

LESSONS OF THE AUSTRIA DEBACLE

Brussels, September 15, 2000

The 14 abruptly stopped diplomatic sanctions against Austria following publication on September 8 of the "Wise Men's" report on Austria's political health. Leading EPP figures are determined that the right lessons should be learned from the debacle. ++ In Spain, 20 people have been arrested in a crackdown on Basque terrorism. ++ Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Party has announced it will leave the Liberal International and applying to the EPP. ++ Vojislav KOSTUNICA, joint candidate of the anti-MILOSEVIC opposition in the Serbian presidential elections, was injured by a mob in Kosovo.

WISE MEN ENDORSE EPP REPORT



The EU "Wise Men's" report released on September 8 gave a clean bill of health to the Austrian People's Party's government coalition with the Freedom Party (FPÖ). The report says plainly that the sanctions risked becoming counter-productive and should end. It concludes that the Austrian government is committed to common European values, and has as good a record - or better - on the treatment of minorities, refugees, and immigrants. The Wise Men's report endorses the [June EPP report](#) commissioned after demands by three members parties that the Austrian People's Party (OeVP) should be expelled because of their controversial coalition.

Austrian Foreign Minister Benita FERRERO-WALDNER and Chancellor Wolfgang SCHÜSSEL (*pictured above left*) welcomed the decision as "a victory for reason - a victory for the EU."

The measures taken by the 14 had been "useful", said a joint statement released in Paris by the French presidency of the European Union. But it said "special vigilance" would be maintained on the FPÖ and its influence on government policy.

This formulation was widely interpreted as a face-saving formula for France, which -along with Belgium - had shown most enthusiasm for the boycott.

Sanctions had threatened to clog up the day-to-day working of the Union, and possibly to block essential reforms ahead of enlargement. The affair also raised issues which are especially delicate in smaller and candidate EU countries - not least in Denmark, which holds a referendum on the euro on September 28.

There has been a widespread feeling that none of the major countries would have been subjected to such immediate and damaging treatment. [Ursula STENZEL](#), leader of the OeVP delegation in the European Parliament, said the measures taken by the 14 had "badly disconcerted" applicant countries.

The end of sanctions also means the cancellation of the Austrian government's plan for a non-binding "ask-the-people" referendum next month, to mobilise public support against the sanctions. This risked further hardening of entrenched positions.

NO MORE "SHOOTING FROM THE HIP"



Although it was not widely understood - least of all in Austria - the sanctions were bilateral, not an action by "Europe". The EPP supports a clear mechanism for dealing with countries deemed to be straying from European values. Ursula Stenzel (*right*) said a common agreement was needed on "a legal procedure which prevents this kind of shooting-from-the-hip in future." This was important to all Member States, as well as to applicant countries, she said.



Calling for change to Article 7 For Agriculture Commissioner Franz FISCHLER (*left*), it was now "up to the Commission" to translate into action the Wise Men's recommendation of changes to Article 7 of the Treaty. (Art. 7 states that the Union is based on freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and basic freedoms). Such a change would "make sure that no country is again punished outside the institutional framework."

The 39-page report - by Martti AHTISAARI, former president of Finland, Marcelino OREJA, former Spanish foreign minister, and Jürgen FROWEIN, a German legal expert - goes into some detail on this issue. It calls for "the development of an EU mechanism to monitor and evaluate the commitment and performance of individual Member States with respect to the common European values," and for "a preventive and monitoring procedure" to be included in Article 7. This would allow for "an open and non-confrontational dialogue" with the Member State concerned. There should also be information and education campaigns to combat discrimination and xenophobia. It proposes a Human Rights Office reporting to the European Council, and the establishment of a fully-fledged EU Human Rights Agency.

WISE MEN'S RESERVATION ON FPOe

The report is critical of only one minister, FPOe Justice Minister Dieter BÖHMDORFER. But it says the FPOe has remained "a right-wing populist party with extremist expressions" since it joined government. It is also critical of the "ambiguous language" used by the party, and expresses "very serious concern" about FPOe leaders' "attempts to silence or even to criminalise political opponents," inter alia by constant libel actions. These had produced "a chilling effect" on the political debate. But the report says that sanctions, while heightening awareness of common European values, had stirred up nationalist feelings in Austria, being "sometimes wrongly understood as sanctions against Austrian citizens." (The Liberal-led Belgian government was notably keen on its citizens cancelling holidays in Austria, and discouraging such contacts as school exchanges.)

ETA FRONT-ORGANISATION SMASHED

Spanish Civil Guards arrested 20 people and raided politicians' offices and private homes in Madrid and the Basque region on September 9 in an operation which the Interior Ministry said had "practically dismantled" the EKIN group, a grass-roots coordinator of Basque pro-independence groups with close ties to the ETA terrorist



movement.

ETA is responsible for some 800 deaths since it began its campaign 30 years ago: EKIN is accused of complicity with terrorism, raising money, and helping to organise street violence.

In brief...

Liberal International Secretary-general Jan WEIJERS confirmed press reports that Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Party, in government with the EPP party MDF - Hungarian Democratic Forum, had expressed its "unequivocal intention" of leaving the Liberals to join the EPP. Pro-European sentiment in Hungary was confirmed by a joint statement of the six Hungarian parliamentary parties reaffirming their commitment to Hungary concluding its preparations for EU membership by the end of 2002.

Campaigning in Kosovo on September 14, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia presidential candidate Vojislav KOSTUNICA (*right*) and other DOS leaders were pelted with rocks, eggs, apples and tomatoes by supporters bussed in by Yugoslav President Slobodan MILOSEVIC. Kostunica was hit under the right eye and on the leg. "Slobodan Milosevic is the biggest traitor of the Serbian people," he told the crowd. "Let him come and look the people into their eyes. You raised a hand against a section of the people. He made you do it." Stressing that he came to convey Patriarch PAVLE's message of peace among the Serbs, Kostunica said: "The Lord will forgive you, but not him." Milosevic - well behind in the polls - has branded his opponent a stooge of the West. His campaign video features a beautiful woman in a field of corn singing My Serbia. The open question is whether he will respect the election results. The polls are on September 24.

