

HERR KARL IN BRUSSELS

As a rule, the majority of Austrians don't care much for the EU. The purpose they use if for today more than ever is that of a scapegoat for everything and anything that happened to them in the past and that continues to happen to them in the present.

Every couple of months we read about it in the newspapers, complete with the empirical data generated by a masterful application of modern-day opinion research: Austrians do not like the European Union. This is evident from an opinion poll regularly conducted across the EU, the so-called Eurobarometer. It measures, amongst other things, how happy European citizens are with their Union. In Austria, leaving the EU and embarking on a self-sufficient future is something only a small, radical minority would seriously consider. But this does not change the fact that there is hardly another member state where the EU meets with the kind of scepticism found between Bregenz (the capital of Vorarlberg, Austria's westernmost province) and Eisenstadt (the capital of Burgenland, Austria's easternmost province).

As a result of this perception, both the tabloids and the quality papers with their limited circulation can be relied upon to regularly report on the "special case of Austria". No one likes to talk about this alleged special case as much as the Austrians them-

selves. This is quite understandable: while Austria's export-oriented economy – above all the banking system (before the financial crisis) – understood how to make use of the advantages offered by the brave new EU world, the real incomes of most workers remained stagnant. This, of course, is not really something the EU can be blamed for – in Austria, collective bargaining is not in the hands of the government, rather it is conducted by social and economic partners (employees' and employers' federations). However, just like the parliamentarians who execute their decisions, the social and economic partners have no interest in improving the reputation of the Union in their country. Why? Because nothing can be won by it, yet everything that they value and appreciate can be lost.

This is how the political and economic elites in Austria have succeeded in creating a situation in which "Brussels" is code for all the imagined or real wrongs experienced by the Austrians early in the 21st century. This is not really a problem, because these elites have a keen understanding of the people they govern or employ. This is a state of affairs that not only ensures a good life, it also ensures their own survival. From this point of view, one cannot really blame the Austrian people's representatives for complaining about the lack of acceptance of the EU and its officials, while in reality they are grateful for the opportunity to shift responsibility for things

that go wrong to a widely unknown supranational organisation: even after fourteen years of membership, hardly anyone in Austria knows how the EU is organised. Only very few can tell the difference between the EU Council, the EU Parliament, and the Commission. That the two large political parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Conservatives (ÖVP) are giving comfort in the long term to the very policies they profess to abhor – those advocated by the right-wing populist Liberals (FPÖ) and the Bündnis für die Zukunft Österreichs [Alliance for the Future of Austria] (BZÖ), a regional FPÖ clone founded by the late Jörg Haider – is something they are conscious of, but which does not affect their behaviour is concerned.

This does not really matter, because the same piece has been played on Austria's political stage for decades; a piece in which only the performers are replaced, but the script remains essentially untouched. The theatre does not serve here as a facile metaphor. If you want to see a piece that is the talk of the town, you buy a ticket, take your seat in the theatre and applaud at the end, if what you've seen was to your liking. In the opposite case you join the regulars at the pub and complain about the bad acting, the miserable stage design, and the unprofessional décor. This is of no consequence to the theatre itself (because it receives a public subsidy that makes it immune to audience reactions). The

same mechanism is activated when most Austrians talk about the EU: they get agitated and complain, which is easy because there are no consequences to be feared. Thus, Brussels has quietly taken over the scapegoat function traditionally occupied by Vienna in small-state Austria. Now it is the name of another city that has become a synonym for a legislative, judicial, and executive authority under which people feel powerless. In other words: Austrians cannot accept the EU because they have always been unable to cope with civil liberties. Today more than ever, Austrians, accustomed to centuries of authoritarian rule under the Danube Monarchy, are in need of an authority on which to place blame. The aristocratic dictators, the Austro-fascists, and the Nazis all understood this part of our mentality and put it to skilful use. Given this line of logic, would it not be alarming if there were no one there who we can blame for our own doings? The Austrians have survived all kinds of things, and they will surely survive democracy. And, along with it, EU membership.

*Klaus Stimedter,
editor of monthly magazine
DATUM - Seiten der Zeit / www.datum.at*