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'The images are already iconic'

Barbara Tóth on what Austria's Ibizagate scandal means for the country – and European right-wing populism

Read this interview in German.

Does the Austrian government crisis mark a return to "decent politics"? Or will the frustration with the political system simply increase?

In Austria, red lines are certainly being drawn that were previously only spoken about. The sloppy relationship with the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is being clarified. In the state of Burgenland, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) have ended the coalition with the FPÖ. In Upper Austria, where the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) is in coalition with the FPÖ, the ÖVP has dismissed a controversial FPÖ politician.

Much of it has to do with the start of the election campaign. Political parties always present themselves more clearly and decently than afterwards. At the same time, the scandal is damaging the reputation of politics as a whole and will increase disenchantment with the political sphere. The scandal will not change the basic situation in Austria: Coalitions are inconceivable in the long run without the FPÖ. With up to 27 per cent of voters behind them, the party is simply too strong and historically anchored in the political system.

What will happen now after the scandalous weekend – will the government continue its work without the FPÖ ministers until the new elections in September?

I think so. On Monday, the FPÖ announced that it would withdraw its ministers if Herbert Kickl, the FPÖ's controversial interior minister, would be dismissed. And he as dismissed. Now, it's President Alexander Van der Bellen's turn who, according to the constitution, plays a particularly important and strong role in such a situation. At Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's suggestion, he can nominate ministers, which could also be civil servants or technocrats.

Next week, the opposition wants to issue a vote of no confidence during a special session. If it finds a majority, then the whole government – including the Chancellor – would have to be replaced. All these are unique events in the history of Austria.

How should the SPÖ react to the affair?

The SPÖ now has to get into campaigning mode as quickly as possible. That's not yet the case. The affair has destroyed the image of the upright, honest working class leaders of the FPÖ. That's a great opportunity for the relatively new SPÖ party leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner. Many observers assume that many FPÖ voters will rather go to the ÖVP or will not vote out of frustration. But there's certainly potential for the SPÖ.

From the social democrats' point of view, it will also be crucial to see how the two green movements will consolidate themselves – or not. There are also interesting extra-parliamentary progressive movements – for example around Barbara Blaha, a former social democrat. What about an alliance with all these forces against right-wing populism?

What consequences does the affair have for the party system in Austria? Are the Austrians about to return to the two-party state of the ÖVP and the SPÖ, or will smaller parties such as the Greens or the Liberals benefit?

No. The FPÖ has "crumbled" already once after an internal conflict, going down from 27 to 10 per cent in snap elections. That was in 2002. At that time, the ÖVP under Wolfgang Schüssel profited enormously and reached over 42 per cent. In the following years, the FPÖ stabilised again under Heinz-Christian Strache – who was initially given little future – and then came back to a stable 20 per cent plus. This means that Austria will also have to live with the FPÖ in the future: the new party leader Norbert Hofer made it to the run-off in the presidential elections of 2016 and can certainly stabilise the FPÖ's potential, even if it will be weakened next Sunday at the European elections.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz sees himself and his party as victims of this affair, even though he brought the FPÖ into government. Does he convince the population with this interpretation? Could the ÖVP even benefit by attracting disappointed FPÖ voters?

That's the question. Will Kurz be able to succeed in the elections with his story? Posing as saviour and anchor of stability, does he profit from the crisis he helped to create? He, who has initiated two snap elections within two years? It will certainly not be easy for him,

because the FPÖ – which continues to be led strategically by the controversial former Interior Minister Herbert Kickl, a very experienced election campaigner – will do everything in its power to attack his credibility.

European conservatives often argue that the involvement of right-wing populists in government disenchants them. Will the FPÖ affair raise the threshold for right-wing populists to become involved in government in the long run?

In any case, the example of Austria shows that right-wing populists are not only ideologically but morally vulnerable. Perhaps even more vulnerable at the moral level. Corruption, a lack of expertise, dubious contacts with Russia or other donors – the video from Ibiza illustrates their weaknesses and will certainly be a point of reference in the future for all those who need arguments as to why no government can be created with right-wing extremists.

The right-wing camp has traditionally portrayed itself as a victim of political persecution, mentioning attacks by other parties or critical reporting by the media. Will its right-wing populist followers be convinced that the FPÖ has become the victim of a targeted political intrigue?

Yes, the story of the conspiracy, possibly with the help of international secret services, is already catching on massively in Austria. Strache also promotes it extensively. Interestingly, however, Chancellor Kurz does it too. The name of the Israeli political consultant Tal Silberstein, who has become synonymous with "Dirty Campaining" in Vienna, is often mentioned. It should not go unnoticed that anti-Semitic codes play a role here. The fact that the scandal was "carried into" the country by German media also helps to build up conspiracy narratives.

We don't know anything yet about the video's creator(s). But what does this approach mean for political culture? Can populism be defeated with honey traps and secret videos?

It's nothing new that politicians and business leaders are out on a limb. That's also why we set higher standards for them. The video is only the climax of a process that has lasted for months. Strache's friend and political partner, Johann Gudenus, who can also be seen in the video (with his wife), would have had enough opportunity to reject the advances. Strache, too, would have had plenty of opportunity to stand up and end the conversation that evening, which lasted more than six hours, and to file a complaint the next day. The

fact that it has come this far at all – to Ibiza – only shows how deeply corruptible the two are.

Will the scandal have a long-term impact on the image of right-wing populist parties in other European countries as well?

The images are already iconic, the power of the moving images – which can be transferred millions of times to mobile phones – has a different impact than if there were only transcripts or eyewitness accounts of the evening in Ibiza. On top of that, there's the video's very own aesthetic, somewhere between cheap porn and jungle camp. That's bound to stick.

How will the scandal affect the European elections?

Forecasts are always difficult, especially because the scandal burst just before the EU elections. In Austria, the EU election will certainly be a test national election because the scandal led to the overthrow of the government. Whether it will have an effect beyond Austria's borders will be seen after the weekend.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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