

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 43

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN AUSTRIA, JUNE 7 2009

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Key points

- Since its entry into the EU in 1995, Austria has belonged to those member states with the highest degree of Euroscepticism. In 2008, one year before the elections to the European Parliament (EP), the Social Democrats - the leading governing party, but suffering from declining public support - gave in to the prevailing mood and adopted a more EU-critical position (by demanding national referendums on future amendments to EU treaties).
- Most of the parties running for the elections nominated new, more EU-critical top candidates. The programmes of the parties focussed on measures against the international financial crisis, social, security and environmental policy and, last but not least, further EU enlargement, in particular concerning Turkey.
- The major debate, however, centred on the political style of the right-wing, populist Freedom Party, which fostered anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic prejudices (with slogans like 'The Western world in Christian hands' and its 'Veto against EU accession of Turkey & Israel'). Thus, like in the past, national, instead of European, issues dominated the electoral contest.
- The governing parties, the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats (People's Party), as well as the Greens, lost votes. The Social Democrats, who experienced their worst election result at national level since 1945, had to give up first place to the People's Party. The Freedom Party almost doubled its share of the votes. The second right-wing, populist party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria, failed to pass the necessary threshold.
- As in 2004, the List Martin, not represented in the national parliament and led by an EU-critical MEP, surprised the established parties and won third place. The success was made possible by the extensive support of the *Kronenzeitung*, the EU-critical tabloid with the widest circulation in the country.

In Austria, public opinion towards the EU has been sceptical ever since the country's accession in 1995. According to the Eurobarometer survey of November 2008, only 39% of the Austrians believed EU membership to be a 'good thing'. By contrast, on the average 53%

of the people in the EU-27 thought so, only in three member states was support lower than in Austria.¹ Still, many Austrians reject new, unfamiliar things coming from abroad and view their country as an idyllic garden, which has to be protected against the moloch EU.

In 2008, Euro-scepticism was further stimulated: First, *Kronenzeitung*, the tabloid with the widest circulation (41.9% of the population in 2008), intensified its traditionally EU-critical stance and campaigned (in vain, though) against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by the national parliament. Second, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) was the leading governing party, but troubled by declining public support and recent electoral losses in two provincial elections (in Carinthia and Salzburg). As a consequence, it changed its EU policy, just a few months before the general elections. Realising that many of their voters were Eurosceptic, Federal Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and the new party chairman Werner Faymann declared that in future major amendments of EU treaties should be subject to a national referendum. It was of high symbolical value that they announced the party's new position in a letter to the editor of *Kronenzeitung*.

In September 2008, premature general elections were held.² The famous Gusenbauer-Faymann letter was one of the major reasons why the Christian Democratic Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP) had renounced its coalition with the Social Democrats. The elections, which were dominated by social issues and the populist strategies of nearly all the parties, resulted in a weakening of both governing parties, while the two right-wing, populist parties - the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ) - gained votes.³ Unexpectedly for the People's Party, which had led in the opinion polls, the Social Democrats, supported by the *Kronenzeitung*, made up ground. Still, the Social Democrats lost 6% of the votes and received only 29.3%, the worst result in their electoral history. The People's Party fared even worse: its 26% meant a loss of 8.3%.

The media and public called for a change. However, for lack of coalition alternatives, the Social Democrats and the People's Party renewed their government co-operation agreement. In the coalition programme, both parties confessed themselves 'in unrestrained form to the project of European integration'; the conflict potential of the new Social Democratic line was defused by a clause forbidding each party to make or support any parliamentary motion to hold a national referendum against the will of its coalition partner. As a consequence of personnel reshuffles, however, prominent advocates of a pro-EU policy had to give up leading positions in their parties (e.g., former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel and Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, both People's Party) and were replaced by more Eurosceptic politicians.

High levels of Euro-scepticism and growing public disaffection with national politics, especially with the performance of the two major parties, were unfavourable conditions for the EP elections, due on 7 June 2009. As **Table 1** shows, EP elections are 'second order elections' in Austria, anyhow, as indicated by the considerably lower voter turnout in comparison to other national elections. In order to mobilise politically disinterested or EU-

¹ See European Commission (2008). *Eurobarometer 70: Public opinion in the European Union: First results*, (Fieldwork: October-November 2008, Publication: December 2008) at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_first_en.pdf.

² For more on this, see: Franz Fallend (2009), 'Europe and the Austrian General Elections of 28 September 2008', *European Parties Elections and Referendum Network (EPERN), Election Briefing Papers No 45*, at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-eb-austria2008_no45.pdf.

³ The Alliance had split from the Freedom Party in 2005. See: Franz Fallend (2007), 'Europe and the National Parliament Election in Austria, October 1 2006', *European Parties Elections and Referendum Network, Election Briefing No 31*, p. 2-3, at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/microsoft_word_-_epernaustria2006.pdf.

critical voters, parties have usually resorted to populist strategies of ‘blame avoidance’ (making the EU the scapegoat for failures of national politics) or even EU-bashing. Instead of stressing that economic, environmental and other problems increasingly require European solutions and that a common Europe might be the best way to cope with nationalism and racism, their campaigns have focussed on national not European issues.⁴ What Austrian parties and their candidates promise in EP elections, above all, is to defend national interests in Brussels. It was very likely that their unpopularity would drive the parties to intensify populist and nationalist appeals in their campaigns for the 2009 EP elections.

Table 1: Voter Turnout in National Elections (in %) (1995–2009)

Year	Presidential Elections	Parliamentary Elections	European Elections
1995		86.0	
1996			67.7
1998	74.4		
1999		80.4	49.4
2002		84.3	
2004	71.6		42.4
2006		78.5	
2008		78.8	
2009			46.0

Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior (www.bmi.gv.at).

The electoral system for the EP elections followed the one for the first chamber of the national parliament, the National Council (*Nationalrat*). Basically, it was a system of proportional representation, but voters could change the order of the candidates on the party lists by so-called preference votes. If the number of preference votes a candidate secured amounted to more than 7% of the votes for his or her party, then he or she moved up to the top of the list (in case several candidates achieved this percentage, they were ranked according to the number of the preference votes). In 2004, this provision enabled Andreas Mölzer, who belonged to the German National wing of the Freedom Party, to oust the official top candidate of his party and to occupy the only EP seat that the party gained. In 2009, it also had an impact.

Parties, candidates and the media

Eight parties ran for the EP elections. In addition to the parties represented in the *Nationalrat* (Social Democrats, People’s Party, Freedom Party, Greens, Alliance), MEP Hans-Peter Martin, whose list had surprisingly won 14% of the votes in 2004, once again challenged the established parties. On the other hand, the Communist Party of Austria, which had participated in the last elections as part of an alliance of left-wing groups, and the Young Liberals, who tried to uphold liberalism after the Liberal Forum had failed to enter the *Nationalrat* in the 2008 general elections, hardly represented a challenge.

As a consequence of their defeats in the general elections, the two major parties searched for new, attractive top candidates for the EP elections. Hannes Swoboda, top candidate of his

⁴ See, for example: Franz Fallend (2004), ‘The European Parliament Election in Austria, June 13 2004’, *European Parties Elections and Referendum Network (EPERN), 2004 European Parliament Election Briefing No 13*, at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-ep2004-austria.pdf>.

party in the 2004 elections and Vice-President as well as parliamentary manager of the Social Democratic group in the EP, was not immediately re-nominated, but only after the party leadership had failed to find a more attractive candidate. Swoboda had to adjust his positions, though. In the past he had steered a clear pro-EU course, had suggested the abolition of Austrian neutrality, and had defended, in principle, the Turkish EU accession. Now he took on the new party line and, for example, demanded a national referendum in case of future EU treaty amendments.

Another personnel question also caused intra-party debates. Social Democratic Party Chairman Werner Faymann showed no ambition to claim the next Austrian EU commissioner for his party (the incumbent, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, responsible for the EU's neighbourhood policy, had been nominated by the People's Party). Party functionaries criticised such inconsistent behaviour as the party leadership, on the other hand, used to attack conservative and neo-liberal tendencies in the European Commission. They warned against sacrificing party goals to tactical populism (a Social Democratic commissioner might run into troubles with the powerful editor of the *Kronenzeitung*). Other media speculated that Faymann abandoned the position to the People's Party in the hope that, in compensation, he would get its support for Social Democratic candidates for other positions (e.g., the Austrian member of the European Court of Justice, but also the general manager of the Austrian public broadcasting corporation ORF).

The People's Party was more successful in its search and presented the former Minister of the Interior (2000–2004) Ernst Strasser as its new top candidate. Strasser had built up a reputation as a minister who introduced restrictive immigration laws and as someone who knew how to make his way (so, for example, he re-structured the police and cleaned out his ministry of Social Democratic sympathisers). Clearly, the choice was intended by Party Chairman and Vice-Chancellor Josef Pröll as a signal to right-wing and EU-critical voters. Othmar Karas, the leader (since 2006) of the People's Party group in the EP, was respected as a competent MEP and busy worker, but not regarded as trump card to win elections. So he was only placed in second position. As a consequence, a committee of retired and active politicians was established to support Karas. However, the committee did not explicitly start a preference campaign for him. In the beginning of his campaign, Karas denied any ambition to claim the leadership of his party's group in the EP but, towards the end, he said that the number of preference votes would affect the division of labour within the group.

Likewise, the Greens changed their top candidate. At a party congress, Johannes Voggenhuber, prominent MEP since 1995, only received 45.3% of the votes of the delegates and was not re-nominated. The decision was prompted by the disappointing result of the party in the last general elections, in particular its failure to attract protest voters (who preferred the right-wing populists, the Freedom Party or the Alliance for the Future of Austria). The new party leadership, installed after the elections, attempted to develop a clearer profile, to intensify contacts with (EU- and Lisbon Treaty-critical) NGOs, like Attac, and to present new faces. The media detected a move towards populism and speculated that the central motive behind the removal of Voggenhuber was to silence a critical voice, however. The MEP had repeatedly accused the former party leadership of a loss of ideology and of court-like decision-making. The new top candidate, Ulrike Lunacek, had worked for an NGO concerned with development policy. A member of the *Nationalrat* since 1999 and chairwoman of the European Green Party since 2006, she stressed that the Greens had no intention to change the party's EU policy. However, Voggenhuber doubted that and refused to accept a candidacy in second place. When he suggested a 'solidarity' candidacy in the last place on the party list (without actively leading a preference campaign) instead, the party executive forbade it as it

was afraid that his support by some provincial party organisations and his popularity among the rank-and-file could bring him so many preference votes so as to replace the elected top candidate. Voggenhuber accused the party leadership of having systematically plotted against him; pointing to criticisms of his ‘silverback’, and to the fact that the three first places on the Greens’ list went to women, he also argued that he was a victim of a battle of the sexes. As a consequence, the conflict, as it was framed, between party functionaries and grassroots democracy continued to dominate media headlines and surely cost the party votes.

The installation of (or, at least, the search for) new top candidates signalled the disrespect of the national party headquarters towards their MEPs, especially towards the chairmen of the party delegations to the EP. In fact, MEPs of all parties agreed that the national parties showed only very little interest in their work. In vain, both Social Democratic and People’s Party MEPs protested against the recent decision of their parties not to enable MEPs to make speeches before the national parliament. The Green MEP Voggenhuber even accused the national parties and MPs of an absolute lack of knowledge in European affairs.

The other parties did not come up with surprises concerning their top candidates. Hans-Peter Martin, of course, led the list that carried his name. As in 2004, he presented himself as investigator and lonely fighter against party rule, for democracy and transparency. His major goal, as he argued, was to prevent a further strengthening of the right-wing, populist parties and their cynical, inhuman policies. Without a party organisation behind him, he depended very much on the *Kronenzeitung*, which had already supported him in 2004. This time, the tabloid published excerpts from an EU-critical book Martin had just finished, in a daily series. The Freedom Party (the former party of Jörg Haider) relied on its only MEP, Andreas Mölzer. In order to address the younger and EU-critical voters, the party also published a comic, in which EU-Brussels was depicted as centre of luxury, greed, corruption, sinister intrigues and lechery for power. The Alliance for the Future of Austria nominated Ewald Stadler, a former member of the Ombudsman Board, who had switched to the National Council in 2006. He warned of the transformation of the EU into a ‘hyper state’. When he used the title ‘ombudsman’ in his campaign (‘our ombudsman in Brussels’), the Ombudsman Board obtained a court’s decision ordering him to refrain from it. The top candidates of the Communists and the Young Liberals were seldom mentioned in the media and remained unknown.

Party programmes

The electoral programmes of the parties for the 2009 EP elections focussed on five major issues: measures against the international financial crisis, social, security and environmental policy, and, last but not least, further EU enlargement, in particular concerning Turkey.⁵ In economic policy, all parties, with some modifications, advocated stricter regulations for the financial markets, a European financial transaction tax and extended controls of banks that receive state help. The List Martin wished to spend €50 billion to fight the recession; curiously, it also suggested to half the political class EU-wide and to create thereby 100,000 jobs in Austria. The Greens demanded a ‘New Deal’: up to five million people should find a job as a result of investments in measures to increase energy efficiency and in renewable energies. The Alliance for the Future of Austria promised to lower Austria’s contribution to the EU budget.

⁵ The following overview concentrates on the positions of the six relevant parties, which, except for the Alliance for the Future of Austria, finally won seats in the EP.

The Social Democrats used the financial crisis - which they attributed to greedy, unrestrained capitalism - to attack neo-liberal economic philosophy and to justify their claim that the EU be transformed into a 'social' Union, obliged to create jobs, secure pensions and increase standards especially in labour protection and health (critics pointed out that, at the same time, the party objected to any transfer of social policy responsibilities to the EU level). Fighting unemployment and a 'European Pensioner Law' also enjoyed prominent status in the People's Party's programme. Like the Social Democrats, the Greens called for a 'social union'. Their comprehensive social concept included a basic minimum income, unemployment and sickness benefits for at least one year and a reduction of working hours. As expected, the Freedom Party viewed social policy through its xenophobic lenses and announced that it would introduce a social security system especially for foreigners, to send unemployed foreigners back to their home countries and to introduce strict labour market rules for asylum seekers. The Alliance for the Future of Austria suggested cancelling the Basel II agreement in order to enable medium-sized enterprises to invest and create new jobs.

As in other recent national elections, security ranked highly in the parties' campaigns. Usually, it was linked with the immigration and asylum issue. Both the Social Democrats and People's Party emphasised that they had prolonged the national army's assistance mission to secure the country's boundaries with its Eastern neighbours (in spite of their inclusion into the Schengen regime in 2007). The Freedom Party and the Alliance went even further and demanded the re-introduction of border controls. Not surprisingly, when the European Commission announced a plan to harmonise the asylum laws of the EU member states and to distribute the burden of dealing with asylum seekers more justly between the states, all the parties, except for the Greens and the List Martin, rejected the plan (some of the Social Democratic MEPs supported it, however). The People's Party opposed the opening of the labour market to asylum seekers after six months and warned of an over-straining of the social system. The Freedom Party used the Commission's initiative to question Austria's allegiance to the Geneva Convention on Refugees altogether.

In environmental policy, the Social Democrats favoured an extension of renewable energies and higher tolls for trucks (above all to reduce transit traffic between Germany and Italy). Moreover, they campaigned for a nuclear-free Europe and wanted to save Austrian water from 'international exploitation' (a recurring argument of Austrian EU-critics). The first and the last points were also supported by the People's Party. The List Martin suggested stricter European regulations for automobile producers. Naturally, the Greens' programme contained the most extensive environmental proposals: among others, they aimed at reducing emissions until the year 2020 by 40% and advocated an EU-wide retreat from nuclear energy. The Freedom Party and the Alliance were worried by the recent gas crisis with Russia and wanted to strengthen Austria's energy self-sufficiency.

Turkish EU accession, which had played a significant role in all recent national elections,⁶ was debated in the EP campaigns of 2009 as well. Although the EU negotiations with the candidate state were progressing very slowly, and although no party was of the opinion that Turkey (at the moment) was fit for membership, all parties, except once more for the Greens, constantly stressed that they objected to having the country as an EU member. Public opinion was clearly anti-Turkey, and like Pavlov's reflex the parties tried by all means to conform to it – with sometimes confusing results. Take, for example, the People's Party: while its top candidate wanted to 'stop' the negotiations, the second man on the list preferred only to

⁶ See: 'The European Parliament Election in Austria, June 13 2004'; 'Europe and the National Parliament Election in Austria, October 1 2006'; and 'Europe and the Austrian General Elections of 28 September 2008'.

‘interrupt’ them – and the electoral programme reminded the readers that it was the People’s Party which had pressurised the EU Council to lead ‘open’ negotiations (that is, not necessarily ending with an accession). The List Martin and the Alliance stated that there was no place for Turkey in the EU; the Freedom Party wanted to stop the negotiations and, just in case, to hold a national referendum on the issue (like the People’s Party). Only the Greens declared courageously to continue the negotiations in order to support the reform process in Turkey, which in their eyes could be a stable anchor in the Middle East region.

Other campaign issues

Studying only the electoral platforms would give an incomplete picture of the dominant issues of the 2009 EP elections. As in many an election campaign in Austria, the Freedom Party also set the agenda and the tone of these elections. It claimed to be completely unlike its political opponents: consistent, credible, incorruptible and patriotic. Its primary goal was to convince the voters to settle accounts with the hypocritical politicians of the other, especially the governing, parties. ‘The Western world in Christian hands’, ‘True representatives of the people instead of EU traitors’, ‘Social warmth instead of an EU for corporations’ or ‘FPÖ veto against EU asylum madness’ were the major slogans of its election posters and newspaper advertisements. In spite of the fact that Israel had not even applied for EU membership, the Freedom Party placed a newspaper advertisement with the title ‘FPÖ veto against EU accession of Turkey & Israel’. The other parties were accused of acting as the henchmen of the USA, while the Freedom Party was presented as a lonely fighter against the expansion of radical Islam, the mass immigration of Muslims and the involvement of Austria in the bloody conflicts in the Near East. ‘7 June, day of the account’ all posters and advertisements concluded gloomily.

The Freedom Party’s campaign slogans caused a public debate, which soon exceeded the realm of the EP elections. During the election campaign, Freedom Party Chairman Heinz-Christian Strache took part in a demonstration against the expansion of an Islamic centre in Vienna, where he held a crucifix to the audience (it has to be remembered that in its programme the Freedom Party had maintained anti-clerical principles at least until 1997, only then it turned to ‘a Christianity defending its values’). When young neo-Nazis disturbed a commemoration of former prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp in Ebensee (Upper Austria) by showing the Hitler salute and firing off soft guns at them, Strache condemned the action. At the same time, however, he defended the young people as ‘silly rascals’, who should not be imprisoned, but only needed a ‘sound beating’. Finally, the third President of the *Nationalrat*, Martin Graf, a controversial figure already because of his membership in an extreme right-wing student league, accused the President of the Jewish Community of being the ‘foster-father of anti-fascist left-wing terrorism’ (after the latter had compared statements by the Freedom Party’s general secretary to those of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels).

A plethora of organisations protested, ranging from the other political parties through the Catholic Church, other churches, the Jewish and the Islamic Communities to civil society organisations. They reproached the Freedom Party for its abuse of religious symbols, its anti-Islamic excesses, its poorly disguised anti-Semitism, and its downplaying of neo-Nazi activities. Social Democratic Federal Chancellor Werner Faymann blamed the party for its ‘unbearable rabble-rousing’ and called Strache a ‘hate preacher’ (like the Islamic preachers the Freedom Party so often attacks). Strache, however, did not give in, but claimed self-defence against remarks denouncing the allegedly right-wing extreme character of his party.

In turn, he attacked the other parties, as well as the Catholic Church, for cowardly avoiding an honest debate about the dominant culture ('*Leitkultur*') in Austria and for ignoring people's fears.

The debate about the Freedom Party's political style and appropriate reactions to it overshadowed the EP elections. Some elder statesmen criticised the governing parties for allowing the Freedom Party with its excesses to put its stamp on the elections and to distract public attention from European issues. In general, they deplored that, after fourteen years of EU membership, Austria had not yet arrived in the EU and that the government had failed to develop a substantial, coherent EU strategy. The 2009 programme of the People's Party may serve as a good example: 'We pick up money from Europe for every Austrian' was one of its central statements!

Election results

As **Table 1** shows, in spite (or because) of the limited EU-focus of the election campaign, voter turnout was not, as expected, lower, but at 46% even 3.6% higher than five years earlier. Still, as **Table 1** also shows, this figure is far below voter turnout in other national elections. According to the opinion research institutes ISA and SORA, 54% of those who went to the polls were EU supporters and 37% EU opponents. Those who did not go to the polls gave 'unattractive candidates' (38%), 'unattractive parties' (32%) and 'disappointment with the EU' (31%) as the major reasons.⁷

As **Table 2** shows, the elections resulted in a catastrophe for the Social Democrats. With 23.7%, the major governing party lost 9.6% of the votes and three of its hitherto seven seats in the EP (it has to be mentioned, however, that in the new period the number of seats for Austria was reduced from 18 to 17). At the national level, after the fall of the Freedom Party from 26.9% to 10% in 2002, this was the biggest electoral loss of any party since 1945. The Social Democrats, who in the 2008 general elections had already secured their worst election result ever, experienced the same once again less than a year later. Including the recent provincial elections in Carinthia and Salzburg, where the Social Democrats had lost 9.7% and 6.0% of the votes respectively, the party had lost every election since Werner Faymann took over the party chairmanship in June 2008. Faymann's advances to the *Kronenzeitung* newspaper, which had supported him in the 2008 general elections, had not paid off as the tabloid had switched its support to Martin this time (probably in order to demonstrate its political independence). The lurching positions of the Social Democratic top candidate were another problem.

⁷ See: Flooh Perlot and Eva Zeglovits (ISA - Institut für Strategieanalysen/SORA - Institute for Social Research and Analysis) (2009). *Wahltagsbefragung und Wählerstromanalyse: Europawahl 2009*, p7, p19, at http://www.sora.at/images/doku/wahlanalyse_sora_isa_grafiken.pdf.

Table 2: EP Elections in Austria (1996–2009)

	1996		1999		2004		2009	
	Votes (in %)	Number of Seats	Votes (in %)	Number of Seats	Votes (in %)	Number of Seats	Votes (in %)	Number of Seats
ÖVP	29.7	7	30.7	7	32.7	6	30.0	6
SPÖ	29.2	6	31.7	7	33.3	7	23.7	4
Martin	-	-	-	-	14.0	2	17.7	3
FPÖ	27.5	6	23.4	5	6.3	1	12.7	2
Greens	6.8	1	9.3	2	12.9	2	9.9	2
BZÖ	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.6	-
Liberals	4.3	1	2.7	-	-	-	0.7	-
KPÖ	0.5	-	0.7	-	0.8	-	0.7	-

Abbreviations:

ÖVP	=	Austrian People's Party (<i>Österreichische Volkspartei</i>)
SPÖ	=	Social Democratic Party of Austria (<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs</i>)
Martin	=	List Hans-Peter Martin – For Democracy, Control, Justice (<i>Liste Hans-Peter Martin - Für Demokratie, Kontrolle, Gerechtigkeit</i>)
FPÖ	=	Freedom Party of Austria (<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i>)
Greens	=	The Greens - The Green Alternative (<i>Die Grünen - Die Grüne Alternative</i>)
BZÖ	=	Alliance for the Future of Austria (<i>Bündnis Zukunft Österreich</i>)
KPÖ	=	Communist Party of Austria (<i>Kommunistische Partei Österreichs</i>) (in 2004 candidacy as part of the Opposition for a Solidly United Europe)
Liberals	=	Young Liberals Austria (until 2004 Liberal Forum)

Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior (www.bmi.gv.at).

Obviously, the Social Democrats were not able to mobilise their traditional voters. According to the opinion research institute GfK Austria, the Social Democrats suffered most from voter abstention: 26% of the non-voters would have voted for the Social Democrats in general elections (17% for the People's Party, 9% for the Freedom Party, 6% for the Greens, 5% for the Alliance).⁸ About one third of its 2004 lost voters moved to the List Martin; more than half of them abstained. Not even its core group, the blue-collar workers, was convinced by the Social Democratic concepts: only 17% of them voted for the Social Democrats (29% for the People's Party, 24% for the Freedom Party, 17% for the List Martin, 7% for the Alliance, 5% for the Greens). Only 14% of those voters who were affected by the financial crisis (by staff or wage reductions, short-time work etc) chose the party (36% the People's Party, 23% the Freedom Party, 13% the List Martin, 10% the Greens, 2% the Alliance).⁹

The People's Party lost as well (-2.7%), but re-claimed first place impressively with 30% of the vote and was able to maintain its six seats. A large number of the party's former voters supported the List Martin or stayed at home, but this was more than compensated by the successful mobilisation of former non-voters.¹⁰ Obviously, the match between the official top candidate and the chairman of the party's group in the EP did not spoil the party's chances but enhanced it in that the two candidates appealed to different groups of the party's traditional voters. Top candidate Ernst Strasser proved his assertiveness immediately after the elections.

⁸ Fritz Plasser/Peter A. Ulram (GfK Austria Politikforschung) (2009). Analyse der Europawahl 2009: Wähler, Nichtwähler, Motive, p. 12, at http://www.gfk.at/imperia/md/content/gfkaustria/data/press/2009/2009-06-07_wahlanalyse_epw_2009_presseunterlage.pdf.

⁹ See: *Wahltagsbefragung und Wählerstromanalyse: Europawahl 2009*, p. 4, 10, 12 (footnote 7).

¹⁰ See: *Ibid*, p. 4 (footnote 7).

Before the official result of the preference votes for his opponent Othmar Karas was published by the Ministry of the Interior, Strasser had already contacted the other nominees on the party list and obtained their consent that he (not Karas) should lead the EP delegation. As Party Chairman and Vice-Chancellor, Josef Pröll supported Strasser's claim, the 112,954 preference votes that Karas received (clearly more than the necessary 7% of the votes for the People's Party, that is, 60,124) were simply ignored.

The Greens had to pay the price for their internal quarrels. Their share of the votes declined by 3% (to 9.9%). They lost about the same number of their 2004 voters to the People's Party, the Social Democrats and to non-voters. The Greens were the party where the top candidate was the least important as the voting motive: only 11% of their voters mentioned it (by contrast, 53% of the voters of the List Martin, 26% of Social Democrats and Freedom Party, 22% of People's Party voters). 87% of the Green voters wanted to 'strengthen the Greens in the EP', while 81% favoured 'environment and climate protection'.¹¹ It is very likely that a 'team' candidacy of the 'old' and 'new' top candidate, Johannes Voggenhuber and Ulrike Lunacek, would have yielded better results for the party.

Contrary to opinion polls published shortly before the elections, the List Martin defended its third place. The 14% of the votes it had won in 2004 had already been surprising, now it even increased its share to 17.7%. Most of its new voters had not voted in 2004; the second major influx came from the Social Democrats. The most important motives to vote for the List Martin were that its top candidate was 'not a typical politician' (78%) and that the list was expected to 'control abuses' (75%).¹² 70% of its voters were readers of the *Kronenzeitung* (by comparison, 67% of Freedom Party voters, 58% of Alliance voters, 38% of Social Democrat voters, 30% People's Party voters, and 6% of Green voters).¹³ At the same time, however, the List Martin was not unequivocally situated in the 'anti-EU' camp: the majority of its voters (53%) thought EU membership to be a 'good thing' (82% of the Green voters thought so, 77% of People's Party voters, 64% of the Social Democratic voters, but only 33% of Freedom Party voters).¹⁴

The Freedom Party also won (+6%), but from a low starting point and less than expected. Probably, the anti-Islamic crusade and the controversial statements relating to Austria's Nazi past were too much even for many EU-critics. However, among those voters who thought that EU membership is a 'bad thing' the Freedom Party was the most successful one; 39% of this group voted for the Freedom Party (31% for the List Martin, 11% for Social Democrats and People's Party, 6% for the Alliance, 1% for the Greens). Freedom Party voters appreciated, above all, the party's positions 'against immigration' (88%) and 'against Turkey's EU accession' (81%). More than two-thirds of its new voters had not voted in 2004.¹⁵ Interestingly, the Freedom Party could not repeat its success of the 2008 general elections, where it rose to become the strongest party among younger voters (up to the age of 30). In the EP elections, only 19% of them voted for the Freedom Party (28% for the People's Party, 22% for the Social Democrats, 14% for the List Martin and the Greens, 3% for the Alliance).¹⁶

¹¹ See: Ibid, p. 4, 13, 17 (footnote 7).

¹² See: Ibid, p. 4, 16 (footnote 7).

¹³ See: *Analyse der Europawahl 2009: Wähler, Nichtwähler, Motive*, p. 21 (footnote 8).

¹⁴ See: *Wahltagsbefragung und Wählerstromanalyse: Europawahl 2009*, p. 21 (footnote 7).

¹⁵ See: Ibid, p. 4, 11, 18 (footnote 7).

¹⁶ See: Ibid, p. 9 (footnote 7).

The Alliance for the Future of Austria had difficulties in finding its place between the List Martin and the Freedom Party and failed to achieve the necessary threshold to be represented in the EP.¹⁷

Conclusions

The EP election on 7 June 2009 strengthened the Eurosceptical forces in Austria. The two right-wing, populist parties, the Freedom Party and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (which ran for the first time, but failed to win seats, however), increased their share of the votes. The Greens, as third opposition party, claimed to continue their pro-EU policy, but replaced their prominent pro-EU oriented MEP and intensified contacts with anti-EU oriented NGOs (they lost votes with their new strategy, however). The governing parties, the Social Democrats and the People's Party, reacted to public opinion and turned to more nationalist, populist and Eurosceptic attitudes. Both 'left' parties, the Social Democrats and Greens, lost votes. However, as it is difficult to locate the List Martin on the left-right axis, the party system did not clearly 'move to the right'.

Not long after the elections the parties appeared to return to 'business as usual'. Even the Social Democrats refused to consider the severe consequences of their electoral disaster (except that those who had argued for the party to claim the position of the next Austrian Commissioner lost ground). Serious political initiatives against the high levels of Euroscepticism in the country or against the recurring, embarrassing incidents relating to Austria's Nazi past did not become not visible (and are not, at the time of writing, to be expected in the near future as the Freedom Party may be needed as potential coalition partner).

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¹⁷ Because of its low voter support, there are no reliable opinion poll data for the Alliance for some of the cited questions.