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Austria's political experiment

The new Austrian government coalition aims to combine right-wing populism and green politics. Can that really work?

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Once again the world looks to Austria as laboratory for political experiments. On 7 January 2019, the new government under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (centre-right ÖVP) and Vice Chancellor Werner Kogler (Greens) might begin its term. Two parties, both representing the 'Zeitgeist' in each their own way and having been massively strengthened in the last national elections in October 2019, have actually come together to form a government that could not be more unusual and contradictory.

On the one hand, there's the new Austrian People's Party under Kurz, which has developed from a Christian-social to a right-wing populist party with 37.5 per cent of the vote by siphoning off support from the even more right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in the elections of 2017 and 2019. And on the other, the Greens who were kicked out of parliament in 2017 and made a brilliant comeback last year with 13.9 per cent, profiting from the tailwind of the Fridays for Future movement and their own pithy, deeply relaxed top candidate Kogler.

Kurz stands for the need for security and identity after the refugee crisis of 2015 while Kogler represents the political urgency of the climate crisis. 'Türkis-Grün', as the alliance is called in Austria in reference to the party colours, wants to serve both: the ÖVP's right-wing populist, sometimes nationalist element and the ecological one of the Greens.

How is that supposed to go together? Not as a compromise, but as 'the best of both worlds', a kind of coexistence. That's at least how Kurz sells his second government. It could also be seen as a national-ecological project that removes the contradiction between right-wing populism and climate protection cultivated by Donald Trump and friends. A clean environment, protected borders — we can see new, politically and strategically interesting intersections emerging.

The Greens' big concessions

As a result, the coalition's political programme doesn't read as a holistic approach, but rather as a patchwork. It includes such tried and tested symbolic political measures as a headscarf ban in schools up to 14 years of age, the emphasis on the fight against political Islam and the controversial preventive detention. All of these are projects that had already been negotiated with the FPÖ.

And then there are green favourites such as the abolition of the tampon tax (symbolic politics again), a solid transparency and anti-corruption package, an air ticket tax (which will still remain lower than in Germany) and the entry into a CO2 emissions pricing system, which has however been postponed until 2022.

How much of their socio-political convictions are the Greens prepared to sacrifice to be part of the government for the first time and trim the country for more ecological politics?

It's also unusual that 'Türkis-Grün' included a controlled way to break the coalition agreement. In the event that another refugee crisis puts too much strain on the coalition, its programme provides for a crisis mode. The ÖVP may then seek other majorities in parliament for tough border measures. The FPÖ — Kurz's former favourite partner — is of course ready.

These are big concessions, especially for a movement like the Greens, which has always claimed a high moral standard.

Can the Greens' replace social democracy?

How much of their socio-political convictions are the Greens prepared to sacrifice to be part of the government for the first time and trim the country for more ecological politics? How plausible is the argument that only Green participation in government can prevent another Ibiza coalition?

In the last few days, we listened to the mantra that political responsibility would require a stooped walk into this coalition. At the recent Green federal congress — the Green party's parliament, so to speak — the coalition programme received a proud 93 per cent approval rating after tough, sometimes heated debates.
But even more interestingly, especially for those who fear that the coalition will bleed the social democrats (SPÖ) in Austria, is what the

'Türkis-Grün' coalition pact does not contain.

So does the year 2020 mark the moment when the almost forty-year-old environmental movement will finally replace social democracy, which is entering the second century of its existence, as the supporting, progressive, socio-political movement? Are the Greens even the new social democracy and is 'Türkis-Grün' in Austria the first field test of this hypothesis?

An anti-social programme?

According to the Austrian social researcher Christoph Hofinger, for the Greens the coalition could have offered the, in the view of the social democrats 'highly dangerous', opportunity to relieve social democracy of its role as representative of the socially weak: 'Is promising paradise that we will preserve our planet? Or promising paradise more comprehensive — also one of a society where everyone has opportunities and where different groups are interwoven with each other with different resources and where a fully-fledged, recognised place in the community is also possible regardless of the resources that have been put into my cradle?'

Under Sebastian Kurz, the ÖVP has clearly positioned itself as a lobbyist for business and industry, employers, taxpayers and service providers. In the Grand Coalition, the SPÖ was the natural counterpart as the party of the working class, the socially disadvantaged, all those who were dependent on state help.

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But: The Greens' leap from an ecological to a social lobby party is nowhere to be seen in the coalition agreement. On the contrary. In terms of economic policy, the course of the previous coalition will continue. With a balanced budget, a reduction of corporate tax to 21 per cent and the expiry of the millionaire tax without replacement.

Income tax rates are indeed reduced, namely from 25 per cent to 20 per cent, 35 to 30 and 42 to 40. But there will be no relief for those who do not pay taxes. The 'family bonus', one of Kurz's most popular measures from 2019, will also be increased. Depending on how much tax they pay, parents will be able to write off up to €1,750 per child per year in future. Those who pay no taxes will be left empty-handed.

Kurz and Kogler, who the media sometimes refer to as 'K.u.K.' in reference to the imperial-royal, Austro-Hungarian monarchy, fail to

tackle classic distributional policies such as inheritance and wealth tax as much as the two most pressing socio-political issues in Austria, apart from the climate crisis: a major school and pension reform.

So what remains for the time being? Chancellor Kurz, as the New York Times pointedly writes, has once again demonstrated his abilities as a 'political chameleon'. He can continue on his tightly right-wing populist course, plus a zeitgeisty eco-bonus, minus individual cases of right-wing extremism.



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