

Salonfähig

*The Mainstreaming of the Freedom Party
of Austria*

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This paper explores the process of attaining sociopolitical legitimacy, or Salonfähigkeit, by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The FPÖ has historically been subjected to partial or total ostracism due to its portrayal as a right-wing populist party whose rhetoric and policies were not acceptable within Austrian public discourse. Since the 1990s, the party has both intensified its rhetoric and increased its vote share, leading to greater political participation, partly favoured by Austria's long history of democratic consociationalism, which emphasises consensus, political stability and power-sharing between competing parties. Especially through its complex interactions with the mainstream conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which oscillate between competition and collaboration, the FPÖ has succeeded in its own mainstreaming, to the point of being perceived as a legitimate contender for national leadership. Through a historical review of Austrian party politics since the decline of its consociational system in the late 1980s, the paper's first sections examine how the FPÖ's trajectory has interacted with that of the ÖVP. This is followed by a case study examining subnational (Land-level) political developments in the 2020s, highlighting how Black-Blue (ÖVP-FPÖ) coalitions contributed to the Freedom Party's mainstreaming. Finally, Austria's post-electoral scenario is analysed, with considerations made on the centrist Stocker government and the future of Austrian conservatism.

Keywords: Austria; Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ); Austrian People's Party (ÖVP); Salonfähigkeit; Landeshauptmann; right-wing populism; Austrian politics.

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Introduction

The inauguration of Christian Stocker as Chancellor of Austria in March marked the end of a five-month political deadlock that followed last October's Federal election. Stocker, a mild-mannered party functionary from the mainstream centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), hastily negotiated a three-way centrist coalition with the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the liberal Neos party, ostensibly in a bid to end the unprecedented paralysis in Vienna's corridors of power. Just a few weeks before, however, Stocker had been at the ÖVP's negotiating team for another, proposed – and, ultimately, failed – coalition, this time with the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The FPÖ, a former coalition partner of the ÖVP that has, nevertheless, often been subjected to similar “firewalls” and sociopolitical ostracism reserved to likeminded parties across Western Europe, had had for the first time in its history the opportunity to take the helm of the country. And while the coalition talks headed by FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl ultimately failed, the very fact that they had begun were a testament to the shifts that have taken place within the Austrian right, and to the Freedom Party's renewed “acceptability” in Austrian politics – or, rather, its *Salonfähigkeit*.

Despite having reached its zenith in the 2020s, this is a process that began in the late-1980s, as Austria's then-consociational political structure was dismantled. The FPÖ's rise, at the expense of the two mainstream parties, was, to a great extent, the consequence of major political, demographic, and societal changes undergone by Austrian society since the 1990s. The fast pace of these changes, and the perception that the mainstream parties were either unwilling or unable to address them, led many dissatisfied Austrians to look for answers elsewhere. The FPÖ, though not the only party to come out of the anti-establishment sentiment that followed the end of consociationalism, is the largest, and the one whose role in opposition and in government has been the most consequential. The party's very existence as a major force, and its attaining of *Salonfähigkeit*, is in itself the most significant change in Austrian political culture since the end of the consociational system – and, perhaps, since the establishment of the Second Republic.

The elevation of the FPÖ to the status of a major party akin to the SPÖ and the ÖVP brings with it significant shifts in the Austrian right, which for decades was dominated by the Christian democrats. The present research paper aims to present an analysis of the FPÖ's path towards *Salonfähigkeit*, or political and societal legitimacy, in Austrian political culture. In the first two sections, an outline of the present-day Austrian party-political system will be presented, including the concept of *salonfähigkeit*, followed by a historical analysis of Austrian politics

between 1945 and the late 1980s, focusing on the FPÖ and its political dynamics with the ÖVP. The third section will analyse political developments following the rise of Jörg Haider to the leadership of the FPÖ and the party's shift towards a nationalist platform that defines it to this day. The final section will cover subnational developments in 2020s Austria, which were crucial to the legitimisation of the FPÖ beyond sporadic Federal-level coalitions, presenting a case study of an Austrian *Land*. Finally, considerations will be made regarding the present state of affairs of the Austrian right and the impacts of the changes in the FPÖ's status to Austrian conservatism and the country's political culture.

Red, White, Black and Blue

Discussions on the FPÖ's evermore mainstream role in Austrian politics, and the potential for a first-ever FPÖ-led Federal government, reached their zenith in the early months of 2025. The matter of the party's *Salonfähigkeit* and whether it has managed to obtain it became one of the most important questions for Austrian political analysts. A composite German word bearing the literal meaning of "acceptable in the salon", *Salonfähigkeit* is most often translated as "acceptable in polite company". In its original formulation, the closest English-language equivalent is the somewhat anachronistic "Courtliness", a literal translation of "*Hoffähigkeit*", an Imperial-era term with a somewhat similar, if more social than political, meaning to *Salonfähigkeit*. In the German-speaking political world, the term took on a meaning of its own. *Salonfähigkeit* became the measure against which political parties, ideas, and personalities are measured. It is a form of political and sociological legitimisation, in which the latter motivates the former. Failure to be regarded as *Salonfähig*, especially on the right of the political spectrum, would usually be a condemnation to the role of perennial opposition through the imposition of a so-called firewall.

Although the conditions for obtaining *Salonfähigkeit* have never been properly defined – as this is a sociological concept that found its way into politics, rather than the opposite – it is mostly associated with adherence to a certain set of values considered to be, at best, "mainstream", and, at the most extreme readings of the concept, "fundamental" to the political system. *Salonfähigkeit*-based political considerations, although not unique to the German-speaking world, hold particular weight therein due to the aftermath of the Second World War and, especially in Germany, the existence of a "culture of remembrance" regarding the Nazi regime. Therein lies a key difference between German and Austrian *Salonfähigkeit*: the former is perceived in more immutable, absolute terms than

the latter – which can be attributed to Austria's legacy of consociationalism. Over time, in Vienna, the term has become a synonym to both a commitment to basic democratic principles, to which all major parties adhere, and to a degree of alignment to the centre-gazing mainstream, with which the post-1990s FPÖ has sought to break.

This German immutability and Austrian flexibility may explain why the Alternative for Germany, better known as AfD, remains firmly behind a “firewall”. The firewall stands even when cooperating with it might have been convenient for the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the German, slightly more centrist equivalent of the ÖVP. The rare attempts by the CDU to break the firewall against the AfD, mostly in symbolic votes, have been met with such strong resistance, even from right-leaning voters and politicians, that the CDU has been forced to retreat.¹ And while many foreign observers expected a change in course by CDU leader and now-Chancellor Friedrich Merz following the 2025 elections, such a shift failed to materialise. Merz, instead, insisted on upholding the firewall, rejecting any ouvertures to the AfD as a threat to Germany's democracy and constitutional order.²

Conversely, in Austria, if in previous decades, an FPÖ-led government would not have been considered by the ÖVP, let alone given a mandate by the Federal President, this is now seen as a realistic scenario. The party, by virtue of being the largest in Parliament, was given the position of President of the National Assembly, occupied by veteran Parliamentarian Walter Rosenkrantz. That this would happen under Kickl's leadership, and that the mandate would be given to him and not to a more moderate figure within the FPÖ further attests to the party's newly gained status. While FPÖ-led negotiations would ultimately fail to produce a governing coalition, the party's status has undoubtedly changed in the aftermath of the 2024 elections.

The present ruling coalition, led by ÖVP Federal Secretary Christian Stocker, and composed of the ÖVP, SPÖ, and Neos, was strongly contested by not only FPÖ voters, but also much of the ÖVP electorate, which favoured a coalition of the right, rather than the continuation of centrist governance. The negotiations' fast pace, and the interim status enjoyed by Stocker in the ÖVP's leadership at the time of his appointing to the Chancellorship, further added to concerns and discussions regarding the new government's perceived political legitimacy.³ The FPÖ, more than an opposition party, exists as a Sword of Damocles hanging above the coalition – if not as itself as a party, for what it represents. The coalition's *raison d'être* is little more than opposition to the FPÖ while attempting to coopt as many policies originally proposed by the Freedom Party as possible.⁴

The FPÖ's role in the Austrian political system, and the relevance of its elevation into a mainstream force, cannot be understood without a thorough assessment of the historical evolution of the Second Austrian Republic. The Second Republic has been a dynamic period in Austrian history, that begins in the end of the Second World War, comprising the end of the Allied occupation, and goes on to the present day. Originally envisaged as a two-party, consociational polity, the Second Republic would undergo major changes due to internal and external political developments, chief among which was – and remains – the rise of the FPÖ as the major third party to the rise of the ÖVP. The fine line walked by the party, troubled by its historical legacy of links with former members of the Nazi party and regime and challenged by much of the mainstream for its responses to the swift demographic changes that have taken place since the 1990s, is emblematic of this period. The adoption by the mainstream centre-right of much of the FPÖ's rhetoric and policies, while insisting on maintaining distance therefrom – and, conversely, contributing to the attaining of *Salonfähigkeit* by the Freedom Party – is another phenomenon that is quintessential to the present stage of the Second Republic.

Pillars, Pulpits and *Proporz*

The political and societal organisation of post-war Austria is often described as a form of consociationalism, i.e. a system built upon power-sharing arrangements by elites representing distinct groups that can be split over ethnic, linguistic, or, in this case, political lines. The concept of consociationalism is often used in modern scholarship of Austria to categorise the unique system of social harmony and quasi-consensus-based governance that was created in the country by Social Democratic and Christian Democratic cadres in the decades that followed the reestablishment of democratic rule.⁵ Consociationalism was created as a pragmatic solution to the restoration of democratic rule in a highly polarised political culture, which, in the previous decades, had been defined by instability, occasional bouts of violence, and a penchant for authoritarianism. This system differed significantly from that of other Western and Central European States, where more conventional forms of democracy were gradually reestablished following the end of the Second World War. The architects of the Second Republic were political veterans of the First, whose experience of constant political instability and regular outbreaks of political violence would strongly influence their design of a system of governance that emphasised consensus-building and compromising.⁶

Post-war Austria is best understood through the prism of pillarisation, or *verzuiling*, a concept created in the Low Countries to explain the politicisation of social, civic and other normally non-political aspects of life, such as associationism in 20th-century Belgium and the Netherlands. In an essay on pillarisation in the Netherlands, the concept is defined as “a system of intentionally organised and ideological vertical segmentation generated by structural links between ideology and religious and secular world views”.⁷ Thus, what differentiates a pillarised system from a regular democratic society, where ideological divisions exist as a natural outcome of a free political debate, is the permeation of the political into the non-political.

Pillarisation is a more comprehensive form of consociationalism, which was prevalent in certain European democratic political systems until the late 20th century. In the Austrian case, the two main pillars were formed around the country's dominant post-War parties, namely the SPÖ and the ÖVP. In their first decades, the two main parties, notwithstanding this newfound desire for cooperation, retained their political differences, both in terms of their political platforms and of their voters' sociological profiles.⁸ The establishment of party-aligned, pillar-style civic and professional organisations, such as the ÖVP's *Teilorganisationen*, contributed to the entrenchment of voting patterns and the creation of solid core electorates. The strong focus given by each party on a certain electorate, particularly that of the ÖVP towards farmers and rural citizens, and the SPÖ towards the urban proletariat and, from the 1970s onwards, progressive-minded bourgeoisie, would lead to these core electorates being at least partially geographically constrained, with certain *Länder* becoming ÖVP strongholds, while the SPÖ would retain control of Vienna and other major urban areas.

In few European countries have the “peasant” of yesteryear, the “farmer” of today, and the timeless “conservative”, in alternating hues of political Catholicism and fading *Christlich-sozial* political doctrine been as intertwined as in Austria. The green, mountainous countryside of the Alpine state is the backbone of its historical conservative movement, and agrarian policies have been at the core of the movement's identity and of its internal power dynamics from its foundational years, over a century ago. Modern-day Austrian conservatism saw its first iteration upon the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishment of the new Republic. From that time, it was intrinsically linked to the Catholic Church and religion, first as a *stricto sensu* ideological guide and institutional patron, then as a *lato sensu* broader, ideological and identitarian marker.

It was in late-19th century Carinthia and Styria that the first farmers' associations in modern-day Austria were formed, both of which still exist as regional branches

of the *Bauernbund*. These were heavily influenced by local Catholic politicians wary of the growing influence of liberalism, both economic and social, and its adverse impacts on farmers' livelihoods and in the preservation of Catholic education and institutions.⁹ Already in the First Republic, these local *Bauernbunden* worked in tandem with the CVP, the ÖVP's predecessor in the Catholic-conservative camp. Suppressed under the Nazi regime, the farmers' associations were reestablished after 1945 by, among others, future Chancellor Leopold Figl, under the national umbrella of the *Österreichischer Bauernbund*, now an official organisation of the newly-founded ÖVP.

The resurgence of the *Bauernbund* as a relevant actor was facilitated by the post-War structuring of Austrian society along heavily pillarised lines, and the establishment of the consociational democratic system that existed until the 1980s. Its existence did not imply an exclusivity in the rural vote by the Christian democrats. Groups of Social Democratic-voting farmers existed, as did a FPÖ electorate, albeit much smaller. Nevertheless, in public discourse, until the 1990s, being a farmer was almost seen as synonym with being an ÖVP voter. The stereotypical farmer with some political acumen and/or eager to be involved in the quintessentially Central European world of associative politics was a supporter or a member of the *Volkspartei*, a member of the *Bauernbund*, and an active participant in other Catholic and ÖVP-linked organisations.

Membership in the *Bauernbund* brought with it an important network, the opportunity to engage in agricultural politics directly, and a potential springboard into party politics at the core of the ÖVP. As of 2025, the farmers' organisation has 236,000 members, attesting to its lasting influence within the party and in the broader agricultural world.¹⁰ There is no *Bauernbund* without the ÖVP, and no ÖVP without the *Bauernbund* – or, at least, without the electorate it represents. To this day, the *Bauernbund*, alongside the ÖAAB, the ÖVP's trade union, and the *Österreichischer Wirtschaftsbund*, its entrepreneurial association, are considered to be the party's most influential organisations in policymaking and electoral weight.¹¹

Starting in the 1970s, the two-party system faced increased challenges, mostly attached to cultural and societal changes taking place in Austria and elsewhere in Western Europe. Secularisation, the weakening of the workers' movement and the rise of socio-political causes such as environmentalism – which were not contemplated by the traditional Austrian political spectrum – are some of these factors. There was, moreover, a growing disillusionment with the dominance of the two parties and the *Proporz* system, whose democratic credentials and degree of transparency were questioned by a new generation of political figures on the

left and the right.¹² The 1970s were a pivotal decade for the beginning of the dismantling of Austria's *de facto* two-party system, which would culminate in a gradual but convoluted depillarisation and, almost two decades later, the elevation of the FPÖ into major party status and the creation of a (quasi-)three party system.

Austrian politics in the 1970s were largely dominated by the Social Democrats, as the party enjoyed high popularity under the leadership of Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. Kreisky can be credited as having heralded the end of the pillarisation system, not least due to his own disregard for well-established consociational traditions that had been heretofore followed.¹³ While Kreisky never reneged on the *Proporz* system altogether, he was much less welcoming of the ÖVP's participation in either government or high-level decision-making during his Chancellorship. Paradoxically, it was during the 1970s and 1980s that the two main parties' platforms became the closest to each other. The ÖVP in particular, facing an increasingly secular and urbanised electorate, sought to distance itself from the negative impacts of the Waldheim affair, when Kurt Waldheim, a former president and secretary-general of the United Nations, was revealed to have served in the German army during the Second World War. The party abandoned certain aspects of the pronounced Catholic-conservative ideological core of the Figl-Raab era of the 1940s and 1950s. As a result, a much stronger convergence on social and cultural matters existed between the SPÖ and the ÖVP in the late 1980s than it did in the 1950s.

Kreisky's relations with the FPÖ were much more positive. The FPÖ of the 1970s and 1980s had abandoned much of the pan-Germanism of its initial years, having adopted, instead, a platform focused on economic liberalism and individual liberty promoted by its most notable leaders at the time, Friedrich Peter and Norbert Steger.¹⁴ This proximity came at the cost of major criticism by the ÖVP and a political scandal – one of many in 1970s and 1980s Austria – involving the wartime involvement of leading FPÖ members, including Peter himself, in Nazi and Nazi-affiliated organisations.¹⁵ Kreisky's defence of the FPÖ would be institutionally consolidated by his successor, fellow Social Democrat Fred Sinowatz, who invited the FPÖ into a coalition, with Steger serving as Vice-Chancellor. This Red-Blue dynamic continued until 1989, in the first months of Franz Vranitzky's Chancellorship, after which the Social Democrat decided to revert to the classic grand coalition format with the ÖVP. The FPÖ's role in Sinowatz's government – and in the early days of Vranitzky's – had remained marginal, however, not least due to its single-digit electoral performances.¹⁶

By the end of the 1980s, there was considerable dissatisfaction with the consociational, two-party political system. The SPÖ and the ÖVP were considered too entrenched, too established, and too similar to each other to offer any meaningful answers to new, evermore complex problems facing Austrian society. Loyalty thereto, already on a downward trend, was eroded alongside the pillar system, with voters shifting to the so-called third or fourth parties, i.e. the FPÖ and the Greens. This shift was particularly dramatic on the right – specifically to the detriment of the ÖVP – for two reasons. Firstly, the SPÖ benefited from the high popularity Chancellor Vranitzky enjoyed during his first years in office in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and his skilful mediation between the interests of centrist and left-leaning Social Democratic voters.¹⁷ Secondly, in the late-1980s the FPÖ underwent a major rightward shift in its political platform and identity, motivated by the return to the leadership of its nationalist wing in the figure of a young politician from the Southern *Land* of Carinthia: Jörg Haider.

From Third Party to First

Haider's leadership closed a chapter of national liberalism in the history of the FPÖ that had been championed, among others, by his predecessor, former Vice-Chancellor Norbert Steger. The party's new platform, heavy in a kind of nation-based or outright nationalistic language not seen in Austrian politics in at least three decades, focused on issues such as migration, culture and security rather than economics or individual liberties.¹⁸ Haider thus broadened the party's appeal to an unrepresented electorate, namely those to the right of the ÖVP, many of whom had felt alienated by the perceived lack of interest in such topics by the FPÖ of Steger and his immediate predecessors. The Carinthian's success was immediate: within months of his leadership, the FPÖ nearly doubled its vote share in the National elections, albeit returning to the opposition as Vranitzky refused to work with a more nationalistic FPÖ. Less than three years later, the FPÖ achieved unprecedented success in the elections for the Carinthian *Landtag*, securing a narrow majority with the ÖVP. Carinthia, despite still using *Proporz* rules for the composition of the cabinet at the time, reserved to the *Landtag* the right to elect – and depose – the *Landeshauptmann* by simple majority. With an agreement reached, Haider was inaugurated as the FPÖ's first-ever *Landeshauptmann*.

Under Haider, the FPÖ established itself as a stable third force in the Austrian political system, at both Federal and *Landtag* level, decisively ending the decades-long *de facto* duopoly of primacy of the SPÖ and the ÖVP. For the first time since its foundation, the FPÖ was able to lay claim to a *Landeshauptmann* seat, namely

that of Carinthia, first held by Jörg Haider between 1989 and 1991 thanks to a coalition agreement with the ÖVP.¹⁹ Haider's accession to executive power, even if at the subnational level at the head of a right-wing coalition, attests to the level of competition being faced by the ÖVP, which, for the first time since the 1950s, was outflanked from the right. This would strongly reflect on the ÖVP's own platform over the next decades, reverting the centre-ward course the party had taken since the 1970s. The 1990s thus marked the end of Austria as a two-party system, and the inauguration of a (quasi) three-party configuration. The FPÖ, formerly a minor third party, was elevated into major party status, being for the first time in a position to compete with the two established parties for the Chancellorship – or, at least, for the symbolic status of first party.

Haider's first tenure in Klagenfurt lasted only a few months. Several scandals over the FPÖ leader's controversial declarations, many of which revolved around Austria's Nazi past, led to a break with the ÖVP and a vote of no confidence supported by the two main parties, who ushered in the moderate Christian Democrat Christoph Zernatto as his successor. As the ties between the two forces of the Austrian right had hit a low point in Carinthia, Haider was once again trampolined onto Federal politics, at a time when conditions were ripe for him to consolidate his profile as a major political figure. Throughout the decade, the FPÖ increased its vote share from 9.7% in 1986 – Haider's first election as party leader – to over 22% in 1999.²⁰ Haider's rise in popularity was constantly marred in similar controversies to those that cost him his first mandate as Carinthian *Landeshauptmann*, which, although not harming his electoral standings, did little to present the FPÖ as an "acceptable" coalition partner. It would only be in 1999, when the party overtook the ÖVP as the largest party on the right, that Haider was called to be a part of the Federal government – a decision that was met with strong resistance by much of the mainstream Austrian political world.

By convention, Haider should have been the one nominated to the Chancellorship, as the FPÖ had surpassed the ÖVP, even if by the smallest of margins. The Carinthian politician's rhetorical choices, past controversies and (at the time) disruptive political platform, however, denied the needed *Salonfähigkeit* not only to Haider himself, but to the entirety of the FPÖ. The mere fact that the ÖVP had accepted to form a coalition of the right – known as a Black-Blue coalition, due to the parties' traditional colours – rather than a grand coalition, or one that would uphold a political firewall, represented a major political change. The ÖVP's decision strongly contributed to the attaining of further *Salonfähigkeit* by the FPÖ, as its participation in a coalition led by an authoritative figure of the mainstream

conservative world granted it a certain degree of political legitimacy in the eyes of the mainstream conservative electorate.

That is not to say that post-Schüssel, the party has attained complete *Salonfähigkeit*. The events that followed the formation of the Schüssel government, including the split in the FPÖ, Haider's departure from the party to found his own Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), and the FPÖ's relegation to the opposition as the BZÖ took its place in the coalition, represented important setbacks for the party. Both the FPÖ and the BZÖ suffered from *Salonfähigkeit*-related issues, the former for its history and leadership, the latter exclusively due to Haider. The Carinthian himself would not join the Federal government in either of its iterations, having returned to Klagenfurt to serve as *Landeshauptmann* in 1999 – a position he held in coalition with the ÖVP until his death in a car accident in 2008.

The participation of the two parties in the ruling coalition would mark a watershed moment for the Austrian right. In hindsight, Schüssel's decision to welcome the FPÖ into the coalition would not only allow for the party's recognition as *Salonfähig* two decades later but also mainstream its heretofore disruptive platform – with consequences for both the Freedom Party and the ÖVP. Haider's BZÖ did not outlive its most well-known leader and soon faded into the obscurity reserved to personalistic parties that outlive their founders. The FPÖ, weakened by the split, embarked on a period of internal reforms, maintaining and consolidating the nationalistic vision of its erstwhile leader, albeit with some adjustments that would make it fit for the new decade. Despite the setbacks caused by Haider's departure, the party had crossed a threshold of relevance and, most importantly, tapped onto a theretofore unrepresented electorate. Right-wing politics built around a national idea, even if not yet *salonfähig*, had become politically mainstream. Following an interregnum, the FPÖ chose the Viennese Heinz-Christian Strache as Haider's successor.

A charismatic young politician, similar to Haider in background if not in style, Strache sought to reunite the party following the conflicts of the late-Haider era and regain its lost electorate. The new leader's background as a member of an openly pan-Germanic *Burschenschaft* – a type of traditional Austrian and German student society – as well as his penchant for controversial statements led to similar concerns and accusations being raised against him as they were under his Carinthian predecessor. For most of his career, Strache was not concerned with *Salonfähigkeit*, but rather with regaining Haider's electorate. In the aftermath of the 2015 migration crisis, much of the FPÖ's platform on migration and security, once regarded as a taboo, was adopted by the ÖVP's new leader, Sebastian Kurz.

On certain aspects, the two parties' platforms were similar to the point of Strache accusing Kurz and the ÖVP of plagiarism during the 2017 electoral campaign. Regardless of the FPÖ's accusations, Kurz's strategy was successful. Having become the ÖVP's Federal Secretary when the party was polling in third place behind, respectively, the FPÖ and the SPÖ, Kurz succeeded in regaining the ÖVP's primacy in the right and winning the election. As expected, his first choice was for a coalition with the FPÖ – a choice that, although still controversial, raised significantly fewer concerns than it did nearly two decades before. The coalition would remain in place until 2019, when a political scandal involving Strache, other leading FPÖ members, and a man pretending to be a Russian oligarch would lead to the fall of the government and its replacement for a Black-Green coalition, still led by Kurz.

The adoption of much of the FPÖ's programme into the ÖVP's by Kurz put the former into a paradoxical situation. Cooperation with the party remained the object of much resistance from the Austrian political mainstream, including centrists within the ÖVP, as will be seen in the next section. Concurrently, the party's ideas, including those which were considered among its most controversial in decades past, such as heavy restrictions on migration, had gained wide societal acceptance, not least due to a greater acknowledgement of the negative impacts of mass migration to public and national security. The FPÖ's lack of *Salonfähigkeit* in the 2010s could be mostly attributed to two points, one of which would be gradually eroded throughout the first half of the 2020s, while the other would be accentuated. Firstly, the FPÖ retained much of the "negative" legacy associated with the Haider era – and with Strache himself – that associates the party with right-wing extremism and, indirectly, with the Nazi era.

The strengthening of an ÖVP that all but incorporates the FPÖ's platform into its own while providing it with "mainstream" credibility of an established party further proves the detachment between the present-day conditions for *Salonfähigkeit* imposed on the party and its actual platform. Secondly, notwithstanding the relative similarity in propositions during the Kurz era, the FPÖ still employed a much more aggressive rhetoric, which is part of its *modus operandi* as a populist party. This trend, initiated by Haider, has continued under Strache and under present leader Herbert Kickl, who is regarded by most Austrian politicians and voters alike as rigidly and uncompromisingly ideological and less "palatable" to moderate, *Salonfähigkeit*-conscious voters than even Strache himself. Nevertheless, a so-called moderate wing within the party has existed since the 1990s, differentiating itself from the party leadership moreso by virtue of its discourse than of its platform. Ironically, it would be the recentring of the ÖVP

under Chancellor Karl Nehammer and the prominence of *Land*-level “moderates” within the FPÖ that would contribute, in part, to its legitimisation at the subnational level, not least due to heavy vote transfers.

A New Colour Palette

The “Black-Blue” coalition would only attain *Salonfähigkeit* in Austrian public consciousness in the early 2020s. The political *cordon sanitaire* against the FPÖ was broken in the 2000s by Schüssel, and much of the party’s ideology was, to a degree, “mainstreamed” during Kurz’s first term. On both occasions, however, the FPÖ’s participation in government was marred by either political instability and infighting – during the Schüssel years – and political scandals involving high-ranking cabinet members – during Kurz’s Chancellorship. This contributed to a culture of continued resistance in the ÖVP *Länder* to engage with the FPÖ as a potential coalition partner. Exceptions to this rule existed, though mostly motivated by *Proporz* rules, such as in the cases of Upper and Lower Austria.²¹ Other cases of Black-Blue coalitions at the *Land* level, such as the late-20th century Vorarlberg arrangements, were motivated by more local than national-level factors – in this particular case, a long track record of cooperation even under the FPÖ’s predecessor party, and the ÖVP’s dominant role in the coalition arrangement.²²

An analysis of recent political developments in Salzburg, a historically conservative *Land* dominated by a centrist-oriented branch of the ÖVP with no track record of cooperation with the FPÖ, corroborates this hypothesis. Salzburg held *Landtag* elections in 2023, at a time when the FPÖ’s nationwide and *Land*-level polling numbers were at historic highs and its participation in the ruling coalition was no longer a taboo. Just one year later, an ÖVP-FPÖ agreement would be struck in Vorarlberg and the FPÖ would claim for the second time in its history a *Landeshauptmann* role, after a decisive election victory in Styria. The events in Salzburg are of particular relevance for the understanding of the mainstreaming – or, rather, the gaining of *Salonfähigkeit* – by the FPÖ as they precede the Vorarlberg and Styria elections by around one year. Furthermore, Salzburg’s political culture is rooted in a socioeconomic structure observed as early as the first post-War period – and later consolidated by the second post-War pillarisation – that led to the *Land* being dominated by the ÖVP until recent decades, thus making it an even more interesting case study in the FPÖ’s role, endogenous and exogenous perception in the present decade.²³

Salzburg was historically a mostly rural *Land*, apart from its namesake capital, and in both urban and rural settings, a stronghold of political Catholicism. The ÖVP has won every *Landtag* election in Salzburg since the restoration of democracy. Concurrently, the local section of the ÖVP has historically been more aligned with a classical, centre-leaning Catholic-inspired interpretation of Christian democracy than with the rightward turns of Schüssel and Kurz. The State party's centrist course was preserved even in defiance of the Federal line in the late 2010s, favoured by its leader, Wilfried Haslauer junior, who has served as *Landeshauptmann* since 2013.²⁴ Haslauer, a scion of an important political family of Christian democratic traditions, rejected the possibility of forming a Black-Blue coalition in the Landtag in 2018, opting instead for a three-party government with the Greens and Neos. His decision at the time was perceived as a repudiation of then-Chancellor Kurz's political course, in favour of the ÖVP's "traditional" preference for coalition partners to its left. Haslauer's justification was based on both ideological and pragmatic political calculations.

On the one hand, the *Landeshauptmann* feared alienating centrist voters, particularly those most influenced by the political and social thought of the erstwhile Catholic pillar. In the view heretofore held by most ÖVP leaders, those voters were ideologically closer to their traditional partners on the left than to any forces to their right.²⁵ The memories of Haider still lingered on, abetted by an equally strong, if differently nuanced, rhetoric by the modern FPÖ. In a State with a strong rural vocation, where the ÖVP's strength is closely linked to the activity of the local *Bauernbund* – that most Catholic, most "old-style conservative" of all *Teilorganisationen*. On the other hand, ÖVP *Landeshauptleute*, albeit generally maintaining a positive relationship to the Federal party, tend to be keen to both draw a political line between Vienna and the State capitals. This allows them to both preserve their influence within their *Land* and exert it at the Federal level, where, due to the ÖVP's internal structure, State-level parties are granted significant power. Haslauer's rationale for a tripartite, centre-gazing coalition was thus as much a product of his own perception of *Salonfähigkeit* as it was of multi-level party-political calculations.

Haslauer is, in many ways, the archetypal ÖVP *Landeshauptmann*. A centre-right politician with a notable Catholic background, a long-time party members and activist in one of the *Teilorganisationen* and a more moderate rhetoric and outlook than those of the party's Parliamentary club in Vienna. As is typical for the party, he is also a pragmatist. For a *Volkspartei*, a stance in the centre is often less a consequence of a concise ideological formulation than it is of a desire to appeal to a broad church. Nevertheless, the principles of *Salonfähigkeit* remain relevant, as

any association with parties outside the *cordon sanitaire* might alienate the large moderate electoral camp. As the two main parties grew ideologically closer over the course of the 20th century, vote transfers on this basis became a more realistic prospect for centrist voters and can be said to have remained so until at least the 2010s.

The reforms undergone during Kurz's leadership, the party's widest in decades, covering ideology, aesthetics, and political strategy, led to a return to a more right-wing course to the ÖVP – a path that was eventually watered down by Nehammer and Stocker, though retaining the hard core thereof. These reforms would ultimately facilitate a *rapprochement* with the FPÖ, first at the national level and, since the early 2020s, at the *Land* level. The ÖVP's reforms were carried out in a top-down manner, with effects being felt at the subnational level only years after the first Black-Blue coalition. What resulted therefrom was a *de facto* "two-speed" ÖVP, with the Federal party willing to work with the FPÖ, with its State-level, more centre-oriented branches still perceiving the party as falling outside the limits of *Salonfähigkeit*. This "two-speed" arrangement would only end in the 2020s, when the first Black-Blue coalitions would take shape.

Salzburg was a lodestar in this process. The 2023 elections delivered a much different *Landtag* from the outgoing one. The FPÖ obtained historically high results, winning over 25% of the votes and 10 seats in the 36-seat *Landtag*, only two less than the historically dominant ÖVP. The Social Democrats obtained seven seats. Amongst Haslauer's former coalition partners, the Greens retained their three seats, while Neos failed to cross the threshold to enter the *Landtag*. Conversely, the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) entered the *Landtag* with four seats. Haslauer's coalition options were much more limited than in 2018. Working with the KPÖ would be unacceptable for most ÖVP voters and would likely generate strong reactions from the *Teilorganisationen* membership. The only possible majorities would thus be a Grand Coalition (with possible support from the Greens) or an unprecedented coalition with the FPÖ. Haslauer's choice for the latter marked a break with his own previous commitment not to work with the party and with the ÖVP's established practice at the State level.

In justifying his decision, the *Landeshauptmann* claimed he originally had "other plans" for the coalition, which was to also include the SPÖ – an idea that is reminiscent of the days of *Proporz*.²⁶ Haslauer's project ultimately failed due to internal turmoil within the Social Democrats, and the *Landeshauptmann* opted for a two-way, ÖVP-FPÖ coalition instead. In different circumstances, this could have been interpreted as merely pragmatic coalition-building. The fact that the decision was taken by Haslauer, a representative of the centrist wing of the ÖVP who had

previously been vocal in his opposition to work with the FPÖ even as the two parties governed together in Vienna at a time when the FPÖ was already led by Kickl, showcases the party's newly gained *Salonfähigkeit*. The FPÖ was made *Salonfähig*, if not for its ideology, at least for the democratic weight it now carries.

This can be interpreted as a legacy of Austria's post-War consociationalism, as it recognises the FPÖ's legitimacy and the need to address its voters' concerns – rather than a common programme, which was only subsequently built – as the reason for its incorporation into the coalition.²⁷ Haslauer's decision was mimicked one year later by another long-time ÖVP *Landeshauptmann*, Vorarlberg's Markus Wallner, who entered into a coalition with the FPÖ following five years of Black-Green government. Wallner justified his move in similar, consociationalist lines, while adding that Vorarlberg's FPÖ was "different" than the Federal one – implying a more moderate, *Salonfähig* party – with which, however, Wallner is only negotiating in his fourth mandate at the helm of the State.²⁸ It was thus not any significant shift in the ÖVP's ideology in Salzburg that led to the coalition with the FPÖ. The party's leadership remain centrist, if somewhat more aligned with the post-Kurz ideological framework. It was, rather, a legacy of consociationalism, through which it would be less acceptable to *not* include the party in talks than to do so.

Perhaps more than at any point since Haider's departure from the party, the political futures of the FPÖ and that of the ÖVP are intrinsically tied. Nearly eighty years after its founding, the People's Party is perceived by much of its electorate as a centre-right party in search of an identity. From a Catholic party, the ÖVP became a Christian democratic party in the 1950s, then a loosely-defined "Christian-social" party from the 1980s onwards, claiming Christian democracy more as a historical legacy than as a coherent ideological basis. During and in the immediate aftermath of the Kurz era, the ÖVP was associated with the image of an "FPÖ-lite", seeking to replicate the Freedom Party's success through the coopting of parts of its platform while preserving key aspects of its more centrist character, such as its approach to the EU and its orthodox economic policy. The ÖVP of the 2020s finds itself torn between an electorate that shift towards the right and the need to appeal to a legacy group of moderate voters who are sensitive to any drastic shifts from the party's historically moderate course. As Stocker rejects a coalition of the right and pushes for an old-style centrist formula, the ÖVP risks further eroding its conservative electorate – and, as a consequence, the party's leadership itself becomes susceptible to rightward changes.

Concurrently, the FPÖ is an ideologically cohesive party, albeit one prone to controversy and isolation due to either political positions or rhetorical choices.

Even in case of a change in leadership in favour of a member of the party's more "moderate", *Land*-based wing – as was the case during the brief, interim leadership of Norbert Hofer, in between the Strache and Kickl periods – the party is unlikely to suffer major losses. Rather, under a more rhetorically moderate leader, the FPÖ might be able to expand its appeal to a more *Salonfähigkeit*-conscious electorate that is now accepting of the party but remains resistant of its present-day leadership. What is certain is that the FPÖ can be considered to have mostly attained *salonfähigkeit*, if not by a moderation of its own policies, then by the mainstreaming thereof by the ÖVP and by the Freedom Party's own growth – which, in a political culture shaped by *Proporz*, plays a much stronger role than it an average European polity. The consequences for both the FPÖ and for Austrian conservatism are far and wide.



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