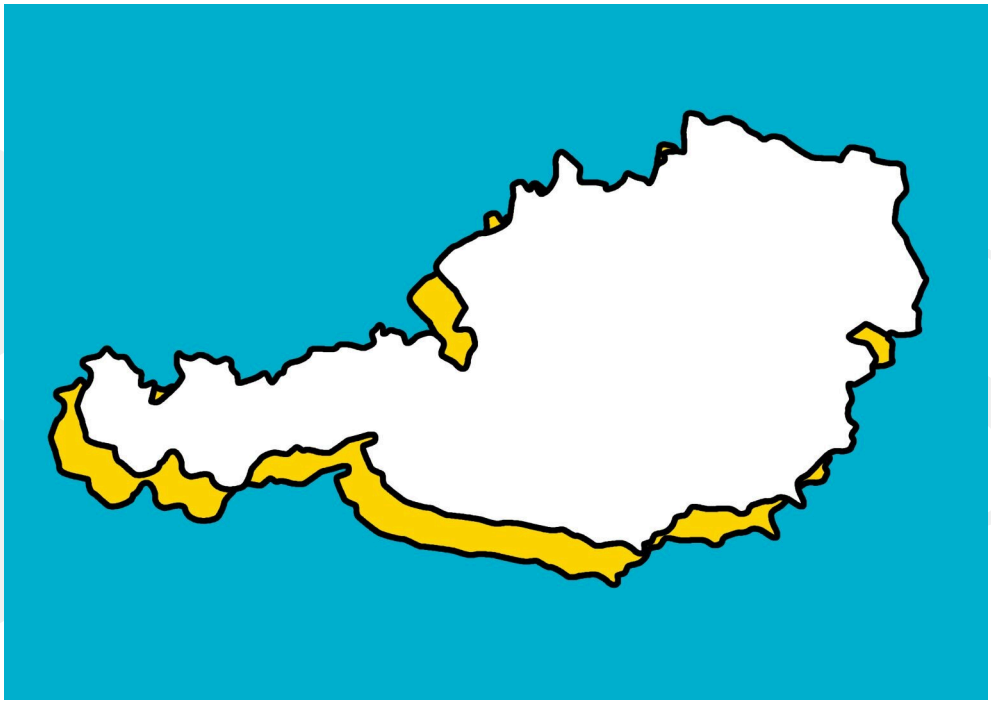
Interview with Former Minister of Defence Fasslabend

29 OCTOBER 2024

Werner Fasslabend



Himmel: Mr Fasslabend, thank you for inviting us to your institute located here at the Springer Castle and also close Schloss Schönbrunn here in the lovely city of Vienna. You have been the defence minister quite a long time. But before that, you studied law. How did that come? Why did you study law at the beginning?

Fasslabend: I mean, this was just a question of starting my business career. I was not sure, but everybody told me that law would be the best and of course I was highly interested already in politics and in official affairs and in so far it was not a strange decision for me and not a difficult decision. Afterwards I joined private industry. I worked 20 years for Henkel company. As a product manager and the sales director. And I did this until I became Minister of Defence. Even when I was already Member of Parliament.

Himmel: You still as a Member of Parliament worked at Henkel?

Fasslabend: Yes.

Himmel: Have you considered, as you mentioned, that you were already interested in politics, whether opportunities or possibilities, during your studies, to get involved in politics? Was it able to combine law with politics?

Fasslabend: I did it from the beginning. I mean, I started with political activities already when I was a teenager, so I went in order to join political meetings, or official sessions in my hometown. When I was a student they asked me whether I wanted to take part at the campaign and afterwards I became a member of a party. I came into different functions, in the region, in the Bundesland and then on national level.

Himmel: Around what time was that? When you've joined there, you've been politically active.

Fasslabend: I became active when I was around about 20. I guess this was during my studies. The first national campaign I participated was in 1959.

Himmel: How were these times?

Fasslabend: You could not compare it, of course, because the general situation in Europe was completely different. I was living extremely close to the so-called Iron Curtain. My house was positioned only 150 metres away from the Iron Curtain. So far this was with the border versus Czechoslovakia, and insofar I experienced this ideological discussion and the relationship between East and West from the beginning of my life.

Himmel: Could you describe how the Iron Curtain looked like?

Fasslabend: It was the river Morava. The middle of the river used to be the border between Austria and Czechoslovakia, and the other side you had already the real Iron Curtain with fences. Usually one could listen during nighttimes the crying of people who wanted to flee to cross the Iron Curtain, shootings from the soldiers, barking dogs.

Himmel: How did that affect your political views, your political engagement?

Fasslabend: Probably it did quite a bit. I mean on the one hand, of course it enforced, the tendency to occupy myself with all the political questions between East and West, the basics of politics, of political systems, the importance of freedom, of an economic system. It also contributed to my specific interest of defence. I could see these military systems at the other side. When there was the Spring of Prague, I still have in my ears the noise of the chains of the tanks of the Russian tanks that came from Bratislava, went to the north to Prague.

Himmel: You've been then in your political career, I would say at the height of your political career, the Defence Minister of Austria. We've come across two topics which we're most busy with, first one being the modernization of the Austrian armed forces and the other one is trying to enhance the role of Austria in peacekeeping questions. Beginning now, with the first of this one, the modernization: What were the major challenges or opportunities which came with that?

Fasslabend: A big challenge, it could not have been bigger than it was in reality. You know why? Because, of course, the end of the Cold War brought

the challenge to change the system completely. On the other hand, also the solution of the Warsaw Pact changed Austria's situation in between the two blocks. Of course, it also brought a new freedom to organise our defence, because we had many restrictions out of our state treaty. Austria did not have the right to buy missiles – we did not have missiles until 1989. The Austrian paradox, you could say, in our history that at the same time when Austria became neutral as a price to get the States Treaty and to get rid of the occupying powers, at the same time we were forbidden to protect ourselves as it was necessary as a neutral country. Because you cannot defend your country, especially the airspace, when you are not able to have missiles. Not ground to air, not air to air. So far you can imagine how difficult it was.

Himmel: So, the Austrian armed forces had to rely on conventional weapons.

Fasslabend: Artillery, yes, very traditional systems. And this was one of my first programmes to buy missiles systems.

Himmel: That's very interesting. How does one build up a missile system? I guess it's a bit hard to start off at all to implement such a system into a running army.

Fasslabend: It's not so difficult, no. I mean people, of course, they had learned a lot. At least a few specialists within the army that had made the courses in the United States or in other countries. So far, they had not only theoretical experience, but even a practical experience to handle such systems. What we did, we bought the system. Especially at the beginning, European systems. Mistral from France, from Sweden and then also Sidewinder missiles from the States.

Himmel: As you now mentioned, where you get the missiles from, I can see that these were all Western or European or NATO-related countries. Was there, in regard to the neutrality, also an idea to reach out to Eastern, former Eastern bloc countries to maybe collaborate with them in the question of missiles?

Fasslabend: I think there was a very short phase where it was considered to do so in order to convince the Russians during the Cold War period to allow Austria to buy missiles, but they were not very positive to this idea. And then Austria, of course, went to the Western countries in order to buy them because everybody knew that there would not be a possible aggression from the western side. But if then from the eastern side.

Himmel: How did it come up that you could convince the powers to allow Austria to acquire missiles?

Fasslabend: We did not, but without that, the moment had come that the States Treaty was not the basis any longer for our material decisions and for our military politics. It was at the end of the Cold War.

Himmel: New times, new strategy.

Fasslabend: Right.

Himmel: But you've kept the strategy of neutrality, which is also a very basic principle of Austrian policy or of Austrian foreign policy. How did that

affect when you draft a new policy, when you draft a new strategy. You have a new millennial, where's Austria going to?

Fasslabend: The Austrian situation what concerns neutrality is a little bit different to most of the other countries, because in Austria neutrality is part of our constitution. This is also the difference to Sweden or Finland.

Back then people did not differ, but they thought, neutrality means we are free and after a while they also meant, this would protect us. Because the others more or less recognised our neutrality, and therefore this also would bring some security. At the End of the Cold War, at least the specialists had realised that this situation had changed or was changing completely. We had to change politics more or less completely, and this was not only by our own military steps we did, but also the fact that we joined NATO Partnership of Peace and even joined NATO missions in former Yugoslavia. I personally also organised the first NATO workshop outside of NATO territory and was also for the first time, the discussion whether Austria should join NATO.

Himmel: I want to take a last question on the history of the neutrality because we've now interviewed a lot of small nations. I wouldn't consider Austria a small nation, but Austria has a very special position as it was once a huge empire, combining a lot of people, a lot of different states, a lot of different cultures around taking a huge part of Europe and the Balkans and has been shrunk to its current size. Does that in any case affect the foreign policy?

Fasslabend: It does not affect Austrian politics in the way it should. Due to the fact that more or less Austria not only overtook a new role or was maybe pushed into a new role and situation, but it as by historic reasons, overtaken this new role to an extent that was not necessary, and I guess we probably could be much more efficient than we are at the moment.

Himmel: Now you've mentioned that Austria is in a NATO partnership, not a full member of NATO. Is that a first step?

Fasslabend: I would say it was an automatic reaction to the new situation after the end of the Cold War. Austria joined the same time when we joined EU in 1995. We also joined NATO Partnership for Peace that was newly founded. After the end of the Cold War, nobody had a plan, nobody was prepared for such a situation.

Himmel: Were the politics taken by surprise?

Fasslabend: Of course, I had as a long serving defence Minister quite a good standing within the Group of Foreign and Defence Ministers and so far, very often or just in smaller circles, discussed what one could. The American, British, German Defence Minister, and we sat together, and we asked ourselves what could we do in order to stabilise Eastern Europe. What would be necessary? To be done politically, but also militarily and insofar we found a few ways and I think the Partnership for Peace concepts was one of them. There was no question about stability then, but rather, what could we do in order to stabilise countries like Poland, like Czechoslovakia, like Hungary, Romania.

Himmel: How?

Fasslabend: I mean you have to be aware that of course also the military in those countries where of old communists and insofar those countries needed new assistance, and they needed new ways also to be linked to the rest of Europe, because otherwise, we would have had more or less a continuum of politics even after the breakdown of the Soviet system. This really was a fascinating period where you could contribute quite a bit and due to Austria's situation and the experience in Central Eastern Europe, we also had the opportunities in official sessions to shape those systems quite a bit.

Himmel: That is what I would then also call your second agenda: the enhanced role of Austria's peacekeeping. What were the ideas? What are the ideas you've changed out?

Fasslabend: I think the main question certainly was the political stability of our neighbourhoods of Central Eastern European. And in this context, it was politics, it was economy, it was security. And cultural questions, of course. What we're trying to do is not only political but also the security sector. For example, we brought all of our neighbouring countries into international missions, for example Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and so on. All of them had their first international missions together with an Austrian contingent. We tried to integrate them more or less into our politics or general security politics and more or less transfer our ideas and our systems also into those countries. We also founded then specific partnership between the Central European countries, it was called Central European Cooperation where we sit together and try to prepare ourselves in order to shape in for the future common battalions or common brigades for international missions.

Himmel: I think that brings us neatly to the last part which I wanted to delve in which is the future strategy, the future policies as you've now mentioned, Central European Cooperation as possibility or platform to cooperate, for example, in common brigades. Is that something which could be also a possibility for Europe, or for the EU especially?

Fasslabend: It was my privilege to initiate and organise the first European Defence Minister meeting in 1998, at the moment when quite a lot of European nations were still resistant towards such an idea.

[Add explanation: The 1998 European Defence Ministers' meeting was pivotal in advancing European security cooperation, spurred by the Balkan conflicts. It highlighted the need for an independent European defense capability, leading to the establishment of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). This meeting set the stage for deeper military collaboration within the EU framework.]

This also was more or less the beginning of common initiatives. As a consequence, I was sure that it was absolutely necessary to do so, but this is something that we just have to do in order to keep our European position respected. NATO is a need for Europe. Europe does need the cooperation

with the Americans in order to withstand dangers coming from the east. But, of course, that this organisation never will be able to do the necessary job. In security policy, you have to differ between defence and security policy. European security, which means to do something for the stability of Europe's neighbourhood, will be a regional European task that nobody else can and will overtake. Europe is at the moment in the situation, that NATO is working and it also will be working in the future, whether Trump will be the next president or not. But the Americans never will care about security in Africa or in the Middle East, in the Caucasian region or at the Balkans. Whether this is the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Caucasian region, whether this is Iraq, Syria, Lebanon in Africa and Libya especially, but also other countries. And if you ask yourself, where is European Union, where is any European state? You will have to say nowhere. Nowhere in none of these countries, Europe does not even play a little role. You can go and the Caucasian region and the whole of the Middle East, the whole of Northern Africa, and after more or less the failure of French African policy you can see nothing is left. Therefore we will have to develop European security policy that enables to contribute to the stability in our immediate neighbourhood.

Himmel: I understand you correctly that you say the European Union requires NATO and requires to play a more dominant role within NATO as for their own security interests when it comes to close neighbourhoods.

Fasslabend: We will have to differ in the future. If there is a defence question like, let me say Ukraine, it is clear that the European countries only together with the Americans will be able to shape a military power that really is enough to counter any danger coming from Russia or from the east. But, the Americans, for sure, will not engage in northern Africa. As you can see, they have left the Middle East. They will not come back. They will not engage in the conquest of the region. They will not engage in the eastern Mediterranean. And insofar this is an absolutely clear task for the European nations, and they only can do it together.

Himmel: To understand the terms defence and security, because you differ between them: What are these terms?

Fasslabend: Defence would mean for me just to withstand a military aggression coming from the east. Security means to shape stability politically, militarily, economically. This means we need it from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean.

Himmel: That's a huge part of the world.

Fasslabend: It's our neighbourhood. I mean, if a country like Turkey is to influence the politics, its complete neighbourhood, then the European Union should be able to do so at least in part of it. But not to be able to do so in any country, is something that I will not accept any longer.

Himmel: Should then the common European security policy not only focus on military, but also on political and economic questions?

Fasslabend: I think this is a natural division of labour for the future. Later, we'll be there for defence and the European nations within NATO have to engage themselves in Northern Africa and in the Middle East, the Caucasian region.

Himmel: Coming to my last question then. What is Austria's role in in in the upcoming development of maybe such a common defence and security policies of the EU or Europe?

Fasslabend: I'm looking at the one side to natural tasks we do have in order to shape a stable environment for our own country, which means engagement in Southeast Europe, the Balkans. To engage ourselves also in Eastern Europe, because this is our immediate neighbourhood and there's a maybe a third region because we are influenced most by the development over there also will be the Middle East. So, Austria certainly will have to play a decisive role for the stability of the Balkans. I have to say that Austria was never hesitated to go into international missions. Due to our geostrategic situation and due to the fact also that we do have capabilities in order to make major contributions for the stabilisation of those regions, we will have to do it.

Himmel: Thank you very much, Mr Fasslabend, for your insights. And thank you very much for your time.

Fasslabend: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

DOI 10.69790/epis05