EUROPE 18.10.2017 | Barbara Tóth

Copycat Kurz

Austria's Conservative leader Sebastian Kurz aped the far-right – and won the election

The Austrian National Assembly elections produced two clear winners: the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) under its young and charismatic leader Sebastian Kurz, and the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) led by Heinz-Christian Strache.

Kurz's relentless focus on security, migration, and an 'Austrians first' welfare state has shifted the entire political discourse right. This benefitted Austria's two main right-wing parties: the FPÖ, now very much part of the furniture, got 26 per cent of the vote while a rejuvenated ÖVP came out on top with 31.5 per cent.

Taking a leaf out of Emmanuel Macron's book, 31-year-old Kurz restyled the ÖVP as a conservative 'movement', replacing the party's signature black with trendy turquoise. Like Macron, he invited newcomers to join his party list, including some who had never served in government.

Kurz was skilful in presenting his power-grab as a new dawn for Austria, all the while securing himself far-reaching executive competencies. His election campaign centred on himself rather than the party, with constant assertions that it was Kurz, and Kurz alone, who had stood up to Angela Merkel and shut off the Balkan Route during the refugee crisis.

'When I become Chancellor, I will…'. Kurz repeated these words with monotonous regularity in each of the manifold TV duels that shape Austrian election campaigns. Soon there was talk of a 'Messiah' and his 'apostles'.

As the campaign began, pundits predicted his youth might count against him. Another potential weakness was his perceived arrogance. Kurz deflected such criticisms by appearing humble yet confident before the media. In the end it was Kurz' leadership qualities that won over voters.

Austria's election has been marked by the desire for a 'strong man at the helm' and a swing to the right. What it has failed to do a provide answers

to the question of how to hem in the right-wing populist insurgency.

FPÖ frontman Strache has accused Kurz of copying his own policies. Many Austrians agreed, and assumed these copycat tactics would fail, since an attempt to outbid the right-wing populists would simply shift the entire political discourse to the right. True FPÖ fans, they argued, would always go for the original, Strache, over the copy, Kurz. Kurz has since proved his critics both right and wrong: his toned-down imitation of FPÖ Strache attracted some votes, but the FPÖ made gains too.

Kurz spent plenty of time strategising. An internal paper emanating from his closest circle in autumn 2016 called Strache 'the perfect vote-winner'. Kurz intended to rob him of this role and, to quote again from the paper, 'take up FPÖ ideas whilst focussing on the future'. For Kurz, this meant taking his politics way out to the right while retaining his aura of Viennese upper-class sophistication (e.g. knowing how to deliver a gentlemanly bow and kiss the hand of a lady).

This tight-rope walk between content and style was made possible by two previous Austrian vote-winners: the late Jörg Haider, who refashioned the FPÖ into an anti-Establishment 'movement' with the help of a modern, personalised media strategy, and his mentee Karl-Heinz Grasser, who went onto serve as finance minister in Wolfgang Schüssel's ÖVP cabinet as an independent. Good-looking and eloquent, Grasser was a media talent with a knack for retail politics who understood how to use his charm to sell neo-liberal policies to the electorate. He later disappeared from politics following allegations of corruption.

Kurz has taken Grasser's baton. The key to his election success was his ability to portray the party as a product of his personality, not the other way round. Whether his bravado will survive coalition talks (all indications point towards the FPÖ as the partner) and the exigencies of day-to-day government is another matter.

Austria's social democrats (SPÖ) have learnt an important lesson from the elections too. The party's attempts to woo FPÖ voters rather than 'excluding' them from democratic discourse only worked to a limited extent. Following firebrand leader Jörg Haider's take-over of the FPÖ in 1986, the social democrats had previously ruled out going into coalition with the FPÖ. This changed under Christian Kern, who took over the SPÖ leadership in 2016.

With 26.9 per cent of the vote, the SPÖ did better than some had predicted. But their relative success was not due to FPÖ supporters flocking to the social democrats. Rather, a split in the Austrian Green

party led many former supporters to switch allegiance to Kern, putting him just ahead of the third-placed FPÖ.



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