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# A missed opportunity

## The utopian demands of the feminist citizens' initiative in Austria make it far too easy for its critics

*Read this article in German.*

'A good life for everyone!' Who wouldn't want that? Those behind the Austrian citizens' initiative on women's issues are taking this battle cry into a crucial week of mobilisation. From 1 to 8 October, the citizens' initiative will be waiting in public authorities' offices waiting to be signed. And whoever is registered with a 'citizens' card' can also quite simply sign with the click of a mouse.

The list of demands is – as the battle cry already suggests – all encompassing. The citizens' initiative calls for an equal share of power for women in all bodies in political and economic spheres – i.e. on voting lists, in political institutions like the parliament, in companies, in associations and cooperatives. With the aim of fighting the gender pay gap, it also urges full transparency in wages regardless of how big the company is – while advocating a step by step reduction of working time to 30 hours for everyone.

On top of that comes a legally guaranteed claim to free childcare and a free place in school up to the age of 14, free contraception and abortions carried out in hospitals and be paid for by health insurance companies. Sexist or stereotyped advertising and content in youth media should be banned. Single parents should receive guaranteed child support. To counter domestic violence, more shelters and protection centres should be provided. Women who are fleeing should be helped better and more quickly.

## Could it have achieved more?

Every one of these nine points would have earnt and carried its own citizens' initiative. The tenth demand for full legalisation of elderly care, which is provided in Austria largely by east European migrant workers who are fake freelancers, was eventually dropped. But precisely this

exploitation of disadvantaged women is one of the main feminist socio-political issues.

Here, the central flaw in the construction of the citizens' initiative becomes obvious. It reflects the broad backgrounds of its backers – daughters and granddaughters from the second women's movement, who come mostly not from politics but from the feministic milieu of civil society. The list of demands has become as multifaceted as their concerns and issues, from traditional social policy to development policy and aspects of gender theory. Accordingly, the initiators emerge as a collective and evade the traditional media narrative, which demands one protagonist.

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Despite all this, it's clear that the citizens' initiative on women's issues will be successful in some regards anway. That's of course important and good, especially in the face of right-wing populism. However, the question remains: Could it not have achieved more?

During the preliminary stages, the initiative had already received 247,436 signatures. The threshold for something to be dealt with in the Austrian National Council (the lower house of parliament) is 100,000 declarations of support.

That means that the conservative right-wing government will have to at least formally discuss the concerns of the initiative. The opposition Social Democrats and Greens support it anyway. The government, however, has already established clarity about its position. Not one female minister, not even Juliane Bogner-Strauß, the Minister for Women, Families and Youth, will sign the citizens' initiative.

## Practical problems and strategic errors

But the initiative has also unexpectedly received criticism from a different corner. The Neos, a liberal party which was founded in 2012 and already holds a few seats in Parliament, represents issue-focused politics, not populism. Its new leader Meinl-Reisinger is anything but an anti-feminist. She only recently announced that she and her husband are expecting their third child and that she will take a short break after birth

while he will take parental leave for one year. But she finds the citizens' initiative 'highly questionable' in terms of women's politics, far from reality and 'uptight' when it comes to political correctness.

Meinl-Reisinger's fierce criticism of the citizens' initiative unfortunately hits the mark on two levels: practically and strategically. In their bold utopianism, some concerns have not been fully thought through. What exactly should a reduction of work to 30 hours look like? How should it be ensured, without limiting the right to vote, that parliament is half populated with women? And where does censorship begin with regard to removing sexist and stereotypical representations from children's books?

This, in turn, accounts for the strategic problem of initiative. Even if does end up being successful, it can never turn into the comprehensive political civil society platform which women's issues and socio-political issues in Austria would urgently need – especially now in a period of the right-wing populist backlash.

## Funding cut for women's policies

The right-wing conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has governed Austria for only a year and in this period, without much of his doing, the opposition has more or less surrendered. The Greens, no longer represented in parliament for the first time since 1986, are caught up in internal fights. The Social Democrats are once again looking at a new way forward. After only two and a half years at the top, its leader Christian Kern, a manager with charisma who did not find the right way forward in opposition, announced his departure. He wants to stand as a *Spitzenkandidat* (candidate to be President of the European Commission) in the next European elections. His successor will be, for the first time in the party's history, a woman: Pamela Rendi-Wagner, a political outsider who has only been party member for a year.

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Without opposition, Kurz is surfing on the wave of ongoing security and migration phobias, which he is fuelling with actions such as border protection exercises, debates about headscarves and Islamicisation scenarios. If a debate about women's politics is taking place, it is mostly about protection against violence – and indeed exclusively about the protection from violence by foreign perpetrators.

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At the same time and relatively unnoticed by the wider public, funding for a range of women’s policy, feminist and civil society initiatives in the area of preventing violence, women’s health, sex education and intercultural advice bureaus have been pared down or abolished.

The list of victims of this policy ranges from the feminist newspapers ‘an.schläge’ and ‘Frauensolidarität‘ (Women’s solidarity) over the small women’s farmers‘ club ‘Campesina‘ and cultural initiatives to women’s and family planning centres across the country. This attack very intentionally hits those women’s initiatives which have been shaped and connected in the context of the second women’s movement. On top of that, the law on equality as an educational principle in schools was rescinded and the gender equal terminology for positions in the army were cancelled.

The far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Kurz’ junior coalition partner, has always campaigned with its conviction to ‘reverse’ the 1968 student protests and its consequences. At every opportunity, the party rails against so-called ‘gender mania’. In a less striking but equally consequential way, Kurz’ Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) is pursuing a traditional women’s and family policy. The new ‘family bonus’, rewards high earners with a tax bonus and promotes a family composition that is robustly based on 'Dad works full time, Mum works part time.'

If the citizens’ initiative had not only brought the expected supporters from the left-wing opposition with it, but also the moderate centre-ground of Austria, then maybe the civil society platform against the right in Austria could have finally come into being.

As it stands, it will be a powerful, colourful and also important sign of vibrant feminism in Austria in 2018. But unfortunately it will be bereft of any concrete political consequences.

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