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The radicalisation of Austrian conservatism

Sebastian Kurz resigned after a series of major scandals. But he still wields power over the Conservatives that radicalised under his leadership

When Sebastian Kurz became chairman of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in May 2017 and chancellor in October the same year, it seemed like the only logical choice. Based on polling, he presented himself as without alternative. Yet, everything went according to a well-written script. A few months later, then lead candidate and party leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache, made the script – known as 'Project Ballhausplatz' – public in a televised talk show.

The script went like this: As a precondition for taking over as ÖVP leader, Kurz made seven demands to the party executive, which guaranteed him far-reaching powers that none of his predecessors ever had. The party was taillored completely to his persona: Kurz was given a right of passage, a free hand in the selection of personnel – up to the appointment of ministers – and was able to contest the elections in autumn as 'Liste Kurz – Die neue Volkspartei' (List Kurz – The New People's Party). Even the party colours were changed from black to turquoise. The de-democratisation within the party was accompanied by adopting the core issues of the far-right FPÖ: migration, Islam, 'foreigners'. The ÖVP became Sebastian Kurz and Sebastian Kurz became the ÖVP.

One scandal after another

Sebastian Kurz's political style is characterised by a logic of permanent campaigning and a concomitant mastery of the news cycle. To him, the next 24 hours are always the most important, and nothing is more decisive than determining the headlines for the next day. This leads to him constantly pushing boundaries and producing scandals. He shares this strategy with politicians like Donald Trump, who have made excitement their core business. It also includes a special way of dealing

with independent media and critics, who are seen as enemies to be fought.

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Besides the staged and deliberate scandals, there are also tangible investigations by the judiciary. Sebastian Kurz is not only in conflict with the law because of current events – although the presumption of innocence applies, of course. He was already questioned a few weeks ago in another matter. Kurz is said to have given false testimony before the Ibiza Investigation Committee concerning his relationship with Thomas Schmid and his involvement in his appointment as sole director of the 'Österreichische Beteiligungs AG' (ÖBAG). Thomas Schmid again plays a decisive role in the current scandal, in this case as Secretary General in the Ministry of Finance.

Schmid is said to have been part of a network that falsified polls prepared at taxpayers' expense to deliver them to a major tabloid newspaper ('Österreich'). The latter then publicised the polls and in return received expensive advertisement deals again at taxpayers' expense. In short, it's all about bribery, venality, and corruption. There are far too many scandals, but always with the same people at the centre. Austria's political reality is like a mixture of crime thriller and bad mafia movie. This time it was one scoop too many and Sebastian Kurz had to resign – or 'step aside' as he prefers to call it. But his network and his henchmen are still sitting at the levers of power.

Conservative parties bent on destruction

In my recent book, 'Radikalisierter Konservatismus – eine Analyse' (Radicalised Conservatism – An Analysis), I describe this transformation of conservatism towards a destructive power. In times of multiple crises, a faction of conservatism seeks its salvation in adopting strategies and ideological elements of the far right. The factual truth becomes an object of discussion and speculation. They construct a parallel reality that has less and less overlap with everyone else's. The destruction of a common space of experience is nothing other than the erosion of democratic cohesion.

Sebastian Kurz could

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alone offer an apology. Instead, he presents himself as an unjustly persecuted martyr. He is thus further fuelling societal polarisation: it is never too much, there is no going too far.

What now, Austria?

Now, there are three possible future scenarios. First, we could see a farewell 'in instalments'. Sebastian Kurz, then, becomes a fallen hero for whom there is no turning back. Either because the judicial investigations become so overwhelming that he really can't help it, or because there will be an uprising in his own party. Some already seeking distance.

Secondly, Sebastian Kurz could enjoy his role as non-chancellor and fill that of party chairman and 'club leader'. From this position, he could torpedo the work of the government, the opposition, and the coalition partner at whim. In his first interviews, the new chancellor, Alexander Schallenberg, presented himself as Kurz's loyal stooge and makes no attempt to fill his office independently or deliver a fresh start. He could become the submissive and staged 'Watschenkanzler' for Kurz.

Thirdly, Kurz may be preparing his return to the chancellorship. However, this path will only succeed if he makes a broad majority of the population believe that the investigations against him are part of a left-wing witch hunt. In doing so, he would not negate or wipe away the investigations, but discredit the judiciary as such. In the end, there would either be a Chancellor Sebastian Kurz or an intact, independent judiciary. Unfortunately, this third scenario is not necessarily the most unlikely.



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