

IFRI'S TUESDAYS IN BRUSSELS



From Balkans to Turkey: An Austrian Perspective on the European Enlargement

Robert WEISS

1st Secretary, Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU

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An Austrian outlook

Austria has a unique perspective on the enlargement process. Given that it joined the European Union in 1995 and participated in the negotiations with accession candidates from 1998, it has experience with both sides of the process. In order to present the Austrian vision on the last accession candidates, Robert Weiss reminded us that the geographical situation plays an important role in the position that a member state might take on a candidate country. A common border for example often means a common history, better knowledge of the country and of course special interests.

In general, the enlargement policy is a "win-win situation". Indeed, it widens the EU influence in the world, spreads its values and develops the European market. On the other hand, future member states assert their international position by being part of the European Union. They also receive help to build their own institutions and sometimes stabilize their democracy. The last enlargement managed to create a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as it brought stability.

In October 2005, the EU began ambitious negotiations with Croatia and Turkey. Robert Weiss tried and answered two key questions in his presentation: What are the particularities of this next enlargement process? What are the main subjects discussed in the Council?

A new framework for negotiations

While the aim of this enlargement is quite comparable to the precedent, the framework is different. First, accession candidates are asked to fulfil two benchmarks, an opening benchmark and a closing one, which are an imperative condition for accession. The opening benchmark did not exist before. Then, there is a suspension clause, which allows the European Union to suspend the negotiations any violation of democratic values or human rights should occur during the process. Last but not least, there is no fixed date for the accession: It is an open end date process.

The European Union is negotiating with two very different candidates.

The geographical situation of Croatia and Turkey cannot be compared: One is a relatively small country, the other is much bigger and with only a small part of its territory in Europe. Furthermore, Turkey has a very influential power with certain principles not always compatible with the European values. The maturity of their institutions also differs very widely: While Croatia is still developing its own institutions, Turkey has been a strong nation-state for a very long time.

A general approach to the discussions in the Council

Robert Weiss, who is the Austrian representative in the Enlargement working group of the Council presented the main subjects discussed in the Council. In the case of Turkey accession, it seems that the arguments can be summarized in two points. First, according to Turkey advocates, the External Policy Dimension is crucial. The accession of this country would strengthen the European defence and security, as well as it would help diversify energy supply. Some describe Turkey as a bridge to the Middle East. The arguments against it concern Internal Policy, such as the organisation of the EU with Turkey as a member, or for example the future of Common Agriculture Policy. With the fulfilment of the benchmarks, Turkey and the EU will certainly reach a strong cooperation. To Austria, the best outcome would be a "EU-Turkey community", a special partnership, but not necessarily an accession as a full member.

Croatia seems to be coping with the regular framework; that explains why the Commission thinks it might be possible for the negotiations to end in 2009, as mentioned by Mr. Barroso and Mr. Rehn. Croatia still needs to implement some painful reforms, that

is why its government has to focus on its political will and should convince the population that the reforms are done in order to make an early entrance in the EU possible. Mr. Weiss observed that the Croatia accession could be an important signal for the Western Balkans, that are now in the stabilisation association process. It shows that the EU keeps its commitments when the candidate implements the reforms.

The presentation was followed by an interesting debate with the audience. Several questions were asked to Mr. Weiss: About Austrian public opinion on the adhesion of Croatia and Turkey or about the French presidency of the European Union, but most of them concerned the sensitive question of Turkish adhesion.