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Austria's silver lining

Despite the country's far right EU election results, the narrow margin suggests mainstream parties still have a chance in the national elections

In the end, it was not the landslide victory for the far right that had been predicted: Despite coming in first and gaining over eight per cent, the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), obtaining roughly 25.4 per cent of the total vote, only achieved less than a one per cent lead over the People's Party (ÖVP) and a two per cent lead over the Social Democrats (SPÖ) in the 2024 European elections. As such, the far right's results were lower than the previously predicted 27 to 30 per cent, and their lead over the other two main parties turned out significantly narrower than expected.

For the Austrian far right, the results remain a glowing success, given that it is the first time the party achieved an electoral victory in a country-wide election, thus giving it a boost of confidence that it could also win the general election this autumn. But, while the far-right's lead and victory in this election should not be downplayed, they should not be overstated either. Certainly, an eight percentage point increase in support is significant and increases the number of MEPs the party can send to Brussels by three. Nevertheless, these results also show that there is currently no clear majority behind any of the three major parties. In light of the looming parliamentary elections this autumn, this reality offers a glimmer of hope that a course correction is still possible.

A 'triel', not a duel

Though often considered second-order elections and with significantly lower turnout, the outcomes of the 2024 European Parliament elections can nonetheless offer some insights into how the far right will perform in the national elections at the end of September, which it is so far also expected to win. Over the past few months, opinion polls for both the European and national elections have largely shown the same results, namely a few percentage points lead for the far right, followed by a neck-and-neck race between the ÖVP and the SPÖ. As such, the outcome

could and should be interpreted as a reality check on the potential of the far right in the national elections.

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More specifically, they suggest that, despite months-long projections of a significant lead, the far right's smaller lead over the other two main parties indicates that the race for the first place this autumn is still very much open and to be decided. Moreover, contrary to what the ÖVP would like to believe, the national parliamentary elections are not a duel between the right-wing ÖVP and the far-right FPÖ, but rather a three-way fight between the ÖVP, FPÖ and SPÖ.

It is also crucial to note that other parties that did not run in the EU elections will be on the ballot in autumn, which could further affect the outcome. Most notable in this regard is the BIER (Beer) Party, which is polling between six and eight per cent and whose aim is to appeal to the 'frustrated citizens', non-voters and protest voters. They could scrape off voters from virtually all parties on the political spectrum — although in 2019, they mostly won over former ÖVP voters.

Winning over (non-)voters

In light of the impending tight-ish race between the three major parties, it is now their turn to come up with sensible political proposals and a strategy to appeal to as many voters as possible in the coming months.

In response to the SPÖ's continued stagnation over the past months, if not years, discussions about necessary course corrections ahead of the national elections have resumed. Specifically in response to its German sister party, the SPD, insinuating the need for tougher immigration policies, several SPÖ voices have once again attempted to reinvigorate the migration debate. Pundits have also declared that the SPÖ needs to find 'an answer to the immigrant question'— whatever that question may be. The success of this strategy will depend on how the SPÖ manages to sell such policies to its voters and perform the balancing act between offering viable solutions without alienating voters. Looking at the EU election results, the Social Democrats in Denmark, for many the 'right-wing', anti-immigration model version of social democracy, lost significantly, thus raising questions about the potential success of this strategy.

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Besides, Austrian PR consultant, Rudi Fuszi, suggested that the Social Democrats should not

eligible voters do not exercise their democratic right to vote.

just offer 'kitchen-sink politics' but also an attractive alternative to middle-class voters with different worries that social democrats are not currently addressing — such as the country's problems with migration and integration. Appealing to voters beyond the working class might sound like a sensible approach: Voter flow analyses illustrate that the FPÖ won over more voters from the ÖVP – a party often associated with more 'bourgeois' voter segments – than any other party, thus countering the common belief that it is mainly social democrats who lose to the far right. The assumption is that the more well-to-do also increasingly vote for the far right and that they can be 'converted' to the social democrats through reasonable politics that go beyond offerings for the poorest of the poor.

However, this approach likewise misses a crucial point: The next few months should be about mobilising non-voters rather than a trial-and-error strategy of fishing for votes in the voter pool of other parties. Turnout rates in Austria have been steadily decreasing over the past decades, from over 90 per cent in the post-World War II era to 75 per cent in the 2019 parliamentary election, a common phenomenon in Western democracies, as described by the late Peter Mair in his book *Ruling The Void*. This means that today, a quarter of eligible voters do not exercise their democratic right to vote. It would therefore be crucial – and perhaps more sensible – to first and foremost mobilise disenchanted citizens with a coherent and attractive programme, as they might be more easily won over than voters who have already formed an attachment to a party. In doing so, mainstream parties stand a better chance of competing with the far right and mitigating its success in this autumn's elections.

To conclude, while it is crucial to recognise that the far right's continued lead in the polls and success in the EU elections should be taken seriously, it is nevertheless not necessarily the canary in the coal mine, but rather an indicator that a course correction is needed on the part of the mainstream parties.



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