

# Please Wait Outside: The Absence of Public Control of Austria's Foreign Policy Due to a Lack of Public Information and Education

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## Abstract

This article is a reflection on the *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (*Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy*, see Senn et al. 2023) from a public information and civic education point of view. It discusses the *Handbook's* value for educating the public on topics and stakeholders of Austria's foreign policy landscape and intends to argue the relevance of political parties' roles in the public discourse to foreign policy education. The article addresses the genesis of public opinion to political decision-making in the foreign policy field and gives an analysis of public control of and citizens' role in foreign policy decision-making.

## Keywords

Austria, Second Republic, foreign policy, security policy, civic education

## Bitte draußen warten: Das Fehlen öffentlicher Kontrolle von Österreichs Außenpolitik aufgrund des Mangels an politischer Bildung

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel reflektiert die Beiträge im *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (Senn et al. 2023) aus der Perspektive der öffentlichen Information und der politischen Bildung. Er diskutiert den Beitrag, den das Handbuch dazu leistet, die Öffentlichkeit über außenpolitische Themen und Stakeholder zu informieren und zu bilden. Darüber hinaus soll der Artikel die Relevanz der Debatte um die Rollen unterschiedlicher Parteien im öffentlichen Diskurs für außenpolitische Bildung zeigen. Er beschreibt Aspekte der öffentlichen Meinungsbildung im Bereich der Außenpolitik und analysiert die Rolle der Bürger:innen in die Außenpolitik betreffenden Entscheidungsprozessen.

### Schlüsselwörter

Österreich, Außenpolitik, Sicherheitspolitik, Neutralität, politische Bildung

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## 1. Introduction

A handbook of Austrian foreign policy (see Senn et al. 2023) is an ambitious project that can never fully illustrate Austria's at times ambiguous positioning on a global stage. The authors have successfully mapped the major areas that have traditionally had a strong impact on and relevance to Austrian foreign policy. Their work could serve as a baseline for future public control of foreign policy decision-making in Austria and as a guideline for those who educate present and future generations on the subject. At least in theory.

While several contributions to the *Handbook* reflect that political parties' foreign policy positions are relevant to Austria's positioning as a whole, the realities of competition between political parties, election campaigns, day to day politics and more or less strategic political messaging account for a big part of what remains to be explored in more depth and explained to the general public. Political scientists, diplomats and other foreign policy experts might sometimes disregard the parties' role in the foreign policy debate because they might find it to be superficial and unable to capture the complexity of foreign policy issues. Political communication is different from diplomacy and scientific discourse and might therefore fail to meet the expectations of the expert community. Nevertheless, it is key to the support of foreign policy. Understanding the difference between how decision-making should work by the book and the political reality of Austria is the most underrated part of civic education.

It is difficult to imagine what the average Austrian would name as the goals of Austrian foreign policy. Would they say our most important partners are Germany and other neighbouring countries or would some say Russia? Did this change after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022? Where would citizens have heard about our foreign policy focus? As Senn et al. (2023b) write in their article the media interest in foreign policy is limited and so are the educational opportunities for young people and adults in this area. However, this does not mean that citizens lack an opinion on the subject. In a survey conducted in Summer 2022 60% of the sample said they are in favor of a common foreign policy of the European Union (EU) and 34% opposed this idea (Statista 2022). It is however unclear, what those polled thought either option would entail. At the same time poll numbers show that 44% are in favor of a referendum on Austria's future support of the sanctions against Russia (Unique Research 2022), with a little less than half of Austrians opposing the full support of the EU sanctions (Seidl 2022). These polls measure a general sentiment towards sanctions and do not take deep-dives into the „but what if“ scenarios of complex developments in the Russian war against Ukraine. A person asked to respond with

„yes“ or „no“ might answer differently than a person asked to explain what it would take for them to support or deny support to the sanctions. We can also only guess where they receive their information on foreign policy. To sum it up, we do know rather little about public opinion on specific foreign policy measures and what it depends on. This article intends to analyse the *Handbook's* value for educating the public on topics and stakeholders of Austria's foreign policy landscape and intends to argue the relevance of political parties' roles in the public discourse to foreign policy education. The article looks at the impact of public opinion on political decision-making in the foreign policy field and will elaborate on the relevance of public control of national foreign policy-making in Austria.

## 2. Invisible Decision-Making in Austria's Foreign Policy

Despite all efforts of social scientists working on different specific aspects of foreign policy the state of academic research and teaching is „not satisfying“, writes Brix (2023) criticising that neither universities nor foreign policy actors themselves prioritise foreign policy. He also observes a lack of foreign policy education in the growing sector of civic literacy. Emil Brix is the incumbent director of the Vienna School of International Studies, which (among other things) prepares many young professionals in Austria for their foreign service entry exam. The Vienna School of International Studies is a fine institution that offers a range of courses on international relations, history, economics, languages and culture. They do, however, not teach the actual dynamics of decision-making and party-political power game analysis a lot, neither does the institute of political science at the University of Vienna. School teachers are restricted by the limited time available to them for teaching a large canon of issues. There are no hobby courses on foreign policy.

There are ways to acquire knowledge about institutional conduct and the constitution, for instance a law degree. But, to get back to the first example, as a young aspiring diplomat you could get to your entry exam and arguably also past that without knowing much of what drives political decision-making in Austria. Of course, it is expected of these young professionals to read, self-study and consume news. However, to those who have never done an internship or joined a political party's youth organisation, it might still be difficult to understand how the monster of Austrian politics eats and breathes. Besides, the lack of non-partisan educational opportunities for young people creates a number of other problems for Austria's democracy.

Paired with what Kneucker (2023) calls „Fachaußenpolitik“ (a foreign policy conducted

exclusively by experts) this can lead to a disconnect between the government and the general public, the government and parliament and even between different branches of government with regard to foreign policy. A lack of understanding and trust between the main actors of foreign policy produces undesirable results for all stakeholders and embarrassment in front of the citizens.

To mind comes the case of Austria's withdrawal from the United Nations' (UN) Global Compact for Migration in 2018 that its diplomats helped negotiate. The same diplomats found themselves in a position only weeks later, in which they had to explain to their counterparts of other countries, why the Austrian government coalition of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) had decided not to sign the compact and to abstain from the vote on the compact at the UN General Assembly in 2019 (Deutsche Welle 2018). While no one but the government parties at the time can be blamed for taking this decision that reflected badly on Austria as a foreign policy actor, this development could have been anticipated and communicated in a different way, both home and abroad by all those involved.

### 3. Who's Afraid of Parliament?

Diplomats and other civil servants are often concerned about discussing their work on foreign policy issues in the relevant committees in parliament.<sup>1</sup> They fear that an important topic could be tainted by party-political games and their well-intentioned hard work could be ruined. However, in a democracy it should be unacceptable to sneak strategic foreign policy decisions past the representatives of the people in parliament without good reason. Dialogue with representatives of the people can prepare the public announcement of an imminent important foreign policy decision. Members of Parliament (MPs) – even if they are not always knowledgeable about foreign policy – must not be underestimated as a bridge to the general public. But they need time to prepare their role in public perception and to prepare their voters and provide them with an explanation acceptable to them. Expectation management is key to the success of many policies. Even though this does not mean that parties can be persuaded to vote against their own core values, better results and better compromise could be achieved by improving the relationship between experts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MPs.

The question remains by which means parliamentarians educate themselves on complex foreign policy issues they are voting on. Their party policy advisors' expertise paired with absorbing news of their choice is a likely answer. With a media landscape more and more fragmented and our societies polarised on many issues, the information parliamentarians base their actions on is probably varying strongly depending on their party backgrounds. In theory, the Austrian Parliament's political experts could provide the MPs with non-partisan information. In practice, the parliamentary administration is too understaffed to provide this service to all MPs. Theoretically, parliament – voting on the budget – could plea for a higher budget to educate itself and the general public. In practice, the governing parties traditionally have a majority in the Austrian parliament and the history of parliamentary descent from government positions is about the length of a tweet.

Therefore, a parliamentary debate on foreign policy issues is prone to be polarised before it even begins. It is understandable that technocrats fear this environment and want to protect their work from being ripped apart in party-political battles. In conclusion, civic education matters even to MPs directly. Another crucial point is some MPs limited knowledge of the English language that makes exchange of information with foreign counterparts and experts more difficult and time-consuming – a potentially interesting future research area for political scientists.

### 4. Foreign Policy is Boring if you Want it to Be

Involving parliament and the general public in strategic foreign policy decision processes early on could also lead to more journalistic coverage of Austrian foreign policy. The foreign policy sections of newspapers and relevant segments on TV are dominated by foreign affairs, rather than reporting on Austria's foreign policy. Moser (2023) finds that this is the result of a lack of interest among the audience and decision-makers in the newsrooms. While this is certainly true to some extent, the other dimension of the problem is that the way Austria's foreign policy is presented to the public is boring to report on. Statements from a foreign minister or chancellor at a press conference on a visit to another country or a phone call with another president are rarely explicit. Treaties with all the legal context do not read like a thriller and the „Partizipationsprozess zum Dreijahresprogramm der österreichischen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit“ is not the most catchy name for a meeting behind closed doors, where colourful individuals representing different institutions of the state, political parties and NGOs fight over the amount and beneficiaries of Austrian

<sup>1</sup> A heartfelt thanks to many colleagues that will remain unnamed in this article, who have explained their perspective on parliamentary consultation in the foreign policy area with me over the years.

development aid. If the whole country can stand reading on every detail about every sneeze that happened in the parliamentary committee to investigate alleged corruption within the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition („Ibiza-Untersuchungsausschuss“) and alleged corruption within the conservative ÖVP, why can't we be bored with Austria's foreign politics on a regular basis?

However, even if something important and somewhat interesting happens in Austria's foreign policy, there is no guarantee for media reporting on it. When Turkey lifted its block on Austria's activities within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Partnership for Peace in spring 2022, media barely covered it. No foreign policy editor seemed to have asked themselves, why Turkey all of a sudden changed its position or whether Austria promised something to Ankara in exchange. Most people did not know that Austria is no longer blocked in NATO, but then again, most people might not have known in the first place, that Austria was for many months excluded from technical cooperation and peacekeeping efforts within the alliance.

There are occasionally attempts by daily newspapers to provide a broader explanation of EU affairs, such as the mass-circulated newspaper *Kronen Zeitung's* double spread stories on individual EU issues, or the daily *Kurier's* portrait series of Austrians serving the EU in Brussels. Both Ennser-Jedenastik (2023) and Kneucker (2023) find that EU affairs are something in between domestic and foreign policy. Ennser-Jedenastik even calls it a „Europeanisation of the Austrian foreign policy debate“, pointing out that questions of European integration have become an important part of the political debate, while other topics, such as defence policy are further left behind. This observation raises the question of whether it is necessary for policy issues to be strongly internalised and wrapped in party-political bickering for Austrians to feel some sort of ownership over the issue and care – a dire sentence for civil servants who want to keep party politics out of foreign policy, should it be the case. Ennser-Jedenastik further says that the norm of cross-partisan action is less applicable to Austria's EU affairs than to bilateral or multilateral action. He sees the reason for this in diverging party positions on whether Austria's place is in the EU or not. This, he says is why EU politics has to some extent become domestic politics. The reason could however also be that EU policies are in fact domestic policies by now. Many issues of our daily lives are regulated by EU law. In most cases the individual citizens do not know where the law they oblige was made and they do not care.

## 5. Hurdles Caused by Austria's Self-deception in the Context of its Neutrality

Naturally, if a situation occurs that requires the general public to have a minimum knowledge of international relations and Austria's capabilities and foreign policy positions, it is difficult to bring them up to speed quickly, as proven by various national governments' struggle to persuade their populations of the necessity of the sanctions against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The current public opinion polling results on sanctions are partly rooted in Austria's neutrality debate up to the present.

For decades Austrian leaders of various parties have built up a self-perception in which the neutral Austria is „building bridges“ and uses its role as a military neutral state to mediate, make peace and be a non-partisan place where conflict parties meet to end wars. In reality this does not happen so often anymore (Senn et al. 2022). However, the false idea that neutrality protects Austria from war and grants it the status of a mediator is etched on the minds of the people, which is now turning into an obstacle to rally support for the sanctions against Russia among the population. In his contribution on the state of Austrian neutrality Senn (2023) warns of this effect. It is also a good argument against providing people with emotionalised debates and almost mythical interpretations of a law instead of giving them access to factual education on issues of foreign policy.

## 6. Austria's failure to turn being a UN seat into something great

Even if Austria pursued an active neutrality policy, there are other obstacles to it embracing the role of a neutral mediator. While Austria is the seat of many international organisations, including the UN and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), it manages to live its life without ever being in touch with the international community based in Austria. Few school classes visit the UN, there is no large think tank infrastructure worth mentioning around it. Young professionals who are not in the foreign service but would like to work on foreign policy are often advised to go to Berlin, Brussels, London, or anywhere else than Vienna. UN officials, who are based in Vienna, are rarely invited to public debates or interviewed by the media. Many of them live very close to the UN headquarters in the outskirts of Vienna, as if they were in another city. This is however not the way Austrian politicians present the situation whenever they speak about Vienna as a seat of international organisations. The Republic of Austria commits to further attracting international organisations particularly in the area of security

policy in its security strategy. However, as Troy (2023) correctly points out, Austria has seen brighter days in this respect and the idea of being a centre of multilateral cooperation has descended to political self-display and showmanship.

## 7. Conclusion

The Austrian tendency to fight about ridiculous things due to a fear of debating important issues is particularly obvious in the field of foreign policy. This *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs (Handbook on Austrian Foreign Policy*, see Senn et al. 2023) is a diligent inventory of even tiny segments of this policy area. All in all, the result is still the description of a small country's foreign policy. Small not only in the territorial sense, but more importantly with regard to its ambitions. It is likely that most Austrian citizens do not have the faintest idea of what Austria strives to be in the world and what role it wants to play. There is little constructive public debate on important foreign policy issues of this country and it is everyone's fault.

The Russian war in Ukraine is the most recent example of how civic literacy could help a unified Austrian position on upholding the economic sanctions against Russia to take a stance for peace and respect of international law. Conflicts that rattle the world are changing. Many threats to Europe's way of life require a high level of cooperation on an individual level to counter them effectively, as the corona pandemic has shown. The role civic literacy plays in this context must not be underestimated. A population well-informed about its role in the world and its relationships is more resilient.

Austria is going to face further challenges in the future. One of them is the Western Balkans enlargement of the EU. So far, the way the incumbent and previous governments have chosen is to repeat continuously that Austria supports the accession of the Western Balkans as soon as possible. While this is an honourable position and the Western Balkan region is certainly always in need of good friends, the strategy of not debating the implications publicly might backfire when the moment of the next accession comes. It is unclear to what extent the general public agrees with this policy and it seems that no one wants to find out. Facts are that the far-right FPÖ opposes enlargement (Vilimsky, 2022), that the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)-dominated labour union wrote a letter to all MPs in protest of opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019, and that Austria prolonged special measures that prevented Croatians from entering the Austrian labour market after their accession to message to its own population that Austria comes first. The

government did so, even though there was and still is a desperate need for labour force in Austria. It seems that if it comes to the next vote in the European Council on another country joining the EU, the government is planning on sneaking the decision past the citizens, which will likely be brutally exploited by the far-right.

Foreign policy as a whole is changing. George Packer's book on the life of the American diplomat Richard Holbrooke (Packer 2018) starts with a memory of the child Holbrooke visiting the construction site of the UN headquarters in New York. It was a time of hope, when there were still people who believed that the founding of the United Nations would end war in the world. This hope is gone but we must never be discouraged to end all the wars we can end. Another sign of change in how foreign policy can be made is the impressive effort of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. He is a lobbyist, publicly fighting for support, empathy and understanding of his country in an unprecedented way. There is no doubt that his particular style will be copied in the future by democratic and by autocratic leaders. A well-educated Austria will see the difference and choose its allies wisely.

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