The reason for opting to analyse such a long period (1945-2005) is that it seemed indispensable in order to gain an overview and explain the surge of Euro-scepticism after over fifty years of euro-euphoria. Since the start of the millennium, Euro-scepticism has become the most favoured political instrument for affirming an Austrian national identity that in the past few decades had never been fully defined. Euro-scepticism thus assumed the role of being a vehicle of integration and cohesion in reverse, given that it brought together a broad spectrum of the electorate, politically though not traditionally affiliated to the Freedom Party (FPÖ), the political force that made Euro-scepticism its battle cry. All this has been evident recently in the long electoral campaign for the Austrian presidency.

Large sections of the population seem to be dissatisfied with the policies advanced by the two leading parties of government, the ÖVP-SPÖ and no longer identify themselves with the policy choices favoured by these two historical political groups. The sympathies of the electorate have moved gradually towards the Green party and the FPÖ, who have maintained an Anti-European stance with which much of the electorate now increasingly concurs¹.

1. *Austria’s long road towards its adhesion to the European union began in the years following the end of World War II.*

Once the idea of the Austrian (Habsburg Empire) and German empires (Anschluss) had come to an end, the ruling

class in Austria returned to the point of departure, i.e. to the pre-war republican experience following the peace treaties, or rather to defining a new political role for a country that had been reduced in size geographically, that was still under military occupation, was divided into four distinct military districts and had limited control over its own sovereignty. In addition to this, the Russians continued to threaten blackmail in a push to resolve the Austrian question.

There was an urgent need to restore full legitimacy and enduring democratic stability, both indispensable for bringing back a national unity that had been undermined by the opposing ideologies of Austrian Marxists, the Pan-Germanism movement and Austrian fascists during the First Republic (1919-34). But this would entail redefining Austrian national identity. As Thomas Angerer noted: «in this process of redefining identity, regional divisions have assumed a new role. Viewed as a prerequisite for starting anew and as an essential element for ensuring a return to a pre-Anschluss Austria, regionalisation has contributed to the reconstruction of Austrian identity».

But what were the options available to the political class? What models of reference did they turn to? Once the dream of Pan-Germanism had been shattered by the war and subsequent military defeat, all references to ‘German’ were removed from discourse on identity, since it was imperative to distance itself from the shadow of its National-Socialist past. The most convenient model of reference was of course Europe. The idea that Austria, with its multinational and multiethnic past, was European rather than German initially emerged in the 1920s, when it first become apparent that if the existence of an Austrian nation was to be formalized, a solid basis for identity discourse had to be constructed.

The aftermath of World War II witnessed the start of a de-Germanizing process of Austrian identity in public

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discourse, in an attempt to Europeanize by means of regionalization in a broad sense. It was no coincidence that in his first speech following the elections of 25th November 1945, the newly elected People’s chancellor Leopold Figl insisted on the existence of an Austrian nation. As it had done in the past, the Alpine nation contributed to the construction of the European ideal and the new government would continue to look towards Europe. «The result of the election was one that all of civilized Europe had hoped» and Austria had passed the test «splendidly», «demonstrating its European vocation and showing its loyalty to the European tradition». Pondering the question of what best characterized Austrian identity, Chancellor Figl declared «Austria and Europe, and the new Europe will be a Europe founded on work, a Europe that shall work steadfastly towards a material reconstruction that will also lead to spiritual regeneration. In place of the ideologies of fear, oppression and intolerance, we must encourage hope and mutual understanding and the will to cooperate together. To achieve these objectives will require the active participation of all nations and all of the élites of Europe. Austria shall be proud to offer its own support and cooperation»3.

It was a feeling of hope that reflected the general mood in most of the country. With the realization that the centuries long period of Empire had come to an end, many Austrians now struggled to identify themselves with the new Republic (Der Staat der niemand wollte)4, so separating the country’s own destiny from that of Germany’s was greeted with much enthusiasm because in one stroke it would cancel the past and wipe clean the slate of complicity with the National Socialist regime5. In addition, a renewed conviction of Aus-

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3 L. Figl, Was ist Österreich, in «Österreichische Monatshefte», 1, 1945, n. 3, pp. 89-91.
tria’s European vocational calling allowed them to maintain reservations concerning the national state.

The idea of constructing a unified Europe in order to prevent further conflict and to reduce dependence on the United States and the USSR had been in existence for some time and had its origins in Kalergi’s Pan-European movement\(^6\). The path to making the European continent a concrete reality would be agreed upon over the following few years, firstly as a means to regain independence and subsequently as an alternative to globalisation. European cooperation would help bury any fears harboured by the Austrians and would create the right conditions for the country to develop its own new and distinct identity.

However, due to the changes in the international balance of power brought about by the cold war, Austria found itself in a delicate position on the margins of Europe. According to a 1950 report by British intelligence services, Austria’s position made it simultaneously a western outpost facing the Soviet Union as well as a bridgehead for the Russians into the west\(^7\).

Constantly being kept in check by the USSR, who had sidelined any decision regarding the Austrian question until 1953, Vienna’s political class found itself forced to defer participation in the embryonic plans for European integration, and kowtow to the priorities dictated by the global political agenda. This effectively limited Austria’s participation in the process of regionalization underway in Western Europe.

The signing of the peace treaty together with the declaration by the Viennese Parliament that Austria would remain permanently neutral (1955) was the price the country had to pay for the withdrawal of the Red Army. However, it did


enable the Alpine state to take its first steps towards the community that it so firmly believed in.

During the 1960s and 1970s, by virtue of the fact that the country belonged to both western and central Eastern Europe, Austria became the *traite d’union* for the countries in the area around the Danube (i.e. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and Romania) with a view to creating an area free of interference by the Great Powers. The aim was to develop political regionalization in Central-Eastern Europe, which would then form part of the project of regionalization in Western Europe.\(^8\)

In the second half of the 1950s, with Austria wishing to take its first steps in the EC as well as join the Council of Europe and participate in negotiations to adhere to EFTA, the country demonstrated its desire to participate fully in international cooperation and of course in the common market.\(^9\) However, the mainstream parties, ÖVP e SPÖ, held differing opinions in this regard. While the People’s Party’s Chancellor Julius Raab and its foreign minister Figl were convinced that joining the European Community offered an historical opportunity, the Socialists (represented by Vice-Chancellor Bruno Pittermann) totally opposed any project to adhere to the EC. The SPÖ saw EFTA as being a threat to the Austrian economy, long founded on a social and economic partnership that had brought stability to the Alpine nation, but had also spawned a system that was isolated and closed to the free market. There were also international factors such as the Soviet veto, resistance from the French and the Italians, besides the above-cited position of the SPÖ, whose leader Bruno Kreisky maintained a position of neutrality and called the EEC «a bloc controlled by the reactionary bourgeoisie»\(^10\).

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\(^10\) See for instance M. Gehler, *Der Lange Weg nach Europa: Österreich*
All these factors contributed to the failing of negotiations for Austria’s adherence to the EEC.

Following a long period of inertia during the Kreisky Era (1970-83), it wasn’t until 1987 that Austria started out once again on its road to Europe. Euro-euphoria took off and the process of integration began to accelerate thanks also to key figures such as the foreign minister Alois Mock (ÖVP) and the Chancellor Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ)\(^{11}\).

The turning point came in 1989. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War produced the right conditions for Austria to join the EU, thanks also to the new and positive relations established with France and Italy and the political might of a unified Germany, whose chancellor Helmut Kohl publicly voiced his support for Austria’s entry into Europe\(^{12}\).

Within Austria itself, a bipartisan campaign to join the EU was launched by the country’s leading political and social actors at the time (ÖVP, SPÖ, the Catholic Church and people from the world of Arts and Culture); it was thanks to their combined influence that the process leading to Austria’s adhesion to the EU was quite rapid (six years). On January 1st 1995 Austria formally became a full member of the Western European club of nations.

2.

At about the same time as the new climate of euro-euphoria was taking root, a new figure emerged onto the Austrian political scene: Jörg Haider. He was a staunch advocate of Austrian nationalism, exploiting the anti-European sentiment


in much of the country.

The reasons for Haider’s success were twofold: he succeeded in undermining the country’s decades-long, well consolidated political stability and in promoting the FPÖ as an anti-European, anti-system and anti-party force. His winning strategy was to forge a direct dialogue with an electorate who had become disillusioned with the major parties and preoccupied with the economic and social perils that the process of globalization and EU membership had begun to impose on Austria from the 1990s onwards (immigration, incorporating Eastern European countries into the EU and globalization).

The political and policy-making alliance between the People’s Party and the Socialists dates back to 1945 and since that time had enjoyed the advantage of there being no third force on the Austrian political scene (dritte Lager) to challenge them. All this changed in September 1986, when Haider was elected political secretary of the national-liberal party at the national congress. Haider’s election signaled a point of no return in the political life of Austria and would erode the foundations on which the long-standing political, economic and social partnership had rested for forty years.

In 1995 Haider had declared: «Seventy years of Soviet history have shown the futility of trying to steamroller freedoms and national diversity. Political imperialism and colonialism cannot stamp out peoples’ cultural identities… the nation state is not finished. To try to abolish it is the quickest path to nationalism – and – all previous efforts to establish a super state have ended up in the dustbin of history. All attempts to suppress natural sentiments and feelings will only lead to chaos because eventually the desire

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of freedom will explode»\(^{15}\).

Remaining leader of the FPÖ for fourteen years (1986-2000), Haider assuaged the liberalistic tones of a party that had initially been in favour of integration with Europe, turning more towards a position of increasing skepticism with regard to EU membership\(^{16}\).

In line with the Euroscepticism voice by British Conservatives, he rejected the notion of a centralized European state, opposed the Maastricht Treaty saying it was «a misguided signal for today’s Europe» and stated his conviction that Europe could only survive by building an alternative model that excluded the countries of eastern Europe\(^{17}\).

A staunch critic of what he referred to as the euro-élite, guilty he claimed of betraying the original spirit of Europe and of becoming increasingly distant from the ordinary citizens, Haider railed against the «intrusions and interference of the euro-fanatics in Bruxelles», whom he accused of wanting to accelerate the process of European integration without taking into account true democracy or the real needs of Europeans.

It was in 1983 that the FPÖ first suggested that a confederation of states would be the ideal solution, or as Haider himself was to say years later, «an intergovernmental association in opposition to a united states of Europe which would bury any hopes of peace because they would irreversibly undermine the right of European peoples to

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self-determination and to nationhood»\(^{18}\).

With the removal of the iron curtain Austria became a close, natural destination for thousands of people looking to escape from poverty in the central eastern European states. The government in Vienna found itself facing a migration crisis which was inevitably to have serious political and social repercussions. Riding the wave of unease felt by the Austrian people, the FPÖ began to gather signatures under the slogan Österreich zuerst (curiously enough, this was the same slogan previously used by the socialist Thomas Klestil during the presidential elections of the previous spring, from which he emerged victorious) calling for the imposition of restrictions on immigration, for an end to mass migration flows and for the safeguarding of the local population (increasing of funds for the police and limitation of rights for foreign residents)\(^ {19}\).

Although the campaign to collect signatures was ultimately unsuccessful (only 416,531 signed, amounting to 7% of eligible voters), Haider was not deterred; he continued to inflame the political debate with anti-European rhetoric.

Two years later the FPÖ leader openly sided with the NO campaign in the referendum on Austrian membership of the European community (1994; YES 66.6%), «in defense of the country’s language, culture and traditions» and he would later inveigh against the single currency as a «threat to the economic stability of the country as well as to the population as a whole»\(^ {20}\).

In an attempt to curtail the rise of a party that was posing an increasing threat to the established party duopoly, the ÖVP-SPÖ stayed close on the heels of the FPÖ, even adopting similar political stances in their public statements.


However, their efforts backfired, as the liberal electorate continued to distance themselves from the People’s Party. Slowly but gradually, the FPÖ was gnawing away at the consensus built up by the two parties, thanks also to a program that played down their former liberal antclericalism in order to win the approval of the Catholic-traditionalist voters\(^{21}\), a strategy that paid off with success at the general elections of 1999 (26.9%, +5%, SPÖ 33.1%, ÖVP 26.9%, Verdi 7.4%)\(^{22}\).

The victory of the Freedom Party marked the end of the ÖVP-SPÖ duopoly and led to the participation of the FPÖ in a coalition government with the People’s Party (Schlüssel I)\(^{23}\).

However, the entry into government of a xenophobic and racist party sparked the strong reaction of 14 EU member states, who decided to apply sanctions to the Far-right government. On February 1st 2000 Austria was declared to be a “pariah” state in the EU\(^{24}\).

As had been the case with the l’affaire Waldheim (1986)\(^{25}\), public opinion came out strongly in support of the Schlüssel government and anti-European sentiment spread rapidly\(^{26}\).


\(^{23}\) R. Mitten, *Austria all Black and Blue: Jörg Haider, the European Sanctions, and the Political Crisis in Austria*, in R. Wodak, A. Pelinka (Eds.), *The Haider Phenomenon*, cit., pp. 179-212.

\(^{24}\) See for instance G. Falkner, *The EU14’s ‘Sanctions’ Against Austria: Sense and Nonsense*, in «Journal of the European Union Studies Association», vol. 14, 2001, n. 1, pp. 14-15. «It is important to note that these actions against the Austrian government were not an EU action, but rather 14 bilateral, albeit coordinated, moves by these governments. Nonetheless, de facto Austria had overnight been made a pariah within the EU». C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 60.


\(^{26}\) C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, cit., p. 73.
Haider decided not to exploit this reaction to international sanctions for political purposes and instead declared: «The structure of the EU has to be changed so that self-appointed bullies cannot trample over the smaller states. The FPÖ shall work towards obtaining radical reform»\(^{27}\). Although a Eurosceptic, Haider was not driven by ideological convictions. He was not in favour of enlarging the EU, but neither did he call for Austria to leave the EU. He remained though, highly critical of policy directions decided in Bruxelles\(^{28}\).

At the 2002 general elections Haider’s party suffered a heavy setback in the polls, paying the price perhaps of officially participating in the institution of government (ÖVP 42.3%, SPÖ 36.5%, FPÖ 10.1%)\(^{29}\). This did not, though, affect the growth of Euro-scepticism in the country. The 2004 pro-euro barometer readings were quite revealing: Austria 25%, Great Britain 28%, Hungary 32\(^{30}\). Austria having the lowest percentage of support for the EU can be partly explained by the growing resentment among Austrians for the loss of sovereignty (transferred to Bruxelles) in certain areas, which threatened to undermine the country’s long-established and well consolidated economic balance. The FPÖ’s winning card was to appeal to Austrian patriotism, a surprising phenomenon in a country not known for its attachment to the ideals of nationhood\(^{31}\).

In a domestic political arena in which the Alpine and


\(^{31}\) «The National pride in Austria, highly developed even by international standards, – as pointed out by Oliver Rathkolb – has never been more powerful than it is today». O. Rathkolb, *The Paradoxical Republic: Austria, 1945-2005*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2014, p. 270.
Outlying regions had always shown diffidence and suspicion of the Central government in Vienna, it is unsurprising that these regions should show increasing mistrust of a European central institution (Bruxelles) that appeared even more distant and oblivious to local interests and traditions. It is no coincidence that the FPÖ has its greatest consensus among voters in Alpine regions such as Carinthia and Vorarlberg. The Freedom party has become a point of reference for those feeling marginalized (ordinary workers, the unemployed, the lower-middle classes who more and more resemble proletariats, residents of Carinthian valley communities) by the processes of globalization and presents itself as the only political force capable of safeguarding the traditional values of a Catholic culture that held the key to the preservation of Austrian identity. As clearly stated in one of the points in the FPÖ’s electoral manifesto: «only if the principle of belonging is given prime importance can we defend the rights of people and safeguard our respective identities against a globalised system».

The solution was attractive to a large portion of the Austrian electorate, as indicated by a survey carried out in March 2015 on people’s voting intentions if early elections were called: FPÖ 27%, ÖVP 23%, SPÖ 22%.

The slim margin of victory in the recent presidential elections (4th December 2016) revealed itself to be a litmus test of the political mood of Austrians, and perhaps of Europeans in general, given the rise of nationalist and populist sentiment, pushing for the abandonment of the process of continued European unity and a return to the individual nation states of the past.


33 http://metapolls.net/2015/03/austrian-legislative-election-8-mar-2015-poll-market/#.WM7Aa_k1-M8