



# **Austria's Regional Role**

Shaping a Sustainable and European Austrian Foreign Policy

Conference paper and policy recommendations  
from the Vienna event of the Talking Europe conference series.

18. June 2018

# Talking Europe: Pan-European Roundtables

## Context

While governments remain, by and large, pro-EU, the last ten years have seen a steady decrease in public trust in EU and national political institutions alongside decreasing support for further EU integration. Eurobarometer indicates an average of 41% support for the EU institutions and an even lower trust in national institutions<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, there is dissatisfaction with contemporary politics. This coincides with record low voter turnout, suggesting that this dissatisfaction has translated into an apathy and disinterest.

Recently, the European Project has been tested to its limits. The Euro zone malaise and refugee influx have helped fuel euro scepticism, while the continent continues to suffer the political backlash of the 2008 Financial Crisis. The UK's decision to leave the EU has prompted a period of deep introspection among political elites. With the election of President Emmanuel Macron adding dynamism to the debate around the EU's future, 2018 promised to be crucial to establishing a new way forward. However, this requires the reconciliation of competing regional visions. Against this backdrop, there have been various attempts to increase dialogue around EU current affairs and develop key issue problem-solving forums. However, dialogue on EU current affairs and reform suffers from two major limitations.

The first is that debate continues to involve conversation between the same institutional actors. It usually occurs across elite academic and policy networks, involving a very particular group of individuals – generally white, male, over-45 and elite university-educated. Within this, various groups continue to be under-represented. Gender imbalances and the under-representation of minority groups are key concerns. Beyond this, young Europeans – who we define as individuals under 30 years – suffer from particularly poor representation in these debates. As a corollary, young people are among the politically

least engaged groups in Europe. According to the European Parliament<sup>2</sup>, voter turnout for individuals under 24 in European Parliament elections is a mere 28%. In many EU member states, this has dropped below 30% for national elections with Greece (22%) a prominent case<sup>3</sup>. This speaks to a problem of apathy and disinterest, at a time when the stakes are at their highest.

The second worrying limitation of existing EU policy debates is the lack of cross-regional dialogue. This is resulting in the fact that issues important in one region or state do not generate interest, discussion or understanding in others.

Pan-European roundtables initiated by the 1989 Generation Initiative aimed to address these various problems of representation and dialogue.

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1 European Commission: Eurobarometer 88. Available at: [bit.ly/2uHJl5a](https://bit.ly/2uHJl5a)

2 European Parliament: Post-Election Survey 2014. Available at: [bit.ly/2Jh68iM](https://bit.ly/2Jh68iM)

3 Interior Ministry of the Hellenic Republic: Official Election Statistics. Available in Greek at: [bit.ly/2kOhznu](https://bit.ly/2kOhznu)

## Aims and objectives

These Pan-European Roundtables formed the key component of our current affairs series “Talking Europe”. The aim of the series was to facilitate balanced intra-community and cross-regional dialogue on European current affairs among young people (between the ages of 18-30), fostering better mutual understanding between them, and contributing to a

cross-pollination of young ideas on issues of crucial importance both regionally and for the wider EU. An additional aim was to generate a system of responsiveness with local, national and European policy stakeholders, allowing broader engagement on the issues that emerge and facilitating the adoption of certain of these ideas by particular decision makers.

## Talking Europe’s main pillars

- 🚩 8 roundtable events in 8 cities
- 🚩 2 delegates sponsored from ‘partner’ city to take part
- 🚩 12-person roundtable followed by engagement event to provide additional ideas
- 🚩 16 webinars to refine proposals and finalise policy papers
- 🚩 8 policy papers containing proposals addressed to regional and national decision makers
- 🚩 8 policy focus groups for roundtable participants and decision makers to engage around policy proposals
- 🚩 1 end of cycle policy report
- 🚩 1 dissemination event in Brussels

## Overview of the events

Dates (2018)	Where	Topic	Partner City
May	London	European cooperation beyond Brexit	Aberdeen
May	Aberdeen	Brexit and renewed calls for independence	London
April	Budapest	Civil society in the age of Orban	Athens
April	Athens	Refugee policy	Budapest
May	Paris	Reforming France; reforming Europe	Berlin
May	Berlin	Responding to the AfD	Paris
June	Brussels	Juncker’s Five White Papers and the Relaunch of the Eurozone	Vienna
June	Vienna	Austria’s regional role	Brussels

# Austria's Regional Role

## Talking Europe's Vienna event

Europe is in the midst of a process encompassing a whole range of strategic challenges. Among others, they range from a stagnating EU integration process in the Western Balkans to far-reaching questions in Eastern European countries. Due to decades of serving as a regional bridge, Austria too is affected by these challenges. In addition, the current Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2018 offers the opportunity to critically define Austria's position in Europe and propose concrete options for action.

Against this background, the joint 1989 Generation Initiative-Shabka Talking Europe-Conference on June 18th, 2018 in the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue in Vienna aimed at sharpening contours of Austrian foreign policy in Eastern and South-eastern Europe by identify current blind spots, providing fresh ideas, and serious approaches that should define a future Austrian foreign policy within Europe.

## Focus questions

In two roundtable sessions (enriched six topic experts and 18 participants) and one panel discussion (with three distinguished experts) the following questions were discussed:

- ❓ What regional role does Austria play in the midst of a changing Europe?
- ❓ What is Austria's regional role?
- ❓ What impact does Austria's policy and involvement have on its regional neighbours in terms of politics, security and economy?
- ❓ Is there something like an Austrian bridge function between Eastern and Western Europe? In case there is, how does Austria execute this-function politically, economically, and socially?
- ❓ How does Austria's engagement impact the situation on the Western Balkans and how does this influence the EU enlargement strategy?
- ❓ Could Austria counteract the polarizing developments in by a kind of „social openness“?

## Findings and policy recommendations

### The Western Balkans

Austria plays an important and relatively prominent role in the Western Balkans, which is internationally accepted as Austria's "niche". It is widely respected and has expertise in the region.

However, in the past two years policies have developed in a negative direction in this regard as Austria has begun to shift its priorities simply towards gaining domestic political advantages through its foreign policy, i.e. to focus on migration and closing down the Balkan route. Therefore, it can be seen that domestic politics is currently a major driver foreign policy making.

The current focus is on defending borders rather than promoting developmental and humanitarian issues. This has and will continue to come at the cost of actually trying to stabilize the region and lay the ground for a continued EU integration process of the region. Austrian politicians also appear to increasingly make some troublesome comments and essentially support nationalists in the region. As a matter of fact, the current Austrian government is also taking cues from authoritarian leaders of the Visegrád states.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus that Austria could act as an enabler of a development process in the region if it so wished:

- 💡 Citizens in the Western Balkans desire stability and security most of all and continue to look towards the EU to provide such guarantees. Thus, only the European framework can bring stability and peace in the region in the long term. Austria should therefore continue to support EU initiatives in the region and step up its balanced, impartial, and comprehensive engagement counteracting ideologies of nationalism and political extremism of all kinds. Austria needs to provide a long-term post-conflict peacebuilding framework that supports citizen empowerment (young politicians, civil society, in the context of rule of law, etc.) rather than focusing on ad hoc and short-term projects (as seen in the context of the post-2015 migration challenges e.g.).
- 💡 In order to make sustainable progress in the Western Balkans, Austrian engagement must strong-arm the EU to “negotiate” the standards candidate countries must fulfil. This must be rectified by making the accession process neutral and technical. A pro-European Austrian foreign policy in the Western Balkans would emphasize on re-shifting the logic from narrow enlargement politics driven by member

### Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

The Ukraine continues to be one of the world’s most pressing conflict and crisis management challenges. More than 10,000 people have died since the outbreak of the war in 2014. With daily ceasefire breaches the conflict continues to demand victims, even if it has disappeared from the media focus. As a solution can only be reached on a diplomatic basis that includes the Russian Federation, the importance of international mediation efforts will not abate.

Against this backdrop it cannot be ruled out that Austria’s geopolitical position in central Europe and its historical regional bridge function could unfold the potential for supporting a diplomatic solution to bring the conflict to an end. Only recently, the 2017 Austrian Chairmanship of the OSCE offered a possibility for Austria to position itself as a mediator. Due to the national election campaign and its preparations’ in the same year, Austria did not use this influential position, however.

states national interests back to an EU enlargement policy driven by EU institutions. In doing so, Austria would set an example of democratic multilateralism.

- 💡 The structure of provisional power sharing arrangements that facilitated an end to the conflict in the 1990s widely entrenched a post-war mentality in the Western Balkan states. During the last decades the political actors have largely remained the same. These very actors continue to prioritize personal agendas and have no genuine interest in reconciliation. This plays out in the sense that votes continue to be cast along lines of constituent groups rather than in terms of progressive policies, even though progressive alternatives do exist. Against this background Austrian political engagement should not only refrain from elevating particular interests of constituent groups all over the region but focus on democratically empowering the regions citizens’. Such an approach would be key to solving various open issues and integrating pro-European dynamics in the political discourse. Furthermore, Austria should back the EU as a powerful mediator with convening powers and trust of all sides to induce sustaining compromise.

- 💡 Austrian foreign policy with regards to the Eastern Ukraine should focus on dialogue and diplomacy as the only way forward. Austria with its longstanding experience as a neutral actor should furthermore act as an enabler to promote a unique solution that avoids binary military logic (meaning neither a NATO nor a Russian bias).

- 💡 Austrian foreign policy engagement must be centred on the fact that there is no military solution to the conflict and a peaceful solution build on civilian instruments must be key elements of any conflict and crisis management effort. Taking multiple collective memories and binary geopolitical interests into account, Austria should actively promote civilian conflict resolution mechanism that offer possibilities for long term reconciliation between all sides and escape narrow political interests. Thus, any honest Austrian reconciliatory approach must also subordinate domestic interests (e.g. energy and resources) to safeguard the room necessary for political compromise.

💡 However, in order to escape the conflict logic, a major rethinking process will have to take place on the Ukrainian as well as on the Russian side. Any possible mediatory and/or enabling positioning of Austria must therefore take into account that any power-sharing arrangement imposed by the international community must be a face-saver for all

### Eastern Partnership states

It is not clear if countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) are tangibly benefitting from Association Agreements that were put in place, particularly in light of Russian countermeasures. Especially in Eastern Partnership (EaP) states this situation highlights the currently predominant adversarial logic (either pro-Russian or pro-European) from which only corrupt domestic elites benefit and depicts a fundamental commitment-capacity-outcome gap from the EU side.

On one side, the transformative power of the EU has not been put to a real test in the domestic context EaP countries' so far and should therefore not be overstated. On the other side, however, the symbolic power that a possible EU integration projects into EaP countries' is extremely high as populations have been remaining very pro-EU.

- 💡 The EU should act as an enabler of the EaP countries to manoeuvre their way between geopolitics and not feed into a destructive either-or-logic. As an enabler Austria should actively support such an approach.
- 💡 The EU's Association Agreements need to attempt to bring immediate economic benefits for the citizens and economies of ENP countries. In this context, the Austrian focus should be on the potential benefit that small and medium sized companies can create for a market system. Through a smart promotion of possibilities of economic growth focusing on reducing poverty, the rampant corruption of the economic system should be combated.

sides concerned and counteract a "winner takes all mentality". In a possible scenario Austria could lead international strategic communications efforts that popularize a possible power-sharing arrangement build on dialogue and lay the ground for compromise among the people affected.

- 💡 In order to lay integral foundations for future development in ENP countries, the EU and the Russian Federation need to work together. Therefore the building of trust is a major challenge for the EU given the different opinion blocks within the Union. As a widely regarded neutral actor in the past, Austria should not hesitate to induce a foreign policy process thinking possible that objectively defines, identifies, and then mediates between "legitimate" Russian and European influence in the region. Austria should ultimately support a strategic dialogue between the EU and the Russian Federation as an enabler. Statements in this direction have already been made the Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz in 2014/15 ("escape the either-or-logic") and need to be followed up upon.
- 💡 Even if it is to be expected that the enlargement narrative will continue to sound compelling and be resonated throughout the EaP countries', these countries need to be embedded in a wider EU foreign policy strategy for the Eastern Europe and shake off the enlargement component in it.
- 💡 Instead of giving way to nationalist agendas that drastically push back on democratic values in the long run, the EU should emphasise on the export of region building ("Eurasia") based on the rule of law and the idea of an economic union. This could open possibilities for joint projects with and open communication channels between the West and East.



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