
Austria – Still the Second Republic or already the Third?

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Summary

For a long time Austria's political system erected after WW II – the Second Republic – looked like the perfect embodiment of first highly unlikely but in the end successful democratization. From a current perspective was it a real success story and can it today serve as a model for other states aiming at democratic consolidation? Austria was a success story (though with some dark sides and 'Lebenslügen') but this was due to non-reproducible beneficial external conditions and Austria's geopolitical position. It can definitely not serve as a model case under different and unprecedented conditions. Moreover some of its earlier advantages and the inability to come to terms with it in a changed political environment are haunting Austria today. Besides problems like globalization it is upon those flaws that a rightist populist political force like the FPÖ can mobilize mass support and win elections.

For a long time Austria's political system – the Second Republic – looked like the perfect embodiment of a highly unlikely but in the end a successful democratization. From the current perspective was it a real success story and can it today serve as a model for other states aiming at democratic consolidation? From my point of view Austria was a success story (with some dark sides and 'Lebenslügen') but due to the not reproducible beneficial external conditions and Austria's specific geopolitical position. It can definitely not serve as a model case under the new and unprecedented conditions like those in Eastern and Southeastern Europe after 1989. Moreover, some of its earlier advantages and the inability to come to terms with it in a changed political environment are haunting Austria today.

After the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the weak and unstable First Republic – the unwanted rump state – was destroyed by internal political strife, the lack of belief in the existence of an Austrian nation and the absolute determination for territorial expansion on the side of the Third Reich. Austria's position was ambivalent in 1938: though occupied by German troops, quite a big portion of the population as well as the domestic Nazi elite were welcoming the invaders and Austria became an inherent part of Nazi Germany which a year later started the war and was after its defeat occupied by the Allied Powers. After the war Austria managed, however, to present itself as the first victim of Hitler's territorial ambitions only and not also as its first volunteer.

From 1945 to 1955 Austria was under the Allied occupation; in addition, the Cold War frontier ran through the country, dividing it into the Western and the Eastern part. After ten years, Austria not only managed to reunite but became the only European country that through a consensus of the Cold War powers gained independence and reached a negotiated retreat of Soviet troops.

Already at that time Austria was an exceptional case rather than a model both in relation to its past, its collective responsibility (if not guilt) as well as in relation to its geopolitical position. Unlike Germany, it overcame its territorial division; unlike its Eastern European neighbors, it avoided Sovietization – both likely scenarios at the time. Austria's second chance for statehood was based on the Austrian State Treaty and the Declaration of Neutrality. Under these quite favorable circumstances Austria for the first time reached a nation-wide consensus about Austrian statehood – something lacking with such dramatic results in the First Republic. If only to escape the camp of World War II's losers – Germany and the Eastern European countries – this was a perfect opportunity to establish and popularize a notion of the belated Austrian nation, although only in defensive and reluctant terms.¹

The external threats and support – the immediate neighborhood of some Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet invasionism on the one hand, the financial help of the Marshall plan and the security promise of the NATO alliance on the other – contributed to the stabilization of the country and helped it find a safe place between the Cold War blocs, of use to both of them.

Without much democratic experience Austria quickly became a politically and economically stable system also due to the establishment of a well functioning system of consociational democracy and its instruments – a state with a strong party system, even a party state. In the 1970s, Austria with about 30% of its adult population being party members, had one of the highest rates of party membership in the whole democratic Europe; more than 90 out of 100 voters cast their vote for one of the two major parties.² For 33 years (1945-66, and 1987-1999) grand coalitions between the Socialist Party/SPÖ and the Austrian People's Party/ÖVP dominated the political arena and a corporatist regime with close cooperation between business and labor – known as Social Partnership – was installed. The parties not only controlled the recruitment within the political system but also in the banking sector, the state industry, the schools, the electronic media, etc. All these features contributed to the stability and conflict resolution before conflicts even came to the fore by means of before-hand reached consensus and power sharing arrangements at almost all levels of society. Especially in the 1970s when Austria was ruled by Socialist (minority, majority and small coalition) governments, political and social reforms were introduced which transformed Austria into a modern welfare state with economic growth, full employment and strong unions that never had to call for strikes and demonstrations.

¹ Ernst Bruckmüller, *Österreichbewußtsein im Wandel. Identität und Selbstverständnis in den 90er Jahren*, Wien, 1994, 15.

² Anton Pelinka, *Parteien und Verbände*, in: Emmerich Talos (ed.), *Sozialpartnerschaft. Kontinuität und Wandel eines Modells*, Wien, 1993, 71.

Term	Federal Chancellor	Composition of Government
1945	Karl Renner (SPÖ)	Provisional government
1945-1947	Leopold Figl (ÖVP)	All party ÖVP/SPÖ/KPÖ government
1947-1953	Leopold Figl (ÖVP)	Grand coalition ÖVP/SPÖ
1953-1961	Julius Raab (ÖVP)	Grand coalition ÖVP/SPÖ
1961-1964	Alfons Gorbach (ÖVP)	Grand coalition ÖVP/SPÖ
1964-1966	Josef Klaus (ÖVP)	Grand coalition ÖVP/SPÖ
1966-1970	Josef Klaus (ÖVP)	ÖVP majority government
1970-1971	Bruno Kreisky (SPÖ)	SPÖ minority government
1971-1983	Bruno Kreisky (SPÖ)	SPÖ majority government
1983-1986	Fred Sinowatz (SPÖ)	Small coalition SPÖ/FPÖ
1986-1987	Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ)	Small coalition SPÖ/FPÖ
1987-1997	Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ)	Grand coalition SPÖ/ÖVP
1997-2000	Viktor Klima (SPÖ)	Grand coalition SPÖ/ÖVP
since 2000	Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP)	Small coalition ÖVP/FPÖ

Source: Table 3.4 Federal Chancellors and Governments in the Second Republic, in: Anton Pe-linka, *Austria. Out of the Shadow of the Past*, Boulder/Colorado 1998, p. 60 (updated)

Over the last decade opportunities and barriers that shaped Austria's internal as well as its international position altered dramatically. Austria's middle(man) position between the East and the West (if we concentrate on its geographic and geopolitical position) or at the edge of the Western world (if we focus on its economic system – market economy – and its political system – multiparty democracy) had to be redefined at a time when the Soviet bloc was no more and with it the political landscape in which Austria's neutrality and non-alignment has made sense and contributed to its nation-building efforts. The lifting of the Iron Curtain was enthusiastically welcomed from an ideological-normative point of view – the perspective of the once communist neighboring states turning into democratic societies – and the fact that a hermetically sealed frontier will become a “normal” border once again. But this positive evaluation did not last. Instead of the splendid isolation instability and competition were the ingredients of the new era. With the bloody war following the disintegration of Yugoslavia many refugees came to Austria, the now open former Eastern bloc borders were perceived as attracting cheap labor and crime and therefore threatening the so called ‘island of the blessed’. In addition, the transition process in the post communist states posed another challenge (menace if you put it more negatively, and this is what many Austrians did): these societies and their economies would compete with Austria in economic and political terms. The fact that today most of them are already full NATO members or at least in the Partnership for Peace program as well as promising candidates for EU accession shows this assumption was not unfounded. Austria's decision to join the EU in 1995, for decades a taboo issue, and the fact that in the end this decision met with an unexpected high approval of the citizenry of about 75 % could be seen in the post Cold War context and the desire for a more secure position within the new political order. Even

though the integration into the EU structures is a once-and-for-all settled issue and the integration in transatlantic security structures is still a taboo, fits into this scheme. Accession to the EU was seen as a game with Austria as the winning-it-all party (falsely, as Austria's position as a net contributor to the EU's budget as well as the short lived "EU sanctions" showed) whereas NATO accession is perceived as a costly affair (in terms of resources and responsibilities) while outside NATO Austria can enjoy all its security guarantees for free.

The external factors were not the only ones that led to the fundamental changes in Austria's political system. Over the last few years, many features of consociational democracy came under heavy attack as no longer appropriate and a burden for a modern and modernizing society. The most important result of this criticism is the transformation of the political system that began in the second half of the 1980s – perhaps it was no coincidence that it was around that time that things started to change in Eastern Europe, too. It was in 1986 that the Green Party gained access to the parliament and the FPÖ under their new leader Jörg Haider re-positioned itself as a right-wing populist party including its proletarianization, masculinization and rejuvenation when it comes to the electorate.³

A once dominant and in many ways hegemonic two-party system established on the basis of a two-camp mentality had to come to terms with its progressive de-legitimization and the continual rise of a third major party – the Austrian Freedom Party/FPÖ. The Austrian Freedom Party was heir to a party that was formed by and for the former Austrian National Socialists (*Verband der Unabhängigen/League of Independents*). Apart from its rightist xenophobic and revisionist elements, it focused on the excessive influence of parties in Austria and the bureaucratic inflexibility of the social partnership system. It constantly tried to present itself as a new party or even not a party at all but a movement. In the late 90s it crossed out the term party and for a short period of time called itself F only.

The rise of the FPÖ is sometimes understood as an increase of pluralism of the party system, evidence of the normalization and in fact the Westernization of Austria's political system. Although the founding of the Green Party indicates a further diversification of the party system, the disproportionate gains of the FPÖ – 1986: 9.7 %, 1990: 16.6%, 1994: 22.5 %, 1995: 21.9 %, 1999: 26.9 %⁴ – rather demonstrate the setting in which this pluralization and transforming of the political system takes place. It reveals the Austrian political system as one not used to pluralism, competition and open conflict at all and at the same time as inward-looking, defensive and at times full of resentment towards the outside world (take a look at the quite similar treatment of the Waldheim affair and the EU sanctions by the political elite and the Austrian public).

Just as it was easy for nationalism to overtake the communist legacy in Eastern Europe, so it was for a nationalist, anti-modernist as well as anti-political party to fill

³ Plasser, Fritz/Peter A. Ullrich, Wandel der politischen Konfliktstruktur. Radikaler Rechtspopulismus in Österreich, in: Müller, Wolfgang C./Fritz Plasser und Peter A. Ullrich 1995 (eds.), *Wählerverhalten und Parteienwettbewerb. Analysen zur Nationalratswahl 1994*, Wien, 1995, p. 485.

⁴ Source: Official election results.

the power vacuum and take the lead in the long overdue transformation process in Austria. It speaks volumes that the only and lonely Liberal Party (Liberales Forum) – a faction from some liberal FPÖ members of parliament in 1993 – never managed to establish itself as a significant political grouping and was severely beaten at the polls. The Green Party as a single issue party with its concentration on the environment, human rights and pacifism gains at the expense of the Liberals' decline, but neither have the power nor the stature to seriously challenge the flaws of the Austrian political system.

There are no special sectors of the society and the political system that need modernization and reforms. It is the political structure itself and its authoritarian underpinning in general that makes it difficult for institutions like the parliament, the judiciary or the media to work in an independent way so vital for a democratic system. Not only party but also the media concentration – the newspaper *Die Neue Kronenzeitung* is one of the newspapers with the biggest number of readers worldwide considering the size of the population and the lack of independent electronic media – while the state-owned Austrian Broadcasting Company ORF, enjoying a broadcasting monopoly and with its board of trustees staffed by the political parties in power, has been a significant element of the Austrian political system. The traditional power-sharing between the two main parties and its hegemonic influence was once a stabilizing factor, but has been getting ever more dysfunctional under the conditions of competitive globalization with the new societal processes and interest groups emerging.

One example for the change going on recently might be the treatment of the core ÖVP and SPÖ interest groups like the pragmatized sector of state bureaucracy and the public transport workers whose consent was once so important for their respective party. Increasingly they have been let down in order to modernize both sectors. But apart from a half-hearted and quite technocratic reformist policy option that did not touch upon their influence in the (electronic) media or the appointments of public officials (judiciary, schools, universities, etc.), the grand coalition offered no conceptual vision of how to revitalize and modernize the Second Republic and had no guts to uncompromisingly speak out against the rightist populist version the FPÖ favored. Whereas the Social Democrats tried to cope with the Freedomites by excluding them from any political pact but on the other hand giving in to many of their demands in a toned-down version (for example, in the migration and asylum-granting policy), the Conservatives oscillated between the declarations of the FPÖ as beyond the constitutional order and at other times toying with the idea of a coalition.

After last fall's general elections the People's Party decided it was time to establish a new political order in which it could eventually take the lead. So for the first time since Jörg Haider headed the FPÖ (1986), a coalition with the FPÖ as the minor political partner (although it has the same share of voters and seats in the parliament as the ÖVP) was accepted by an important segment of the political system. It was then that the perplexed Austrians had to learn that what to a majority of them seemed a perfectly normal political arrangement, the Austrian style, was judged by the leading European governments as a precedent with the potential of endangering democracy in the whole Europe. Although the so-called sanctions were rather symbolic and were felt above all on the representative political level, the government managed to present them to the public as the sanctions against Austria and its citizens. This successful mobilization led

to the closing of the ranks and the marginalization of the opposition voices, and eventually brought about the lifting of sanctions (in the meantime assessed as counterproductive). Within the Austrian government the ÖVP was strengthened at the expense of the FPÖ (with also the public support for the FPÖ in decline – see various opinion polls and the quite heavy FPÖ losses at the provincial elections in Styria and the Burgenland). It is not clear whether it is the intent of the electorate to reward the ÖVP for domesticating the FPÖ or to punish the protest party FPÖ for their modest role in the government.

It remains to be seen in which ways the new coalition government will undertake the necessary reforms and whether it is going to avoid to fill in the grand coalition power vacuum with its own political allies and protégés. In this context the rise of the FPÖ to power should not be perceived as a heavy burden on the Austrian political system only. It reflects its shadows and its vagueness and this could have a catalytic effect as well. So we are definitely leaving for the Third Republic; it remains an open question whether the direction Austria has taken is liberal or illiberal.