

The European Parliament elections in Austria will be the latest battleground in the far-right's challenge to the country's EU consensus

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*The last Austrian national election in 2013 saw the radical-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) obtain 20.5 per cent of the vote. **Philipp Decker** provides an overview of the origins of the three main political parties within Austrian political culture. He argues that the upcoming European Parliament elections in May will either confirm a further shift to the right, or signal that voters still believe the two governing centre parties can represent their interests.*



The 2014 elections for the European Parliament represent an opportunity for Austria's two centre parties to respond to a deepening crisis in the face of the rising radical-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). The centre-left (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ) and the centre-right (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP), which currently form a coalition government after having survived [the national elections in 2013](#) with a narrow majority of 50.8 per cent of the vote, face increasing demands from their shrinking social base and from within their own party organisations. While each of these parties lost around 2 per cent of their vote share, the far-right FPÖ increased its share by 3 per cent, gaining 20.5 per cent of the votes overall, despite a number of significant protest parties taking part in the election.

The SPÖ is confronted with critical voices especially from its progressive younger generation and its labour base. The party has nominated as leading candidate for the EP elections a former [anchor-man](#), who experienced a bumpy start and an ambiguous representation in the media. While the ÖVP has undergone some minor changes (its [foreign minister](#) and general secretary being the youngest in history), it remains programmatically quite static. Thus it has to bear increasing public criticism, especially from regional factions within the party as well as from urban liberal segments that feel increasingly marginalised. Its leading candidate is an experienced [MEP](#), who faces the newly established [NEOS](#), a reformist liberal party that eats into the ÖVP's middle-class and better-off constituency. The FPÖ has nominated two of its main nationalistic figures, gaining considerable [organisational](#) and [intellectual](#) capacity.



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At first sight the nominations of the three parties represent nothing surprising. While the SPÖ and ÖVP remain quite cautious, the FPÖ seems to be more ambitious with its dual leadership in the campaign. From a broader perspective the central question will be whether the centre-left and centre-right parties are able to find the strategic means to respond to their deepening crisis, which endangers not only the two parties' national claim to leadership in European affairs, but might also signal a pattern that affects Austria's political culture in a more structural way. Recent polls presented below indicate that Austrian citizens are still split on who will better represent them in the European Parliament.

Table: Polling figures on Austrian voting intention for 2014 European Parliament elections

Party	Parliamentary group	Predicted vote share (%)	Predicted seats
Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	S&D	22.6	5
Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	N/A	22.5	4
Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	EPP	22	4
The Greens – The Green Alternative	Greens/EFA	14	3
NEOS – The New Austria	ALDE	12.5	2
Hans-Peter Martin's List	N/A	2	0

Note: Based on an average of EP 2014 polls conducted by Gallup, Hajek and Market 07/03/2014-16/03/2014. The Table is provided for illustrative purposes and is not an attempt by the author to predict the final result.

Ethnic neo-nationalism as a challenge to consociational democracy

The political failure of the Austrian First Republic and the experience of fascism have provided the ground for Austria's unique political culture after WWII of what political scientists call 'consociational democracy'. It represents a democratic model that is supposed to prevent the articulation of antagonisms (e.g. 'class politics') through the institutionalisation of mechanisms that facilitate compromises. In terms of government, the symbolic and organisational consensus was achieved through grand coalitions, uniting centre-left and centre-right, and claiming to represent all legitimate societal demands. Under these conditions the FPÖ remained a marginal party gaining about 5 per cent at national elections for decades.



The FPÖ candidates for the 2014 EP elections, Credit: APA/Herbert Pfarrhofer (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Similar to the centre-left and centre-right parties, the far-right nationalist party also has its origins in a political movement that took shape in the last decades of the Habsburg Monarchy. The notoriously anti-Semitic [Pan-German](#) movement diverged from the so-called 'national liberals' and promoted an ethnic German national project, contesting the multi-national imperial state. However, due to its radicalism it remained marginal within the political arena. After WWII and the experience of Nazism, Pan-German nationalism was discredited in the Austrian politics of the Second Republic.

The significant rise of the FPÖ began under the leadership of [Jörg Haider](#) in the 1980s. While drawing on the political economic doctrine of liberalism, Haider revived certain components of the party's historical ethno-nationalism. Organisationally, he renewed the

party through a generational break and a focus on his personal leadership. The ideological basis inherited by the party's historical roots appeared to constitute a fertile ground for a neo-nationalist project, especially due to its existing intellectual elites. Student fraternities ('Burschenschaften') are central for the party's recruitment and responsible for the intellectual capacity of the German national movement, which dates back to the 19th century.

Under Haider, the FPÖ transformed the former German national project into a reformist Austrian national project ('The Third Republic'). With the rise of neo-liberalism during the 1980s Austria's 'consociational democracy', which was drawing on an extended welfare state to satisfy societal demands, became increasingly targeted by the right. Haider's reformist project openly challenged the extended state and consensual governance, by claiming to represent 'the Austrians' and 'the working people' in contrast to the grand coalition, which was identified with unproductiveness and the toleration of 'foreign' burdens. In the 1999 national elections the FPÖ gained second place with 26.9 per cent and formed a coalition government with the third-ranked People's Party.

In 2005 a rift within the FPÖ led to a shift under the new leadership of [Heinz Christian Strache](#). While the party kept its populist and radical-right components, some of its ideological features were replaced. Instead of representing itself primarily in the historical tradition of 'national liberalism', it shifted towards a rather leftist discourse of social justice and statism. It combined its anti-establishment discourse with a critique of the current economic system identified with the EU. This strategy of presenting itself as the new 'Workers' Party' paid off to a certain extent, defeating the SPÖ in the 'blue collar' segment of the electorate at the 2013 national elections. However, far from replacing the Social Democrats with a society project based on civic nationalism, the FPÖ's ideological configuration as a radical-right neo-nationalist party that defines 'the other' predominantly in terms of ethnicity and religion ([anti-Semitic](#), [anti-Turkish](#), [anti-Muslim](#)) constitutes its distinct ideological core.

Potential consequences

The elections will either confirm a further shift in favour of the Freedom Party or signal that the two governing centre parties have the capacity to respond to the challenge from the far-right. Despite the fact that the EP elections have a rather symbolic character domestically, an increase in FPÖ vote share will signify that Austria's two centre parties and thus its traditional political culture face a real challenge. Austria's consociational democracy is characterised by compromise and societal consensus, leaving no significant space for radical parties at the margins of the political spectrum. While a radical-left that could challenge this consensus is absent, the FPÖ, with its exclusionary nationalism based on polarisation and 'othering', framed in terms of religion, ethnicity and 'Brussels', represents a real challenge to both centre parties and popular support for the EU.

At the European level, the FPÖ has actively been engaged in [alliance-building](#) and clearly has a vision to play an important role in the establishment of a European party family of the radical-right. While neighbouring Hungary has already faced the institution of a neo-nationalist regime, a further rise of the FPÖ would increase the pressure on the Austrian centre parties to recalibrate and openly promote their own visions of Austria in Europe, which they have largely avoided to articulate so far.

In such a process three scenarios seem possible. First, they could revive their own historical roots by engaging in intellectual renewal on the common basis of consociational democracy and some form of welfare state. Such a model would strengthen their domestic credibility while maintaining a basic consensus concerning the EU. Second, they could develop alternative reformist models of Austria within the framework of a normative vision of the European Union. Or third, they could give in and comply – tacitly or overtly – with the FPÖ's neo-nationalism, accepting its ethno-national vision of Austria.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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