How not to run a leadership contest

The struggle for leadership of Austria's Social Democrats is not over yet. And it highlights the fundamental issues facing progressive left parties

When enough goes wrong, bad luck often follows — this understated version of Murphy's law has been evident in Austrian social democracy this year. Months of bitter dispute preceded the referendum held by the SPÖ over recent weeks on the leadership of the party and the outcome announced a week ago was ... unclear.

The candidates were:

- Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the hapless incumbent chair, whose authority had been repeatedly undermined and who represented the centrist position of moderate progressivism;
- Hans Peter Doskozil, governor of the small provincial region of Burgenland, representative of the right wing of the party and on socio-political questions a conventional conservative, yet on economic issues striking a left-wing stance, and
- as an outcast, Andreas Babler, mayor of the city of Traiskirchen, a grassroots candidate with shirt-sleeved folksiness and left-wing ideals, also whirling through the country.

The party leadership had set up a somewhat ill-conceived selection process: party members were to make a choice in a membership poll, but there was no provision for a decisive election should no one achieve an absolute majority or even a clear victory. This has now plunged the party into crisis.

An unpleasant dilemma

For the result of the members' vote was extremely close. Doskozil, the candidate of the right, received 33.68 per cent, the anti-establishment rebel, Babler, 31.51 per cent and the outgoing Rendi-Wagner came third but just a hair's breadth adrift.

The whole thing was a celebration of inner-party democracy: voter

turnout was 72 per cent, with almost 110,000 members participating. But what would now eventuate anywhere else in the world – a run-off election – was not foreseen.

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Next weekend, SPÖ delegates have to decide between Doskozil and Babler at a party conference. They cannot be envied: If Babler is elected, the accusation will be that the functionaries have overruled the members' vote; yet it cannot be that a candidate who had only 34 per cent of the members behind him is simply appointed chair, given he would hardly win a majority were a run-off held.

It is not clear how the party intends to extricate itself from this messy situation without incurring further deep wounds. The vote at the party conference will be fraught.

To put it bluntly: the members' ballot had high legitimacy but no clear result; the election at congress will have a definite result but less legitimacy. That is not a pleasant dilemma.

The rise of right-wing populism

Leaving aside the calamities caused by ill-planned procedures, how did we get here in the first place? In recent months, Austria's social democrats have been debating key questions for the contemporary European left.

The background noise to the leadership debate has been the rapid rise of right-wing populism in the country. The established political system is in serious crisis and, for months, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) has been leading in the polls. The conservative ÖVP, in turn, is willing to form coalitions with the most radical agitators of the extreme right.

The party establishment suffered a resounding defeat.

So Austria is on a slippery slope and the spectre of 'Orbán-isation' from neighbouring Hungary looms at the next parliamentary elections. Social democracy would thus have the historic task of – once again – being a bulwark for modernity, liberality and democracy.

In the face of this, the party is struggling to chart a course, while meantime having to address the painful conflicts with which many centre-left parties are struggling today. The outgoing leader stood for a

moderate progressive course, left-liberal and modernist, yet also embodied an unchallenging, middle-class social democracy which lacked any hint of radicalism.

Neither fish nor fowl, this fuzzy message did not connect with the lower-middle and working classes — with whom it had been losing credibility for years. That line, it at least is clear, has been voted out. The party establishment suffered a resounding defeat.

Two very different candidates

Both alternative candidates – the one from the right wing, the other from the idealistic party base – tried thus to present themselves as anti-establishment figures, close to the sensibilities of ordinary citizens. More grassroots, common-people social democracy, less professional politics and spin from the backrooms of the capital — that was pretty much the message.

Both were banking on credibility and a certain authenticity. Doskozil always pleaded for a social democracy protecting the working classes through small but concrete measures, while otherwise close to the traditional-conservative values of the white-suburban and rural working classes on socio-political issues. Roughly speaking, he wants a combination of economic left *étatisme* and, for example, a more rigid anti-immigration policy, somewhat on the example of Danish social democracy.

So, if you like, it's a left-right combination. In Doskozil's environment, people like to read Sahra Wagenknecht of Germany's *Die Linke*. They pose as 'pragmatic' and paint an enemy image of left-liberal hipsters from the inner cities.

In contrast, Babler is on the left economically and on socio-political questions. The former factory worker is a grounded type, affable, shoulder-slapping and generally regarded by ordinary people as 'one of us' — a bit of a Bernie Sanders just off the assembly line. Again and again, he invokes social-democratic idealism, portrays the party as a 'protest movement' not satisfied with the prevailing circumstances and so pitches to the dissatisfied and the angry as the advocate of those who have no voice.

SPÖ members want a social democracy with a popular appeal that can

In his hometown of Traiskirchen, he has achieved brilliant election victories, winning up to 73 per cent of the vote. In recent weeks, he has demonstrated that he is a gifted campaigner

also win over progressive and urban middle classes.

at the federal level too.

Even if the competition for the party leadership has been bumpy and not without acrimony, the fundamental questions facing progressive left parties have been dealt with in an exemplary fashion. The members in their wisdom did not make a clear choice among the candidates but aggregated a perverse collective aspiration: we want all three lines.

While the candidates may be quite far apart, the members may not however be so distant. They want down-to-earth pragmatism and leaders who exude electability while representing the DNA of social democracy as a party critical of the system. They want a social democracy with a popular appeal that can also win over progressive and urban middle classes.

Maybe the equal allocation of votes to each candidate for leadership of the SPÖ contains an implicit message, as to how a political Solomon might judge the party should be held together by the most selfless among them.

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