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Austria's elephant in the room

What lessons can be learnt from the recent Austrian elections? One issue, in particular, has taken centre stage

Two weeks after the federal elections in Austria, it is still unclear which parties will form the next government. The far-right Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), led by Herbert Kickl, clearly won the elections with almost 29 per cent, but the conservative People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP), which gained 26 per cent, rules out a coalition with them as long as Kickl is in play. Dropping the leader who achieved the best result in the party's history hasn't seemed to gain traction in the FPÖ so far. Hence, the ÖVP might decide instead to form a coalition with the social democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ), who came third with 21 per cent, and probably include the fourth-placed liberal NEOS (9 per cent) as well.

While standing closer to the FPÖ on key economic and migration policy issues, the ÖVP aligns better with the SPÖ and NEOS regarding the rule of law and foreign policy. Moreover, this would allow the ÖVP to assume the chancellorship rather than be the junior partner to the FPÖ. However, this broader option, the 'coalition of the losers', as Kickl puts it, promises no stability either: the German traffic light coalition of social democrats, liberals and greens serves as a warning sign to all concerned parties about how difficult it would be in such a diverse coalition concerning crucial policy areas like the economy.

Coalition conundrum

A few days ago in *Social Europe*, Robert Misik argued that it is up to the ÖVP and SPÖ (and NEOS) to push back against the far right by forming a coalition. While the situation in Hungary substantiates this worry, a cordon sanitaire around the winner may not be the right strategy — neither democratically or tactically. Even less so, as the ÖVP never ruled out the option of forming a coalition with the FPÖ (minus Kickl) during the campaign, yet 26 per cent decided to vote for them. This suggests that 55 per cent of Austrian voters do not share the apocalyptic concerns related to an FPÖ in government and might feel betrayed by being told, 'It's nice that you used your democratic right, but you voted the wrong

way.' Exclusion from the opportunity to form a government and the anticipated austerity politics in the coming years to address the budget deficit could further strengthen the far right, enabling them to win even more support in the upcoming regional elections and in five years in the federal elections.

Karl Nehammer, the sitting chancellor and ÖVP chairman, signalled that the reluctance to form a coalition with Kickl is not due to the FPÖ's issues. The ÖVP takes – Nehammer said on election night – the concerns of the almost 30 per cent of voters who supported the FPÖ this time 'seriously, very seriously'. It's about the methods with which the populist Kickl wants to address the problems.

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Arguably, the party is not that different from its leader, and in two of the three federal states where the FPÖ is a junior coalition partner to the ÖVP, Kickl's closest allies are in the government. Therefore, an 'FPÖ without Kickl' is neither politically nor ideologically realistic. It does not seem to have worked as a discursive strategy during the campaign, aimed at not alienating the Kickl-averse ÖVP voters and attracting non-radical FPÖ voters. However, for moving towards the SPÖ and NEOS, along the lines of accountability and presumed stability rather than being seen as a 'security risk', as Nehammer describes Kickl, this approach of 'FPÖ yes, Kickl no' might now be a viable way forward.

The election results reveal that none of the contending parties managed to understand the motivations of FPÖ voters or to propose and credibly represent an alternative. This is not solely an Austrian issue; we have witnessed similar situations across various European countries in recent years, highlighting the helplessness of democratic elites in the face of the far-right surge. Much has been written on this topic, but I will focus on two puzzles left by these results that the Left may need to address in the coming years, both in Austria and beyond.

Materialistic vision, electoral defeat

The electoral results of the SPÖ must be bitter for the materialistic Left. The party failed to gain votes under Andreas Babler's leadership compared to 2019 (losing 0.1 percentage point) and could attract almost no new votes from the FPÖ or non-voters. The current voter analysis

shows that out of the slightly more than one million votes the SPÖ gained, a mere 29 000 came from FPÖ voters since 2019 and 54 000 from non-voters, while losing 65 000 to the FPÖ. Additionally, 180 000 of those who voted for them in 2019 abstained from voting in the federal elections in 2024. Fifty per cent of workers voted for the FPÖ.

Babler was a credible candidate for a materialistic vision. Embedded in the trade unions and forged in labour struggles, he even admitted in an interview to being a Marxist. Far from being an orthodox Marxist who dismisses issues beyond labour as 'stupid identity politics', Babler managed to frame feminist, migration and ecological causes in class terms, focusing on the issues of the less privileged and standing with the workers and disenfranchised, whether in production or healthcare. He proposed concrete ideas for redistribution, integration and a socially just green transition. The social democrats who supported Babler hoped to redirect the anger and anxieties of FPÖ voters from 'migrants' and the 'Covid dictatorship' towards the 'upper 2 per cent'. While his flagship policy proposals – wealth tax and inheritance tax intended to affect the upper 2 per cent – irritated economic elites, they did not seem to capture the political imagination of the lower classes or FPÖ voters and non-voters.

Arguably, his campaign was aided neither by the media, who had much to say about how politicians are portrayed, nor by his own party elites, who – during the campaign – publicly denounced his electoral programme as 'unserious' through a leaked internal email. This portrayal depicted him as out of touch with the 21st century, despite his accurate capture of the everyday struggles of workers. However, the events of the campaign's last weeks do not explain why his programme failed to gain traction beyond his party base since his election as party leader in June 2023. In the short term, the challenge will be to maintain a leftist vision during coalition negotiations with the economically right-wing ÖVP and NEOS. In the medium term, the question will be whether the party elites from other factions will attempt to oust Babler. In the longer run, ideological and strategic questions will certainly resurface.

All of this will need to be analysed and contemplated in the coming years. Migration will surely be one element of these considerations.

'It's the migration, stupid!'

To the frustration of an SPÖ that wanted to focus on issues of property, working conditions, inflation and redistribution in the campaign, the main concern for voters was migration. According to polls before the campaign, 43 per cent said migration and asylum were the

most important problems politics should address. These issues entail social and cultural tensions that cannot be articulated solely in class terms.

The significance of the topic in Austria is not primarily driven by the media, but by its tangible presence in the everyday lives of Austrian voters: in 2022, the number of asylum applications in the country tripled, reaching new heights since 2015; in 2023, family reunifications from Syria became more common; the proportion of immigrants who do not speak German by school age is a noticeable problem in public education; stabbings and gang wars increased in Vienna's immigrant neighbourhoods; and just a few weeks ago, a terrorist attackat on a planned Taylor Swift concert was thwarted, which was ultimately cancelled due to the threat. Events in neighbouring Germany also influence the public mood in Austria: at the end of August in Solingen, North Rhine-Westphalia, a man with rejected refugee status killed three people with a knife during a town feast; and in Munich at the beginning of September, an Austrian citizen of Bosnian origin prepared to fire shots near the Israeli consulate — in both cases involved radicalised young men linked to the Islamic State.

These examples also show that many issues are intertwined in the complex topic of 'migration': the tensions created by illegal border crossings; cultural barriers to the reception of refugees; the effects on the social welfare system, which, by definition, create tensions among those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. A related issue is what kind of social care refugees should be entitled to, so that Austria does not become, in Kickl's formulation, a 'refugee magnet'; the chances of someone losing their life in a terrorist attack are statistically insignificant, but it is understandable if the attacks feed fear.

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Issues of asylum, labour migration, integration, crime, Islamism, terrorism and the distribution of social welfare are very different and complex concerns. They require caution, taking legitimate security concerns of the population seriously without oversimplifying problems and creating scapegoats. In fact, all FPÖ contenders took illegal migration and security questions seriously in the campaign, not depicting these topics as inherently right-wing or racist per se. However, the election results suggest that they failed to present themselves as capable of providing answers. Obviously, a party that proposes a simple |migration stop| might have it

easier, but it is a difficult puzzle that still needs to be solved in the coming years.

Neither reframing societal conflicts and the election's stakes in class terms nor a human rights-based inclusion versus exclusion framing seem to work when faced with the material reality of many people experiencing cultural and social tensions that cry out for efficient and sustainable solutions.

The columnist of the Austrian left-liberal weekly *Falter*, Ruşen Timur Aksak, formulated it succinctly after the elections:

'I have to ask myself whether the FPÖ's political competitors – especially those on the left-of-centre – even want to recognise that the issues of migration, asylum, and Islamism are and will remain significant concerns for the population. In my desperation, I almost want to shout: "It's the migration, stupid!" But then I see pictures of spontaneous anti-FPÖ demonstrations in Vienna and fear that the established forces in politics, society, and art will again be unwilling to learn from their failures.'

Pressuring for a firewall against extremists and protesting against a party or electoral results all seem to be blindfolded, self-reassuring or strategies that may serve the elite's interests but are unlikely to convince voters to change their choices, as evidenced by the successes of the German AfD. On the contrary, these actions add fuel to the fire. If elites appear disconnected from the problems many parts of the electorate face, anti-elitist and anti-pluralist parties seem a viable option for them. If social democrats want to reverse this trend, they may need to more credibly engage with material reality, not only in class terms.



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