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Letting go in order to win

Paradoxically, a party split might be the only thing keeping the Austrian Social Democrats from becoming irrelevant

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In the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) right now, anarchy prevails. Officials openly badmouth each other, internal emails quickly find their ways to journalists, and no one trusts anyone else – and justifiably so. This chaotic situation comes from bitterness over their own role in opposition, declining poll numbers, and an undeniable lack of leadership.

Nevertheless, contrary to the assertions currently made by Social Democrats behind closed doors – and quite openly by the Austrian media – party leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner is certainly not the problem. The party, which has chosen a female chairperson for the first time in its history, experiences a deep crisis – and that's just becoming increasingly obvious now.

Since 2016, there have been two changes in the SPÖ leadership. Rendi-Wagner's predecessor, Christian Kern, was regarded as a charismatic hope with charm and vision – and as a bid for voters beyond the classic target groups. However, he could not save the party. The one election he had to fight was only not a disaster because the Greens, severely weakened by infighting, met with total defeat and lost their seats in Parliament, with most of their previous voters defecting to Kern.

The underlying reason for the ongoing failure of the Austrian Social Democrats is much more complex than the leadership question: the SPÖ as a 'catch-all' party has imploded. And that's been the case for some time now. The only difference: the SPÖ's scattered parts are no longer tightly held together by political newcomer Rendi-Wagner.

The SPÖ's tight rope

The SPÖ became a popular party by finding a way to connect pensioners,

artists and the working class. Today, however, this kind of umbrella no longer works. That isn't the SPÖ's fault. Their followers have simply developed diametrically different approaches to politics and life in Austria – to refugees, gender, headscarves, and the job market. Someone who wants to make the left-wing elite happy will upset the working class, and vice versa.

A good example: Should Austria bring foreign workers into the country to fill job vacancies? When the centre-right ÖVP and far-right FPÖ enabled this by expanding the list of understaffed professions, the SPÖ's General Secretary was furious that the government's plans brought in 150,000 immigrants. That's all that it took for the SPÖ to be criticised from the left: they move further right than the FPÖ, some said. But the party was doing nothing more than defending the interests of its core constituencies: the Austrian workers, who would naturally be better off if employers would invest in educating Austrian workers and paying them a decent wage instead of importing cheap skilled workers.

Therefore, the most authentic way for the SPÖ to keep the left-wing voters while regaining its former voter groups would be a party split.

In central political issues, the SPÖ cannot please both the urban left and the more pragmatic working class – and that's not going to change. Moreover, because of social media, a regionally differentiated policy is no longer possible. On Facebook, everyone can read what the local SPÖ groups are planning from Burgenland in the east to Vorarlberg in the far west. All Social Democrats need to defend their national programme.

What does that mean? If the SPÖ wants to strengthen its profile again, it could give up one of the two groups, surrendering it to its political opponents.

And this has been happening anyways in Austria for quite some time now. For many years, the right-wing populist FPÖ has managed to sway former Social Democratic voters. In the most recent 2017 parliamentary elections, the FPÖ's most significant gains were among blue-collar workers – most of them former SPÖ voters. The SPÖ, on the other hand, scored points among academics and many who were formerly sympathetic to the Greens.

A split is unlikely

Therefore, the most authentic way for the SPÖ to keep the left-wing voters while regaining its former voter groups would be a party split.

On the one hand, we could think of a unionised party. It would represent the interests of workers and bring back all those former voters who have ended up with the FPÖ or the new popular ÖVP of the young right-wing politician and now-former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

Without having to take care of the leftist elite, this part of the SPÖ could once again become a competent representative of those who, at best, vote today out of nostalgia. To accomplish this, this faction would not move significantly to the right, but only create targeted policies for financially weaker households. Besides the labour market, topics could include social housing, pensions, and migration. Above all, this wing could communicate in all political debates again in a way that addresses these voters – with more wit and less political correctness.

On the other hand, the urban left wing could join forces in a movement that would unite students, artists, and the bourgeoisie and also win over the Greens and voters of NEOS, the small liberal Austrian party. Campaign topics would include climate change, social injustice, and education – although of course there would certainly be overlaps with the other spin-off party. Oddly enough, apart from the complex problem of immigration, the two camps are divided much more by cultural issues rather than matters of substance.

Of course, the party split will not occur. The SPÖ will muddle through and continue as before despite falling approval ratings. And it will wait for its redemption by a strong chairperson who will at least drown the voice of all of its dissatisfied members.



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