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A tale of firsts: the 2019 Austrian snap election

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ABSTRACT
The 2019 Austrian snap election, held on 29 September 2019, was preceded by a series of scandals. Most prominent among them was the so-called 'Ibizagate' involving the former Vice-Chancellor and FPÖ party leader, Heinz-Christian Strache. The scandal eventually led to the collapse of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in May 2019 and the formation of a caretaker government. The election day in September brought a clear victory for the ÖVP with an increase of almost six percentage points, compared to its vote share in the 2017 election. The second big winner was the Green party which scored the best result in the party history with 13.9 per cent of the vote. Amid scandals, the FPÖ saw its support fall to only 16.2 per cent; the election also resulted in an all-time low for the SPÖ achieving only 21.2 per cent. The article presents the background, the election campaign and the results of the 2019 Austrian election, discussing the wide range of 'firsts' that characterized them, including the formation of the first ÖVP-Green coalition government in Austria.

KEYWORDS Austria; snap election; electoral campaign; government formation; scandals

Background

The victory of the People's Party (ÖVP) at the 2017 Austrian elections[1] had led to the formation of the third government between the ÖVP and the radical-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria.[2] Compared to 2000, when 150,000 Austrians took to the streets to protest against the first ÖVP-FPÖ government, the inauguration of the government in 2017 was accompanied by far less protest. Also, while the first ÖVP-FPÖ government had caused outrage across the EU and even led to diplomatic sanctions by Austria's European Union partners (Luther 2003), the renewed agreement between the two parties in 2017 was followed by very few critical reactions from European leaders. Two things contributed to this. First, Sebastian Kurz, the new leader of the ÖVP party, had worked hard in presenting himself, as well as his party and the government coalition, as pro-European both during

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the coalition negotiations and soon afterwards. Second, the FPÖ and its political stances seemingly went through a process of 'normalization', which also contributed to the acceptance of the party as an almost natural partner for the ÖVP in 2017 (Bodlos and Plescia 2018). Namely, Sebastian Kurz was extremely skilful in co-opting many of the elements of the FPÖ right-wing populist agenda, hardening its policy stances on immigration and asylum-seekers in the months preceding the election (Plescia *et al.* 2019). These circumstances surely helped the FPÖ's image of being a potential coalition partner also to be taken seriously at the federal level.[3]

The ÖVP-FPÖ government appeared to have made – at least to the outsider – a sharp break from the coalition quarrels that had characterized the previous grand-coalition governments between the ÖVP and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ). Sebastian Kurz was a master of message control and of preserving the appearance of a harmonious coalition with the FPÖ up until May 2019. This went as far as him not even commenting on the series of racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic actions and statements by the FPÖ, dubbed radical-right 'Einzelfälle' (isolated incidents), that clearly lacked distance from the National Socialist period. International concern furthermore arose when the Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl (FPÖ), seemed to have illegally ordered a police raid on Austria's own intelligence service, which is, among other things, charged with monitoring and countering right-wing extremism. Kurz disassociated himself from his coalition partner whenever it seemed advantageous to avoid his image being tainted by such controversies.[4]

Except for initial steps taken by the new government towards the announced, entrepreneur-friendly tax reform and the increase in the maximum daily and weekly working hours, much of the government attention was directed to the issues of foreigners, refugees and migration. Unsurprisingly then, most of what has been planned and achieved by the ÖVP and FPÖ in their seventeen months of government was within these policy areas. Specifically, Herbert Kickl planned or implemented many measures directed towards asylum seekers and immigrants, including a reduction of the hourly wage in public-sponsored jobs for asylum seekers, the closure of several mosques, financial cuts to social workers assigned to schools in order to finance new German classes for foreigners only (which were soon to be criticized as 'Ghettoklassen' (ghetto classes)). Other related government policies were a re-design of social assistance and minimum income. This included cuts to the total support for families per child and for immigrants with insufficient linguistic skills in either German or English. Further reforms were the indexation of family benefits for children residing in other EU countries and a ban on headscarves for girls in elementary school. Much, however, of what the government

parties had laid down in the coalition agreement could not be undertaken because of the abrupt collapse of the government in May 2019.[5]

Prelude to the 2019 election campaign: 'Ibizagate'

It was on 17 May, just a little more than a week before the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections, that two German media outlets (the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*) published a secretly filmed video that would eventually lead to the government collapse. Soon to be known as 'Ibizagate', the seven-minute-long video clip would be the trigger of one of the biggest political scandals in Austria's recent history. Filmed in July 2017, just months before the previous parliamentary elections, it showed the later Vice-Chancellor and leader of the FPÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache, at a luxury estate on the Spanish island of Ibiza, where he was casually trying to convince a woman – purporting to be the niece of a Russian oligarch – to buy the country's largest-circulation newspaper, the tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*. In return for benevolent reporting by the acquired newspaper and monetary contributions to his party, he suggested that he could offer lucrative public contracts once the FPÖ entered government.

Only a day after the broadcast of the video clip, already several thousand demonstrators had gathered around the Viennese Ballhausplatz, the official residence of the Chancellor, demanding the dissolution of the ÖVP-FPÖ government. Denying the allegations of corruption, but acknowledging the seriousness of the situation, Strache resigned on the same day. Shortly after, Kurz called snap elections to be held in September. Again, only a day after that, the FPÖ was blindsided by the Chancellor, when he asked the President to dismiss the controversial Minister of the Interior, Kickl, whose ministry would have taken an important role in investigating the legal substance of the Ibiza conversations and who, as the FPÖ's general secretary, was suspected to have known about doubtful aspects of FPÖ party finance. The removal of Kickl, the chief strategist of the FPÖ, from the government without prior consultation with the coalition partner, was seen as a direct affront and resulted in the resignation of all FPÖ Ministers that same evening on 20 May. The only exception was Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, an independent picked by the FPÖ. On the request of Kurz, President Alexander Van der Bellen then replaced the FPÖ Ministers with technocratic experts to form an interim ÖVP minority government on 22 May to remain in office until early elections were held.

The scandal and the subsequent government crisis turned the EP election campaign into a sideshow. Indeed, the EP election was mainly regarded as a test of parties' strength before the upcoming federal election.

The ÖVP won with 34.6 per cent of the vote, an increase of 7.6 percentage points compared to the 2014 EP election. Interestingly, despite the recent scandal, the FPÖ was not only able to contain its losses (i.e., losing only 2.5 per cent of votes compared to 2014) but Heinz-Christian Strache, who had symbolically been placed last within the FPÖ's EP list of candidates long before 'Ibizagate', also got the number of preference votes required to gain a seat in the European Parliament – a seat that he declined a month later. Of the remaining parties, the SPÖ, NEOS and Greens obtained almost as many votes as in 2014. This was of particular importance to the Greens, as they had lost representation in the national parliament only two years earlier (Bodlos and Plescia 2018).

Just one day after the EP elections, Kurz and his cabinet were ousted from office through a vote of no-confidence, which was initiated by the Social Democrats, and backed by the Freedom Party as well as the smallest opposition party JETZT, during a special session of Parliament on 27 May. Even though no-confidence motions are common in Austrian politics, this was the first one to succeed. For the time being, the result of the motion made Kurz the shortest-serving Chancellor since 1945, with only 525 days in office. Not wanting to transition to become a 'simple' member of Parliament, he renounced his parliamentary mandate in order to dedicate himself solely to the upcoming election campaign.

Following this, President Van der Bellen named Hartwig Löger, Minister of Finance in the Kurz cabinet, as the interim Chancellor until the appointment of a technocratic caretaker government, as demanded by the Austrian Constitution. Finally, on 3 June, the President appointed a government of civil servants and judges, led by Austria's first female Chancellor, the former President of the Constitutional Court, Brigitte Bierlein. This was the first ever presidential cabinet; it comprised trustees of the main parliamentary parties.

Meanwhile, as there was no ruling coalition, the parties in parliament formed ad hoc alliances to pass legislation in July during the last sessions before the parliamentary recess. Among the laws that were passed was, for example, a nationwide ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, reversing one of the ÖVP's concessions to the FPÖ in the collapsed coalition government.

The campaign

Due to the heated public debate after 'Ibizagate' and its immediate political consequences, there never really was a break between the EP election campaign in May and the start of the campaign for the snap election in September. Without a clear policy focus, the ÖVP's campaign was again

fixated on its lead candidate. While having been ousted as Chancellor may have formally cost Kurz his incumbency bonus, it did not keep his party from putting up adverts with the words 'Austria needs its Chancellor'. Although there was little doubt that Kurz would eventually win the snap election, the thus far professional campaign engine of the rebranded ÖVP stuttered for the first time. It encountered initial difficulties in June when faked ÖVP emails connecting Kurz to the Ibiza affair became public. Shortly after, the weekly news magazine *Falter* uncovered that before the collapse of the coalition, a member of Kurz's team had five hard drives from the Chancellery destroyed by a specialist company. The rather suspicious detail was that the man gave a false name and address, and failed to pay the bill. That the drives were destroyed just days after the Ibiza video was published, prompted speculation that they might have contained data proving the ÖVP's connection to the scandal. The same media outlet also uncovered that a number of millionaires had been donating money to the party, slicing their donations in such a way that the public would not immediately learn about them. Yet another set of leaked documents, published only a few weeks before the election, suggested that the ÖVP had intentionally planned to overspend during the 2017 election campaign (the party exceeded the campaign cost limit in 2017 by six million euros). In spite of this, the ÖVP never lost its lead in the polls and was largely expected to win the election.

The FPÖ's campaign seemed similarly haunted. After the resignation of their party leader, the FPÖ had to reorganize quickly. On the one hand, former presidential candidate Norbert Hofer was supposed to be the friendly face of the party. Being the official lead candidate, he made it very clear that he wanted to form another coalition with Kurz. This statement was also featured prominently in the FPÖ campaign, while an election spot even showed Hofer and Kurz in couples therapy rebuilding trust. At the same time, the FPÖ warned against a possible ÖVP-Greens coalition. Herbert Kickl, on the other hand, openly attacked Kurz for having tried to remove him from the government and took a strong anti-immigration stance at campaign events. However, barely recovering from the Ibiza scandal, another corruption case around the former party leader Strache was revealed in August, when Austrian authorities initiated a bribery investigation into the appointment of an FPÖ official to a high-ranking position at Casinos Austria (Casag), a partly state-owned gambling corporation. These allegations further interfered with the FPÖ's efforts to improve its tarnished reputation, as it tried to distance itself from Strache and the Ibiza scandal.

In the final week of the campaign, new allegations that Strache may have abused his party's expense account for private purposes further
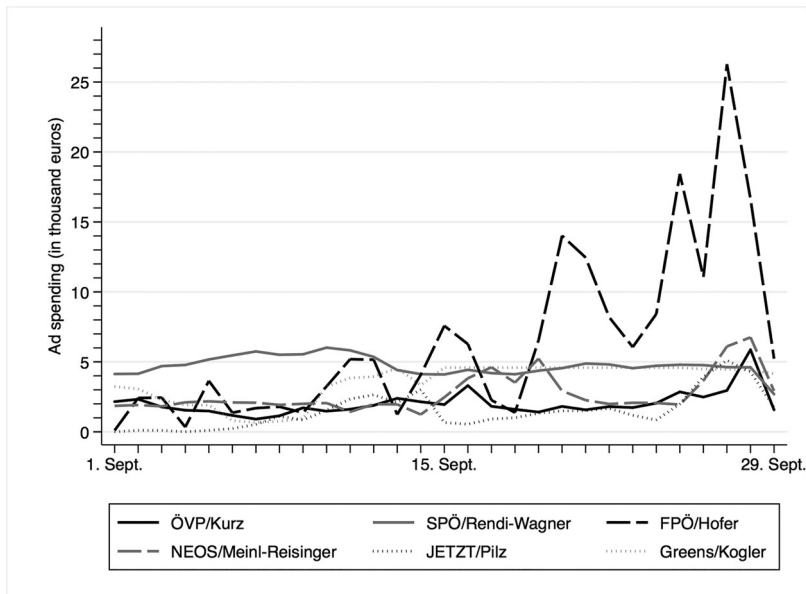
Figure 1. Facebook Expenses by Party and Lead Candidate.
Notes: Data was gathered on a daily basis and stems from the Facebook Ad Library Report. Expenses for the party and lead candidate accounts were combined. When, in the raw data, daily expenses were noted as '≤100' Euro, they were recoded as '100' Euro.

torpedoed the far-right's campaign efforts. In a last attempt, the party massively invested in Facebook advertising, seemingly trying to counteract the negative media narrative, as a new transparency feature on the social media platform made visible. In the last seven days before the election alone, the FPÖ spent 95,000 Euro to promote their party and lead candidate's account, more than ÖVP, SPÖ and NEOS combined (see Figure 1).

Regardless of the troubled campaigns of the ÖVP and FPÖ, the opposition parties, i.e., SPÖ, NEOS and JETZT, could not gain much momentum. Calculated optimism seemed to be the main drive behind the Social Democrats' campaign, as it was long clear that they would not pose a serious threat to Kurz's Chancellorship. The Green extra-parliamentary opposition, however, experienced a revival. Strengthened by their success at the 2019 EP election and continuously polling above 10 per cent since July 2018, the Greens benefited from a favourable issue agenda (fostered by the international attention to Greta Thunberg's movement) and focussed on their ambition to re-enter Parliament, campaigning with the slogan 'clean environment, clean politics'. In fact, compared to the 2017 election, immigration-related issues were much less salient during the 2019 campaign. Instead, the fight against the climate crisis moved to the top of many voters' concerns and was featured prominently in most party agendas. The Greens, in particular, addressed the issue of climate change
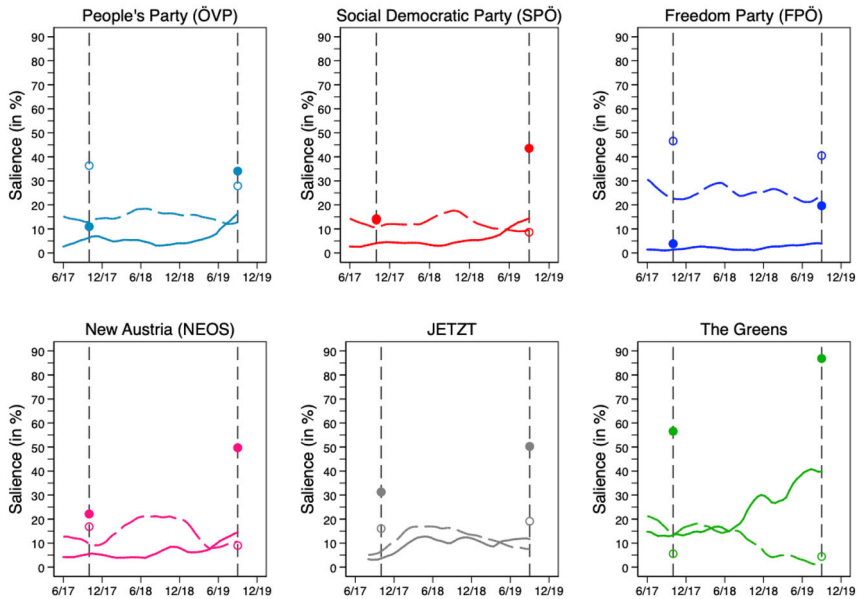
Figure 2. Party and Voter 'Immigration' and 'Climate' Issue Salience between 2017 and 2019.

Notes: dashed line = salience of immigration in each party agenda; solid line = salience of climate change in each party agenda; hollow circles = salience of immigration in each party's voter agenda; solid circles = salience of environmental policy/climate change in each party's voter agenda. The party agenda is computed based on parties' and parliamentary groups' press releases as archived by the APA OTS Database and searched based on issue-specific search strings for immigration and environmental/climate change policy (see Haselmayer et al. 2016). The voter agenda is a combined measure based on respondents' prospective vote choice and the most important issue questions in the AUTNES pre-electoral panel survey waves 4 and 11 respectively, referring to immigration and environmental/climate policy (see Aichholzer et al. 2019). Note that wave 11 includes two separate items for environmental policy and climate change, which were combined to calculate the voter agenda. In both waves, respondents could choose up to three most important issues. Survey data is weighted based on demographic and political factors.

in up to 40 per cent of their press releases, while more than 85 per cent of their voters deemed it to be among the three most important issues facing the country. While some parties picked up on the issue sooner than others, the FPÖ and its voters continued mostly to ignore it (see Figure 2). Either way, in the months before the 2019 election and similar to other European countries, tens of thousands of people took part in demonstrations in Vienna and other Austrian cities to demand action on climate change.

The controversial decision by the public broadcaster (ORF) to invite the Greens to their televised debates was another favourable prerequisite for the party. Over decades, the ORF had argued only to invite representatives of parties that had representation in the national parliament. The public broadcaster's Director-General, however, argued that, based on the Greens' realistic chance of entering the next parliament, inviting them

Table 1. Elections to the Austrian parliament, 29 September 2019.

	2019%	2019 Votes	2017%	Vote Change	2019 Seats	2017 Seats	Seat Change
ÖVP	37.50	1,789,417	31.47	+6.03	71	62	+9
SPÖ	21.20	1,011,868	26.86	−5.66	40	52	−12
FPÖ	16.20	772,666	25.97	−9.77	31	51	−20
NEOS	8.10	387,124	5.30	+2.8	15	10	+5
JETZT	1.90	89,169	4.41	−2.51	0	8	−8
Greens	13.90	664,055	3.80	+10.1	26	0	+26
Others	1.30	57,722	2.19	−0.89	0	0	0
Turnout	75.6	4,835,469	80.0	5,120,881	–	–	–

Note: There were 6,396,802 eligible voters and 4,777,226 valid votes.
Source: Federal Ministry of the Interior.

was a journalistic imperative. Not least because of this decision, the 2019 elections saw a record high of forty-three televised debates between top candidates on up to seven different public and private channels (Eberl *et al.* 2020).

The results

Table 1 displays the 2019 and 2017 election results. Most strikingly and despite a less than ideal election campaign, the ÖVP scored a clear victory winning 37.5 per cent of the vote and 71 seats out of 183 seats in the Lower House or *Nationalrat*; the ÖVP performed better than predicted by pre-election polls, increasing its vote share by almost six percentage points compared to 2017. Never before in Austria was the lead between the first and second place as big as in this election. The second big winner of the 2019 election was the Green party; it tripled its support by securing 13.9 per cent of the vote (26 seats) and its best result since the party's foundation in 1986. Both parties gained votes in every *Bundesland*, with the largest gains in Salzburg for the ÖVP and in Vienna for the Greens.

The second-placed party, the SPÖ, however, saw its support fall to 21.2 per cent (40 seats) – the worst result in the party's history. The FPÖ was expected to achieve around 20 per cent of the vote, but it finished far behind achieving only 16.2 per cent (31 seats), down from 26 per cent in the 2017 election. Both parties lost votes in every *Bundesland*, with the largest loss for the FPÖ in Carinthia, its stronghold.

While the liberal NEOS continued to grow and reached 8.1 per cent of the vote (15 seats), JETZT, which had formed in 2017 as a Green splinter group, won only 1.9 per cent of the vote and thus failed to pass the 4 per cent threshold required to re-enter parliament. Turnout slightly declined compared to 2017, confirming a downward trend. Of the remaining

parties that ran for election, none was able to achieve enough votes to be represented in parliament.

In terms of electoral volatility, the AUTNES online panel study (Aichholzer *et al.* 2019) indicates that the Greens were the most successful party in retaining its 2017 voters (about 90%) followed by the ÖVP (about 79%); the 2017 voters who did not vote again for the FPÖ in 2019 went mostly to the ÖVP, while most of former SPÖ votes went to the Greens and to a lesser extent to the ÖVP. Finally, most of the votes lost by JETZT went to the Greens as well. Turning to the long-term socio-structural divisions of vote choice in Austria (Plasser *et al.* 1992), the ÖVP has reaffirmed itself as the most successful in rural areas this time, however, followed by the NEOS. The Greens (together with the NEOS) are the parties most successful among highly educated voters. From the point of view of occupation and social class, the connotation of the FPÖ supporters remains more similar to that of the SPÖ compared to the ÖVP (larger support among blue-collar and less among the civil servant). In contrast, the NEOS but especially the Greens remain particularly underrepresented among the blue-collar workers.

Government formation and the new government

The topic of government formation was very salient during the entire election campaign. In fact, the FPÖ campaign was almost entirely focused on its desire to rebuild the coalition with Kurz's ÖVP. Kurz, however, left all options open. While he had insisted, especially at the beginning of the election campaign, that any cooperation with the Freedom Party after the election was contingent on the absence of former Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl, from a future FPÖ government team; later during the campaign Kurz signalled that he would accept Kickl as leader of the FPÖ parliamentary group (*Klubobmann*). Of the three former opposition parties, NEOS was arguably the only one that openly favoured a coalition with the ÖVP. SPÖ leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner emphasized on several occasions that, in her view, a coalition with the right-wing populist FPÖ was not an option, but she did not position herself clearly concerning other coalition options. So did the Greens.

Election Day results made clear that forming a government with majority support in the parliament would have required the ÖVP to join with either the FPÖ, the SPÖ or the Greens. While the renewal of the incumbent government between the ÖVP and the FPÖ was perceived as among the more likely outcomes of the 2019 election, the resounding defeat suffered by the FPÖ sparked intra-party opposition against re-entering government. While neither the ÖVP nor the SPÖ immediately

ruled out the possibility of forming a coalition together, it was widely known that neither of the parties (nor their voters) was very much in favour of a grand-coalition government. The last coalition on the table was the one between the ÖVP and Greens: while not receiving much attention during the campaign (as it was assumed that the two parties would not achieve a majority together), it immediately became the focus of much discussion after the election.

Following brief consultations with all party leaders, Kurz started preliminary talks with the Green party, lead by Werner Kogler. At the beginning of November, the ÖVP and the Greens finished their exploratory talks, and both parties announced that they would enter formal coalition negotiations, despite their – on most policies – starkly different ideological positions.

Some 93 days after the election, on 1 January 2020, the two parties proclaimed they had reached a deal to form a coalition government. Although the ÖVP and the Greens are currently part of coalition governments in several Austrian *Länder*, this marks the first time that the Green party is in government at the national level.

The 326-page coalition agreement not only includes plans for a headscarf ban for Muslim girls under the age of 14, the introduction of preventive custody for individuals deemed a threat to public safety, as well as corporate and income tax cuts, but also proposals for a carbon tax on airline tickets, a target to make Austria carbon neutral by 2040, and plans to expand public transport across Austria. Other Green policy priorities contained in the coalition deal comprise plans for a freedom of information law and greater oversight of party finances. However, a central election promise by the Greens, namely the overhaul of the taxation system to price CO_2 emissions, was put off until 2022. Most controversially, the pact also includes a crisis mode in the event of another 'refugee crisis' which provides a controlled way to break coalition discipline and allows both parties to seek other majorities in parliament on immigration matters. The deal was heavily criticized by the three opposition parties as well as by environmental groups. Still, as required by the party statute, the Green party congress formally and overwhelmingly approved the coalition agreement on 4 January 2020, with 93 per cent of the 264 delegates voting in favour. The ÖVP, however, faced no party congress hurdle and approved the coalition unanimously in the party executive.

Under the coalition agreement, the Greens took control of the enlarged Infrastructure Ministry which now also includes environment, climate, energy and technology. In addition, the party took the Ministry of Justice as well as Social Affairs. The Green party leader, Werner Kogler, became the Vice-Chancellor and is responsible for the Ministry for Arts and

Culture, Civil Service and Sport. The ÖVP holds all other ministries, including the Chancellery, the Finance, Interior and Defence Ministries. Alexander Schallenberg, who was a member of the caretaker government, remains in post as the Foreign Minister. The new ÖVP-Green government is the youngest and has the highest percentage of female ministers in post-war history in Austria.

Conclusion

The scandals and events unfolding since 17 May 2019 have been the prologue to a tale of firsts. For the first time in Austria's post-war history, a Chancellor was ousted by a vote of no-confidence, and a caretaker government had to be formed. This led to the country's first female Chancellor, Brigitte Bierlein. Eventually, the 2019 snap election and coalition formation resulted in the first federal government between conservatives and Greens in Europe.[6] The new cabinet, which was formally appointed on 7 January 2020 by President Van der Bellen, is Austria's first government with a female majority as eight of the 15 members are women. Besides, the Greens also nominated Alma Zadić for the post of Justice Minister, whose family fled from Bosnia when she was a child, making her the first Austrian Minister with a refugee past. Another first is that Klaudia Tanner (ÖVP) took the defence portfolio, which was so far led by men exclusively.

After two closely-held snap elections (in 2017 and 2019, respectively) and the tumultuous events amid scandals leading to the end of the third ÖVP-FPÖ government, there is a widespread longing for political stability. The comprehensive government agreement signed by the ÖVP and Greens also has the objective to provide such stability and to make the partnership between two ideologically very different parties work. Should the unlikely partnership actually succeed, it may very well set an example for other multi-party systems in Europe, where Green parties are currently gaining momentum and willing to enter government coalitions also with unlikely partners, especially in neighbouring Germany.

However, it remains to be seen whether the new alliance will last the full legislative period of five years and which electoral consequences the Greens will have to face for accepting right-wing economic and migration policies in exchange for increased climate protection. In contrast, the undertaking will be much less risky for the ÖVP, as Kurz has not backed down on his hard-line stances with regard to immigration and internal security, which are among his key topics since first taking office as Chancellor.

Finally, the electoral defeat of the FPÖ left the party searching for a scapegoat, which it found in the former party leader Heinz-Christian Strache. After having been locked out from his own Facebook fan page already in October, he was kicked out of the party on 13 December 2019. His wife, Philippa Strache, was kicked out of the parliamentary party group, only hours after she was sworn in as Member of Parliament. Since then speculations about Heinz-Christian Strache's comeback have been mounting and three Strache-loyalists have quit the FPÖ party group in the Vienna City Council. The fate of both the FPÖ and the newly created splinter party, the Alliance for Austria (DAÖ), looks uncertain. At least for the moment, however, the 'populist wave' has died down a bit in Austria.

Notes

1. Other recent reports in the Elections in Context series include Arter (2020), Faas and Klingelhöfer (2019); Garzia (2019), van Holsteyn (2018), Prosser (2018), and Aardal and Bergh (2018).
2. The first ÖVP-FPÖ government (Schüssel I) formed after the 1999 election and was terminated after two years (2000–2003). The second ÖVP-FPÖ government (Schüssel II) formed after the 2002 election and lasted four years (2003–2007).
3. The FPÖ is and has been in the past a partner in government coalitions at the regional (Länder) level in Austria with both the ÖVP and the SPÖ.
4. Eberl, J.-M., E. Zeglovits, and H. Sickinger (2019). 'Austria's Snap Election: Kurz Is Back and So Are the Greens', LSE blog https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/09/30/austrias-snap-election-kurz-is-back-and-so-are-the-greens/ (last accessed October 2019).
5. Note that in December 2019, Austria's Constitutional Court partially invalidated several controversial laws passed by the ÖVP-FPÖ government.
6. Note that this is the first *two-party government* between conservatives and Greens. There have been coalitions including conservatives and Greens, and at least one other party in the past (see Finland between 1995-2002 and 2007-2014; Ireland between 2007 and 2011, Czechia between 2007 and 2009).

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Disclosure statement

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