Austria's right-wing government at six months: What's the record so far?

Austria's government was sworn in six months ago on 18 December. **Manès Weisskircher** *discusses the domestic record of the new government, noting that so far, its support has remained stable. The government's biggest domestic hurdle has not been mobilisation against new socioeconomic or migration policies, but rather opposition to the reversal of a smoking ban in restaurants.*

Sebastian Kurz with Donald Tusk, Credit: European Council President (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Six months ago, on 18 December, the new Austrian government was sworn in. Its composition guaranteed international media attention: First, the 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, leader of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), became chancellor. Second, the radical right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) returned to power. Its long-term leader Heinz-Christian Strache became Austria's vice-chancellor.

Last year, not only the FPÖ, but also the ÖVP put restrictive positions on immigration and integration at the centre of its electoral campaign. The parties of the left proved unable to respond effectively – the Social Democrats (SPÖ) lost the chancellorship, while the Greens were voted out of parliament completely. The ÖVP and FPÖ agreed on a coalition agreement that focuses on liberal economic policies and measures to reduce immigration. The two parties did not have a tough time finding common ground – quite different from some other recent instances of government formation in Western Europe.

Critics of the new government hoped that its actions would soon make supporters think twice. The FPÖ was seen as a particular likely candidate for losing support – during its last stints in national government (2000-03; 2003-05), the party experienced electoral decline and eventually a party split. However, at the moment such expectations seem premature.

The domestic record

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As expected, both parties continued to keep the issues of immigration and integration salient. In some instances, this focus was directly linked to welfare state measures. For example, the coalition agreed to lower minimal social security for individuals with limited or no German language skills. Moreover, parents who work in Austria will soon receive family allowances that are dependent on the living costs in their children's places of residence. For many Eastern European citizens working in Austria this will lead to a substantial decrease in their disposable income. The government also reduced funding for integration measures. In addition, the ÖVP and FPÖ decided to shut down seven mosques which were accused of being close to 'radical' political Islam, and announced plans to ban children from wearing head scarves in kindergarten and elementary school.

Beyond immigration and integration, the ratification of CETA, an economic agreement between the EU and Canada, has been a surprisingly salient issue in Austrian politics. Even though the FPÖ had vehemently opposed the treaty while in opposition, in government the party voted in favour of ratification. What the FPÖ could push through instead was a stop to a smoking ban in restaurants, which had already been agreed on by the previous SPÖ/ÖVP coalition. The government also, at least temporarily, stopped a programme targeting the long-term unemployed above the age of 50. The coalition also agreed on an expansion of the state's capacity for online surveillance – even though months before the last election, the FPÖ had compared similar proposals to Erich Mielke's Ministry for State Security, the *Stasi*, in the German Democratic Republic.

The FPÖ is now in charge of the ministries that provide political control over the police, army and intelligence agencies. Investigations against several officials at the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism have caused huge controversy. The Minister of the Interior, Herbert Kickl (FPÖ), suspended the head of this intelligence agency, who was also under investigation. However, after a court lifted his suspension, he's now back in office. Opposition parties and journalists have accused the FPÖ of an attempt to install its own people in that agency and to suppress intelligence investigations against the extreme right.

The infamous 'isolated cases' of the FPÖ also made headlines. These *'Einzelfälle'* are regular instances of racist, discriminatory, or otherwise highly controversial actions and statements by FPÖ politicians, or close relationships to individuals or groups engaging in such behaviour. For example, Udo Landbauer, a leading FPÖ candidate at this years' regional election in Lower Austria, had been a key member of a fraternity whose song books included anti-Semitic lyrics. As a response to this and many other cases, vice-chancellor Strache installed a commission to examine his party's history. However, party veteran Andreas Mölzer has publicly stated that the commission is 'primarily a tactical manoeuvre to get out of the headlines' – and Mölzer is a member of the commission.

The FPÖ also continued its long-term campaign against the Austrian national public service broadcaster ORF. Norbert Steger, former FPÖ deputy chancellor (1983-1987) and new head of a pre-existing ORF control body, has underlined his 'educative' approach towards journalists, which includes strong criticism directed at individual journalists and implications of possible layoffs. In February 2018, current vice-chancellor Strache posted a picture of news anchor Armin Wolf on Facebook, which included the sentence 'There is one place where lies become news. It's the ORF'. Strache added the text 'Satire! J' to his posting. After Wolf initiated a law suit, Strache backtracked, apologised, and paid compensation which the journalist donated to a research institute on Austria's Nazi past.

Stability in the polls and at the ballot box

After six months in charge, poll numbers indicate stability for the new government. Currently, Austria's three biggest parties remain close to their election results from last year. The ÖVP is ahead, with more than 30 percent, while the SPÖ and FPÖ are close to each other, in most survey clearly below 30 percent. The individual politician who enjoys the greatest public trust is chancellor Kurz.

Beyond poll numbers, both the ÖVP and FPÖ have also fared reasonably well in the four regional elections since December 2017. The ÖVP easily held three of its regional governorships, while the FPÖ could increase its voting share in all four regional elections – however, in some instances less than the party had hoped for. Ironically, the SPÖ's biggest success was expanding its hold over Carinthia, which used to be a long-term stronghold of the FPÖ.

One reason for the persistence of the new government's popularity is its ownership of the immigration issue – a topic that continues to be of high salience in Austria. According to the latest Eurobarometer data from November 2017, 28 percent of Austrians regard immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country – this is higher than at any time between 2005 and May 2015, before the intensification of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe. No other issue was picked more often.

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Another reason, though difficult to measure, is the lack of open conflict between the two government parties – its key members have abstained from publicly criticising each other. This is in stark contrast to the previous 'Grand Coalition' of the SPÖ and the ÖVP, where both sides, but in particular the ÖVP, frequently attacked their 'partner'. Now the ÖVP, including chancellor Kurz, mainly keeps silent on some of the controversies surrounding FPÖ politicians mentioned above.

A lack of challengers

On 1 July, Austria will assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. During the Presidency, chancellor Kurz can expect even more favourable coverage than usual in Austria's high-circulation tabloids, who will portray him as being at the heart of European politics. At the same time, the comparatively long time until the next important domestic elections, set for 2019 (the EP election and a regional election in Vorarlberg), might give his government additional room for manoeuvre.

Here, some political opponents also see an opportunity. They expect that further welfare state cutbacks and economic liberalisation will hurt the popularity of the ÖVP and FPÖ. But even if this is the case, the question on who might capitalise remains. Lacking direction, the social democrats have so far failed to set the agenda in opposition. In particular, they have failed to present credible alternatives: on immigration and integration, they share some of the plans of the ÖVP and FPÖ, and have neither the desire nor oppportunity to challenge the government's issue ownership. On CETA, their attacks on the FPÖ for performing a U-turn have appeared awkward – after organising an intra-party referendum in 2016, the SPÖ leadership itself ultimately decided to go against its members' rejection of the agreement.

The two remaining parliamentary parties have become one-man bands without leaders. In May, Matthias Strolz, the eloquent leader of the liberal NEOS, announced his resignation from politics. Peter Pilz, leader of his 'own' eclectic left-green Liste Pilz, had stepped down already last year after allegations of sexual harassment. These accusations did not lead to legal prosecution and this month, Pilz returned to parliament, but only after intensive and very public intra-party fighting over appointments. The Austrian opposition parties are in a dire state.

Beyond party politics, Austria is well-known for its relatively limited protest behaviour. A notable exception came in 2000, when the organisers of the so called 'Thursday demonstrations' (*Donnerstagsdemonstrationen*) managed to mobilise thousands of protestors over a period of weeks against the first ÖVP/FPÖ government. However, nothing similar has occurred this time. Protests against deportations of rejected asylum-seekers have been mostly limited to individual cases when social ties to the affected individuals have made activists out of citizens. What has generated the most opposition so far has been the reversal of the general smoking ban in restaurants. The 'Don't smoke' initiative has received more than 500,000 declarations of support – at the beginning of October, Austrians will have the chance to officially sign the non-binding initiative.

From 'Europe', no serious challenge can be expected. In 2000, the first ÖVP/FPÖ government faced strong international criticism and was even 'sanctioned' by the other EU members. Now, the European context has significantly changed. Austria will succeed Bulgaria, another country where the right and the radical right govern together, in assuming the presidency. Kurz and Strache have already emphasised that they will put the 'protection' of the EU's external border at the centre of their presidency – a goal that they share with governments as different as those of Germany, Hungary, and Italy.

To be sure, there are potential dangers for the coalition. What happens if Kurz can attract even more FPÖ sympathisers to vote for the ÖVP? So far, Kurz' strategy of focusing on immigration and integration has fully paid off – it seems unlikely that he will remove this crucial element from his winning formula. How will the ÖVP react should the FPÖ try to pursue policies outside the scope of the coalition agreement? For example, in May vice-chancellor Strache questioned the free movement of persons in the EU – interestingly, he also pointed to the effects of brain drain on Eastern European economies. And what happens if the opposition manages to mobilise against the government? While the social democrats lost the chancellorship in last year's election, they remain substantially stronger than many of their sister parties in Western Europe.

Austria's next legislative elections are due in 2022 – plenty of time for strong challengers to emerge. But also plenty of time for the ÖVP and FPÖ to pursue their desired policies.

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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.

About the author

Manès Weisskircher – *TU Dresden / European University Institute*
Manès Weisskircher is a is a researcher at the TU Dresden (MIDEM — Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy) and at the European University Institute in Florence. His research interests include comparative politics and political sociology. He tweets @ManesWeissk

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