

# One year into office, Austria's grand coalition is under pressure from the growing popularity of the far-right Freedom Party

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14/10/2014

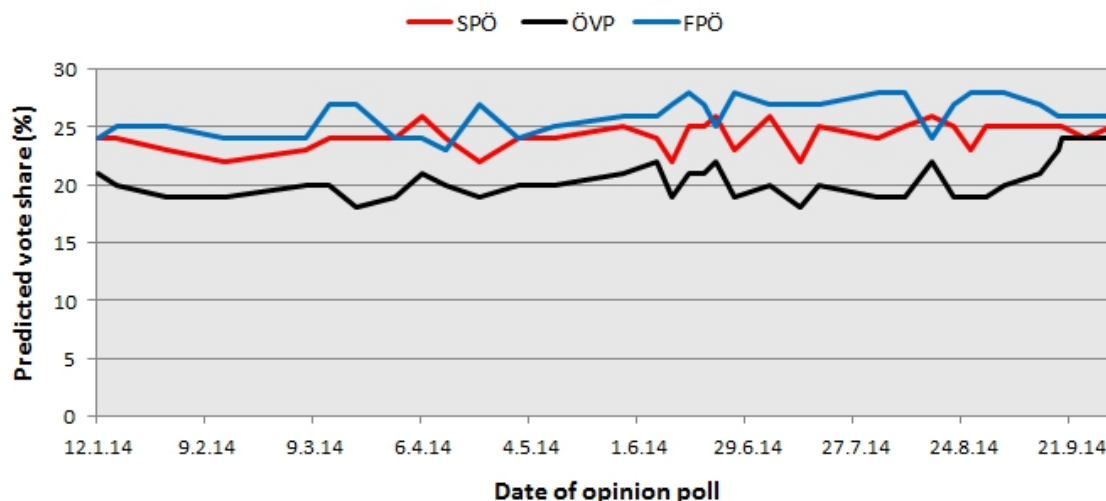
Austria held a general election in 2013, with the centre-left SPÖ and centre-right ÖVP ultimately forming a 'grand coalition'. **Philipp Decker** assesses the government's first year in office and where it stands in the context of current public opinion in Austria. He writes that the two mainstream parties are increasingly coming under pressure from the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), which has effectively positioned itself in opposition to the governing parties on issues such as the military, European integration, and the government's approach to Islam.



One year after the country's [general election](#), the Austrian 'grand coalition', composed of the centre-left [Social Democrats](#) (SPÖ) and the centre-right [People's Party](#) (ÖVP), is increasingly under pressure from the far-right [Freedom Party](#) (FPÖ). One factor in the latter's success is its ability to translate polarising and thus emotional transnational issues into its domestic anti-status quo discourse. While the SPÖ seems to adopt a defensive pro-status quo stance, characterised by its lack of a distinctive normative vision, the ÖVP has initiated an internal reform process.

Public opinion polls carried out during the last nine months indicate that the coalition government has increasingly lost public support and remains below the slight electoral majority of [50.8 per cent of the vote](#) that it received in 2013. As the Chart below shows, while over the last year the SPÖ (22-27 per cent) seems to have lost its leading position to the FPÖ, which was able to consolidate its position at the head of the three parties (23-29 per cent), the ÖVP fell temporarily below the 20 per cent mark (18-25 per cent).

**Chart: Opinion polling for the three main parties in Austria in 2014**



**Note: Figures represent results from 35 opinion polls conducted between 12 January and 2 October 2014.**

An [analysis of the transferred votes](#) shows that in the 2013 general election the FPÖ came first among workers, receiving 33 per cent, with the SPÖ gaining only 24 per cent. The SPÖ lost out predominantly to the FPÖ, while the

newly founded liberal **NEOS** ate into the social base of the ÖVP. Although both coalition parties have their strongest support base among retired persons, the FPÖ is the most popular party among the younger population. This demographic aspect indicates that the centre parties are in danger of a proportionally declining social base of traditional voters.

### **Government reshuffle and two different approaches to ‘challengers’**

As the continuing decline in popular and internal support left its mark on the coalition, a government reshuffle eventually took place on 1 September 2014. The changes undertaken by the SPÖ remained marginal, limited to formal modifications in terms of ministerial posts. Even though the SPÖ had continuously lost support in the polls, and consequently its first place to the Freedom Party, its party leader focused entirely on enhancing his own internal position.

The SPÖ remains quite vague when it comes to the articulation of present societal problems and a concrete political long-term vision. It is for example striking that while the far-right FPÖ continually presents itself as a “social”, national alternative to the Social Democrats, which views capitalism critically and promises to struggle against the privileges of banks and big business, the general secretary of the SPÖ **agrees** that ‘class’ is no longer an adequate political concept.

In contrast to the Social Democrats, the People’s Party attempted to regain some of its lost ground through a ‘young and conservative’ face-lift in the aftermath of the 2013 elections. Part of this strategy was the appointment of the **youngest Foreign Minister** in Austrian history and of the party’s youngest general secretary. This rejuvenation in terms of personnel was accompanied by an attempt to re-position the party towards a ‘new conservatism’.

In the context of the recent government reshuffle, the ÖVP responded to the continuing growth of NEOS, which began to draw off some of its urban, liberal supporters. It replaced its party leader, an outspoken pragmatic conservative, with a more argumentative, economic liberal. By strengthening its economic liberal wing to counter NEOS, while keeping its newly promoted young conservatives, the ÖVP was able to **regain some points** in the polls.

One major factor that contributes to the FPÖs growing public support is its configuration as a nationalist party. As such, its ideological capacity depends on its ability to articulate its normative political vision in opposition to the mainstream parties. It contextualises its domestic political positions in reference to global politics. As a result, the widespread polarisation concerning issues such as the Ukraine crisis or the question of Islamist movements becomes increasingly translated by the FPÖ’s discourse into its own opposition to the status quo, which it identifies domestically with the government. Two policy areas offer a good illustration of this distinction: the Europeanisation of the national army, and the issue of Islam and integration.

### **Europeanisation of the national army**

The future of the army was the subject of a popular vote in 2013, when a proposal to end the practice of conscription was rejected in a non-binding referendum. Recently, the Social Democratic Minister of Defence pushed forward a reform programme that reduces the army’s budget and capacities, while trying to legitimise this course of action with



HC Strache, Chairman of the FPÖ, Credit: Franz Johann Morgenbesser (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

reference to rationalisation and Europeanisation. Central for the presented argument is its EU context and the vision of continuing the current process of Europeanisation, which is viewed as the condition for the people's welfare.

As the People's Party had supported the successful campaign for maintaining conscription in the referendum, it enjoyed popularity on this topic. This was especially useful as it strengthened its position as a 'law and order' party. As the ÖVP traditionally supports further Europeanisation, it was coherent in its stance by actively supporting a pro-European vision for Ukraine from the very beginning of the crisis.

The Freedom Party's position in this context, as a party in opposition to the status quo, was on the one hand to criticise the perceived weakening of the national army, but also to claim that instead of Europeanisation, the strengthening of Austria as a nation-state would enhance the country's position in a future world order. It has strategically connected its national position as a patriotic anti-EU force to the international level by publicly declaring and actively providing support not only to fellow nationalist parties such as the French Front National, but also to [Putin's Russia](#) in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

## Islam and integration

Another widely discussed issue concerns integration policies and the government's distinct approach to Islam. This area illustrates the central role of the conservative Foreign Minister, who tackles the policy field of integration through the party's ideological framework of societal conservatism and economic liberalism. Neo-liberal slogans such as '[integration through merit](#)' are complemented by a conservative, [multi-confessional vision of society](#). Major conservative projects during recent years include the foundation of the Saudi-funded "International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue" in Vienna, support for the "[UN Alliance of Civilizations](#)" and the inclusion of Turkish-Islamic entrepreneurs into its economic association.

Recently, the ÖVP has promoted a more differentiated approach to Islam viewing it as being at the core of problems and solutions to integration. On the one hand, it took up some of the Freedom Party's demands such as the strict promotion of the German language, the prevention of foreign funding of Muslim organisations, and a 'law and order' approach to the problem of violent Jihadism. On the other hand, it complements this with its distinct conservative vision of an 'interreligious dialogue' promoted by the state. One result is the proposed reform of the so-called '[Islam Law](#)', which aims at the regulation and standardisation of Islam and the accommodation of the Muslim community within a hierarchical organisation.

The Social Democrats have again adopted a rather passive orientation and not only accept the status quo, but also support and imitate the People's Party's particular approach. In contrast, the Freedom Party has continually attacked the position of the government, and promoted an anti-Islam and anti-Muslim neo-nationalism, which has contributed to the party's ideological anti-establishment position on the far-right.

Looking ahead, the next round of the FPÖ's struggle takes place in the upcoming elections in the capital of Vienna in 2015. The leader of the Freedom Party, Heinz-Christian Strache, has announced his intention to run against the current mayor of the Social Democrats, immediately framing the election in the context of a national struggle against [Turkish influence](#). As Vienna is the bastion of Social Democracy, where the ÖVP is traditionally weak, it will become an important test of the SPÖ's capacity to counter the rise of the nationalist FPÖ.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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