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The New Austrian Government and the Rise of the Far-Right in Europe

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Introduction by Elisabeth Roehrlich, University of Vienna and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C.

Austria, a small nation state in the heart of Europe with less than 9 million inhabitants, is usually not at the center of world political attention. Without doubt, outside of the country more people are able to name the main characters of *The Sound of Music* than can list any members of the Austrian government. However, the parliamentary elections of October 2017, and the coalition government that was sworn in two months later, have resulted in a new interest in Austrian politics. The country is now not only ruled by Europe's youngest leader—the new Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, is 31—but has also become the “only Western European country [in the European Union (EU)] with a far-right presence in government.”¹

Topics that have shaken up the rest of Europe over the past few years—the so-called refugee crisis, the rise of political populism, an ever-increasing EU-skepticism—appear under the magnifying glass of the Austrian case. The two partners of the new coalition government are the conservative ÖVP (Austrian People's Party), which won most votes and is run by Kurz, and the far-right FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), led by Heinz Christian Strache. While right-wing populism has been on the rise all over Europe—from Victor Orbán in Hungary to Marine Le Pen in France—so far it has not achieved this kind of power in a Western European country in the EU. For many foreign observers, the historical roots of the Freedom Party, whose predecessor VdU (Verband der Unabhängigen) was founded by former Nazis in the late 1940s, raises concerns. Two days after the new government took over, the Editorial Board of *The New York Times* entitled a piece “Austria's Welcome to a Party with a Nazi Past.”² After the election in October, the German satirical magazine *Titanic* tweeted a photo of Kurz with a target on his chest, under the heading “Kill Baby-Hitler, finally possible.”³

While many worried that the new coalition government would echo much of the EU-skepticism that predominates within the FPÖ, it has been described recently as “a mix of far-right, pro-Europe and youth.”⁴ Most importantly, the coalition agreement excludes the possibility of holding a referendum on Austria's membership in the European Union (thus avoiding an Austrian version of “Brexit”). Kurz's first trip as Chancellor took him to Brussels, even before he showed up in the Austrian parliament. Austria's President,

¹ Carmen Fishwick, “It's been looming over us for decades': Austrian voters on the far-right,” *The Guardian* (online), 23 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/23/its-been-looming-over-us-for-decades-austrian-voters-on-the-far-right>. Switzerland, of course, is the exception, but it is not a member of the EU. On the Norwegian case see: Emily Schultheis, “What Right-Wing Populists Look Like in Norway,” 12 September 2017, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/norway-progress-party-populism-immigration/539535/>.

² “Austria's Welcome to a Party with a Nazi Past,” *The New York Times* (Editorial Board), 20 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/opinion/austria-nazi-past-kurz.html>.

³ Judith Mischke, “German satirical magazine escalates ‘Baby Hitler’ scandal,” 27 October 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/kurz-hitler-titanic-german-satirical-magazine-escalates-baby-hitler-scandal/>.

⁴ Melissa Eddy, “Austria's New Government: A Mix of Far-Right, Europe, and Youth,” 18 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/world/europe/austria-chancellor-kurz.html>.

Alexander van der Bellen, a long-standing member of the Green Party, made clear early on that he would not tolerate an anti-European government.

The Austrian historian Oliver Rathkolb, a contributor to this roundtable, has entitled his seminal book on Austria's modern history *The Paradoxical Republic*.⁵ Austria's political system after 1945 has been characterized by a number of such paradoxes: the country is pro-Western, but only joined the EU in 1995 (and never NATO); neutrality has remained a central pillar of state identity. For decades the Social Democrats and the Conservatives dominated politics, administration, and the economy in a specifically Austrian form of organized corporatism, the *Sozialpartnerschaft*. In 2000, an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition governed for the first time in Austrian history. Massive public protests as well as strong reactions by the other member states of the EU (remembered in Austria incorrectly as 'EU-sanctions') accompanied the accession of the government. While the protests have been smaller this time, worries remain in large parts of the Austrian population.

In their essay for this policy roundtable, Anita Bodlos, Jakob-Moritz Eberl, and Carolina Plescia analyze the 2017 parliamentary elections in Austria against the background of pan-European solidarity and the refugee crisis. They explain that the controversial politics of migration in different EU countries have led to an environment in which quite separate legal, institutional, and economic questions surrounding free movement are linked in public and political debates, and that a new sensitivity for the political dimension of the EU is needed. Oliver Rathkolb takes a closer look at the history of so-called dirty-campaigning and its role in previous Austrian elections. He argues that, while controversy over the use of dirty-campaigning strategies was at the center of public and political discourse over the 2017 parliamentary elections, migration policies and the search for a strong political leader were more influential in shaping the outcome of the elections.

Participants:

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⁵ Oliver Rathkolb, *The Paradoxical Republic: Austria 1945-2005* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

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Study (AUTNES) and co-leader in a national project on populist vote in Austria founded by the Anniversary Fund of the Oesterreichische Nationalbank (OeNB).

Oliver Rathkolb is Full Professor at the University of Vienna's Department of Contemporary History and the Department's director. He was the founding director of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres, 2005-2008, a Schumpeter Fellow at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University, 2000-2001, and Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago in 2003. Rathkolb is the author of several books and numerous articles on Austrian contemporary history in an international context. He is a member of the advisory board of the House of European History (European Parliament, Brussels) and chairman of the International Advisory Board of the House of Austrian History.

Essay by Anita Bodlos, Jakob-Moritz Eberl, and Carolina Plescia, University of Vienna

Pan-European Solidarity, the Refugee Crisis, and the Logic of Closure: Insights from the Austrian National Elections 2017

Robert Schuman, one of the founders of the European Union (EU), explained in 1950 that *de facto* solidarity is the pre-condition for concrete achievements in the EU project.¹ Nowadays, the financial crisis, the explosion of core-periphery (North-South) conflicts in the wake of the sovereign debt problems and, in 2015, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’²³ have enormously amplified the calls for and the challenges faced by *pan-European solidarity*. In particular, the principle of free movement has been put increasingly under strain.

The free movement of people is one of the fundamental rights guaranteed to EU nationals by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. This includes the rights of movement and residence as well as work authorisation and equal treatment with national citizens for all EU citizens.⁴ Free movement represents a policy achievement unrivalled anywhere in the world and has become an integral part of EU Member States’ economies and societies.

Yet, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the intra-EU free mobility has become a contested issue: First, enlargements of the European Union in 2004 brought several new Member States with substantially lower wages than the EU average. As transitional restrictions on mobility were progressively removed, mobility increased more than some analysts expected. Second, shortly after these enlargements, the deepest economic crisis of modern times created enormous pressure on many Member States’ labour markets, public finances, and social systems, and the economic inequalities that resulted appear to have been a significant driver of human mobility. Third, in 2015, instability in Europe’s neighbourhood generated a refugee and migration crisis that—while not directly connected to the principle of free movement itself—put new pressure on some Member States’ administrative capacities and has fuelled intense political debate about the EU’s role in the movement of people.

Faced by unprecedentedly numerous troubled situations, both elite and public opinion have become increasingly polarized. Some EU leaders have placed solidarity at the heart of EU action—for instance, through physical accommodation of immigrants throughout the Union. However, many others do not consider solidarity instruments as sustainable for responsibility-sharing across Europe and even called for more

¹ European Union, “The Schuman Declaration—9 May 1950,” accessed 17 November 2017, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration_en.

² In 2015, the European Union has witnessed increased immigration with more than 1.3 million asylum applicants.

³ UNHCR, “Statistical Yearbook 2015,” accessed 17 November 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/country/59b294387/unhcr-statistical-yearbook-2015-15th-edition.html>.

⁴ European Parliament, “Free movement of workers,” last modified June 2017, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_3.1.3.html.

restricted access for EU workers to welfare benefits, in some cases in ways that challenged established principles of non-discrimination within the EU. The polarization between the logic of closure and the logic of solidarity is to be seen both within countries and between countries. In 2016 half of the European population (58 per cent) had positive attitudes towards intra-EU mobility, although only 34 per cent agreed with immigration from outside the EU. However, these attitudes varied greatly across Member States. Sweden, for example, had relatively positive and Hungary comparatively negative immigration attitudes, concerning both intra-EU mobility and migration into Europe.⁵

Meanwhile, faced with these hard times, European voters are increasingly turning to politicians offering a return to an imagined, golden past, as is evident in the growing success of populist radical right parties across the EU (for instance, the Greek Golden Dawn, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the *Front national* in France, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the German Alternative for Germany). In particular, a burgeoning monist-populist attitude defends the national identity and the national interest by appealing to a closure of borders. This re-emphasis on national identification undermines the pluralist essence of Europe, where nationalities with different socio-cultural backgrounds are asked to cooperate, and hence challenges the EU as a political project.

Austria's Critical Role and the 2017 Austrian Elections

Austria held a key position both during the European enlargement as well as during the most intense stages of the refugee crisis, in terms of being affected by and influencing policy decisions in Brussels. In 2004, during negotiations with the new EU member states, Austria and Germany, along with some other EU members, insisted on a transition period as they feared an uncontrollable surge in immigration and subsequent wage dumping. Similar concerns resurfaced in the context of the refugee crisis in 2015, however, with an added discomfort about the cultural and religious compatibility of incoming refugees. Austria registered 88,000 refugees in 2015 (a 214 percent increase compared to 2014)⁶ and also emerged as a key transit country for refugees and migrants on their way through the Western Balkans to Germany and Scandinavia.

Solidarity with refugees was promoted among non-negligible parts of the Austrian population, but eventually, Austrian politics moved away from a 'welcoming culture' by demanding upper limits for asylum claims and installing and enforcing border controls. The Austrian government's actions led to controversial discussions about the adequate management of the crisis on a national and a European level, and marked a shift in Europeans' attitudes towards the arrival of asylum seekers as well as towards the overall Schengen Agreement according to which border checks among European countries have been largely abolished.⁷ Ever since, immigration policy has been prominent on the agenda of both European and Austrian politics. The issue

⁵ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 85.2* (GESIS Data Archive, Cologne, 2016. ZA6694 Data file Version 1.0.0, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12633>).

⁶ Bundesministerium für Inneres, "Asylstatistik 2015," accessed 17 November 2017, http://www.bmi.gv.at/301/Statistiken/files/Jahresstatistiken/Asyl_Jahresstatistik_2015.pdf.

⁷ Valmir Mehmeti, "Schengen Agreement," n.d., schengen visa info (website), <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-agreement/>.

salience of immigration and asylum as well as law and order also substantially increased in the Austrian general electorate compared to 2013.⁸

This situation has played well for the far right *Freedom party* (FPÖ) and its anti-immigration and anti-elitist discourse⁹: from mid-2015 till spring 2017, polls indicated the FPÖ as the most popular party with an estimated vote share well above 30 per cent.¹⁰ Later on, starting from May 2017, continuing attention to the issue of immigration has played well for the 31-year old Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sebastian Kurz. Nominated leader of the centre-right Christian democratic *People's Party* (ÖVP), in May 2017, Kurz immediately called early elections. During the campaign, Kurz was able to take ownership of the immigration issue by conveying a clear anti-immigration position, thus eclipsing the FPÖ.¹¹ Kurz's campaign included calls for closing Islamic kindergartens and cutting minimum social transfers to recognized refugees.

The major winners of the 2017 Austrian election held on 15 October were the parties on the right of the ideological spectrum.¹² The ÖVP obtained 31.5 per cent of votes, coming in first place by increasing its vote share by more than seven percentage points and obtaining fifteen more parliamentary seats than it won in the last general election held in 2013. Despite being unable to secure the second position and to equal the all-time high election results of 1999, the populist far right FPÖ increased its vote share since 2013 by 5.5 points to 26 per cent. Hence, combined, the two parties on the right of the ideological spectrum reached a total of 57.5 per cent of the votes. The incumbent Chancellor Party, the Social Democrats (SPÖ), gained 26.9 per cent in a head-on-head race against the FPÖ. The biggest surprise of the election night was the debacle of the Greens. One of the most successful Green parties of Europe,¹³ the Austrian Greens were unable to pass the electoral threshold—the first time since they first entered the Parliament in 1986. The relatively new liberal/centre-right party *The New Austria and Liberal Forum* (NEOS), which campaigned for the first time in 2013 managed to slightly increase its vote share, securing one additional mandate to the nine won in 2013. The

⁸ Evidence found in the data collected by the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), <http://www.autnes.at/>.

⁹ Julian Aichholzer, Sylvia Kritzing, Markus Wagner, and Eva Zeglovits “How has radical right support transformed established political conflicts? The case of Austria,” *West European Politics* 37:1 (2014): 113-137.

¹⁰ “Wahlumfragen für Österreich,” neuwal.com, accessed 17 November 2017, <https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/index.php?cid=1>.

¹¹ Carolina Plescia, Sylvia Kritzing, and Patricia Oberluggauer, “Austria 2017: conflict mobilization in a reconstructing political landscape,” 9 October 2017, <http://cise.luiss.it/cise/2017/10/09/austria-2017-conflict-mobilization-in-a-reconstructing-political-landscape/>.

¹² All election results are taken from: Bundesministerium für Inneres, „Wahlen,“ accessed 17 November 2017, <http://www.bmi.gv.at/412/>.

¹³ Martin Dolezal, “The Greens in Austria and Switzerland: Two successful opposition parties,” in *Green parties in Europe*, ed. Emilie van Haute (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 15-41.

Green splinter party, Liste Peter Pilz, in its first appearance in a general election, managed to enter the Parliament.¹⁴

Broadly speaking, the results of the Austrian elections suggest that the electorate and the parties turned to the right. The Social Democrats (SPÖ), as well, moved to the right by reversing a long-term principle of rejecting the FPÖ as potential partner in national government. Now that the ÖVP-FPÖ government has been sworn in on 18 December 2017, the FPÖ has gained executive power on a national level for the fourth time since its existence.¹⁵ This halts again the traditional consensual system under which the SPÖ and the ÖVP mutually governed the country based on majorities in the parliament at around 90 percent or above.¹⁶ Unlike during previous negotiations with the FPÖ, European leaders uttered few critique or warnings. Since the early 2000s, Europe has produced a number of governments that include populist radical right parties.¹⁷ Any criticism would thus have been toothless.

Conclusions

One contradictory effect of the economic and refugee crisis has been that while pan-European solidarity is called for with increasing frequency, national citizens and politicians now increasingly support a logic of 'closure,' i.e., are trying to re-establish the old boundaries between the nation and the outside. Several EU member states are now seriously questioning the future of the free movement of persons in the EU. The appeal to solidarity served both to cement horizontal alliances among the disadvantaged and vertical exchanges between rulers and ruled. Solidarity and political justice became irreversibly intertwined through the democratic process. The controversial politics of migration in many EU countries have created an environment in which quite separate legal, institutional, and economic questions surrounding free movement have become intertwined in public and political debates. These range from public concerns about the economic and social impacts of intra-EU mobility, including the consequences for social systems to which EU citizens have the right of free access, to questions of sovereignty and national control in the context of rising support for Eurosceptic parties across Europe. Clearly, a novel sensitivity for the political dimension of the

¹⁴ Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Eva Zeglovits, and Hubert Sickinger, "Austria election preview: Sebastian Kurz and the rise of the Austrian 'anti-party'," 4 October 2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/10/04/austria-election-preview-sebastian-kurz-and-the-rise-of-the-austrian-anti-party/>.

¹⁵ The FPÖ was the junior partner in two coalition governments with the ÖVP (2000-2006) and in one coalition government with the SPÖ (1983-1986). See Wolfgang C. Müller, "Regierung und Kabinettsystem," in *Politik in Österreich. Das Handbuch*, eds. Herbert Dachs, Peter Gerlich, Herbert Gottweis, Helmut Kramer, Volkmar Lauber, Wolfgang C. Müller, and Emmerich Tálos (Vienna: Manz, 2006), 168-187.

¹⁶ Parlament, "Zusammensetzung des Nationalrates seit 1945 (aufgrund des jeweiligen Wahlergebnisses)," 17 November 2017, <https://www.parlament.gv.at/WWER/NR/MandateNr1945/>.

¹⁷ Cas Mudde, "Fighting the system? Populist radical right parties and party system change," *Party Politics* 20:2 (2014): 218-226.

EU, understood in the deep sense of preserving stability, order, mutual trust, compliance, common interests, and solidarity, is needed.¹⁸

¹⁸ Pamela Pansardi, and Francesco Battegazzorre, “Which legitimacy for the European Union? An analysis of the President of the Commission’s State of the Union Addresses (SotEU),” *REScEU Working Paper Series*, September 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309133944_Which_legitimacy_for_the_European_Union_An_analysis_of_the_President_of_the_Commission%27s_State_of_the_Union_Addresses_SOTEU.

Essay by Oliver Rathkolb, University of Vienna

*Dirty Campaigning in Austria's 2017 early Parliamentary Elections, and their Results: An Expected Rightward Turn*¹

The origins of the elections in 2017, which had originally been scheduled for 2018, start with Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) Chancellor Werner Faymann's political about-face on the issue of refugees in 2015, when he first supported the 'we can do this' approach of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and then changed his position and advocated for a tightening of the country's borders. At the same time, Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz added an edge to his domestic political profile by stating that he would close off the Balkan route into the country.

Faymann's waffling would eventually mobilize those foes within his own party that then removed him and his entourage from power. His successor, Christian Kern, the CEO of the Austrian Federal Railways who had worked in the SPÖ parliamentary group before his tenure in state-adjacent industries and was well connected, subsequently attempted to utilize his rhetorical gifts and active media presence to halt the SPÖ's slide in the polls. He even appeared to consider calling an early election in February 2017, after having skillfully presented his plan A and a comprehensive new electoral platform. However, his ÖVP Vice Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner deftly engaged him on his "New Coalition" proposal before being forced to cede to the pressure generated by the strong polling numbers of the young rising star Sebastian Kurz.

While Mitterlehner resigned prematurely, having been exasperated by the intra-party quarrels that were also negatively affecting the coalition, Kurz then perfectly organized his long-standing plan to take over the ÖVP leadership that endowed him with absolute powers. He then called for new elections.

The buzzing discussions regarding the 2017 National Assembly campaign, stoked by broadsheets and free dailies, have left many people with the impression that this was the most extremely negative campaign of all time. Various debates on both public and private television stations reinforced this impression, and social media channels then spread it throughout their respective networks.

However, as post-election polls have demonstrated, the animated debates surrounding two 'anti-Kurz' Facebook pages (and a smaller 'anti-Kern' page) were not deciding factors in the elections, much to the surprise of even ÖVP party officials. The two anti-Kurz Facebook pages had been created—as it later turned out—by PR consultant Tal Silberstein, who worked for the Social Democrats and was then fired because of a criminal investigation in Israel. Rather, the party that fulfilled the electorate's desire for a strong, clear, and uncompromising style of leadership on the issues of immigration and refugees was successful. Had Kurz remained calm and unfazed in the face of the attacks on him via Facebook, he might have received even more votes.

Around the time of the 2013 National Assembly elections, experts concluded that negative campaigning had occurred in the years following 1945, as well as during the 1960s, but that this negativity was replaced during the 1970s by more positive campaigning strategies. In the 1980s, spurred by then FPÖ-leader Jörg Haider's

¹ Compare more details on the election campaign in the anthology by Thomas Hofer and Barbara Tóth, eds., *Wahl 2017: Loser, Leaks & Leadership* (Vienna: ÄrzteVerlag, 2017).

aggressive style of campaigning, negative campaigning made a comeback and reached a deleterious peak in 2006, during which time political advisor and lobbyist Thomas Hofer created the apt metaphor of the “triumph of negative campaigning.”²

The following essay attempts to substantiate this theory, as well as to detail the elements of negative and dirty campaigning, which is defined as direct attacks on the personal integrity of leading candidates where the source of these attacks is obscured.

The first negative highlight was the Presidential election in 1965, when the socialist Viennese Mayor Franz Jonas ran against Chancellor Alfons Gorbach of the ÖVP. During the campaign, people stated that Jonas’s wife spoke Czech, not German, and that he was unelectable because he was confessionless. Jonas began to steadily lose support in the last weeks of the 1965 campaign. He won the election by a razor-thin margin, taking 50.7 per cent of the vote. Incidentally, Jonas spoke a very literary German and, as a trained typesetter, had a very proper sense of language for a politician. This kind of dirty campaigning can be found even today in the form of negative jokes.

The Americanization of campaigns shaped the ÖVP strategy in 1969. It was based on the campaign style of New York’s then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller, which was brought to Austria by the former ÖVP Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the United States, Karl Gruber who said, “We planned in advance to make the billboards old fashioned, the print ads sophisticated, and the television spots shocking.”³ Furthermore, Karl Pisa, then the ÖVP campaign manager, stated that the TV movie “Kapuzenmänner” (Hooded Men), in which these men on motorcycles force a car off the road, was an attempt to alert people to the consequences of a possible government led by a potential socialist chancellor Bruno Kreisky (SPÖ). This topic was also the subject of newspaper ads. In hindsight, the debate surrounding the hooded men proved to be deleterious for the ÖVP, as Kreisky repeatedly blamed it on these scare tactics as well as on the ÖVP candidate, Josef Klaus, himself. Even though there was a solid campaign budget in 1970 of over 100 million schillings (7 million euros) strategies were still predominantly formulated by political operatives, not by public relations professionals or advertising experts.

A look back clearly demonstrates that negative campaigning has been used in elections since 1945, and was exceptionally prevalent all the way through to 1970. The fact that topics rooted in National Socialist propaganda continued to be used after 1945 is one of the unwitting continuities of the Second Republic’s political culture. Direct and indirect anti-Semitism returned in the late 1960s and again around 1970, only to subsequently disappear from National Assembly campaigns, before bursting forth again in the debate surrounding former UN General Secretary Kurt Waldheim’s Nazi past when he was candidate for presidency in 1986. Later on, anti-Semitic stereotypes were selectively utilized by Haider and today remain present on social media, as well as in speeches against Tal Silberstein in the latest attacks of 2017.

² Thomas Hofer, “Der Triumph des Negative Campaigning,” Thomas Hofer and Barbara Tóth, eds., *Wahl 2006: Kanzler, Kampagnen, Kapriolen* (Vienna: LIT-Verlag, 2006), 5-31.

³ David Hermann-Mengg, *Politische TV-Spots der Ära Kreisky* (unpublished diploma thesis, University of Vienna, 2016), 77.

Susanne Vockenhuber correctly titled her 2011 master's thesis at the University of Vienna "Negative Campaigning—old wine in new tubes?"⁴ Lore Hayek examined this phenomenon via campaign billboards and concluded that the SPÖ under Kreisky clearly moved away from negative campaigning in 1971 and that both the major parties ÖVP and SPÖ distanced themselves from it in their campaign billboards after 1990, when the ÖVP unsuccessfully attacked the SPÖ, their government coalition partner.⁵ Negative campaigning then partially moved away from billboards into other forms of media.

U.S. campaign strategies have been repeatedly imitated and utilized since the first modern political election campaigns of the late 1960s. The use of these strategies was intensified in the late 1990s. While we do not have a real evaluation of the efficacy of an overly strong usage of U.S. examples, this U.S. import did not help the ÖVP in 1970, nor did it work for the SPÖ in the late 1990s, when an incredibly popular Chancellor, Viktor Klima, was rendered into an unrecognizable shape by his spin doctors, lacking any political edges. In addition, the public broadcaster ORF's ZIB 1 news program and the broadsheet *Kronen Zeitung* tried to dismantle him as a reliable leader. Voters demand authenticity and can frequently tell when they are being given the runaround.

While dirty campaigning itself is not a new phenomenon, it does now utilize new digital media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and is no longer dependent on whispered jokes and word of mouth. The goal, however, remains the same—to cast doubt upon the integrity of leading candidates by employing shadows from their private lives. Nonetheless, there are still certain areas that remain off-limits in Austria: sex, for example, does not sell.

In 2017, the intensive debates about dirty campaigning did not influence the result of the elections, which ended with the forecasted and clear victory of Kurz and the ÖVP, and an unexpected, severe loss for the Green Party: "In the elections to the National Assembly held on October 15, 2017, the SPÖ, according to the preliminary results, received 26.9 percent (+0.0) of the votes, the ÖVP received 31.5 percent (+7.5) and the FPÖ received 26 percent. The Green Party received 3.8 percent (-8.6) and will subsequently not be represented in the National Assembly. The PILZ List reached the minimum threshold, receiving 4.4 percent of the vote, while the NEOS received 5.3 percent. The remaining parties shared 2.1 percent of the vote."⁶

Within 60 days of the election, Kurz and Heinz Christian Strache, the Chairman of the FPÖ, formed a coalition that some international media have presented as a partially right-wing populist government. During the campaign, Kurz even sometimes outflanked the FPÖ, a party that had been promoting a right-wing populist message for decades, on the issue of immigration. This development was even noted by Strache in a cheap shot on Kurz during their joint press conference. Unlike the first two coalitions between these two

⁴ Susanne Vockenhuber, *Negative Campaigning - alter Wein in neuen Schläuchen?: eine Analyse politischer Negativbotschaften in den Nationalratswahlkämpfen der Zweiten Österreichischen Republik* (unpublished diploma thesis, University of Vienna, 2011).

⁵ Lore Hayek, *Design politischer Parteien: Plakatwerbung in österreichischen Wahlkämpfen* (Vienna: LIT-Verlag, 2016).

⁶ For an analyses see the website of the Austrian Institut für Strategieanalysen: <http://strategieanalysen.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ISA-SORA-Wahlanalyse-NRW2017-2.pdf>.

parties (2000-2003 and 2003-2007), both of which were terminated prematurely before the end of the legislative term, the third edition of this coalition government is projected to hold firm, with an emphasis being placed on unity and working side-by-side. There are, however, clear differences between the current FPÖ and its iteration from the time of the first coalition government with the ÖVP, as it had 9 members back then that were members of ethnic German organizations (17 percent of FPÖ members of parliament), while 39 percent of the party's members of parliament in 2017 have such an affiliation. 6 percent of these members were in super conservative *Burschenschaften* fraternities back then, compared with 31 percent today.⁷ This means that 31 percent of these members engage in fencing duels, though the middle school organizations only use dull blades.

Where this government will end up politically is an open question, as Kurz has brought the EU file into the Chancellor's office under the control of a Chancellery Minister, and has, at the same time, underscored that he will look to place the emphasis of the EU Presidency on fighting terrorism and preventing illegal immigration, even though the latter has recently become significantly less frequent. Both the Ministries of Interior and Defense as well as the central intelligence coordination by Vice Chancellor Heinz Christian Strache are occupied by FPÖ Party men. That Strache in his younger days was a member of a paramilitary neo-Nazi group is known in Austria but no longer matters. When Strache was asked by the liberal German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on his Neo-Nazi past (1985-1992) he became very nervous but then stated that he was "stupid, naive and young."⁸ Yet in 1988 he demonstrated and shouted in the Burgtheater against Thomas Bernhard's play "Heldenplatz." This drama "caused ructions for its attacks on the city's antisemitism and Austria's "cunning, lying" president"⁹ Kurt Waldheim.

The new program of the conservative-right populist government has a conservative-right wing focus. These are their principal plans:

The European Union

Despite the FPÖ's historical ambivalence towards the European Union, the coalition "commits to Europe" but will act to "steer the EU back in the right direction towards its fundamental ideas." During its EU presidency in the second half of 2018, Austria will "take a leading role in correcting some of the erroneous developments" of the bloc, including "strengthening the idea of subsidiarity." Although the new government wants more Swiss-style "direct democracy," they ruled out a British-style referendum on Austria's EU membership. During its presidency it will hold a summit on immigration. It also wants to contribute to an

⁷ Karin Riss, Maria Sterkl, "Blauer Klub in Burschenschafterhand," 25 October 2017; <https://derstandard.at/2000066617298/Blauer-Klub-in-Burschenschafterhand>; Maria Sterkl, "Deutschnationale haben FPÖ-Bundesliste fest im Griff," *Der Standard*, 22 August 2017, <https://derstandard.at/2000062942847/Deutschnationale-haben-FPOe-Bundesliste-fest-im-Griff>.

⁸ "Head of Austria's far-right has neo-Nazi past, complex history with Israel," 15 October 2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/europe/157739-171015-head-of-austria-s-far-right-has-neo-nazi-past-complex-history-with-israel>.

⁹ Michael Billington, "Heldenplatz," 15 February 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/15/heldenplatz-review>.

improvement of relations between the West and Russia and says Vienna will not agree to Turkey joining the EU.

Immigration

The program calls for a halt to “illegal immigration” and to speed up the asylum process to deport those who are not accepted. Asylum is “temporary protection” only. Those “refusing to integrate must expect sanctions” and “parallel societies” must be prevented. There will also be a stop to the so-called “immigration into the social system.” Monthly payments to those with asylum and subsidiary protection will be cut to €365 plus an “integration bonus” of €155. “We want to protect our homeland Austria as a livable place with all its cultural assets. This includes deciding for ourselves who can immigrate and live with us and ending illegal immigration,” the document says.

Bureaucracy and Taxes

The coalition also wants a “slimmer state” and a “brake on bureaucracy,” with the aim of cutting state expenditure by several billion euros. Lawmakers will see their salaries frozen.

Austria, the programme says, is the “world champion when it comes to regulation and limiting freedom and personal responsibility.” It no longer has the lowest unemployment rate in the EU. Looser labor laws will see workers be able to work up to 12 hours a day in what the parties say is a “win-win” for employees and employers. There is also a pledge that there will be no new taxes and that the proportion of taxes and other charges taken off salaries will be cut “towards 40 percent” from 43 percent. Families will get a yearly tax bonus of €1,500 per child.”¹⁰

Pre-election polls have shown that Austrian society, when compared with 2007, clearly wants stronger leadership and that the issue of immigration is far and away the most important topic, particularly for those under the age of 29.¹¹ The ÖVP and FPÖ also dominate this cohort with 28 and 30 percent, respectively, of polling support, while the SPÖ is a distant third with 17 percent.

¹⁰ “Here are the main policies of Austria’s new right-wing government,” *The Local*, 17 December 2017, <https://www.thelocal.at/20171217/here-are-the-main-policies-of-austrias-new-right-wing-government>.

¹¹ “Analyse: Wer wen gewählt hat,” *Der Standard*, 15 October 2017, <https://derstandard.at/2000065824253/Wen-Menschen-wie-Sie-gewaehlt-haben>.