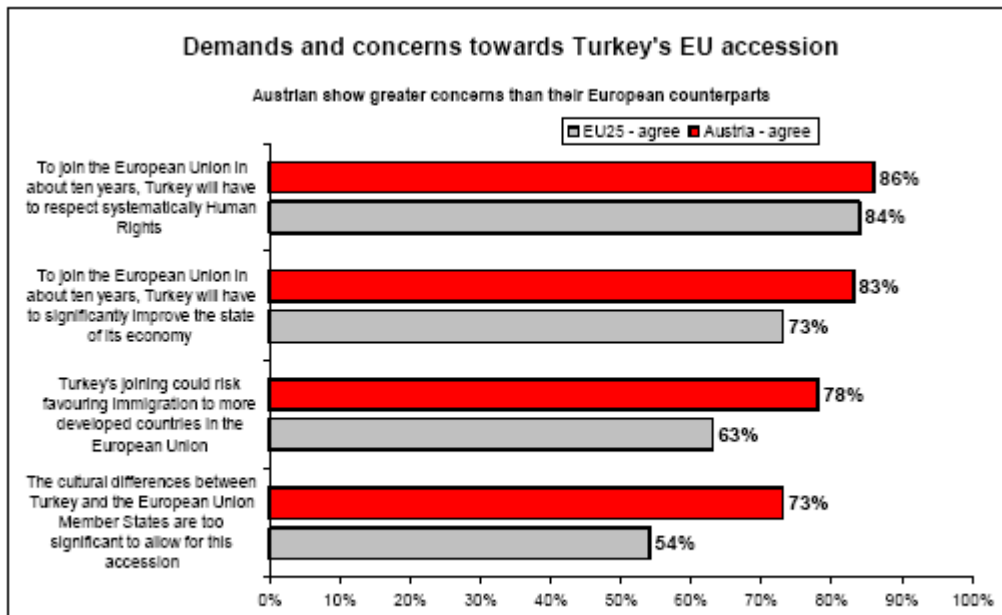
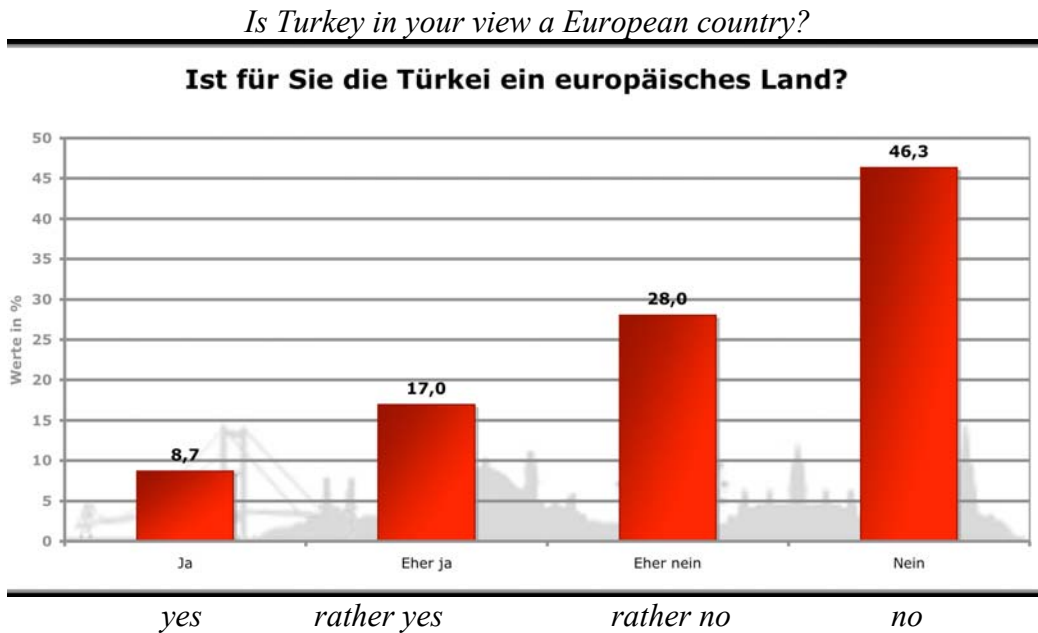


Diagram 8, Source: Eurobarometer 63.4, spring 2005

²³ ÖGFE/GFK Poll.

²⁴ http://www.tuerkeidialog.at/fileadmin/tuerkeidialog/download/Ergebnis_Tuerkei_11.01.07.pdf.

A similar question was asked again in 2006 by Eurosearch:



Sceptical attitudes are pervasive across the Austrian population, whether one looks at students, managers, pensioners or housewives.

Attitudes towards Turkey's EU accession by profession: in favour (red), against (yellow)

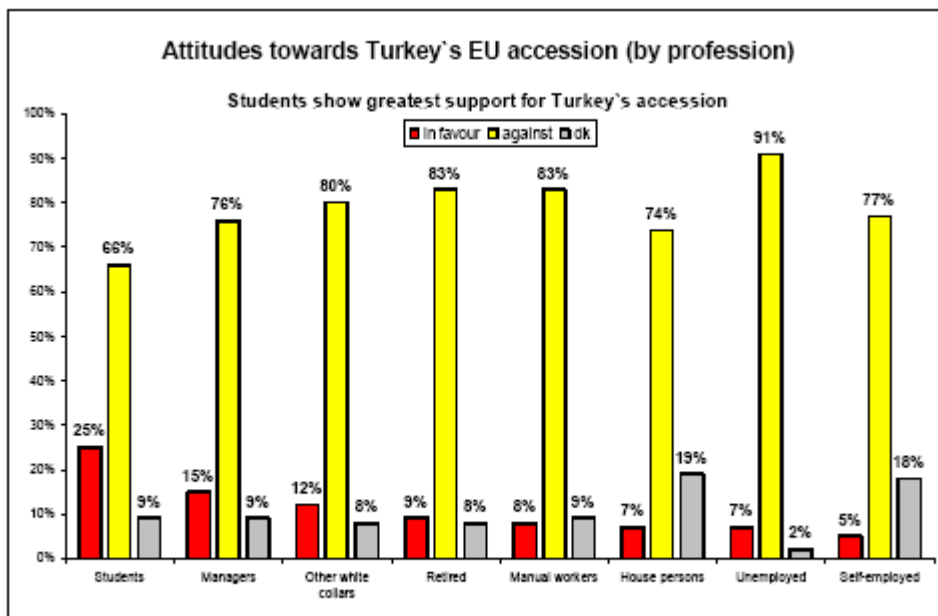


Diagram 6, Source: Eurobarometer 6.4, spring 2005

Students - managers - white collar - retired - manual worker - housewives - unemployed - self-employed

A detailed analysis of existing polls also shows that many of the arguments used elsewhere to bolster support for Turkish accession do not convince most Austrians. Only 20 percent of Austrians believe that Turkey’s EU accession “would strengthen security in that region”. Only 24 percent of Austrians believe that having Turkey in the EU would foster mutual comprehension between European and Muslim values. Nearly two thirds do not believe that high economic growth in Turkey helps the EU, or that a Muslim Turkish democracy would help the EU in its dealings with the Muslim world.

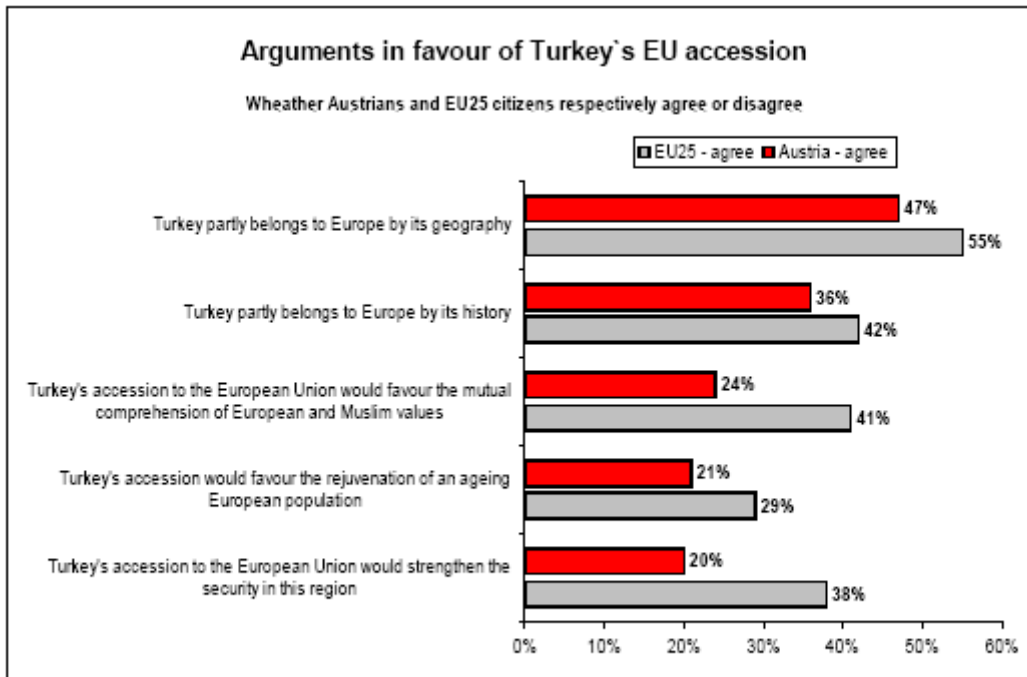


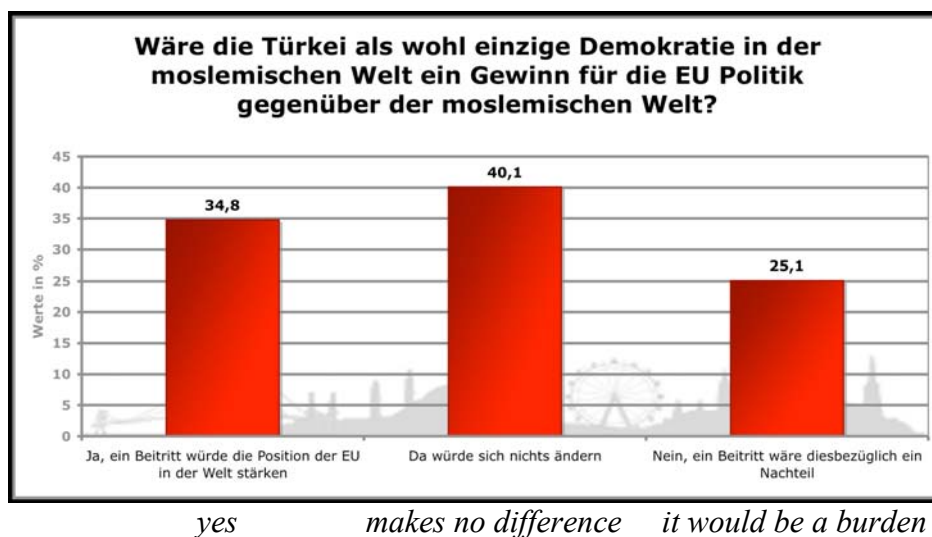
Diagram 9, Source Eurobarometer 63.4, spring 2005

According to you, is a Turkey with constant high economic growth a positive factor for the economic development of the EU?

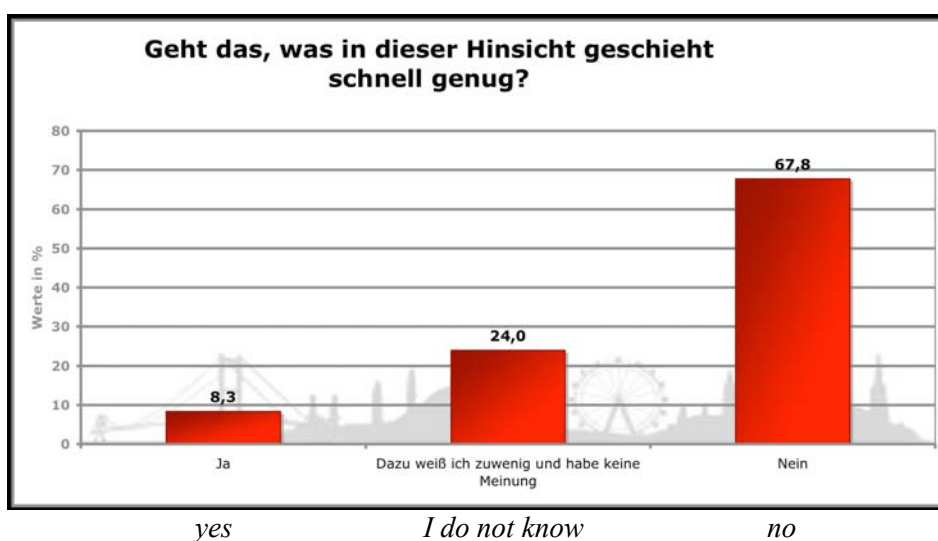


Yes it makes no difference no, rather a burden

Does Turkey, as the only real democracy in the Muslim world, help EU policy towards the Muslim world?



Turkey is undertaking reforms in the areas of the economy and civic rights. Are these reforms fast enough?



A Catholic bulwark against Islam?

According to the same Eurosearch poll, some 60 percent of Austrians say that religion is irrelevant to the question of whether a country should be permitted to join the EU. Only 28 percent see Europe as a “Christian fortress”. In fact, the Austrian Catholic hierarchy has not taken a position against Turkish accession.

The central institution of Austria’s Catholic Church is the 15-member Austrian Bishops’ Conference, and it has long taken pride in its tradition of dialogue with Islam. Asked about Turkey, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the chair of the Conference, noted in December 2004 that “it is not a religious question; these are political questions, where Catholics can have

different attitudes.”²⁵ On another occasion, Schonborn stated that Turkey belonged “historically” to Europe.²⁶ In June 2004, the Conference’s *Council on World Religions* also issued an official statement, appealing for an open approach to the Turkish question:

“Austria has traditionally played an important role as a broker of religious, cultural, and political values towards the Islamic world. It would be time to follow this tradition, forgoing populist temptations, especially regarding the discussion of the EU-accession of Turkey”²⁷

The unknown Turk

Given the prominence of this issue in Austrian politics, it is striking is how little knowledge there is in Austria about modern Turkey. Looking at Austria’s most popular history and geography schoolbooks, ESI found that Austrian students learn nothing about the modern Turkish Republic.

History books used in the *Hauptschule* (11-14 years) do not mention modern Turkey at all.²⁸ Austrian students learn about China, African decolonisation and the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The only reference to Turkey is in a section entitled, “How Austria, fighting the Ottomans, extended its power to the southeast of the empire.” In *Erde Mensch Wirtschaft*, used in the final class before graduation, students learn about enlargement, Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Tellingly, in a timeline on European integration, Turkey is not mentioned.²⁹

Although Austria has long taken pride in its position as a centre for Ottoman Studies, scholarly connections with Turkey itself have been lukewarm in recent decades. Unlike Germany, Austria has no academic centre for Turkish studies.³⁰ There is also no official cultural centre to promote contemporary Turkish culture (unlike other countries such as Poland or Bulgaria). Between 1995 and 2001, only 38 Austrians went to Turkey for an academic exchange financed by the Austrian government, while in the same period, 3,561 Austrians went to Great Britain, 3,436 to the US, 2,971 to France and 102 to Bulgaria.

In previous Austrian enlargement debates, Austrian institutions produced a considerable volume of serious empirical studies. Think tanks, industry and labour institutions, party institutes, the Austrian National Bank, ministries, regional and local governments and universities all set out in the early 1990s to understand the transition countries. The Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) produced close to a hundred studies and reports between 1994 and 2005 on the topic of EU enlargement. The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW), established in 1973, also published a large number of research reports.

²⁵ *ORF OE1 Radio, Mittagsjournal*, 23 December 2004.

²⁶ *Kathpress* 14 January 2003.

²⁷ *Stellungnahme zu den Beitrittsverhandlungen der Türkei mit der Europäischen Union aus religiöser Perspektive*. Österreichische Bischofskonferenz, Kontaktstelle für Weltreligionen, 25 June 2004. For full text online, see http://www.irf.ac.at/docs_expert_d.php?radio_detail_d=869 (in German).

²⁸ ESI visit to ÖSV bookstore in Vienna, 2 August 2005.

²⁹ *Geografie und WS-Kunde*, 8 Gymnasium, „Erde-Mensch-Wirtschaft“, Ed. Hölzl, page 118:

one page on „The EU’s Eastern enlargement“ – story on CEE, part SEE.

Foundation Center for Studies on Turkey at the University of Duisburg/Essen, <http://www.zft-online.de>

The debate on Turkey has been entirely different, when it has taken place at all. A seminar held on 25 and 26 November 2004 in the Austrian Diplomatic Academy, organised jointly with the Austrian Institute for European Security Policy, had the title “Where is the EU going? Turkey and the risk of overstretch.” The summary of the conference was called “EU-Turkey: explosion of a time bomb.”³¹ There was no Turk on any of the discussion panels. Austrian political parties have very few contacts with likeminded parties within Turkey.

At the gates of Vienna?

It is our conviction that a referendum on Turkey would be a mistake. This is not because there is no need for a thorough debate on the advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits of Turkish accession. On the contrary – it is a fact that, if Austria proceeds with a referendum, a serious debate will be the first casualty.

What is striking about other debates on EU enlargement over the past decade has been the capacity of Austria’s politicians to lead public opinion. When it came to Austria’s own accession in 1995, and to the last two rounds of eastward expansion, Austria’s leadership acted on its convictions, despite initially negative opinion polls. In all three cases, there was intense debate across business associations, trade unions, academic institutions and of course the media. Public opinion responded to this debate – witness the sharp shift in public attitudes towards Croatia.

In the case of Turkey, the dynamic has been quite the reverse. Since 2004, Austrian politicians have avoided any serious debate on the merits of Turkish accession. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, in a guest commentary in the *Kronen Zeitung* in October 2004, called for an “honest, unmasked analysis on the impact of Turkish accession to the EU”, complaining there had “not yet been enough material to answer questions of immigration, the labour market, costs, the results on regional funds, or agriculture.”³² However, the government has not commissioned any studies on the impact of Turkish enlargement on Austria or the EU. Instead, politicians have played on popular fears and prejudices, absolving themselves of responsibility for the decision by pushing the issue off to a referendum. Public opinion has therefore hardened against Turkish accession.

With support for Turkish accession now at an extraordinary low level of 5 percent, a vicious circle has set in, with Austrian politicians unwilling to address the issue for fear of making themselves easy targets for their political opponents. Austria is therefore set on a course that leads inexorably towards a failed referendum and the international notoriety that will accompany it. If the Turks are once again defeated at the gates of Vienna, Austria may find itself treated less kindly by historians.

But this is not the only possible outcome. The alternative is for Austrian opinion makers in politics, business, academia and the media to begin looking seriously at the question of what impact Turkish accession would have on the EU and on Austria. Given the benefits Austrian business has reaped from transition in Eastern Europe, they should investigate whether a prosperous Turkey might open up new markets. When the far right conjures up the clash of civilisations, they should assess this on its merits with a dispassionate look at how

³¹ *EU: Türkei – Explosion einer Zeitbombe*. ÖIES – Europaforum 2004, www.oeies.or.at.

³² *Der Standard*, 11 October 2004.

contemporary Turkey is changing, on issues like freedom of expression and the status of women and ethnic minorities. And if it emerges that there are Austrian interests that need to be protected, they should assess whether there are other strategies available than a blunt rejection at a referendum.

By having the courage to address the issues on their merits, and creating a political space for an open debate, Austria's politicians may find once again that they can help to shape public opinion into a more enlightened view of Austria's interests.