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MEPs in national parliaments: bringing the EU closer to home?

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MEPs in national parliaments: bringing the EU closer to home?

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In *May 2015*, the Austrian Nationalrat decided to allow Austrian members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to speak in specific plenary debates in the Austrian Parliament. This measure, supported by all parties except the FPÖ and Team Stronach, aimed at achieving closer cooperation between national and European MPs, at greater transparency for European Union (EU) decisions and, most importantly, at bringing the EU closer to both the Austrian people and the Austrian Parliament. With this decision, the Austrian Parliament joined the small group of national parliaments that encourage the participation of MEPs in their domestic plenary debates. In this research note, Austrian high school student Chiara Valentin explores speeches by MEPs in the national parliaments of Austria and the Netherlands and investigates to what extent this practice can achieve its aims.

In most EU member states, MEPs may engage in parliamentary EU affairs at home. However, such an engagement is usually limited to the

participation in committee meetings, either by simply attending or with a formal right to speak but not to vote (Table I).

Table I. MEP participation in parliamentary committee meetings

Country	Chamber	Committee	Country	Chamber	Committee
AUT	Nationalrat	Speak	HR	Hrvatski Sabor	Attend
AUT	Bundesrat	Speak*	HU	Országgyűlés	Speak
BE	Chambre des Représentants	Speak	IE	Dáil Éireann	Attend
BE	Sénat	Attend	IE	Seanad Éireann	Attend
BG	Narodno Sabranie	Attend	IT	Camera dei Deputati	Speak
CY	House of Representatives	Speak	IT	Senato	Guest Expert
CZ	Chamber of Deputies	Attend	LT	Seimas	Speak
CZ	Senate	Attend	LU	Chambre des députés	Speak
DE	Bundestag	Speak	MT	Kamra tad Deputati	Speak
DE	Bundesrat	Speak	NL	Tweede Kamer	Speak*
EE	Riigikogu	Speak	NL	Eerste Kamer	Speak*
EL	Hellenic Parliament	Attend	PL	Sejm	Speak
FI	Eduskunta	Guest Expert	RO	Senat	Speak
HR	Hrvatski Sabor	Attend	RO	Camera Deputaților	Speak

Source: [European Parliament's Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments](#) and author's inquiries with NP staff; * by invitation.

Speaking rights in plenary debates are much rarer. In only 9 out of the 40 parliamentary chambers do MEPs have the right to participate fully in plenary debates (Table 2). Yet the rights in committee meetings and plenary sessions do seem to be linked. In

every chamber where participation in committee meetings is not allowed, it is not allowed in plenary sessions either. Similarly, in all chambers where MEPs are able to hold speeches in plenary sessions, they are allowed to speak in committee meetings as well.

Table 2. MEP participation in plenary debates

Country	Chamber	Plenary
AUT	Nationalrat	Speak
AUT	Bundesrat	Speak
DE	Bundesrat	Speak
HU	Országgyűlés	Speak
IT	Camera dei Deputati	Speak
LT	Seimas	Speak
NL	Tweede Kamer	Speak
RO	Senat	Speak
RO	Camera Deputaţilor	Speak

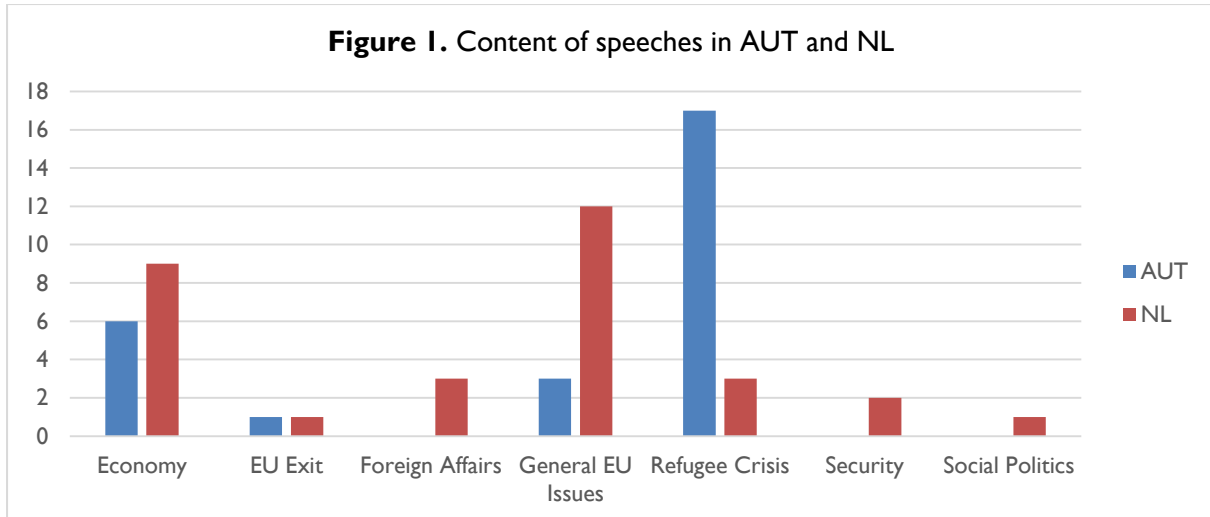
Source: [European Parliament's Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments](#) and author's inquiries with NP staff.

The mere right to speak in plenary debates, however, does not ensure that this actually happens in practice. According to the parliamentary websites as well as inquiries with parliamentary information offices, only the Austrian Parliament and the Dutch Tweede Kamer (House of Representatives) have so far made regular use of the opportunity, albeit based on different rules: In Austria, MEPs can speak during the so-called 'Aktuelle Europastunden' (topical EU hours), which take place four times per year in the Nationalrat on a topic chosen by one of the parliamentary party groups (by rotation). A similar right exists in the Bundesrat, although so far only one of the previously planned biannual *Europastunden* has taken place, in July 2015. Dutch MEPs, in turn, have the opportunity to speak in the Tweede Kamer once a year, on the occasion of the debate on the *Staat van de Europese Unie* (State of the European Union), where developments of the EU and visions for the future are being discussed. This research note thus analyses 58 plenary debate contributions made by Austrian and Dutch MPs between 2013 and 2016. The aim is to explore what topics they (were asked to) speak on, to what extent they

introduced a European rather than national perspective into the debate and in which manner they assessed the EU and its policies.

As Figure 1 shows, the most prominent topics discussed in the EU plenary debates were the refugee crisis, closely followed by general EU issues and economic questions. There are, however, significant differences between the two countries. The Dutch debate contributions revolved mainly around general EU issues and economic questions while also touching upon various other topics. In Austria, by contrast, the refugee crisis clearly dominated the debates. These differences can be partly explained by the different settings: Austrian MEPs are invited by their parties to voice their opinions on the specific topic of the *Europastunde*, which is chosen by a different party each time. In 2015, two issues dominated these debates, the refugee crisis as well as the international trade agreements TTIP and CETA. The aim of the *Dutch Staat van de Europese Unie*, in turn, is to look back at the major developments in the EU over the preceding year and to present the government's vision for the EU and the European agenda for the coming year.

Figure 1. Content of speeches in AUT and NL



MEP plenary speeches – a European or a national perspective?

How do MEPs participate in these debates? An important question is whether the participation of MEPs in national parliaments really helps to view problems and ideas from a European perspective. As Figure 2 indicates, most MEPs do indeed present a European perspective on the topics under debate, i.e. outline the view of the EP – or the EU more generally – on a policy topic or discuss the rationale behind EU decisions. Only 12 out of 58 examined speeches take a national perspective instead, meaning that the MEP speaking acts more like a national politician than an MEP, focussing on domestic viewpoints or conflicts over EU issues. Although this seems to be quite a high share, it still needs to be considered that the staging of the *Staat van de Europese Unie* and the *Aktuelle Europastunde* alone may raise awareness of the EU and almost 80% of the speeches held by MEPs do shed light on the EU-perspective of the topics that are spoken about.

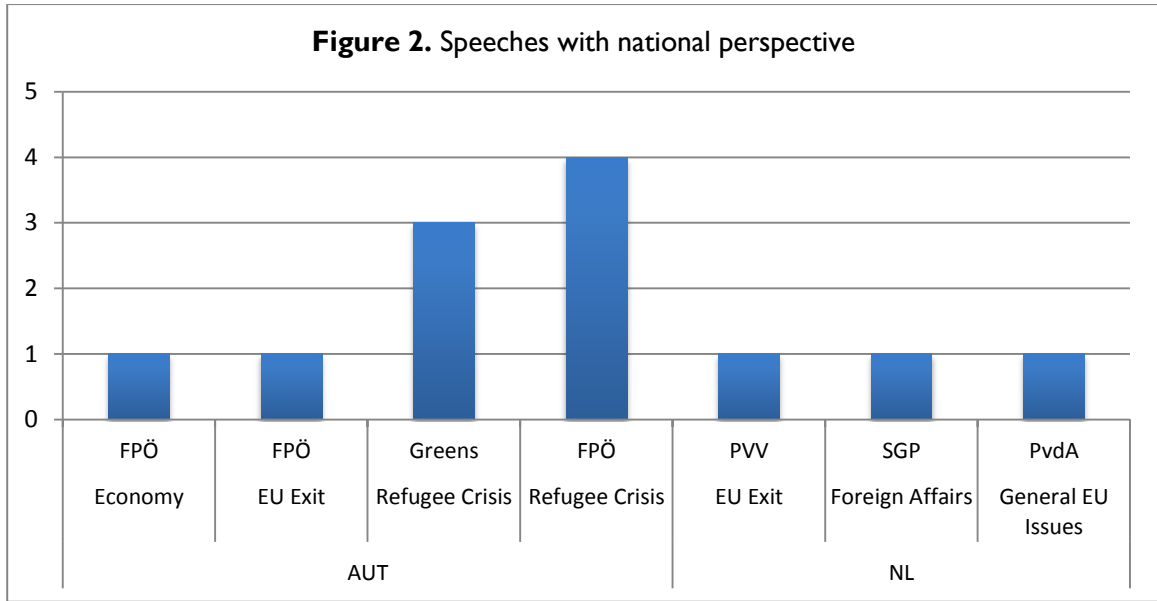
As Figure 2 shows, most of the speeches with such a national perspective (9 out of 12) come from Austrian MEPs from the parties FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) and Die Grünen



Most MEPs present a European perspective on the topics under debate in national parliaments



(Green Party), the two largest opposition parties in the Nationalrat, and focused on criticism of the Austrian government. Indeed, MEPs from opposition parties in Austria, even when providing a mainly European perspective, often criticised the government. By contrast, speeches with a dominantly national perspective were much rarer in the Tweede Kamer, and domestic government/opposition dynamics hardly played a role. The speech on foreign affairs by a member of the SGP (Reformed Political Party), a party in opposition in the Tweede Kamer, did not focus on any criticism of the government. Rather, conflicts between governing parties played an, albeit minor, role: MEPs belonging to the PVV (Party for Freedom) and the PvdA (Labour Party), which are governing parties in the Dutch Tweede Kamer, mainly focused on criticising each other party’s coalition partner. Dutch MEPs providing a European perspective did not focus on criticism of the government at all.

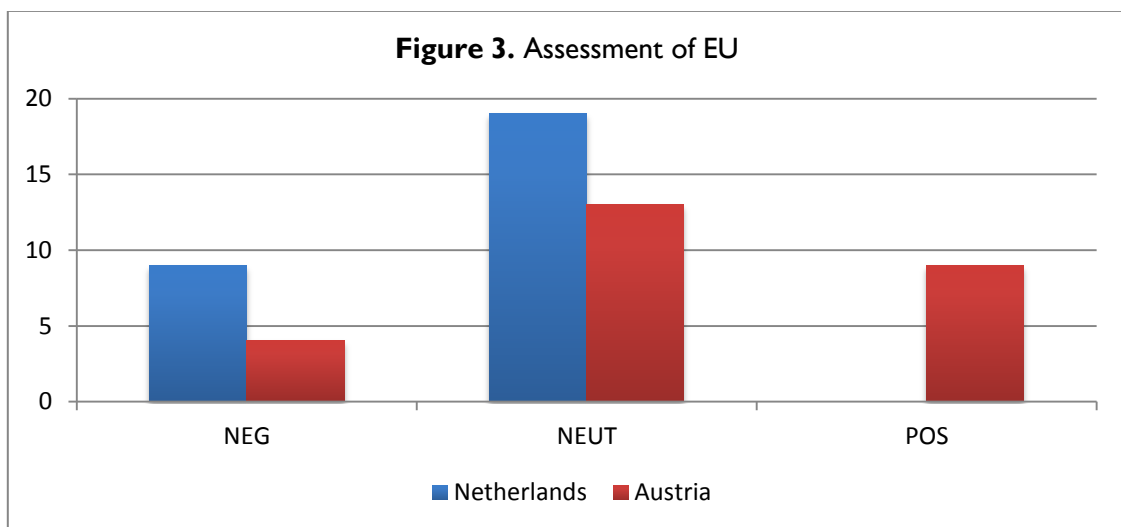


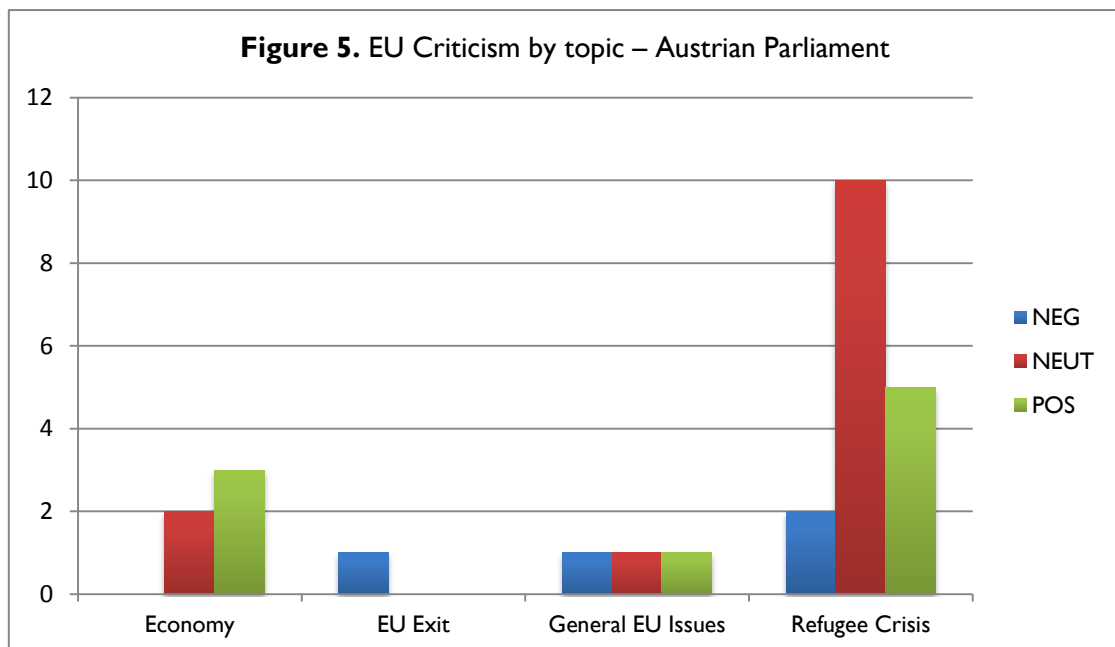
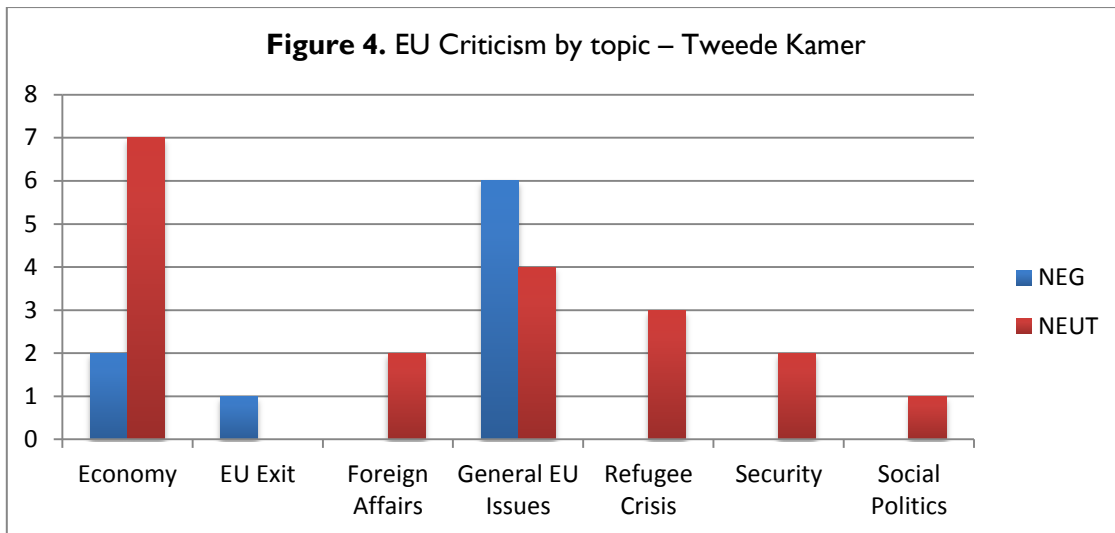
Providing PR for the EU?

Where, as in most cases, MEPs adopt an EU perspective in their debate contributions, they rarely simply provide positive PR for the European Union or European decisions. In fact, in both parliaments, MEP contributions are mainly neutral in tone or even assess EU decisions negatively (Figure 3).

Again, there are differences between both countries: In the Tweede Kamer, almost a third of the speeches (9 out of 31, Figure 3) were rather negative about the EU or its

policies, whereas only a small number of the examined speeches in the Austrian parliament criticised the EU (4 out of 26, Figure 3). Moreover, no Dutch MEP spoke positively about the EU, while the positive mentions in Austria outweigh the negative ones. In Austria, criticism of the EU comes mainly from MEPs from the Eurosceptic FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), while the criticism in the Netherlands is nearly evenly split among the parties. Only the MEPs from the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) stick to a purely neutral tone.





Assessments of the EU are also highly dependent on the topic under debate. Unsurprisingly, a negative assessment dominates the contribution on leaving the EU in both countries, a topic brought up by Eurosceptic MEPs explicitly advocating an exit of their member state. Yet criticism is also voiced in the Tweede Kamer in the context of contributions on economic questions and, especially, more general EU issues. In turn, in Austria the EU is criticised much less, and mainly in the context of the refugee crisis. And in most cases, these negative assessments

are balanced out by more neutral or even positive ones.

To sum up, Austrian MEPs from domestic opposition parties often tend to fall back into a dominantly national mode when speaking in the national parliament, and criticise the national government even from a European perspective. Overall, however, the EU is presented in a slightly more positive way, with the main criticism coming from MEPs belonging to the Eurosceptic FPÖ. Dutch MEPs, in contrast, take on a much more European perspective in their contributions,

but provide an overall more negative picture of the EU. One reason for these differences could be the different institutional setup. Since the Dutch debates take place on the State of the European Union by the government, MEPs do not seem to use the opportunity to criticise specific governmental EU policies. At the same time, the speeches cover more general EU issues. In Austria, in contrast, the focus on more specific EU topics or policies allows for somewhat more targeted debates, but at the same time also seems to encourage opposition MEPs to focus more strongly on domestic EU policy. The fact that Austrian MEPs are overall somewhat more positive in their assessment of the EU, may possibly be explained with the rather [strong public Euroscepticism in Austria](#), which Austrian MEPs from more Europhile parties may try to address.

To what extent the participation of MEPs in these debates does succeed in bringing the EU closer to the people is, however, still an open question. Yet especially in times like today, where Euroscepticism is on the rise across all member states, it is important to give MEPs a chance to represent the European Parliament at home. This way, it might be easier for the public to retrace actions of the EU and understand points of views that might strongly differ from those of their countries. Furthermore, this format can contribute to making the EU more authentic and transparent, as MEPs do not only try to shed good light on it, but also voice criticism.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA.



Chiara Valentin is an Austrian High School Student. In summer 2016, she was an intern at the Institute of Advanced Studies Vienna for an [FWF](#) funded project [Parliamentary Communication of EU Affairs](#) (PACE). During the internship, she conducted her research on MEP speeches in domestic plenary debates.