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RETURNING TO POWER:
THE DEVELOPMENT
OF AUSTRIAN
SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

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 **Renner**Institut



INDEX

Few words from the Editors	7
1. Coming back from opposition	11
2. Austrian politics and social democracy's strategic context	15
2.1 Peculiarities of the Austrian situation	15
2.2 Ruptures in the 1990s and the aftermath	17
2.3 Downs and ups in the 2000s.	19
2.4 Turbulence in the grand coalition	22
2.5 The surge of neonationalism since 2017	24
2.6 Recent volatility of the party system	29
3. Current developments of political programme and strategy	35
3.1 Policies and ideas	36
3.2 Right-wing populism and the policy fields of asylum, migration and integration	46
3.3 Developing social democracy's home base: The Vienna model	52

4. Current developments in the party organisation 57

 4.1 "Compass of values" 57

 4.2 The new party programme 60

 4.3 Reforming the party organisation:
 Giving members a say 62

5. Prospects 67

Bibliography 73

Biography 77

Few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case studies is a new publication series from the FEPS and Karl-Renner-Institute Research Programme, which is soon entering into its 15th year of existence. This particular collection is designed to provide readers with a set of answers to reoccurring questions such as: *how are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Is their current situation a result of a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other queries are covered in the volumes that are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to zoom in, they also provide an incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies – being in that sense an innovative assemblage that feeds in an obvious void not only within the world of think tanks, but also when it comes to contemporary academic writings.

This volume puts the spotlight on the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), which in the last three decades has been persevering through dynamically changing political and socio-economic contexts. The path forward has been marked both by impressive wins and historical lows, which all have been dutifully accounted for and skillfully examined by Armin Puller. As a result, he offers an acute reflection. His thinking stretches between the discussion regarding the centre-left proud tradition and the monumental challenges that as a party it needs

to address. Against this background, Puller sets a diagnosis that SPÖ is ready to enter the electoral competition and emerge from it decisively victorious in the upcoming elections (which are expected to take place in 2024).

Indeed, the tone of Puller's narrative remains optimistic. He points to the fact that SPÖ has been one of the most successful parties inside of the PES family – it was the strongest party in 16 out of 23 elections within the Second Austrian Republic. SPÖ proved capable of initiating and mastering transformative reforms, when in government – and when the situation called for it, it played the role of a strong, constructive opposition. Although it noted some significant electoral defeats as well and found itself cornered within the changing compositions of the Austrian political stage, each and every time SPÖ has proven capable of bouncing back. This shows the party's resilience against the backdrop that saw a shift from the two-party system toward a multi-stakeholder one. This also suggests that diverse theories regarding the unavoidable, historical crisis and subsequent collapse of the traditional parties – may see SPÖ as a proud *exception to the rule*.

Furthermore, there are several ingredients of the SPO's resilience. First, the party has been able to uphold a coherent course. Yes, naturally it has not been immune from influences, and it echoed debates that the sister parties held (especially between the 1990s and 2000s), and yes, struggled especially at the end of the era of the grand coalitions. But still, in overall – what comes forward is the recognition that SPÖ hasn't surrendered its position as the main actor on the center-left. This has happened against many odds – among them the rise, split, and fall of the Greens. And, to that end, the party stood that tall in all diverse constellations, having had to acknowledge that *politics of the compromise* had faced severe setbacks and learn how to succeed in the hostile environment typical for the *politics of conflict*.



Secondly, SPÖ has not given up being an ideological party. Puller quotes diverse projects that catalyzed internal political debates and led to the adoption of subsequent programmes. Within them, SPÖ opposed austerity and neoliberal approach, while arguing for an active state and promoting a *Green New Deal*. The latter has been an ambitious answer to many issues, starting from the fact that Austria was likely to be lagging behind in attaining its climate target, and finishing on the need to re-think the perpetually neglected challenge of defining new industrial strategy. Consequently, the agenda focused on progress and prosperity, looking at ways to fight social inequalities, providing high-quality public services, and ensuring means to do that (of which an example is the proposal for the inheritance tax). While the author provides a more detailed record and explanation of the policy proposals, what seems to emerge is a picture of a party that has been considered competent and is more and more credible. The question that remains is how far the electorate will want to see SPÖ's agenda as the project fit to answer the needs of the moment and transform the country in a desirable way.

That also means that there is a handful of other policy responses that the SPÖ will be required to craft more comprehensible in order to outline a coherent political project for the upcoming elections. The party congress later this year will discuss both traditional Social Democratic matters, but also more recent pressing issues like the impact of the war in Ukraine on foreign policy proposals and an ambitious climate protection agenda. These are likely to be critical battlefields, also when taking into account the dynamics of the transformed right and radical right. There Puller points both to the legacy of scandals, the radicalization of the ÖVP, and the very worrying resurrection of neo-nationalism.

But what may serve as yet another reassurance is that SPÖ modernized also internally. The text shows how over the last decade



the party implemented a new understanding of the members' rights and responsibilities, how it opened to supporters, and how it put in place more mechanisms of deliberative democracy. All the reforms were conducted with attention to the party's traditions and without upsetting i.e. prominence of the Austrian regions in the context of internal governance. The study of these organisational transformations is absolutely fascinating and instructive. But Puller's analyses end at a great cliff-hanger, since the volume needed to be finalized and go to print. This suspension is the following. The newly elected leader Andreas Babler won the leadership contest, which he entered as third and unlikely frontrunner. On the wave of interest and enthusiasm, the party saw a great mobilisation and also many new members joining. The big question remains what comes next, also following the upcoming Congress in Graz – will he and his team get the SPÖ to be the first at the finish lines in the electoral races 2024?

Brussels / Vienna, 1st September 2023

1

Coming back from opposition

Following the 2017 national election, Austria's Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) had to go into opposition. This is only the third period of opposition the party has seen in the Second Republic since 1945, reflecting the exceptional performance of one of the most successful cases of this party family. Of the 23 general elections that have taken place in the Second Republic, the SPÖ became the strongest party in 16 elections in terms of votes (and 14 in terms of parliamentary seats). Of the 35 governments during this time period, the SPÖ led or participated in 26, and hence, was in opposition only to nine governments, of which six were formed after December 2017. The last national election of 2019 saw the party experience defeat, with a historically low result of 21.18% of the votes, demonstrating the challenging strategic context it faces. While polls have been rather positive during the course of 2022, designating the SPÖ not only as the strongest party but also as the inevitably leading party of the next government, with the unique possibility of forming a German-style centre-left coalition, recent polls predict an alarming rise of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). The next election is supposed to take place in autumn 2024, leaving some time for the party to develop its strategy. Coming back from opposition and returning to power will be decided, above all, by direction and strategy in the year to come.

Analysing the dilemmas of contemporary social democratic parties in general terms has become a topic of its own. Clearly, all social democratic parties are affected by long-term trends that have been in place since the late 1970s, such as the tendencies of post-Fordist capitalist economies and post-democratic national competition states to be more open to neoliberal political projects, policies and actors than towards leftist politics of social justice, generating the well-known effects of the erosion of social cohesion, the weakening of trade unions and the worker's movement, or limiting redistributive state capacities. While these tendencies are efficacious and cannot be ignored, their identification is insufficient to explain the current political moment. Smaller countries such as Austria may have wider and better options to circumnavigate some of these tendencies than big countries, contributing to the national myth of Austria as an "island of bliss". As popular as this impression may be, the picture of the island amidst a storm leaves almost no space for politics, which is displaced by weather events that can hardly be influenced. Contrary to this impression, politics plays a decisive factor in the development of a country and its social formation. As history and the performance of the SPÖ highlight – from organising its reformist project of social modernisation in the 1970s and managing the crisis of Fordism in the 1980s and 1990s to dealing with the global financial crisis after 2008 – it has never advocated post-political passivism or accepted ideas of quasi-natural electoral cycles. The SPÖ has proven a strong capability to initiate and master original and innovative transformations several times in the past.

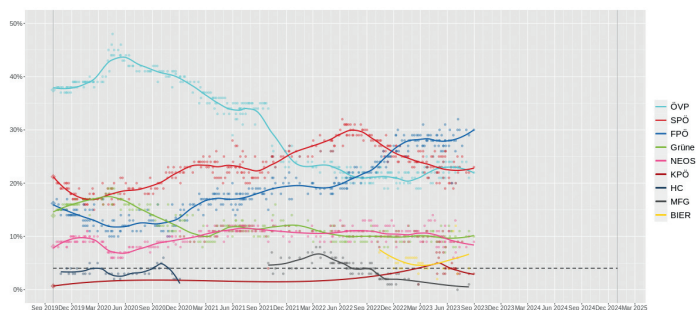
Explaining the current political moment involves an analysis of the conditions of the surge of neonationalism in Austria, as well as the conditions of the SPÖ's particular strategy of being a natural party of government. Hence, the aim of this case study is to analyse the SPÖ's

strategic context with a focus on recent political changes and the party's recent attempts for strategic transformation.

Figure 1: 2019 Austrian legislative election result in terms of votes and seats

Party	Votes	%	Change	Seats
Turnout	4,835,469	75.59	-4.41	-
Valid	4,777,246	98.79	-0.21	-
ÖVP	1,789,417	37.46	+5.99	71 (+9)
SPÖ	1,011,868	21.18	-5.68	40 (-12)
FPÖ	772,666	16.17	-9.79	31 (-20)
Greens	664,055	13.90	+10.1	26 (+26)
Neos	387,124	8.10	+2.81	15 (+5)
Jetzt	89,169	1.87	-2.54	0 (-8)
KPÖ	32,736	0.69	-0.10	-
Beer Party	4,946	0.10	-	-
All others	25,265	0.53	-0.89	-

Figure 2: Recent polls 2019-2023



Source: Wikimedia Commons (Austria2024.svg, 05.09.2023)

2

Austrian politics and social democracy's strategic context

Political parties operate in a complex social setting of constraints and opportunities relating to the political strategies about their context, which they formulate in competition with other political actors. To understand the SPÖ's recent political strategy, some aspects of the Austrian political system and developments need to be addressed.

2.1 Peculiarities of the Austrian situation

The claim of the exceptional situation and performance of the SPÖ rests on specific features of the Austrian political system conditioning it. Three need to be mentioned:

- The SPÖ was formed in a political context that it could significantly influence itself by continuous government participation. Austria's political system was shaped by a lasting social compromise, institutionalising interests of the organised worker's movement in a system of "social partnership" (*Sozialpartnerschaft*). It encompasses representative political bodies for all employed people ("labour chambers", *Arbeiterkammern*); fixed annual collective bargaining mechanisms and one of the biggest public sectors, comprising not

only social infrastructure but also, until the 1990s, key industries and the banking sector under state control. Via the institutions of social partnership, union representatives have always had a share in state power as well as access to the state apparatus and state knowledge. The SPÖ managed to politically monopolise the interests of organised labour. Its most distinct manifestation was the “Kreisky era” of social democratic majority governments between 1970 and 1983, realising full employment, economic stability, welfare state extensions and numerous social-liberal reforms. At the beginning of the 1990s, the SPÖ still encompassed more than 10% of the electorate and almost 30% of its voters as members (Müller, 1996; Ucakar, 2006). While the current numbers only amount to 2.5% of the electorate and 15% of its voters (calculation based on a report by the SPÖ, 2020), they are notable evidence of a strong party organisation.

- The development of the SPÖ is characterised by asynchrony, compared to the main developments of its party family in Europe. After the end of social democratic majority governments in 1983, the SPÖ remained in power and was the party to manage the crisis of Fordism in the 1980s and 1990s, as the senior party in different coalitions – in particular, from 1987 onwards with the Christian Democrats (ÖVP) – thereby restraining neoliberal reforms of the welfare state and the public sector in relatively moderate transitions. After the election in 1999, the party had to go into opposition (only its second time of opposition after the period of 1966-1970) at the moment when the majority of EU member states were governed by social democrats, some of them coming to power after long periods of opposition (such as the German SPD or the British Labour Party). When the SPÖ came back to power in January 2007, again leading a coalition government with the ÖVP until 2017, the electoral heyday for social democracy in Europe had already come to an end.



- Compared to other social democratic parties, the SPÖ is characterised by a relatively stable ideological orientation over the course of its existence. Its programme and direction avoided strong ideological ruptures, even in the 1990s and 2000s (Keman, 2011; 2017) and always emphasised unity between different ideological traditions of the party, a stance and strategy going back to the Austro-Marxist ambition for the unity of the worker's movement and the left. For the longest time, the SPÖ has seen almost no party competition from the left, besides the appearance of the Greens in the 1980s, the party identity of which relies on triangulating left and right. The resulting stability of the SPÖ's party identity in the political spectrum is reflected in the general stability of the party's internal balance of power, which has, until recently, not seen the formation of internally competing political wings. The SPÖ is also characterised by enduring strong links to Austrian unions (Luther, 2017).

2.2 Ruptures in the 1990s and the aftermath

The so-called "grand coalitions" of 1987-1999, under the leadership of social democracy, contributed to a strong economic performance of the country, focusing on high employment based on a combination of further integration into the European common market, with a gradual liberalisation of the public sector and modernisation of state institutions. EU membership in 1995 was the common project of the coalition, helping to set political differences aside. Soon after the 1994 referendum on EU membership had taken place (66% voted in favour), the parties of the grand coalition divided upon issues of welfare reform, taxation and different paths of modernising the country's political economy. Divergent hegemonic visions about state purposes

and the role of markets and the public sector led to the erosion of this form of coalition, which was already suffering from dealignment of the social bases of both parties connected to policy convergence and dissatisfaction of core voter's expectations. The grand coalition has seen a linear loss of support. In the 1990 election, the SPÖ and ÖVP still had a common vote share of 74.85%. This dropped to 62.59% in the 1994 election, saw a rise to 66.35% in the 1995 election where both parties politicised their programmes against each other, and went down to 60.06% in 1999.

The big profiteer of discontent with the old two-party system, neocorporatism and the government was the right-wing extremist party, FPÖ. Its politics – after 1986 a form of post-Nazi right-wing extremism with explicit, positive references to the Third Reich – had switched by the end of the 1990s to criticism against the party state, social partnership and the welfare system from a liberal-authoritarian perspective, putting forward variations of anti-foreigner racism, Austrian patriotism and national economic competition (Becker, 2018). In the 1999 election, the FPÖ managed to overtake the ÖVP as the second biggest party and appealed to those internal factions within the ÖVP, which aimed to renew their party and free them from the constraints that social democratic chancellors forced upon them.

From the perspective of the SPÖ, coalition governments with the Christian Democrats were an unpleasant but inevitable necessity that the party had to accept, given the dangers of rising right-wing extremism. To maintain the coalition, the SPÖ went a long way to meet conservative and neoliberal policy goals halfway and even considered implementing pension reforms that put the party in direct confrontation with the union movement and relevant parts of the party organisation. The rise of political strategies around a “radical centre” and the “*Politik der Mitte*” provided a welcome narrative to place social democracy



in post-ideological, new political times and helped to put it in line with its traditional goals and direction by emphasising the identity of a state party to guarantee social cohesion. However, the unexpected formation of a government between the FPÖ and ÖVP in February 2000, which was met with bilateral sanctions from other EU member states' governments, unsettled this identity as the SPÖ's coalition partner realigned.

2.3 Downs and ups in the 2000s

When the SPÖ was pushed out of government, the type of opposition was different from the first one in the 1960s. With a right-wing government in power, aiming to weaken social-partnership institutions permanently and introducing neoliberal reforms, such as of social insurance and the pension system, it could no longer rely on the endurance of the social compromise that it had helped to shape and maintain over the course of the Second Republic. Austria moved from a political system based on consensus to one based on conflicts. Connected to the ruptures in the 1990s, volatility has characterised the party system and the formation of coalitions ever since.

Under these new circumstances, reorienting the party became a challenging endeavour and focused on two aspects: campaigning against governmental attempts to dismantle parts of the social system and strongly rejecting unpopular governmental policies, on the one hand; and confronting them with a social democratic politics of social cohesion based on popular social policies, on the other. The strategy proved to be successful in the early election of 2002, which was the result of an internal political implosion of the FPÖ. The election saw the SPÖ gaining votes, confidence and momentum. However, the

government continued under a new balance of forces (the majority of government supporters of the FPÖ switched tickets to the ÖVP) and remained in power for the full period, despite further implosions of the FPÖ, the governmental party of which split from the party organisation under the new party name BZÖ.

The election of 2006 produced an unexpected outcome, insofar as the government parties ÖVP and BZÖ lost their majority, and the only possible form of coalition turned out to be the reanimation of a grand coalition between SPÖ and ÖVP. Negotiations for the coalition and daily political business proved challenging. While those factions of the ÖVP oriented towards fostering the social partnership had never vanished, they were marginalised and well-integrated into a conservative party project based on a strategy of antagonising and eradicating social democratic tendencies in the state system. Accepting a social democratic chancellor and the party's new policies was regarded as a defeat. The same applied to the SPÖ. As the core of its strategy was built on antagonising the government, the main actor of which was to become the later honourable junior partner, it was difficult to find common ground. The coalition agreement resulted in both parties blocking each other's political ideas, and infights became the primary activity of the new government. For the SPÖ, the impossibility to realise its main policies, which formed the party's identity in opposition (abolishing tuition fees that were implemented in 2001 and cancelling the acquisition of military fighter jets), became a strong obstacle to its political credibility. Additionally, the party's main success to enforce a new social policy of a conditional basic income in a reluctant form was not perceived to legitimise the ÖVP's main project of an automatism to increase the retirement age among its social base, underlined by popular disapproval in the polls. The government ended in early elections in autumn 2008 that were called by the ÖVP.



Before the government ended, the SPÖ changed its leadership: Alfred Gusenbauer, who had led the party since February 2000, gave way to Werner Faymann. With the change in leadership, a sudden change of political strategy followed. Its main objective was to prevent the realisation of unfortunate polls that saw the party losing the election and its position in government, resulting from disenchantment of core voters. To remobilise traditional social democratic voters with an already-established political allegiance to the party, it gave up the social-liberal rhetoric that it developed in the 1990s; reshaped itself as the “party of labour”, highlighting traditional values and strengthened its anti-fascist line of tradition, entailing the rejection of the FPÖ from a morally principled position. In September 2008, the month before the election, the SPÖ managed to build parliamentary majorities in different settings with the FPÖ and the Greens for several popular policies, such as the abolition of tuition fees (for Austrian students), special retirement terms for heavy (manual) workers to ease problematic effects of the former government's pension reform and anti-inflation measures. While the 2008 election did involve an electoral downswing for the SPÖ, it managed to remain the strongest party and could continue leading the government in a grand coalition, which proved to be the only arithmetically possible two-party coalition. As a result, the ÖVP adjusted and changed its course towards a more socially liberal and neocorporatist orientation. With the emergence of the global financial crisis soon after formation of the government, the grand coalition found a common project and managed – against the pro-austerity trend in Europe under conservative leadership – to avoid a strong recession. The SPÖ-led government not only achieved the EU's lowest unemployment rate via short-time work models, as well as employment and qualification schemes, but also externalised some of the costs produced by a broken financial system onto the banking sector via a levy that was introduced in 2011.

2.4 Turbulence in the grand coalition

Despite these successes, the grand coalition was characterised by mutual political blockages and infights. In particular, the ÖVP leadership faced internal opposition, resulting in another change of leadership before the 2013 election, which saw the two parties proposing polarised policies, especially on issues of wealth taxation, market regulation and welfare reforms. The election resulted in a further downturn for both parties, as their conflicting political rhetoric to mobilise their respective social bases could not meet the reality of government policies. While the grand coalition still represented a combined vote of 59.67% in 2006, it went down to 55.24% in 2008 and narrowed to 50.81% in the 2013 election.

Both the SPÖ and ÖVP tried different strategies to renew their parties. While the SPÖ switched from a social liberal to an inwards-oriented traditional party identity in 2008, the ÖVP had no less than four changes of leadership between 2006 and 2017 (Wilhelm Molterer, Josef Pröll, Michael Spindelegger and Reinhold Mitterlehner) and developed diverse party projects: a neoliberal-neoconservative orientation in 2006-2008; a liberal renewal advocating an eco-social market economy in 2008-2011; the re-emergence of a hard-line neoliberal-neoconservative strategy in 2011-2014; and the return of a neocorporatist-liberal strategy in 2014-2017. While these changes in party projects managed to stabilise the representative functions of both parties, in relation to their respective social bases for the moment, they could not reverse the gradual loss of electoral support and growing public disapproval of the grand coalition. Strong efforts by the government to adopt big political projects, such as a successful tax reform in 2015 (embracing many proposals by the unions and

trying to shift tax burden towards capital income), could not generate the awaited enthusiasm among members and voters and gave the impression of lasting political stagnation in the country. The first round of the presidential election in April 2016 made it clear that the times of the grand coalition were ending. The candidates of both coalition parties finished fourth and fifth, while the candidates of all three opposition parties – FPÖ, Greens and the liberal NEOS – found strong support, even amongst core voters of SPÖ and ÖVP.

As the social democratic party project of re-traditionalisation was widely expected to end up in a further electoral downswing, the party changed direction in May 2016. A change of leadership from Werner Faymann to Christian Kern followed and with it came a party project of re-politicisation. The party gained political momentum, attracted lively intellectual and motivating internal debate, and produced a new political programme of a social liberal and ecological modernisation for the country. The so-called "Plan A" that was presented in January 2017 changed the political discourse and incorporated numerous original policy ideas. The SPÖ gave the impression of a confident party with a strong and viable programme for the coming decades, overcoming the times of the mere defence of its former legacy. To prevent an early election, the ÖVP agreed to meet some of the programme's policies and another renewal of the grand coalition followed. In the perception of the inevitability of grand coalitions for a stable government led by social democracy, the leaderships of SPÖ and ÖVP agreed to renew their collaboration once more.

2.5 The surge of neonationalism since 2017

While the resulting governmental compromise was acceptable to both party leaderships, the internal opposition within the ÖVP grew stronger, in particular, by a faction under Sebastian Kurz, antagonising a further subordination to social democracy in the coalition. As this faction, also strongly represented within the government, started to openly reject the coalition, governing became impossible. Kurz, who had already held the ambition of taking over his party for several years and organised a strong political network, reaching out to media, businesses and polling companies (producing manipulated surveys to convince other factions and the public of his popularity, as it later turned out (Parlament Österreich, 2023; SPÖ Klub 2023)), forced Mitterlehner out of his post in May 2017 and called for an early election in autumn. Meanwhile, the ÖVP underwent a complete renewal of party identity, image and name (“New People’s Party”), positioning itself as the reasonable version of the FPÖ. In its new neonationalist programme, “fighting back” against refugees became the core political issue of the party. It revived its former neoliberal-neoconservative agenda by bringing forward the argument that reducing migration would necessitate cutting back welfare systems and state expenditure to prevent refugees from coming in the first place. Besides the rhetoric of border controls and pushing back refugees, it pursued policies to liberalise labour relations, subsidise big businesses and weaken social-partnership institutions. Neonationalism developed as the common perspective of the ÖVP and FPÖ, to the extent that they became almost indistinguishable.

With the loss of a viable perspective of finding a coalition partner and forming a government, social democracy defended its new programme of social-liberal modernisation but could not manage to dominate the



political discourse any longer. When pressed to address the salient issues of the election period, which came down to migration and asylum arrangements, the party exhibited contradictory positions and switched between strong, reluctant disagreement and partial support for some proposed measures. Despite the SPÖ achieving a strong mobilisation and gaining votes for the first time since 2002, the party finished second, and the ÖVP formed a coalition with the extreme right on their common programme. What followed was a government bound together by shared neoliberal and neonationalist policies. Core projects that were implemented were the liberalisation of restrictive working-time regulations against union resistance and a reform of the social insurance system, strengthening the interests of employers and preparing for the privatisation of public accident insurance. In the midst of its activities, the government imploded in May 2019 due to a corruption scandal, involving the vice-chancellor and FPÖ chairman, H. C. Strache. Continuation of the government would have been possible technically but was undermined by the obvious lack of awareness of the extent of the scandal among the FPÖ's leadership, which was regarded as intolerable among the majority of actors within the ÖVP. Furthermore, the FPÖ seemed to be in dispute over leadership succession and strategy. The coalition was ended by Kurz through sacking the FPÖ's interior minister, Herbert Kickl, a politician surrounded by scandals and the representative of the party's apocalyptic right-wing populist arm; the response by the FPÖ was all their ministers stepping down. When the new (minority) government proposed by Kurz lost a motion of no-confidence in the parliament (first time in Austrian history) and later a technocratic caretaker government followed, and early elections took place in September 2019.

After the 2017 election, the SPÖ went into its ongoing third period of opposition and experienced a lack of political clout and direction. When

Christian Kern stepped back from his chairmanship unexpectedly in September 2018, the party was left rudderless. Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the party's first chairwoman, stepped on stage in October 2018. The implosion of the government and the election campaign in 2019 took place in the context of an unsettled party strategy and deficiency of organisational strength. The party's election campaign combined elements of both its former strategies of re-traditionalisation and social-liberal modernisation in a way that was seen as disconnected from the dominant issues of the political discourse. The ÖVP managed to sideline policy issues in a campaign focusing on Sebastian Kurz in his fight to come back to power against the parliamentary decision to withdraw confidence in the former chancellor. The election resulted in a surge of the ÖVP and a historical low for the SPÖ. As the renewal of a right-wing government with the FPÖ became an impossibility for the ÖVP, it formed a coalition with the Greens. Not least due to the weak election result of the SPÖ, the Greens, who were elected out of parliament in 2017, could celebrate their biggest election victory (13.9%) and were eager to enter government. An earlier attempt in 2002 to form a coalition between the ÖVP and the Greens failed because of excessive demands made by the Greens. Now with the rare emergence of a second opportunity to enter government, the Greens accepted the dominance of neonationalism as a principal direction of the government and settled for soft elements of ecological modernisation (via a reduction of ticket prices for train commuters and a moderate carbon tax). Neonationalism, in particular, in terms of anti-migration policies and an emphasis on economic competitiveness, was regarded by the Greens as an inescapable reality of Austrian politics. An "ethics of responsibility" to prevent the FPÖ from returning to power would necessitate support of the ÖVP's politics.

With the advent of the pandemic, the government focused on tackling the triple crisis of public health, economy and the social

situation with unsuspected state interventionism exceeding that of most other European countries. Besides providing a wide-ranging short-work model, the economic crisis management concentrated on providing substantive and often immoderate direct financial support for businesses in the form of clientelism and prioritising high-income groups. Furthermore, the government was overshadowed by judicial investigations into the political network of Kurz and his first government, revealing possible corruption scandals. The scandals were met with illiberal campaigning against the independence of the legal system and its bodies by Kurz and his party. When the investigations against Kurz were extended to cover a possible deception of parliament over the appointment of a close personal ally to governmental high office, pressures on Kurz became stronger, forcing him to step back in October 2021. A first attempt to continue his government by supervising his appointed successor, Alexander Schallenberg, as chancellor and his party's ministers from the outside failed soon after, resulting in a big reshuffle of the ÖVP ministers in the cabinet. Since December 2021, the government has been presided over by Karl Nehammer.

The ÖVP has not recovered from the spectacular fall of Kurz and is suffering from weak polls and strong disapproval, undermining the possibility of the party forming another coalition with the Greens. According to current polls (June 2023), only up to 34% of voters would support one of the two government parties (OGM, 2023). The regional elections in January 2023, in the party's stronghold of Lower Austria, saw the ÖVP losing almost ten percentage points. In the Salzburg election of April 2023 it lost 7.4 percentage points. In both cases it formed a state government with a strengthened FPÖ. In the Carinthian election in March 2023, the ÖVP consolidated on a low level as the third-ranked party and formed a coalition with the SPÖ as the junior party. Hence, both governmental parties are clinging to power and

have resisted calls for early elections. These are brought forward, in particular, by the FPÖ, the rise of which might cause astonishment given their recent record of corruption and lack of governmental competence. Shaking off these incidents is not only connected to popular support for neonationalism that is shifting back from the ÖVP towards the FPÖ but also to a number of other factors, such as powerful campaigning against the government's (already-scrapped) measures to contain the pandemic, opposition to governmental policies of ecological modernisation and inaction against inflation, as well as addressing strong popular support for Austria's declared neutrality in the current war of Russia against Ukraine. The FPÖ has managed to successfully monopolise wide-ranging discontent with the government, and position itself as the anti-system opposition whereas the rest of the opposition in this context appears much less confrontational. While social democracy has found an effective political line over the course of 2022, emphasising its successful historical record of governmental competence, it now remains for the party to clarify its political project.

Figure 3: Election results in the Second Republic 1945-2019

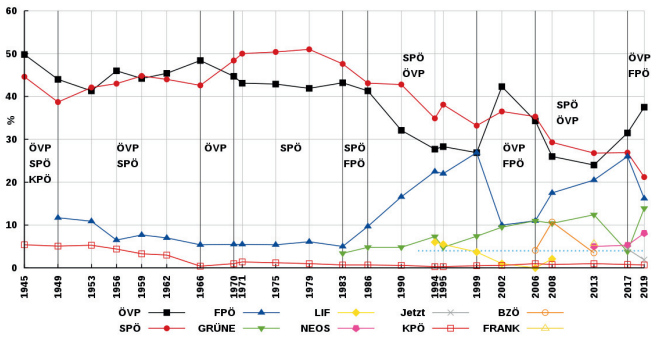


Figure 4: Periodisation of Austrian governments

Period	Parties in government	SPÖ's position	Elections	Average vote share of SPÖ
1945-1966	ÖVP-SPÖ	Junior partner in grand coalition	1945, 1949, 1953, 1956, 1959, 1962	42.9%
1966-1970	ÖVP	Opposition	1966	42.6%
1970-1983	SPÖ	Governmental majority	1970, 1971, 1975, 1979	50.1%
1983-1986	SPÖ-FPÖ	Senior partner in coalition	1983	47.6%
1987-1999	SPÖ-ÖVP	Senior partner in grand coalition	1986, 1990, 1994, 1995	39.7%
2000-2006	ÖVP-FPÖ/ BZÖ	Opposition	1999, 2002	34.8%
2007-2017	SPÖ-ÖVP	Senior partner in grand coalition	2006, 2008, 2013	30.5%
2017-2019	ÖVP-FPÖ			
2019	Caretaker government	Opposition	2017	26.9%
2019-*	ÖVP-Greens		2019	21.2%

2.6 Recent volatility of the party system

While Austria's party system is still comparably rather stable, it has also seen novel forms of volatility, reflecting an erosion of political representation. This affects, in particular, the established parties of the grand coalition having lost the former support that once defined them as mass parties but also the FPÖ having to withstand the alternation of highs (1999, 2008, 2013, 2017) and dramatic lows (2002, 2019). Additionally, new parties have emerged and disappeared in the last

elections. In 2013, when the election turnout declined to a historic low of 74.9%, two new parties entered parliament (NEOS with 4.6% and the business party FRANK with 5.7%). In 2017, in an election with strong party competition and a return of the turnout to 80%, the Green party split and only the marginalised wing PILZ (later JETZT) entered parliament with 4.4%, while the Greens and FRANK could no longer meet the 4% threshold. In 2019, turnout declined to 75.6% again and JETZT disappeared, while the Greens re-entered parliament.

The most successful new party is NEOS, which advocates liberalism that is traditionally rather weak in Austria's political spectrum. NEOS succeeded in filling a political vacuum that was created after the Christian Democrats shifted to hard-line neoconservatism in 2012. Although the ÖVP has weakened this programmatic tradition after its historical low election result in 2013, NEOS could defend its place in parliament by combining classical liberal economic and social positions with policies to strengthen transparency, market solutions to tackle the climate crisis and improving educational standards, thereby attracting a relevant segment of professional middle-class voters. NEOS is a clear opponent of Austria's neocorporatist political system and stands in strong competition with the ÖVP due to its social base overlapping with social milieus formerly exclusively represented by the ÖVP. As its liberalism stands in conflict with the FPÖ's liberal tradition coupled with authoritarian neonationalism, the party is not supportive of governments led by the FPÖ. At the state level, it is a junior coalition partner in the Vienna government led by the SPÖ and was also, until recently, part of the Salzburg government led by the ÖVP. In the current constellation, NEOS is a potential coalition partner for the SPÖ at the national level if a majority could be established in combination with the Greens.

Volatile tendencies of the party system persist. It is not unlikely that a new party might be able to enter parliament in the next national

election. During the core phase of the pandemic, a right-wing party named MFG ("People, Freedom, Fundamental Rights") emerged, centring around opposition to measures preventing the spreading of COVID-19, including wearing masks and vaccinations. Its home base is located in rural parts of Upper Austria, where it could enter the state's parliament in the 2021 election with 6.2%. According to most polls during the years 2021 and 2022, the party would have made it into parliament in the case of a national election. With the end of the pandemic and corresponding measures, the party has vanished. Its supporters are strongly attracted by the FPÖ, which has equally taken an anti-measures stance under the leadership of Herbert Kickl and was hit hardest by the existence of the MFG. Both parties were competing in the political representation of the anti-measures protest that could mobilise several tens of thousands people at the beginning of 2022.

Another contender appearing in the party system is the Beer Party. It champions a satirical programme proposing a "beerocracy", with public beer fountains and celebrating heavy beer consumption in a country that is known for one of the highest rates of alcohol consumption per capita among the countries of the OECD. At the same time, it addresses topical left-liberal concerns opposing racism and discrimination in a frivolous way ("tolerance of foreign beers", "diversity in brewing culture", "supporting people with lower drinking capacities"). Its party leader, Dominik Wlazny, better known as punk-rock singer Marco Pogo, achieved political fame in Austria's presidential election in October 2022, where he finished third with 8.3% of the vote share (and second in Vienna with 10.7%). The party is not yet present in parliament or the legislative bodies of the Austrian states but won mandates in half of Vienna's districts in the 2020 election and may intend to participate in upcoming elections. If this ambition holds and the party manages to reproduce the successes of its presidential campaign, its candidacy

will affect parties of the left and liberals more strongly than parties of the right. Some polls show the Beer Party managing to overcome the 4% threshold required to enter parliament, enhancing the difficulties for coalition formation in a potential six-(or-seven-) party system.

A surprising development is the re-emergence of the Austrian Communist party KPÖ. Due to its significant role in the Austrian resistance movement against the Nazi regime, the KPÖ was one of the three parties of the post-war democratic order and was represented in parliament until the end of the 1950s. After the Hungarian Revolution of autumn 1956 was brutally crushed by the Soviet Union, the party lost support and was voted out of parliament in the 1959 election. Since then, there has been no party presence in parliament to the left of the SPÖ. The recent communist revitalisation took place starting from Styria, where the party established itself as a credible and ambitious representation of tenants' interests and managed to take over the mayoralty of Graz, Austria's second largest city, in November 2021. The success of the KPÖ can be attributed to the weakness of the parties of the grand coalition but also to the KPÖ's popular policies and principled positions in salient political issues such as housing. It has thereby filled a political vacuum created by the implosion of Graz's social democracy in infights over the last two decades, which have pushed the SPÖ to fifth place. In the April 2023 state elections in Salzburg, the party also achieved considerable success, entering the state parliament with 11.6% and 4 out of 36 mandates. The issue of housing addresses the pressing social question in the current cost of living crisis. The successes in Graz and Salzburg are a boost for the party's efforts to come back on the national level. A clear potential in this direction was exhibited in recent polls since April.

The volatility of the party system corresponds to the turbulence of political representation by the SPÖ and ÖVP. Their party identities have



seen substantial swings between different lines of tradition, and their party projects revealed short-term endurance and tensions between their orientation on a politics of representation and the imperatives of governmental stability. The dilemmas of grand coalitions are highlighted by public disapproval, with the last grand coalition government rising from a level of 51% in September 2013 to 68% in May 2016 and 72% in October 2017 (Plasser and Sommer, 2018) and voter preferences for this type of coalition sinking from levels of 22% at the 2008 election to 15% in the 2017 election (ibid.). The recent history of Austrian politics demonstrates that success belongs to those parties that seek to develop novel hegemonic political visions and dare to transform existing political antagonisms. This involves constituting new political fault lines, shifting voter's preferences, instead of accepting them as a given. The failures of the Kurz governments connected to corruption (as investigated by parliament (Parlament Österreich 2021;2023; SPÖ Klub, 2023)), governmental incompetence and a lack of capacity to organise consent for its political projects, ending in a fiasco, are a windfall for social democracy and have created a window of opportunity to combat neonationalism. Its rise is also a symptom of public discontent with grand coalitions and an indicator of the demand for political reforms that were blocked by this very form of coalition.

3

Current developments of political programme and strategy

Since being in opposition, the SPÖ has been trying to define its party identity by navigating between different lines of tradition and establishing a political project for government. It has adopted and maintained several policies from its party project of social-liberal re-politicisation but also a commitment to appeal to working-class core voters from its earlier party project of re-traditionalisation. The combination was held together by a pragmatic stance to avoid internal conflicts and factionalism between representatives of both strategies by emphasising an orientation “neither to the left nor, certainly, to the right but ahead to the future”, as former chairperson Rendi-Wagner (cited by the SPÖ, 2018a) put it at the 2018 national congress in her very first address to the party. The combination was not only elaborated on in the party’s 2019 electoral manifesto (SPÖ, 2019a) but also ideologically grounded in the party’s tradition as a state party of strengthening economic and social cohesion, highlighting its long record of governmental competence in a programmatic speech by Rendi-Wagner held in March 2022 at the peak of social democracy’s poll surge (SPÖ, 2022a). It is to be expected that the recent change in leadership in June 2023 to Andreas Babler will produce a novel party project shifting leftwards, aiming to outline and frame the party’s

policies and ideas within an accentuated left and mobilising, offensive strategy and party identity.

3.1 Policies and ideas

Being on the defence, the SPÖ is yet to define a coherent political project for a return to government. In doing so, it can draw on popular policies and ideas that it has developed in several policy fields, for example, tackling the pressing issue of inflation, developing Austria's industrial sector, proposing a *Green New Deal*, solving the care crisis and current challenges in the health system, and establishing social justice via capital and inheritance taxes. Some of these policies were proposed in the 2019 election manifesto (SPÖ, 2019a) in policy papers (SPÖ 2019b; 2022b) and have recently been renewed in the party's action programme from January (SPÖ, 2023a). Salient fields of contestation in Austrian politics are also the issues of asylum, migration and integration that are covered in the next chapter (3.2).

3.1.1 Tackling inflation

With the concurrence of the breakdown of economic supply chains and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Austria has seen a strong increase of inflation to levels unfamiliar in the last 50 years. This affects not only energy prices but also groceries and, in particular, rents. Most low-income households face serious difficulties paying their bills, and middle-class households experience significant and threatening cuts to their purchasing power. One of the more problematic issues is the Austrian rent spiral. Rent increases were a major long-term driver of general inflation before the events of 2022. Between 2010 and 2020, when general consumer prices increased by less than 20%, rents increased by 50% in the private sector, by 38.5%

in the low-profit sector and 35.3% in the public sector (Huber, 2022). These increases are connected to real-estate speculation, lack of public housing investment (outside of Vienna) and aggressive strategies within the sector to undermine the otherwise strong Austrian tenancy laws. With general inflation being high at the moment, the spiral continues as real-estate companies are allowed to automatically increase rents with consumer prices for every accumulated 5% increase. The last rent increase wave arrived in summer 2023, adding up to four increases for many renters over the course of only 15 months. The SPÖ demands that rents should be frozen for the next two years to break this spiral and that new regulations should be introduced to restrict rent increases to only one annual increase of 2% maximum after 2025 (SPÖ, 2023a). In the energy sector, the SPÖ was the first party to propose energy price caps and has dominated the policy field early on. When the government finally changed course to introduce such a cap for electricity, the SPÖ emphasised the importance to also cap gas prices to help households and businesses. Energy prices remain a pressing political issue, in particular, given the strong imbalance between the arising cost of living crisis and the surging profits for energy providers, which have tripled in 2022 alone (with surplus profits remaining untaxed by the government). The party is also calling for a deep reform of the European energy market to scrap the liberalisation of the sector and its merit-order system, which fuels the inflation of energy prices and produces competitive disadvantages for the EU's economy (SPÖ, 2022b). Another popular demand is a temporary suspension of VAT on groceries. With these policies, the SPÖ has managed to dominate the political debate on inflation strongly. Thereby, it has mainly relied on pragmatic proposals that can be implemented in parliament on a short-term basis and are compatible with the government's stance of avoiding structural reforms (such as via tax reduction or temporary

caps to help households across income levels as well as businesses). At the same time, it has also proposed genuine social democratic policies, in particular, in housing (proposing public investments and restricting profit-driven real-estate strategies) and the energy sector (via market regulation).

3.1.2 Developing Austria's industrial sector and accomplishing the energy transition

Industrial policy is a rather neglected policy field in Austria, in particular, since the crisis of the nationalised industries in the 1980s and the strong integration of Austrian industries into the business cycles of the German industrial sector. The Austrian manufacturing sector accounts for 28.8% of total economic output; its industry share (manufacturing without construction) is 22%, which is one of the highest shares in the EU. This has contributed to the stable economy of the country, even in times of crisis. Bringing back this field of policy aims to secure, steer and support the industrial sector through a coordinated strategy for the necessary transition towards decarbonisation and environmental sustainability (ibid.). To do so, a financially strong public energy transition fund, under the umbrella of the state holding company ÖBAG, should be set up to coordinate national investments and state shareholding in strategic partnerships, as well as to initiate and fund research and development of innovative technologies and business models in this sector. Critical infrastructure and the acquisition of critical raw materials cannot be left to markets if risks of price fluctuations and supply uncertainties are to be minimised. Another pillar of this strategy is extending measures to improve the qualifications and training of employees in future technological sectors. Austria does have a long-established skilled workers' training system, combining public and private elements in education and direct funding

for employees to retrain. The energy transition demands tens of thousands of new specialists, such as technicians, heating installers or mechatronic engineers. For the energy transition to succeed, training programmes for skilled workers must be either launched or enlarged at an early stage. Addressing the shortage of skilled labour requires that existing workers are trained for the tasks of the economy of the future. Active state interventionism via investments in research and development, education, qualifications, training and welfare, in line with the strategy of the entrepreneurial state, is social democracy's way forward to a new industrial policy. It radically differs from the neonationalist approaches of reducing industrial policy to mere direct funding and tax breaks for companies, as well as reducing labour rights by further work-time flexibilisation and labour costs by scaling back incidental wage costs. The aim is to use state intervention to create new governance models to induce and steer the transition towards social-ecological modernisation. This also implies that industrial policy cannot be separated from important tasks to guarantee the provision of public services in welfare, health, education and mobility.

3.1.3 Green New Deal for Austria

The plans for setting up an energy transition fund and a Labour Foundation to requalify people for professions needed for the transition towards a decarbonised economy also form part of the concept of the SPÖ's *Green New Deal for Austria* (SPÖ 2019a; 2021a; 2021b). This proposal spells out the idea that tackling the climate crisis cannot rest on instruments of market making and goals of changing individual behaviour. If climate policy is reduced to such a strategy, not only will Austria fail to generate the intended outcomes, such as the goal to achieve climate neutrality by 2040, but will also contribute to increasing social inequality. Therefore, a social democratic perspective

on mitigation and adaptation is needed that does not rely on market forces of supply and demand and intervening through prices but by changing systems of economy, energy and transport. Austria is particularly affected by climate change. In 2018, the temperature was already more than 2°C above the pre-industrial level, an increase about twice as high as the global average (Rechnungshof Österreich, 2021). At the moment, Austria has no coordinated strategy with regard to achieving the EU's climate targets. The last Climate Protection Act, defining a national strategy, was adopted in 2011 and ended in 2020. The current government has not yet introduced a new strategy, leaving institutions, citizens and businesses in the dark. Since 2020, the SPÖ and other opposition parties have put pressure on the government to initiate political debate but have not succeeded. It is widely assumed that the ÖVP is blocking significant negotiations within the coalition. This is particularly problematic as Austria is already strongly lagging behind other European countries in achieving the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 (combating climate change and its impacts) and EU targets. According to the Federal Environment Agency, Austria will clearly miss the climate targets for 2030 and 2050 on the basis of the binding measures currently implemented and planned. It is already one of the few EU countries not to have reduced its carbon emissions in relation to 1990 levels at all. In relation to 2005 levels, emissions decreased by about 18% by 2021 but are expected to rise again with the recovering economy after the pandemic. When the EU target of emission reduction was set at -36% by 2030, Austria's Federal Court of Audit estimated that the necessary compensation through the purchase of emission certificates would amount to €9.2 billion by 2030 (ibid.). With the EU target now set to a reduction of 55%, the costs of inaction increase drastically. The SPÖ's *Green New Deal* aims to achieve EU targets via transitioning industry and energy



systems but also focuses strongly on mobility. Austria is already the top performer in the EU when it comes to train travel. To improve this, the SPÖ proposed the “1-2-3 climate ticket” (SPÖ, 2019a) in its election programme in 2019 for regional train travels, making tickets cheaper and train travel more attractive for commuters. This should be combined with financial incentives for commuting by train; the existing commuter allowance system is only for car journeys. Furthermore, the SPÖ calls for an extension of the existing train network infrastructure and further electrification to provide better services and allow commuters to substitute travelling by car in less urban areas of the country. The plan also entailed the implementation of a carbon tax, contributing to the international Green Climate Fund to support climate action in poorer countries and supporting climate initiatives of businesses. The ideas of train ticket reductions and carbon taxation were taken up by the government after 2020, but public transport systems have not seen improvement and the chosen model of carbon taxation is unlikely to generate significant effects other than to produce tax revenue.

3.1.4 Solving the care crisis and strengthening the public health system

Currently, about 450,000 people in Austria are dependent on care, and the number is expected to rise due to longer life expectancy. By 2050, it is estimated that 750,000 people will be care dependent. This is a huge challenge for Austria's welfare state, in terms of the provision of care facilities and caregivers. The care system is extremely complex and encompasses public and private institutions at different levels of federal, provincial and municipal competence, offering different services that can hardly be compared by dependents and their relatives. Austria's otherwise comprehensive social insurance system does not directly provide care but offers a care allowance, implemented in 1993

as a payment according to the state of health and degree of care required. Although the allowance was increased over time, it was not adjusted for inflation and has lost more than a third of its former value. Furthermore, this model has not led to the expansion of care facilities but to the use of private services, often outsourced to female relatives and poorly paid workers, mostly as 24/7 nurses from Eastern European countries working as self-employed one-person businesses. The SPÖ aims to change this system by switching from financial payments to service delivery (SPÖ, 2019b). To do so, a public care guarantee fund combining existing facilities and services across levels of competence, as well as investing in the building of new ones and hiring and training nurses, is to be established. The allocation of care services and places, whether stationary, part-stationary, mobile, short term or long term, is to be organised centrally by regional one-stop shops and in a transparent and unbureaucratic procedure. The “care guarantee” aims to provide care on the basis of need and independent of the financial capability of families. At present, most often, care allowances are insufficient to afford the quality of care that is needed, putting dependents and their families in financial trouble and a state of desperation.

Care has been a political issue in Austria for a very long term, but reforms were blocked within the grand coalition, as the ÖVP has always been in favour of direct payments rather than (public) systems of provisioning. When the issue of care became salient in the run-up to the 2017 general election, the ÖVP finally agreed to end one of the most problematic legal arrangements in this policy field, namely, the *Pflegeregress* (care recourse). This authorised Austrian states to take recourse to private assets of care dependents and their close relatives in the case of subsidised long-term care, a regulation that led to drastic cuts in family incomes and hesitation within families to apply for long-term care, even when needed. The abolishment of this arrangement

was very popular and has taken the issue of care off the table for the moment. The ÖVP has proposed a model for a better care system that still relies on direct payments but partially improves the supply of care facilities by privatising public accident insurance and shifting the money towards care. This part of social insurance covered private as well as occupational accidents and constituted a very effective and cost-efficient model. At the same time, businesses and private insurance companies opposed this model, as it implied costs for employers and obstructed business models for private insurance companies. In its coalition with the FPÖ, the Kurz government cut back on the accident insurance in 2018, leading to a reduction in services to limit costs for employers. At the same time, the government cancelled its proposed care reform so that the situation for the care system remained as it was. The current government (ÖVP-Greens) plans to take measures to encourage relatives, mostly women, to stay at home to provide care but has not yet presented concrete plans. The SPÖ's care model is the only remaining model on the table, and its implementation would not only solve the arising care crisis but also produce a very cost-efficient, high-quality solution to increase expenditure by only 20% compared with the current state.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the crisis in care has also extended to a crisis of the health system, in terms of the lack of personnel and medication due to interruptions in international supply chains. The SPÖ aims to increase the number of medical personnel by investing in education and training, but also by developing new models for general practitioners and specialists outside the hospital system (SPÖ, 2023a). Besides the typical model of one-person businesses subsidised by public health insurance associations, the profession shall be made more attractive by setting up units to be shared by publicly employed doctors. Furthermore, the SPÖ has proposed to set

up a fund to strengthen the local pharmaceutical industry by bringing back the production of critical medication and medical products and to build up an emergency ration.

3.1.5 Redistribution

Social inequality is on the rise, also in Austria. With inflation being high and supply chains in turmoil, the post-pandemic economy generates pressure, in particular, on low-income households, leading to an increase in poverty while material wealth accumulates at the top. Regarding income inequality (AK, 2020a), Austria fares generally rather well, with the top 20% earning four times as much as the bottom 20%, on average, whereby median income is high – about 20% above the average of the Eurozone – putting Austria in the Eurozone's second place after Luxembourg. An important contribution to this is the Austrian welfare state, redistributing wealth via the social security system – also encompassing education, health and public housing – in particular, through the provision of public services and by financial benefits increasing disposable income. However, the current cost of living crisis puts households in the lower third of income at risk of poverty due to the absence of savings and them being strongly affected by negative economic developments. Although Austria fares comparatively well in terms of SDG 1 of eradicating poverty, 17.3% of the population (1.5 million people) were still at risk of poverty or exclusion in the year 2021 (AK, 2022). In terms of wealth inequality (AK, 2020b), Austria is among the top unequal countries of the Eurozone, with a Gini coefficient of 0.73, the second-worst position. The top 10% of households accumulate 65.7% of net wealth, with the top 1% holding 40.5%. At the opposite end, the bottom 50% only hold 2.5% of net wealth, implying that the middle stratum is thin. A central cause of this inequality is the extremely low level of wealth-related taxes, amounting to only 1.3% of total tax



revenue, placing Austria in the third-last position in the OECD (where the average amounts to 5.7%). Wealth is passed down through the generations, in particular, due to the absence of inheritance taxes. The last regulation of inheritance tax was abolished in 2008 as the SPÖ, in government, could not find the necessary majority in parliament to renew the regulation that was in force until then. The Faymann governments of 2008-2016 saw some success in terms of capital taxation, such as a bank levy (introduced in 2011 and strongly reduced in 2017), but could not reverse the trend.

In line with previous policies, the SPÖ renewed its plan to reintroduce inheritance taxes in its 2019 election programme (SPÖ, 2019a). This tax is labelled as the “millionaires levy”, as it refers to the taxation of assets above €1 million. It is estimated that even a moderate taxation of inheritances above €1 million would generate an annual tax revenue of about €1 billion, money that is needed to reduce the burden on labour taxation and to finance a social-ecological transformation. Furthermore, the SPÖ aims to close opportunities for tax avoidance for big businesses, introduce a financial transaction tax, increase corporate taxes and coordinate a minimum in taxing corporations at the European level. In line with its objective to strengthen the welfare state, these policies would initiate a reversal of the trend of rising inequality. The issue of inequality was recently politically overshadowed by several corruption scandals in the ÖVP-led governments, in particular, cases where parliamentary investigations revealed that senior civil servants and the finance minister of the ÖVP intervened to cut taxation for several party-affiliated business tycoons (SPÖ Klub 2023; Parlament Österreich, 2023). A civil servant involved, who was later put in place as CEO of the republic’s holding company ÖBAG by personal intervention from Chancellor Kurz, became famous for having put pressure on a responsible subordinate by writing, “Don’t

forget – you work in the ÖVP cabinet!!! You are the whore for the rich!” (SPÖ Klub, 2023), in a personal text message. In reaction to these events, the SPÖ also emphasises the importance of tackling inequality by introducing checks and balances to avoid corruption and enforce tax justice. It must be mentioned, in this regard, that the state of democracy in Austria has experienced a setback, indicating a worrisome development. According to the famous democracy index V-DEM (Varieties of Democracy), “a significant decline on the indicator for transparent laws and predictable enforcement is a decisive change that contributed to Austria falling below the criteria for liberal democracy” (V-DEM Institute, 2022). This evaluation of Austria’s democracy as a mere electoral democracy rather than a liberal democracy took place before the corruption scandals of 2021, raising concerns about further downgrades.

3.2 Right-wing populism and the policy fields of asylum, migration and integration

Nationalism and right-wing populism have evolved into dominant forms of politics, at least since the rise of the FPÖ in the 1990s, and have been able to build on former right-wing extremist traditions present in Austrian politics since the 19th century. When Austrian neocorporatism came under pressure in the crisis of Fordism, in particular, the politics of full employment resting on expansive fiscal policy, the FPÖ changed from a liberal to a liberal-authoritarian orientation, politicising cleavages that cut across the class divide from 1986 onwards. Under the party leadership of Jörg Haider, the party combined an orientation on national economic competition, implying the necessity of hollowing out the welfare state and abandoning the party state, with open racism,

blaming foreigners as scapegoats for all kinds of social ills. One of the party's greatest successes was its "Austria First" petition in 1993, which included several racist demands and was supported by 416,531 people (amounting to 7% of the electorate). It was not only met with strong condemnation by all other parliamentary parties but also with the then-largest demonstration in the Second Republic's history when 300,000 people protested just in Vienna. While the FPÖ was initially committed to forms of post-Nazi German nationalism, it switched to Austrian patriotism until the end of the 1990s, accepting the post-war consensus, with the aim of eradicating the *cordon sanitaire* that was erected by the SPÖ in the grand coalition.

Although the parties of the grand coalition drew lines of demarcation against the FPÖ's right-wing populism and racism, the policy fields of asylum, migration and integration were gradually reorganised around ideas of restrictions, conditions for benefits and sanctions, appearing to implicitly support the FPÖ's call for a halt to immigration. The restrictive Austrian *Fremdengesetz* (Law on Aliens) was introduced in 1997 and revised and reinforced dozens of times since then (whereby it was divided into restrictive laws regarding asylum arrangements, residence and immigration policing in 2005 under the governments led by the ÖVP and FPÖ/BZÖ). The parties of the grand coalition had originally hoped that linking the rejection of the FPÖ's language of fear and hate with incorporating anti-migration policies would depoliticise the FPÖ's core policy fields. However, the strategy could not mitigate the salience of these issues but has rather contributed to their dominance. The FPÖ's politics has kept pace with tightened restrictions ever since and moved towards a further radicalisation, increasingly defining itself through exclusionary nationalism and blunt anti-Muslim racism.

The politics of fear and hate experienced a surge during the 2017 election campaign, which saw the ÖVP shifting to the right. Surveys

revealed that “asylum and integration” were the predominant topics, with 58% of respondents debating them (SORA, 2017). Other issues, such as welfare and jobs, were sidelined as the social democrat’s campaign had difficulties in getting through. During the “summer of migration” in 2015, Austria saw a rise of asylum applications to 89,098, mainly from Afghanistan (25,600), Syria (24,500) and from Iraq (13,600). Politicisation by the FPÖ took on new dimensions. It was directed not only against refugees but also against Muslim migrants within the country, in particular, against the Turkish minority, mobilising hate against “foreign infiltration” (*Überfremdung*) and “ethnic replacement” (*Umvolkung*), concepts forming the core ideas of contemporary right-wing extremist discourses (Wodak, 2020). These debates stand in stark contrast to Austria’s response to earlier waves of migration, for example, the rather uncontroversial reception of about 90,000 Bosnian refugees in the 1990s. By 2016, the FPÖ’s right-wing extremist politicisation led to debates within the grand coalition about introducing maximum limits for the intake of refugees, whereby the ÖVP faction around Kurz started to embrace the positions of the FPÖ. The debate led to a sudden policy shift of the government and initiated a new spiral of rhetorical radicalisation between Kurz’s faction and the FPÖ. This dynamic effectively resulted in the sidelining of social democracy in the 2017 election campaign. Although the SPÖ managed to marginalise the politics of fear and hate during the short period of Kern’s government in 2016-2017 with a new social-liberal vision, it re-entered the stage once the conditions for a reform partnership of the grand coalition vanished.

When pressed to articulate a position on asylum, migration and integration in the 2017 election campaign, social democracy’s stance was characterised by uncertainties, leading to an erratic impression. This also involved mirroring the neonationalist wording of “taking back



control over migration" (SPÖ, 2017a) that was unsuited to clarify political differences. The issue has already haunted the party for many years, as demonstrated by open political conflicts between communitarian and cosmopolitan viewpoints. During its opposition period, the party decided to clarify its position between these viewpoints and to find a common perspective. Its first result was the Kaiser-Doskozil paper (SPÖ, 2018b) adopted by the party's executive committee in September 2018 and named after representatives of both party tendencies (Peter Kaiser is the governor of Carinthia, representing cosmopolitan views; Hans-Peter Doskozil is the governor of the Burgenland, representing communitarian views). It is not simply a compromise between divergent views within the party but a guideline differing from neonationalist populism championed by FPÖ and ÖVP. It emphasises that asylum is a human right defined by international and European law, not a recommendation or idea to be interpreted by the government of the day. It proposes a unitary and cooperative mechanism for executing fairer and faster asylum procedures at the European level, with shared costs among member states and standardised services and benefits for refugees. Furthermore, it calls for stronger European border controls with shared responsibilities, legal flight routes for refugees and a European "Marshall Plan" for Africa and developing countries to mitigate the causes of migration and flight. The overall aim of these measures is to guarantee asylum rights while sharing costs and burden via European cooperation. Another principle concerns the integration of refugees and migrants in Austria through a combination of benefits, such as providing education, language courses and work permissions, as well as sanctions as a last resort for violating requirements for integration. The paper that was also adopted in an extended and ideologically grounded version on the party's national congress in November 2018 (SPÖ, 2018c), and integrated into its

2019 election manifesto (SPÖ, 2019a), documents strong differences from neonationalism, also in the sense that the integration policy under Kurz turned towards embracing right-wing populism (Rosenberger and Gruber, 2020). Rather than fostering integration, it aims to produce obstacles, reduce services for refugees and migrants (e.g., by cutting budgets for courses in language acquisition, making access difficult and cost-intense) and generate an unwelcoming environment through a rhetoric of polarisation and anti-Muslim racist agitation. This right-wing populist stance was also demonstrated by the ÖVP-FPÖ government in rejecting the ratification of the “UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” in 2018, in line with Hungary.

The 2019 election saw a fragmentation of the political discourse. With each of the parties debating their core issues in isolation, leading to a displacement of debating immigration to a lesser position (SORA, 2019): 23% of respondents debated immigration in the election campaign, making it only the fourth most-important election topic. Climate crisis (33%), corruption (29%), the health system and the care sector (25%) were considered more important, placing the top issue of 2017 at the same level as jobs and labour rights (23%). For the ÖVP, fighting back against migration remained the core political issue, in line with its right-wing populist party project in its government with the Greens. Its programme was presented under the label of “protecting borders and climate”. Right-wing populism remains strong; this is obvious from the government’s recent refusal to allow the EU member states Bulgaria and Romania to gain entrance into the Schengen system, which was justified by agitation against the “broken asylum system in Europe”. The current poll surge for the FPÖ under a strategy of apocalyptic right-wing populism promises that the issue will not disappear from the next election. The FPÖ’s variant of populism reached a new low in February 2023, with a FPÖ member of the Lower

Austrian government attacking migrant teenagers on live television for having changed the ethnic homogeneity of the population.

To prepare for the upcoming election, the SPÖ has renewed its position on asylum and migration in its action programme from January 2023 (SPÖ, 2023a). The party highlighted that its position was still applicable in the current context after Austria again saw an increase in asylum applications in 2022 to a level of 108,781 applications, a development that was repeatedly addressed through neonationalist agitation by the ÖVP and FPÖ. The SPÖ has stressed that it is committed to human rights, rejects exclusionary neonationalism and racism, and calls for European cooperation to manage the challenges of asylum and irregular migration by collaborating on procedures, resources and costs, as well as initiating diplomacy on repatriation with third countries.

Also, the party is in the process of changing its position on citizenship rights. Currently, Austria has one of the most restrictive citizenship laws (Valchars and Bauböck, 2021), excluding many long-term migrant residents from access due to extensive bureaucracy and high costs, particularly affecting individuals and families on a lower income. One of the peculiarities of Austria's citizenship law is that a mandatory income limit needs to be exceeded as a requirement for application, effectively excluding most employees in professions such as care, cleaning or construction, thereby producing the effect of a form of census suffrage. Additionally, citizenship rights are solely connected to parentage (*jus sanguinis*) so that exclusion from citizenship is passed down through migrant families for generations. Currently, already every fifth resident in Austria and every third resident of Vienna does not hold an Austrian passport and is therefore excluded from the right to vote. To reduce obstacles and costs, the SPÖ aims to allow applications for Austrian citizenship after people have lived in the country for six years

(currently ten years) and have been in employment for at least three of the last six years. Furthermore, income limits and administration fees shall be significantly reduced, and children born in Austria shall receive citizenship if one parent has lived in Austria for at least five years. The position was elaborated in a national working group (SPÖ, 2021c) and is supposed to be adopted at the next national party congress.

Placing the party in opposition to the anti-immigration party identity of the ÖVP and FPÖ helps to strengthen the social democratic profile. Recent comparative research, also on Austria in particular (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger and Mudde, 2021), has demonstrated that this strategy is most successful and resonates strongly with potential social democratic voters. In contrast, more authoritarian or less liberal stances on issues of immigration, gender and the environment are unlikely to result in electoral gains, undermine the social democratic party identity in the long term and risk losing parts of its electoral base to other parties that represent left or liberal positions. This suggests that the salience of issues of immigration cannot be met with embracing elements of right-wing populism, such as authoritarianism and nativism. It also highlights the need for social democracy to tackle the salience of immigration by addressing concerns with a positive vision and politics for integration, as well as producing new political antagonisms overshadowing the narratives of neonationalist right-wing populism.

3.3 Developing social democracy's home base: The Vienna model

Vienna can be regarded as social democracy's home base and stronghold. Never having lost a free election, the SPÖ has governed Vienna continuously since 1945 (and did so also between 1919 and 1933). Combining the political bodies of an Austrian state and a city



commune, Vienna has developed a long-term model of provisioning affordable high-quality services through a strong public sector, encompassing above all public housing (60% of Vienna's inhabitants live in city-owned, subsidised or co-op housing), the health sector, energy, transport, and primary and secondary education, as well as water and sewage, garbage disposal, parks, more than 50 swimming baths, a public forest and many free beaches on Danube island. Vienna has been named as the "world's most liveable city" numerous times by different studies, such as the EU's Global Liveability Ranking or the Mercer Quality of Living Survey.

According to a popular slogan, Vienna is different, particularly in relation to other parts of Austria. The slogan clearly reflects the country's urban-rural divide. With nearly two million inhabitants and 2.9 million in the metropolitan area, Vienna is the fifth largest city in the EU and the second-largest German-speaking city after the German capital, Berlin. As a capital city, the seats of international organisations (such as the UN, the IAEA, the OSCE or the OPEC), a business hub and a university city, Vienna is characterised by a different political and cultural climate. This particular climate has been the topic of conservative, fascist and right-wing agitation since the beginning of the 20th century, also of contemporary neonationalism in both its versions by the ÖVP and FPÖ. The next-largest urban areas in Austria are Graz (280,000) and Linz (200,000 inhabitants), reflecting that half the population lives in rural areas. Politically, social democracy has always been the dominant party in Vienna, where it could form majority governments for the longest time. Since 2010 (and between 1996 and 2001), the SPÖ has been dependent upon coalition partners. Between 2010 and 2020, it formed two governments with the Greens, and since 2020, with NEOS as junior partner. This allowed the Greens to influence the policy field of city planning and recently made NEOS responsible for its primary

policy field of education, whereby the general strategy and orientation of the city government remained under social democracy's vision.

Among the more recent important political achievements of Vienna, the following measures can be mentioned. Firstly, the city introduced free kindergarten places for children aged 0-6 years in 2009. These are open all day, all year round, and charges apply only for meals (exemptions are granted to low-income households). About 100,000 children are in kindergarten, 40% in high-quality public kindergartens, whereby the biggest private providers are the social democratic children's rights organisation *Kinderfreunde* and several church-related organisations, fulfilling high educational standards and services to receive government funding. This model of affordable high-quality childcare is the strongest area to display the divide between Vienna and the rest of Austria (childcare is the responsibility of Austrian states and communes). Whereas Vienna's kindergartens are organised as educational sites, allow full-time employment of parents and meet the existing demand, childcare outside of Vienna offers mostly only reduced care time or is even non-existent, contributing to Austria's very high share of part-time employment among women of 50%. Secondly, Vienna introduced annual public transport passes for €365 per year in the year 2012 for its very well-developed transport network. The costs for customers have not been raised since then, having contributed to a high share of public transport in Vienna's modal split. Before the pandemic in 2019, Vienna's inhabitants used public transport for 38% of their journeys, walked for 28%, cycled for 7% and used cars only for 26%, resulting in one of the lowest car shares of cities within the EU. Currently, 850,000 annual passes and an additional 100,000 long-term passes, such as student passes, are issued by the public transport company Wiener Linien, implying that half of the population holds long-term passes. The city has also rolled out plans to develop its cycling routes in 2020. Thirdly,



Vienna's innovative smart city strategy, which was adopted in 2014 and extended in 2019, has recently been enhanced by the *Vienna Climate Guide*. This is a strategy to break down the city's climate objectives to the departments of the city government and their services and measures. From the perspective that tackling the climate crisis is only possible by providing sustainable public infrastructure, it aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2040 through modernising this infrastructure in a socially inclusive way. One of the current projects is to extend public district heating, already one of the biggest in Europe, to almost 60% of households by 2040 and power it from sustainable energy through sources such as geothermal plants or waste heat.

In the latest challenges, the pandemic and inflation, Vienna has used its judicial powers to set up its own systems and measures. During the pandemic, one of the bigger achievements was setting up a system of testing sites and home kits, providing free and fast PCR testing for the whole population, in cooperation with the health sector and businesses. The model is responsible for Austria's highest test rate per capita in the world and helped the city to uphold its health care system during the pandemic. The system was so successful that it was later duplicated by the federal government. Additionally, the city invented direct financial, legal and organisational support systems for citizens and businesses, for example, through a public investment company, making the city a direct temporary shareholder of enterprises under stress. In the current inflation crisis, Vienna has extended its governance models to help citizens and businesses in need. One of the measures is direct financial support for citizens and businesses to cover their increased energy bills, supporting about two thirds of citizens with up to €1,000 this year.

Other challenges to be faced by the SPÖ-led government are city growth, rising social inequality and the problem of migrant exclusion.

Vienna has been growing massively (by more than 20%) for the last two decades. To maintain its high-quality public infrastructure, new developmental projects – in particular, in terms of housing, but also in terms of the extension of health care, education, transport and services – are necessary. Vienna pursues ambitious long-term city planning, resting not only on the objectives of socially inclusive, climate-friendly and feminist urban planning, but also on a long-term strategy of the purchase and allocation of land for projects that are supervised by diverse governance models. Many urban developmental areas, such as Seestadt Aspern, Sonnwendviertel or Nordbahnhofviertel, are among the biggest in Europe. The increase in social inequality across Europe puts pressure on Vienna's citizens and systems, for example, in terms of rent increases due to real-estate speculation and problematic legal solutions that increase rents with inflation in the private sector. Although comprehensive city planning provides important instruments for government intervention, the trends at the national and European level call for further interventions that are beyond the influence of a city. An immense deficiency of democracy in the city's political system is the exclusion of one third of Vienna's population from the right to vote. Vienna tried to change its state election law in 2004 to give non-citizens the right to vote but was held back by the decision of the Austrian constitutional court that the issue needed to be decided at the national level. The city has called for a rapid change to the exclusion of migrants ever since.

Vienna's successes are a foundation for social democracy to build on, also at the national level. Together with the institutions of organised labour within Austrian social partnership, the Vienna city government is a pillar connecting social democracy with state power and state knowledge and demonstrates the party's vision for "a good life for all".

4

Current developments in the party organisation

With the change to the party system as a result of shifts in its political-economic foundations in the 1990s, the social democratic party organisation also experienced a transformation that affected, above all, the size and composition of the membership and the structures of the party. Reforms to the party organisation were already undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s and have contributed to a modernisation of its structure. A further substantial reform was initiated in 2018, in particular, to open the party to non-members and to give members a say over the party's direction. Furthermore, the party has updated and renewed its values and objectives in a new party programme, as well as clarified its criteria for entering coalition governments.

4.1 “Compass of values”

An issue that has preoccupied the party in recent decades, with varying degrees of intensity, is that of coalition building. The strengthening of the party's anti-fascist line of tradition and its decision to preclude the FPÖ from coalition building (a formal decision that was adopted at national party congresses and renewed multiple times) has effectively bound social democracy to grand coalitions, thereby also reducing its

potential to dominate in coalition negotiations. The grand coalitions of 1987-1999 and 2006-2017, under leadership of the SPÖ, saw the ÖVP dominating policy fields such as fiscal policy, economic policy and education, blocking important demands of social democracy for a very long term period. In particular, during the last grand coalition period, internal debates about ending the preclusion of the FPÖ from coalition building emerged. Proponents of this strategy argued that considering coalitions with the FPÖ would increase the party's bargaining position in coalition negotiations against the ÖVP but also allow for different governmental programmes with the FPÖ that might allow advances in policy fields characterised by conservative blockades. Furthermore, allowing the FPÖ to realise parts of its anti-immigration agenda would, it was argued, also resonate positively with segments of the SPÖ's voter base. Opponents of this strategy argued that the FPÖ's agenda on social, economic, fiscal and education policy does not at all differ from the ÖVP but is, in fact, even more radical in terms of their intention to eradicate the remaining pillars of Austria's social partnership. Moreover, the FPÖ's racism should be seen as a strategy to undermine social cohesion and split social democracy's social base, which is why the belief in such a coalition would be based on self-delusion.

The issue of coalition building was considered unshakably settled for a long time, given that the majority of the party organisation and the party leadership collectively favoured maintaining a principled position against the FPÖ and given that this position formed the core of the party's identity during the grand coalitions. However, the topic moved to the centre of attention when the SPÖ formed a coalition with the FPÖ at the state level in the smallest state of Burgenland in 2015, raising doubts over the unity of the party on a decisive issue. The coalition was the answer to a blackmailing strategy by the second-ranked ÖVP, trying to impose its policies on the government, after the SPÖ lost the



overall majority that it had held for ten years. An alliance with the third-ranked FPÖ as junior partner made it possible to continue governing without friction. The decision had effects at the national level, as the debate on the party's relationship with the FPÖ gained momentum and proponents of an opening became a stronger tendency within the party, thereby also producing opposition in the form of a contradicting tendency. Both tendencies, a communitarian minority tendency and a social-liberal majority tendency, have since been established and cut across the formal parts of the party at the national, state and communal levels. The coalition in Burgenland remained in place until the "Ibiza scandal" of 2019, when it was ended, and early elections in January 2020 resulted in the SPÖ winning back its overall majority.

To avoid uncertainties and debates on coalition formation before the 2017 national election, the party aimed to settle the issue once and for all. As a clear distinction from the FPÖ has indeed strongly rested on morally principled absolute arguments, the objective target was to advance this position towards a politically reasoned catalogue of criteria for the party, stating under which conditions it would enter coalitions. The result was the *Compass of Values* (SPÖ, 2017b) from June 2017, a document entailing a strong preamble on the principles of social democracy to establish a society based upon solidarity, democracy and human progress, and seven clauses on anti-fascism and the constitution, human rights, the commitment to the EU, social security, gender equality, education to secure equal opportunities for all and the freedom of arts. The catalogue has helped define social democracy's position on the political spectrum and found undisputed agreement within the party across all formal parts and within both tendencies. As the former chairperson and chancellor, Christian Kern, has emphasised, "it is now up to political competitors to decide whether they agree with the criteria [...] or reject these very values" (Kern, cited

by the SPÖ 2017c), as the political positions of the SPÖ are now put on the table. Effectively, the “compass of values” does still preclude the FPÖ from coalition building, as their politics and party identity violate almost all criteria strongly in their political project to divide the nation across ethnic lines. However, it does open a path for the FPÖ should it decide to change course. The *Compass of Values* was adopted at the 2018 national party congress (SPÖ, 2018c).

4.2 The new party programme

The national party congress in 2018 also adopted a new party programme. Since 1958, the SPÖ has actualised its programme every two decades with renewals in 1978 and 1998. The previous 1998 programme was influenced by the rhetoric of the Third Way, emphasising market making and questioning the welfare state. At the same time, it defined the party's overall goal as the overcoming of class antagonisms (SPÖ, 1998), a wording relativising the direction of the programme's narrative and revealing ambiguities about the party's rather defensive political project. To overcome the defence of social democracy, the party distanced itself from this programme very early on. In 2002, the party proposed multiple new policies under the name *Network Innovation* (Gusenbauer, 2002) to soften or dispose of Third Way rhetoric. In 2009, the party adopted a plan named *Austria 2020* to develop a new radical vision for the party. In 2012, the national party congress finally agreed to produce a new programme. Through a comprehensive and inclusive internal debate on vision, objectives and values of the party, attempts to generate new momentum and ambition against the background of a grand coalition in deadlock were made.

Party programmes characterise a party for a longer time period, in terms of its political visions and value commitments across all parts and

tendencies, aiming to inspire members and sympathisers alike and define an identity in relation to its social base. As nearly all foundations of the party were put into question internally with the downturn in the last grand coalition, the process to develop a new programme came with high expectations. Much effort was invested in setting up an inclusive and mobilising multiple-loop procedure, including expert panels, member panels at all levels of the party, local and regional congresses, as well as online debates and a membership ballot in June 2018 before the programme was adopted at the party congress later in November. With this comprehensive procedure, a very large number of party members and the whole party organisation could be addressed and involved.

The programme itself strongly differs from its previous version and returns to a radical reformist rhetoric “questioning the existing structures of wealth and power”, calling for “a redistribution of income and wealth, as well as a democratisation of the economy” encompassing “a fundamental transformation of our way of production and life” (SPÖ, 2018d). As the “party of the working population” (ibid.), the SPÖ defines its main challenge as fighting the insecurities produced by a broken economic system perpetuated by post-democratic attempts to hollow out the welfare state and establish a new project of social-liberal and ecological modernisation. It defines the social democratic core values of freedom, equality, justice, solidarity and democracy and states that a solidary society is not only possible but also just and contributes to social cohesion. An important signifier is the idea of a “good life for all”, transforming all social relations, such as in the economy and in working life, forming guiding principles in the policy fields of education, housing, the urban-rural divide, gender relations, migration and integration, as well as to address challenges such as the climate crisis. An original idea of the programme is to reframe the neonationalist signifier of

(national) security towards social security. This involves ideas of social freedom as a reality for all people, a life in dignity with real possibilities to pursue and realise dreams, resting on a solidary common bond and social structures (ibid.).

The programme does not seek to anticipate concrete policies, but understands its purpose as an ethical-political guideline for the orientation and vision of the party. It gives direction in terms of overall objectives and values but does not determine the means and ways to realise them (ibid.). With this separation of vision and policies, the party programme provides a long-term framework for establishing a common ideological basis for all parts and tendencies of the party and ensures common points of reference that have enduring force in debates on policies. The programme was overwhelmingly adopted by the membership (86% acceptance, 5% rejection, 9% indifference) (SPÖ 2018e; 2018f) and delegates at the subsequent national party congress in 2018. It also allows a high level of flexibility for the party in defining a governmental programme and in campaigning for its new vision.

4.3 Reforming the party organisation: Giving members a say

Modernising the party organisation was another intention of the debates during the years of the recent grand coalition. The last structural reforms were undertaken in 1987 and 1991 to adjust the organisation and its structures to new demands by members and new means of political communication, as well as to align the party in central and public office with demands and routines of professionalised media communication, a field that the party mastered impressively during election campaigns until 2017. In 2014, the national party congress

decided to develop the party towards a membership and participatory party (SPÖ, 2014). With a mass membership of more than 200,000 in 2013, the SPÖ was (and still is today, with about 150,000 members) (SPÖ, 2023b) among the strongest social democratic parties in Europe and characterised by an active party life. Members are an important resource, not only financially but also as volunteers, establishing links to a party's social base, acting as opinion multipliers and bringing in ideas and candidates to be selected for offices (Scarrow, 2015). Like all mass parties, the SPÖ has lost members since it peaked with 727,265 members in 1960 or 721,262 in 1979, (Müller, 1996; Ucakar, 2006) and is has adapted to this development. Orienting towards the grassroots is considered a viable response to electoral setback.

Ideas of opening the party materialised with the change of leadership and strategy in 2016. This involved the introduction of guest memberships at no charge in March 2017 and of membership ballots on policies, the first of which took place in September 2016. Moreover, new mechanisms for the restriction of terms of public office and for giving members a say over coalition agreements and the selection of the party's chairperson were discussed. The implementation of these reforms was interrupted by the 2017 early election but were taken up again in 2018. Guest memberships can be considered a success. In 2017 and 2018, 3,227 guest members entered and contributed to a total of 12,341 new registered members for both years combined, while exits remained exceptionally low (SPÖ, 2023b) a new high not seen for the last two decades.

Regarding measures to increase participation, the party has made advances in terms of membership ballots. Direct democracy in Austria is generally not very strong. Although there are instruments such as the people's petition (*Volksbegehren*), which has been used in 72 cases since 1964, most of them successful at obtaining the relevant number of

votes for the petition to be debated in parliament, this instrument is more suitable for attracting attention than actually influencing politics. Actual (binding or consultative) referenda are rare in Austria and have, so far, taken only place three times at the national level. In line with this, internal party democracy in Austria is defined by representative procedures. Introducing referenda was an original and spirited step and had positive results. The first internal ballot in September 2016 concerned the issue of the Comprehensive and Economic Trade Agreement (CETA). With a response rate of about 13%, 23,730 members participated and voted overwhelmingly, with 88% against the ratification (which was the party leadership's majority position then before CETA was ratified in parliament in October). Another ballot took place in June 2018, concerning the party programme and the party reform. At a response rate of 22%, 37,464 members took part and agreed to the party programme (86%), as well as to different organisational reform proposals: 72% of members agreed to the idea of binding membership referenda on coalition agreements; 79% welcomed stronger petition rights of members; 88% supported a limit for multiple public offices; and 73% agreed that office terms should be restricted to two consecutive terms for the same candidate, unless a two-thirds majority by the represented body overruled (SPÖ, 2018e). The ballot also included questions on what members thought about the membership management of their party structures and their opportunities for involvement (SPÖ, 2018f). This part revealed that members generally felt well-integrated and cared for (72%), they saw high levels of involvement (70%) and were generally proud to be members (87%). The results were handed to all parts of the party to evaluate and draw conclusions for their respective structures and levels. The rule book changes were adopted at the party congress in 2018 to define the party as a "democratic participation party", an "open membership party", a "party of professional volunteering", of political dialogue and of



diversity, a “party open for debate”, a “campaigning party”, “educational party”, a “party of successful policy making”, of social alliances and of internationalism (SPÖ, 2018c). The new rule book now formally includes guest memberships, conditional ballots on members petitions and on coalition agreements (ibid.). Some of the rules from the ballot consultation were not integrated into the changes, despite positive resonance by members, such as a binding vote by members on the party chair, the office-term limitation or binding unconditional ballots on coalition agreements. It is to be seen whether these changes might be adopted in the future, once the party becomes accustomed to these new instruments.

In spring 2020, the party conducted another membership ballot labelled “You determine our path” (SPÖ, 2020), asking for a vote of confidence in the former party chair, Pamela Rendi-Wagner, as well as consulting members on several policies and whether the party should campaign for them in the current situation. The response rate rose sharply to almost 43.5% (42.6% in valid votes). Rendi-Wagner was supported by 46,579 votes (71.4%) and 18,652 (28.6%) voted against. This voting contributed to a period of internal political consolidation and facilitated the party's positive poll surge between September 2021 and August 2022. The consultation part of the ballot allowed a number of policies to be prioritised. Four policies were ranked highest, namely, strengthening the public health care system (85.7%), extending the welfare state via a system of a public nursing-care insurance (80.8%), raising or introducing taxes for millionaires and big businesses (80.1%), and securing pensions without deductions after 45 years of work (79.8%). Six other policies were also ranked high and five others moderately high. The ballot manifests the positive effects of party member involvement in terms of mobilising and unifying the party organisation.

5

Newest developments and prospects

With a currently mixed picture in the polls, the SPÖ is under pressure to outline its political project for government and to gain momentum against the parties of right-wing neonationalism. While the ÖVP is strongly affected by corruption scandals and has to face an upcoming election with a probable loss of about 15 percentage points – according to current polls that would place it in third position – the FPÖ is experiencing a poll surge, placing it in the first position with support from 27% of respondents (OGM, 2023). The domestic Austrian politicisation of the Russian war against Ukraine contributes to this. Whereas support for Ukraine is represented and monopolised by the governing parties, the FPÖ attracts and mobilises opposition against this course, raising doubts about the government's political standing in a country defined by a tradition of military neutrality. With its support for European unity and sanctions against Russia, for the Ukrainian right to self-defence and Austrian military neutrality (but not political neutrality), the SPÖ implicitly shares the position of the government. In connection with its rejection of measures against the spreading of COVID-19 and its contempt for democratic institutions, media and European unity, the FPÖ can place itself as the anti-system opposition party.

In its strategy over the last years, the SPÖ has focused on its profile as the party of governmental competence, in contrast to the

corruption-ridden ÖVP. With the government bound together by avoidance of an early election because of high disapproval rates, the SPÖ needs to extend its profile beyond proficiency, statecraft and leadership. Coming back from opposition will depend upon the party's capacity to politicise the social question and to address strong discontent with the government's disability to tackle the cost of living crisis in the form of a positive alternative political project for government. The SPÖ has policies that are viable, popular, mobilise its party base and show a clear contrast with the dominant position of neonationalism in Austria's political spectrum. They address the multiple crises characterising the current political moment and highlight the ineffectiveness of the government's programme. The vision of a "good life for all" and of a social-ecological modernisation, as proposed in the *Green New Deal for Austria*, are beginnings in order to remove problems of social inequality, exclusion, social fragmentation and ecological unsustainability and to overcome the dominance of post-democratic neonationalism. The SPÖ's task will be to develop a consistent political project, combining its vision and policies, as well as to produce a coherent narrative about its mission in the current political conjuncture to mobilise support and create an electoral coalition, advancing it towards a lasting social alliance.

To a lesser extent than previously, social democracy can focus its strategy on relying on stable segments of former social democratic voters but will need to form novel alliances of different and manifold social groups. To form such a new political bloc, social democratic parties need to politicise the causes of social ills, to mobilise and enchant people with a transformative agenda, and to organise and involve them in a party organisation campaigning for this change. There is no indication that social democratic parties can win simply by representing or appealing to voter's sentiments about existing policies



in the present political discourse dominated by different varieties of neonationalism and unsettled by a fragmented party system. The crisis of traditional political identities and established political parties is an indication that representation depends more than ever on the power to establish new political identities by shifting the political discourse. The SPÖ is a party with strong resources to accomplish such a task. It is a party with an active and motivated strong membership, with party structures all over the country, and strong ties to unions and its institutions. Despite diminished material, organisational and symbolic resources, the SPÖ has capacities that allow for a successful return from opposition.

In June 2023, the party saw a change in leadership following public disputes between then-chairperson Rendi-Wagner and Hans-Peter Doskozil, the governor of the Austrian state of Burgenland. After a consultative leadership contest among the membership was initiated and held in April and May, an extraordinary national party congress on the 3rd of June decided between two candidates, which is a novelty in the history of the SPÖ. The contest was originally intended to take place only between Rendi-Wagner and Doskozil but was extended by the application of Andreas Babler, the mayor of the Lower Austrian city of Traiskirchen and a member of the Federal Council (the upper house of the Austrian parliament). Doskozil has publicly criticized the party's chairperson and leadership several times over the past years based on the assumption that the party's weak performance in the polls is caused by the failure to adopt a restrictive migration policy. Following the example of the Danish social democratic party, a shift towards the neonationalism of the FPÖ and ÖVP would, according to this belief, allow the party to gain voters from the centre right and form a coalition government with the Greens and the liberals. Although there is no indication of the viability of this strategy, Doskozil pointed to his local

election success from 2020, when the SPÖ won 49.94% of the votes. His positions combine conservative identity politics; a stronger role for the Austrian states versus social-partnership institutions, unions and the federal level; and traditionalist social policies. He has formed a strong political wing of the party over the last years, aiming to change the strategy and policies of the party severely, thereby raising doubts over the possibility of unifying the party under this course. Babler is a nationally known representative of the party's left, who rejects the idea that communitarianism and authoritarianism would help the party gain momentum. What is needed, according to this belief, is a left approach and a politics from below, focusing on a wide definition of the working class, embracing service workers, the new middle class and workers with a migrant background; an investment-oriented social policy, tackling the cost of living crisis and rising poverty; more progressive stances on the cultural dimension; and a more radical *Green New Deal* breaking with neo-/liberal paradigms. Babler's commune, Traiskirchen, is the location of the country's biggest refugee camp, which suffers from overcrowding and underfunding. He is an outspoken advocator of campaigns for the humane accommodation of refugees and for the integration of migrants and has mobilised the city's residents and resources to improve the situation for refugees and migrants. In the Lower Austrian election of 2023, he was one of the most popular candidates and has achieved remarkable vote gains for the SPÖ in his commune of almost 4% against the general downwards trend of the party. His election results in Traiskirchen are regularly among the highest for the SPÖ in the country, with more than 70% of the votes.

The leadership election among members did not produce a clear result, but revealed an almost equal distribution of votes between the three candidates, with the then-incumbent chairperson and with

drawing from the race. The election of a successor became the task of the party congress. Andreas Babler convinced the delegates with a powerful and fulminant speech focusing on the necessity to position social democracy as a social alternative to intervene in the social balance of forces, and to stop identifying merely through party competition, like all other parties. Social democracy should enter the political stage as a party that “fears nothing and no one” (Kontrast, 2023) and start accepting the challenges of the current moment calling for a social democratic corrective.

Figure 5: Recent leadership elections 2023

Leadership election among members (24th April to 10th May 2023)

Membership	147,993	
Turnout	72.39%	
Candidates	Votes	%
Hans-Peter Doskozil	36,019	33.68%
Andreas Babler	33,703	31.51%
Pamela Rendi-Wagner	33,528	31.35%
None of the above	3,702	3.46%

Leadership election at the party congress (3rd June 2023)

Delegates	602	
Valid votes	597	
Candidates	Votes	%
Andreas Babler	317	53.10%
Hans-Peter Doskozil	280	46.90%

Figure 6: Elected chairpersons of the SPÖ since 1945

Period	Chairperson	Highest public office
12/1945 - 05/1957	Adolf Schärf	Vice-Chancellor 12/1945 - 05/1957
05/1957 - 02/1967	Bruno Pittermann	Vice-Chancellor 05/1957 - 04/1966
02/1967 - 05/1983	Bruno Kreisky	Chancellor 04/1970 - 05/1983
05/1983 - 05/1988	Fred Sinowatz	Chancellor 05/1983 - 06/1986
05/1988 - 04/1997	Franz Vranitzky	Chancellor 06/1986 - 01/1997
04/1997 - 04/2000	Viktor Klima	Chancellor 01/1997 - 02/2000
04/2000 - 08/2008	Alfred Gusenbauer	Chancellor 01/2007 - 12/2008
08/2008 - 05/2016	Werner Faymann	Chancellor 12/2008 - 05/2016
06/2016 - 11/2018	Christian Kern	Chancellor 05/2016 - 12/2017
11/2018 - 06/2023	Pamela Rendi-Wagner	Minister for Health and Women 03/2017 - 12/2017
Since 06/2023	Andreas Babler	Parliamentary party leader since 06/2023

After the recent turmoil in and strong disputes over the principal direction of the party, establishing unity and a bold political project are the main tasks for social democracy. Under its new leadership, the party will hold a national congress in autumn 2023 to settle controversial political issues, develop a common project and strategy for government and implement necessary changes to the party organisation to give members a stronger say and involve them in a politics from below. The party has so far seen an upswing in membership for the first time in four decades: In the leadership election alone, more than 9.000 new members have joined, and the party is experiencing an influx of members all across the country. There is great confidence that this momentum can be harnessed for the coming confrontations.

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Biography



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