

Young Austrians: Confronted by a Nation in Doubt

This article explains Austrians' skepticism against EU-enlargement to the Bosphorus, what youngsters think about it and how that might change agenda one day. In Austria only a minority is convinced of the advantages of the European Union. Moreover the biggest opposition towards a Turkish EU-membership can be found in Austria. However, by putting the focus on young Austrians, growing up in an internationalized environment, the picture starts to brighten.

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During the last two years in Austria, emotional political and public discussions about the future of the European Union and especially about a Turkish membership have caused a highly polarized climate in which the mainstream opinion is a resolute opposition – from the political left to the right. Antagonism towards EU-enlargement to Turkey is supported by a worsening “Zukunftsangst”, the fear of globalization, unemployment and social descent. This anxiety is accompanied by a rising Islamophobia caused by international terrorism, failed integration of immigrated families and by a lack of understanding of Turkish culture, history and politics. After 9/11 and the Madrid bombings, media coverage of Islam was characterized by possible threats for society and security. In Austria, as in many countries, police as well as the media started looking for Muslim “hate preachers”. People feared the people sitting in back-rooms and mosques, talking in languages Austrians were unable to understand – people they had heard about in the media. Every Arab looking man with a long beard seemed to be a possible danger. Among young people, this development caused a kind of skepticism towards Islam rather than fear of it. For the first time, many youngsters were confronted with the importance of successful integration and the understanding of what the Islamic faith is all about.

In Search of Someone to Trust

Affected by these factors, the future seemed bleak for young Austrians.

The perspective of youngsters on national politics, the European Union and membership for Turkey is widely influenced by older generations and the general mood in Austria. Pessimism, if not fatalism, prevails among the young generation of one of the EU’s richest countries. In this society, it seems the individual views of the young are hampered by majority thinking and popular fears. Austrian youngsters are more concerned about their future than in other EU-countries: 62 percent of 15- to 25-year-olds fear social security systems will worsen and even less than a third expect their own income situation to improve compared to their parents². In February 2006, 10.3 percent of Austrians under 25 were unemployed – the highest percentage of unemployment in several decades.

Explaining to young people that the European Union is not responsible for economical, social or integration problems is hard – especially when populists and influential parts of the mainstream media blame the EU over and over again. Youngsters often do not see the biggest achievement of the European Union: creating an area of peace and stability on the continent. The majority of adolescents never experienced the Cold War. As far as they can remember, they grew up in a safe environment of open borders – the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain were already gone. Neither did they notice the crises and wars in South Eastern Europe.

Not realizing the relevance of a united Europe makes it hard to create something like a European identity. Today, most young Austrians relate to their country and to the region they grew up in. Far behind they are Europeans and world citizens as well. If such a European identity is the goal, young people should be the first to convince: As opposed to those older, their perspective of the world is not set. They are the ones, where initiatives would be most effective. But it is going to take time, effort, media coverage and cultural exchange for something like a European culture to be established.

In general, the younger generation feels forgotten by Austrian as well as by European politics. Since youth doesn’t have a strong voice or a powerful lobby, on the Austrian or the European

² *Development of Indicators for Comparative Research in the European Union (EUYOUPART: Final Comparative Report*, (Institute for Social Research and Analysis (2005). See <http://www.sora.at/EUYOUPART>

level, their opinions tend to be not taken very serious by politicians. More than two thirds of Austrians between 14 and 24 think that politicians generally don't care about the people's concerns.³

Regularly, politicians, pretend interest and give false promises when they try to appeal to young voters. A trend that also appeared during Austria's presidency of the European Council was the calling of sessions and seminars by leading politicians where problems of youth like education and unemployment are discussed. The crucial question is: Have Austrian and European politicians finally recognized the problems of young people, or is that just another part of political public relations?

Generally seen, there is no widespread political frustration among young people, they just seem to be unsatisfied with national party politics. The participation in elections show, that Austrians between 18 and 25 are more engaged in European politics than the older generations. Young people are not connected to parties and their long existing structures like their parents and grandparents used to be. They look for other methods of political participation: Seven percent are members of an environmental organization, similar amounts are members of an animal protection group or a human rights organization, and many of them have also participated in actions and demonstrations. Trust in non-governmental organizations is much higher than in political parties or politicians: about half of young Austrians trust in Amnesty International, about four out of ten in Greenpeace, and only one out of five in the Austrian parliament. As the EUYOUNG poll shows, adolescents even have higher confidence in EU institutions than in Austrian institutions⁴.

Turkey, Islam, and Fear – One and the Same?

Young Muslims are facing different problems in Austria: they grow up in two different worlds and must find their identity. Youth organizations like the fast growing Muslimische Jugend Österreichs (Muslim Youth of Austria) help thereby, building up a social network for people of all origins, connecting social activities and their religion. The majority of the few thousand members see themselves as Austrians of Muslim faith, speaking German to each other and being well integrated in Austrian society. In contrast, other youth organizations only appeal to people of a certain nationality, promoting only their national traditions but unwilling to open themselves towards Austrian culture. Such organizations also decrease people's chances for a good education and job prospects.

A perception many people have is that Turkish people tend to stay within groups of their own nationality, practicing their traditional way of living. This raises mistrust and suspicion among Austrians who are not able to see into these groups they are confronted with in subways or public parks. They see housewives wearing scarves and long dresses, groups of Turkish youth cruising in their BMWs, a perception that greatly influences people's opinion of Turkey.

The integration of Turkish immigrants and their children seems to have failed on many levels. Although politicians like Austria's foreign minister Ursula Plassnik describe the co-existence of Austrians and people of Turkish origin in Austria as "exemplary"⁵, the reality is different. Young Austrians have few contacts with Turkish people of their age, as both groups tend to

³ Carina Kerschbaumer, 'Youth predominantly disappointed by politics', Kleine Zeitung, 7 May 2005

⁴ 15-to 25-years olds say they trust "much" or "very much" in: the Austrian government (19 percent), in the Austrian Parliament (20 percent), in the European Commission (22 percent), in the European Parliament (24 percent).

⁵ Austria Press Agency, APA0486, 3 June 2005.

live separated from each other. According to a current study by sociologist Hildegard Weiss⁶, children of Turkish parents are worse integrated into Austrian society than children of other immigrants. About two out of three only have Turkish friends, and only one out of ten has an Austrian partner. According to Weiss, one of the most important reasons for this is that many Turkish parents grew up in rural, poor and traditional environments. Often parents don't make a first step towards integration and don't allow their children to have contact with others. Only a small part of children growing up in immigrant families is given the opportunity to receive a good education and attend university. Many of them end up in schools where a large share of foreign pupils are hardly able to speak or understand German, while teachers are busy being social workers.

In 2005, there were approximately 200.000 people of Turkish origin living in Austria, about 100.000 of them of Turkish nationality.⁷ Many of these people had come to Austria since the 1960s, when Turkish guest workers were called to Austria to compensate for a lack of manpower. Last year, 1.064 people with Turkish nationality demanded asylum in Austria, 71 of them were granted, making Turkey number 5 in the list of origin countries⁸. In the eyes of young Austrians, who do not have Turkish friends and have not learned much about Turkish culture or people, think that Turkey just doesn't fulfill European standards when it comes to human rights, emancipation, freedom of opinions and the rights of minorities. Likewise, politicians use this argument to substantiate their opposition to Turkish membership in the EU. Up to now, in the eyes of many adolescents as well as adults, the group of badly integrated Turkish immigrants in Austria stands for what they believe to be representative for Turkey.

According to the Eurobarometer poll, 51 percent of Austrians agree that Turkey at least partly belongs to Europe because of its geography, but only 39 percent see it as a part of Europe from a historic perspective. 78 percent believe that because of cultural differences, Turkey shall not become a member. Actually, nowhere within the EU is there is such little acceptance for Turkish entry as in Austria. Overall, only eleven percent of the people approve of it.

Due to a lack of knowledge and understanding, the question of integration is often simplified to being a question of religion. Elitist circles as well as the mainstream media report a so-called Muslim parallel society in Austria. Islamophobia, which came up in Austria like in many other countries after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, heightened by the Madrid and London bombings, has fuelled this discussion additionally. Experts believe the consequence of Turkey joining to the Union and the accordingly free traffic of persons would cause a increased immigration to Austria. While many politicians insist that Islam is not their point of criticism in the question of Turkey becoming a member of the European Union, in fact, this unknown religion and culture seems to be one of the issues people are scared of.

The Islamic community is growing rapidly. Within the past 15 years figures have doubled: In 2006 about 350.000 Muslims live in Austria, making Islam the second largest religion. As youngsters of the second generation state, their faith also helps them to keep in touch with their parent's culture and traditions. As a consequence, religion seems to be more important for them than for Austrian youngsters. For young Austrians, the importance of the Catholic Church is decreasing. This trend can be especially seen in urban areas. Despite a continuous loss of members, the Catholic Church still has some influence on Austrian society. Bonds

⁶ Hildegard Weiss carried out the research 'Integration of foreign youngsters', at the University of Vienna in 2005.

⁷ According to Statistic Austria.

⁸ 'Asylum und foreigner statistics', (Ministry of the Inner, 2005)

with the ruling People's Party (ÖVP) are still strong, especially and in rural areas the Christian community plays an important role.

Youth are confronted with a group of people their age for which religion is very important. This is one reason for mutual irritation – or alienating. Christian churches are losing their social influence; other, secular forms of confraternity are taking religions' place. A whole generation defines itself through individuality which is based on diversification and separation. This not only implies a classification of common and alien values but also a distinction between good and bad.

While in other countries the argument of a better understanding of each other's values is seen as a pro-argument, 72 percent of Austrians don't think that Turkey's membership would increase security and stability in the region (EU25: 48 percent) (format footnote). Seven out of ten Austrians state, a membership wouldn't help each other's understanding of Muslim and Christian values (EU25: 47 percent)⁹. What is the reason for this dramatic difference? Is it the lack of common experience, a lack of proximity? Answers are hard to find, especially when politicians are just trying to benefit from the emotions.

Not Brand New but Fancy Enough: Clash of Civilization-Light

As an example for how the "clash of cultures" is abused for populist political reasons, the election campaign of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) can be taken: Starting in spring 2005, the FPÖ started a long pre-election campaign with billboards and posters in Vienna saying "Vienna must not become Istanbul", "German instead of 'not understand'" and "Pummerin instead of Muezzin" (the Pummerin is a famous bell of Vienna's Saint Stephen church). With their xenophobic messages they try to reach older generations first. Sure enough, that influences young people as well, as they get socialized and politicized by their parents and grand-parents and experience the emotional and cranky culture of political discourses.

Their right-wing's message is clear: A membership of Turkey in the EU would result in a stream of Muslim immigrants coming to Austria, endangering prosperity, security as well as Austrian culture. The issue of Turkey earned the Freedom Party 15 percent of the votes in Viennese local elections in October 2005.

Astoundingly, historical events are still playing a decisive role in people's minds: the two Ottoman sieges of Vienna in the 1529 and in 1683. The Habsburg Empire then represented what can be called a Christian bulwark preserving the door to Europe.. The Ottoman Islam was demonized as the punishment of god even up to the 19th century. Young people are less impressed by such stories; their picture of Turkey is formed by people with Turkish origin living in Austria rather than by ancient sieges. As described, the picture they see isn't perfect either.

The neglecting of a Turkish EU-membership is one of very few issues in Austrian politics, government as well as opposition parties can agree on. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel's People's Party as well as the opposition Social Democrats, which have changed their course from a clear pro-European position to a populist EU-septic one, would like to see a privileged status as an alternative to a full Turkish membership. They name the economic burden as well as the EU's absorption capacity as main reasons for their rejection. The

⁹ Eurobarometer 64 National Report: Austria, (European Commission, 2005)

opposition Freedom Party warns of a wave of immigration and sees the Austrian culture and identity endangered. As the only party represented in the Austrian parliament having a slight pro-Turkey position, the Greens are pointing out that negotiations offer greater chances for both, Turkey as well as the European Union.

The majority of Austrian youngsters seem to prefer serious politics rather than cheesy populism: two thirds of young Austrians feel distant to the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party. When it comes to closeness to parties, a clear majority of youngsters is in favor of center-left: the most popular party among 15- to 25-year olds are the Social Democrats (36 percent feel close), the Austrian Greens (34 percent) and to the conservative Peoples Party (ÖVP; 29 percent).¹⁰

One example that showed the importance and the potential of votes it might deliver to parties was Austria's intention of offering Turkey negotiations with an open end. Austria blocked the agreement on starting membership talks with Turkey in early October 2005. For two days, Austria was outnumbered "1 against 24". Old and young, were told, what they were supposed to think already: that Turkey wouldn't fit into the European Union, no matter which arguments are used to back this position. In the end, it has to do with the Austria's' historic inferiority complex: Older people love to see their country perceived to be a small David, fighting alone against the overwhelming strong Goliath, also known as "those in Brussels". Young people hear politicians telling them that all their actions are for the country's and the people's sake. Young people are often left irritated and frustrated about politicians following such murky tactics.

After two days, Austria finally agreed on starting membership talks with Turkey. Back home, Schüssel tried to sell this as an Austrian victory, claiming that the Unions capacity for a Turkish membership the absorption capacity of the EU has to be checked before the joining – a point that was already in the mandate in a comparable wording.

In fact, although denying a correlation with the Turkey issue, Schüssel managed to get an agreement of the EU 25 of starting negotiations with Croatia, where Austria is the biggest foreign investor (2.6 billion Euros in 2004) and has major economic interests. In the past, Croatia was seen as a stronghold against the Turks, Austria saw itself in the same way. As an EU member state, Croatia might be an ally for Austria. History unites. Or it divorces.

For the majority of young Austrians, history doesn't influence their opinion of the EU and Turkish membership. Austria's political strategy at the summit in October 2005 might have confused many of them. The reasons for Austria to push for Croatia's membership negotiations are not clear for young people.

The younger people are, the less they oppose a European Union extending to the Asian continent: Among the 14-24 year olds, 21 percent favor a Turkish EU membership. Among the people older than 40, the rate of approval lies at 9 percent, among Austrians older than 64 only 5 percent want to see Turkey as a member.¹¹

A Cosmopolitan, Please

¹⁰ *Development of Indicators for Comparative Research in the European Union (EUYOUPART) Final Comparative Report*, (Institute for Social Research and Analysis 2005). See: <http://www.sora.at/EUYOUPART>

¹¹ *Eurobarometer 64 National Report: Austria*, (European Commission, 2005)

One possibility to show young people the positive consequences of a united Europe is the ERASMUS student exchange program, in which about 4.100 Austrians are going to attend this year. 1.6 million Europeans have already profited from the experience of living and studying in another country and thereby learning about other cultures. This might also be one of the best PR-tools the European Union has. In that way, youngsters are softly forced to more open minds. While Spain, France, Great Britain and Italy are the most attractive exchange countries for Austrian students and Eastern European countries are catching up, Turkey is way down the list. As it seems, few Austrians are acknowledging Turkey as a European partner when it comes to education and the exchange of knowledge as well as cultural and economic values.

By pushing exchange programs with Turkey, many youngsters would be able to get an authentic picture of what Turkey really is like, probably in contrast to their preconceptions. Still, the problem remains that the possibility of exchange programs is limited to an elite. The decisive mass is not involved in any of these programs. Construction workers, painters or carpenters do not travel to Brussels to get to know the very centre of the European idea, and they do not take part in discussions on editorial pages. They do not feel represented in elitist visions. Unsurprising: As a consequence, the important group of non-students remains hard to convince that also they profit from a united Europe. In the eyes of many youngsters, the European Union is an abstract something based in Brussels, having tons of meetings, passing strange regulations and – as politicians and the mass media point out from time to time – costs a lot of money. But where are the advantages? Examples are rarely communicated.

Open borders, the freedom to travel, work or study everywhere in Europe and to pay with one currency in many of the countries – many young people take that for granted. But those freedoms sometimes also cause problems: Last year, the European court forced Austria to fully open its universities to foreign students. Because of barriers for certain studies like medicine in Germany, numerous students went to Austria to study. Some universities had to limit their number of students per year which increased the competition among students and caused a lot of frustration – about the Austrian way of dealing with problems in the education system as well as about the European Unions' rules.

The current generation of teenagers and people in their twenties is growing up in a transnationalized environment with only few more real existing borders. Nowadays' menaces are the walls inside the head, created by populist politicians and the mainstream media. Both accent the differences between "them" and "us" while communalities are concealed. Whatever differences they might hold – cultural, religious or ethnic they just seem hazardous from a distant, conservative view. The created distance between Austrians and Turkish people, between Christianity and Islam or between the European Union and Turkey as a candidate country might be a reality for many older Austrians, who are unwilling to take a step towards an unknown culture. Youth has the opportunity to choose another approach. In many ways, they are already Europeans, although they probably haven't realized it yet. Young Austrians are perplexed by the older generation's politics and policies. That's not because they feel that leaders act too conservative or too liberal, too left or too right. They are irritated because they don't share common views and attitudes. It's not only about the well known gap between old and young; it's about national and international attitudes. That is what many youngsters haven't realized yet. They were born into a Europe without borders, into a time of continuative unity. For them, Europe, apart of political discussions and economic cooperation, is not a vision but a given fact. Therefore, young people are significantly less sceptical of accepting Turkey as a member of the EU. They don't have strong historic or religious provisos, like many adults do have. As the years pass by, not only political situations

but also moral concepts have changed. Young Austrians are less burdened with cultural images than former generations whose prejudices and fears cause the highest desire to reject Turkish membership in the European Union.

In 2020 or 2025, the mood in Austria might be a different one. Because the people who are young today will then be opinion leaders and part of the political establishment, as well as an important group of voters. They could then accept trans-national and trans-cultural communalities and create a new reality in which differences unite. In 15 of 20 years, the future might look much brighter.