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The good man from Traiskirchen

The leadership dispute among the Austrian Social Democrats is escalating. Andreas Babler, a successful small-town mayor, might profit from this

Austrian politics is well used to a status close to a nervous breakdown. The political system has been lurching through deep crises for years. Today, the country is governed by a shaky coalition of the right-wing conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the moderate, centre-left Greens. The ÖVP, having taken a sharp turn to the right in the past decade, has been shattered by the fall of its temporary beacon and former chancellor, Sebastian Kurz. The far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) has been ahead in the polls for months, benefiting from the crises and the incompetence of its rivals.

For many glancing at neighbouring Hungary, the spectre of 'Orbán-isation' under an ultra-right government makes the nerves flutter. In Lower Austria, one of the most important regions of the country, a far-right government has recently been formed, the associated officials and MPs deeply networked into the neo-Nazi milieu.

A paralysed SPÖ

Amid this situation – indeed precisely because of it and as a precipitating factor in itself – the largest opposition party, the social-democratic SPÖ, is sliding into chaos. Recent election defeats and a decline in the polls have finally escalated a long-simmering leadership dispute.

Quarrelling at the top had paralysed the SPÖ for some time. Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the incumbent leader, had long been subjected to the taunts of her inner-party rival Hans-Peter Doskozil, head of the Burgenland regional government. After several provincial elections with unpleasant results, she challenged him in turn: at a brought-forward party conference he should put himself up so that the leadership question could finally be settled, she demanded.

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opponent would back down – or, if not, lose out at a delegates' conference. But he took up the gauntlet and announced his intention to run against the leader – only, however, in a grassroots contest in which every party member could vote.

She had no choice but to agree. So everything looked like a duel between Rendi-Wagner, who represents the centre of the party, and Doskozil, who is considered the leader of the more conservative wing and is oriented towards the model of Danish social democracy. But things turned out a little differently.

Because of the gruelling trench warfare and the rather hapless performance of the leader, there is a strong mood in the party — 'neither of the above'. Swaths of members and functionaries are angry with the entire party establishment, including those within its elite who let things reach this pass but also the troublemaker from Burgenland constantly causing internal unrest.

A window of opportunity for others

And so the call went out for more candidates. The first to throw his hat into the ring was a young reformer from Vienna, the economist Niki Kowall. Two days later, the prominent and successful mayor of a small town, Andreas Babler, announced his candidacy.

Beginning with Kowall's announcement, something even more unexpected happened. Within barely 48 hours, a veritable run on SPÖ membership began: 9,000 joined the party within a few days – more than the Greens' total membership – boosting the previous tally of 138,000.

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The motives behind the surge were manifold. Fearing a renewed shift to the right in the country, many previous independents felt driven to do something: broad sections of the citizenry are simply convinced that the country needs an energetic social democracy. A great many were enthusiastic about Kowall or Babler (Kowall has since dropped out in favour of Babler). Before the 23.59 'deadline' on Friday the 24th, there were veritable accession 'parties' where long queues formed. Overnight it became downright hip to be an SPÖ member.

The party's top officials were overwhelmed by this course of events and had to change the rules for voting in the leadership contest, more than once. They did not cut particularly happy figures, acting helplessly as if holding primaries were some kind of rocket science.

Now that the fog has lifted to some extent, the leadership contest will pit three promising contenders against each other, all of whom are relatively atypical of social-democratic party leaders nowadays.

The three contenders

Rendi-Wagner took over in 2018 after the surprise departure of the former chancellor Christian Kern. At the time, she was more the candidate of the urban, modern, left-liberal currents in the party — a woman with a winning charisma, fashionable and young, socialised beyond the party cliques. She had joined the SPÖ only a year and a half earlier when she became minister of health.

Rendi-Wagner did not have an easy time gaining authority as party leader, but she made a series of mistakes, was overcoached and lost quite a lot of her appeal. Her greatest strength is her admirable stamina. But the doubts as to whether she is the right person at the top have never gone away and have recently become rampant. Her great shortcoming is that hardly anyone believes anymore that she could win a general election. Some of these negative assessments may be unfair but unfortunately, they can hardly be changed.

Casting himself as down-to-earth, to a degree Doskozil is the offer for all those who would like to go back to the 1970s.

As with Rendi-Wagner, Doskozil was a minister in Kern's government, responsible for defence. Before that, he was a policeman. He cultivated a 'tough on security' image, especially on migration. In general, he is on the right wing of the party but tries to present himself as left-wing on socio-economic policy. Casting himself as down-to-earth, to a degree he is the offer for all those who would like to go back to the 1970s. Apart from all political aspects, Doskozil has another big disadvantage: he lost his voice through a laryngeal disease, can now only whisper and is hardly understandable on television. In a mediatised democracy, this is no minor matter.

The party rifts admittedly do not run along a left-right axis alone. The leader has thrown supporters under the bus, while her rival has also made

many enemies. Their dispute is far more personal than ideological. That is why Babler has to be taken seriously — some even consider him the favourite. Many officials and members, from big cities but also small communities, want to vote for him. He has a large proportion of the young and new members practically in the bag.

Babler (50) has for years been regarded as a kind of principled but modest party rebel. When he took over the mayoralty in Traiskirchen, a medium-sized town near Vienna, about 10 years ago, the SPÖ had 69 per cent of the vote in the municipality. He increased that share to a phenomenal 73 per cent, and even five years later saw that fall only marginally to just under 72 per cent.

Many are convinced that a representative of a 'regular guys SPÖ' such as Babler could stand up to the FPÖ, precisely because he can appeal to the discontented and the voters who feel they go unheard.

Although he is considered an important figure on the left wing of the party, that is not the explanation for his success. He is a grounded guy, used to be a forklift driver in a mineral-water factory and rose through the ranks via second-chance education. He doesn't talk like the political elite but positions himself credibly as a spokesperson for the normal, ordinary people who otherwise rarely see themselves represented by social democracy today — and elsewhere vote for the extreme right in protest.

Many are convinced that a representative of a 'regular guys SPÖ' such as Babler could stand up to the FPÖ, precisely because he can appeal to the discontented and the voters who feel they go unheard. His great strength is that he can mobilise anger about social conditions worthy of criticism while saying 'I am the voice of those who have none'. Meanwhile, his humanitarian sentiments on asylum secure him the enthusiastic support of the progressive, urban middle classes. Habitually, he is called – paraphrasing the title of a Bertolt Brecht play – 'The good man from Traiskirchen'.

Rising tensions

As expected, the supporters of the two main contenders immediately questioned the electability of their challenger, despite – going by the polls – they are being hardly deemed popular tribunes themselves. Nerves are becoming frayed.

Long-time party members are frustrated by the bitterness, though many are energised by the wind of change and the influx of new members.

Around the party executive table, there are regular shouting matches: it has been difficult even to agree on trivial details of the selection process. The members' vote is to be completed by May, after which a party congress is to approve the result. Yet what happens if the three candidates – or two of the three – are more or less evenly matched remains up in the air.

Whatever the scenario, this is not a comfortable situation for the SPÖ. The victory of the anti-establishment candidate on a wave of optimism is not inconceivable. That the competition ends with only losers and no real winner is also highly possible. Between resurgence and rebirth and catastrophic descent into relative insignificance, everything is up for grabs for the social democrats in the months ahead.

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Robert Misik
Vienna

Robert Misik is a writer and essayist. He publishes in many German-language newspapers and magazines, including *Die Zeit* and *Die Tageszeitung*.