
AUSTRIAN FOREIGN POLICY RE-DISCOVERING CENTRAL EUROPE

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Background

After the restoration of Austrian sovereignty in 1955, the main goal of Austrian foreign policy was integration in the Western structures without neglecting the constraints imposed by the 1955 Vienna State Treaty and by the self-declared neutrality status.

Austria joined the United Nations Organisation in 1955, the Council of Europe in 1956, was a founding member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1960 and succeeded in concluding association treaties with the European Communities in 1961 and 1972. In the 1970s, Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky tried to establish Austria as a neutral global mediator, engaging the country in the Middle East conflict resolution and in enhanced contacts with the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the developing countries. Austria supported the CSCE process, and later the establishment of the Central European Initiative (proposed by Italy). As regards the Austrian federal countries, they were founding members of the Alps-Adriatic co-operation and of the Working Community of Danubian Regions.

The changes in the collapsing Soviet bloc resulted in the Austrian EC membership application, expressed in 1989. The generally positive avis of the European Commission on the Austrian application of 31 July 1991 was backed by the Commission's assumption that Austria could fulfil an important regional function using its special historical, cultural and political ties with its neighbours, and thus promoting their integration into the European structures. However, during the accession negotiations 1993/94, and in the period following the accession on 1 January 1995, the Austrian foreign policy was mainly focused on EU integration and did not show a clear concept regarding a special relationship with its neighbouring countries, except for activities like the annual meetings of the Central European Presidents and continuous efforts of personalities like

Erhard Busek to promote the importance of closer contacts with Central and Eastern Europe.

During the first Austrian EU presidency in the second half of the year 1998, negotiations were opened with the countries of the Luxembourg group including the neighbouring countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia. In the negotiation process the Austrian side followed a partly hard but consistent line that did not lead to any blockade with the exception of the energy chapter in the negotiations with the Czech Republic.

In February 2000, the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) became partner in a coalition government. The other 14 EU member states answered to this development by imposing bilateral political sanctions against Austria, sanctions which were not supported by most of the Central European countries. Under these circumstances, Austria started to develop a special relationship with partners on the other side of the former Iron Curtain:

In 2001 the Regional Partnership (RP) was formulated as a political forum to support EU accession of the Visegrád 4 and Slovenia, and to find ways for common positions within the EU institutions.

In 2002 the Danube Co-operation Process was launched to underline the unique role of the great European river to help create economic, political and societal ties and to support co-operation in the region.

Regional co-operation

As there are undoubtedly different kinds of regional co-operation on various levels, we have to define which meaning the terminus will have in the further discussion in this paper.

In the context of the two initiatives mentioned above, regional co-operation can be described as a regulated political interaction among a group of neighbouring states with a low level of institutionalisation. Thus, highly formalised models like the European Union can be excluded as well as sub-regional cross-border co-operation, civil society interaction or ad-hoc coalitions.

The establishment of the regional partnership and of the Danube Co-operation Process (DCP) were of declarative character and their existence depends on the activities voluntarily undertaken by the actors involved. Both

structures have ideological conceptions behind them: The regional partnership is based on the assumption that there is a distinct Central European region, while the DCP underlines that the Danube is more than a river, but the lifeline for a common political and economic area.

The level of institutionalisation is extremely low. The establishment of a central office was avoided, the working process takes place in meetings on different levels at different venues.

Both initiatives are supported by the commitment of the member states to take stock of the possibilities provided by the platforms.

The strength of such a kind of co-operation might be flexibility, as purpose and agenda of the initiative can be easily changed upon request.

A weak point is considered to be the dependence on short-term interests of the member states.

Additionally, there must be a clear common goal as well as already established intensive ties, otherwise such a regional initiative resembles an empty bottle.

An important external factor is the high complexity of decision making in the enlarged EU that requires a closer co-operation between the member states, especially if they are small or medium sized.

Regional Partnership

The initiative was proposed by the then Austrian foreign minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner as “strategic partnership”, and established on 6 June 2001 in Vienna. The member states are Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The partnership has an informal character. It was created to support the EU integration of the participating accession countries and aims at a closer co-operation within the EU structures to define common interests and to launch initiatives.

The already existing partnership instruments in the Benelux region and among the Nordic countries served as examples.

The main function is to act as a kind of Central European lobby within the EU, co-ordinated by the ministers of foreign affairs. However, it was clear from the beginning that the initiative also has to address special policy areas apart from genuine foreign policy, and the working level below the ministerial one. Such steps were undertaken by the creation of a close co-operation in the field

of internal security (the “Salzburg Forum”), and by the establishment of the “Platform Culture Central Europe”.¹

The initiative has to face three major challenges:

- 1) The Visegrád co-operation already exists and is a rather well-working instrument for four out of six RP countries, thus there is a danger of overlapping activities. The Visegrád 4 has continuously stated that the RP should not replace Visegrád but is thought to have an additional value.² However, the idea of expanding the Visegrád co-operation to Austria and Slovenia has been mentioned recently. Another sign of good co-existence was the meeting of the Visegrád prime ministers at the end of 2004, followed by a meeting of the prime ministers of the RP.
- 2) Bilateral conflicts: Austria has a difficult relationship with the Czech Republic, especially because of the Temelin Czech nuclear power plant and of the so-called “Benes decrees” that legalised the expulsion of the German and Hungarian speaking populations from former Czechoslovakia after World War II. There are some irritations with Slovenia concerning the Slovene minority in Carinthia, a southern province of Austria. Another conflict potential exists between Hungary and the Slovak Republic on the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority living in the Southern part of Slovakia.
- 3) Missing coherence: The economic disparities between Austria and the other participating countries result in different points of view in major issues like the transition periods on the free movement of the labour force or the contributions to be paid to the EU budget. Another major factor is the different orientations in external security policy. While Austria still maintains its status as a neutral country, all the other members have joined NATO and have special relations with the US. Poland follows as a medium-sized EU member state with a more self-confident external policy than the

¹ Kraus, Herbert: „Regionalismus in der erweiterten EU“, in: Focus Europa 5/2004, p. 8-10.

² Kiss, László J.; Königova, Lucie; Luif, Paul: „Die Regionale Partnerschaft“: subregionale Zusammenarbeit in der Mitte Europas“, in: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft, 2003/1, p. 65.

smaller countries and is also involved in other regional forums like the Weimar Triangle or the Baltic Sea Co-operation.

These observations taken into regard, the trend to concentrate on specific fields of common interest such as internal security and culture is a rather good decision for the functioning of the initiative. However, it could be stated that there is no consensus in the very important “hard” policy areas such as external policy and economy.

In all events, labour-sharing within the EU is a requirement for all the partners. It is evident that there are manifest common interests in areas such as infrastructure development, home security and culture.

As the RP is an informal low-institutionalised process there is no need for permanent agreement among the partners: If the instrument is useful to the countries they will use it.

The mechanism can also serve as an important consultative process to overcome stereotypes and to find a better understanding.

The Austrian minister for Foreign Affairs, Ursula Plassnik, assessed in her speech “Co-operation for the best of all”³, held on 27 April 2005 in Vienna, that the regional partnership had started to show practical results. The countries put forward a joint paper on the future of Kosovo, have intensified the fight against organised crime and corruption, and have established a permanent dialogue between the parliamentarians of the participating countries. It is an everyday experience that within the EU you cannot succeed alone.

There are also examples of well-working bilateral co-operation, like the common Austrian-Hungarian position paper on EU policy towards the Ukraine.

The recent political changes in the Ukraine were one of the most important issues discussed at the meeting of the foreign ministers in Warsaw on 12 January 2005. Apart from that, a closer consular co-operation was discussed in reaction to the Tsunami disaster in South-East Asia.

The most recent meeting, on 11 July in Budapest, was dedicated to the issues of the Western Balkans, Kosovo, the European Neighbourhood Policy

³ Plassnik, Ursula: „Zusammenarbeit zum Besten aller“, speech delivered on 27 April 2005 at Haus der Industrie, Vienna

and the Austrian EU presidency in the first half of 2006. Within the framework of the meeting, the opinions on the development of the EU constitution could be addressed, as well as the positions on the finances of the EU. The regional partners used the meeting for talks with the Ukrainian foreign minister Tarasyuk.

(1) Salzburg Forum

The annual meetings of the ministers of the interior, taking place since 2000, comprise praxis-oriented talks on the EU enlargement process, the creation of a regional area of security, models for regional co-operation and address common interests and problems. The main thematic focus is on combating organised crime and finding strategies for the protection of the EU external borders. In 2001 the co-operation was formalised by the signature of the “Salzburg declaration”. The meetings of the “Salzburg Forum” were also attended by other distinguished representatives, like the EU commissioners Vitorino and Frattini, the Stability Pact special co-ordinator Erhard Busek or representatives of the acting EU presidencies. Beginning with July 2004 a half-yearly rotating chairmanship was introduced to underline the equality among the participating countries. However, the annual meetings remain to be organised by the Austrian side.

In July 2005 Romania was accepted as new participating country in the “Salzburg Forum”, thus extending its membership beyond the RP.

Liese Prokop, the Austrian minister of the interior, expressed an intention to enhance the partnership within the Salzburg group. She assessed the partnership as an important precondition for the establishment of an optimal security environment in the center of Europe, but also for the development of common positions within the EU.⁴

(2) Platform Culture Central Europe

Since its establishment in 2001, more than 100 projects in different cultural areas have been developed within the “Platform Culture Central Europe”. It has become a tradition that the platform organises a joint cultural event in the

⁴ Prokop, Liese: „Innere Sicherheit erfordert internationale Zusammenarbeit“, in: IDM Info 2/2005, p. 1.

country holding the EU presidency. In 2005, portraits of Central European book typographs were presented in The Hague, and in London a documentary film festival will be organised. In Autumn 2005 a common music festival was held in Beijing including a publication in the Chinese language on music traditions in Central Europe. Currently the inclusion of the Ukraine in the European cultural process is in progress.⁵

Danube Co-operation Process

At the foundation of the DCP it was underlined that this initiative should not create another regional institution, but function as a co-ordinating tool for existing initiatives. The DCP was launched by Austria and Romania, together with the European Commission and the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, to harmonise and set priorities for initiatives serving the development of regional co-operation in political and economic terms. The DCP was founded on 27 May 2002 in Vienna by the initiators and 11 other countries: Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria, Moldova and the Ukraine.

The process declared itself as operating on 6 dimensions: the economy, navigation, the environment, tourism, culture and sub-regional co-operation.

The ministers of foreign affairs meet every two years. In the interval period, civil servants will prepare ministerial conferences. The last conference took place on 14 July 2004 in Bucharest, and the next one is scheduled to take place in Vienna in 2006.

The main goals of the DCP are a better co-ordination of the numerous initiatives through exchange of information, and the provision of impulses for enhanced regional activities. The DCP makes available tools like the internet platform www.danubeco-operation.org and the Danube Region Business Conferences that take place in those years in which no ministerial conference is scheduled.

Of course, one could say that the DCP is a tiger without teeth: there is neither direct influence on ongoing projects, nor a budget for initiatives of its own. Another problem is the lack of awareness of the DCP's existence and its

⁵ Brix, Emil: „Eine Außenpolitik der kulturellen Grenzüberschreitung“, in: IDM-fokus europa, 4/2005, p. 15.

meaningfulness. Last but not least, not only is the heterogeneity of the members a fact, but also their very different attitude to the DCP. While Austria and Romania have strongly involved themselves, other countries show a rather limited interest in this kind of co-operation.

The “Declaration on the establishment of the Danube Co-operation Process” is the constituent document of the DCP. The Danubian countries express that “for the first time in history [they] share the same democratic principles and values” and that they “wish to co-operate to help bring stability, prosperity and better economic and social cohesion to the entire region.”⁶

The process was evaluated for the first time in Bucharest. In the final document the countries decided that “the Danube Co-operation Process shall continue [...] to broaden and deepen present Danube co-operation taking stock of and using the existing structures and develop further the various initiatives already launched in different fields of present Danube co-operation.”⁷

The current indicative work programme (2004-2006) foresees the following priority fields:

Development of sustainable transport solutions, pan-European dimension of Danube navigation, development of river infrastructure, free trade, database of entrepreneurs, adaptation of a Danube legal regime, protection of river basins, development of tourism, cultural networking, co-operation of universities, fostering environmental awareness, co-operation between cities, cross-border co-operation for sustainable development.

As the DCP cannot intervene directly in the mentioned fields, the activities are mainly carried out by the following institutions:

European Commission, Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, Danube Commission, SECI, Steering Committee Corridor VII, Via Donau, ICPDR, DABLAS, international financial institutions, Danube Tourist Commission, Platform Culture Central Europe, Danube Rectors’ Conference, and various NGOs.

⁶ “Declaration on the establishment of the Danube Co-operation Process”, <http://www.danubeco-operation.org/Content.Node/files/idm/Declaration.doc>

⁷ “The Danube as a European Lifeline”, <http://www.danubeco-operation.org/Content.Node/files/idm/Finaldocument2.doc>

Conclusion

The examples of the Regional Partnership and of the Danube Co-operation Process show an increasing involvement of the Austrian foreign policy in Central and South-Eastern Europe. The latter is additionally underlined by the active part Austria is playing in the peace-keeping missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Despite the shortcomings of the two initiatives mentioned above, their establishment illustrates a substantial shift in Austrian foreign policy orientation after 2000. The sanctions of the EU 14 are no sustainable explanation for the change of priorities, but can be considered as one of the factors leading in this direction. Of higher importance is the strong engagement of Austrian enterprises in the region as well as the historical and cultural ties that link Austria with the other countries of the region.

The initiatives provide the participating countries with a tool to lobby for common interests (regional partnership) or to harmonise and prioritise their activities (DCP). It is not the structure of these initiatives that will be decisive for their success or failure, but mainly the commitment of the countries involved.

From the Austrian point of view, the establishment of the initiatives was an important step towards a closer co-operation with its neighbours and beyond. The framework for a more intensive exchange of views and for the realisation of common ideas has been created.