



Chancellor Schüssel's challenge

How to revive the spirit of the EU in Austria

BY MELANIE A. SULLY

Austria's presidency of the European Union started less than favourably — with an EU constitution many said was “dead”. The Austrian legislature, the *Nationalrat*, had ratified the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe in May 2005 and the second chamber, the *Bundesrat*, followed soon after. But just days later, the voters of France and the Netherlands, both founding members of the EU, rejected the Constitution in referenda. This double rejection plunged Europe into confusion and uncertainty (see *Federations* Vol. 5 No. 1, “Europe’s rude awakening from a federalist dream,” by Philip Stephens). The EU was in uncharted waters and experts disagreed on what to do next.

Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel announced “the constitution is not dead, since the ratification process is still underway.” Technically this was true, and in February 2006, during the Austrian presidency, the Belgian parliament ratified the Treaty. But the peoples of Europe seemed less than convinced. Before EU accession in a referendum in 1994, Austrian voters had given the government a massive two-thirds majority for joining Europe. In the election to the European Parliament ten years later, only 42 percent of voters even bothered to go to the polls.



Austrian
Chancellor
Wolfgang
Schüssel

Austrian skeptics

A Eurobarometer poll of the European Commission published at the beginning of 2006 showed that Austria has become one of the most Euro-sceptic countries in the Union, rivalling even Britons. Only 20 per cent of Austrians support Turkish membership in the EU. Of all the federal states, Salzburg is the most proud to be seen as part of Europe. The poll showed that Austrians are especially disturbed by unemployment, wastefulness in the EU and crime often attributed to the recent enlargement of the EU to 25 members. In March 2006 the radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ) began a petition campaign against the admission of Turkey into the European Union.

The Austrian State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Hans Winkler, said the EU presidency should not act as the Constitution’s forensic scientist, but admitted it was necessary to win back the confidence of Europe’s citizens. At a “Sound of Europe” conference in Salzburg to mark the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth, Austrian Chancellor

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Wolfgang Schüssel proclaimed that Europeans did not know enough about each other and somehow saw each other as “foreigners.”

Europe Day

As a way of overcoming this apparent disinterest or even hostility to Europe among Austrians, the Austrian parliament changed its rules of procedure in 2005 to allow for so-called “Europe Debates.” Each parliamentary group could propose a topic for discussion within the framework of this debate dedicated exclusively to EU issues. Also, at the beginning of each EU presidency there is the opportunity for members of the Austrian parliament to debate the proposed work program set out by the EU presidency.

The first attempt at such a session of the Austrian parliament took place in September 2005 and was televised live for eight hours. Parliamentarians said that far from stimulating interest in EU affairs, it was met with apathy.

Anti-Europeanism

Although Austrians are less than enthusiastic about the European project, they were nevertheless shocked by the strength of anti-European feeling in the Middle East and Asia following the publication in Denmark of the controversial cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed.

Scenes of violence and attempts to storm the Austrian embassy in Tehran showed that Austria was looked upon as a symbol of Europe during its presidency. Austria appealed for restraint defending freedom of speech but urging tolerance and respect for religious beliefs. The reaction to the caricatures left many wondering what to do when there is a clash between freedom of expression and respect for religion — both core European values. This in turn raises more questions than answers since EU countries are split on the question of Turkish membership in the EU and the implications of absorbing a large non-Christian country.

The Next Waltz

In July, Finland takes over the EU presidency and with it the debate on the Constitution. In Helsinki the diagnosis on the European Constitution varies. While some have written the whole thing off, others see a glimmer of hope.

European integration started in 1945, in part to counter the domination of Europe by superpowers. Today Europe is struggling to speak with one voice in the world — endeavouring to speak in a voice that echoes all its peoples, member states and regions. (6)