
What has Austria done with its freedom?

Ursula Plassnik,
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»Foreign policy, in my view, is like jazz; it's an improvisation on a theme, and you change as you go along«.

Richard Holbrooke

The Leitmotiv of Austrian foreign policy was contained in the first independent Mission Statement of the Second Republic, the government declaration of 27 April 1945:

“Externally the Provisional State Government will make every effort, through the measures it takes, to restore the confidence of the three world powers, to procure as soon as possible all guarantees required for the future deliverance of the country from occupation, and to lead the Republic back into the line-up of sovereign states. (...)

(...) Austria wishes to live in undisturbed friendship with the peoples of the Danube region and in peace and friendship with all neighbours in the best interests of all.

Austria's provisional government welcomes the establishment of a new political and economic world order by the three leading world powers and all their allies. May the Republic be granted the possibility of participating soon in the community of all nations and peoples and of cooperating therein with its limited means and powers (...)”¹

This government declaration – delivered before the end of the Second World War – formulated with impressive clarity the classical Austrian *Leitmotiv* for 50 years of active foreign policy:

- an unbending will for freedom, that is to say to unrestricted equality of treatment and full international authority;
- a deep desire for neighbourly harmony;
- an unconditional determination to seek recognition at global, as well as at European, level as well as to accept formative responsibility.

The concrete room for manoeuvre in realizing these aims was, looking back, very limited for a long time: restricted first of all through ten years of occupation, then by the Iron Curtain and the Cold War, as well as by being at the delicate geo-political intersection of antagonistic social systems.

Successful foreign policy manifests itself precisely in dealing with frontiers, whether self-set ones or those imposed by exterior realities. In dealing with, and ultimately overcoming, these frontiers Austrian foreign policy has over the past fifty years displayed perseverance and shrewdness in recognising historical windows, as well as courage in picking up and tackling new possibilities.

The first aim – full sovereignty and freedom

The most important aim during the first ten years after the Second World War was the restoration of Austria's full sovereignty and freedom. For a long time the European post-war situation, with increasing tension between the Allies, seemed to make a solution for Austria impossible – no matter what action the Austrian government took.

The main achievement of Austrian politicians during this period was to identify at the right time and correctly interpret the signs of the time. Molotov's speech on 8 February 1955 saying any further delay in concluding the Austrian State Treaty would be "unjustified" was immediately interpreted correctly by the Austrian ambassador in Moscow. His initiative was seized upon without any delay by the Austrian government. Within the shortest possible time all the questions still open were settled, and only three months after Molotov's speech that which for ten years had seemed impossible was achieved: the signing of the Austrian State Treaty.

"*Austria is free!*" proclaimed Foreign Minister Leopold Figl joyfully and with every justification. In doing so he expressed a deeply felt desire of his fellow-countrymen: Austria was free – liberated in 1945 from the criminal Nazi regime, and now too from international occupation and tutelage.

Freedom – from what, and for what?

Freedom is not only a freedom *from* something, but also a freedom *for* something. So for what has Austria used its freedom? What did it do with its freedom in the world of the '50s and '60s?

Immediately after the signing of the State Treaty the government made use of the new freedom and defined Austria's sphere of action through the Neutrality Law as well as by incorporation into the international community of nations. Already in December 1955 Austria went beyond the Swiss pattern and entered the United Nations. An individual, specifically Austrian, path was being pursued.

For Austria UN membership was not an end in itself. Austria had shown, early on, that it was willing to accept international responsibility. As early as 1960 Austria provided a medical contingent for the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Congo. This intervention was the stepping stone for several more peacekeeping operations. Altogether more than 42,200 Austrian (women and men) have served with UN in the last 45 years. The tradition which began in the United Nations is being followed up today under the auspices of European solidarity with operations in Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia.

Austria soon realised the chances of its UN membership being recognised and utilized: In 1960 the Austrian federal government had brought the South Tirol problem to the attention of the 15th General Assembly of the United Nations and thereby attracted international attention to the matter. UN resolution 1497/XV led to the recognition of Austria as protective power for the South Tiroleans and, subsequently, to the South Tirol Package of 1969. In this way South Tirol came into the possession of an autonomy statute which is considered world-wide as a model for the solution of a minority conflict.

Alongside membership of the United Nations the second pillar to which Austrian foreign policy was committed was already Europe. By joining the Council of Europe in 1956 Austria clearly opted for western Europe and its values. At the time this represented the full extent of Austria's foreign policy manoeuvrability as far as Europe was concerned.

Austria's attempts to reach an arrangement with the European Economic Community (EEC) encountered repeated setbacks which clearly demonstrated the limits of the country's freedom of manoeuvre. And Austria's efforts to make an appropriate contribution towards the process of European integration regularly encountered resistance from the Soviet leadership. These signals from Moscow had their effect on several of our friends in the west of the Continent. As a consequence only our purely trading interests were able to be guaranteed through the creation in 1960 of the European Free Trade Association (Efta).

Just how closely Austria's position was linked to geo-political framework conditions in the vital question of European integration was demonstrated on one final occasion in 1989 – only a few months before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the demolition of the Berlin Wall. The then Belgian foreign minister seriously suggested, when Austria deposited its application for EC membership, that the Community should first of all discuss the matter with the Soviet Union.

Even Bruno Kreisky was still deeply influenced in 1988 by the existing circumstances of the East-West conflict. In the 2nd volume of his memoirs he wrote about the debate on a possible EC membership for Austria: *“We lie in the middle of Europe and have to acknowledge that the Second World War created power situations which we cannot unilaterally ignore.”*²

Neutrality, not neutralism

From the point of view of security policy Austria's possible range of action was clearly delineated: the Neutrality Law of 26 October 1955 obliged Austria to observe a strict freedom from alliances. The core elements of neutrality are clearly laid down: no participation in wars, no accession to military alliances, and no toleration of military bases for foreign countries.

However, Austria never pursued a policy of ideological neutralism. It is well known that Federal Chancellor Julius Raab had made it indisputably plain when the Neutrality Law was being debated that our country would not accept any obligation to “ideological neutrality”. In all these years Austria has always seen itself as member of a pluralist-democratic circle of states and has been accepted as such by the community of nations.

As early as 1953, when large areas of the country were still under Soviet occupation, Leopold Figl described Austria as “the easternmost outpost of the free world”. These were by no means empty words. In the times of great crisis which rocked the Soviet block in 1956 and 1968, as well as at the beginning of the '80s, Austria was the gateway to freedom for hundreds of thousands of refugees from Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia and Poland.

These events and Austria's reaction to them put our foreign policy in a completely different light from that in which they were seen by international observers in 1955. In that year the *Manchester Guardian* wrote:

*If Austria gets its well-deserved independence then this is because Austria is of no significance to anyone as an ally nor of danger as an opponent. Austria can swim around in the middle of Europe as a neutral country because Austria, wherever it swims, will not seriously upset the balance of power.*³

The active '70s

Austria proved very clearly in the '70s that it would not rest satisfied with the role of an aimless swimmer and quite intentionally pursued international objectives. Those were the years during which Austria was accorded specific respect thanks to Bruno Kreisky's foreign policy in the Middle East. His 1975 meeting with Yassir Arafat in Vienna demonstrated the necessity for recognising the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian yearning for a separate state, so that peace could be achieved in the long run.

The '70s were also the years during which Austria assumed more importance in the United Nations as expressed variously by the appointment in 1971 of Kurt Waldheim as the UN Secretary-General, by Austria's first term (1973/74) on the Security Council, or by the opening of the Vienna International Centre in 1979.

Austria also played a key role as a member of the Neutral and Non-Aligned group in the whole CSCE (now OSCE) process of détente as well as as an international meeting-place during the '70s. Looking back one can say that Austria's commitment to the Helsinki process was perhaps the most important contribution towards European neighbourhood policy. The circumstances of the Cold War made pursuance of the already-mentioned 1945 aim of living in “*undisturbed friendship with the peoples of the Danube region*” only possible through persistent devotion to the details of the CSCE Helsinki Final Act. Today, 30 years after the signing in 1975, we have come to realize the disruptive force of the principles established at that time – from the observance of human rights to the peaceful adjustment of frontiers. The Helsinki Final Act, as the international framework for whole generations of dissidents in eastern Europe, made an historical contribution to the inner decay of Communism.

In this connection one should not overlook the active role played by Austrian intellectuals and the media – such as the *Europäische Rundschau* – which, by maintaining a critical dialogue, supported dissidents in Communist-governed countries and furthered the growth of civil society in those countries.

When Austria in 1980 was celebrating the 25th anniversary of the State Treaty no one imagined how close the complete remodelling of Europe was. All the same the British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington remarked optimistically – and prophetically – in *Europäische Rundschau*:

I hope, and I believe, the next twenty-five years will be marked by a still greater mutual understanding between the peoples of Europe – specifically between all those in a greater Europe who will benefit from the links provided by a joint culture and a joint heritage. As we know in Great Britain very well, we can rely on the Austrian people to participate fully in this progress.⁴

Carrington presumably did not know how quickly he would prove to be right: only seven years later Austria set out to get in on the joint European project, at the initiative of a particularly far-sighted Austrian politician, Alois Mock. As early as 1987 (two years before the end of the “east block”) Mock campaigned for the entry of Austria to what was then the European Community because he realized that for Austria the time had come to take a decisive step towards a joint Europe. After years of working to convince his own party, the coalition partner and the population, no less than 66.6% of the population voted on 12 June 1994 in favour of joining the European Union.

The EU accession on 1 January 1995 led to a fundamental change in the pattern of Austrian foreign policy. It was only with its membership of the European Union that Austria was given the opportunity, in the true sense of the word, to “make something out of its freedom”. And for this reason, as I see it, 12 June 1994 is a date in the history of the Second Republic which deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as 15 May 1955.

Inseparably connected with this date is 1 May 2004. This was the day on which the expansion of the European Union marked the re-unification of Europe that we had actively promoted from the very start – after all, the substantial negotiations on accession began in November 1998 under Wolfgang Schüssel who was then the EU-President. Thanks to the accession of our neighbouring countries Austria has been brought closer to realisation of its long-standing foreign policy tenet – the development of a genuine partnership in Central Europe – than the provisional government of 1945 ever dreamed would be possible.

Priorities for the future

The coalescence of Central Europe through the 1 May 2004 extension represents a unique chance for Austria that we want to utilize by actively developing and deepening regional partnership with our neighbours in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Poland. The same applies to our targeted cooperation with other important neighbours and many small and medium-sized EU-countries in the west, north and south of Europe. The Europe of today and of tomorrow needs the awareness that the voices of these countries are not only indispensable but also carry weight. Austria’s second Presidency of the EU (in 2006) calls for an enormous amount of work. It also offers the opportunity, though, of making this involvement convincingly visible at the centre of EU activities.

Our partnership in Central Europe already proved its worth during discussions on the European Convention. Together with the Regional Partners we managed to draw attention within the common European foreign policy to our joint positions regarding the future of the west Balkans and Ukraine.

During the past fifty years Austria’s foreign policy has established a clear profile through its engagement for peace and democratisation in the world, and it is a prior-

ity task today to demonstrate this profile in the light of changing conditions as well as to fine-tune it further in the future.

The fact that both the OSCE and the United Nations have official seats in Vienna is both a distinction and a mandate for Austria. Within the OSCE Austria makes a point of supporting the young democracies in Europe, for example by despatching election observers to such important polls as those in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. The presidential election in Ukraine is ample proof of the importance of independent OSCE election observers.

The United Nations is urgently confronted with the difficult task of adapting its structures, created at the end of the Second World War, to the challenges of the present day. The United Nations Office at Vienna is particularly well situated in this respect and has the chance of becoming a genuine "Security Centre": the UNODC (United Nations Office for Drug-Control and Crime Prevention), IMOLIN (Information Network for Money Laundering), the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), and CTBTO (Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organisation) are precisely those bodies, situated in Vienna, which are employed in current security matters. The network of seismographic observation centres, coordinated by the CTBTO in Vienna, could in future provide an important contribution towards a world-wide flood-wave early-warning system.

As far as the European Union is concerned the first ten years of our membership were like an apprenticeship, and it was not always easy to make our interests effectively heard. Today Austria has found its place in Europe: as an active member in the formation of a peaceful Europe. Our know-how is recognized, especially regarding peace operations but also in the field of democratisation and in the economic and administrative consolidation of the young democracies in central and eastern Europe.

For Austria the realm of peace policy embraces a "Dialogue of Civilisations" which is intended to improve understanding for everything that is foreign and different. Inculcating a respect for this in everyday life will in future be one of the most important bases for the maintenance of peace. In an age of multi-identities and increased mobility the demand for practical models of successful and respectful coexistence will further increase.

Respect for the other person can only function on the basis of joint allegiance to human rights. We have therefore, from the very beginning, been in favour of including the Catalogue of Basic Rights in the European convention. The European Union has thus finally taken a decisive step towards a genuine community of values. The European Human Rights Agency, which should be set up in Vienna, is likewise a witness to this community of values.

As far as the geographic orientation of our foreign policy is concerned one region is clearly at the focal point: the western Balkans. The positive development of this part of Europe is of immediate interest to Austria, and we will, with complete conviction, apply ourselves to the integration into Europe of this neighbour region. Ever since the disintegration of Yugoslavia Austria has been represented in the countries of the western Balkans with peace-keeping forces and with high-ranking representatives of various international organizations.

Austrian business is also very active in the countries of south-east Europe. Austrian companies not only make good use of market opportunities, they also contribute to the economic improvement of the region through their activities.

In the globalisation age neighbourhood is not only a question of geographical proximity. The tsunami catastrophe of 26 December 2004 made us painfully aware of how closely intertwined today's world is. Mobility – as well as the awareness of joint vulnerability and responsibility – has turned distant countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand into neighbours.

In recent years Austrian women and men have shown, again and again, that our solidarity also applies to those parts of the world living on the shadow side and whose lives are endangered by wars, poverty and sickness. This solidarity is accepted by the federal government as a model for Austrian development policy.

The framework within which we operate today is a globalized world, with globalized opportunities but also with globalized problems. We cannot benefit from these opportunities on our own, nor can we solve the problems alone. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the EU extensions in 1995 and 2004 have enormously increased our freedom, namely the freedom for something. In this sense it is fitting that, as a recognized partner in the European Union and in the world, we should utilize our freedom through a new form of neighbourly application and solidarity.

Looking back over 50 years of foreign policy one thing becomes clearly obvious: we have always made the most of our freedom at times when we were united at home and pursued our goals jointly. In this way it was not only possible to survive the shadows of war, tyranny and destruction but also to make a contribution towards accepting and clarifying painful responsibilities for our past, such as for forced labourers and those deprived of their rights.

The rebirth of Austria 60 years ago, the State Treaty 50 years ago and accession to the European Union 10 years ago – all these occasions in the present jubilee year demonstrate what is possible if Austria defends its interests in a spirit of unity. In this respect we not only regard 15 May 1955 as a unique historical event but we also derive strength from it and a sense of responsibility for a common future in peace and freedom.

*We consider mankind to be free:
but its freedom is only real and concrete
to the extent that is determined to pursue a goal
and that it takes pains to introduce changes in the world.
(Simone de Beauvoir)*

¹ Government Declaration of 7 April 1945, published in Staatsgesetzblatt No.1 of 1 May 1945.

² Bruno Kreisky, *Im Strom der Politik*, Vienna 1988.

³ Leading article in the *Manchester Guardian* of 30 April 1955; here translated back from the German original

⁴ Back translation from the German version