EUROPE 04.06.2018 | Barbara Tóth

Orban in Lederhosen

Austria's EU presidency is pandering to Europe's most chauvinistic tendencies

Read this article in German.

Strong governments take domestic policy decisions based on their foreign policy needs. With weaker administrations, the reverse is true: domestic concerns dominate their foreign policy. Austria falls into the latter camp. The socially-conservative nation of 8.7 million is due to take over the rotating EU presidency in July, and its policy priorities for this period emphasising 'security' and 'stability' are designed to play to a domestic audience.

The presidency's tagline is 'A Europe which protects'. Not, that is, against unemployment, social inequality or data-hungry tech conglomerates. 'Protection' in the Austrian context means combatting illegal migration and tightening the EU's borders.

Domestic politics writ large

Austria's dynamic chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP) rose to prominence in the October 2017 legislative elections on a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment. He presented himself as a 'saviour of the West' who, during his time as foreign minister shut down the Balkan refugee route and 'rescued' Austria from an influx of migrants from war-torn lands.

Now he wants to bring his exclusionary politics to the rest of the EU. He can count on support from ordinary Austrians, but will also be welcomed by critics of Angela Merkel's liberal refugee policy in Germany and across the continent.

Kurz believes the key to solving Europe's refugee crisis lies in increasing

Kurz has also become a spokesman for states in Europe's East that cite 'illiberal democracy' as the answer to the EU's perceived weakness. That is worrying liberal commentators in

funds to the EU border agency Frontex, rather than reforming the way the EU redistributes asylum seekers across its member states.

Austria, who warn of creeping 'Alpine Orbanism' – a reference to Hungary's strongman leader Viktor Orban.

There are already signs that Austria is ceding to authoritarianism. Its ultra-nationalist Freedom Party (FPÖ) won a quarter of all votes in 2017, and is now junior partner in the coalition government. Increasingly though, the FPÖ's hard-line rhetoric and penchant for strongman leaders is shaping the discourse of Austria's mainstream, centrist parties.

Fortress Europe

Kurz believes the key to solving Europe's refugee crisis lies in increasing funds to the EU border agency Frontex, rather than reforming the way the EU redistributes asylum seekers across its member states. He says he would consider sending Austrian police officers and soldiers as back-up. Kurz also proposes deporting refugees with no claim to asylum to detention centres outside of the EU.

Interior Minister Herbert Kickl of the far-right FPÖ has dubbed the strategy the 'Vienna Process', in a somewhat grandiloquent reference to the 1815 Congress of Vienna, which aimed to create a new European order following the defeat of Napoleon.

The strategy hinges around Forum Salzburg, a security partnership of nine central European states: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Other countries will be allowed to participate during Austria's EU presidency.

When it comes to Austria's priorities in Europe, Sebastian Kurz might as well be representing the FPÖ.

Under the Austrian plan, asylum processes and benefits would be standardised across the EU, as a way of stopping some countries, including Germany, the Netherlands and indeed Austria, from being more attractive to immigrants than others.

Cutting Europe's cloth

Security and migration policy won't be the only issues facing the Austrian presidency. Brexit negotiations and the EU budget are also high on the list of priorities. Chancellery Minister Gernot Blümel (ÖVP) will be

leading discussions on Brexit.

On the EU budget, Blümel will need to tread a fine line between national interests and the wishes of other member states. He estimates that Britain's departure could cost Austria an extra €500 million in budget contributions, something Vienna refuses to sanction. To cut costs, Blümel proposes reducing the number of civil servants, including axing half the 28 Commissioners, a suggestion that has riled smaller member states.

Meanwhile, Austria's Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl (independent, but nominated by the FPÖ) says she intends to make closer ties with the West Balkans her focus. She appears to be the member of the Austrian administration willing to use the presidency to increase Austria's profile.

Indeed, concerns that the Austrian presidency will become little more than a demonstration of FPÖ power are misplaced. Speaking at a Europe Day ceremony, FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache explained the division of labour in the coalition: '[Kurz] takes care of the European Council, and I take care of Austria'. However, when it comes to Austria's priorities in Europe, Sebastian Kurz might as well be representing the FPÖ.



Barbara Tóth
Vienna

Barbara Tóth is a Vienna-based author and journalist. She writes for the magazine *Falter* about Austrian politics.