

Holding the Line: The Austrian Greens in Government against the Far Right

An interview with Sigrid Maurer

April 1, 2020

In January 2020, the Austrian Greens entered government alongside the centre-right People's Party in a move that blocked the far right from taking a second term in office. Over and above other priorities, the new government's programme places the climate emergency at its heart. Across the world, borders and the climate are increasingly important political dividing lines and the far right is on the rise. Could the Austrian example offer a path to resolve these tensions? In this conversation, president of the Green Group in the Austrian Parliament Sigrid Maurer explains why the Greens shouldered this responsibility, the progress made in coalition negotiations, and what it means for Austrian politics, domestically and in Europe, for the years to come.

Edouard Gaudot: Is this new centre-right/Green form of government a potential model for other Green parties around Europe?

Sigrid Maurer: The current government is the result of a very unusual situation in Austria. It came into being after the collapse of the turquoise-blue¹ government following a corruption scandal, which are common when the extreme right is in government. It should also be seen against the backdrop of years of grand coalition governments, thought of as stalemate coalitions because relations between the parties have become so hostile. It was about shouldering our responsibility towards the voters. They elected the Greens to stop the climate crisis and to push forward on our campaign issues, namely a clean environment, clean politics, and social justice. The coalition negotiations delivered in precisely these areas.

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Whether this model should be adopted by other European countries depends on their respective political situations. Of course, the most desirable option would be to form progressive coalitions. However, in a situation where there are no progressive majorities, coalitions with centre-right partners are preferable to those in which right-wing extremists take control. This helps to prevent situations such as those in Poland and Hungary, where institutions that guarantee the rule of law are put under pressure and severely curtailed. The coalition should also be seen from this perspective – preventing right-wing extremists from returning to power, as well as keeping our election promises. The key issue is the climate crisis; other major themes that we secured in the government programme are

the sizeable “Transparency Package” and the Freedom of Information Act. The Greens also hold the ministry of social affairs.

The situation in Thuringia in Germany demonstrated the political damage that can be done if there is a lack of communication between the moderate parties in complex electoral situations, leading to a loss of control.² An alternative is the pragmatic solution that has emerged in Austria. Given today’s political constellation, is there another way?

We all are responsible for ensuring that democracy is upheld. Creating coalitions with conservative parties to prevent the extreme right from coming to power is part of that. The situation in Germany is much better than in Austria – the basic consensus is that coalitions with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) are ruled out, at the federal level at least. This is not at all the case in Austria. The Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) has no fear of contact with the extreme right, and very little awareness of what it really means to help right-wing extremists to come to power.

But also the Social Democrats (SPÖ), which are in coalition with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the Burgenland regional government.

Right. The SPÖ first claimed to be a bulwark against the Right and then formed a coalition with them.

How do your Green partners in Europe view the turquoise-green experiment? With admiration or concern?

There is already a certain degree of concern – about European policy positions, for example. But at the same time, everyone is aware that, given the difficult situation we are in, it is the best alternative. To be honest, it is the only alternative. In that sense, there is understanding and support, although there is still criticism of individual government positions. Our position on the EU budget is different from that of the ÖVP, and the same applies in other areas. It is often a question of who prevailed in the coalition negotiations, and how. But the Greens committed the government to a strong Europe in the preamble to the coalition agreement, and there is an emphasis on development aid and the expansion of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. These issues would not be there without the Greens.

Recently it became known that centre-right leader and current Chancellor Sebastian Kurz opposed the continuation of the EU’s Mediterranean search and rescue effort, Operation Sophia. What is the Green position on this?

The Green position is clear: this mission should resume. The point has been made by our Minister for Social Affairs and has always been our position. As far as civil maritime rescue missions are concerned, the Greens do not share the view that they represent a pull factor for migration. For us, a further key issue is monitoring illegal arms shipments to Libya. Ship inspections are a central aspect and are the real objective of this mission, although it is often overlooked in public debate.

Were you inspired by the work of other Green governments, such as the Green-led regional government in Baden-Württemberg, Germany?

There have been exchanges, but the Austrian situation is unusual. The negotiations to bring about this coalition were long and intensive – but at no point did we think, “Let’s consider these fine examples”; it just didn’t work that way. The negotiations focused on the very particular situation in Austria.

There is a major difference at the European level between Kurz governing with Herbert Kickl, Norbert Hofer, and Heinz-Christian Strache [leading FPÖ politicians and former ministers], or with the Greens. In relation to far-right figures like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Italy’s Matteo Salvini, there is also a Europe-wide aspect to consider and

the coalition could represent the beginning of a turnaround, especially regarding climate protection. With the programme that this government has set itself – climate neutrality by 2040 – Austria can and must be a pioneer within the EU and an example to other countries. As far as coalitions with the Right are concerned, it could also mark a turning point.

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As an opposition party, the Greens did not have particularly friendly relations with the other governing parties of the Visegrád countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). The Federal Chancellor, on the other hand, has always cultivated these relations. In addition, the Czech Republic and Hungary, unlike Austria, rely on nuclear energy. On the other hand, cooperation with Germany on energy issues can be difficult, as is well known. How do the Greens assess their regional assertiveness – especially in energy policy – and what prospects for cooperation do they see?

Of course, talks are held, but the position of this federal government is clear: no investment in nuclear energy, not even with European money. There is no disagreement between the Greens and the ÖVP on the nuclear issue and, generally, all parties are in consensus, even though the Greens were the pioneers in this field. This position is also brought into all discussions at European or international level.

But isn't it difficult for Austria to assert itself on this issue in the current regional context?

Our position is clear opposition to the financing and support of nuclear energy.

How do the Greens position themselves in relation to calls by leading figures in the climate movement to treat environmental issues as largely apolitical and purely scientific?

We are delighted by the climate movement. Science is at the heart of green politics, as it was 30 years ago when scientists first began to discuss global warming. The Greens were also a laughingstock back then – on issues like acid rain, for instance. In the meantime, the problem turned out to be real and it has since been addressed. There is no discrepancy at all between what the climate movement is calling for and the Greens' basic approach. A strong commitment to science is the guiding principle of the Austrian Greens, and one which was frequently met with astonishment in the government negotiations. At one point in the negotiations, the ÖVP said that negotiating with us was completely different. Whereas on many topics the Freedom Party just didn't care, the Greens referenced a study on every issue. The same science-based approach is taken to all policy areas, not just climate change. Climate protection has always been an important theme for the Greens and a source of credibility, but it is the responsibility of all political parties to fight climate change, especially since we only have 10 more years to contain global warming.

Would you go so far as to say that the climate issue is no longer a political issue?

No, it is always a political issue. Away from climate, take the gender pay gap as an example. Many studies show that it exists and what it consists of, but whether or not we do something about it is a political question. The responsibility does not lie with science but is a question of political priorities. These two spheres cannot be separated. Furthermore, while the demands of the climate movement are strongly based on science, they are also political. They say, "These are the findings, and we must act." The call for action means political demands.

Do you not think it could lead to misunderstandings if the climate movement is perceived to be calling for the depoliticisation of global warming?

Given the ongoing difficulties even with simply passing climate protection measures into law, I really do not see this as a problem. If it were depoliticised, then it would be a good thing, just as the question of whether a political system needs to prevent the spread of disease is no longer political. That question is also based on scientific data and has become self-evident. Our aim must be for climate protection to occupy a central position in the political debate and for it to be treated as unquestionable. That is still a long way off and it is unlikely that these issues become depoliticised because there are always different possible courses of action. Even if people say that climate protection is important, there are still different ways to deal with it, different approaches and philosophies. According to the eco-social approach, ecological and social issues should always be considered in unison.

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With the coalition between Kurz’s “New People’s Party” and the Greens, the typical voters of this alliance are on average younger and more urban than those of the previous turquoise-blue government, and in part seem to embody a different lifestyle. How do the Greens see their task in a society where party preferences tend to be distributed along geographical and generational lines?

It is indeed the case in Austria that people in rural areas vote differently to those in urban areas, with different priorities. To an extent, the turquoise-green government is an experiment: there are big differences between the two parties, and the coalition negotiations took a very long time. But there were issues on which the two parties essentially have common views. For example, within education, both groups attach great importance to more support staff in schools, such as school-based social workers and administrative staff to support teachers. There are commonalities, and possibilities for building bridges. With Alexander van der Bellen, the federal president is a Green and he has won the confidence of the country since taking office. He has succeeded in addressing different parts of the population through dialogue and trying to understand what motivates others. He has broken down prejudices among rural populations about the Greens. The Greens are a party that can build alliances. This election campaign demonstrated that the Greens can also have a broader appeal. The first polls, at least – the government is still young – indicate that there is potential for growth for the Greens, even in social milieus where the party has until now held less appeal.

The word “homeland” (*Heimat*) was used by parties of many different persuasions during the election campaign. It is often seen as the key word that describes the protection of both the environment and borders, and it is to be the guiding principle of the new government. Do you think it is the right term to understand the ambitions of this government?

No. “Protecting homeland, protecting borders” is not a Green programme. That would be illogical. The Greens are a human rights party and have done everything possible to mitigate the ÖVP’s ideas on these issues. Humanitarian aid, development cooperation, and initiatives for people with a right to asylum are all Green parts of this chapter of the government programme. The concept of homeland is already quite loaded in Austria, although Alexander van der Bellen has encouraged a certain reinterpretation. He interpreted homeland to mean a good place for everyone, where they live and live well. But apart from that, it is an ÖVP slogan and is not a core element of this government. The ÖVP has also given its own interpretation to the saying “the best of both worlds”. In the government programme, the Greens tried to bring together different worldviews in the best way possible, but there is only one

world and one planet. This coalition is an effort to fulfil our responsibility to the many voters and the republic as a whole. There are chapters where the Green signature is more obvious, and chapters where it is less so. But it is certainly not the case that the themes were simply divided up, with the non-responsible party unable to have its say – otherwise, the asylum and migration chapter would have looked far worse.

But the phrase “protecting the environment and borders”, is this something you share? It is often presented as a concept on which there is a broad consensus.

No. The phrases that have been formulated in this way – such as “protecting the environment and borders” and “the best of both worlds” – are irrelevant. We have taken on responsibility for Austria, this is the Green approach to this coalition. It is a thoroughly practical and solution-focused approach, especially given the impending climate catastrophe as well as for many other areas. This government programme takes a future-oriented approach to a range of issues, a key example of which is transparency.

What role do the Greens want to play in the European Green Deal? Is this also an important part of the Greens’ ambitions as a governing party?

The government cannot be split into the Greens and the ÖVP – it is a coalition. But, of course, we want to play a strong role and ensure that the European Green Deal is implemented as effectively as possible. From an Austrian perspective, we will try to make the greatest possible contribution to it. It is our responsibility as Greens.

This interview was first published in French on [Le Grand Continent](#).

Footnotes

¹ Turquoise representing the conservative, Christian democratic Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and blue the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ).

² Following state elections in Thuringia in October 2019, the liberal FDP candidate Thomas Kemmerich was elected as state premier thanks to the support of the far-right AfD. The election was won by the far-left Die Linke but the party’s candidate was beaten by one vote. Kemmerich resigned in February 2020 to pave the way for new elections.



Sigrid Maurer is President of the Green Group in the Austrian Parliament and a campaign and coalition negotiation strategist for the Austrian Green Party.

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