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Sebastian Kurz's fall from grace

Recent corruption scandals have not only ruined the Austrian leader's clean-cut image. His entire political project has been exposed as pure marketing

Thursday is the day when politics is done in the Austrian Chancellery. Or at least what the conservative party leader Sebastian Kurz and his Praetorian Guard understand politics to mean. It's the day when the innermost circle of the conservative-green ruling coalition meets to discuss the issues of the coming week. What will make for good media coverage, and what will garner fewer headlines? Where is the message control effective, and where does it need an extra spin? It is not only in such moments that the Chancellor looks more like the breathless editor-in-chief of a tabloid whose timeline is the next few days' campaigns – rather than like a statesman whose perspective is that of the next generation.

For four years, this finely-tuned marketing machinery was able to conceal the complete absence of any underlying political, moral or ideological compass. A different approach! Time for something new! The surface sparkled, and until recently the polls reflected that. It was only four years ago, in 2017, that Kurz stood as the antithesis to his own party and to the worn-out party system with its grand coalitions.

His plan for taking power was known as 'Project Ballhausplatz'. The old, outdated Christian-social catch-all party – with its familiar party colour of black – became a rejuvenated, right-wing populist movement clothed in turquoise; instead of aiming for a grand coalition of red-black, Kurz first set his hopes on an alliance with the extreme right-wing FPÖ (turquoise-blue), and then, after the Ibiza scandal broke and new elections were held, on an eco-nationalist progressive coalition with the Greens (turquoise-green). All that mattered was that it was different, that it was under control, or – as one of the many chat messages from Kurz's innermost circle of power that have surfaced in the course of corruption investigations so nicely puts it – that it could be 'directed'.

Even Austria's conservative commentators are now finding the correct words to describe Kurz's coterie as what it has always been: a somewhat

snazzier and more professional incarnation of the traditional party bigwigs. Immaculately wrinkle-free, but as old-fashioned in their thinking as ever, groomed for power politics in the ÖVP's most intense and ruthless career hothouse: Lower Austria. In the end, however, Kurz is nothing more than the typical product of a party that has jointly governed the country for 36 years, in the course of which it has internalised the absolutist belief that '*L'état c'est moi*'.

Mired in corruption allegations

What is this all about? Since the Ibiza scandal broke, an investigative committee of the Austrian parliament has been working on the issue of political corruption. Originally, this was supposed to focus primarily on the FPÖ, but it soon became clear that the ÖVP was also involved in '*Freunderlwirtschaft*' ('doing business with your chums'), as corruption is often called in Austria.

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Specifically, hundreds of messages were found on the mobile phone of the head of the Austrian state holding company, Thomas Schmid, which shed a horrifying light on turquoise practices. Meanwhile, investigations are under way into the Chancellor, the Finance Minister, the head of the state holding company and the head of the Chancellor's cabinet. Kurz has been accused of making false statements to the investigative committee.

To divert attention from this, Kurz has opted in recent weeks for a strategy in which attack represents the best form of defence. The state prosecutors investigating corruption are portrayed as biased and partisan. Files from the Finance Ministry were only delivered to the investigative committee when the Constitutional Court involved the Federal President – an unprecedented step in Austria. This follows the right-wing populist template of criticising the elites and the institutions. Kurz does not seem to see himself as accountable to any authority.

A mafia-like operation

The fact that this 'bunch of snot-nosed turquoise upstarts' (Werner Kogler, leader of the Greens) runs the state as if it were their party, practising '*Freunderlwirtschaft*' just as they always have, is actually less objectionable than *the wayin which* they do it. The messaging within the

innermost turquoise circle displays pure cynicism, coupled with misogyny and a cloying sycophancy. The anti-democratic, authoritarian hubris that can be seen in their brazen disregard for traditional customs and morals is terrifying. Comparable behavioural codes can only be found in religious sects or the mafia, or both. One message, for example, complains that 'females' have to be found for the supervisory board of the state holding company, in order to comply with the 'bloody quota' (meaning the quota for women as mandated by law).

One can only imagine the chat messages between Kurz and his minions when the Chancellor attacked the independent judiciary, ignored Parliament's rights of scrutiny and dismissed the findings of the Constitutional Court as 'legalistic nitpicking'. Did he then perhaps also type, 'Yes super. Full steam ahead, please,' into his mobile phone – the words he used to praise his trusted lackey in the Ministry of Finance, Secretary General Thomas Schmid, after the latter tried to blackmail the Austrian Bishops' Conference? Kurz was unhappy about the way the churches criticised his harsh refugee policy, whereupon Schmid threatened them with new taxes. The churches' representative had turned 'red, then pale, then shaky', Schmid proudly reported to Kurz.

'Parliament has spoken, the people will decide' – the malicious slogan with which Kurz campaigned in the 2019 National Council elections following the parliamentary vote of no confidence in him after the Ibiza scandal broke – says more about him and his understanding of politics than he is comfortable with today.

The Kurz brand is ruined, in Vienna as well as in Brussels.

Being a populist is not a problem per se. The people have to be able to understand their leaders. But being an opportunist and a populist at the same time, one who exploits for his own advantage the system he claims to criticise, will not work out well even for the 'boy wonder' Kurz. It only lands you in a credibility double bind, and even the best message control won't save you then. Especially not in the European public.

Are new elections Kurz's way out?

The Kurz brand is ruined, in Vienna as well as in Brussels. The foreign press has passed judgement on Kurz and on the U-turns he performed at the last EU summit on the issue of the distribution of vaccines. In Vienna, the Chancellor posed as the Robin Hood of those countries that had got a raw deal at the European vaccine bazaar. In Brussels, he

threatened a blockade if Austria did not receive extra supplies. Yet the Republic is not one of the countries that lost out.

In Austria, Kurz is still ahead in the polls, but at the same time opinion is divided on whether he should resign if charges of making false statements to parliament are brought against him. The full scale of his iniquities has yet to emerge. Kurz himself has already announced his intention to continue in power even if he is convicted.

In Vienna, commentators are not ruling out the possibility of snap elections to turn things around. Elections again already? Even with the party leader on trial? Kurz has obviously learned a lesson from his fatherly mentor, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu. The crucial thing is to keep a hold on the levers of power. Netanyahu has been Prime Minister since 2009 and has successfully defended his office in four (!) pre-term elections since then: in 2013, 2015, 2019 and 2020. In 2020, he was facing trial on charges of fraud, breach of trust and bribery; in comparison, the threatened charge against Kurz of making false statements to the investigative committee seems like a juvenile misdemeanour.

Marketing instead of policy, jostling for key posts instead of instituting reforms, cynicism instead of Christian social doctrine: if Kurz does not want to go down in Austrian political history as the youngest ex-politician, he will have to reinvent himself – at the latest in a campaign for new elections. He has proved in the last four years that he can be incredibly flexible. And that he knows how to surf the prevailing mood. It's just composure and substance that are lacking.

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