

SPEAKING TO BOTH SIDES

CAN A GREEN MESSAGE RESONATE IN TOWN AND COUNTRY?

AN INTERVIEW WITH
SILVIA NOSSEK
BY **GEORG MAIßER**

Vienna's district of Währing offers idyllic countryside to the west and the vibrancy of the city to the east. Its chairperson, Green politician Silvia Nossek, won her seat with the promise to reduce traffic and introduce parking fees, an agenda which appealed to urban parts of her constituency but was fiercely opposed in the more remote parts. Such tensions are emblematic of the immense challenge facing Greens – of putting forward an agenda for both town and country.

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This interview is available in its original language (German) on the Green European Journal website.

**DIE GRÜNEN
HABEN KEIN
LEBENSMODELL
FÜR DEN LÄNDLICHEN RAUM**

Als grüne Bezirksvorsteherin von Währing, dem 18. Wiener Gemeindebezirk, ist Silvia Nossek ebenso für urbanen StadtbewohnerInnen zuständig wie für jene Menschen, die bereits „wie am Land“ leben, inklusive Einfamilienhaus und Auto vor der Tür.

GEORG MAIßER: What makes the Green approach to local politics distinctive?

SILVIA NOSSEK: The Green approach to politics consists above all in articulating something which is clear to most people already, yet which remains an uncomfortable truth: that carrying on as we have done up to now is not an option. And the necessary transformation in the way we live, the way we produce things, and the way we consume cannot be carried out – or cannot only be carried out – at the national and international level, but also has to occur at the level of local politics.

In my day-to-day activities, I find it helpful to hold on to the clear objective of making our society ecologically and socially sustainable – so that a good life is possible for everyone, now and in the future.

I am continually astounded in my everyday work by the passions aroused by issues connected with cars and parking spaces, and how deeply every bit of public space clawed back – for environmentally-friendly transport, for tree-planting, or as shared space for everyone –

is resented by many people as a restriction on their personal freedom and an interference in their right to live how they want. It's only possible to make the right decisions in such cases with an appreciation of sustainability and of the right of all people, including children and older people, to mobility.

Why is it that even in your district the Greens are more successful in the urban parts than in the rural parts? Why do Greens seem to have such difficulty appealing to the inhabitants of rural areas?

SILVIA NOSSEK: There are of course striking structural differences. The city centre part of Währing has a better local supply system, and much better public transport facilities – it is easy to live without a car there. At the same time, the density of development produces a demand for public spaces and an acute awareness of how these are threatened by the car.

Conversely, the people at the periphery of the district are much more dependent on their cars – and because of the patterns of development and settlement, and because of the many private gardens, they are far less interested in public spaces.

The green lifestyle we propose meets the needs of the inner city, but we have not yet developed an attractive Green story for the countryside.

To take only one example: the overall energy consumption for an average Vienna apartment with only standard energy-saving technology is considerably lower than that of any family *Passivhaus* [low-energy 'passive house'] in the country. In rural areas, the way buildings are currently constructed, the way retail infrastructure is designed, the way mobility is organised – none of this is compatible with a sustainable lifestyle. And it is hardly possible to deal with this at the individual level; instead, fundamental structural changes are needed.

So far we have not focused enough on this, and have failed to bring out the full implications in the public debate. One of the rare exceptions to this general rule is the new land use planning law drawn up by the Green Vice-Governor Astrid Rössler in Salzburg, which I see as a milestone indicating the path ahead. People in the countryside are starting to be worried about more and more land vanishing under concrete and roads. They see how their inner cities are being abandoned because the car-centred lifestyle is not compatible with these settlement patterns, often hundreds of years old. We are the party that says that change is necessary and for many people this is painful. But we have to show that the solutions we propose lead the way to something better.

Still, it seems as if the urban 'Bobos' (Bourgeois-bohemians) of Vienna, Madrid, London, Paris, and other large European capitals have more

in common with one another than with their compatriots who live in the countryside. Will the difference between town and country lead to a split in society?

SILVIA NOSSEK: What is important here – and what Greens have to lead the way on – is developing a new sense of solidarity, less upward aspiration, notwithstanding the desire for autonomy and emancipation, and instead an alliance between the middle and lower classes. In other words, a society with a collective sense of belonging, where responsibility is shared, decisions are taken together, and ultimately an understanding that our collective and individual well-being is interdependent.

And we should debate the question of an up-to-date and sustainable division of labour between the city and country: what are the different strengths of urban and rural economies, in what ways are they dependent on each other, what can they learn from each other, and so on. For example, the country can re-learn things from the city about a sharing culture: public transport, green spaces, swimming pools – all these things are used communally in the city, whereas the countryside idyll is based on having your own garden, your own swimming pool, your own car. Conversely, the country can teach the city about the importance of identity and belonging, especially in periods of change.

Are city dwellers more aware of the consequences of their own actions because living in permanent proximity to other people makes the dependence of the individual on society more evident? Or are there other explanations for the striking difference in voting patterns?

SILVIA NOSSEK: Rural areas have always had more conservative underlying structures – any kind of change there is resented as an imposition. And many people move to the country because they don't want to be in such close proximity to others – because there they can have their own house, their own garden, their own swimming pool. And of course their own car – at the cost of being dependent on it.

Another difficulty is that some policies or developments that are considered successful in rural areas are highly suspect from an ecological perspective – but of course still count as successes: automobility and road building, sprawling development on a regional scale, shopping centres and business parks on green-field sites, increasing concentration in the agricultural economy, winter tourism.

I think we Greens ought to be thinking about those structural elements and values of rural life to which we could make a positive connection – and there are a few that spring to mind: cooperatives, organic farming, civic volunteering and civic clubs and associations, etc.

How do you view the opposition between 'nature' and 'city'? Is it not peculiar that the Greens' dream is to bring 'nature' into the city? Why not simply live in the country in the first place, and let the city be a city, with all its negative attributes (such as noise, crowds and traffic)?

SILVIA NOSSEK: Well, I think it is a common error to automatically equate rural living with nature, peace and quiet, a more authentic way of life, and small-scale development. In the country you often get more traffic noise than in a courtyard garden in Vienna; honey from urban bees has far fewer pesticides than that of their rural cousins; there is greater biodiversity in the city; and it is much easier to get by without a car there.

From an ecological perspective, it would not be possible for the majority of people to live in the country given present economic structures; so it is the job of politics to safeguard the quality of life in the city – that everyone has a green space within easy reach, policies that take proper account of children and old people, areas of peace and tranquillity, and being able to sleep with the window open.

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Do you have the impression that as district chairperson you have altered your earlier position on some things? Do some Green notions turn out to be naïve and unrealistic when they come up against the reality of how 'other people' live?

SILVIA NOSSEK: It is naïve and unrealistic to assume that we can simply carry on as before and that somehow our lives and

those of our children and grandchildren will remain essentially unchanged. A fundamental change is going to take place – the question is only whether it is one that we actively manage or one that is inflicted on us. And climate change means that we don't have much time.

But at the same time, this transformation requires time and commitment: for some people, decisions that limit car mobility represent a massive intervention in their daily lives and in their life plans, and even in Vienna there are residential districts where it's hard to get by without your own car. The changeover will require innovation and investment in public infrastructure, and an expansion of the public transport system and of car-sharing schemes. And the transformation requires broad acceptance of the need for fundamental change. Firstly because at the moment food is

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being produced too cheaply to be healthy; secondly because housing can't be run as a free market if it is to be affordable for all; thirdly because mobility such as we have now costs the individual, and all of us, too much – and not only in financial terms; and finally because the way we produce, consume, and throw things away is destroying the foundations on which we live – and at some point there really will no longer be enough for everyone.

Knowing how urgently the change is needed, and at the same time knowing that it all requires time – that is the emotional tightrope that every Green politician has to walk.

Does the Green way of thinking have a particular affinity with local politics, as opposed to a regional or national orientation? Or, is it possible that the direct impact of local politics in people's lives demonstrates more readily the necessity of Green policies than at the other political levels, where the connections are often more abstract? To put it another way: Is the transformation of Mariahilfer Straße to a pedestrian area and the 365 euros annual season ticket for all public transport in Vienna more helpful for the Greens' electoral prospects than a new renewable energy law or Green policies on women? Or do you not see any real difference?

SILVIA NOSSEK: I don't see any real difference. What is important is to make the connections between policies at the different levels – we do far too little of that! For example: what is the connection between current legislation on rents and construction activity in Währing? National laws, regional laws, and the executive power on a district level all have to come together to make a real change, to invest more in social housing, and to lower rents. What duties and commitments do Vienna and Währing have under the Paris Climate Accord? How would the introduction of a European standard for reusable fruit and veg boxes reduce the amount of waste left behind at our street markets – and how much money would this save the district?

There is an intellectual trend at the moment of seeing cities as centres of resistance against globalisation, exploitative neoliberalism, and rising nationalism. To what extent do you think that is justified? Are cities a testbed of resistance where progressive politics can be developed and in which a post-national cosmopolitan identity could perhaps emerge? Or is that wishful thinking?

SILVIA NOSSEK: I can't see it. Frankfurt and Paris are currently fighting over who will inherit London's role as a financial centre, Wall Street is the epitome of unfettered capitalism, and the global competition between cities adds to that between countries. And yes, there is such a thing as a 'post-national cosmopolitan identity' – I was a management consultant for long enough to know that you can find it in every Master's course at the *Wirtschaftsuniversität* (Vienna University of Economics and Business) or in every international course of studies in all the cities of the world. However, I fail to see how it will result in resistance to the right-wing liberal mainstream.

So you don't believe in the city as a kind of laboratory where solutions for the whole country can be found? But wasn't the success of Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen in the cities a sign of the possibilities of a progressive majority there? Let us not forget Barcelona or Paris, the 'sanctuary cities' in the United States, or the resilient cities

fighting against climate change when national governments won't.

SILVIA NOSSEK: Yes, maybe. It's true that it's easier to create a communally-based and sustainable lifestyle for everyone in the city than it is in the country. Because sharing and communal use are intrinsic to the city. And because it is easier to create a living environment of short distances, local supply, and environmentally-friendly transport where the population and building density is higher. But even if it does prove possible to achieve a socio-ecological transition in the cities, they are still located within a wider environment that is right-wing and neoliberal. This was Vienna's experience already in 1930s Austria – and if there is a right-wing government in Austria after the elections to the National Council in October, one of its priorities will be the fight against a Vienna governed by a Red-Green coalition.

The political achievements of Red Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century are still legendary today. This time of socialist rule with a very transformative agenda on housing, education, and mobility has shaped the city right up to the present day. Would you say that what they were doing then was already 'Green' politics?

SILVIA NOSSEK: Of course, the politics of Red Vienna, seen from today's perspective, was in essence Green politics: the overarching goal for Red Vienna, too, was a good life for all.

A municipal infrastructure was created for the benefit of all in a comprehensive and consistent manner, from public transport and swimming pools and parks through to libraries, and such a vision of a participatory city remains a model for social and ecological policy. And the parallels can be taken further: equal educational opportunities for everyone; secularism as a policy principle; affordable, healthy housing for everyone; enlightenment and modernity as the foundations of society.

In a sense, Green politics is bringing the ideas of Red Vienna into the 21st century – and this means above all taking the ecological challenges seriously, as well as developing a concept of participation and of innovation more in keeping with the times.

If Greens had an absolute majority in Vienna's City Hall, what would they do differently?

SILVIA NOSSEK: We would use the city's status as the biggest housing owner in Europe to instigate an ecological offensive: thermal insulation for all municipal buildings, solar power plants on the roofs, green wall systems, rainwater harvesting, etc. The third runway for Vienna airport and the Lobau motorway would be binned as projects that are not fit for the challenges of the future. There would be substantially more innovation and investment in public transport and a policy push in favour of local shops, artisans, and the repair economy,

as well as innovations in commercial transport. We would have a far bolder education policy and take substantially more radical steps towards decarbonisation.



SILVIA NOSSEK

was born in the rural village of Schönborn. She studied Mathematics and History in Vienna, where she started her political work with the Austrian Green Party in the district of Währing. From 2009 until 2012, she was spokesperson of the Green Party in Vienna. In 2015, she led the Green Party to victory in the communal elections and subsequently became district chairperson.



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