

Why Austria is at such odds with Ankara

By **Verena Ringler** of the **European Stability Initiative (ESI)** in Vienna

Alfred Gusenbauer, who chairs the Austrian Social Democratic Party, said not long ago that "Turkey in the EU would mean the end of the EU." And Christoph Leitl, the president of Austria's influential chamber of commerce and a prominent player in the ruling People's Party, warned that "the EU should not enlarge further in the next two decades", adding that given the 40m Anatolian peasants, and 14m unemployed within the EU, one should not encourage hopes for membership which the EU cannot live up to."

These are not isolated opinions, for most Austrian politicians right across the party spectrum as well as almost the entire political,

intellectual, and business establishment share the scepticism of Messrs Gusenbauer and Leitl. When Austria's chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel and Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik created a stand-off with their EU colleagues last October over whether the Union should open membership negotiations with Turkey, they were applauded by all Austrian political parties except the Greens, and by most pundits. When they finally gave in to the compromise that opened the way for negotiations with Turkey, they found themselves criticised by the opposition social democ-

rats, the co-governing right-wing Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, and the opposition right-wing Freedom Party for being "soft on Turkey".

Opinion polls show why that tag is so unwelcome for any politician in Austria today. In April 2004, a survey by the Sozialwissenschaftliche Studiengesellschaft, found that 73% of those polled said Turkey was not suited to join the Union. Reasons included "the conflict with the Kurds" (39%) and "because Turks are mostly Muslim" (43%). A Eurobarometer survey in January of this year found

AUSTRIA

Head of State

Heinz Fischer (SPÖ)

Head of Government

Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP)

Next Elections: Nov 2006 seats

Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	79
Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	69
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	18
The Greens (GRÜNE)	17

GOVERNING COALITION

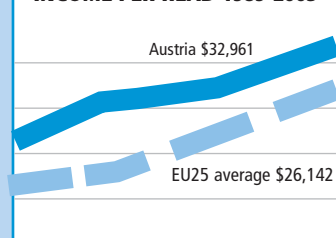
97 SEATS OUT OF 183

ÖVP

(EPP-ED)

FPÖ-BZÖ

INCOME PER HEAD 1989-2005



80% of Austrians opposed to Turkish EU-membership, and a mere 11% in favour.

So why have Austrians been uncompromisingly in the vanguard of opposition to Turkish entry? Austrians still adamantly refuse to see the opportunities that could be created by Turkish accession, with 78% believing that Turkey is too different culturally for accession to work (in the EU-25 the figure is 55%), while 72% reject the idea of Turkish accession as a way to enhance regional stability (EU-25 48%), and 71% doubt that Turkish accession would foster greater understanding between European and Islamic values (EU-25 47%).

How to explain this remarkable consensus, how deep does it run and is it likely at all to soften? To answer these questions, it is important to distinguish between the three main anti-Turkey camps in Austria: The far-right Freedom Party and its co-governing spin-off are easiest to understand as they are against the EU, against enlargement, against migration and, unsurprisingly, against Turkey. Running on an anti-

foreigner, anti-Muslim and anti-Turkey platform in the Vienna elections in October 2005, the far-right rump party of the former list of Jörg Haider appealed to some 15% of the electorate. In the run-up to Austria's takeover in January of the rotating EU presidency, the party advertised a "pro-Austria, anti-Turkey" petition to be launched in 2006.

Political opinion on the centre-left, the social democrats and some Greens, explains its opposition to Turkey by citing globalisation, relations with the US, geopolitical risk and, above all, fears of EU overstretch. Their broad argument would seem to be that Turkish accession would be a victory of capitalist interests over social and democratic ones. Another strong consideration is the much more tactical one that in the upcoming legislative elections later this year the centre-left hopes to win votes away from the declining far-right.

Thirdly, there is the "Mitteleuropa" camp. Players in and around the centre-right People's Party

(ÖVP) point to the costs of EU enlargement, the possibility of mass immigration and the cultural argument that Turkey is a "different civilisation". But in practice the ÖVP not only supports enlargement to include the Balkans, but has also pragmatically endorsed EU decision-making on Turkey. Chancellor Schüssel co-signed Turkey's candidate status in Helsinki back in 1999, and has signed successive EU resolutions in 2002, 2004 and 2005.

This degree of cross-party consensus means that Austria has not had a genuine debate on Turkey at any point in the past two years. One polling expert has remarked that "it is mainstream to bash the EU, and common sense to oppose Turkey in the EU." Ever since the EU parliamentary elections in mid-2004, when all Austria's political parties had leading candidates who were opposed to Turkish EU entry, the political dynamics on Turkey have been extremely one-sided. Even those who seem willing to see the benefits of Turkish EU accession have been reluctant to speak out. On issues like the adoption of

the euro or the “big bang” enlargement in 2004, the Austrian elite has led public opinion to accept policies that were initially unpopular, but on Turkey the dynamic has been the opposite.

Austrian institutions ranging from political parties to academia and research institutes still have remarkably few contacts with their counterparts in Turkey, and industrialists have also been conspicuously absent from the membership debate despite their strong involvement in Turkey’s hydro-electric power sector.

And what about Turkey itself? Ankara only began to take special note of Austria’s views when political ranks looked to be closing against Turkey in 2004. This was interpreted by some Turkish analysts as an irrational detour back to the era of Hapsburg-Ottoman rivalry. Turkey seems to have sensed that it had no hope of influencing the Austrian debate, but nor did it in any way try to exercise public diplomacy to turn the tide. □

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Danes settle down to “serious debate” on the EU’s crisis

By Anne Mette Vestergaard, Chief advisor on European Affairs at the Danish Institute for International Studies

The failure of the constitutional treaty turned Denmark’s EU agenda upside down. In May 2005, most Danes accepted the government’s line and the opinion polls promised a clear Danish Yes. It was also expected that a positive outcome on the treaty would be followed by one or more referendums on the abolition of Denmark’s various opt-puts. But after the French and Dutch Nos, opposition to the treaty rose so sharply that Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen had no choice but to follow the UK and postpone the referendum until some unspecified point after the mid-2006 EU summit.

Danes are still strongly in favour of EU membership, but if asked to ratify the constitution would say No. Yet, just as we in Denmark

were expected to face up to our responsibilities after our 1992 No vote on the Maastricht Treaty, the Danish government now expects the French and the Dutch to present their ideas on how the EU can move forward. So long as there is no clear signal on this from France and the Netherlands, the winning argument during a campaign in Denmark would be “You’d better say no until we know what text we are voting on”.

The Danish Parliament has responded quickly to the idea of a reflection period by allocating some €1.8m for a national debate on the future of Europe. The idea is to support a wide range of events throughout the country and end up with a report for the European Council in June 2006. Thanks to our No to Maastricht, we already have solid experience of how to go about this. But it remains to be seen whether a public debate that is not linked to a referendum will grab the attention of citizens and the media.

Under a “Citizens’ Agenda” headline, five broad ques-