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Ode to Joy

What the new party leader Joy Pamela Rendi-Wagner intends to do with the Austrian Social Democrats

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For the first time, Austria's Social Democrats (SPÖ) have a woman as their party leader with the unusual name Joy Pamela Rendi-Wagner. Known as 'Pam' in-house, she explained that her first names are due to the hippie past of her parents. 'Yes we Pam' were the euphoric headlines in Austria's tabloids, and the news magazine *profil* published a flash poll in which 32 per cent found her better suited as SPÖ chairman than her predecessor Christian Kern. Only nine per cent think it's the other way around.

In Austria, fresh new party leaders with sky-high approval ratings are a familiar phenomenon. But the higher they are, the lower they fall when the initial euphoria is over — once their rivals take aim and the tough everyday business of politics wears them down. The half-life of an SPÖ leader has become shockingly brief. Christian Kern, who the media had celebrated as 'Mister Cool', led the SPÖ only from May 2016 to November 2018. Now Rendi-Wagner is taking over and will lead the SPÖ into the European Parliament elections in the spring of 2019. Then, in 2022, national elections will follow against Chancellor and Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) boss Sebastian Kurz.

Woman, doctor, mother, career changer: at first glance, Rendi-Wagner's biography would seem made precisely for representing the SPÖ against the right-wing populist and conservative government. Currently, the SPÖ's support oscillates between 25 and 30 per cent in opinion polls.

Highlighting the government's shortcomings

In Kurz's cabinet, there is a 50 per cent female quota, but all of its key protagonists are male. Kurz, his Vice Chancellor and Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) leader Heinz-Christian Strache, and notably Interior

Minister Herbert Kickl (FPÖ) dominate issues of security, migration and integration. There is no women's policy in the feminist sense, but a family policy that is geared to Austria's dominant model of 'dad works full-time, mom part-time'.

Who, if not a woman doubly legitimised by her own history and profession, could highlight these shortcomings? And even more so a woman who doesn't come from the party apparatus, but from the outside and is therefore perfectly suited for representing the party's 'openness'?

Nevertheless, or perhaps exactly for that reason, Rendi-Wagner is encountering a lot of skepticism from within the SPÖ.

In contrast to her appearance, Rendi-Wagner, born in Vienna in 1971, comes from a classic social democratic background, typical for those years of social upheaval in Austria's large cities.

She is an invention of Kern, the former power company and federal railroad manager, whose career and sophistication, as soon as he had to change from the Chancellor's Office to the opposition bench, were skillfully turned against him by his opponents. 'Old guard', 'insider', and 'power base' are concepts that are foreign to Rendi-Wagner and Kern.

Also in style and appearance Rendi-Wagner is anything but a typical Austrian Social Democrat. In the past, the top officials of the 'red' party were recruited either from the strongly male trade union wing or from its women's movement — which had a clear effect on the party's character. The graceful, distinctive and fashion-conscious Rendi-Wagner with her chosen mode of expression, feminine taste and cool brunette bob, looks more like a French university professor than an Austrian comrade.

Her first hiring decision was to appoint the former theater manager and SPÖ Minister of Culture Thomas Drozda as the party's Managing Director. He is, like her, a confidant of Kern whose natural bearing represents urban, bourgeois social democracy. Drozda has a possibly Herculean task to master for the party in the next two years: its headquarters has run dry of staff and expertise, and its campaigning power has been badly shaken.

However, immediately some SPÖ officials responded: 'With all due

respect, Thomas: you are a Bobo'. The abbreviation 'Bobo' stands for the urban educated class of the bohemian bourgeois. In present-day Austria that is still latently intellectually hostile, this is more of an expletive than a compliment. Yet one of the most important ancestors of Austrian social democracy, Victor Adler, was a Viennese bourgeois and doctor. This fact is apparently buried in the party's history. And already for a long time Austrian social democracy has ceased to be the representative of the working class, even though many of its officials seem to pass themselves off as such. Instead, it represents the salaried and cosmopolitan academics and pensioners.

In the 2017 national elections, 59 per cent of the workers chose the FPÖ, with only 19 per cent for the SPÖ. Pensioners, accounting for 39 per cent, are the strongest red voters, followed by employees with 26 per cent. The change in constituency from the SPÖ to the FPÖ has been going on since the 1990s. With the rise of right-wing populists under Jörg Haider, the FPÖ has persisted ever since. Political scientists therefore consider it futile to win back these voters. Another permanent shift is the gender gap of the electorate. The majority of women vote SPÖ and Greens, men for the FPÖ. That in turn could provide exciting momentum for Rendi-Wagner: the SPÖ's electoral base is feminist, and it now finally has a woman at the top.

Who is Rendi-Wagner?

In contrast to her appearance, Rendi-Wagner, born in Vienna in 1971, comes from a classic social democratic background, typical for those years of social upheaval in Austria's large cities. Her father was a social psychologist, and her mother a kindergarten teacher. Each of them had two sons from previous relationships. Thus Pamela grew up in a patchwork family, in a public housing project in Favoriten, a working class district. Soon her mother was a single parent, as Rendi-Wagner emphasised at her first press conference.

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What follows is an exemplary career of advancement thanks to diligence and education, which makes Rendi-Wagner the ideal incarnation of the great promise of social democracy.

Rendi-Wagner studied medicine. At a congress abroad, she met her

future husband, diplomat Michael Rendi. The couple shared career and family as a partnership. In Vienna, Rendi-Wagner then specialised in tropical medicine. When her husband was called to Israel for an ambassadorial post, she went along, learned Hebrew and accepted a visiting lectureship at the University of Tel Aviv. In Israel, she completed her postdoctoral teaching qualification during maternity leave after the birth of her first daughter.

When Austria's Ministry of Health announced a job opening as Head of Public Health, it was her moment to play the career card. In 2017 she was appointed by Kern as Minister of Women and Health. At the same time, he made Rendi-Wagner his number two in the election campaign. Only then does she join the party.

Is there anything like women's issues in social democratic politics? And if yes, what are they? In the end, are they a means in the fight against right-wing demagogues? These are crucial questions that can be decided in Austria in the next few months if they have not been already. Carinthian SPÖ Governor Peter Kaiser calls Rendi-Wagner's weapon of choice 'the red trident': health and social policy, gender equality, and justice.

Authenticity and charisma are more important than ever for top politicians; without question, Rendi-Wagner possesses both on the basis of her medical profession and her previous media successes. Even her opponents attest to her great political talent. Whether she will be able to prevail as the head of the opposition against the right-wing government in Austria depends above all on whether she succeeds in breaking through the permanent implementation of a state of emergency. And likewise, whether she can frame the public's fear of losing status and security as being a matter of health, job security and equal rights rather than a question of foreigners and migration.



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