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The voting behaviour of the Austrian Members of the European Parliament during the legislative period 2014-2019

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The Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE) regularly observes the voting behaviour of the Austrian MEPs. In the recently finished legislative period, 290 roll-call votes were recorded. The following patterns can be deduced from this material: fault lines in the informal “Grand Coalition” between ÖVP (PPE) and SPÖ (S&D) regarding international trade agreements and security and defence; The “oppositional” voting behaviour of the MEPs of the FPÖ (ENF); The MEPs of the Green Party (Die Grünen) were the most proactive defenders in the area of climate- and environment protection. More steps with the aim to enhance transparency as well as the degree of visibility of the European Parliament should be taken in Austria and beyond.

Introduction

Since July 2010, the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE) observes and analyses the voting behaviour of the Austrian Members

of the European Parliament (MEPs). Out of each of the twelve plenary sessions taking place in Strasbourg every year, five roll-call votes are selected. The resolutions are described shortly, and the voting behaviour of the Austrian MEPs is presented in a chart. The aim of the monitoring is to enhance transparency with regard to the decision-making processes in the European Parliament. At the same time, it aims at increasing the visibility of the Austrian Members of the European Parliament and present their work to a wider public.¹

In the last five years, Austria was represented by altogether 18 MEPs: Five were members of the Austrian Conservative Party ÖVP (EPP group)², five of the Social Democrats SPÖ (S&D group)³, four MEPs belonged to the Austrian Nationalist/Right-Wing Populist party FPÖ (ENF group)⁴, three to the Austrian Environmental

¹ See: <https://oegfe.at/abstimmungsmonitoring/> (24.05.2019)

² The MEPs of the ÖVP (Österreichische Volkspartei) are members of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament.

³ The MEPs of the SPÖ (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs) are members of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament.

⁴ The MEPs of the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) are members of Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) in the European Parliament.

Party Die Grünen (Greens/EFA group)⁵ and one to the Austrian Liberal Party NEOS (ALDE group).⁶

Main findings

In the recently finished legislative period, which lasted from July 2014 to April 2019, 58 plenary sessions took place in Strasbourg. We recorded 290 roll-call votes in this period and published the voting behaviour of the Austrian MEPs. This policy brief is based upon a qualitative analysis of the gathered material. The following patterns in the voting behaviour of the Austrian MEPs can be deduced from it.

- *Fault lines in the informal “Grand Coalition” regarding international trade agreements and security and defence*

Unlike in national parliaments the work of the European Parliament is not characterised by the antagonism of government parties and parties of the opposition. Nevertheless, during the recently finished legislative period the two largest political parties, PPE and S&D, dominated the legislative process trying to find compromises. In addition, the Austrian MEPs of the ÖVP (PPE) and the SPÖ (S&D) supported most of the roll-call votes analysed by the ÖGfE, since they formed part of the “Grand Coalition” between Conservatives and Social Democrats.

However, the informal coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ also drifted apart several times, e.g. with regard to votes on international trade agreements as well as on security and defence.

In the legislative period 2014-2019, the MEPs of the SPÖ voted unanimously against all free trade agreements whereas the MEPs of the ÖVP unanimously supported them. Examples are: Japan-EU Free Trade Agreement (JEFTA)⁷ (December 2018), Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada (CETA)⁸ (February 2017), Non-legislative Recommendations of the European Parliament for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)⁹ (July 2015).¹⁰

The analysis of the votes on a stronger cooperation between the EU member states in the area of security and defence shows a similar pattern. The MEPs of the SPÖ were much more sceptical concerning a deepening of the Common Security and Defence Policy than the MEPs of the ÖVP. Nevertheless, the unanimous voting behaviour in the SPÖ national delegation more frequently broke up in this case, leading to a mix of “No” votes and abstentions. This pattern is reflected e.g. in the following votes: Non-legislative Resolution on the European

⁵ The MEPs of the party Die Grünen-Die Grüne Alternative are members of the The Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) in the European Parliament.

⁶ The MEPs of the party Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS) are members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) in the European Parliament.

⁷ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 10.-13. December 2019) <https://bit.ly/2EIG5qZ> (17.05.2019)

⁸ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 13.-16. February 2017) <https://bit.ly/2wcwhua> (21.05.2019)

⁹ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 06.-09. July 2015) <https://bit.ly/2HvLDjW> (21.05.2019)

¹⁰ For more examples see: Edthofer, Johanna/Schmidt, Paul (2019): *Das Abstimmungsverhalten der österreichischen Abgeordneten zum Europäischen Parlament*, ÖGfE-Policy Brief 12'2019 <https://bit.ly/2YLxRiS> (24.05.2019)

Defence Union¹¹ (November 2016), Legislative Resolution on the strengthening of the security checks at Europe`s borders¹² (October 2017), Legislative Resolution on the establishment of the first EU-fund for defence industry¹³ (July 2018).¹⁴

- *The “oppositional” voting behaviour of the MEPs of the FPÖ in the European Parliament*

Another pattern that can be deduced from the ÖGfE Monitorings is the rejectionist stance of the MEPs of the FPÖ. In the large majority of the analysed roll-call votes, the MEPs of the FPÖ voted with “No” or abstained from voting – often as the only Austrian national delegation. Alongside with their colleagues from the Eurosceptic and Right-Wing Populist European political group ENF, the FPÖ assumed the role of the opposition in the European Parliament. The topics were wide-ranging and the rejection of the FPÖ MEPs ranged from votes on climate and environmental protection, protection of EU fundamental rights, protection of children`s rights, the fight against tax fraud, gender equality, migration, strengthening of worker`s rights and road safety.

Examples for the oppositional voting behaviour of the FPÖ are: Legislative Resolution on more rights for children in criminal procedures¹⁵ (March 2016), Legislative Resolution on more tax transparency for international companies¹⁶ (July 2017), Legislative Resolution on a mandatory aim for energy efficiency of 35%¹⁷ (January 2018).¹⁸

- *The voting behaviour of the Austrian MEPs regarding climate and environmental protection*

According to recent surveys, climate and environmental protection is an important topic for Austrians. 84% are of the opinion that the EU should be more engaged in climate and environment policy in the future.¹⁹ With regard to the voting behaviour of the Austrian Members of the European Parliament in the area of climate and environment protection, it is no surprise that the MEPs of the Green Party (Die Grünen) are the most proactive defenders in the area of climate and environment protection. This result is supported by the findings of a study conducted by the Climate Action Network (CAN). According to this survey,

¹¹ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 21.-24. November 2016) <https://bit.ly/2WozuWx> (21.05.2019)

¹² ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 23.-26. October 2017) <https://bit.ly/2HB98Xy> (21.05.2019)

¹³ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 02.-05. July 2018) <https://bit.ly/2YnArz> (21.05.2019)

¹⁴ For more examples see: Edthofer, Johanna/Schmidt, Paul (2019): *Das Abstimmungsverhalten der österreichischen Abgeordneten zum Europäischen Parlament*, ÖGfE-Policy Brief 12`2019 <https://bit.ly/2YLxRiS> (24.05.2019)

¹⁵ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 07.-10. March 2016) <https://bit.ly/2Epk2it> (21.05.2019)

¹⁶ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 03.-06. July 2017) <https://bit.ly/2WWSrkN> (21.05.2019)

¹⁷ ÖGfE-Monitoring (Plenary Session 15.-18. January 2018) <https://bit.ly/2VTCfPO> (21.05.2019)

¹⁸ For more examples see: Edthofer, Johanna/Schmidt, Paul (2019): *Das Abstimmungsverhalten der österreichischen Abgeordneten zum Europäischen Parlament*, ÖGfE-Policy Brief 12`2019 <https://bit.ly/2YLxRiS> (24.05.2019)

¹⁹ Market Institute, Survey on behalf of ÖGfE, P.B1591.1901.P5 (Survey period: 29. January to 15. February 2019). The spring 2019 Eurobarometer of the European Parliament also gives high priority to the protection of the environment and combating climate change. See: Eurobarometer 91.1 of the European Parliament – Factsheet Austria, spring 2019

the MEPs of the Austrian Green Party voted most frequently (91%) for a climate- and environment-friendly policy among the Austrian parties in the European Parliament. In the second place in this ranking comes the SPÖ with 86%. NEOS came third place with 37%, followed by the MEPs of the FPÖ with 27% and the MEPS of the ÖVP with 12%.²⁰

Conclusions and recommendations

The European Parliament has become more and more powerful in the course of time. Today it acts as equal co-legislator in the majority of decisions taken at European level. Against this background, it is important to know which

stances the Members of the European Parliament take with regard to different topics and how they are reflected in their voting behaviour. The ÖGfE Monitorings give helpful insights into the priorities of the political parties represented in the European Parliament during the recently finished 8th legislative period. They are a good tool for information, initiate discussions and advertise the work of the Austrian MEPs to a wider public. It would be desirable if more such steps with the aim to enhance transparency as well as the degree of visibility of the Austrian MEPs and the European Parliament would be taken in Austria and beyond.

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²⁰ Climate Action Network Europe: *Defenders, Delayers, Dinosaurs. Ranking of EU political groups & national parties on climate change*. April 2019

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