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Austria's far-right wins, but can it govern?

The FPÖ emerged as the winner of the country's recent general elections. But a three-party coalition could still block its rise to power

The result was – of course – expected in Vienna and, ultimately, nobody was really shocked. That is why the international headlines are needed that describe the historical and political dimension of the FPÖ's clear election victory on Sunday as what it actually is: a turning point (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*) and a 'right-wing bang' (*Bild-Zeitung*).

With 29 per cent of the vote, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has never been stronger in the Austrian general elections. Party leader Herbert Kickl – anything but a tribune of the people or a charismatic figure – managed to top Jörg Haider's top result from 1999 (27 per cent). Haider is regarded as the role model of all current right-wing populists in Europe. Kickl, on the other hand, started his career as a speechwriter and was previously regarded more as a strategist in the background than a frontrunner.

No one can take this clear victory away from Kickl. Regardless of whether it propels him into government or the opposition, the momentum is on his side. 'Our hand is extended', he said on election night, 'to every party'. The 2024 National Council elections are full of historical superlatives – both positive and negative – and mark a turning point into the 'Third Republic'.

How great would the success have been if the FPÖ had had a charming front-runner as its lead candidate? That is also the first lesson to be learned from Austria's 'right-wing bang': the authoritarian, somewhat undemocratic anti-elite protest project FPÖ has become self-sustaining and no longer depends so heavily on a strong leader. It has finally become Austria's 'true people's party', with a solid base of core voters across all milieus and genders. It is only in urban areas that it falters.

An all-time low for the Social Democrats …

In 1999, when Haider's FPÖ really took off, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) still came first. Just a quarter of a century later, the balance of power has been reversed. The Social Democrats are now only in third place, at an all-time low of just over 21 per cent.

SPÖ leader Andreas Babler hoped to invigorate his party with heartfelt left-wing populism, albeit without success. He just managed to cross the psychologically important 20 per cent mark. Austrian social democracy always succeeded when it took a more centrist and moderate line than other social democratic parties in Europe. But Babler's left-wing course went unrewarded. Paradoxically, the working-class child, with his writing style influenced by Didier Eribon and heavily laden with autobiographical anecdotes, about the 'pride' he wants to return to the working class, did not score points with his target group — the working class. The SPÖ received almost no votes directly from the FPÖ, with only 29 000 out of the party's 1.03 million voters shifting their support. Above all, the party won in urban districts where the 'Bobos', the educated, cosmopolitan, left-wing bourgeoisie, live, who tend to vote Green but this time switched to the SPÖ for tactical reasons.

The framing of Babler as 'left-wing extreme' by his opponents has paid off.

The powerful Viennese SPÖ has already indicated in the run-up to the elections that it prefers to end the Babler experiment sooner rather than later. However, this won't be that easy. Babler has pushed through an amendment to the statutes that provides for the direct election of the party leader by the party base. Anyone who wants to remove him against his will must first organise a kind of referendum within the SPÖ. If 10 per cent of all party members sign a petition to this effect, the party executive can nominate an opposing candidate. In this case, anyone can stand for election if they collect 1 500 signatures. If no candidate receives a majority in the first round of voting, there will be a run-off election.

Conclusion: a social democracy that gets caught up in factional struggles and puts forward not someone from the centre but from the fringes will not be able to position itself as a strong alternative to right-wing populism. The framing of Babler as 'left-wing extreme' by his opponents has paid off. Perhaps a moderate front-runner would have been the better

choice. At least in Austria, we need to stop believing that we can win over voters directly from the right-wing populists.

… a distant second …

This was also something the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) had to come to terms with, suffering its biggest ever loss at the polls last Sunday. Just 19 000 voters switched directly from the FPÖ to the ÖVP, even though their leader Karl Nehammer fully embraced the chancellor bonus and, at the same time, copied the FPÖ's right-wing slogans on the dominant issues of security and migration — albeit in a more digestible tone.

In the end, all the autosuggestion in the world couldn't help. At the ÖVP's final election campaign event on Friday, there was still talk of a 'photo finish' after a 'race to catch up'. But the neck-and-neck race between the ÖVP and FPÖ, as indicated by the polls, never truly existed. With 26 per cent, the ÖVP came in a distant second. A whopping 11 per cent less than in 2019 and a nosedive from first place. It was always clear that Nehammer would not be able to get the 'Sebastian Kurz boost'. Unlike in the SPÖ, however, loyalty to him within the party is still unshaken at present.

And now? Kickl is the winner. But at the same time, he isn't, because no one wants to form a coalition with him. Not even the ÖVP, which, while not ruling out a coalition with *his party*, had firmly ruled out working with *him* in the run-up to the election. In their view, he has 'radicalised' himself during the pandemic and is a security risk to democracy.

… and a potential firewall.

So, there is a 'firewall' (*cordon sanitaire*) in Austria that could take the form of a three-party coalition of the ÖVP, SPÖ and the Liberals — known as 'Neos'. As things stand on Monday evening, the ÖVP and SPÖ can also come together with an extremely slim majority of 93 out of 183 seats in parliament and forge a kind of MiGroKo (medium-sized coalition) against the self-proclaimed VoKaKi (People's Chancellor Kickl).

It seems more likely that the ÖVP and SPÖ will rely on the support of the strengthened Neos (nine per cent) and not that of the defeated Greens (eight per cent), with whom the ÖVP has governed in an unsatisfactory coalition to date.

The election campaign is

Welcome to the world of the three-party

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coalition, Austria! Chancellor Nehammer would then have to come up with a strong reform agenda in order not to look like the chancellor of a coalition of losers. But so far, he has not shown much vision or creative drive.

It cannot be ruled out that the ÖVP will ultimately throw its 'with-Kickl-surely-not' dogma out the window and come to the conclusion that the 'security risk' Kickl could be accepted as a junior partner — provided that the FPÖ leaves it with the power-politically essential portfolios of Finance, Home Affairs and Justice, for example. Even before the election, Austrian industry was clearly in favour of a blue-black, liberal economic project. The president of the Federation of Austrian Industries, Georg Knill, considers the SPÖ under Babler to be 'detrimental to the location'.

And so the election campaign is over, but the power struggles are only just beginning. Talk of a 'Third Republic' may sound exaggerated. But if you take the grand coalition, concordance democracy and the balance of interests between the two former major parties, the SPÖ and ÖVP, as the foundation of the Second Republic of Austria, then all of that has crumbled with this National Council election at the latest.



Barbara Tóth
Vienna

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