

# All Parliament's a Stage

It's late September and posters of high drama, in vivid colors, suddenly appear all over Vienna. They show heroic poses and arcane tokens, heralding tales of intrigue and passion, power and righteousness. Eagerly awaited by the Viennese, the magic flute gleams from the billboards, promising a new and stunning staging of Mozart's beloved opera *Die Zauberflöte*, premiering this fall.

And right next to them, the new election posters, aiming to carry Austrians off in their very own world of make-believe. Faced with the most important legislative elections in a decade, Austrian voters find themselves on a quest to chart the right path. The results of the elections – potentially delivering anything from a center-right government with Europe's youngest head of state to a left-leaning patchwork coalition, unprecedented in the history of the Second Republic – will have repercussions far beyond the country's borders. And so, as the audience settles into their seats, this year's crop of players slips into their roles and does their best to land the leading part in the upcoming production of the Republic's 26th National Council.

## AN ELECTION TO LOSE

It was supposed to be his moment in the spotlight. Heinz-Christian Strache, chairman of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ), took over in 2005 when it was at rock bottom. Deprived of their charismatic

On October 15, Austrians will head to the polls to elect a new parliament – in the most elaborate piece of theater the Alpine Republic has on offer

BY BENJAMIN WOLF

erstwhile leader Jörg Haider, who led them into two governments before splitting off to found his own short-lived BZÖ, it fell to “H.C.” to painstakingly rebuild the FPÖ brand. After ten years of railing against the eternal Grand Coalition, reinstituted in 2006 after the defeat of Wolfgang Schüssel's first-ever Blue-Black (FPÖ-ÖVP) government, it was the backlash to the refugee summer of 2015 that ushered the FPÖ to first place in the polls.

While Austrians opened their doors and hearts for more than 80,000 refugees in just one year, the Freedom Party concocted a winning mixture. Blending suspicion against immigration with exasperation about the endless feuding between the governing Social Democrats (SPÖ) and Conservatives (ÖVP), the party also profited from the implosion of other populist outliers like Team Stronach, an Austro-Canadian billionaire's vanity campaign that had siphoned off protest votes at the 2013

election. FPÖ campaign volunteer Reinhard Wansch, 33, puts succinctly why he supports his party: “I know that I can count on H.C. Strache and the FPÖ. Much in this country is just unfair, particularly toward us Austrians, and the FPÖ is the only party that wants to change that.”

The 2016 nail-biter presidential election brought home this momentous shift when, for the first time in the history of the Second Republic, both candidates of the main parties were eliminated in the first round. The final runoff pitted the Freedom Party's Norbert Hofer against the independent (former Green) Alexander Van der Bellen. After an election rerun on December 4, 2016, the widely respected Van der Bellen was elected president with 53.79% of the vote (a substantial gain over the invalidated first round, at a wafer-thin 50.3%). With the far right still strong, the next parliamentary election, it seemed, was the FPÖ's to lose.

## K. & K. TO THE RESCUE

But lose it they well might. Spooked by the disastrous first round of the presidential elections, the Social Democrats traded their hapless chancellor, Werner Faymann, for Christian Kern, the sleek and savvy CEO of the state railways ÖBB, easing public frustration and perhaps saving the presidency for Van der Bellen. It also revived the SPÖ's fortunes in the polls. As chancellor, Kern attempted to galvanize the moribund

coalition and linked his strong presence on social media with policies to promote “startup culture” and make Austria fit for the digital age. The PR blitz culminated in a skillfully staged presentation of Kern's ambitious manifesto to overhaul the Austrian state, the “Plan A,” in January 2017. This resonated with many, particularly younger supporters of the Social Democrats. “I share the SPÖ's principles – freedom, equality, fairness and solidarity – one hundred percent,” says David Kranebitter, 26, party assistant in Tyrol. “The SPÖ is the only party presenting a positive vision of Austria. Our leading candidate Christian Kern is experienced and competent, and he has already taken on responsibility on several occasions in his life.”

This quip might well refer to Kern's strongest competitor in the match for Austria's chancellorship: ÖVP party chief Sebastian Kurz. The talented Mr. Kurz, young, silver-tongued and photogenic, has been building his personal nimbus since joining the government as “boy wonder” in 2011. Serving two years as integration secretary, he used the position to tout tolerance and stronger efforts to improve opportunities for immigrants and their descendants in Austria.

ÖVP frontrunner Sebastian Kurz (left), 31, enjoys the highest popularity ratings of all leading candidates. Christian Kern, 51, gave the SPÖ a boost when taking over his party in May 2016, but is now struggling.

## DEUSEX MACHINA

After becoming foreign minister in 2013, and even more following the refugee surge of 2015, Kurz gradually changed tack and began to forcefully demand a stricter immigration policy, both for Austria and on the European level. It was he, we kept hearing, who closed the Western Balkan route in March 2016, something he did have a hand in, thus stemming the flow of refugees to Central Europe. This last claim was more doubtful: By March 2016 the numbers had already fallen to the level of mid-2014. Then the winter weather and accelerating repatriations all added up. Still, it was a clear message to disenchanted voters leaning toward the FPÖ: Vote Kurz and get law, order and a promised new style in politics without having to opt for the troll.

This is also reflected in the new name of the Conservatives on the ballot, now “Liste Kurz – Die neue Volkspartei” (the new People's Party), complete with a new

turquoise color instead of black. They also claim to be building a “movement,” including several candidates from outside the ranks of career politicians. “Sebastian Kurz was the only one who always had an open ear for student issues and who sincerely cares for the interests of the young,” insists Andreas Jilly, 25, former chairman of the ÖVP's student association Aktionsgemeinschaft (AG) and candidate for the parliamentary elections. “That's how politics should look: Creating and shaping matters together and listening to people instead of patronizing them.”

And indeed, Kurz's ascension as chairman of the ÖVP in May 2017 led to a sharp ten-point jump in the poll numbers of his party, showcasing his broad electoral appeal and relegating the FPÖ and the SPÖ to second and third place, respectively. This is all the more remarkable because Kurz was taking over his post from Vice Chancellor and economics and science minister Reinhold Mitterlehner, a stout proponent of Austria's time proven model of social partnership and incremental compromise, who had fallen prey to the Conservatives' internal sniping (not least fanned by Kurz himself).

Determined to tame the praying mantis that is the ÖVP, which with



PHOTOS: THIS PAGE: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: GEORG HOCHMUTH / APA / PICTUREDESK.COM (X2); WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; RENE PROHASKA / VERLAGSGRUPPE NEWS / PICTUREDESK.COM; NEXT PAGE: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HERBERT NEUBAUER / APA / PICTUREDESK.COM; SPÖ PRESSE UND KOMMUNIKATION.

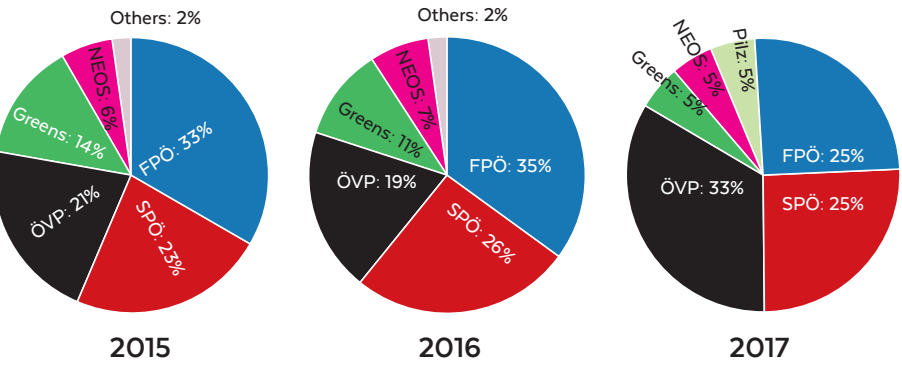




Changing Fortunes

The right-wing FPÖ led the polls for two years after the refugee surge of 2015. Since then, SPÖ and ÖVP have changed their party chiefs – with impressive results.

Source: Neuwal.com / Wahlumfragen / September 2015, 2016, 2017



Mitterlehner had devoured and discarded its fifth chairman in ten years, Kurz stipulated an exhaustive list of demands that allowed him to reshape the party. Successfully, at least so far. While Kurz continues to lead in the polls, Kern's Social Democrats struggle to regain their momentum, beset by only thinly veiled factional disputes and a botched start to their campaign (the SPÖ slogan "Take what you are entitled to" encountered mixed reactions). Many Kern supporters now bank on an expected strong showing in upcoming TV debates. All the while, the FPÖ is lurking in the background, waging a lively campaign on social media.

THE REBELS REGROUP

As the three giants compete for first place and the opportunity to try to form a government, the smaller Austrian parties split and merge, reposition themselves and still offer some of the freshest ideas in the campaign. The Greens, after a strong 12.42% in the last legislative elections and the opportunity to share in the reflected glow of Van der Bellen's triumph, floundered from one PR disaster to the other. Having first expelled their youth wing due to infighting, their oft-criticized but competent and tough chairman Eva Glawischnig stepped down in May 2017 for health reasons and was followed by the duo Ingrid Felipe and Ulrike Lunacek. A bizarre spat over the list position of veteran Green deputy Peter Pilz, an internal firebrand from the party's realistic wing, resulted in his mounting a "Liste Pilz."

Both parties now poll at 5%, just above the parliamentary threshold of 4%.

Despite this internal turmoil, the Greens' principles and convictions still attract many citizens. "I want to live in an open-minded society, which faces up to reality and commits itself to democracy and mutual respect," explains Gregor M., 32, technician at a big Austrian industrial company. "I'm not satisfied with the Greens, but they are the ones who correspond best to my idea of life and the future." And indeed, while the three big parties have all pivoted to a tough line on immigration (ÖVP and FPÖ more overt, the SPÖ subdued) and put lower taxes, less bureaucracy and a so-called "new" style of politics at the forefront, the small parties carry the flag for human rights, address big issues like climate change and put forward bold concepts on education and Europe.

This is, certainly, how the NEOS of energetic party chief Matthias Strolz want to see themselves. "We are a grassroots political movement. For us, it's all about the citizens' ideas," insists Peter Berry, 26, an Englishman volunteering for the NEOS campaign in Vienna. Berry, working as a teacher at a Viennese high school, is particularly drawn to the NEOS savvy on education reform. "Many Austrian teachers don't even realize how restrictive the laws here are: The length of lessons, the pacing of the school year, much of the content, all prescribed," he says. The NEOS have a plan for more school autonomy, "making it possible to cater to every child's needs." This, Berry is convinced,

along with the party's centrist liberalism on societal and economic questions, would make the NEOS a valuable addition to any coalition government.

The NEOS also joined forces with Irmgard Griss, a former president of the Austrian Supreme Court of Justice (OGH) who ran as an independent in the 2016 presidential elections and fetched a remarkable 18.94%, ending up third. They run now under the extended name "NEOS – Alliance for Freedom and Responsibility" and poll stable at 5-7%.

The election will also see some also-rans, most prominent the art-cum-protest "non-party" G!LT set up by Austrian comedian Roland Düringer, the Communists (KPÖ) joining forces with the remainder of the expelled Green youth and the FLÖ, a far-right split-off of the FPÖ, among others.

FINALE FURIOSO

Until Election Day on October 15, the front-runners of Austria's five leading parties (excluding Pilz, much to his chagrin) will face each other more than 30 times on public and private TV – feeding the Austrians' appetite for political theater in every imaginable combination, from 1:1 duels to round table debates. They will also flood billboards, newspapers and social media with their message, trying to convince voters.

The day after, however, all that will matter is coalition arithmetic. Since most seem to be tired of the Grand Coalition between Social Democrats and Conservatives – despite a decidedly better governing record than many are willing to acknowledge – the door looks wide open for a coalition with the Freedom Party. A patchwork coalition, perhaps of NEOS, Greens, Liste Pilz and a big party, by contrast, seems far-fetched, even though it would probably stand the best chance of breathing new life into politics. Then again, President Van der Bellen's stance to not accept a government endangering Austria's position inside the European Union might force the FPÖ to make concessions if they want to govern – or nudge the SPÖ and ÖVP to examine alternative coalitions.

Austrians, meanwhile, will watch the pirouettes and maneuvers with amusement and, whenever possible, with shouts of wild enthusiasm or indignation. They, too, have a role to play and neither love nor money would induce them to take a pass. 10

The small parties carry the flag for human rights, address big issues like climate change and put forward bold concepts on education and Europe.

Entgeltliche Einschaltung

SETZ  
EIN  
STARKES  
ZEICHEN

WÄHLEN  
— IST —  
STARK  
NATIONALRATSWAHL  
15.10.2017

ILLUSTRATIONS: KARIN DREHER, KARIN-GRAFDESIGN.COM

NATIONALRATSWAHL 2017

Einfach auch per Wahlkarte. Jetzt informieren unter:  
Tel. 01 525 50 | www.wahlen.wien.at

Stadt Wien