



Country Issue: Austria



The Relaunch of Europe

Mapping Member States' Reform Interests

Europa

ie Institut für
ip Europäische Politik

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Institut für Europäische Politik (Institute for European Politics, IEP) is one of the leading foreign and European policy research centres in the Federal Republic of Germany dedicated to the study of European integration.

Further information on the project can be found here:

www.relaunch-europe.eu

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THE RELAUNCH OF EUROPE

MAPPING MEMBER STATES' REFORM INTERESTS

The Relaunch of Europe. Mapping Member States' Reform Interests (RelaunchEU) is a project conducted by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) that surveys the implementation prospects for twelve concrete reform proposals. It covers the policy areas of Social Union, Economic and Monetary Union and Defence Union as well as asylum and migration policy and the EU's institutional set-up. Furthermore, it analyses the support for flexible integration and the positioning towards the five scenarios presented in the European Commission's »White Paper on the Future of Europe« of spring 2017. It covers the positions of national governments and of relevant progressive political parties, which received a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the previous European or national elections.¹

The study follows two main objectives: (1) It demonstrates the scope of action for prompt reforms of the EU in the selected policy areas while also taking into account which member states would, under certain conditions, be willing to implement the specific proposals. (2) It empirically determines which member states could belong to an avant-garde group willing to deepen integration.

Researchers from think tanks and research institutions in the member states of the EU-27 compiled information to determine the position of governments and progressive political parties towards the twelve reform proposals. This qualitative analysis reflects the country experts' views and is based on documents such as coalition agreements, government or party programmes, position papers, press releases, interviews, op-ed pieces, and official documents. It presents a snapshot of the discussions within the governments and parties. In order to keep the country issues short, internal debates and deviating opinions cannot be covered in detail. Positions are subject to change, especially following elections and the formation of new governments. The snapshot was taken at the end of September 2017. More recent developments could not be included. Notable exceptions are the country issues of Austria and Germany, which were updated following the latest coalition negotiations.

The study's results are published in English on the website www.relaunch-europe.eu. It presents maps for every actor and reform proposal, 27 country issues and an analytical paper. The paper compares the positions of all actors in all member states of the EU-27 on the twelve concrete reform proposals and presents five flagship-projects, which bear the chance for a relaunch of Europe.

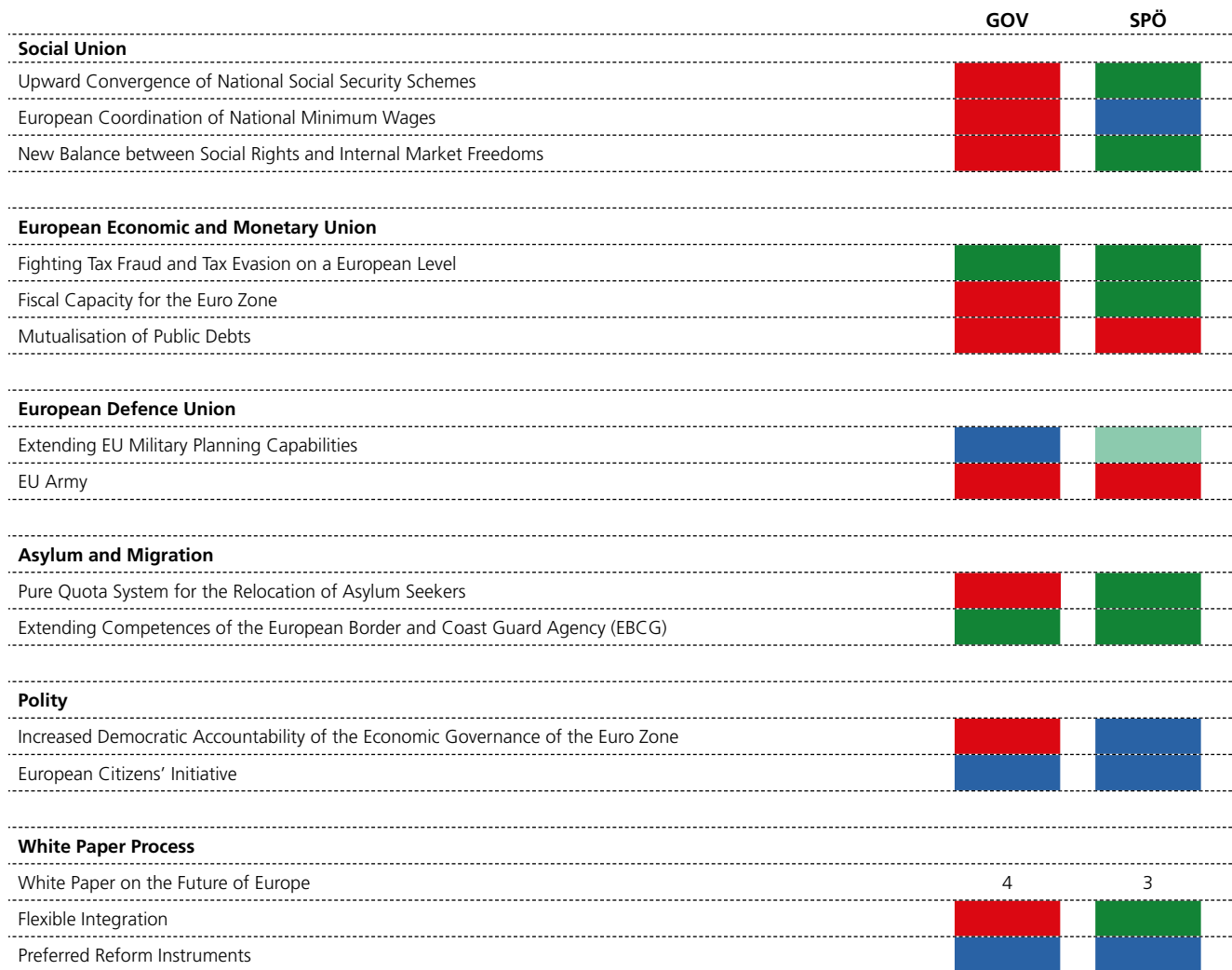
¹ If a party fulfills this criterion, but is not a relevant actor in the national public debate anymore, it was deleted from the sample based on the judgement of the projects' country expert.

AUSTRIA

Since early elections in October 2017, Austria has been governed by a coalition of the conservative party Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) and the right-wing populist party Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ). The progressive party

Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ), who had been governing the country in a grand coalition with the ÖVP since 2007, has won 26.9% of the votes in the last elections, becoming the third largest party in the parliament.

Support of the Austrian Government and the SPÖ for Deepening EU Integration



Legend

- support for
- support under conditions
- against
- neutral

- GOV** National Government
- SPÖ** Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs

- 1 – Scenario 1: »Carrying on«
- 2 – Scenario 2: »Nothing but the single market«
- 3 – Scenario 3: »Those who want more do more«
- 4 – Scenario 4: »Doing less more efficiently«
- 5 – Scenario 5: »Doing much more together«

SOCIAL UNION

The SPÖ has been a long-standing proponent of completing the European Monetary Union (EMU) by achieving **upward convergence of national social security schemes**. Yet, during the last election campaign, the SPÖ has changed from its former specific position to a more general call for a social chapter concerning the EMU. The party merely draws attention to the establishment of certain social standards across the EU. The ÖVP-led government takes a different stance on this issue as well as concerning a **European coordination of national minimum wages**. They regard fiscal and social competition as an instrument to increase the competitiveness of member states within limits and therefore seek to prohibit »Gold Plating« in implementing EU-legislation. The SPÖ formerly demanded a European minimum wage policy but removed this demand from its platform for the electoral campaign in 2017. In general, there have been intensive discussions on the issue of regulating wage competition within the Union since this would undercut Austria's social protection scheme and existing wage regulation, which is based on collective bargaining agreements. With a view to a **new balance between social rights and internal market freedoms** the Austrian government has not taken yet an official position. However, the government programme generally follows a liberal free-market approach, thus prioritising internal market freedoms and aims to increase the level of prosperity through economic liberalisation at the expense of social security standards. On the other hand, the SPÖ is a keen proponent of adding a social component to the four internal market freedoms. The four freedoms and the social dimension shall have equal legal status. Although this support is not equal to demanding a social progress protocol attached to the EU treaties, the SPÖ does suggest complementing existing fiscal and budgetary targets, such as criteria of the stability and growth pact, with a social chapter. The established social minimum standards would have the same legally binding nature as fiscal and budgetary rules. Thus, this initiative would limit the absolute priority of the four freedoms. Moreover, with regard to current economic disparities in the EU, the SPÖ also proposes the possibility of limiting access to national labour markets and therefore the free movement of people in cases of increased labour migration.

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION

Concerning **fighting tax fraud and tax evasion on a European level**, the SPÖ particularly supports the establishment of a minimum corporate tax rate across the EU. Fearing a race to the bottom in corporate taxation, the SPÖ endorses increased transparency by publishing profits and taxes paid on a country-by-country basis. Furthermore, proposals aim at withdrawing the recognition of letterbox companies for tax purposes and at better protecting whistle blowers while at the same time criminalising advice aimed at tax avoidance. A proposal by the former Federal Finance Minister (ÖVP) during the last legislative period in July 2017

endorsed the creation of a common consolidated tax base and put forward further ideas for effective corporate taxation in the digital era. These include taxing companies based on their digital presence in a country, not their headquarters, and improving and harmonising taxation treaties as well as the exchange of information with third countries. Hence, while the ÖVP endorsed a tougher stance on the fight against tax evasion originally, the position of the new coalition government is not entirely clear yet. However, according to the coalition agreement, the government supports the reform of the Value Added Tax Directive on the European level in order to fight entrepreneurial turnover tax fraud. With regard to the idea of a new **fiscal capacity for the euro zone**, the SPÖ supports the creation of a European investment fund in order to boost public investment in the EU. The SPÖ particularly highlights the advantages of an increased joint fiscal capacity, as it would allow for a better social and economic convergence between EU countries in the long-run. It would contribute to aligning national economic cycles in order to cushion asymmetric shocks as experienced by Austria's job market with regard to rising unemployment rates. In addition, the party wants to re-direct existing EU programs towards more growth- and investment-focused objectives. The new government and, most prominently, its Chancellor (ÖVP) criticised the idea of establishing a joint fiscal capacity for the euro zone. Both the SPÖ and the government have voiced their opposition to the **mutualisation of public debts** in the EU. This issue is domestically considered as »toxic« at present. Nevertheless, prominent members of the SPÖ have expressed their support for the common issuance of debts (*Eurobonds*) in the past.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE UNION

With regard to initiatives to further develop a European Defence Union, such as extending the EU military planning capabilities or the establishment of an EU army, Austria is bound to a neutrality clause which stipulates a policy of non-alignment and non-participation in any military alliance including NATO. Due to the country's constitutional constraints, **extending EU military planning capabilities** is not an issue at stake either for the Austrian government or the SPÖ. Consequently, the creation of EU headquarters for executive military missions and operations has been hardly discussed – even more, there has been reluctance to use the term EU headquarters at all. However, the government does not exclude Austria's support for enhanced EU military cooperation in the areas of training, peacekeeping and disaster relief. According to the SPÖ Austria's support for military planning and conduct capabilities on the EU level should be subject to the condition that this would neither create an automatically binding obligation for Austria to participate nor lead to the establishment of an EU army. Furthermore, cooperation with non-member states is also conditioned on commonly shared values and democratic governance. The Austrian government opposes the establishment of any kind of an **EU army** and plans to maintain an independent military national defence instead. This

is a long-held official stance that was already clarified when the European Commission originally proposed its creation. However, the former Austrian Foreign Minister and recently elected Chancellor (ÖVP) supported the initiative to transform the EU battle groups into an EU rapid reaction force for disaster relief in third countries and at EU borders. Nevertheless, any support for closer EU cooperation on issues such as training, peacekeeping and disaster relief is restricted due to Austria's constitutional provisions on neutrality. The SPÖ's official position is similar to that of the government.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

The Austrian government opposes a **pure quota system for the relocation of asylum seekers**, and abides by the largely symbolic Austrian national limit (»Obergrenze«) set for the number of asylum seekers accepted per year, which was introduced in 2016. Repeatedly, the Austrian Chancellor described the debate over a pure quota system as a »pit-fall«. In fact, he expressed concerns that a pure quota system for asylum seekers might in fact advance the division of the European Union rather than its unification. Consequently, the Austrian government emphasises the need to focus on improving border security instead and is planning to devote its EU Council Presidency 2018 to the respective issue. Contrarily, the SPÖ campaigns for the creation of a fair quota system based on EU-wide harmonised criteria on asylum applications and decisions as well as common refugee support measures. The general debate on a reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) has been constantly linked to measures in trying to prevent migration flows in the first place. The SPÖ demands a closer cooperation with third countries, including an investment program such as a »Marshall Plan for Africa«. However, the protection of the EU's external borders by integrating police, civilian and military means, as especially demanded by the SPÖ, has been the prevailing issue in Austria. As the country is located on some of the main migration routes, EU level and national measures should focus on limiting the number of arriving refugees and asylum seekers and on re-establishing the Schengen area as a space without internal border controls. Therefore, the **European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)** should be strengthened. It is the government's position that the EBCG should receive significant resources to fulfil its tasks, including military assets. However, until sufficient control over the European Union's external border is (re-)established, the government reserves the right to take unilateral steps to secure Austria's national borders instead. Beyond this, concrete details concerning the proposed reform of the EBCG are generally lacking, as the topic's salience has been low due to the presence of other migration issues.

POLITY

The **European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)** is neither a topic on the agenda of the Austrian government nor of particular importance to the SPÖ. None of the actors has publicly

commented on the on-going ECI reform process. However, the government has expressed general scepticism regarding measures and instruments of direct democracy. There are few discussions regarding concrete proposals for **increasing democratic accountability of the economic governance of the euro zone** in Austria. As regards the question how the euro group should progress in the future, the government opposes any further integration of the euro zone and deems a European minister of finance unnecessary. On the other hand, the SPÖ considers the EMU to be incomplete and calls for additional convergence criteria that also include social and long-term economic goals such as an unemployment target. Furthermore, the SPÖ supports close cooperation on fiscal policies across the EU. However, proposals so far rather concern policy changes than institutional ones. The definition of accountability is based on policy output rather than institutions or procedures. Consequently, a more accountable euro zone would be defined by its added value and benefits for EU citizens. Even if the SPÖ does not impose any conditions for altering the euro zone governance, discussions are closely linked to the parties' ambition to restore the EU as a motor for growth and wealth for its citizens. Hence, proposals in this regard also involve reforming the EU budget.

WHITE PAPER PROCESS

Discussions on the **»White Paper on the Future of Europe«** initiated by the European Commission or even on the idea of flexible integration have come to the core of the political debate in Austria since the last elections. The positions of the SPÖ and the ÖVP-led government on this topic diverge considerably. The progressive SPÖ and the ÖVP-led government have different preferences with regard to the five scenarios presented in the »White Paper on the Future of Europe«. The SPÖ has emphasised that a Europe of two speeds as advocated for under scenario 3 »Those who want more do more« is already a reality and should hence be used to advance cooperation in areas important to a majority of EU member states. The new government favours scenario 4 »Doing less more efficiently« and emphasises the principle of subsidiarity. The governing coalition partners have expressed severe doubts about **flexible integration**, as they are convinced that creating two groups of first and second class member states would weaken the Union instead of strengthening it. Still, they acknowledge the fact that flexible integration is already a reality and necessary in some policy fields.

Legend

Actors Covered by the Study in each EU Member State

- *National Government*: including its members from one or more political parties, the Head of State or Government, relevant executive ministers and administration.
 - *Progressive Parties*: They include all parties that are represented either in the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) or that are members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and have gained a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the last national or European elections. They also include La République en Marche (REM) in France.
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Concrete Reform Options in Different Policy Areas

Social Union

1. *Upward Convergence of National Social Security Schemes* to provide Europe-wide protection against social risks and to ensure a decent standard of living for EU citizens.
 2. *European Coordination of National Minimum Wages* to ensure a decent income within the EU to prevent in-work poverty, to promote social convergence and to avoid social dumping across the EU.
 3. *New Balance of Social Rights and Internal Market Freedoms* to compensate the current precedence of internal market freedoms over national social rights.
-

European Economic and Monetary Union

4. *Fighting Tax Fraud and Tax Evasion on a European Level* for a fair allocation of tax burdens among natural and judicial persons.
 5. *Fiscal Capacity for the Euro Zone* to provide stabilisation against economic shocks through public expenditure in the euro zone.
 6. *Mutualisation of Public Debts* to tackle the problem of a sharp increase in public debts in some member states as a result of the euro zone crisis.
-

European Defence Union

7. *Extending EU Military Planning Capabilities* also for executive military missions and operations.
 8. *EU Army* establishing a permanent multinational military force under European command.
-

Asylum and Migration

9. *Pure Quota System for the Relocation of Asylum Seekers* which would replace the Dublin system.
 10. *More Competences for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)* expanding the current EBCG tasks in terms of »shared responsibility« between the EBCG and national authorities.
-

Polity

11. *Increase Democratic Accountability of the Economic Governance of the Euro Zone* to make its institutions more responsive to EU citizens.
 12. *European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)*: revision of the ECI regulation to make the instrument more citizen-friendly and effective in order to strengthen the participative democracy in the EU.
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White Paper Process

13. *The White Paper on the Future of Europe* by the European Commission presents five possible scenarios for the future course of European integration.
14. *Flexible Integration*: limiting the application of certain rules to certain EU member states.
15. *Preferred Reform Instrument*: Treaty reform, reforms inside or outside the Treaties.

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