

Austria, a lesson for the EU¹ :

If politicians do not fight in the elections over the European democratic project conceived after 1945, then it will be the project of the 30s which the EU will inherit.

According to an article of December 1998 : « How Europe could end up in the hands of the post modern great grand sons of Hitler, Franco, Mussolini and Petain ...»

- **Franck Biancheri**, February 6, 2000 -

Remark: The Austrian crisis has become a European crisis

Currently, Austria seems to be ruled by a right/far-right wing coalition arrived to power quite democratically, dragging the EU into a very serious political crisis.

For almost 4 months, Austria was without a government because of the incapacity of the historic right-left coalition to rebuild itself once more.

As soon as the new coalition project between Mr SCHUSSEL and Mr HAIDER gets to be known, Austria's partners within the EU quickly react and with great vigour, thus condemning this possibility without appeal. And since their threats became ineffective, they have implemented a series of bilateral retaliations affecting all of Austria's relations with its EU partners.

For a week, anti-government and sometimes violent demonstrations come out one after the other in large Austrian cities whilst European economic circles actually refuse to get involved in any way in this controversial issue and decide to show a "business as usual" behaviour. European intellectual and political circles, in a strange mixture of honesty and utilitarianism for domestic purposes, announce the risk of Hitler's return for tomorrow, thus showing "clairvoyance" never demonstrated before without imagining the imminence of such a coalition in Austria.

Today, the EU is facing a very serious political crisis that directly affects its day-to-day functioning as well as its political philosophy in general. So this is indeed a crisis of the EU as well as an Austrian crisis: perhaps the first major European political crisis after all.

Analysis: Besides the Austrian situation, we witness the re-emergence of another European project competing with that of 1957

The unanimity of the reactions of the remaining 14 Member States clearly underlines the seriously endangered European politicians represented by the Austrian precedent. This danger is not in Austria, but a bit everywhere in Europe.

Because they did not see anything coming, the European political classes and in particular the left-wing parties awoke by noting that the right could be tempted by government alliances with the far-right, that no one in the EU could prevent it, that these far-rights were no longer incarnated by old people but by teams rather young and (except for the satisfaction of the idea that the Austrians are fundamentally different from other Europeans), this could possibly happen anywhere in the EU.

Anticipation is intended to be operational, so let's admit the failed *denazification* of Austria after 1945, let us keep in mind that it reinforces the divergence of mentality between a new

¹ In the framework of the legislative elections of October 3rd, 1999, the FPÖ came second with 415 votes in advance over the ÖVP, behind the SPÖ majoritarian but unable to form a government. Schüssel chose to form a "black-blue coalition" with the ultra-nationalists and became, on February 4th, 2000, the Federal Chancellor.

Member State and the older EU members. And, knowing that we can not redo what was missed 50 years ago, let's evacuate this data and do some facts analysis.

Since 1989, the post-war era and the world order it established (including within our political spheres) has rapidly moved away, with its prohibitions and certainties. It will no longer be enough to consider someone fascist or Nazi for that person to be disqualified from the political game; in the same way treating people as communists no longer has this effect since 1989. Some will regret it, but this is a fact. One might need more imagination, conviction and action to oppose now these ideas or visions of Europe.

European unanimity badly hides a total strategic vacuum

What strikes European unanimity about Austria is its inefficiency and lack of a long-term vision: no anticipation, no long-term strategy (have we thought of what will be actually done if the Austrian government does not make legally or politically reprehensible decisions? We will be providing it with a good "European Democraticism" in six months or a year?)... and especially no impact on Austria (despite threats, coalition was formed).

Threatening or sanctioning without results often leads to situations which are the opposite of those desired, especially when we are aiming for democratic processes. Let us take a recent example, as a Frenchman, it does not seem to me that the anti-France coalition at the time of the resumption of the French nuclear tests had the least impact in France, even the contrary.

Finally, this was the case of the unanimous sanctions because all the current governments of the EU are on the left, except one, Spain, which is historically bound to be strongly anti-fascist because of the still close to date Francoism. If some believe they see evidence of the emergence of a common European political vision in these sanctions, they should only imagine for a minute the case where half of the EU governments would have been right-wing! A quick glance at the way the EPP deals with this problem is enough to understand the issue.

Anticipation: Exit the institutional impasse and address the populations - The politicians must start addressing European themes

With Austria, the EU faces today two emergencies to deal first with a short-term problem: (1) how to break the stalemate in which the series of bilateral sanctions will plunge us without giving a good conduct certificate to Mr HAIDER? And then a long-term problem: (2) how to oppose the re-emergence of a racist and xenophobic vision of Europe?

See below two operational tracks to combine with the two necessities.

1. Establishment of a Supervisory Committee at the highest level of the EU, connected to civil society:

It is likely that the two members of the ruling coalition in Vienna will do everything to avoid any slippage potentially punished by the EU. And, it would be unconscious to bet on their incompetence to succeed that. Mr. HAIDER and his troops have time before them. They aim for the second half of the decade and can even "waste" time.

If within six months this situation is proven, the other 14 Member States will gradually have to cut sanctions which, because of their intensity, can not be maintained for long. They will have to join a position closer to that advocated by the Commission, more circumspect in this sector. This change will have to be simple and easy to read by public opinion while serving the purpose of weakening the ideas conveyed by Mr HAIDER and his party.

The EU could thus set up an ad hoc Council Committee (Troika), assisted by a Commissioner, comprising three or four major human right-NGOs, to maintain constant surveillance of Austria on human rights and democracy issues.

This committee would be in contact with the Austrian civil society and should report monthly to European leaders and public opinion with the possibility of reinstating new sanctions if crimes are identified. This structure would have the advantage of being able to transform bilateral sanctions into a common mechanism (thus avoiding the disastrous image of a "retreat") and presenting a democratic EU, open to the Austrian people.

This would provide the EU with a procedure for other similar crises.

2. To rapidly support the multiplication of links with the Austrians at the citizen level:

In the long run, we must target the citizens. It is from them that M. HAIDER and his ideas come out. It therefore seems important for the EU to support rapidly (and this word must now have a real meaning within the institutions, speaking of weeks rather than months) a series of initiatives launched by Austrian and other Member States' civil societies to increase contacts between Austrian citizens and EU citizens (the opposite of what bilateral sanctions imply today). Beyond their impact on the Austrian reality in the short term, it is about launching two strong messages:

- ***Democracy is first and foremost the people's affair*** (it is not civil servants who will explain to their people that they are wrong, but other populations will do it)
- ***Today, and especially tomorrow, the organised civil society will have to be at the forefront, and it must quickly grow up in European matters (capacity for analysis, influence, action, ...).***

But that will not be enough, because the essence of the problem is mainly political.

To avoid that tomorrow five or six Member States follow Austria's case (and here we will really have entered the situation that I developed in December 1998 in the article cited in the introduction), **it is crucial that EU political classes are also seizing the "European lever", and stop abandoning it to extremist politicians on the one hand and officials on the other.**

To do this, they must understand that the coming decade will be "made of Europe" including in the national elections; it is now around the European themes that will be engaged the gigantic battle to determine the future of this continent.

Indeed. If today a majority of Austrians do not take as "natural" some values at the heart of the European construction since 1957, what will happen tomorrow with the Central and Eastern European countries whose history and the relation to the community project are even more distant than those of Austria? A successful enlargement is also about anticipating those risks.

And I do not even dwell on the situation of an EU with Turkey in it...

Franck Biancheri, February 6, 2000

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