

Granting Austrian citizenship to German-speaking Italians would not be a victory for South Tyrol's separatists



Austria's new government has proposed to offer Austrian citizenship to German-speakers in the province of South Tyrol in Italy. [Stephen J. Larin](#) and [Alice Engl](#) argue that although the proposal has been welcomed by separatist parties in South Tyrol, it does not threaten Italy's territorial integrity, and it would not have happened without the close relationship between the Austrian ÖVP and the autonomist-but-not-separatist South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP).



Bolzano, South Tyrol, Credit: [Dan](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Austria's new centre-right government led by Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) and Heinz-Christian Strache (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ) recently announced plans to offer citizenship to the German- and [Ladin](#)-speaking population of Italy's northern-most province, South Tyrol, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of the First World War. The province's separatists have claimed this as a victory, but it does not threaten Italy's territorial integrity, and it would not have happened without the close relationship between the ÖVP and the autonomist-but-not-separatist South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP).

Both the FPÖ's sister-party in South Tyrol, the Freedom Party (dF), and the ideologically-similar South Tyrolean Freedom Party (STF) have [claimed responsibility](#) for the initiative and characterised it as a major step toward restoring the province's ties with Austria. Their relationships with the FPÖ are indisputably responsible for putting the issue on the new Austrian government's agenda, but this was a necessary rather than sufficient condition to make it happen.

Most of South Tyrol's German-speaking parties have [lobbied for the extension of Austrian citizenship](#) to the province's German-speakers since 2009. The SVP initially led the charge, but relented due to legal obstacles. The nearly-single-issue STF was undaunted, however, and recently coordinated a [written request](#) for citizenship to Kurz, signed by 19 of South Tyrol's 35 Provincial Councillors across the German-speaking parties, the Italian-speaking deputy of Team Autonomie, and the cross-community Movimento 5 Stelle Alto Adige-Südtirol.

But the ÖVP would not have agreed to this request if the SVP were against it, regardless of what the FPÖ wanted. The ÖVP and SVP have a long history of cooperation, Kurz and SVP Charmain Philipp Achammer are friends, and there is no reason for the ÖVP to do something that would undermine the SVP in favour of its separatist opponents.

So how could Austrian citizenship for South Tyroleans help the SVP?

In 2008 the SVP failed to win a majority of the provincial vote for the first time in its history (48.1%), and received its lowest support ever (45.7%) in 2013. Most of its lost support has been transferred to the dF, which jumped from 5% of the vote in 2003 to 14.3% in 2008, then rose again to 17.9% in 2013. The shock of these losses, populist right-wing successes at the expense of traditional conservative parties in Austria and Germany, and dissatisfaction among the SVP's own conservative wing have all led to a siege mentality taking hold among the party's leadership.

The SVP has tried to bolster its popular legitimacy through a variety of initiatives since winning its 2013 mandate, most notably the 'participatory-ish' [South Tyrol Autonomy Convention](#), which failed on its own terms but nevertheless demonstrates the overarching and comparatively significant [success of the province's autonomy arrangement](#) at a difficult time for majority–minority relations worldwide. And the fact that the [overwhelming majority of the province's German-speakers voted 'Yes'](#) in Italy's 2016 referendum on constitutional reform, which the separatists campaigned against, demonstrates that they still trust the SVP on matters related to South Tyrol's autonomy.

But this won't be enough to counter the dF's appeal in the upcoming Autumn 2018 provincial election, because much of its new support is driven by concerns over migration and other core conservative issues, not a sudden surge in support for secession. While most German-speakers surveyed in the province's most recent [Linguistic Barometer](#) identify as 'South Tyrolean' (80.7%) rather than Italian (9.3%), a mere 2.2% identify as Austrian – contrary to a [2014 Guardian article](#) – and the majority are satisfied with South Tyrol's place within Italy.

The SVP has therefore gone out of its way to support symbolic issues such as Austrian citizenship, and talks tough about migrants in an attempt to leverage nationalist politics to retain conservative voters. It can do this safely because the European Union means that Austrian citizenship for Italians doesn't change much (and indeed, the leaders of the SVP have described the initiative as '[European](#)', not '[ethno-nationalist](#)').

Whether this will be enough to regain conservative support, or at least prevent further losses, remains to be seen, but Austrian citizenship helps South Tyrol's dominant, autonomist party as much as it helps separatists. It is a symbolic threat to [Italian nation-statists](#), the most vocal of which are outsiders who are not involved in provincial politics, and it frustrates provincial cross-community parties and activists by reinforcing nationalist rhetoric among local politicians and media. But for many people in South Tyrol, it is yet another fringe, elite-level quarrel that has little to do with their everyday experience and concerns.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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