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'A pro-European eco-chancellor'?

Barbara Tóth on successful Greens, crashed ethno-nationalists and Sebastian Kurz's options after the Austrian elections

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Sebastian Kurz has clearly emerged victorious in Austria's national elections. What do you see as the reason for his success?

To a large extent the weakness of his competitors. Sebastian Kurz benefited the most from the Ibiza scandal. He managed to win over those voters (especially men) who turned away from the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). We can see this in the analyses of voter migration. Over 250,000 voters moved from the FPÖ to Kurz's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). The Social Democrats (SPÖ) under its new leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner has only really found its way in the election campaign in the last two weeks. Rendi-Wagner lost many voters, who her predecessor Christian Kern could bring from the Greens to the SPÖ in 2017, back to the Greens. But of course, Kurz ran a very solid election campaign. The work of his PR team, his own social media activities, such as the Facebook page with 800,000 followers, and direct marketing paid off. In short, Kurz can run election campaigns without traditional media, thanks solely to his channels.

The FPÖ has lost many more voters than predicted in the surveys. Did Ibiza then play a greater role for the voters?

Ibiza was one reason. But in the last week before the election, there was also an expense scandal that the party couldn't solve in time. Heinz-Christian Strache charged the party high expenses for his apartment and his lifestyle. Now the party threatens to expel Strache if the accusations are confirmed. This has demobilised many of his voters, especially in Vienna, Strache's stronghold. Both scandals are connected. In both cases, Strache's former bodyguard and chauffeur played an important role as an informant. Strache tripped not only over the infamous Ibiza video, but also over his own lifestyle.

The Greens made considerable gains. Do they just follow the European trend or is there a specific Austrian dimension to this?

When the Greens were thrown out of parliament in 2017, it came as a surprise and shocked many Green voters who had voted for the SPÖ at the time. The Greens deliberately designed their election campaign as a 'We want to get back to parliament' and appealed to their 'lost' voters. That worked well. On top of that, of course, there's the general public mood. Environmental issues were the most important topic in this election campaign, alongside dealing with money, corruption and Ibiza. Accordingly, the Green chose 'Sundays for Future' as their slogan for Sunday's election.

The SPÖ has once again lost voters although its chairwoman had put a lot of effort into the campaign. What happened?

This is partly because of the Green's success – the SPÖ and the Greens appeal to similar groups of voters. But Sebastian Kurz's finale in the election campaign also played a role. SPÖ leader Rendi-Wagner only found her campaign style during the phase of numerous TV duels. She became more relaxed, more emotional, more aggressive and sometimes even put the experienced and cool Sebastian Kurz on the defensive. If the election campaign had lasted a week or two longer, there might have been a lot of votes to gain for the SPÖ. Of course, the SPÖ also still anticipates a bigger party reform, a charismatic candidate alone is not enough. The provincial governor Peter Kaiser (SPÖ) put it this way: the SPÖ is one of the most structurally conservative parties in the country.

In short, Kurz is now spoilt for choice: which coalition partner will he choose? Or is he betting on a minority government?

The ÖVP has a majority with the FPÖ, the SPÖ and the Greens. On election night, the FPÖ ruled out governing again – so that's no longer an option. Inside the SPÖ, the mood is very ambivalent. Most people prefer to focus on a fresh start, a party reform. So it's just the Greens that remain. In principle, they have become willing to govern and pragmatic enough to make compromises. But they will certainly not make it as easy as the FPÖ in government.

In a coalition with the Greens, Kurz would for the first time have to position himself more clearly, for example as a pro-European eco-chancellor. He's able to change and strong enough in marketing to get it right. But Kurz's good election result is not quite as comfortable in the end. That's why they still discuss the option of a minority government in Vienna. It's barely anchored in Austria's political culture. Only once, in 1970, the SPÖ tried such a government with

the support of the FPÖ for one year. Fortunately, it's often said in Vienna these days, there's the popular transitional cabinet of civil servants, which was appointed by the Federal President after Ibiza. The coalition negotiations can therefore take a little longer without pressure.

This interview was conducted by Michael Bröning.



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