

Austria takes a rightwards turn

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Sebastian Kurz's rapid rise to the top of Austrian politics could result in the dismantling of the welfare state, cuts in social benefits and a renewal of euroscepticism, writes Philipp Novak

The result of the Austrian legislative election brought about a swing to the right. Both conservatives and rightwing populists have increased their votes, while the share of left parties is historically low.

The rapid rise of Sebastian Kurz reflects the desire for political renewal after the stagnation period of the grand coalition.

After a short period in the city council of Vienna, Kurz became state secretary for integration.

In 2013, Kurz became Europe's youngest foreign minister and was relatively popular. During his tenure, he first held more liberal views towards immigration and pressed for a welcoming culture for migrants. When German chancellor Angela Merkel opened the borders in 2015, Austria experienced an influx of 100.000 refugees and migrants. Kurz invited political representatives from the Balkan states and they decided to close the border between Greece and Macedonia. Although the Balkan route is only partly closed, this move matched the true preferences of a silent majority of the Austrian population and helped Kurz to increase his popularity.

When social democrats switched to a more credible economic programme – known as 'Plan A' – at the beginning of 2017, the Austrian People's party refused to cooperate. In the background, Kurz prepared to take over the lead of his party.

When the party leader resigned, Kurz called for early elections and terminated the grand coalition. He renamed his party to 'Liste Kurz' on the election posters. Some observers compared Kurz to Macron, but in fact he did not really create a new movement and only changed the People's party's political colour from black to turquoise. He conducted a single-issue campaign and advocated only vague positions. In the aftermath of the migration crisis of 2015, the most important issue was immigration. He abandoned the welcoming culture and copied the policies of the Freedom party. He promised to shut down migrant routes to Europe and cap benefit payments to migrants, which immediately led to a surge in the polls. From this point on, the election campaigns had hardly any impact on the final result.

However, the Social Democratic party was involved in a dirty campaigning scandal against Kurz on Facebook, initiated by election adviser Tal Silberstein, which led to the resignation of the campaign manager two weeks before the elections. The party's result was close to its 2013 result and can be largely explained by the drop of the Green party, which failed to enter the Austrian parliament after a split of their party. Nevertheless, the Social Democrats could not increase its vote share and only became second.

Apart from a continuation of the grand coalition under a chancellor Kurz, only two coalitions are possible. The most likely coalition of the People's party and the Freedom party could lead to a dismantling of the welfare state, cuts in social benefits for migrants and to more eurosceptic position from the Austrian government. However, it remains doubtful whether the required fiscal consolidation, as well as necessary reforms of Austria's pension system will be carried out. Seen from this angle, the People's party-Freedom party coalition could even increase the reform tie-up.

A red-blue coalition between social democrats and rightwing populists already exists in Austria's eastern province Burgenland and is probably the last chance for the economic modernisation advocated for by the Social Democratic party, unless both parties converge around social policy positions to bridge other divisions. However, given the intra-party conflicts between the pragmatic and leftwing factions within the Social Democrats, this coalition is not very likely. In opposition, however, lies the risk of 'Corbynisation' of the party.

Independently of whether the Social Democrats will be in opposition or not, they must take responsibility. A period in opposition without a commitment to modernisation would be irresponsible. Immigration is still a major concern for a lot of voters. This explains the popularity of Social Democratic defence minister Hans Peter Doskozil. Furthermore, Austria's demographic problems, declining competitiveness and public sector inefficiency are a burden on the country's future. It is now the right time for progressives to propagate their ideas and to show that they are the true force of reform.

Philipp Novak is a founder of the [Austrian Progressive Social Democrats](#) and tweets at [@Philipp_Novak](#)

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