

Investing in the Climate: The Austrian Greens in Coalition

Article by Sigrid Maurer

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Since January 2020, the Austrian Greens have, for the first time, been part of the national government as a coalition partner of the Conservatives. Although this partnership and the legacy of the previous government's corruption scandals have raised difficult questions, the Greens have continued to pursue their vision for a clean environment and politics. We asked Sigrid Maurer, Green Member of the Parliament, what its coalition with the Conservatives means, how the party has managed to stay on course, and what lies ahead for the party.

This interview is part of a series that we are publishing in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: The pandemic and the economic recovery are currently making headlines, but what other issues are in the spotlight in Austria? How are you, as Greens in government, addressing them?

Sigrid Maurer: The health crisis, combined with the global economic crisis and the employment crisis, is clearly the defining issue here in Austria. But in our management of this crisis, we haven't lost sight of the other major issue for which no vaccine exists: climate change. Therefore, the steps we've taken in the battle against the pandemic also tackle the climate crisis. We have made sure to exceed the climate targets set out in the EU recovery plan created investment premiums with environmental incentives, and put together a package that enables municipalities to make environmental investments. With our investment policy, we have not only fought the pandemic but strengthened the economy, averted an employment crisis, and ensured greater climate protection. We care deeply about all of these issues and are working to create links between them and tackle them holistically.

Can you always count on the cooperation of your coalition partner?

Obviously, we are in a coalition [with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)], not a single-party majority government. Our goals are stated very clearly in the government programme and include climate neutrality by 2040. Our coalition partner might grumble about this commitment, but it can't get out of it.

We have already implemented a range of measures. For example, we have adopted the largest ever railway expansion package and mobilised several billion euros for climate protection. There's a lot more in the pipeline, including the introduction of a country-wide public transport pass for only 1095 euros a year. This is a milestone; it encourages more people to use public transport and makes it affordable to do so.

In autumn, we will vote on an eco-social tax reform to be implemented in spring 2022. The first phase is already underway, for example with the greening of the standard fuel consumption tax (NoVA)¹: the more environmentally friendly the car, the lower the tax. The point is to integrate an environmental component into the tax system. Climate-damaging behaviour becomes more expensive and climate-friendly behaviour is rewarded. This tax reform is the linchpin of the environmental turnaround. Even [Austrian Chancellor] Sebastian Kurz knows that eco-social tax reform is inevitable.

Austrian politics has been repeatedly hit by corruption and other scandals, some of which have involved members of previous governments. We want to change that: the Greens were elected on a joint platform of a clean environment and clean politics. This means we also want to make progress on party funding and the abolition of official secrecy. These are central issues on our agenda.

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But what about other areas? Let's take the example of asylum and migration policy. Your coalition partner has a completely different perspective and wishes to keep Austria's borders closed. Are these responsibilities just regarded as separate? In other words, the Greens take care of the climate, and the Conservatives can do whatever they like in their areas of responsibility?

Within the Federal Government and in Parliament, everything is always decided jointly, but we have agreed on significant room for manoeuvre within each department. This freedom is essential – for instance so our climate protection minister Leonore Gewessler can put in place the types of significant measures mentioned earlier. And also within the justice sector, where it is helping us protect the ongoing investigations into the Ibiza affair.² But of course, it also means that the ÖVP has a lot of freedom of action within its departments. This is most obvious in the Council of the EU, where the appointed minister represents the Austrian position. There we see our coalition partners shifting uncomfortably in their seats when the Council criticises Orbán's position or expressing positions on migration issues that have not been agreed upon within the coalition. This leads to a lot of internal discussion. We Greens, meanwhile, worked hard to block the climate-hostile EU Mercosur free trade deal, and often open European doors to far-reaching environmental decisions.

It is clear, however, that for any decision to pass through the national parliament, the consent of both coalition partners is required. This means our coalition partner cannot simply tighten up asylum legislation, but also that we are not able to introduce the *Lieferkettengesetz* – an act creating a due diligence framework for companies along their supply chain – by ourselves.

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Classic green themes are being enthusiastically adopted by other political parties. We only have to look at Bavaria, where conservative Minister-President Markus Söder is literally hugging trees on his posters. How is it in Austria: have green issues now also been taken up by other parties?

Other parties have been trying to slip on a green disguise for a long time - the Social Democrats in particular. But this is totally implausible. The Social Democrats have been in all sorts of government constellations for the last 30 years and have made absolutely no progress on climate change. Now they're pretending to be greener than the Greens. In Austria we have a saying: "If you can go to the master blacksmith, why go to the apprentice?" If you need something doing, go to the experts. The Greens are the only party that is reliable on climate protection, and the voters know that.

Climate change has become such a major issue that political parties can no longer avoid it. They have all finally recognised that something needs to be done. The only question is, are they up to the magnitude of the task? The New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS), for example, are only willing to discuss climate protection measures that are good for the economy. But as soon as it comes to structural measures that make climate-damaging behaviour more expensive and climate-friendly behaviour cheaper, they're nowhere to be found.

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Moving from domestic to European policy: are you on the same page as your coalition partners when it comes to European policy?

The preamble to our government programme contains a clear commitment to Europe. This is particularly important because the black-blue coalition before us [made up of the ÖVP and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)] went in the wrong direction as far as Europe is concerned. We're changing that. For example, we are campaigning for a right of initiative for the European Parliament; this is a concrete part of our government agreement. However, specific European policy issues are dealt with by the relevant ministers, with no obligatory coordination between the government parties. And of course, there are also European policy issues on which the ÖVP position differs from ours.

I'd like to look into this point a bit more closely. Sebastian Kurz has been sharply critical of the European recovery plan and European vaccine policy, and has a special relationship with authoritarian statesmen like Viktor Orbán. How do you deal with this?

That is clearly not Green policy. And we have clearly distanced ourselves from this. Karoline Edtstadler, EU minister and ÖVP member, has also taken a clear position on the rule of law proceedings against Hungary.

How do these political differences play out in public debate about the role of Europe?

Sometimes it seems as if 1995, Austria's EU accession year, were an invisible border. The young, who were politically socialised after that, only know life inside the EU and take it as self-evident. Within the older generation, however, there is a group that still sees the EU as a foreign body, and for whom "Brussels" is a synonym for foreign domination. There is a lot of anti-European populism, especially on the right-wing fringe. The ÖVP is traditionally a pro-European party, but it keeps trying to seal off this flank so as not to lose voters to the FPÖ. This leaves us in the role of pro-European governing party. It is also up to us to criticise the constitutional developments in Hungary and Poland. And we are fulfilling this role proactively and with conviction.

Which level of politics currently is the priority for the Greens in Austria - local, regional, national, or European?

The huge dimension of the crisis to be overcome means that we can't just focus on one level and put the others on the back burner. The art is to bring all levels together, and we are using all the means at our disposal to do this, and to do it well. Our main focus is naturally where we have the most scope for action: the federal government at the national level. But our climate goals must be pursued at all levels. It would be wrong to believe that meaningful policy can only be made at one level.

The climate crisis and the environmental transformation of Austria and Europe are the most important issues of our time.

We are witnessing systemic competition between the USA and the People's Republic of China. Where do you see Europe's place in this constellation?

The USA was a democratic pioneer for a long time, but a lot has gone wrong there, especially socially. The human exploitation that we see in both the USA and China does not exist in Europe. The European Union also needs to play a pioneering role on climate protection. So thanks to Europe's plurality and its ability to bring together even the most diverse countries, it has an intermediary role to play in every direction.

The Austrian Greens lost their parliamentary seats and then got their best election result in 2019. Now they are part of the national government for the first

time. How does the party see its development, politically and strategically, in the coming years?

The climate crisis and the environmental transformation of Austria and Europe are the most important issues of our time and will be the most important spheres of political action for the coming decades. We are running a race against time and cannot afford to rest. The climate crisis is becoming a central issue for most citizens. To tackle it, the Greens need to evolve into a larger, broader-based party, while continuing to listen very carefully and to take people's concerns and fears very seriously. It must be self-evident that the environmental transformation must also be a socially just transformation. This is true not only for Austria, but everywhere, making it a profoundly European project. And we will stay true to our main priorities – “clean environment, clean politics” – central principles not only for Austria but also for all of Europe.

1 The Normverbrauchsabgabe (NoVA) is a one-off tax payable when purchasing or registering passenger cars, motorcycles and quad bikes, as well as light commercial vehicles, in Austria.

2 The leader and deputy leader of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) were filmed at a luxury resort in Ibiza in July 2017 offering access to lucrative public contracts in return for media support. The release of the video in May 2019 led to the collapse of the ÖVP-FPÖ governing coalition.



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