

KKI

POLICY BRIEF

E-2019/36

The Spectacular Fall of a Political Experiment in Austria

Sebastian Kurz's Failure to Tame the Radical Right

Egy politikai kísérlet látványos bukása Ausztriában

Sebastian Kurz kudarcra a radikális jobboldal megszelídítésében

TAMÁS LEVENTE MOLNÁR



KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Reviewers:

Barnabás Szabó

Máté Szalai

Typesetting:

Andrea Tevelyné Kulcsár

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: + 36 1 279-5700

Fax: + 36 1 279-5701

E-mail: info@ifat.hu

<http://kki.hu>

© Tamás Levente Molnár, 2019

© Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019

ISSN 2416-0148

Abstract: As a result of “Ibizagate” Sebastian Kurz’s turquoise-blue government resigned, and the chancellor himself was forced out of office by the Austrian parliament in a vote of no confidence. Prior to the parliamentary elections in 2017, the similarities between the respective positions of the ÖVP and the FPÖ, resulting from Kurz’s conscious accommodative strategy towards the right, opened up the possibility of cooperation between the two parties. At the same time, the actions of Kurz came with the risk of legitimizing many of the FPÖ’s right-wing policies, a danger he did not shy away from. At the beginning of his one-and-a-half-year-long governing period, Kurz tried to establish a “new style” of governing, but later events foiled his efforts. Nevertheless, the ÖVP chairman can calmly expect the upcoming early elections, and will most likely be able to choose from several potential partners afterwards.

Összefoglalás: Sebastian Kurz türkiz-kék kormánya az „Ibiza-botrány” hatására lemondott, a kancellárt pedig egy bizalmatlansági indítvánnyal a parlament kényszerítette távozásra. A 2017-es parlamenti választást megelőzően az ÖVP és az FPÖ közötti pozícióbeli hasonlóságok, amelyek Kurz tudatos alkalmazkodó stratégiájának voltak köszönhetőek, lehetővé tették a két párt együttműködését. Habár ez az FPÖ legitimálásának a kockázatával járt, Kurz elfogadta a helyzetet: másfél éves kormányzása elején egy „új stílusra” törekedett az FPÖ-vel való kapcsolatokban. Ez azonban az eseményeket figyelembe véve sikertelen véget ért. Mindezek ellenére az ÖVP-elnök nyugodtan várhatja az előrehozott választásokat, és nagy valószínűséggel több potenciális partner közül válogathat majd.

INTRODUCTION

On May 18, one day after “Ibizagate” broke, vice-chancellor and leader of the right-wing radical Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) Heinz-Christian Strache resigned from all of his posts, and Sebastian Kurz asked Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen to call an early election, a proposal to which the president agreed. Kurz’s initial plan to keep the governing coalition, composed by the centrist-right Austrian People’s Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, ÖVP) and the FPÖ intact until the early elections collapsed when the remaining FPÖ ministers resigned as a response to the dismissal of Herbert Kickl (FPÖ), minister of the interior. As an alternative, Kurz then formed a government of experts, but this was not tolerated by the parliament’s majority which led to a no-confidence vote backed by the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) as well as the FPÖ along with a minor fraction named JETZT – Liste Pilz. The vote of no confidence was the first successful one of its kind in the country’s history since World War II. After this, Federal President Van der Bellen appointed Brigitte Bierlein, at that point president of the Constitutional Court, to lead the interim government until the early election set for the end of September.



Following his election victory in 2017, Sebastian Kurz wanted to build a stable government based on a "[new style](#)" of politics. "A new basic understanding of politics is needed, too. We have to abandon the false approaches based on quarrel and dissent, and move towards new forms of positive cooperation"— this is how the [2017 ÖVP–FPÖ coalition treaty](#) explains the meaning of the proposed "new style". The first government led by Sebastian Kurz, which had to resign after just 526 days, was characterized by several conflicts between the governing parties as well as between the government and the opposition. Despite all his efforts to "tame" the radical right when in government and to maintain the appearance of a harmonic atmosphere, Kurz ultimately failed to keep the cooperation going.

This policy brief aims to assess how the relation between the ÖVP and the FPÖ changed during their coalition in 2017–2019. In my paper, I will challenge the hypotheses of Pontus Odman and Eve Hepburn regarding the effects of mainstream parties adopting populist positions on immigration, laid down in their 2017 [book](#) "The European Mainstream and the Populist Radical Right". In their book, based on Bonnie M. Meguid's 2005 [analytical framework](#), the authors claim to have identified the following three scenarios:

- *adversarial position*: in cases where the support of radical right parties has increased or consolidated over time, "mainstream parties are assumed to have taken up adversarial [meaning liberal/multicultural] positions in response to the niche contender's success";
- *accommodative position*: in cases where the support of radical right parties has declined, "mainstream parties have changed positions in the restrictive/assimilationist direction in order to remedy this electoral 'theft'";
- *dismissive position*: "mainstream parties do not address the immigration issue at all".

First, I will assess the accuracy of the concept of "niche contender" with regard to the FPÖ. Using the authors' scenarios, I will review then the ÖVP's position towards the FPÖ during the 2017 election campaign, but (unlike the authors) I will go beyond the topic of immigration and list the possible similarities and differences in other policy fields as well. Further, I will evaluate the success of Kurz's "new style" of governing with the FPÖ. Finally, regarding the early election in September, I will provide some possible outcome scenarios.

THE FPÖ'S GOVERNMENT RECORD

The Austrian Freedom Party is a lot more than just a "niche contender" (to use the term of Odman/Hepburn) of Austrian politics, as it indeed became part of the political mainstream decades ago. Interestingly, since 1983 the FPÖ has come into power on the national level for longer or shorter periods every 17 years; either as a junior partner of SPÖ or ÖVP.

Between 1983 and 1987, the FPÖ was part of the government twice as a junior partner to the social democrats. In 1986, following the election of Jörg Haider as the FPÖ's party leader, the SPÖ in a [party congress resolution](#) decided not to form any coalition on the national level with the Freedom Party from then on. (The resolution was renewed in 2004). At the federal province level there have been several examples of SPÖ–FPÖ coalitions, such as in Carinthia (2004–2006) or in Burgenland (2015–2019), as well as with others (mostly with the ÖVP) in three-party coalitions.

The Austrian conservatives did not at any point declare a refusal to cooperate with the FPÖ. Regardless of heavy international criticism, Wolfgang Schüssel formed the first national ÖVP–FPÖ coalition government in Austria's history in 2000. Three years later, the alliance was reaffirmed and continued until his election loss in 2006. After 11 years of various grand coalition (SPÖ–ÖVP) governments, again an ÖVP–FPÖ agreement was signed, making Sebastian Kurz chancellor of Austria.

In contrast to other parties of the radical right in Europe (such as in Germany or France), as a junior governing party the Austrian FPÖ has been able to set the political agenda while being in power instead of just influencing the mainstream political course from outside.

WHO OWNS THE ISSUE?

Regarding the Odmalm/Hepburn scenarios of how mainstream parties (ÖVP) could position themselves if the radical right's (FPÖ) support increases or decreases, one should take a look at the parties' election results over the last years (see table 1). Between the elections of 2006 and 2013, two major trends could be observed. The first is a large decrease in support for the ÖVP: the conservative party lost 10 percent in seven years, which accounts for a loss of roughly half a million voters, many of whom turned to the FPÖ instead (see table 2). The second largest group of lost votes (approximately 210,000) went to the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ), a "spin-off" from FPÖ led by Jörg Haider after he left the party in 2005. While support for the ÖVP dwindled, the FPÖ managed to multiply the number of its electorate – partially, but not exclusively at the expense of the ÖVP. Considering this shift of power, Odmalm/Hepburn would assume the mainstream ÖVP should take up a *more* adversarial position to the niche contenders in order to curb their success. But in the run-up to the 2017 election, they chose to do the opposite.

Table 1
Election results of the two parties in the last four parliamentary elections

	ÖVP	FPÖ
2006	34.3%	11.0%
2008	26.0%	17.5%
2013	23.9%	20.5%
2017	31.5%	26.0%



Instead of taking an adversary position, Sebastian Kurz implemented an accommodative strategy towards the FPÖ. According to the acknowledged wahlkabine.at voting advice application, a high number of similarities could be found in their respective election programs: out of the 26 questions regarding each party's positions on various topics, ÖVP and FPÖ took similar positions in 17 cases (as opposed to 14 similarities between ÖVP and SPÖ and 11 between SPÖ and FPÖ). More importantly, the two parties showed similar positions in policy areas which mattered most to Austrian voters. These were – according to a representative [survey](#) – immigration and integration, social issues, and economic and labour politics. Both ÖVP and FPÖ stood for a [restrictive migration](#) policy including the closing of the Mediterranean route for refugees, reducing social benefits for immigrants, denying work permits to asylum seekers, and limiting refugee family reunifications. Relevant similarities could be observed in the two party's conservative-liberal [economic](#) and [social policies](#), too: amongst the proposals were extensive tax cuts for business, more flexible labour law regulations, reduction of wage costs, etc.

Seeing the election results, Kurz's accommodative strategy towards the FPÖ turned out a success. The ÖVP won the elections with 31.5 percent of the votes, the "electoral theft" came to a halt, and the ÖVP in fact (re)gained voters from the FPÖ (see table 2). Kurz was able to present the FPÖ's positions in a "socially acceptable" manner which gained him the chancellor's seat. At the same time, his accommodative strategy bore the risk of legitimizing many of the radical right's positions and thus enabling them to pick up even more radical stances.

Table 2
Voter migration between the ÖVP and the FPÖ in the last four parliamentary elections
(the arrows indicate the direction of migration)

	ÖVP	FPÖ
2006		102,000
2008		88,000
2013		0
2017	73,000	

Once in government, the FPÖ managed to secure the ÖVP's political support for some of its old demands, such as restricting the rights of social partnerships (institutionalized relationships between the government, political parties, and certain interest groups), restructuring the advisory board of the national public broadcast (ORF) (although the motion could not take effect due to the government's collapse), or lasting shifts in the country's migration policy (see below for details). Having the support of the ÖVP made all these highly controversial FPÖ-demands more acceptable for the Austrian public.

GOVERNING BASED ON A COMMON AGENDA

Following the formation of the turquoise-blue government in December 2017, the government parties began to implement what was promised during the election campaign. In order to create a "slimmer state", the new government reduced or even cancelled several welfare programs, such as various unemployment-related benefits, the guaranteed minimum income, or the indexation of family benefits (for the latter the European Commission [launched](#) an infringement procedure due to the violation of the principle of equal treatment). In April 2019, shortly before the collapse of the government, the promised [tax reform](#) was released. The [complete package](#) foresaw a gradual reduction of taxes summing up to 6.5 billion euros until 2022, which is almost half of what ÖVP and FPÖ promised (14 and 12 billion euros respectively) during the election campaign. Regarding finances, their biggest success was to present a balanced budget, and indeed the [first budget surplus since 1974](#), which could be reached mostly due to the favourable external economic situation.

Regarding immigration policy, the other "hot topic" of the election campaign, the government has delivered the previously promised restrictive course. Restrictions on rights and benefits for migrants and asylum-seekers have been tightened (the reduction of minimum income as well as the indexation of family benefits affected foreign citizens in particular), some deeply symbolic measures (e.g. [headscarf ban](#) in kindergarten and in primary school) have been put in place.

In political terms, the most controversial issue was the Austrian withdrawal from the UN global migration pact. For this decision, Kurz was heavily criticized by EU officials (including European Commission President [Jean-Claude Juncker](#)). The withdrawal came as surprise to many, as it was made during the time of the country's Council presidency, when it was playing a [key role](#) in the negotiations of the migration pact. It was a result of [continuous pressure](#) by the FPÖ.

ONE-TIME ANOMALY OR ONGOING STRUGGLE?

At the beginning of the ÖVP–FPÖ government's term, a key promise was to deliver the above-mentioned "new style" of politics. This was especially important to Kurz, who wanted to put an end to the "culture of conflict" (which he associated with the previous governing era of a grand coalition with the SPÖ) and create a harmonious atmosphere, enabling the government to focus on their electoral mandate and deliver the promised work.

Taking a look at the events of the last one and a half years, "Ibizagate", which triggered the government's collapse, proves to be just the tip of an iceberg. Research of the German newspaper [Süddeutsche Zeitung](#) sheds light on a long list

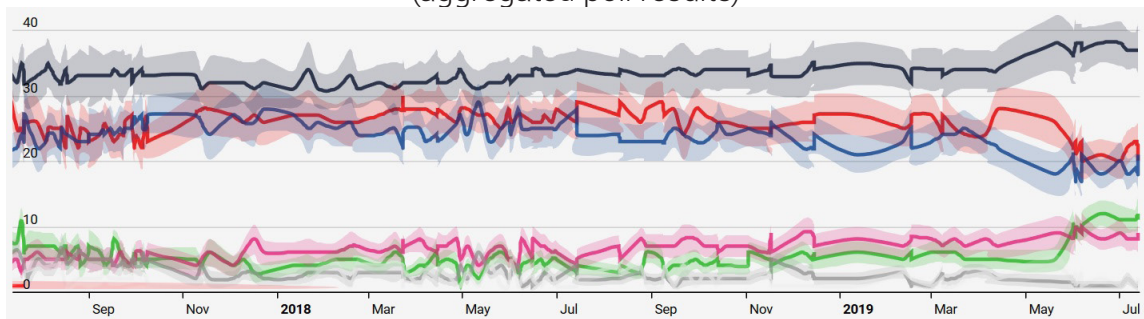


of scandals: FPÖ politicians and members party-affiliated groups have repeatedly shown tendencies towards neo-Nazi ideas and used neo-Nazi vocabulary; Minister of the Interior Kickl has been accused of undermining the rule of law; FPÖ ministers have repeatedly been attacking the independence of the ORF; both ÖVP and FPÖ have restricted the rights of asylum-seekers, and politicians of both parties have been recorded uttering anti-Semitic and racist statements.

Chancellor Kurz rarely condemned these statements publicly, as sustaining the coalition and maintaining his “new style” has undoubtedly been more important to him than picking fights on these issues. To uphold the appearance, both Kurz and Strache emphasized their [good interpersonal relations](#) many times at common press conferences. Due to his uncritical public position towards the breach of taboos by his coalition partner, the opposition dubbed Kurz “*Schweigekanzler*”, silent chancellor (the name that was first used for Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel).

[Figure 1](#)

Support for Austrian parties since the parliamentary election in 2017
(aggregated poll results)



Legend: black – ÖVP, red – SPÖ, blue – FPÖ, purple – NEOS, green – the Greens

It's interesting to ask oneself what the future of the turquoise-blue coalition could have been, would it not have been for “IbizaGate”. Before the release of the incriminating video footage, the polls showed stable support for the governing parties (see figure 1). Most probably Kurz would have continued to “swallow” the “recurring individual cases” of breaches of conduct by his coalition partner, as he put it in his [statement](#) announcing the end of the coalition. It remains true, however, that his chancellorship was accompanied by continuous scandals, both bigger and smaller, which eventually he was not able to manage. Thus, his promise of a “new style” of governing proved to be nothing more than hot air.

KURZ'S MULTIPLE CHOICES

Following the political turmoil after “IbizaGate”, the ÖVP managed to increase the number of its voters in the [European parliamentary elections](#). According to recent polls, the parties who voted in favor of the no-confidence vote against Kurz (SPÖ, FPÖ, and JETZT – Liste Pilz) are scoring worse than before, while those

who opposed the no-confidence vote are gaining support (ÖVP, NEOS, and the Greens, although the latter are currently not represented in parliament). A recent [survey](#) suggests that Austrian voters saw the no-confidence vote as a kind of litmus test of political stability in the country which in part explains the changes in support for the parties.

As the above-mentioned poll and election results showed, Austrian voters did not blame Sebastian Kurz for the breakdown of his government. He has every chance to win the early elections in September and thus become chancellor again. Based on current developments, Kurz will likely find himself in the comfortable situation of having the choice between (at least) three potential coalition partners after the election.

Scenario 1: Reconciling with the FPÖ	Scenario 2: Back to the grand coalition	Scenario 3: Trying out something new
<p>The FPÖ members' anger towards the ÖVP has all but settled down, as they blame Kurz for the termination of the coalition, a development leading to internal turmoil in the FPÖ. As an "act of revenge," the party voted in favor of the no-confidence vote which has made future cooperation unlikely. Strache's successor as party leader, Norbert Hofer, still tries to be conciliatory in order to keep possibilities for the party open after the elections. The ÖVP leadership, on the other hand, will think twice before teaming up with a partner who proved this unreliable (again). From all three scenarios, this is the most unlikely.</p>	<p>SPÖ Chairperson Pamela Rendi-Wagner named two motives for their support of the no-confidence vote against Kurz: first, they criticized his lack of coordination with the parliament concerning the post-"Ibizagate" developments; second, they attributed full responsibility for his government to Kurz as a chancellor. The right wing of the party might be open towards Kurz as a coalition chancellor, but currently they only constitute a minority within the SPÖ. Kurz left the social democrats behind to break out of the "monotonous" patterns of the grand coalition and start a new style of politics. An ÖVP-SPÖ coalition would only be thinkable if no alternative options than another coalition with the FPÖ remained.</p>	<p>The no-confidence vote was a handy tool for Kurz to map potential partners for the future. If the electoral support is sufficient, Kurz could retry his "new style" approach with a different partner: either with the liberal NEOS (<i>Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum</i>) or with the Greens, or even both. The NEOS would be a perfect match for the ÖVP in social-economic terms, while from the neighbouring Bavaria – a German federal state with similar political traditions to the Austrian's – we have already seen a conservative leader implement green positions successfully. An Alpine Jamaica-coalition (or <i>Dirndlkoalition</i>, to use the Austrian term) is unprecedented on national level, but not on the federal province level (Salzburg).</p>



SUMMARY

According to the hypothesis of Odmalm/Hepburn, the centrist-right ÖVP should, considering the power shifts in the Austrian politics between 2006 and 2017, have taken up an adversarial position towards the FPÖ before the parliamentary elections in 2017. But in the run-up of the elections the opposite has happened: Sebastian Kurz's accommodative strategy towards the radical right during the election campaign in 2017 proved to be a recipe of success and made the following cooperation with the FPÖ possible, but it came at a price, too. A more accurate description of this specific Austrian case can be found in Tarik Abou-Chadi's 2014 [article](#) on the impact of niche party success on the policy agendas of mainstream parties.

With a growing vote share of a radical right party at the previous election, mainstream parties shift their profile toward a more ethno-cultural and restrictive position on immigration. In response to an increase in radical right party support, mainstream parties equally increase the salience of the multiculturalism issue. An increasing number of immigrants not only causes parties to talk more about immigration, but also to shift their position toward a more restrictive profile.

Kurz overestimated his own capabilities of handling the FPÖ, but as polls and surveys suggest, Austrian voters do not blame him for the collapse of the government. His approach of creating a "new style" of governing with the radical right (meaning terminating the conflicts and focusing on getting the job done in a harmonious manner) has proven a failure due to numerous disputes and scandals.

As polls suggest, the ÖVP has various choices for a coalition partner after the elections in September. If Kurz still seeks an alternative to the "business as usual" grand coalition, and does not want to reconcile with the FPÖ, he has to step off the beaten paths of Austrian politics and look for new partners. Concerning the country's European politics, the Austrian position might shift depending on the ÖVP's future coalition partner, particularly on some relevant European topics, like the negotiation of the new EU budget, rule of law and democracy debates, or the future directions of the EU's refugee and migration policy.