



Österreichische Gesellschaft
für Europapolitik



Austria and the EU's joint COVID-19 vaccine strategy - Between solidarity and national activism



Narratives travelling the information space

Chronology

It was March 12, 2021 when the Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz informed the Austrian public about alleged irregularities in the joint European Union (EU) vaccine procurement in a surprise press conference.¹ Kurz claimed that the delivery of vaccine doses to member states did not take place on per capita basis and according to the decision taken in the European Council. Rather, in the "EU

Steering Committee" (which discusses and reviews all aspects of the Advanced Purchase Agreement contracts before signature), separate agreements between health officials and pharmaceutical companies would have been reached, which ensured that Malta or Denmark, for example, received far more vaccine doses than did other countries, such as Austria or Bulgaria, who would fall behind.

Kurz said that it was time to put a stop to this "vaccine bazaar", to disclose secret contracts and to achieve an equal and fair distribution of vaccines - as defined in the EU's joint procurement strategy. The statements of the Austrian chancellor were the preliminary climax in the Austrian debate on the success and efficiency of the common vaccine strategy, presented by the European Commission on June 17, 2020.²

Looking back

For a long time, the joint EU vaccine procurement was not a big issue in the domestic political debate in Austria. The fact that vaccines could make a significant contribution to ending the pandemic was undisputed across all parties. Likewise, that an independent scientific assessment and safety requirements should be a prerequisite for EU market authorization. At most, it was discussed - and above all by the oppositional Freedom Party (FPÖ) - that vaccination should be voluntary in any case and never compulsory. The FPÖ though raised accusations that the government intended to undermine democratic standards by dictating compulsory COVID tests and vaccinations and to establish a two-class society of vaccinated and non-vaccinated citizens.

When the news of the approval of the Sputnik V vaccine in Russia was announced in August 2020, it was met with overall skepticism. Health Minister Rudolf Anschober (Greens) emphasized that "safety and quality" had priority and that approval by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) was needed. The leader of the Russia-friendly FPÖ also criticized Moscow for "not adhering to international procedures for the development and approval of vaccines".³

Towards the end of 2020, when the first vaccine approvals came into sight in the EU, the joint vaccine procurement again gained

public attention. The government, formed by the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens - depicted the vaccination as a game changer and praised European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen repeatedly for the joint procurement initiative⁴, an assessment that was shared also by the oppositional Social Democrats (SPÖ) and New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS).

not to be realistic, the inadequate supply of vaccines and ambiguities in the domestic vaccination strategy caused anger and frustration. While in Israel, the United Kingdom and the USA large quantities of vaccines were available, the EU lacked behind and the EMA was urged to speed up its procedures. Reports of delivery cuts and production bottlenecks among vaccine manufacturers caused further uncertainty.

Key narrative

The EU Commission's joint vaccine procurement initiative is a positive step

In a nation-wide survey from January 2021, 62% of respondents did not believe the federal government had prepared and implemented the vaccination process "well".

On the eve of the EU summit on January 21, 2021, Chancellor Kurz - together with the heads of government of Greece, Denmark and the Czech Republic - called in a letter to EU Council President Charles Michel that "the European Council should send a strong signal to the European Medicines Agency to ensure that the approval process for vaccine candidates (...) is as efficient

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1 <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/bundeskanzleramt/nachrichten-der-bundesregierung/2021/03/bundeskanzler-kurz-poche-auf-gerechte-auslieferung-der-impfstoffe-in-der-eu.html>

2 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1597339415327&uri=CELEX:52020DC0245>

3 https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20200812OTS0027/fpoe-hofer-klares-nein-zu-corona-impfpflicht

4 <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/bundeskanzleramt/nachrichten-der-bundesregierung/2020/bundeskanzler-kurz-impfung-ist-die-chance-die-pandemie-zu-besiegen.html>

5 https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20201124OTS0172/fpoe-kickl-impfkampagne-ist-schwarz-gruener-masterplan-fuer-zwangstestungen-und-zwangsimpfungen

as possible.⁶ A move that was described as “populist” by the SPÖ and NEOS who claimed that it was not the EU but the government that failed in vaccination management and did not order enough doses. A view that was shared by a majority of Austrians: in a nation-wide survey only 29 percent of respondents said that the federal government had prepared and implemented the vaccination process “well”, while 62 percent did not agree on this.⁷

Key narrative

The EU should be more assertive to get enough vaccines.

The FPÖ in turn demanded the disclosure of contracts and accused vaccine producers of collusion, profit maximization and enrichment. The party claimed that compared to the USA, the EU was inactive in the procurement of vaccines and had not been careful enough when negotiating the contracts with pharmaceutical companies. In short, the “EU bureaucracy” had failed,

as had the Minister of Health and the Austrian Special Representative for the corona management and Co-Chair of the Steering Committee for the control and monitoring of the procurement of vaccines in the EU, Clemens Martin Auer.⁸

Key narrative

The EU bureaucracy has failed.

With the increasing shortage of vaccines, due to production bottlenecks and thus the failure of AstraZeneca to deliver on time, the topic of “Sputnik V” was brought up in the public debate again. After reports of its high efficacy became public, the FPÖ called for the Russian vaccine to be included in the national vaccination program, following the example of Hungary, but other parties also suggested that this should be considered if the vaccine should be approved across the EU. Chancellor Kurz joined in stating that there should be “no taboos” and called Russia’s President Vladimir Putin in order to expand the range of vaccines. This was also the purpose of rising talks between Austria,

Israel and Denmark with the goal of a foundation aimed at setting up a joint vaccine production. A potential further vaccine production in Austria explicitly should not exclude Chinese and Russian vaccines, according to Chancellor Kurz.⁹ An interesting move as the wish for getting a jab of Chinese or Russian origin ranked very low in Austrians’ minds, as GLOBSEC data show.¹⁰

Key narrative

Sputnik V should not be a taboo.

This increasingly tense debate was interrupted by the promise of the European Commission to provide the Austrian district of Schwaz (Tyrol), that was particularly affected by the South African virus mutation, with an early delivery of 100,000 doses of the BioNTech Pfizer vaccine, a decision which received high media attention and was claimed by the government as a great negotiation success.¹¹

The procurement “bazaar” and its „black box“

The EU dimension

Despite these positive signs, a few days later Chancellor Kurz raised the topic of an unfair vaccine distribution across the Union. The chancellor demanded a correction mechanism in the distribution of vaccines and showed incomprehension that the EU already exported 70 million vaccine doses abroad, but did not receive any from outside the EU. At the EU level, the Austrian chancellor’s criticism was met with ambivalence: while the heads of government of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Latvia and Slovenia supported Austria’s position, other member states such as Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden were critical of the Austrian advance and stated that the

desire for additional vaccine doses was not based on solidarity but should only divert attention from Vienna’s own failings in health management.

After an alleged veto threat – denied though by the Austrian government – against the ordering of additional vaccine doses, Austria accepted the Union’s final decision to procure 10 million doses to be frontloaded among the member states with an additional focus on five member countries with particularly low vaccination rates (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia), although this did not reflect Austria’s original intentions. The Austrian government also refrained from participating in this correction mechanism.

The national dimension

After the chancellor had suspected secret agreements in the EU Steering Committee, it finally became clear that Austria had relied more than other countries on the AstraZeneca vaccine, which now was not delivered as reliable as expected, and had abstained from purchasing 100,000 BioNTech Pfizer doses. Governments themselves had decided to adapt the per capita distribution system according to their national preferences. No one wanted to take political responsibility but Austria’s representative in the Steering Committee, Clemens Martin Auer, was to be a scapegoat and had to resign from this position, as well as from that of the Austrian vaccination coordinator.

In the domestic political debate this decision led to some political turmoil: While the opposition accused the chancellor of isolating the country at the European level and shifting responsibility for his own failures to a “minor” civil servant, Auer’s dismissal also felt like a disavowal of the Green health minister who then resigned one month later. In addition, the opposition accused the government that it had only earmarked a budget of 200 million euros for the procurement of vaccines, which the Ministry of Finance denied though.

The ÖVP now made the vaccine a top priority for the chancellor. At the end of March, Kurz announced that Austria was negotiating 1 million doses of Sputnik V and that the first deliveries could arrive as early as April 2021.¹² In addition, the

early delivery of 50 million BioNTech Pfizer vaccine doses to the EU agreed by the European Commission was claimed by the governmental party as a success of the chancellor’s engagement at the EU level.¹³ Kurz also signaled that Austrian vaccine doses would be given to the Czech Republic (that also had criticized the EU distribution mechanism) and subsequently to the countries of the Western Balkans.

Key narrative

We do not want to rely on the EU in procuring vaccines.

With an increasing vaccine delivery and vaccination rate, the discussion of the joint vaccine procurement lost public attention again. In the end the Sputnik vaccine was not delivered, as the new Minister of Health insisted that the EMA’s approval would be a prerequisite while the chancellor answered a parliamentary enquiry that the Sputnik procurement did not fall within his responsibility. The foundation for a joint vaccine production with Israel and Denmark is still waiting to be implemented.¹⁴

The role of the media

The debate about the EU’s joint vaccine strategy and procurement was also reflected in the domestic media landscape. Particularly in the initial phase of the spread of the corona virus, the measures to contain the pandemic found broad media support. Irrespective of their ideological and political orientation, Austrian media reiterated the government’s calls to stay together to fight the pandemic and showed understanding for the necessity to temporarily restrict individual and democratic freedoms. As the pandemic continued, however, criticism of excessive measures and fines against individual citizens or restrictions imposed against specific regions increased. In addition, liberal media – traditionally critical of the ÖVP led by Sebastian Kurz (such as the newspapers Der Standard, Falter) – took the opportunity to combine their criticism of the corona measures with criticism of the chancellor.



Sebastian Kurz trifft den Impfnationalismus auf die Spitze, um von eigenen Fehlern abzulenken. Ohne Rücksicht auf die Europäische Union – und die Wahrheit
(Robin Kurz: Sebastian Kurz takes vaccination nationalism to extremes in order to distract from his own mistakes. Regardless of the European Union – and the truth)
<https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20210323/robin-kurz>

The private television broadcaster SERVUS

TV of the Austrian billionaire and Red Bull

⁶ <https://www.sn.at/politik/weltpolitik/kurz-fordert-vor-eu-gipfel-rasche-impfstoffzulassung-98661805>

⁷ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210130OTS004/atv-frage-der-woche-fetzen-im-semesterzeugnis-62-der-oesterreicherinnen-mit-impfmanagement-unzufrieden

⁸ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210129OTS0094/fpoer-hofer-eu-schaltet-nach-selbst-verschuldeter-impf-pleite-in-den-panik-modus

⁹ <https://orf.at/stories/3200503/>

¹⁰ <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2021/>

¹¹ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210303OTS0166/bk-kurz-und-lh-platter-eu-stellt-100000-impfstoffe-fuer-durchimpfung-des-bezirksschwaz-zur-verfuegung

¹² <https://orf.at/stories/3207457/>

¹³ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210416OTS0092/vp-gesundheitssprecherin-schwarz-pfizer-bestaeigt-erfolgreichen-einsatz-unseres-bundeskanzlers-fuer-mehr-impfdosen

¹⁴ <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000128636445/was-aus-kurz-ruf-nach-einer-eigenproduktion-von-corona-impfstoffen>

founder Dietrich Mateschitz positioned itself as the mouthpiece of the corona skeptics ("Querdenker"), criticizing the measures imposed as well as the effectiveness and safety of vaccines¹⁵ and questioning the danger of the virus in general.¹⁶ The broadcaster launched also a special talk series ("Corona Quartett") in which amongst others, a prominent corona skeptic, Sucharit Bhakdi, was a regular guest who, due to antisemitic statements, later was banned from the screen. Also in the past, SERVUS TV had already seen itself as an opposite pole to public broadcasters, and assumed a rather critical position towards the EU.

The difficulties in successfully managing the joint vaccine procurement and the allegation of a vaccine bazaar were widely discussed in Austrian media. While quality media critically commented the setbacks in vaccine supply, they defended the Union against claims that a national procurement would have proven more efficient. News of an unfair distribution of vaccines were met with skepticism: Depending on their attitude towards the Chancellor's political party, the credibility of the Austrian position was called into question.¹⁷

The largest tabloid media (Kronen Zeitung, ÖSTERREICH and, to a lesser extent, HEUTE) - generally pursuing an EU-skeptical editorial line - also took a critical position on the issue of delayed vaccine procurement, which increased even further with the accusation of a Brussels blackbox. The headline of the Kronen Zeitung "EU versagt völlig beim Impfstoff" ("EU fails completely with vaccines")¹⁸ is just one example of how this topic was campaigned and dominated the line of tabloid papers for the next days and weeks. As on previous occasions tabloid media pictured the EU as bureaucratic, aloof and incompetent that would let Austria down. In contrast, the picture of the Federal Chancellor fighting for Austrian interests was drawn, which was emphasized by pithy headlines, images, quotes and interviews. The "proactive" role of the chancellor has also regularly been depicted in Germany's largest tabloid paper BILD that on March 1, 2021 came up with the headline "Chancellor Kurz breaks with EU losers".¹⁹



Servus TV, 20.09.2020
(Corona: Nur Fehlalarm? – ein Talk Spezial mit Prof. Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi (Corona: Just a false alarm? – a Talk Special with Prof. Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi))

Ungleiche Aufteilung, wie am Basar verschachert EU versagt völlig beim Impfstoff



15 <https://www.servustv.com/aktuelles/v/aa-25tgf38u91w12/>

16 <https://www.servustv.com/aktuelles/v/aa-25fuzpcws2112/>

17 www.falter.at/zeitung/20210323/robin-kurz

18 Kronen Zeitung, March 13, 2021

19 www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/impfstoff-debakel-oesterreichs-kanzler-kurz-bricht-mit-eu-versagern-75583084,view=conversionToLogin.bild.html

Even in times of a pandemic, the Austrian media remain true to their traditional ideological and political editorial line when it comes to reporting on domestic politics and the EU. Quality media have sought to paint a rather balanced picture on the joint vaccine procurement and distribution. Depending on their political orientation, however, this was sometimes associated with very sharp criticism of the government.

The tabloid media, on the other hand, took the challenges of the pandemic as an opportunity to express their skeptical stance towards the EU and present the Austrian Chancellor as the guardian of domestic interests. Hope of renewed benefits from government advertisement might have played some role in this.

Bild
BILDPLUS
WETTER 25°C
DÜSSELDORF
TV-SENDER
EPAPER
KONTAKT
ZEITUNGSABO
BILD SHOP
LOGIN

STARTSEITE NEWS POLITIK GELD REGIO UNTERHALTUNG SPORT FUSSBALL LIFESTYLE RATGEBER AUTO DIGITAL SPIELE VIDEO
06.03.2021 10:52 UHR HOME > POLITIK > AUSLAND > IMPFSTOFF-DEBAKEL – ÖSTERREICHSCHE KANZLER KURZ BRICHT MIT EU-VERSAGERN

WEGEN IMPFSTOFF-DEBAKEL Kanzler Kurz bricht mit EU-Versagern

...und will eine eigene Impfstoff-Produktion mit Israel und Dänemark

VON: PAUL RONZHEIMER
01.03.2021 - 22:00 Uhr

Sebastian Kurz ist der Geduldssoden gerissen!

ÖSTERREICHSCHE KANZLER BRICHT MIT DEN IMPF-VERSAGERN DER EU UND ARBEITET GEMEINSAM MIT DÄNEMARK UND ISRAEL AN EINER EIGENEN IMPFSTOFF-PRODUKTION.

Bild.de, 01.03.2021
Kanzler Kurz bricht mit EU-Versagern
(Chancellor Kurz breaks with EU losers)

Summary

The fact that Austria managed to cope relatively well with the first corona waves motivated the government – and especially the federal chancellor – to position itself together with Israel and other countries as pioneers or "first mover" in the pandemic. Due to the sharp rise in the number of infections in autumn/winter 2020/21, rising domestic political criticism of the government's corona management and the sluggish progress in vaccination, this position increasingly came under pressure.

The discontent was channeled to a large extent by the FPÖ, which accused the government of authoritarianism, sharply criticized its economic and health measures and, after initial reluctance, brought the EU into the crossfire. The other two oppositional parties, the Social Democrats and the liberal NEOS, on the other hand, mostly defended the joint EU approach and blamed the government for mishandling the pandemic at home.

Public opinion was not left unaffected by this and trust in the government's crisis management received increasingly bad marks. In order to counter this criticism, the ÖVP in particular felt compelled to demonstrate strength (e.g. by criticizing an unfair vaccine allocation within the

EU and the search for new international partnerships) and to make the vaccination management the chancellor's top priority, which in turn led to conflict with the green coalition partner.

Although Chancellor Kurz always emphasized that his criticism did not refer to the EU's vaccine strategy and to Commission President von der Leyen, this was the way it was perceived publicly by many in Austria. In February 2021, only 37 percent of Austrians said in an ÖGF survey

that the joint vaccine procurement had been a good decision, whereas 42 percent answered that it had been better if each member country had ordered vaccines by itself.²⁰ GLOBSEC data (March 2021) show that only 36 percent of Austrians wanted the European Union "to deal with the negotiation on buying the vaccines for us instead of our country's government" while 59 percent preferred that their national government should handle the procurement of vaccines on its own.²¹

The attitudes of Austrian political parties towards the EU follow familiar patterns even during the pandemic. While the Greens, NEOS and also the SPÖ mostly show a pro-European approach, the conservative ÖVP more often takes an

EU-critical line and seeks to establish its own strong profile, i.e. by forging new alliances with other small and medium-sized member states, a stance that had been visible in recent years also on the issues of migration and the multiannual EU financial framework. With a tough position on migration, finances and the distribution of competences between the national and EU level, the Conservatives also strive to address potential voters, e.g. of the traditionally EU-skeptical FPÖ.

After the financial and migration crisis and the rise of nationalistic and populistic movements, it is now the pandemic that has shown once more that there is a dire need for more open discussion on the EU in Austria. All political and societal actors should be aware that the current debate on the future of Europe can only prove successful if the ongoing polarization is met with more citizens' involvement, open dialogue and the search for a new European momentum.



Narratives travelling the information space