

# Austrian Foreign Policy and key Debates on EU Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

The *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (*Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy*, see Senn et al. 2023a) and its rich empirical findings that cover a broad spectrum of geographic and thematic priorities speak in stimulating ways to timely scholarly debates on European Union (EU) foreign policy. On the one hand, the Austrian case reveals dynamics that are also visible in other EU member states, including a certain degree of foreign policy de-Europeanization, a growing politicization of foreign policy, and a greater demand for horizontal coordination of different aspects of foreign policy. On the other hand, Austria needs to find its place in an EU foreign policy that itself is in a period of adapting to major internal and external challenges. Placing the findings of the *Handbook* in the context of recent scholarship on EU foreign policy, this article highlights the multi-level nature of Austrian foreign policy and points to important contributions of the *Handbook* for scholarship on EU foreign policy that extend beyond the case of Austria.

## Keywords

Austrian foreign policy, EU foreign policy, Europeanization, politicization, horizontal coordination

## Die Außenpolitik Österreichs im Lichte zentraler Debatten zu den EU-Außenbeziehungen

### Zusammenfassung

Das *Handbuch zur Außenpolitik Österreichs* (Senn et al. 2023a) liefert reichhaltige empirische Erkenntnisse zu einem breiten Spektrum von thematischen und geografischen Schwerpunkten österreichischer Außenpolitik. Zentrale Ergebnisse des Handbuchs sprechen auch auf interessante Weise zu gegenwärtigen akademischen Debatten zur Analyse der Außenbeziehungen der Europäischen Union (EU). Einerseits weist Österreichs Außenpolitik wichtige Parallelen zu anderen EU-Mitgliedstaaten auf, wie de-Europäisierungstendenzen, eine stärkere Politisierung von Außenpolitik, und ein verstärkter Bedarf an horizontaler Koordination von verschiedenen externen Politikbereichen. Andererseits muss Österreich seine Rolle in einer europäischen Außenpolitik finden, die sich selbst an tiefgreifende Veränderungen und Herausforderungen im regionalen und internationalen Umfeld anpassen muss. Indem der Artikel zentrale Ergebnisse des Handbuchs im Kontext von gegenwärtigen Debatten der EU- Außenpolitikforschung reflektiert, betont er besonders den Mehrebenen-Charakter österreichischer Außenpolitik. Gleichzeitig wird die Bedeutung zentraler Erkenntnisse des Handbuchs zur Außenpolitik Österreichs für unser Verständnis der EU-Außenpolitik aufgezeigt und diskutiert.

### Schlüsselwörter

Außenpolitik Österreichs, EU-Außenpolitik, Europäisierung, Politisierung, horizontale Koordination

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## 1. Introduction

The *Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy* (Senn et al. 2023a) offers a broad perspective on Austria's foreign policy in the second republic. It considers the growing embeddedness of Austria's foreign policy in a multi-layered, multi-actor global governance system, focusing on its role in the European Union (EU) and in a range of International Organizations. And it covers Austria's foreign policy on a multitude of geographical and thematic issue areas. At the same time, the *Handbook* identifies key patterns and trends in Austria's foreign policy that have evolved over time that relate, among other things, to the evolution of Austria's foreign policy identity, the policy-making process, as well as Austria's foreign policy behavior (Senn et al. 2023b). Concerning the process of making and implementing Austrian foreign policy, core findings identified in the *Handbook* include: the progressive Europeanization of Austria's foreign policy, its politicization and de-politicization, additional demands for horizontal coordination across different policy domains, and the fragmentation of strategy-building. Besides identifying core features related to the foreign policy process, the *Handbook* points to three primary goals that drive Austrian foreign policy: 'security, prosperity, and self-identification' (Senn et al. 2023b, 7).

Austria's participation in the foreign policy of the EU - which over time has developed an increasingly ambitious foreign policy that has also experienced a growing process of institutionalization - raises interesting questions about the implications of core findings of the *Handbook* for EU foreign policy. Whilst Austria certainly still develops its own foreign policy alongside its involvement in EU-level cooperation, its embeddedness in the multi-layered EU foreign policy system clearly impacts on core aspects of its foreign policy (Alecú de Flers 2012; Müller/Maurer 2016). Against this backdrop, this article will reflect on key patterns and trends of Austria's foreign policy from the perspective of important scholarly debates in the domain of EU foreign policy, which is currently facing a series of internal and external challenges. This focus serves two main purposes. On the one hand, several chapters in the book raise the question about the broader relevance of the 'Austrian case', an issue that is also addressed in the *Handbook's* agenda for future research (Senn et al. 2023b, 14). Here, integrating the Austrian case with scholarship on the foreign policy of the EU and its member states can help to address bigger questions and to ground the study of the Austrian case more firmly in relevant theoretical debates. On the other hand, Austria's participation in EU foreign policy cooperation is also of relevance from a policy perspective, including for understanding the EU's

ability to deal with increasingly challenging domestic and external realities.

The article proceeds as follows. It first delineates key debates on EU foreign policy that relate to the *Handbook's* core findings of the Austrian case. Concerning the dimension of policy-making and implementation, it will focus on debates related to (de)Europeanization, politicization, and horizontal policy coordination. Similarly, it covers the debate on core EU foreign policy orientations with respect to security, prosperity, and self-identification, which are another core concern of the *Handbook*. In a next step, we relate core findings of the *Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy* to the identified debates on EU foreign policy, pointing to important issues for integration and cross-fertilization. The conclusion briefly discusses core findings.

## 2. EU Foreign Policy in Times of Multiple Crises

Over the past one and a half decades, EU foreign policy has been confronted with several simultaneous and mutually reinforcing domestic and external challenges that have been described as 'polycrisis' (Juncker 2016). Externally, the global environment is characterized by a reconfiguration of power, growing divisions, and the contestation of the established liberal order. Simultaneously, the EU's Southern and Eastern neighborhood has become increasingly conflict-prone and unstable, triggering migration flows and the proliferation of illiberal values. Most recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been described as a historic moment that marks a new reality in Europe, putting EU foreign policy and many of its underlying assumptions to test (BBC 2022). At the same time, the EU has been facing severe internal conflicts, marked by austerity, Brexit, growing nationalism, rising populism and a growing politicization of EU foreign policy and its underlying norms.

Among scholars of EU foreign policy, these developments have triggered a growing interest in exploring the impact of multiple crises on EU foreign policy from different theoretical perspectives (Müller 2016; Bergmann/Müller 2021; von Homeyer et al. 2021; Riddervold et al. 2021). Accordingly, it will also be interesting to situate key findings on the Austrian case more systematically in the debate on the polycrisis, which has given rise to different, and sometimes competing trends. On the one hand, research has noted that in important domains of EU foreign policy, notably in the areas of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the EU has responded to crisis-induced pressures and challenges with efforts to upgrade the institutional framework for EU foreign policy cooperation. Among

other things, this progress has involved developing the EU's first autonomous military command and control apparatus (the MPCC), closer cooperation in the domain of defense research and development, and setting-up the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to jointly plan, develop, and invest in shared capability projects (Fiott/Bellou 2020). More recently, the EU's 'Strategic Compass' (Council of the EU 2022) has developed a common EU threat assessment in a shifting world and put forward an 'action plan' for further upgrading CSDP. Yet, despite some notable progress in the institutionalization of EU foreign policy cooperation, scholarship also points to stalemate and even to countervailing trends. This includes dynamics of foreign policy de-Europeanization (Müller et al. 2021; Stavridis et al. 2015) and the growing politicization and contestation of EU foreign policymaking (Biedenkopf et al. 2021; Johansson-Nogués et al. 2020; Petri et al. 2020; Youngs 2020).

De-Europeanization serves as an analytical framework that is concerned with "the way previous accomplishments of foreign policy Europeanisation are challenged, undermined or even reversed" (Müller et al. 2021, 529). This may involve the reconstruction of national foreign policy structures and priorities with a focus on national rather than common EU interests, resistance to procedural norms that constitute the EU's culture of cooperation as well as to fundamental EU foreign policy norms, such as its commitment to democracy, human rights, good governance, and multilateral cooperation. In pronounced cases, de-Europeanization might even go as far as involving a structural disintegration of EU foreign policy institutions. De-Europeanization has been most substantive in the case of Brexit, but it also has been observed with respect to Central European countries like Poland (Dyduch/Müller 2021), the Czech Republic (Weiss 2021), and Hungary (Varga/Buzogány 2021; Visnovitz/Jenne 2021; Müller/Gaszi 2022) that remain part of the EU. In the case of Hungary, it has gone beyond a de-Europeanization of foreign policy positions and rhetoric, involving also substantive changes at the level of domestic foreign policy institutions. Conversely, at the level of foreign policy discourse and positions, certain de-Europeanization dynamics have also been observed in countries like Greece and Portugal, not least as the financial crisis has undermined elite support for the EU and its foreign policy (Raimundo et al. 2021).

Whilst de-Europeanization dynamics have often been driven by domestic developments in individual EU member states, including the rise of right-wing populism, these dynamics have also fed back into EU-level foreign policymaking. As mentioned above, the contestation of EU foreign policy cooperation, both with respect to procedural and substantive EU norms, has increased. And on some occasions, right-wing populist

governments in EU member states have even succeeded in uploading their illiberal policy preferences to the EU-level, shaping joint EU foreign policy on issues like external migration governance (Escartin 2020). These challenges are compounded by the fact that other external actors, including China and Russia, seek to influence EU foreign policy through their relations with individual member states. Yet, at the same time research also points towards a certain resilience of the system of EU foreign policy cooperation and its underlying norms, in spite of growing contestation. In this context, it is interesting to consider the case of Austrian foreign policy also in the light of emerging research on foreign policy de-Europeanization.

Another important aspect of EU foreign policy is the ambition to develop a 'comprehensive', or 'integrated' approach to its foreign policy, establishing growing institutional links for horizontal coordination between different aspects of the EU's international relations. This is exemplified by a growing emphasis by researchers and policymakers alike on crosscutting issues like the 'security-development nexus', the 'security-trade' nexus, the 'security-migration nexus', or the 'climate-energy-trade nexus' (Smith 2013; Karyotis 2007; Furness/Gänzle 2017; Leal-Arcas/Armas 2018). Among other things, research has been concerned with the role of horizontal coordination for ensuring the coherence and effectiveness of the EU as an international actor (Thomas 2012). Similarly, the theoretical perspective of horizontal policy integration (Jordan et al. 2006; Hogl/Nordbeck 2012) has been employed to examine the EU's capacity for horizontal coordination in terms of achieving 'common, integrated trans-domain policies' (Hogl/Nordbeck 2012, 112; Boremann 2007). Again, here it would be interesting to situate the findings on the case of Austrian foreign policy in the broader debate on EU foreign policy, which also requires growing horizontal coordination among different bureaucracies at multiple levels.

Moreover, the new external and domestic realities faced by the EU and its member states have triggered a debate on the EU's international role and its identity as a foreign policy actor. In the post-Cold War era, the academic discourse surrounding the EU's foreign policy identity has been dominated by concepts that conceived the EU as 'normative power' (Manners 2002), or a 'market power' (Damro 2012) in international affairs. In this view, the appeal of the EU as a normative power that promotes human rights, democracy, the rule of law and multilateral cooperation, as well as its large market size and regulatory capacity constitute the main foundation of its external power. Yet, in an external environment marked by growing conflict, instability, and the proliferation of security risks, perspectives emphasizing the importance of geopolitics and hard

security considerations have been gaining ground (Lehne 2020; Nitoiu/Sus 2019). This also manifested itself at the level of the EU's strategic discourse, with the EU's global strategy (European Union 2016) emphasizing the need for 'strategic autonomy' and 'principled pragmatism' and the European Commission defining its role as a 'geopolitical Commission'. Given the fragmented strategic debate diagnosed for Austria's national foreign policy in the *Handbook*, the necessity of integrating the national debate systematically with the EU-level debate merits further attention.

### 3. Austrian Foreign Policy in a Changing EU Foreign Policy Environment

As delineated above, core findings of the *Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy* speak in interesting ways to recent debates on EU foreign policy.

In terms of foreign policy-making, Austria is participating in an EU foreign policy that has become more contested and politicized, whilst a number of EU member states have experienced important de-Europeanization dynamics. These broader trends in EU foreign policy cooperation are to some extent mirrored in important developments in Austrian foreign policy identified in the *Handbook*. Austrian foreign policy has traditionally been marked by a considerable degree of Europeanization, including a move towards a more differential form of neutrality and the adaptation to EU foreign policy priorities and positions (Senn 2022), whilst also relying on the EU to amplify its voice in international affairs. Yet, against the backdrop of a more contested EU foreign policy, Austria has itself become more willing to take positions that depart from the EU-mainstream as it seems less constrained by institutional cooperation at the EU level. Examples include Austria's voting behavior in the context of EU foreign policy cooperation at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, including on issues related to the Middle East peace process (Harrer 2023). In some cases of EU foreign policymaking, Austria even went as far as blocking a Common EU position, as exemplified by its opposition against the EU-Mercosur agreement (Mourão Permoser 2023). Against this backdrop, it would be interesting for scholarship on Austrian foreign policy to engage more with emerging research on foreign policy de-Europeanization and the contestation of foreign policymaking.

The *Handbook* also points to important domestic dynamics in Austrian foreign policy that are of broader concern for EU foreign policy-making. As noted in the *Handbook*, the participation of the populist radical right freedom party (FPÖ) in government (1983-1986, 2000-2005, 2017-2019) makes it an interesting case that

relates to the broader debate on the relationship between populism and (EU) foreign policy. At the same time, populist parties may even exercise certain influence on foreign policy when in opposition, including through processes of 'populist contagion' of the positions of mainstream parties (Rooduijn et al. 2014). Whilst research on populism and foreign policy have recently moved increasingly into the focus of scholars of EU foreign policy, other domestic dynamics observed in the *Handbook* have received only little attention thus far. For instance, the observed trend towards a greater fragmentation of the party landscape and shorter durations of government-coalitions at times of a greater politicization makes national foreign policy less stable and predictable, which also has consequences for EU-level foreign policymaking. Overall, the growing role of party politics, as well as of political leaders for Austrian and EU foreign policy points to certain limitations of theoretical approaches to EU foreign policy analysis that emphasize the role of commonly shared national interests, role conceptions, and identities as key determinants of foreign policy. Moreover, it calls for a greater exchange between scholarship on party politics, which is the domain of comparative politics, and works on EU foreign policy that tend to be dominated by perspectives from the discipline of international relations.

Another interesting aspect identified by the *Handbook* is the growing need to coordinate Austrian foreign policy among different ministries and actors (see e.g. Kneucker 2023). Given Austria's embeddedness in the EU's multi-layered foreign policy-system (Costa/Müller 2019), this coordination has an important European dimension. Increasingly, responding to EU-level foreign policy initiatives requires the coordination between different Austrian ministries and actors, especially since the EU aims at an integrated approach to its international relations. Yet, this, multi-level aspect of EU foreign policy cooperation has received little attention thus far, pointing to a significant gap in research.

Finally, the *Handbook* shows that new trends in the EU's strategic discourse - including a greater emphasis on 'geopolitics' and hard security aspects, as well as a quest for strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy - raise important questions for Austria's foreign policy in terms of self-identification, as well as for related orientations about its security and prosperity. Finland and Sweden's recent move to opt for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership means that the overlap between the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and NATO in terms of membership has further increased. Austria, in turn, has remained committed to its neutral status. Works on Austria's self-identification as a foreign policy actor thus need to take into consideration that finding its place in

an evolving European security environment constitutes a major component of this debate.

#### 4. Conclusion

The *Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy* speaks in interesting and stimulating ways to broader scholarly debates on EU foreign policy, showing a strong potential for cross-fertilization. On the one hand, the Austrian case reveals dynamics that are also visible in other EU member states and also impact on, and interact with, EU level cooperation. This includes certain de-Europeanization dynamics, as for instance visible with respect to certain aspects of Austria's voting behavior at the UN, a politicization of foreign policy, and a growing demand for horizontal coordination of different aspects of foreign policy.

At the same time, Austrian foreign policy is embedded in an EU foreign policy that itself is in a period of responding to major internal and external challenges. For Austria, whose foreign policy has become considerably Europeanized since becoming a member of the EU, this means that it has to find its place in a substantially altered European security environment. Engaging with the research debates highlighted in this article will thus not only be relevant to better understand the connections, and interplay between Austrian and EU-level foreign policy. It, moreover, offers the potential to inform, stimulate, and provide guidance for Austrian foreign policymakers and other relevant stakeholders that play a central role in defining the future of Austrian foreign policy in a changing European, regional, and global environment. In this respect, the *Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy* offers real potential for a greater exchange between academia and the 'policy world', which thus far has been rather limited (see Brix 2023).

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