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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Austria

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

This country report examines the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in Austria between 2008 and 2025. Austria has been a stronghold of populism since the late 1980s, but also of Euroscepticism, which rose sharply shortly amongst Austrian citizens soon after the country joined the European Union (EU) in 1995. The study reveals an almost perfect link between populism and Euroscepticism in Austria, as all four Eurosceptic parties that managed to enter the Austrian or the European parliament in the period of investigation were also populist parties. By winning between sixteen and 30 percent of the vote, these parties ensured that Euroscepticism consistently played an important role in Austrian politics in the period studied. This was mainly due to the radical-right Austrian Freedom Party, which by far was most successful electorally, and increased significantly its populist EU critique over time both in terms of salience and radicalism. This, it is argued, time and again had a mitigating effect on the pro-EU stances of Austria's main centre-left and -right mainstream parties (the Social Democrats and the People's Party), but also on the positions taken by Austria on the EU level (especially during the FPÖ's participation in government from 2017–9).

Keywords

populism, euroscepticism, Austria

This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ✓

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1. **Uta Russmann**, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

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Introduction

Austria is known as one of the strongholds of populism in Europe since the late 1980s. The share of votes reached by populist parties in the period under investigation (2008 to 2025) at nationwide elections has been between 15.7 and 29.8 per cent. This is owed mainly to the far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), one of the oldest and most successful representatives of this party family that has been a crucial player in the Austrian party system for several decades (Heinisch 2003). In addition to the FPÖ, three other populist parties managed to win seats at elections to either the national or the European parliament: the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), Hans Peter Martin's List (HPM) and the Team Stronach (TS). However, neither of the latter three parties was able to establish themselves permanently in the Austrian party system. As a result, the FPÖ, since 2017, has been the only relevant populist party in the Austrian party system.

When looking at Euroscepticism, Austria may well be labelled as a stronghold too. Remarkably, the country's accession to the EU in 1995 was supported by a two-thirds majority in a constitutional referendum. Approval rates started to drop soon thereafter though (Liebhart 2020), and Austrian citizens became one of the most critical towards the EU across all member states (Fallend 2008). While public opinion has fluctuated somewhat over time, the overall picture has remained constant. In the 2023 Eurobarometer, Austria not only recorded the highest share of citizens seeing EU membership as a'bad thing' but also the lowest share of those seeing it as a 'good thing' (European Parliament 2023).

Also on the party level, Euroscepticism has played an important role throughout the decades. In the 1990s, the FPÖ, but also the (left-wing) Green Party, campaigned against EU membership, and the FPÖ has remained highly critical ever since. The Green Party, though, reversed its position after the referendum and today has become one of the strongest supporters of deeper integration (Fallend 2008). Since then, all parties in the Austrian party system that can be categorised as Eurosceptic have always been populist parties. As a result, party conflict about European integration in Austria until today has been marked by Pro-EU mainstream parties on the one side, attacked by mainly right-wing Eurosceptic populist parties on the other (e.g.Miklin 2014).

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026).

Populist actors

Between 2008 and 2025, the following four parties can be classified as *populist* by the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2023) and managed to win seats in at least one nationwide election (i.e. election to the national or the European parliament).

Austrian freedom party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ, populist radical right)

The FPÖ was founded in 1956 and descended from both libertarian and nationalist currents of the nineteenth century. It remained a rather marginal opposition party during the first three decades of its existence, but started to become highly successful as of 1986, when Jörg Haider transformed it into one of the first populist radical right parties in Europe. Between 2008 and 2025, the party received between 16 and 28.8 per cent at national elections, entered national government as junior partner of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) on the national level for the third time (from 2017 to 2019), and was also part of several regional (state-) governments (Miklin et al. 2024). In 2024, it managed to end up in first place in elections to the Austrian and the European Parliament for the first time each. This electoral success can be attributed to the party's pronounced emphasis on restrictive migration policies, identity politics, and authoritarian positions, alongside traditional populist characteristics. In particular, the FPÖ adopts a sceptical view of the liberal dimensions of democracy and frames politics as a Manichean conflict between the "good" and the "evil." Within this framework, the party portrays itself as the only legitimate representative of the Austrian people, standing in opposition to allegedly corrupt political elites. Beyond its longstanding focus on opposing migration, the FPÖ has adopted highly critical positions on a range of other policy issues, including climate change measures and the Austrian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (see also: Miklin 2024: 42).

Alliance for the future of austria (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ, Populist (radical) right)

The BZÖ was founded by Jörg Haider in 2005 as a split-off from the FPÖ after ongoing internal conflicts during the FPÖ's second term in government from 2002 to 2006 (Luther 2006). While more radical and policy-oriented factions remained in the FPÖ, the more pragmatic and office-oriented members joined the BZÖ. During the time under investigation, the party received 10,7 per cent at national elections in 2008 but failed to re-enter parliament in 2013 and did not stand in any of the subsequent elections.

In terms of ideology, the BZÖ started off very similar, but somewhat less radical and aggressive than the FPÖ. Although it remained a right-wing populist party until its end, the party adopted an increasingly moderate, more business-oriented

profile after the sudden death of Jörg Haider in 2008 and the associated hopelessness of succeeding the FPÖ as the 'truly' radical right populist party in Austria.

Team stronach (TS, n.a.)

TS was founded in August 2012 by an Austro-Canadian industrialist and billionaire called Frank Stronach. It managed to form a parliamentary group only a few weeks later and without having run in any election due to five members of parliament from the BZÖ and one from the SPÖ leaving their former parties and joining forces. In 2013, it succeeded in re-entering the national parliament receiving 5.7 per cent of the votes and eleven MPs. The lifespan of the TS turned out to be even shorter than that of the BZÖ, though. Already as of early 2015, several MPs left the party, which in June 2017 announced that it would no longer stand in the early elections three months later but would dissolve by the end of the year (Die Presse 2017).

In terms of ideology, TS, like FPÖ and BZÖ, was economically liberal with a focus on populist discourse – criticising allegedly unresponsive and incompetent political elites and focusing on law and order. Beyond that, however, it focused more on fighting corruption, lowering taxes and calls for bureaucratic- and democratic reform, than on nativism, immigration and anti-pluralism (Pühringer & Ötsch 2013).

Hans-peter martin's list (Liste Dr. Martin, HPM, Valence Populism)

HPM was founded in 2004 by Hans-Peter Martin, an Austrian journalist. Martin entered politics as an independent top candidate for the SPÖ at the 1999 European elections but was expelled from the Social-democratic Group in the European Parliament in 2004 (Der Spiegel 2004). As a result, he ran on his own list at the EP elections that year. Winning 14 per cent of the Austrian vote, HPM ended up in third place behind ÖVP and SPÖ but ahead of the FPÖ, which secured the party two of the 18 Austrian seats in the EP. While it failed to enter the national parliament in 2006, it managed to even surpass its 2004 success at the European elections of 2009 by winning 17.7 per cent and three seats. During the following legislative period, the party lost two of its 3 MEPs. Party leader Martin was accused of non-transparent financial management by one of his former colleagues and in the end decided not to stand in the 2014 elections.

In terms of ideology, HPM so far has been the only non-right populist party that has ever run successfully in a nationwide Austrian election. Despite Martin's social-democratic background and despite being located left of centre both economically and on cultural issues, according to the Chapel-Hill expert survey (Rovny et al. 2025), left-right conflict played a minor role in the party's campaigning. Instead, the party focused almost exclusively on the fight against political corruption and for increased transparency.

According to both PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2023) and the Chapel-Hill expert survey (Rovny et al. 2025), all four populist parties can be classified as Eurosceptic. Since three of them (BZÖ, HPM and TS) have existed only for a relatively short period, their impact on Austrian EU politics overall has remained rather limited. Hence, the next section will cover them only briefly, to then focus on the party that clearly has been playing the most important role throughout the period under investigation – the FPÖ.

Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-euroscepticism nexus

The BZÖ did not oppose the EU completely, but polity-wise advocated a 'core-Europe' composed (in a first step) solely of net-contributor countries and pushed for binding national referenda on all future treaty changes and enlargements. In terms of policies, it called for both de-integrative measures like the reintroduction of national border controls already in 2008, but also for additional EU-regulations like a financial transaction tax (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich 2008). In terms of populism, European actors were criticised as dominated by functionary elites and anonymous power structures enforcing policies on Austria, while Austrian mainstream parties were criticised for being in thrall to these European elites (Der Standard 2009).

TS conceived of itself as "convinced Europeans" but called for an EU "composed of self-determined nation states" (Team Stronach 2013) and criticised alleged tendencies of ever-increasing centralisation, bureaucratisation and planned economy. The Euro was seen as a mistake that needed to be reversed. Compared to the other three parties, but also the party's strategy on national issues, populism, like a sweeping criticism of EU actors, played a minor role in the party's communication of the EU. Instead, critique was voiced mainly from a liberal economic perspective, calling for a return "to European policies that respect the sovereignty of the people and promote the creation of prosperity through fair competition" (Team Stronach 2013: 15).

HPM's Euroscepticism was not directed towards the very idea of EU integration, and party leader Martin described himself as an 'ardent Pro-European' (Die Presse 2009). Other than FPÖ, TS and BZÖ, the party also did not call for a

Europe built on sovereign nation states, but rather for a stronger European Parliament, amongst other reforms. Criticism focused almost exclusively on the alleged lack of transparency of EU institutions and a resulting high level of corruption and privileges amongst and for European actors (ibid). Hence, HPM has so far been the only party that provided a populist but not (far-)right electoral choice to Austrian voters unhappy not with the general idea of EU integration but with the way it has so far materialised within the EU.

In sum. BZÖ, TS and LPM all fall into the category of soft Euroscepticism. None of the parties rejected European integration completely. However, they criticized the EU's institutions and political actors and called for reforms toward partial renationalization (TS and BZÖ) or stronger supranationalization (HPM).

The FPÖ indeed favoured EU integration for the first 30 years of its existence due to its German nationalist origins and the resulting denial of an Austrian nation (Fallend 2008: 2010ff.). It adopted a very critical position only after its populist turn in the early 1990s and, facilitated by an ideological move from German nationalism to Austrian patriotism, has remained highly critical since then (Frölich-Steffen 2004). While events such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the refugee crisis or the war in Ukraine arguably had relatively little influence on the FPÖ's position on the EU, they probably have increased the attention the party has paid to the European level compared to earlier years. Thereby, the party's criticism covered basically all aspects of EU integration throughout the years (polity, policy, principle, practice, and future). Although the FPÖ has never publicly demanded that Austria leave the European Union, it has expressed support for the United Kingdom's Brexit decision while leaving open the possibility of a future Austrian withdrawal from the EU (Bartlau, 2018). Hence, the FPÖ clearly is the party closest to falling into the category of hard Eurosceptizicism amongst the parties discussed.

In terms of polity, the FPÖ has called for the renationalization of decision-making powers, to unwind purported aberrations evoked by both the Maastricht and the Lisbon Treaties (Miklin 2024). It promotes the concept of a "Europe of Peoples" and opposes what it critizises as an artificial harmonisation of societies through forced multiculturalism, globalisation, and mass integration (FPÖ, 2024a). From the party's perspective, the European Union should operate according to the principles of subsidiarity and federalism, while the constitutional foundations of sovereign member states should take precedence over EU law (FPÖ 2024a). (Reflecting this position, the party has also advocated substantially reducing the size of the EU by proposing to halve both its budget and the size of its institutions: "The smaller the bureaucratic monster in Brussels, the less it can intervene in the lives of European citizens with ever more regulations." (Freiheitlicher Parlamentsklub 2024; own translation).

In terms of policies, the FPÖ rejected the EU's measures taken during the Eurozone crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as those on migration and the climate crisis. Populism has thereby been playing a very important role. As in national politics, FPÖ's campaigns usually rely less on substantive policy arguments than on the mobilisation of negative emotions through the use of strongly alarmist rhetoric. Within this communication strategy, the party depicts its domestic political rivals as constituents of a single political bloc ('Einheitspartei') and either corrupt (e.g., in the case of Covid-19), fanatical, or irrational (as, e.g., in the case of the European Green Deal; see also: Miklin 2024: 46).

Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

Given the limited time in, and impact on, the Austrian party system of TS, BZÖ and HPM, the following section will focus solely on the FPÖ.

Until the late 2000s, the default response of Austrian mainstream parties was by and large adversarial. Hence, ÖVP, SPÖ, and the Green party openly and jointly defended the European project against the criticism of the FPÖ as well as the other three Eurosceptic parties.

Things started to change, however, when the FPÖ successfully increased the salience of its EU critique. In 2008, the SPÖ published a letter in Austria's largest (Eurosceptic) tabloid (*Kronenzeitung)*, announcing that, due to Austrian citizens becoming ever more critical towards the EU, the SPÖ would push for national referenda on all future treaty changes as well as on the accession of Turkey to the EU. The SPÖ soon backed down on these promises though (Falkner 2017). It adopted an even more active adversarial strategy in the following years, calling (a.o.) for a strong and institutionally reformed Europe that is capable of action and presented Social Democracy as an alternative to a nationalist and divided Europe (SPÖ 2019).

In contrast to this, the traditionally pro-European ÖVP (which in the past had been the main driving force behind Austria's EU accession) became more accommodating throughout the years. While the party had criticised the SPÖ's letter in 2008 citing it even as the final reason for cancelling their then governing coalition (Luther 2009), the party clearly became less

supportive towards the EU as of 2013 (Heinisch et al. 2020). This development reached its peak in 2017, when Sebastian Kurz became party leader and generally moved the party closer towards the FPÖ on issues like nationalism, authoritarianism, but also populism more generally (Abdou and Rudin 2021). The party now openly criticized the EU's bureaucratic nature as well as its expansion of competencies "into areas that go beyond the original approach of an economic union" (ÖVP 2017, 43) and also raised its objections against EU policy strategies (e.g. regarding climate change) more openly (Die Presse 2024).

With the ÖVP moving closer to the FPÖ, the latter party's actual impact on Austria's role within the EU increased too. This was the case especially during the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition from 2017 to 2019. First, Austria in general became less supportive towards problem-solving within EU institutions but (as during the Migration crisis) pursued its own initiatives outside the EU framework instead (Die Presse 2016). Second, while Austria in the past usually sought for the collaboration and coordination with pro-EU member states like especially Germany, the ÖVP-FPÖ government often teamed up with the then Eurosceptic and populist governments of the Visegrad-Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slowakia), and (together with Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden) was part of the so-called *Frugal Four* - who, among other things, opposed increased redistribution of the EU budget or collective debt, and called for budget rebate for themselves (Kurier 2018). Third, the government further increased the use of the strategy to instrumentalise the EU in a blame game – for example, when passing nationally popular measures to cut down social benefits for non-Austrian EU citizens, which were in breach with EU law and hence were repealed by the European Court of Justice soon thereafter (Der Standard 2022).

Conclusion

Since Austria acceded to the EU in 1995, populism and Euroscepticism on the party level have been basically identical twins as all four Austrian Eurosceptic parties that managed to enter the national or the European parliament were also populist parties. Except for maybe the Team Stronach, populism also played an integral role in justifying their EU-critique. Notably, except for Hans-Peter Martin's List, criticism was raised almost exclusively from a far-right or at least right-wing, nationalist point of view by the parties.

The degree of opposition to the EU, as well as its impact on EU politics in Austria, has varied significantly between the parties. Overall, the FPÖ clearly has taken the most critical position throughout the years, criticising basically all aspects of EU integration. Initially, the party arguably used this critique primarily as a strategic tool to differentiate itself from other parties. Throughout the years, however, the role that Euroscepticism plays for the FPÖ and its voters has increased. Lately, this has resulted in Austrian governments becoming more populist and critical in EU affairs too. The latter development has been largely a result of the ÖVP moving closer towards the FPÖ on the EU issues and the ÖVP's dominant role in the last two governing coalitions (ÖVP-FPÖ from 2017–9 and ÖVP-Greens from 2019–2025). It remains to be seen to what extent this trend will continue during the current coalition composed of ÖVP, SPÖ and the liberal (and Europhile) NEOS, as well as with future governments, in which the FPÖ itself might well play an important role again.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data Availability

No data are associated with this article.

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Open Peer Review

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Version 1

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✓ **Sandro Tabatadze**
Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Tbilisi, Georgia

The report is comprehensive and has a well-established structure. The introduction briefly outlines the background and logic of the report, which is followed by a description of populist actors, their historical development, and policy proposals. After this, the nexus is shown and analyzed. Responses to euroscepticism and their consequences are also illustrated in a structured manner, with all key references. Therefore, the report is definitely well-written and useful.

The statement: "The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026)" needs to be at the beginning of the report. Also, in the conclusion, it might be better to articulate the nexus (Euroscepticism-populism) more clearly.

Overall, the report is useful and valuable, especially for teaching and for understanding the country-based landscape in a very concise manner.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Euroscepticism, populism, far right

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 25 July 2026

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?

Uta Russmann
University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

Although it reads more like a chapter from a handbook than a scientific article, the text provides a brief, informative and descriptive historical overview of populism, Euroscepticism and political parties in Austria from a political science perspective. This is also its main goal. It might be better not to talk in the abstract about examining the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, since this article does not really describe or analyze this relationship in the Austrian context. The article reports on all the key developments and changes (or 'trends') regarding populism, Euroscepticism and political parties in Austria over time, focusing on the period from 2008 to 2025. It would be helpful to provide definitions of populism and Euroscepticism after the introduction. These should include an explanation of the differences between soft and hard Euroscepticism, and how these have been measured. Such definitions would help readers better understand one of the article's key findings: that populism and Euroscepticism are essentially identical, a finding which should be based on empirical data. The same is true of a second key finding: 'The degree of opposition to the EU, as well as its impact on EU politics in Austria, has varied significantly between the parties'. It would be useful to cite the empirical studies on which this finding is based. The short summaries explaining the similarities and differences between parties are very informative and helpful to understand the historical and cross-party perspective.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political communication, media and elections, digital communication, (visual) social media, strategic communication

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.