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Austria: a comeback for the People's Party (ÖVP)-Liberal Party (FPÖ) coalition?

On 15th October next 6.4 million Austrians aged 16 and over will be appointing the 183 members of the National Council (Nationalrat), the lower house of Parliament. Sixteen political parties are running in this election, which is a record for the country. Six of these movements have been created recently: the Peter Pilz List, the name of a former ecologist MP (he left the party on 17th July last) – Mr Pilz lies on the centre-left of the political scale; the Free List Austria (FLÖ), a far right populist party founded by Karl Schnell, a former Liberal Party member (FPÖ), from which he was excluded in 2015 (Barbara Rosenkranz, a former FPÖ candidate in the presidential election of 25th April 2010 joined the Free List Austria and will be its lead candidate in the Land of Lower-Austria); My vote Counts (G!lt), founded by actor Roland Düringer; the White (WEISSE), who recruited Waltraud Dietrich, Leo Steinbichler and Ulla Weigerstorfer, three former Team Stronach members, who this year are not standing in the general election; the Movement for the Future (NBZ) and finally the Homeless in Politics (ODP).

The general elections on 15th October are being organised a year early and follow the resignation on 10th May last of Vice-Chancellor and leader of the People's Party (ÖVP), Reinhold Mitterlehner from all of his positions. He was replaced by Sebastian Kurz, Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs elected four days later as the leader of the ÖVP, and who asked Chancellor Christian Kern (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ), after a trial period with a minority government, for the organisation of a snap election. "Important decisions about the direction that the country has to take have to be given to the electorate," indicated Sebastian Kurz, who added, "a snap election is the best option to enable change in Austria."

Christian Kern has accused the ÖVP of not respecting its January 2017 promise to enable the adoption of several measures which would have allowed the government coalition to stay in office and have brought down the number of those tempted to vote the Liberal Party (FPÖ), a right-wing populist party led by Heinz-Christian Strache. Amongst the measures quoted feature the ban on the full veil in public places (with the threat of a 150€ fine), the ban on the distribution of the Koran, the obligation for immigrants to follow a year-long

integration programme (learning German and an ethics course), the obligation for asylum seekers to undertake work in the public interest under the threat of not being able to access social benefits.

The coalition government was also shaken by the massive arrival of refugees in Austria from the Middle East (notably from Syria and Iraq) and Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya): 42,000 people in 2015, 90,000 the following year. Although a great majority of the refugees continued their route to Germany, around 90,000 in all asked for asylum in Vienna, i.e. around 1% of the Austrian population.

Since the end of the Second World War, political life in Austria has been dominated by two parties: the People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), which were established according to two divides: religion (the first is the successor to the Christian Social Catholic Party, that was very much attached to the Catholic Church) and social class (the second is the successor to the Social Democratic Workers' Party). In 1975 these two parties rallied 93.4% of the vote; 84.4% in 1983, but only two thirds of the electorate (66.4%) in 1995 and just half (50.8%) in the last elections on 29th

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September 2013. Moreover, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, the candidates of these two parties were eliminated from the presidential race in the first round of the presidential election on 24th April 2016.

In the 1980's, two phenomenon modified the Austrian electoral landscape: the emergence of new parties (notably the Greens) and the revival of an old party that had remained in the minority for a long time, the Liberal Party (FPÖ), created in 1956. As a result the two main parties were weakened, their support collapsed, likewise the number of votes in their favour. A decline in the electoral turnout exacerbated this trend.

Austria functions according to the Proporzsystem, a corporatist system based on compromise and power sharing between the two main parties, as well as on cooperation between the unions and employers.

One thing is certain however; the outgoing coalition is not due to be re-elected after the general election on 15th October. Each of the two parties has indicated that it does not want to continue working with the other. According to the most recent poll by Research Affairs, published on 14th September, the ÖVP is due to come out ahead with 35% of the vote – taking the lead over the Liberal Party (FPÖ), which is due to win 25% and the SPÖ which is due to win 24% of the vote. The Greens - Green Alternative, NEOS, the New Austria (NEOS), a liberal party led by Matthias Strolz, and the Peter Pilz List are due to win 5% of the vote each. In view of these voting intentions, a government coalition rallying the ÖVP and the FPÖ led by Sebastian Kurz seems to be the most likely result.

THE REVIVAL OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY (ÖVP)

The newly elected leader of the ÖVP, 31 year-old Sebastian Kurz, nicknamed Milchbubi ("the little lad" - he is also the youngest candidate ever in Austrian history for the post of Chancellor) is the lead candidate for the party in the general election. Before being unanimously elected as leader of the party, the Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs set several conditions: that he might modify the statutes of his party to strengthen his powers and that he would be totally free to appoint his party's candidates in the general election.

Many new personalities now feature on the lists put forward by the ÖVP, including some non-members who have the support of other organisations. "Things cannot continue as before. Changing faces is not enough, the ÖVP must be totally transformed," declared Sebastian Kurz on 14th May last.

To mark the development in the decline of partisan support the party is now running under the name "Sebastian Kurz List-the New People's Party".

"What he is doing is unique in Europe, he is trying to combine a traditional party with the image of a new movement, a kind of hybrid party," declared Peter Filzmaier, professor of political science at the universities of Graz and Krems. "The ÖVP will transform into a hybrid mix of a traditional organisation and an open platform," says Fritz Plasser, a political scientist. "Sebastian Kurz has turned the ÖVP into a party to his liking and he aims to break with the system by cashing in on his youth. He offers nothing in terms of a particular ideology and remains extremely mobile so that he can overcome the traditional splits," maintains Patrick Moreau, a researcher.

A constant government member over the last 31 years the ÖVP, a centre-right party is well established in the rural areas of Austria, but is declining in the towns. These are the voters that Sebastian Kurz aims to win over. We can – possibly - deduce that the victory by Emmanuel Macron in the French presidential election on 7th May last gave confidence to the young Austrian leader. Although the two men share youth and audacity, their stories are different however, simply because the Austrian represents one of his country's main parties. However, it has to be admitted that although the ÖVP lagged behind the Liberal Party (FPÖ) and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) before Sebastian Kurz was elected, the arrival of the latter at its head reversed the trend as of mid-May. Since then the ÖVP has been sailing along in first place in the polls.

The leader of the Austrian right started his campaign on 6th June last in Lower-Austria where he met several SME representatives. He decided to undertake a series of Austrian Dialogues, to exchange ideas with experts across all of the country's Länder.

Critical of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) open doors policy in 2015, as well as of the agreement between the EU and Turkey over migrants, Sebastian Kurz, the representative of the ÖVP's right-wing supports toughening up the migratory policy. He notably hopes to put an end to economic migration and to increase controls on the EU's external borders. Hence, he wants to close the Balkans route, used the migrants wanting to travel from Greece to Europe. If he is elected chancellor Sebastian Kurz wants to reduce the role of NGO's which intervene on behalf of the migrants. "Some NGO's undoubtedly think that they are doing good by intercepting illegal migrant boats in the Mediterranean but in fact this does no good but simply creates chaos," he declared.

"Sebastian Kurz is occupying the Liberal Party's space i.e. that of stopping immigration," maintains Patrick Moreau. The ÖVP's leader is trying to pull the rug from underneath the populist vote. "The People's Party, just like the Social Democratic Party has become a watered down Liberal Party. Controls on the borders, reduction of family benefits for foreigners, protectionism on the employment market, the ban of the full veil ... they are competing to see which of them will be closest to the Liberal Party line," analyses Anton Pelinka, a political scientist.

Sebastian Kurz has also stolen the theme of political revival and action to counter blockades in the political system from the FPÖ. The populists are quick to accuse him of copying them and of stealing their ideas. "Sebastian Kurz's economic programme is almost the same as that of the FPÖ. We are waiting for the ÖVP to present its own economic programme," said Heinz-Christian Strache ironically at the beginning of September. "Sebastian Kurz has placed Heinz-Christian Strache in a dialectical dead end. His aim is to destroy the FPÖ," analyses Patrick Moreau.

As Austria's diplomatic head Sebastian Kurz has also distinguished himself as being the only European Foreign Affairs Minister to ask for the end of membership negotiations with Turkey. He has also been one of the rare supporters of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (Alliance of Young Democrats-Civic Union, FIDESZ-MPP).

With the appointment of Sebastian Kurz as candidate for the post of Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache is no longer the only one to embody the break from and the revival of the Austrian political landscape. However, the FPÖ stands reassured, as it notes that regarding the issues of immigration and asylum, these remain at the heart of political debate in the electoral campaign. The chances of the populist party sitting in the next government have never been as likely as they are now. But those of its leader taking the position of Chancellor are extremely slim. The President of the Republic Alexander van der Bellen also indicated that he would never appoint Heinz-Christian Strache as Chancellor, even if his party came out ahead in the general election.

Finally, the FPÖ is struggling because of the success of its ideas and due to one main problem: to stand out it would have to take its positions even further; however, by becoming even more extreme, it might lose some of its electorate. Hence, the populists have given up the idea of campaigning over an exit from the euro, which the Austrians do not support.

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY STRUGGLING

The Austrian Social Democratic Party has lost two thirds of its members and half of its electorate over the last 30 years. Even though its leaders find this hard to acknowledge, the SPÖ has undeniably shifted its narrative and action to the right, except regarding societal issues. On 14th June last the party even opened a door to an alliance with the FPÖ, an option that it has always ruled out[1]. Since 2015 however the Social Democratic Party has governed the Land of Burgenland in coalition with the populists. Christian Kern set out a certain number of criteria to which any party that wanted to govern in coalition with the SPÖ had to adhere (including a commitment in support of a minimum monthly wage of 1,500€, gender equality, a pro-European policy).

The outgoing Chancellor admitted that a coalition with the Greens- Green Alternative and NEOS – the New Austria – a liberal party led by Matthias Strolz, undoubtedly was the best option in their opinion, even though he thought that this seemed rather unlikely. Led by Ingrid Felipe, but supported by MEP Ulrike Lunacek for the post of Chancellor,

1. The SPÖ governed Austria in coalition with the FPÖ between 1983 and 1987.

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the ecologists, who achieved their best general election score on 29th September 2013 (12.42% of the vote), are now struggling in the polls in which they are barely rising above the 5% mark in terms of voting intentions.

"Austria needs a plan and we have one," declared Christian Kern during the SPÖ congress that took place in August last. The outgoing Chancellor likes to say that even though the Proporzsystem needs to be reformed, the Austrian model – alongside that of Scandinavia – is one of the most egalitarian in the world and that it has to be protected.

Christian Kern is campaigning on the theme of employment rather than that of immigration. He is pointing to the growth of the Austrian economy after six difficult years. He maintains that he has created 63,000 new jobs over the last twelve months, i.e. more than Germany. He also stresses that 300 international businesses had set up in Austria, where the (private and public) investment rate is 3 points higher than that of Germany.

The outgoing Chancellor wants to reduce private and corporate taxes and also social contributions by 5 billion €. He aims to finance this by increasing taxes on international businesses and inheritance. The social democrats also want to implement a major State reform that will enable Vienna to save millions of euros.

THE AUSTRIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Austrian parliament is bicameral. The lower house, the National Council (Nationalrat), brings together 183 MPs elected for five years; the upper house, the Federal Council, (Bundesrat), has 64 seats for representatives from the country's 9 Länder.

The members of the National Council are elected by a majority vote in Vienna and in the Land of Vorarlberg and by proportional election in the seven other Länder which are divided into 43 local constituencies. Each of the regions appoints between 7 and 36 MPs. Each person has two votes: one which expresses a national vote for a party and the other to appoint a specific candidate within a local constituency.

The distribution of seats is undertaken according to the

Hare Method in the regional and provincial constituencies and according to the d'Hondt Method at federal level. A party that puts forward candidates across the entire country must absolutely win 4% of the votes cast or a direct mandate – i.e. around 25% of the vote in one of the local constituency – to be able to enter parliament.

It is obligatory to vote in four of the nine Austrian Länder: Carinthia, Styria, Tyrol and Vorarlberg. On the day of the election it is the responsibility of each town council to decide on the opening and closing times of the ballot boxes. Since 28th September 2008, every Austrian aged 16 and over has been allowed to vote.

Political parties with fewer than three seats in the National Council must win the signatures of at least 2,600 voters if they are to take part in the legislative election. These have to be collated across Austria as a whole and distributed as follows: a minimum of 500 in Lower Austria and in Vienna, 400 in Upper Austria and Styria, 200 in Carinthia, Tyrol and Salzburg and 100 in Burgenland and Vorarlberg.

The Bundesrat represents the Länder. Each Land is managed by a government (Landesregierung) and a Diet (Landtag). The Länder are competent in all areas that are not specifically the responsibility of the Federal State: urban planning, the protection of the environment, land use, transport. Each Land appoints a number of representatives that is proportional with its population (a minimum of 3) to sit in the upper house (proportional vote). Vienna, which is the most populous region, has 12 representatives in this assembly. The Presidency of the Bundesrat is the responsibility of the Länder and this changes every 6 months, as they succeed each other in alphabetical order.

6 political parties are represented in the National Council at present:

- the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), founded in 1889, led by the outgoing Chancellor Christian Kern, with 52 seats ;
- the People's Party (ÖVP), a centre right party created in 1945, led since 14th May last by outgoing Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs Minister, Sebastian Kurz, with 47 seats;

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- the Liberal Party (FPÖ), a right-wing populist party created in 1956, led by Heinz-Christian Strache, with 40 seats
 - NEOS – new Austria (NEOS), a liberal party founded in 2012, led by Matthias Strolz, with 9 seats.
 - The Greens-Green Alternative (DG), founded in 1986, chaired since 19th May last by Ingrid Felipe, with 24 seats;
 - the Team Stronach (TS), a populist party created in 2012 by Austro-Canadian businessman Frank Stronach, with 11 seats;
- Austrians also elect their president of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. Alexander van der Bellen won the presidential election that took place in 2016. The ecologist candidate, who stood as an independent, won in the second round of voting on 4th December 2016 51.7% of the vote against 48.3% for his populist rival Norbert Hofer (FPÖ).

Results of the previous general election on 29th September 2013 in Austria

Turnout: 74.91%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)	1 258 605	26,82	52
Peoples Party (ÖVP)	1 125 876	23,99	47
Liberal Party (FPÖ)	962 313	20,51	40
The Greens- Green Alternative (DG)	582 657	12,42	24
Team Stronach (TS)	268 679	5,73	11
NEOS – New Austria (NEOS)	232 946	4,96	9
Alliance for the future of Austria (BZÖ)	165 746	3,53	0

Source : Home Affairs Ministry <http://wahl13.bmi.gv.at/>

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