

Austria's election is further evidence that Europe is turning right

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Another election in Europe and another strong result for right-wing parties. This time, and coming less than one month after the election in Germany delivered an unexpectedly strong result for the hard right, it was the turn of the Austrians to drift even further in that direction.

Combined, the centre-right Austrian People's Party and hard right Austrian Freedom Party won support from nearly half of voters, introducing the very real prospect of a coalition between the two.

It was unclear whether the centre-left Social Democrats had managed to finish in second and avoid the humiliation of trailing a hard right party that has long been associated with xenophobia, neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism, as only one percentage point separated them.

Rather than be seen in isolation, this election should instead be viewed as giving us further evidence of Europe's rightward drift.

The new chancellor of Austria will be 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, whose recipe for success included emulating the hard right on a range of issues. He and the centre-right talked of slashing benefits for migrants, closing Islamic kindergartens and banning foreign funding for mosques.

His party has already overseen a controversial new ban on the burqa. Kurz also flexed his right-wing credentials on the more specific issue of the refugee crisis, sending the army to help police Austria's southern border with Italy and calling on the EU to strengthen its external border and do more to stop NGOs from rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean.

There is no doubt that the refugee crisis created a favourable climate for the centre and radical right. At Chatham House, we surveyed voters across Europe and found that Austrians consider the handling of the refugee crisis to be the

greatest failure of the European Union.

The result should challenge the conventional wisdom about support for Europe's hard right: the Freedom Party appears once again to have drawn much of its support from men under 30 who have not gone to university. Earlier this year, in France, Marine Le Pen was similarly popular among the under-40s – facts that reveal how the staying power of populism is perhaps stronger than some anticipate.

Nor is Kurz the only politician to be flirting openly with the hard right.

Earlier this year in the Netherlands the conservative-liberal Marc Rutte urged migrants and newcomers to “act normal or go away” in a move that was widely seen as an attempt to stem the rise of Geert Wilders.

Liberal Sweden overhauled its stance on the refugee issue partly in response to the rise of the nationalist Sweden Democrats party, while the EU at large is revising its entire strategy, a move that is seen by Hungary's Viktor Orbán and other ultra-conservatives as evidence that they have won the argument.

These examples are backed up by systematic evidence. According to a recent study in political science, since 1980 both Europe's mainstream right and left have drifted to the right and largely in response to the rise of the populist right.

For this reason, though Austria will dominate this week's headlines, it is distinctly unlikely to be the last case of a European state moving further to the right.

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