

Europeanisation of Political Parties and Party System in Austria

Summary

The subject matter of this monograph is Europeanisation of Austrian political parties and of the Austrian party system between 1995–2015 understood as a process of internal adaptation to its functioning in the European Union. It analyses those parties which were continuously present in the National Council in the period studied and, moreover, had their own delegation to the European Parliament. Beside the three pro-integration parties – the Social Democratic Party of Austria (German Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, SPÖ), Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and the Austrian Green Party (Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative, GRÜNE) – some consideration has also been given to the issue of Europeanisation of a grouping critical towards integration and the European Union – the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ).

The empirical purpose of the analysis was to assess the change in the Austrian party system resulting from the state's membership in the European Union as well as the adequacy of responses provided by the above listed four Austrian political parties to any stimuli coming from the EU. My reflections encompassed the evolution of programmes, structural and organisational transformations, transnational cooperation engendered by the parties, including their activity in the European Parliament, as well as changes to the inter-party competition caused by Austria's membership in the EU. The main research problems involved naming and describing the aspects of Europeanisation of Austrian parties and the party system as well as answering the question of factors which shape the stance of a political party towards European integration.

The main hypothesis behind the subject matter of this research is that both the political parties and the party system of Austria are undergoing change brought about by European integration and Austria's membership in the EU. The main hypothesis is accompanied by sub-hypotheses:

A top-down Europeanisation has induced changes to the election programmes and manifestos, as well as organisational structures, of all analysed parties. Due to their presence in the transnational federations and EP political groups, a bottom-up Europeanisation of the Austrian parties takes place among the pro-integration groupings to a larger extent than in the case of the Eurosceptic party, which avoids any transnational cooperation and whose politicians have for many years remained independent MEPs.

Attitude towards the European Union has become one of the polarising features for the party system in Austria. A conflict rooted in the relationship towards European integration affects the inter-party competition in Austria on the electoral level and influences voters' decisions.

The Austrian party system and the political parties, as well as the evolution of their programmes and any coalitions made, is influenced by a high level of criticism towards the EU in the Austrian society which has persisted since the 1990s.

The critical position of the Freedom Party of Austria towards European integration/the EU stems from its aversion to the weakening of the national state, a negation of the idea of a cosmopolitan Union, which according to the party poses a threat to the homogeneous national community of Austria, as well as from an election strategy which is to some extent a derivative of the party's place in the Austrian party system.

The book comprises five chapters. The first chapter presents various definitions of the ambiguous term 'Europeanisation' and delineates the main directions for contemporary academic discussion. It provides a detailed description of conceptualisation problems associated with Europeanisation of political parties. Essential to this research project is to operationalise Euroscepticism as a concept and to demonstrate selected key typologies of negative attitudes towards European integration and the EU.

Chapter two analyses the role and significance of a party in the Austrian political system and assesses the level of stability of the national political scene together with the social rooting of and confidence in political parties. In order to prove the quantitative and qualitative changes taking place in the federal party system this chapter investigates the system in the years 1945 to 1994 as well as after 1995, i.e. after Austria's accession to the EU. It also outlines the attitude of Austrians towards the EU and European integration, thus proving a deep social polarisation. By analysing the following EP elections it shows how much the issues of European integration, the vision of the EU and European policy concepts of the individual parties have influenced voters' decisions.

Chapter three contains a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the political programmes and election manifestos to the National Council and the EP evalu-

ated for variability or stability of any content related to European integration and Austria's membership in the EU. The qualitative analysis conducted focuses on comparing the stances of four parties – SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, and GRÜNE – towards the EU institutional system and particular EU policies. It has been interesting to study the periods in which the criticism of the EU particularly increased or decreased as well as to find whether the amount of space devoted to the issue of European integration in election programmes continuously increased. The purpose of the qualitative analysis of the programmes adopted by the parties after Austria's accession to the EU has been to identify their respective priorities in the European politics and present the parties' concepts for the shape of united Europe.

Chapter four identifies the organisational and structural changes that have taken place in the four parties in connection with European integration, determines the position of MEPs in the structure of the analysed parties, assesses their cooperation with the European parties and the actions MEPs of individual parties undertake in the EP. The research focuses on transnational cooperation and the assessment of party delegations' activity in the EP since 1996. The MEPs from the four Austrian parties have been compared in terms of the positions and offices they hold and, above all, of their involvement in the legislative and political activity of the EP.

Chapter five discusses the case of the Eurosceptic party FPÖ in terms of its origin, the evolution of its political thought, and its presence on the electoral, parliamentary, and cabinet scene. The research conducted in this part of the study focuses on answering the question of the roots of the FPÖ and the changes in the programme and organisation of the party which have taken place over the years. This chapter analyses the influence of individual FPÖ leaders on the party line as well as on the successes and defeats of the party on the electoral scene, and its position on the parliamentary and cabinet level. This part of the study identifies the conditions for the FPÖ's stance shift from being pro-integration to Eurosceptic and attempts to answer the question as to whether the attitude of the Freedom Party of Austria towards the EU stems from ideological matters or is an adopted election strategy of an opposition and politically isolated party.

The research results obtained and presented in this publication confirm the main research hypothesis which assumes the Europeanisation of the parties and party system in Austria. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Austrian party system indicates that since the end of the 1980s there has been an ongoing erosion of the existing system which is connected with deconcentration of support for the entrenched parties and the emergence of a third counterbalancing power in the form of a far-right populist FPÖ party. Symp-

toms of the change include, among other things, a shift from a bipolar rivalry to a tripolarity system (SPÖ, ÖVP i FPÖ), a marked split of the political scene into two blocks ÖVP-FPÖ and SPÖ-GRÜNE, a new coalition formula ÖVP-FPÖ/BZÖ (between 2000–2007), intensification of rivalry between the ruling parties and the opposition, as well as the politicisation of society which demands a larger share in the exercise of power. A gradual redefinition of the existing socio-political divides ensues and the emergence of new political groupings is an indicator of new issues in the political discourse.

Membership in the EU may be deemed as one of many catalysts for change in the party system. The evolution of the Austrian party system should be viewed as a consequence of many concurrent processes which, since the end of the 1980s, have been taking place in the stable party systems of Western Europe, such as an increased electoral volatility, weakening of the relationship between the party and its voters as well as the appearance of new division lines. Austria's presence in the EU may be interpreted as a factor which has precipitated the pace of changes taking place in the party system. The processes on the political scene have been accompanied by an intense debate on the benefits and challenges connected with Austria's membership in the integration structures, the ongoing accession negotiations, and subsequently a discourse concerning the obligations and actions undertaken by the federal government that resulted from the state's accession to the EU. The attitude towards European integration has become a point of reference not only for the existing political groupings but also for the emerging ones – emphasising their markedly pro-integration (Liberal Forum, NEOS) or Eurosceptic programme (The Hans-Peter Martin's List, BZÖ, Team Stronach). The attitude towards European integration, the vision of the EU, and the assessment of benefits arising from the EU membership are becoming with each election an increasingly clear line dividing the Austrian parties into pro-integration and Eurosceptic political groupings.

The analysis conducted has confirmed that the top-down Europeanisation has resulted in changes to the election programmes and manifestos, as well as to the organisational structures of all parties analysed, regardless of their attitude towards European integration and the EU. In the case of the pro-integration parties, a dynamic and committed Europeanisation has led to moderate to intense changes to their EU awareness and activity. On the other hand, with respect to the Eurosceptic FPÖ, the process of its Europeanisation is halted, which indicates both low EU awareness and a limited scope of change in activity which results from the party's negation of the EU's form and European integration.

The research results confirm the hypothesis according to which the election programmes and manifestos of the four political parties have undergone Europeanisation. Within the first years of Austria's accession to the EU, all studied

political groupings introduced changes to their political programmes. There is no significant difference between the amount of space (in percent) devoted to European integration issues in the election and political programmes in the pro-integration parties and the Eurosceptic FPÖ.

One can see over the years that what the parties that perceive themselves as pro-integration, i.e. ÖVP, SPÖ, or even GRÜNE, have underlined in their election programmes and manifestos is the protection of Austria's interests in united Europe. In support of the idea of European integration, the parties enumerate the many political, economic, and social benefits of Austria's accession to the EU in 1995 convincing the Austrians that the decision they made in the EU membership referendum was right. At the same time through their European policies, the parties have undertaken to continue to watch over Austria's interests in the EU. By doing so the parties want to convince voters to support them instead of the populist FPÖ, which has built its message around criticism of the EU. It must, however, be emphasised that the topics that dominate the main political programmes and manifestos in National Council elections are domestic matters. In their election programmes/manifestos, the parties pay most attention to those national policies which remain within the sole competence of the state (education, migration, employment policy), which makes any discussion of the EU a de facto debate about Austria's internal problems.

An analysis of party statutes reveals that the changes in the pro-integration parties have been caused by the references made to European-level cooperation. The parties have set up separate units or groups for European affairs and included their MEPs as experts – at least formally – as members of those party bodies. National parties name candidates for European elections, draft the election manifestos and run campaigns before the EP elections. The autonomy of MEPs against their national parties has increased incrementally. The Austrian MEPs enjoy considerable autonomy in the EP and any attempts to, for instance, force a choice of a delegation leader without the support of the remaining MEPs have been doomed to fail. However, regardless of their attitude towards European integration and the EU, in none of the parties analysed does the MEPs' autonomy at the supranational level translate into any power inside the party. One can observe that as a result of European integration the party structures within the EP are becoming more and more detached from their national parties, although there have been instances where Austrian MEPs returned to national politics.

An analysis of the Austrian MEPs' activity and effectiveness shows a growing disproportion between the MEPs from the ÖVP, SPÖ, Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative who are members of political groups present in the EP and the independent MEPs from the FPÖ. The MEPs chosen from the SPÖ and ÖVP lists (to

a lesser extent the GRÜNE) have a strong and well-established position in their political groups, which is, among other things, demonstrated by Austrians' holding important offices – both in the formal bodies of the EP, i.e. EP committees and delegations, as well as informal ones, e.g. chairs of various intergroups. What must be viewed as a strength of their delegation, the Austrian MEPs are members of those committees where the EP participates in the formulation of EU policy or whose scope of activity is seen as a priority for Austria. An analysis of Austrian MEPs activity in the EP since 1996 indicates that the MEPs from ÖVP and SPÖ (members of EPP and PES/S&D), by concentrating on their parliamentary work, have authored a higher number of reports, opinions, and draft resolutions. The independent MEPs or those from small Eurosceptic groups (members of FPÖ) have a considerably smaller influence on the legislative process in the EP, but they speak more often in debates in plenary sessions and table more questions, thus giving their activity an interventionist and happening-like character. The high percentage of independent MEPs from Eurosceptic parties must be seen as the main weakness of the Austrian EP delegation.

Considering the deep polarisation of the Austrian society, which has been confirmed by numerous public opinion polls, the sub-hypothesis that a conflict based on the attitude towards European integration affects inter-party electoral competition in Austria by influencing voters' decisions proves to be correct. Polls indicate that when voting for a party the electorate gives weight to its attitude towards European integration. Even though a party's assessment is dominated by its perceived competence in national policies, one of the major voters' motives has been an effective representation and protection of Austria's interests in the EU.

The election success of the Freedom Party of Austria within the first twenty years of Austria's membership in the EU may be viewed as both a proof of effective absorption, as well as of a skillful use by this populist grouping of Eurosceptic sentiments within the society which demands an uncompromising representation of Austria's interests at the EU level. The assimilation of pro-integration mainstream parties, which means a decline of ideological differences, but also a lack of debate on European issues, caused that the FPÖ – taking advantage of the demand for criticism towards the EU – has strengthened its position by accumulating the votes of persons with radical, often nationalistic views. The Eurosceptic attitude of the FPÖ results primarily from its adopted strategy and not from ideological issues. For many years the Freedom party of Austria has – on one hand – been in search of its own identity, while on the other it has strived to survive on the political scene.