



Parliamentary elections in Austria - Social Democrats remain stable, gains for right-wing parties

By Maria Maltschnig, director of the Karl-Renner-Institute¹

October 2017

The SPÖ has retained its 52 mandates, but has had to hand over first place to the conservative ÖVP, which gained 7.5 percentage points. The SPÖ gained more than 100,000 votes in total.

The SPÖ was able to win votes mostly from non-voters and former green voters, but mostly lost votes to the right-wing populist FPÖ. Overall, we see a shift of about 4% points from the left-wing parties to the right. The liberal NEOS, which cannot be attributed to either of the two camps, remained stable, while the Greens suffered heavy losses and remained below the 4% hurdle to enter the National Parliament. Even if this is hardly a landslide victory for the right-wing parties, there is still a clear shift to the right. In addition to the percentage movement in favour of the right-wing parties, a clear rhetorical and substantive reorientation of the ÖVP from being a classical conservative party to being a party with right-wing populist tendencies can also be observed. The programmes of the ÖVP and FPÖ extensively overlap.

There are three major reasons for this result:

- 1) Since the summer of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants travelled through Austria - many of whom have stayed - the issues of asylum, migration and integration have dominated the debate and are strongly associated with issues of internal security and crime. Many Austrians perceived the events of 2015 and thereafter as a severe loss of control by the state and politicians.
- 2) Not only the FPÖ but also the conservative ÖVP used classic right-wing populist stylistic devices in the election campaign. Sebastian Kurz and Heinz-Christian Strache answered all political questions (education, social security, pensions, health, ...) with a sidestep: "We need an end to migration". To put it in a nutshell: the social question was thus obscured by the question of migration.
- 3) A large part of the Austrian print media has played an active role in this election campaign, and Sebastian Kurz and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) have received massive political support. The tabloids launched a campaign against the SPÖ candidates in a way that is more familiar from the British experience - complete with photomontages and attacks on the family of Christian Kern.

¹ Maria Maltschnig (31) studied Socio-Economics in Vienna. After working for the Austrian Chamber of Labour and the Federal Ministry of Finance, she was an Assistant to the CEO of the Austrian Federal Railways. After that she became head of the cabinet of the Austrian Chancellor and six months later turned director of the Karl-Renner-Institute.



4) There were major difficulties with the SPÖ's election campaign, which resulted in the campaign leader having to resign two weeks before the election date.

What does this election result mean for Europe?

As has already been seen in the election campaign, a new edition of the Black-Blue Coalition seems to be a foregone conclusion. Sebastian Kurz, who is likely to become the new head of government, has expressed sympathy for Viktor Orban in the past. At the same time, he is close to the CSU's opposition to Angela Merkel within the German conservatives. In conjunction with the FPÖ, which repeatedly calls for a stronger connection between Austria and the political line of the Visegrad states, Austria's position within the European Union could change.