

The Kurz affair has uncovered the Trumpian dimension of Austrian politics

On 9 October, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz resigned following a corruption scandal. Reinhard Heinisch and Annika Werner explain why the rise and fall of Kurz has parallels with the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States – and why, like Trump, we may not have seen the last of him as a key political figure.

The [fall of Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz](#) reveals the Trumpian dimension of Austrian politics, which encompasses several aspects. First, as with the Republicans in the United States, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) was taken over by a close-knit coterie from outside the mainstream of the party intent on breaking with its traditions and behavioural conventions.

The takeover plan, dubbed *Project Ballhausplatz* (in reference to the location of the Federal Chancellery in Vienna), had already been rumoured in the media, but was confirmed by a trove of telephone chat conversations involving the former Chancellor and his inner circle. Thousands of these chats were seized by prosecutors and many were subsequently leaked to the public.

The first step was for the conservatives to parrot the political agenda of the populist far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), but to present these xenophobic and Eurosceptic positions in a more polished and mainstream guise to appear acceptable and statesmanlike, as these chats show.

The second part of the scheme, according to the transcripts and the prosecution's hundred-plus-page brief, involved a campaign in which falsified opinion polls portraying then Foreign Minister Kurz in a glowing light were regularly published in an Austrian tabloid newspaper, which in turn received paid advertisements from the Ministry of Finance. This has now led to Kurz, his close associates, and the entire party being officially accused of corruption, bribery, and embezzlement. The core of the corruption allegation is precisely that the Ministry of Finance apparently spent taxpayers' money on the Foreign Minister's political ambitions.

The third part of the scheme was to denigrate the party leader and Vice Chancellor at that time, Reinhold Mitterlehner, as a hopeless loser and to sabotage successes of the then government, of which Kurz himself was a member. The dual aim was to exacerbate the conservatives' dire electoral situation and, at the same time, to hasten the demise of the grand coalition in which the ÖVP was the junior partner. If all turned out as planned, the popular Kurz could credibly present himself as the saviour and extract political concessions from a party dominated by politically cautious elders who feared the complete marginalisation of their party.

Kurz, who had built up an impressive network of young confidants in high positions, was supported in this, according to the prosecution, by Thomas Schmid, a loyal supporter and high-ranking official in the Ministry of Finance. At one point, Schmid is quoted as bragging in one of his chats that Kurz could now "shit money", which made the anti-corruption division of prosecution suspicious. Schmid's problem, and ultimately Kurz's problem, was that the police managed to confiscate the former's cell phone in another corruption investigation, which has since turned out to be a political gift that keeps on giving.

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The ruthlessness, naked ambition and conspiratorial nature reflected in these chats also have echoes of Trump, as does the apparent willingness to break political taboos. For example, Kurz learned while he was still Foreign Minister that his party had reached an agreement with its coalition partner to fund a national after-school childcare programme to ease the burden on working parents. When Kurz heard this news, he responded in a chat calling it "not good" for him and asked if he could "stir up" any opposition; after all, this deal was a success for the government, which he wanted to get rid of.

Another series of later chats allegedly shows how Kurz, then already the head of a Christian conservative party, told Schmid to strike fear into the clergy for daring to criticise Kurz's refugee policy as inhumane. It has been reported that Schmid was to blackmail the bishops by suggesting that the government would strip the church of certain tax privileges, with Kurz issuing an instruction to "go full throttle".

Another Trumpian aspect was the timing of the takeover. Just as the Republicans were vulnerable to political takeovers from the political fringe after their double defeat at the hands of Obama and their so-called [post-mortem](#), the Austrian conservatives were in massive decline in 2016. In this situation, Kurz, much like Donald Trump, proposed moving the party sharply to the right rather than to the centre, as Merkel had done in Germany. This shift to the right was not driven by the Conservatives' typical constituency, as we have shown in a [recent study](#), but was specifically designed to tap into the FPÖ electorate.

Moreover, Kurz was able to turn a structural weakness of his party into a political advantage for himself. As we discuss in a contribution to a new book on Europe's mainstream right, [Riding the Populist Wave](#), the ÖVP is traditionally a heterogeneous party with a weak centre. In the past, the national party was dominated by powerful component organisations and regional party leaders. Kurz used the vacuum in the centre to his advantage by filling the central party apparatus, the government, and a sizeable portion of conservative MPs with people who were personally loyal to him but posed no threat to his power.

He also successfully pressured his party to give him an unprecedented full power statute, or else he threatened to leave the ÖVP and form his own party. This was an extremely frightening prospect for conservative state governors, who rely on the largesse of the federal government and its control by conservatives. They accepted Kurz's terms and dismissed Mitterlehner, whom Kurz is reported to have lambasted with derogatory expletives in his chats.

The vulgar language in these chat exchanges would normally be unremarkable in a private conversation, but it resonated with the public precisely because Kurz and his team were known for carefully controlled messaging, rhetorical deftness, and highly choreographed public performances. This language and the dirty tricks he is accused of stand in stark contrast to the image Kurz cultivated in his 2017 and 2019 election campaigns, in which he promised "a new style" and an end to politics as a dirty business.

Polite language, restrained gestures, a neat appearance and formal attire have become his trademarks. While that is not particularly Trumpian, Kurz's affinity for the media is. Political insiders have described his way of governing as maintaining power through communication. His ideological core or his political vision for the country, on the other hand, have remained elusive even to careful observers.

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The substantive political impact of his two terms in office has been small, despite hyperbolic proclamations of historic political change. To be sure, there were frequent political acts of great symbolism, such as raising the Israeli flag on the Chancellery during the brief Gaza war, the demonstrative toughness toward immigrants and Muslims, or the announcement to co-produce the Sputnik vaccine in Austria to "correct for the failures" of the EU.

Some of this was also enacted as formal policy; some remained pure rhetoric. There were also scapegoats such as the EU, especially the European Commission, which Kurz blamed for the initial lack of vaccine doses in Austria, although the failure clearly lay with an overly fiscally restrictive Austrian government. Overall, however, he pursued conventional conservative clientele politics with a preference for those clientele groups within his heterogeneous party on which he depended to consolidate his power.

His main achievement was to embody in the public eye the role of the dashing young conservative visionary who transformed a stodgy old party into a campaign juggernaut, marginalising the left and taming the far right. His party worshipped him uncritically, and he seemed impervious to the government's fiascos in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and the mounting investigations and scandals that have since become a daily media drumbeat. Only when party elders realised that a vote of no confidence, supported by all parties, even the ÖVP's Green party coalition partner, was likely and that a government without the conservatives was a distinct possibility, did they push Kurz aside.

Yet they were not strong enough to push him out of office altogether. Therein lies the conservatives' dilemma: they seem unable to continue either with him or without him. Neither a credible alternative nor a political direction are apparent at present. Kurz, who created a party within a party, can still count on the support of many at the grassroots level and on networks of loyalists who were electrified by his successes, his media skills and also his willingness to put political ambition above political taboos. Naturally, they point to a leftist cabal in the justice system that is conspiring to get rid of a successful conservative – herein, too, lies a parallel to the devotees of Trump.

Kurz was first and foremost the ÖVP's answer to the silent counterrevolution, the rise of the populist radical right. It is ironic that he was ultimately undone by an investigation that began with the [Ibiza scandal](#) and an ignominious chapter in the history of Austria's Freedom Party, which has now caught Kurz himself. Even more ironically, the current situation probably benefits the FPÖ above all, which is preparing to win back voters from the conservatives and can take comfort in the fact that Ibiza has now been overshadowed by the Kurz affair.

For more information, see the authors' contribution to [Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
