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The upcoming European elections in Austria will take place against the backdrop of the end of a five-year governmental period of the conservatives and Greens, and a visible upswing of right-wing Eurosceptic forces. The conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP/EPP) and The Greens (Die Grünen/EFA) have formed a coalition government since January 1st, 2020. Both political parties generally support EU-integration, although they hold different views in specific areas, e.g. asylum and migration, climate protection, transport or the social dimension. However, both parties have agreed in condemning Russia's war against Ukraine and expressed their solidarity with Kyiv. Since Austria is a militarily neutral country, they have pledged to provide financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Nevertheless, to reach a consensus has been a constant uphill battle for both political parties because their core values differ. While the Greens are more pronounced in areas such as the EU taxonomy, free trade like the Mercosur agreement, energy and climate, as well as social and migration issues, the core values of the ÖVP are performance culture, prosperity together with social security, as well as international competitiveness. In addition, the party emphasises the maintenance of internal and external security, defensible democracy, reliable armed forces, protection against crime and controlled legal immigration.

The ÖVP opposed the end of internal combustion engine cars as of 2035, arguing for technology neutrality. As regards the Schengen expansion to Romania and Bulgaria, the conservatives insisted on Austria's veto because of perceived illegal migrant movements and a lack of border control. After months of European pressure on the ÖVP, the government finally agreed to cease (as of March 31st, 2024) the checks on Romanian and Bulgarian citizens at EU internal air and maritime borders ("Schengen Air"). Nor do they support the abolition of unanimity on the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, although this is part of the European People's Party (EPP) electoral manifesto and the Austrian coalition agreement mentions the need to push for the extension of qualified majority voting, e.g. on foreign policy.

The upcoming national elections in the autumn dominate the current EU election battle. In the domestic debate, the EU has often been portrayed as a scapegoat and antagonist while the transnational dimension and highlighting the Union's added value are often missing.

On the European stage, the ÖVP does not always follow the positions of its European family, the EPP, while it is interesting to note that Othmar Karas, one of the most established MEPs and the first vice-president of the European Parliament (EP), does not always follow his own party line in his voting behaviour. Due to these ever-increasing differences, in October 2023 Karas announced that he would not be standing for the new European Parliament.

In contrast to the ÖVP, the Austrian Greens to a large extent follow the line of their European party family.

Austrian public perception

As the [EP Spring Eurobarometer](#) survey shows, the future of Europe, migration and asylum, action against climate change, support for the economy and the creation of new jobs, as well the fight against poverty and social exclusion, are the most important topics for EU citizens and should be discussed during the upcoming EP election campaign.

In Austria, trust in domestic politics has eroded in recent years. Various corruption scandals have contributed to this. In addition, there is a high level of frustration with the work of the government over the last few (crisis) years (e.g. regarding high inflation and the increase in the cost of living, after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainability of the social system and health care financing, and migration).

The public perception that these problems are not being adequately addressed benefits the opposition and the Eurosceptic and radical right Freedom Party (FPÖ/ID) in particular. It is consistently leading in the polls for both the EU and national elections.

These challenges and the upcoming national elections in the autumn also dominate the current EU election battle. In the domestic debate, the EU has often been portrayed as a scapegoat and antagonist while the transnational dimension and highlighting the Union's added value are often missing.

As regards the Austrian media, outside election periods it is rare to find extensive coverage of European topics and decisions made on the European stage. Moreover, tabloid media, with a strong role in the public sphere, tend to take quite a Eurosceptic stance. The European elections – long regarded as a secondary issue – will likely boost coverage and background reporting. But we can expect a high number of TV debates featuring the lead candidates – both by Austria's public service broadcaster ORF as well as their private competitors – or special topical supplements in quality newspapers.

The parties and their elections campaigns

Since the beginning of April, the political parties have been slowly rolling out their European election campaigns and started with the promotion of their top candidates. Beside the five parties represented in the Austrian parliament and the European Parliament, two other lists managed to collect enough signatures to feature on the ballot paper.

In their election campaigns, the parties focus on the following topics:

The ÖVP/EPP, with their lead candidate Reinhard Lopatka, calls for “more Europe” in terms of the internal market. At the same time, the party wants “a better Europe” in the fight against illegal migration, regarding more robust external border protection with asylum procedures exclusively at the external borders or in third countries; and it enters the fight against overregulation and backs more subsidiarity. Though these topics are similarly addressed by the FPÖ, the ÖVP is striving to show that its stance is constructive and pro-European. The conservatives also call for the provision of more funds to “strengthen security and defence readiness” and “economical budgeting”, and support further EU enlargement and solidarity with Ukraine.

The Social Democrats (SPÖ/S&D) with their lead candidate, Andreas Schieder, are committed to a social and fair Europe and warn of an imminent shift to the right. Other core areas of their campaign include social security, free trade agreements only with high social and environmental standards, the creation of safe and legal channels for migration, initiatives against disproportionate power of global companies, the supply chain act, a stronger focus on social issues and social cohesion, and fair taxation, as well as support for the Green Deal and solidarity with Ukraine. SPÖ lead candidate Schieder calls for a “Europe first” agreement instead of “Made in China” to boost Europe’s reindustrialisation, which includes protectionist measures. On its billboards, the SPÖ also promotes “peace and freedom”.

The FPÖ/ID, with lead candidate Harald Vilimsky, is in favour of radically downsizing the EU, stopping the “process of centralisation” and reversing it by returning competences to the member states. Moreover, direct democracy should take precedence over EU law, asylum abuse and illegal migration should be fought more effectively and sanctions against Russia need to be opposed. The first series of FPÖ billboards were rendered in black and white presenting the slogan “Stop EU madness” and depicted European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hugging each other. There are also illustrations and the keywords “asylum crisis”, “warmongering”, “corona chaos” and “eco-communism”. Interestingly, in this first part of its campaign, lead candidate Vilimsky did not feature on the billboards whereas in the second phase he is portrayed as “Patriotic – what else?”, with the additional keywords “free – safe – neutral”.

The Greens (Grüne/EFA), with their young, female lead candidate Lena Schilling, stand for combatting climate change, showing solidarity with Ukraine, securing a more democratic Europe, fighting right-wing extremism, and pro-feminism. Moreover, their campaign includes youth participation rights, zero tolerance of corruption, enforcement of a price cap on train tickets with a maximum of 10 cents per kilometre, EU world leadership in green technology and affordable medicine throughout Europe. On the billboards Schilling who comes from a climate activist background but has announced to become a member of the Greens is prominently featured with the slogans “More heart than hate”, “Climate needs heart” and “Europe needs heart”. In the course of the election campaign Schilling has been confronted with allegations questioning her credibility casting a shadow on the Greens’ election prospects.

The upswing of Austria's Eurosceptics would further exacerbate the already highly polarised and emotional domestic EU debate and foster a voting trend for the national parliamentary elections in September 2024 that could lead to a government with a more reserved stance on EU integration.

The election manifesto of the liberal NEOS/Renew Europe, with their lead candidate Helmut Brandstätter, includes the creation of a United States of Europe with a common foreign, security and defence policy and an EU army; solidarity with Ukraine; abolition of the principle of unanimity; deregulation of the internal market and strengthening EU industries; reforming the asylum system and the establishment of clear standards for due process and humane reception; more enlargement; and a European right to education as a fifth fundamental freedom in the EU. In its first wave of billboards, NEOS decided against including its lead candidate but instead posed questions like "What protects against Trump?" and "What stops Putin?", with the faces of the two leaders mentioned featuring prominently.

Interestingly, all parties declined to display their European family logo on their promotional material.

Regarding the two outsiders not yet represented in the Austrian parliament or European Parliament, they will have to fight hard to pass the 4% threshold required to secure representation on the European stage for the next five years:

The Communist Party/KPÖ is fielding Günther Hopfgartner for the upcoming EU elections. Last time, as in all previous EU elections, the KPÖ failed to win a seat in the European Parliament, with 0.65% of the vote, but this time its prospects could be much better. According to the KPÖ, the European Parliament needs a force that can be relied upon to stand up for housing and social issues, for neutrality and for peace. In this regard, it is also worth noting that Walter Baier, an Austrian, will be the top candidate of the European Left in the EP elections. However, this fact has played no part (yet) in the current election debate or in the KPÖ campaign itself.

The entry into the EP election battle of the relatively unknown list DNA (Democratic-Neutral-Authentic), with its lead candidate Maria Hubmer-Mogg, comes as a surprise. The party opposes the former COVID-19 measures, demanding an "independent investigation into the COVID-19 policy" and calls for the rejection of the WHO's planned pandemic treaty. The DNA demands an "immediate end to sanctions against Russia" and the start of peace negotiations and wants an "end to EU corruption". If the DNA managed to pass the threshold to gain a seat in the upcoming EU parliament it is not clear which European party, if any, it would join.

The likely results of the EP elections in Austria

According to [recent polls](#) (April 22nd-24th, 2024), the FPÖ would make significant gains with 27% of the votes (+9.8 percentage points compared to the result of 2019). The other winning parties would be the NEOS with 13% (+4.6) and the KPÖ with 3% (+2.2). Those suffering losses would mainly include the ÖVP with a predicted 20% (-14.6), and the Greens, with 12% (-2.1) while the social democrats would remain stable with 24%.

What is new and noteworthy is that the Eurosceptic FPÖ could substantially motivate its voters to go to the polls and could end up in first place for the first time in the history of European elections in Austria. With public dissatisfaction running high, smaller parties are also

gaining ground. However, at the end of the day it is all about mobilising supporters. The election campaigns have just started and there is still a long way to go to translate the opinion polls into actual election results.

Be that as it may, the European elections are unlikely to change Austria's general approach to European integration. Even if the Freedom Party makes considerable gains, a large majority among Austrian MEPs will still be from pro-EU parties. Nevertheless, the upswing of Austria's Eurosceptics would further exacerbate the already highly polarised and emotional domestic EU debate and foster a voting trend for the national parliamentary elections in September 2024 that could lead to a government with a more reserved stance on EU integration.

