

Austria and German leaders pull different ways on refugee crisis

After the victory of Sebastian Kurz of Austrian People's Party in legislative elections on October 15, German Chancellor Angela Merkel of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has to prepare for a changed dynamic in neighborly relations.

Although the two parties belong to the same European Union party, Kurz, the 31-year-old minister for foreign affairs, Chancellor-designate of Austria and Merkel, the longest-serving incumbent head of government in the European Union, have different plans about the Europe's future, especially over managing and trying to resolve the migrant crisis in the region.

The European refugee crisis that began in 2015 has raised concerns in many countries about its negative impact on national security and economic growth. Such concerns can be used to mobilize voters and influence their decision before elections.

Kurz rode on a clear, direct migration policy to taste electoral success, bringing a new viewpoint to national politics.

Although the European Union is struggling to cope with the crisis, member states have not been able to agree on an integrated plan to resolve it. Since 2015, more than 130,000 people assigned for first time asylum application in Austria need immediate help. Many immigrants are taking advantage of the less-than-perfect European immigration policy and continually exploiting opportunities offered by the Austrian social system that does not give them an opportunity for integrating into the society or labor market.

It is for this reason that Kurz has stood up for limiting the number of migrants and drastic cut in financial support that they receive. He said all asylum seekers can only get a subsidy of 560 euros (\$662) per month, and those living in the country for five years, with at least one year work experience, can be allowed to have full access to the social system.

Austria also plans to close the Western Balkan route through which more than

760,000 people reached Europe's borders and made their way to Western countries in 2015. They want to send soldiers and police officers to the Greek-Macedonian border so as to prevent migrants from taking the dangerous route.

The young politician's policy on illegal migrants and the Western Balkan route has been remarkable. His actions took Austria closer to the line followed by Visegrad Group countries (Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland) on the refugee crisis. It is unlike Merkel's stance that triggered resistance not only in European parties, but also within her ruling coalition. After Merkel's CDU and its counterpart the Christian Social Union (CSU) won the German election in September, she will remain chancellor for the next four years.

Social Democratic Party (SDU) rejected the offer to be part of the coalition, and left no option for CDU other than holding talks for a new government with the Free Democratic Party and the Greens party, named "Jamaica Coalition" after the Caribbean Island's flag that has similar colors.

Negotiations have started and could drag on before a new German government is formed. The parties differ not only over economic policies, but also have divergent viewpoints over the migration issue. They need to clarify certain questions and make compromises to come to an agreement.

Many politicians think that Merkel's policy of welcoming refugees has failed. But she still believes the problem needs to be solved by the EU and every member state should share the refugee burden.

Merkel does not really support the idea of closing European borders or sending refugees back to their original country. Although, under CSU pressure, she had to agree on the maximum number of refugees that can come to Germany every year.

Meanwhile, Austria's new chancellor-candidate also has to face the challenges of coalition building. The Social Democratic Party of Austria has refused to be part of the coalition.

It may be possible that the winning party set up a new government with the Freedom Party of Austria, which has been in the third place in the last legislative election. With this, Kurz would push his party more rightward or govern in minority.

In either case, Kurz's winning in the Austrian elections is already lending a huge momentum to a changing Europe.

The author is a Jinrong Scholar at the BFSU Research Center of the United Nations and International Organizations. opinion@globaltimes.com.cn

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