

## **Austrians' attitude on EU enlargement**

In our surveys we see a more than stable trend in public opinion. Since 2010 – the year we started asking Austrians about a possible accession of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey – there has been little change in citizens' perceptions.

Why is the public skeptical about further EU enlargement steps? I think it is because of the many challenges and crisis the EU had to face in recent years. Although Austrians do not question EU membership itself, there is often criticism how the EU works "in daily life" and how it can cope with the challenges ahead. The war in Ukraine, the topic of migration and high inflation have further sped up worries and confirm citizens' view that the European Union first and foremost has to consolidate before venturing such broad and ambitious steps as integrating new members. An ÖGfE survey carried out in July 2022 shows that 78 percent of respondents found it important to deepen cooperation between EU member states while only 24 percent stated that EU enlargement was important.

Skepticism about EU enlargement in Austria is not a new phenomenon. Austrians have also been reserved towards Bulgaria and Romania joining the EU. Croatia's EU accession on the other hand was met with sympathy, the country being a "quasi neighbor", having a good image and being one of the most important tourist destinations for Austrians.

Austrians do not really differentiate much between the individual countries of the Western Balkans. The percentages of support and rejection are fairly close together. Our research shows that Austrians generally are more positive of accession bids of countries they have more knowledge of – so in the case of Austrian direct neighbors that joined the EU in 2004 and Croatia as mentioned above. Overall, there is little knowledge about the Western Balkan countries, while they are associated with a lower economic standard and defects concerning a stable political and institutional landscape. The fact that the accession countries would be net receivers once they joined the EU also is a big issue. Last but not least, the challenge of migration that is an ever recurrent topic in the domestic political debate (keyword: migration on the Western Balkan route), plays an important role. Regarding the relatively positive stance on Bosnia-Herzegovina one reason could be that there is a quite large BiH diaspora in Austria. Serbia's ambivalent positioning between the EU and Russia could be an explanation why many Austrians are opposed of the country becoming an EU member, the bilateral tensions with Kosovo also are an argument for those who fear that political instability could be imported to the EU if the two countries joined the Union.

EU enlargement is one of the few issues, where the Austrian government or Austrian governments, no matter what the coalition looks like, take a more strategic view and say: "We are very much in favor of the EU enlargement, even if the public is not, because we see it as a medium-term process." On the other hand, when a possible accession of the WB countries is debated in Austrian politics, there is too much focus on security issues and potential risks that could come along with it and too little communication about the chances and benefits for Austria and its economy.

In general, there is too little public awareness of the fact that an integration of all Western Balkan countries would be a big advantage for Austria – especially regarding our economy that already is among the most important investors in the region as well that EU integration of the WB countries would bring higher geopolitical stability.

Due to a faltering EU accession process, the wish of the WB countries joining the EU, has not been on the top of the agenda in the domestic political debate, so it is no big surprise that we have not witnessed any significant changes in public opinion in recent years. One can assume that overall awareness would grow if the process gains momentum and politics, the media and civil society make it a topic. A policy that strongly supports EU enlargement should explain proactively why the

integration of our neighbors is important especially for Austria and what can be done to speed things up.

It is of utmost importance that Austria remains a supporter of the WB countries ambition to join the European Union. If the Western Balkan region would fall victim of increased Russian influence this would go hand in hand with political instability and would undermine efforts to strengthen the system of liberal democracy, the rule of law, basic human rights and European values. Austria should therefore further strengthen its engagement in the region – in terms of the economy, political cooperation, support of an independent civil society, cultural cooperation or youth exchange. Honestly, today the European Union itself is not ready for further enlargements, it needs to improve its capacity to absorb new members. Austria should therefore should engage itself on the European stage in order to make both sides fit for a new step.

See also: <https://www.oegfe.at/survey/oegfe-survey-no-majority-for-eu-enlargement-divided-opinion-on-expansion-of-the-schengen-area/?lang=en>

Paul Schmidt  
Secretary General  
Austrian Society for European Politics  
[paul.schmidt@oegfe.at](mailto:paul.schmidt@oegfe.at)  
[www.oegfe.at](http://www.oegfe.at)

Photos: <https://www.oegfe.at/pressefotos/> © Wilke

Vienna, 30 May 2023