



A new dawn of anti-immigrant policy hegemony? The Austrian election and its (potential) consequences

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The recent national elections in Austria have been of the more contentious kind and have led to a shift in Austrian power constellations. For only the second time in more than 50 years, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and its neo-leader Sebastian Kurz have surpassed the Social Democrats (SPÖ) to earn the privilege to form a new government coalition (which most likely will be formed with the radical right FPÖ). During the hot election campaign period, two topics have outranked other issues by far and had big impact on the election outcome, i.e. campaign tactics and immigration.

While conflicts over campaign tactics, mutual accusations of dirty campaigning between the two governing parties and in particular the Silberstein affair played a dominant role in the final weeks before election day, the topic of immigration – in particular the management of refugees and the asylum crisis in Europe but also the role of Islam in Austrian society – has shaped the debate early on. It became the primary campaign issue for People's Party leader, Sebastian Kurz, thereby addressing a popular dissatisfaction after the refugee movement's since 2015 and enforcing many claims already raised by the radical right FPÖ. Obviously, the FPÖ is the preferred coalition option for Mr. Kurz, since the parties' election manifestoes considerably overlapped in many policy areas. Especially regarding immigration and integration, on which Mr. Kurz has moved the ÖVP's profile further to the right, both parties share a common denominator. But what would the consequences of a new right wing government coalition be for Austria's migration policy framework?

To understand the potential impact, one has to reconsider the policy developments in recent years. After the FPÖ's internal collapse and the return of a Grand Coalition in the 2000s, the FPÖ's rebirth as an even more aggressive anti-immigrant voice revitalized the pressure on both mainstream parties and contributed to a couple of measures taken by the Grand Coalition: e.g. the introduction of a point-based immigration system limiting labor migration specifically to highly-skilled immigrants and shortage occupation; the introduction of a new integration law including a ban on full-face-veils; most clearly though the drastic restrictions on refugees (annual cap limit, fortification of the southern border, ...) that quite often resembled the claims raised by the FPÖ. Sebastian Kurz' played a vital role in many of these measures and now seems prone to continue, or even reinforce the direction of these recent steps.

Thus, although so far the point-based immigration system has failed to attract sufficient candidates, it is to be expected that the forthcoming government would continue to reaffirm

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it with slightly adapted criteria for access. At the same time, though, cuts on social security payments for foreign workers and refugees are vital claims for both parties and have most recently been implemented by a regional ÖVP/FPÖ-coalition in the province of Upper Austria. Yet, at the centre of an ÖVP-/FPÖ-migration approach we expect further symbolic policy measures addressing the muslim community, that currently has become the key target group for anti-immigrant politics. This is tied to a highly critical stance vis-à-vis Turkey's regime, its role in controlling the refugee routes and its continued attempt to enter EU accession talks. A potential coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ would likely seek a closer cooperation with the Visegrad-countries in terms of refugee and security policy, both on a bi- and multilateral as well as on a European level. However, we would not expect the ÖVP to jeopardize its traditional role as the most pro-European party in the Austrian party spectrum with a tougher stance vis-à-vis the European Commission, not even in the area of asylum. It may very well use Austria's council presidency in 2018 as a means to push for harder measures in the interest of its cooperation partners, but – similar to the first ÖVP/FPÖ-coalition in the 2000s – the ÖVP will still be forced to tame the accusations against its coalition with the radical right by explicit compliance with Brussels.

So where will the road lead from here? In face of a right-wing majority coalition, with Social Democrats tied up in internal debate over its immigration policy approach and with the Greens exiting parliament, it is fair to say that Austrian politics has shifted drastically to the right. The policy consequences are yet to be seen, but Austria might once again be on track to set new restrictive standards in immigration policy making among Western European Democracies.