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Ajla Rizvan

Right-Wing Politics in the Current Conjuncture

The “Kurz project” as an example of
a mode of neoliberal crisis management

The International
Center for Development
and Decent Work

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Abstract

In this working paper, the author situates the political project under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (termed the “Kurz project”) as a mode of neoliberal crisis management. The case study is conducted using a conjunctural analysis. It is argued that following the event of the Ibiza-affair in 2019 which led to a political crisis in Austria, the Kurz project managed to solidify its stance despite numerous scandals. The main findings are that on the one hand, this is due to a specific strategy employed by Sebastian Kurz, through which he managed to portray himself as the victim of the events. His strategy involved a strong dismissal of other political actors, and the interception of investigations on allegations surrounding him and his personnel. On the other hand, the success of the Kurz project is also based on the crisis of the neo-corporatist system, which opened up a power vacuum in the Austrian political landscape that has allowed Sebastian Kurz to take on power. The Kurz project, then, is a political project that was able to successfully mobilize political possibilities for its own success. It is as such situated in a general conjuncture of neoliberal transformation. This working paper also analyzes the Kurz project as a specific national conjunctural formation of a general neoliberal conjuncture exemplifying how neoliberal ideology ranges from ideas which promote internationalization and economic deregulation, to right-wing ideology, emphasizing conservative values and implementing policies which discriminate foreigners and refugees. The paper builds its analysis around the periodization of the Kurz project, which consists of two periods – the crisis of the neo-corporatist system and the Kurz project, which builds on the first periodization. Generally speaking, the paper shows how a tilt in the power relations between capital and labour has taken place (in favor of capital) and how the conditions for decent work in Austria have worsened under the Kurz project.

Keywords: Conjunctural Analysis, Sebastian Kurz, Austria, Ibiza-affair, Stuart Hall, neoliberalism, Decent Work

1 Introduction

This working paper will concern itself with a conjunctural analysis of what I term the “Kurz project”. The Kurz project stands for a form of neoliberal governance, with Sebastian Kurz, former chancellor of Austria and former party head of the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (Austrian People’s party, ÖVP) at its centre. The analysis started out, first and foremost, as an analysis of the Ibiza Affair, or rather: an analysis of the consequences of the political crisis that followed in Austria after the publication of the video that triggered the Ibiza-affair. This is the research puzzle that lies at the heart of the analysis: Even though the Freedom party of Austria (FPÖ) and the ÖVP used similar damage-control strategies in the aftermath of the video – like displaying themselves as victims (Münch 2019; Oswald 2019) – they did so with differing success.

The research question tries to understand how the Ibiza-affair can be contextualized with reference to the differing consequences for the political actors and their strategies in handling the affair, and how such factors relate to a specific mode of neoliberal crisis management.

The central sub-questions answered throughout the thesis include:

- What are the specificities of this mode of crisis management, i.e., what makes this mode “different”?
- What are the central strategies that have been employed by the social actors in this mode of crisis management?

Given their strategies in handling the affair, the key assumption is that the Ibiza-affair has had quite different consequences for the involved political actors. It is argued that Kurz’s strategy has proven to be more successful for the time, and that this exemplifies the specificities of the mode employed by Kurz. I argue that the “Kurz project” stands for a mode of neoliberal crisis management, made possible by the “Crisis of the Neo-Corporatist System” (CNCS). The research that has been conducted serves to contextualize the CNCS and how political figures like Sebastian Kurz are able to consolidate their power; it is also an example of the flexibility of neoliberal ideology. Thus, it makes it apparent that neoliberal ideology consists of many elements and incorporates the normalization of right-wing ideology. Furthermore, the analysis shows how the balance in the power relations between capital and labour has shifted in favor of capital under the “Kurz project”. This has led to a worsening of the conditions for decent work in Austria.

2 Situating the Research

This paper can be situated in the works of conjunctural Marxism, which forms the theoretical framework for the elaborations put forward here. Relying on Hall (1987; 2011), who has analyzed much on the key concepts of conjunctural analysis², the Kurz project is placed in the general conjuncture of neoliberalism and views neoliberalism as a heterogeneous school of thought which includes ideas ranging from right-wing, authoritarian concepts to socially more liberal ideas (Ryan 2019; Slobodian/Plehwe 2020). This analysis draws strength from other works as well including those of Hall et al. (1978), Hall and Massey (2010), Clarke (2014; 2019), Opratko (2019) and Ege/Gallas (2019).

Since the research concerns itself with the specificities of the Austrian political spectrum, it draws from a range of insights on Austrian politics which look at the decline of the social partnership model (Fallend et al. 2018; Karlhofer/Tálos 2019; Sickinger 2019). Furthermore, the analysis of the FPÖ and ÖVP in this paper has been informed by Mudde (2016), Strobl (2020) and Strobl/Bruns (2016).

² See: Hall et al. (1978).

3 Theoretical Overview

This working paper analyzes the Kurz project with the conjunctural analysis, which has its roots in the works of Stuart Hall et al. (1978), specifically “Policing the Crisis”, which examines the ensuing “moral panic” after a mugging³ in Great Britain and foreshadows the emergence of “Thatcherism”. Hall et al. (1978) look at mugging not as a stand-alone problem, but situate it in the conjuncture of Britain in the 1970s. Broadly speaking, conjunctural analysis can be situated in the bigger theoretical school of “Conjunctural Marxism”, a school of thought employing theories elaborated on by Althusser, Poulantzas and Stuart Hall among others (Gallas 2017). A conjuncture is here understood as a complex formation of a historical moment, in which different contradictions are condensed and a specific balance of forces is inscribed into it. Grossberg (2019) further refines the concept, describing a conjuncture as a level of the social formation⁴, which forms some sort of totality (however fragile and temporary that might be) and which is “located between the specificity of the moment and the long duree of the epoch” (ibid.: 42). Focusing one’s attention on conjunctures (which are complex and particular) is one way through which the multiplicity of forces can be analyzed, theorizing that crises can have multiple causes, with different contradictions cutting through them. The articulation of specific contradictions by social forces defines a conjuncture in different dimensions: social, economic, and political, giving a distinctive shape to a conjuncture (Hall/Massey 2010: 57; Clarke 2019: 135), and how they might be resolved, re-aligned or simply re-articulated specific to the conjuncture, thereby giving the opportunity to discern certain trends and tendencies in the course of these processes (Jessop 1983: 95; Gallas/Ege 2019: 91). Furthermore, a conjunctural analysis is connected to the analysis

3 Mugging, which condenses the themes of race, crime and youth, is thus viewed as an “ideological conductor” (Hall et al. 1978: viii) of the crisis that Great Britain was slipping into at that time and through which its economic catastrophe, the crisis of hegemony and the slow build-up to the law-and-order society of the UK was analyzed and contextualized (ibid.; Clarke 2014: 114; Opratko 2019: 134).

4 Oftentimes, the conjuncture can also be understood as a social formation. A social formation is defined by the fact that it is populated, at least in part, by people who exist in “organised and repetitive social, political, economic and cultural relations, which are themselves embodied in and expressions of multiple interrelated and contradictory institutions (if only of custom, habit and tradition), and who generally have or attempt to have some sense of shared identity or common belonging” (Grossberg 2019: 48).

of hegemonic constellations. According to Opratko (2019), every analysis of hegemony⁵ and hegemonic constellation is a conjunctural analysis: the analysis of the relations of forces that make political action possible or not forms an important part of conjunctural analysis, since the focus is on the articulation of forces and how they come together to create a new terrain, “on which different politics must form up” (Hall 1987: 16). As such, a conjunctural analysis always involves theorizing on the reciprocity of the different levels of society, the role of social actors and the state⁶, and rejects economic determinism.

To situate the research in this theoretical framework, the Kurz project, as a mode of neoliberal crisis management with changing strategic alliances, is viewed as embedded in the general conjuncture of the “long march of the Neoliberal Revolution” (Hall 2011: 9). I view the project as a specific, national conjunctural formation overdetermined by the long march, with the levels relating to each other reciprocally. It further constitutes a hegemonic project between two parties – the FPÖ as a far right-party and the ÖVP as a mainstream right-wing-populist party (Ennser-Jedenastik 2019: 33; Mudde 2016: 4; Strobl/Bruns 2016: 105ff) – that facilitates neoliberalization within Austria. Neoliberalism here is not understood in a monolithic manner, but seen as a heterodox school of thought that combines influences ranging from authoritarian measures to more liberal thought, however contradictory that may be (Ryan 2019: 117f.). As long as the end goal remains constant, safeguarding the competitive order and exposing humanity to the compulsions of adjustment as per the price mechanism, the means of arriving at this goal always shift with time and place (Slobodian/Plehwe 2020: 6ff.).

5 Hegemony here is defined in a Gramscian sense: It is defined as the ethico-political leadership of a ruling group over subaltern groups. Hegemony is generated through the generation of consent, although the hegemony that is established through consensus is armoured by coercion (Opratko 2012: 43ff.; Jessop 1983: 100).

6 This paper follows a Poulantzian definition of the state: here the state does not mechanically reproduce capitalist class domination within the capitalist mode of production (Gallas 2017: 259; 272f.). While it secures the right to property through the law and coerces compliance, if need be (ibid.: 260) and, in that sense, secures the pre-conditions for capital accumulation (Jessop 1983: 93), its functions go beyond that. It further provides unity and “has the particular function of constituting the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation” (Poulantzas [1968] 1975: 44, italics in original). Furthermore, contradictions are condensed in the state structures, making it the object of political practice for social forces (ibid.: 45).

4 Methodology

In order to conceptualize the research conducted in this paper, this section will briefly outline the methodological approach employed in the research process. The methodology is informed by Ege's and Gallas' (2019) approach to conjunctural analysis, specifically their operationalization of the framework.

Historical-materialist theories face challenges in the operationalization of their theoretical assumptions. As Buckel et al. (2014) put it, the problem lies in the conceptualization of the different levels of analysis and its highly abstract concepts, like "relations of forces" (ibid.: 43ff.). A conjunctural analysis, however, can function as an approach that bridges these analytical troubles: for one, while it is not a fully formulated research programme with clearly defined steps, it does provide reference points around which one can structure one's analysis. Its strength lies in its procedural openness, which makes the research process unpredictable at times, but also results in a certain flexibility that corresponds to the complexity and reciprocity of (the different levels of) a social formation (Ege/Gallas 2019: 92).

Ege and Gallas (2019) operationalized the framework as follows:

- Recognizing a theme (foregrounds different dimensions of the social world)
- Identifying the object of analysis
(entered through the theme; much broader than the theme)
- Periodizing the said object: Mapping its emergence, identifying a point of no return and point of manifestation (ibid.: 92ff.). The periodization functions as a sort of frame and is underlined with different methods to exemplify economic, political, and cultural phenomena of the object.

4.1. Object, Theme and Periodization

As the research was carried out, the Ibiza-affair served as the starting point from which the object was identified. The central question was how did the Ibiza-affair receive and report on the media? And, how have the political actors involved reacted to the affair?

What became apparent in the examination of the theme is that the consequences have been quite different with regard to the political actors. While HC Strache, head of the FPÖ and vice-chancellor, resigned, Sebastian Kurz did not even think about resigning until a successful vote of no confidence forced him to do so; after this, he became chancellor again in the snap election of October 2019, which was caused by the Ibiza-affair. One part of the research puzzle was how he remained in his position of power despite the events. This, then, turned out as the object of analysis: a mode of neoliberal crisis management, termed as the Kurz project. I rely on the term because, for one, Sebastian Kurz as an actor is central in the time frame, marking a phase of political dominance that is exemplary of a neoliberal mode of governance that uses crises and changes its strategic alliances in order to solidify its stance. This is in no way new; the interesting thing here, however, was the question of the strategic choices of the political actors involved in this mode of governance. As such, Sebastian Kurz is identified as a key political actor and his strategic (re-)alliances and strategies to cope with the political crises triggered by the Ibiza-video are analyzed.

The third step in this operationalization, the periodization of the object, entails two periodizations: First, the Kurz project, and secondly, the CNCS. The Kurz project stands as a political mode of governance filling a space provided by the crisis of the Grand Coalition-system (CNCS), which has been dominant and formative for the political culture in Austria. Thus, the thesis builds on an analysis of the CNCS as the breeding ground for the Kurz project. Both periodizations interlock and depict an analytical division of the present conjunctural formation. The general conjuncture is, of course, more complex and broader than the object of this research. But the object of analysis highlights one important aspect and development of the neoliberal conjuncture, namely, the changes in the strategy and strategic alliances of neoliberal governance.

4.2. Indicators

While the different turning points were identified as sites of the conjuncture where the different contradictions and tendencies come together, the periods required further “zooming in” into the issues. As such, different indicators have been employed to analyze how the object of the analysis has emerged. The indicators have been chosen to reflect the economic, political and cultural dimensions of the research object for the sake of analytical clarity.

Table 1: Indicators

DIMENSION	INDICATORS	PRIMARY SOURCES
Economic	<p><i>Economic developments of the last 30 years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – unemployment levels – changes in the wage ratio – rise of atypical employment-forms – real GDP growth 	<p>BEIGEWUM (2015) Becker et al. (2015) Ederer et al. (2015)</p>
Political	<p><i>Changes within (and diversification of) the party system and Social-Partnership-System</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – election results-diminishing popularity of Grand Coalition-System – changes in legislation regarding role of social partners – exclusion of social partners in the decision-making process <p><i>Rise of far-right parties</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – rise in anti-immigration laws – hostility expressed through opinion polls in civil society 	<p>Tálos (2015) Fallend (2019) Karlhofer/Tálos (2019) Stern/Hofmann (2018)</p>
Cultural	<p><i>Discursive shifts regarding immigration – more emphasis on conservative, nationalistic concepts (“the homeland”, “family”, “Austrian values”)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – analysis of election posters – rhetorical figures used in speeches and statements – use of concepts in ÖVP-FPÖ party programmes and coalition agreement 	<p>Wodak (2013) Rheindorf/Wodak (2018) Ennser-Jedenastik (2019)</p>

On the one hand, the economic indicators exemplify a transformation from a primarily Austro-Keynesian model to a neoliberal model (thus showing how neoliberalism has structured and influenced the Austrian system over time), on the other hand, they also show how power relations have tilted in favour of capital vis-à-vis (organized) labour and how the rise of the right-wing can also be connected to a worsening of the economic situation of workers (Eribon 2012: 130ff.). The political indicators mostly show how the

Austrian party system has changed over the last years, transforming from a party system dominated by two traditional parties (the Social Democratic and the Conservative party) to a more fragmented and diversified system that indicates a loss in popularity of those two parties and the social partners both within popular opinion and the political decision-making process. Reinforcing this, the rise of far-right parties (and the appropriation of right-wing discourse by other parties) is connected to the fragmentation of the party system. Lastly, the cultural indicators were chosen to highlight the discursive shifts regarding immigration and nationalistic, conservative discourse and values within the Austrian (civil) society, both influenced by the political and economic developments and reinforcing those at the same time. As culture is here understood also as a site of political struggle – “the domain through which forms of domination and subordination, inclusion and marginalization, and hierarchical relations could be organized and ordered” (Clarke 2014: 113), the cultural indicators here function to exemplify the struggles that are being fought to assign meaning to certain aspects and concepts, and, through that, to tie into the common sense in a hegemonic way.

4.3. Methods and Data

The research was based on a document analysis, based on a qualitative content analysis as elaborated on by Blatter et al. (2018: 117ff.). These documents include:

- Official government documents (coalitional agreements)
- Official statements (press conferences given by political figures, speeches, statements made to the press)
- Policies (planned and implemented)
- Media reports (commentaries, columns, reports on events)
- Opinion surveys

The choice of documents for this thesis is informed by their importance for exemplifying general statements, ideas, and key strategies of political actors⁷.

7 Official government documents function to, for instance, set the tone for a new coalition, or to further elaborate on certain political perspectives key political actors might have. Moreover, the official documents in combination with statements and media reports contained numerous policies which either failed to be realized or could be implemented during the different periods.

5 Context: The party System of Austria, Economic Reorientation and the ÖVP-FPÖ Coalition

Austria is a parliamentary system with semi-presidential components. While the parliament and government are intended to check on each other through checks and balances, in constitutional reality, the parliamentary groups of the governmental parties have significantly more importance in the decision-making process than the ones in opposition.

5.1. Austria’s party System

While Austria has a multiplicity of parties competing with each other in the party system, it was long dominated by the Social Democratic party (SPÖ) and the ÖVP, which formed grand coalitions with each other regularly, while the other parties used to remain in oppositional seats (Sickinger 2019: 90ff.). Additionally, the Grand Coalition System had the feature of a strong inclusion of the social partners in the political decision-making process, namely the *Arbeiterkammer Österreich* (Chamber of Labour, AK) and the *Wirtschaftskammer Österreich* (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, WKÖ). This is due to the high willingness of the traditional parties to compromise on a lot of political matters, a distinctive feature of Austria’s political system (also referred to as “concordance system”).

Austria’s political system, however, has been subject to changes in the past 20–30 years, given general changes in the importance of the partners, changing patterns of compromise and ideological tides that have “shaken up” the long-established rules of decision-making on the one hand, and changes in the external – or economic – conditions of political decision-making in Austria on the other. These factors made the bargaining process between the social partners and the traditional parties more difficult (Karlhofer/Tálos 2019: 115; Sickinger 2019: 105ff.). Both the SPÖ and the ÖVP reoriented themselves towards the EU in their stance on economic matters, emphasizing privatizations and liberalization. Adding to the changes in the political system, the party system became more fragmented – the formation of the Green party and the Liberal Forum (as a split-off from the FPÖ) being two examples of smaller parties gaining ground, next to the FPÖ. Most of all, these parties criticized the established system and paved the way to heightened awareness of dissident voices against the party duopoly and the social partners (Fallend et al. 2018).

5.2. Economic Reorientation

The Austrian system has, as already indicated, been subject to profound changes. One of these clear shifts can be seen in the economic dogmas that have been dominant in Austria, namely, a shift from an Austro-Keynesian⁸ orientation towards a neoliberal orientation of the economy. This has been partly prompted by the intention to join the EU – and embedded in a global shift towards neoliberal ideas – but, as Becker et al. (2015) point out, the role of economic associations (like the *Industriellenvereinigung* i.e., association of industrials, and parties affiliated with big industrial companies (like the ÖVP) in driving these processes forward should not be dismissed (ibid.: 7). Another driver of the economic orientation towards the EU and thus the neoliberalization of the Austrian system has been the integration of the Austrian economy into the German, export-oriented productive system: "Austria increasingly became the extended workbench of West German industry" (Becker et al. 2015: 8, translation my own). Furthermore, financial processes entail an integration of Eastern and Southern European countries through credits (to households, for instance) and the expansion of Austrian banks into those (Ederer et al. 2015: 44). The economic dimension of the CNCS thus, the Kurz project, entails a strong focus on industrial export enforcement and outward-oriented financialization (Becker et al. 2015: 18ff.). Regarding labour relations, the material foundations of the institutionalized class compromise eroded throughout the years. Put differently, power relations turned in favour of capital vis-à-vis the working class, as observed and exemplified in the development (meaning a decrease) of wages and the increase in forms of atypical employment (ibid.: 15ff.).

8 The Austrian system has traditionally been associated with a variation of Keynesianism which can be described as "Austro-Keynesianism". High social security, economic stability and a broad policy-mix – including anti cyclical fiscal policy, an orientation towards full employment, and a strong emphasis on the state – were features of Austrian politics from the 1970s onwards, through which a broad middle-class was established (Androsch 2007: 11; Maderthaner/Musner 2007: 19; Penz 2010: 143).

5.3. The ÖVP-FPÖ Coalition(s)

Under these changes, the “concordance system” was increasingly confronted with problems of participation and legitimization, made apparent in the decline in voters’ turnout at the chamber elections of the 1990s, diminishing popularity of the traditional parties and the social partners, and higher voter shares for parties like the FPÖ, the Liberal Forum and the Greens (Tálos 2015: 179ff.; Ennsner-Jedenastik 2019: 30f.). This subsequently culminated in two bigger fractures to the Grand Coalition system. The first one being the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition of 2000–2006, the second one being the second ÖVP-FPÖ coalition of 2017–2019⁹. These coalitions extended the exclusion of the social partners even though the AK received worse treatment than the WKO, whose interests were, in some aspects, even prioritized (Sickinger 2019: 126ff.). One example for this is the introduction of the 12-hour-working day, which was pushed through by an initiative motion without consulting the trade union associations and the AK, but in association with the WKO, who was very much in favour of the 12-hour-working day (Sickinger 2019: 121f.).

5.4. The Ibiza-affair

The Ibiza-affair is the manifestation point in my analysis of the Kurz project. The strategies employed by Kurz in his mode of crisis management exemplify how this particular crisis has served to solidify his political position and strategy afterwards. As such, the Kurz project stands for a mode of crisis management that solidifies its stance not in the light of crises, but through them.

The affair constituted a political crisis in 2019, terminating the FPÖ-ÖVP coalition that had been in place since 2017. In 2019 a video was published, showing then FPÖ party head and then-vice-chancellor HC Strache, together with then-chairman of the FPÖ parliamentary club Johann Gudenus, in a villa on Ibiza in summer 2017. The video was a trap set for the two. An actress, purporting to be a Russian niece of a wealthy oligarch, Igor Makarow, contacted Gudenus in 2017 and met with the politicians on Ibiza, stating that she and her companion wanted to bring “a lot of” money to Austria without it appearing on any bank accounts, implying that the money was laundered, and, through the process, help the FPÖ financially. These negotiations were secretly filmed and later on passed on to German media outlets (Obermaier/Obermayer 2019: 32ff.).

⁹ While the first ÖVP-FPÖ coalition under chancellor and ÖVP party-head Wolfgang Schüssel in 2000, was met with international outcry and sanctions, the second one was received with less dismay, given the wider presence of far right-parties in the EU and the normalization of right-wing discourses (Fallend 2019: 20; Erlanger/Kanter 2017).

The video constituted a scandal in many ways. Other than the negotiations about corrupt practices on behalf of the FPÖ, what added to the scandal were Strache's elaborations about the various ways that the different parties in the system – the FPÖ included – received illegal donations. The donors mentioned in the lengthy discussions (among them Novomatic, a big casino-company, and Gaston Glock) apparently had made illegal donations through the use of NGOs, made possible by the fact that NGOs are not legally required to reveal their finances (ibid.: 80ff.). This prompted investigations into the different parties' finances and the non-profit organizations that were mentioned in passing in the conversation (Al-Serori et al. 2019). Moreover, Strache repeatedly explained how he favoured Orbán's censorship of media in Hungary, stating that he would wish for similar conditions in Austria (ibid.).

The video had widespread consequences for both the FPÖ and the general political climate. The practices discussed in the video constituted attempted corruption and even though what was promised to the alleged niece was never carried out, the implication of corruption by the two politicians was enough to cause a political crisis in Austria, resulting in the termination of the governmental coalition, snap elections and the first successful vote of no-confidence in the history of the second republic of Austria against the then-chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Obermaier/Obermayer 2019: 229). Both the implications of corruption and the defamations against political opponents by Strache and Gudenus led to Gudenus' resignation as a party politician and from his parliamentary position and, in Strache's case, as party head and vice-chancellor (Obermaier/Obermayer 2019:250ff.; Zeit Online 2019).

6 Analysis

Building on the operationalization laid forth by Ege and Gallas (2019), this paper’s main part is based on two periodizations, which build on each other. The following subchapters will first outline the research puzzle more thoroughly, going into the periodizations subsequently.

The Kurz project is conceptualized as a specific formation in the “Long March of the Neoliberal Revolution” (Hall 2011: 9) and exemplifies the flexibility of neoliberalism that solidifies its stance through crises. To reprise the arguments laid forth by Slobodian/Plehwe (2020), neoliberalism is seen as a flexible, heterogeneous ideology where neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian ideas are connected to each other in varying degrees. As such, neoliberalism, conservatism, and authoritarianism should not be thought of as juxtaposing schools of thought but rather as mutually reinforcing (ibid.: 6ff.). Furthermore, the analysis sees the Kurz project as embedded in the general Crisis of the Neo-Corporatist System (CNCS), or put differently: the transformations of the Austrian political system, economic orientation and situation, and cultural realm. The changes within the Austrian political landscape have resulted in a political constellation where the ÖVP is faced with little opposition given the diminishing popularity of its former partner, the SPÖ. Adding to this, the diminishing public support for the ÖVP (connected to the general transformation and crisis of the Austrian system) has made Kurz’s takeover and the numerous concessions made to him in the process possible. Through this context, the analysis sheds light on the success and ideological reorientation towards right-wing ideology of both the FPÖ and ÖVP. The crisis of the neo-corporatist system stands in a reciprocal relationship with the rise of right-wing discourse in Austria and culminates in the political style of Sebastian Kurz. To wrap this section up, it also helps to conceptualize the changing constellation of actors in the power bloc. While the CNCS involves the FPÖ as a fundamental actor in the normalization of right-wing discourses, the Kurz project provides the counterpart where the FPÖ is no longer the key actor in the dissemination of right-wing discourses, and even takes a back seat, leaving room for other actors – here, Sebastian Kurz – to advance the consolidation of right-wing politics.

6.1. The Crisis of the Neo-Corporatist System

Table 2 outlines the CNCS, depicting in detail the phenomena that have prompted the changes and developments in Austria in the past 30 years – and which mirror them, too, in a reciprocal way – situating the Kurz project in the transformations. As outlined in the context chapter, the economic dimension of the CNCS involves a change in economic dogmas in the export-oriented accumulation model which is dominant in Austria – from Austro-Keynesianism to a neoliberal framing. The political dimension of the crisis involves a shift from a style that emphasized compromises with the social partners to a system more akin to a “political arena” where conflicts are more common, and where especially trade union associations and organizations are marginalized compared to the economic associations (Karlhofer/Tálos 2019: 121). Lastly, the cultural dimension involves a stronger emphasis on nativist ideas and a high degree of normalization and acceptance of right-wing discourses and ideology (Rheindorf/Wodak 2018: 31ff.).

Table 2: Periodization of the Crisis of the Neo-Corporatist System and Consolidation of Right-Wing Populism

TIME (FRAME)	STAGE	TURNING POINT(S)	TYPE	OTHER EVENTS AND PROCESSES
1989–1995	Fissures within the system	Fall of the Iron Curtain Start of EU-Accession Negotiations	Starting Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – rising unemployment levels – increasing presence of Austria in Eastern Europe – fragmentation of the political system – success of FPÖ and popular approval
1995–2015	Diminishing popularity of Neo-Corporatist System Consolidation of FPÖ as a political party	EU-Accession of Austria 2008 Financial Crisis	Point of No Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – competitive pressure due to the EU-accession – first ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000 – diminishing popularity of SPÖ and ÖVP over the years – change in political leadership of the FPÖ – financial crisis of 2008 – political crises of the Grand Coalition
2015	Manifestation of right-wing populism in Austria	Summer of Migration	Manifestation Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – presidential elections of 2016 – SPÖ and ÖVP party heads step down – aggravation of hard stance on immigration in Austria – Silberstein-affair

The starting point of the CNCS is set around the fall of the iron curtain, with the beginning of the EU-accession talks for Austria.

While the fall of the iron curtain was seen as an economic opportunity for Austria to seize new markets and expand their capital markets into the region, it also signified a point of heightened conflicts within the country. This is exemplified in the public’s xenophobic reaction to the events: fears over public security and of increasing migration to Austria from the ex-communist countries were further (successfully) goaded by the FPÖ (Siebold 2019; Gehler 2014: 133ff.; Pudlat 2014: 137ff.; SORA 2019). At the same time, with an EU-Accession being negotiated with Austria, the country reoriented itself both economically and politically more towards the Union. While processes of neoliberalization had been under way since the late 1970s, the negotiations further cemented processes of internationalization, deregulation and privatization, together with a flexibilization of the labour market (Becker et al. 2015: 18; 21f.; Ederer et al. 2015: 36ff.; Tálos 2015: 180f.). Furthermore, the negotiations were successfully instrumentalized by the FPÖ, claiming that the accession would result in higher immigration to Austria, thus painting the “European elites” in a negative light (Becker et al. 2015: 10f.; Siebold 2019). Their strategy led to heightened support for the party; they were able to increase their share in votes from 16.6% in 1990 from 9.7% in 1986 (SORA 2019).

The period of 1995–2015 is classified as a “point of no return” in this periodization. One of the important events is the EU accession of 1995, which furthered neoliberalization and a normalization of right-wing discourse. Economically, it resulted in heightened competitive pressure for formerly protected areas, while the economy experienced an increase in unemployment numbers to 7% in 1996 (Fallend et al. 2018; Arbeit Plus 2019; WKO 2020). Another event that contributed to the CNCS is the financial crisis of 2008, which caused a dent in Austria’s economy, a blow triggered by depleted demand from its main export region, the Eastern European region. Austria’s GDP fell by 3.8% (Ederer et al. 2015: 44ff.).

While these economic developments had strong repercussions, the country also saw political and cultural changes. Politically, the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition of 2000-2006 had the strongest repercussions for the Grand Coalition system. On the one hand, the ÖVP reoriented itself more towards right-wing discourses akin to the style the FPÖ was employing, and away from its former partner, the Social Democratic party; on the other, this break in the Grand Coalition-pattern of the SPÖ and ÖVP also had a negative impact on the legitimacy of the social partners (who, at that time, were already suffering from diminishing popularity) and their inclusion in the political decision-making process as well. The social partners, however, were affected asymmetrically by the coalition: while the labour union associations (the AK and the Austrian trade union association) were excluded in a more rigid manner, the coalition continuously catered to the interests of the WKO (Fallend 2019: 7ff; Sickinger 2019: 106f; SORA 2019). These changes happened

alongside the FPÖ gaining in popularity, as seen since the elections of the 1990s. Their success is mostly credited to a strong focus on anti-immigrant rhetoric and their reference to nativist concepts and ideas under charismatic party heads, first Jörg Haider and then HC Strache, after Haider resigned. Both party heads are known for their right-wing extremist past (Fallend et al. 2018; Ennsner-Jedenastik 2019: 30f.). Generally speaking, nativism as a set of ideas became more important, exemplified by a stronger emphasis on 'integration' as a concept that served to juxtapose 'the immigrants' and 'the natives', and fed off of racist ideas and juxtapositions of 'us' versus 'them'. This can be seen in the election posters of these years. In the elections of 2006, the FPÖ used the slogan Daham statt Islam (Home[land] instead of Islam, with daham being a vernacular version of daheim); in the Viennese elections of 2010 they printed Deutsch statt "nix versteh'n" (German instead of "no understand", imitating foreigners whose command of German is not fluent). Notable is also the use of the Austrian flag in both posters:

Figure 1: Election Poster 2006



Source: Demokratiezentrum Wien 2006

Figure 2: Election Poster 2010



Source: Wodak 2013: 176

The CNCS is in summary a good example of a tilt in power relations in favour of capital vis-à-vis labour, as exemplified in a diminishing rise in real wages, a falling wage ratio and an asymmetrical rise of the profit ratio (Becker et al. 2015: 21; Ederer et al. 2015: 49ff.). But this is not to say that the crisis is an economic issue. In reality it stands in a reciprocal relationship with the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments and nativist ideas which were gaining in importance within the society; something that the political parties goaded as well as succeeded in pulling off. As Eribon (2012) has argued, the general distrust of workers in their former representatives (due to economic turmoil, for instance) coincides with the rise in popularity of right-wing parties and their views (ibid.: 130ff.).

6.2. Summer of Migration: Manifestation Point and Starting Point

In this analysis, I see the SoM as a manifestation point of the CNCS on the one hand, and the starting point of the Kurz project on the other. Several reasons may be put forward to support this claim. First, the SoM was picked up by the FPÖ and Kurz in the same way the other events consolidating into turning points had been taken up. Immigration was a central topic and determined politics and the public discourse in the following years. Second, response to the SoM is an example of the contradictory behaviour of the bigger parties, especially the SPÖ who first welcomed the refugees, then decided to turn around and go for a more restrictive course. Third, political mistrust in the SPÖ and ÖVP reached another high point after the SoM, expressed in the outcome of the presidential elections of 2016. And, fourth and final, the SoM was strategically used for Kurz to refine his political stance and strategy, chalking measures like the closure of the Balkan route as his sole success. In short, the SoM and the period afterwards is a manifestation point because the political fault lines that had been cushioned in the periods before were now clearly visible. This period, together with the ones before, paved the way for what I term the rise of the Kurz project as a mode of political crisis management which is marked by neoliberal and authoritarian ideas, and most importantly, the mandate of flexibility, both in politics and Sebastian Kurz's way of 'doing' politics and presenting himself, be it as the approachable family man, or the politician who knows how things work (Baumann/Schmid 2020).

6.3. The Kurz project: Specificities

Table 3 shows the periodization of the Kurz project, marked by Kurz’s rising popularity, his strategic move when he took over in his party and the consolidation of his power through the Ibiza-affair.

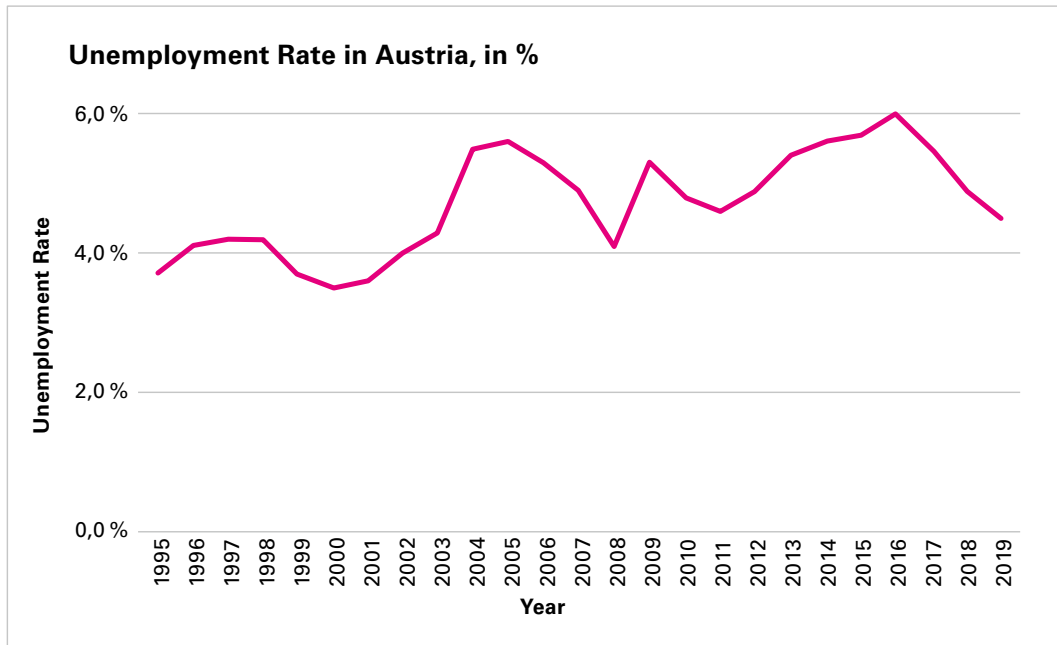
Table 3: Periodization of “Kurz project”

TIME (FRAME)	STAGE	TURNING POINT(S)	TYPE	OTHER EVENTS AND PROCESSES
2015–2017	Rising Popularity	Summer of Migration	Starting Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Presidential elections of 2016 – step-down of Faymann, party head of the SPÖ – political infights and conflicts between SPÖ and ÖVP – dissatisfaction with the Grand Coalition – closure of the Balkan route
May 2017–May 2019	Strategic Move	Kurz’s takeover of the ÖVP	Point of No Return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – centralization of power in Kurz’s position – termination of SPÖ-ÖVP coalition by Kurz – ÖVP-FPÖ coalition – ÖVP wins snap elections – numerous scandals on behalf of the FPÖ
May 2019	Consolidation of Power	Ibiza-affair	Manifestation Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Vote of no-confidence against Kurz – ÖVP wins snap elections, FPÖ loses – ÖVP-Greens coalition – numerous allegations of corruption against the ÖVP surface

a. Starting Point – Summer of Migration

As already mentioned, the SoM constitutes both the manifestation point of the CNCS and the starting point of the Kurz project. The SoM made the fault lines of the political power bloc more apparent: Set in the economic turmoil of the post-2008 years, distrust of the population towards the SPÖ and ÖVP became bigger. While unemployment numbers peaked and reached 6% in 2016 (Peters et al. 2016; Zeit Online 2016), the rate of long-term unemployment tripled from 47.333 people in 2012 to 121.775 in 2016 (Arbeit Plus 2019). Atypical employment became more and more common in these years, with a rise of 32.6% of people employed in “new self-employed” forms of labour contracts from 2007-2017.

Figure 3: Unemployment Rate



Source: WKO 2020

Politically, the conflicts between the SPÖ and ÖVP during the SoM prompted new challenges to the Grand Coalition. Public opinion on the partners was influenced by the public infights on the one hand, while the coalitional partners' contradictory stances on issues like immigration aggravated their unpopularity on the other hand. This distrust could be felt not the least within their own base. During this time, parties like the FPÖ gained in popular opinion (Peters et al. 2016; Zeit Online 2016; Rheindorf/Wodak 2018: 16f.). The coalition, by then marred by infights, blockages and bad press, was unable to provide alternatives to rising unemployment and low GDP growth (Fallend 2019: 17ff.).

Culturally, the already observable emphasis on Austria as a cultural nation, the Austrian homeland and its language continued and found its expression in the media, political election campaigns and policies. These developments are mirrors of the increasing proliferation of ideas of the superiority of Austria and its apparent values, which are appraised as enlightened and progressive, in juxtaposition to a constructed "barbaric" value system imported by foreigners and refugees. These ideas have been conducive to a political atmosphere that is marked by more restrictive measures for refugees and immigrants, like the Integrationspaket 2017 (Kurier 2017). Table 4 shows a summary of opinion polls of that time, showing a rise of xenophobic opinions among the Austrian population after the SoM.

Table 4: Opinion Polls

What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?					
	IMMIGRATION	THE STATE OF MEMBER STATES' PUBLIC FINANCES	TERRORISM	RISING PRICES	UNEMPLOYMENT
Spring 2015	37%	36%	8%	15%	26%
Autumn 2015	66%	28%	15%	11%	18%
Spring 2017	38%	23%	21%	13%	17%
Autumn 2017	38%	23%	21%	13%	17%

What do you think are the two most important issues facing the country at the moment?					
	IMMIGRATION	UNEMPLOYMENT	ECONOMIC SITUATION	RISING PRICES	EDUCATION SYSTEM
Spring 2015	31%	33%	20%	17%	/
Autumn 2015	56%	30%	17%	18%	/
Spring 2017	32%	28%	12%	20%	22%
Autumn 2017	28%	21%	12%	19%	22%

Source: Eurobarometer 2015a; 2015b; 2017a; 2017b

b. Point of No Return – Kurz's Takeover

Following the SoM, Sebastian Kurz held the reins of his party. In the process, he demanded power of authority over the party's political direction and the political personnel, as well as a free hand in the negotiations for a coalition (Puller 2018: 14). The party agreed to all his conditions for the takeover, given their loss of perspective and Kurz's rising popularity among Austria's population (Salzburger Nachrichten 2016). Kurz became party head, distancing himself, in the process, from the former partner of coalition, and called for snap elections which the party won. Kurz, subsequently, formed a coalition with the FPÖ and became chancellor.

Part of the analysis of the Kurz project is the analysis of the coalitional agreement of the ÖVP and FPÖ, which is marred by neoliberal and conservative signifiers. The most important neoliberal signifiers were: economic competitiveness (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 17,132f., 139f., 140f.), deregulation (ibid.: 4; 17, 133, 147), freedom (ibid.: 17, 124, 133, 142), the right to property (and the active promotion of acquisition of property) (ibid.: 47) and cuts to social spending (ibid.: 117), all forming part of a general argument that emphasizes on individual self-responsibility and the importance of market mechanisms. Pertaining to the state, the agreement emphasized de-bureaucratization and deregulation on numerous

occasions, emphasizing on the costs of bureaucracy and the limitations the state puts on individual freedom and choices (ibid.: 4, 7, 17, 18, 128, 133). While these neoliberal chiffrés play an important role, the conservative side put its focus on nativist concepts¹⁰, like the concept of the family, which is seen as the foundation of the Austrian society – and which is reinforced even in the flexibilization of the working hours, depicted as a measure that would serve the compatibility of work and family (ibid.: 9, 101, 139).

Generally speaking, the period of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition intensified the exclusion of the labour organizations from the decision-making process by advocating for budget cuts for social partners, restructuring their internal structure and the introduction of the 12-hour working day against the interests of the AK (Karlhofer/Tálos 2019: 125ff.; ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 128; Stern/Hofmann 2018: 38). Regarding the welfare state, the coalition put forth cuts to social spending and unemployment benefits. The nativist and right-wing orientation, however, becomes most apparent when one looks at its handling of the issues of migration and asylum. Access to social security for migrants was made more difficult (Bachmayer-Heyda 2020) and the coalition strongly emphasized its opposition to dual citizenship, for which they only made an exception for South Tyrolean Austrians living in Italy (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 33f.).

In general, Kurz's takeover is seen as a point of no return for a few reasons. On the one hand, it cemented the concentration of power in Kurz's hands; on the other, the Grand Coalition-system had met a dead end by then, with the SPÖ and ÖVP both struggling to stay popular. The subsequent power vacuum made it possible for Kurz to take over and become a central figure (Zandonella/Perlot 2017:9). Kurz was also successful in directing almost every political issue through the prism of migration and refugee issues – be it the economy, the state of the welfare system or the defense of Austrian values (from said refugees) (Puller 2018: 14). This phase further cemented the normalization of right-wing discourses on a political and cultural level in Austria.

c. Manifestation Point: The Ibiza-affair

When the Ibiza video was published in May 2019, it meant the end to the coalition between the ÖVP and FPÖ and the end of HC Strache as head of the FPÖ. This period is seen as the manifestation point of the Kurz project, as Kurz was able to productively manage the fissures that came to light during the crisis to solidify his own position for the months to come. Even though he had to resign due to a successful vote of no confidence against

¹⁰ As Cooper (2017) has shown, the family unit and fear around its disintegration has long been central to neoliberal ideology (ibid.:9f.).

him, he nevertheless won the following elections with 37.5% votes. and thus, even higher numbers than in 2017. The FPÖ had lost 10% points – a third of which had run over to the ÖVP – ranging at 16.2% (SORA 2019).

Kurz’s political strategy became very apparent in the aftermath of the Ibiza-video. It builds on a strict framing of narratives and discourses. Kurz refused to take responsibility for the coalition with the FPÖ, instead painting himself as the victim of the numerous scandals of the FPÖ, even stating “enough is enough” when asked about the Ibiza-affair (Strobl 2020):

“You might have noticed that, in the past two years, I had to endure quite a bit for the successes of the coalition. [...] There have been many instances where it was hard for me to stay silent [with regard to the scandals of the FPÖ]. But after yesterday’s video I have to say: ‘Enough is enough’. [...] The FPÖ, with this behaviour has harmed the reform project and the way of change intended for Austria. It has also damaged Austria’s reputation [...].” (Der Standard 2019, translation my own)

Even more, he then goes on to portray himself as the sole political player who would be able to drive the “reform project” forward – without the FPÖ (ibid.).

Another aspect of Kurz’s political style is the interception of investigations into illegal party donations and the allegations of corruption made against Sebastian Kurz and other ÖVP-party officials. The party intercepted two major investigations (the shredding affair and the casino-affair) right in the aftermath of the video (Schmid 2021; Frey 2021; Möchel/Schreiber 2019). In the interceptions of the affair, Kurz attacked the *Wirtschafts- und Korruptionsstaatsanwaltschaft* (“Prosecutor’s Office for Economy and Corruption”, short: WKStA) on numerous occasions, going as far as to call the judicial body a “network of red [communist] prosecutors” (Löwenstein 2020). Last but not least, his political style not only exemplifies the undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies of neoliberal governance, it also shows how flexible it continues to be: after dissolving the coalition with the FPÖ, the ÖVP formed a new coalition with the Green party, since the SPÖ as a coalitional partner was still out of question for the ÖVP. Now, the ÖVP had shifted its course and framed its economic conservatism with an ecological spin. The export-oriented accumulation model is now supported by an ecological component, where the economic and conservative stance are informed by an emphasis on sustainability. Sustainability is now used to frame central issues of the coalitional parties, but without taking the focus away from neoliberal and conservative values (ÖVP/Green party 2019: 5).

7 Conclusion

Now that Kurz has ultimately stepped down as chancellor in 2021 due to the numerous scandals surrounding his person, the Kurz project has proven to have come to a premature end. But the formation, no matter how recent or long it is exemplifies what has been building up in the past 30 years: That the Grand Coalition-system is experiencing a severe crisis; and that the space – the power vacuum – that has opened up due to this crisis has been taken up by a neoliberal mode of governance that relies on right-wing ideas and world views as well as forms of political control to keep up the mode of governance. Mostly, it also speaks for a normalization of right-wing ideas and views. This is most apparent in the coalition with the Green party since 2019, which is a party that has historically been situated in left-wing oppositional spaces. In 2021, deportations that could have been prevented by said party were carried out nevertheless under their coalition. Even in less extreme cases they supported the right-wing orientation of the government, be it through mere silence or contrite consent. But this is not to say that the power bloc, both the new and the old, are devoid of contradictions and infights. This working paper strives to show how these contradictions can blow up seemingly cohesive power blocs.

The Kurz project, in the end, was a political project that was able to successfully mobilize political possibilities for its own success. It is one of the many projects – and not the definite one – and, embedded in the social formation, it is shaped by the terrain it operates in and shapes it at the same time. The project as a conjunctural formation serves as an example of a mode of neoliberal crisis management that, through the use of different strategies, has proven to be durable in the light of a political crisis, at least for the time being, and has left its mark on the political landscape of Austria. Lastly, to reiterate Hall’s (2011) concept of “the long march of the Neoliberal Revolution” (ibid.: 9), the project is both an expression of the long march on a bigger scale, and forms its own conjunctural formation with its own specificities on a smaller, national scale.

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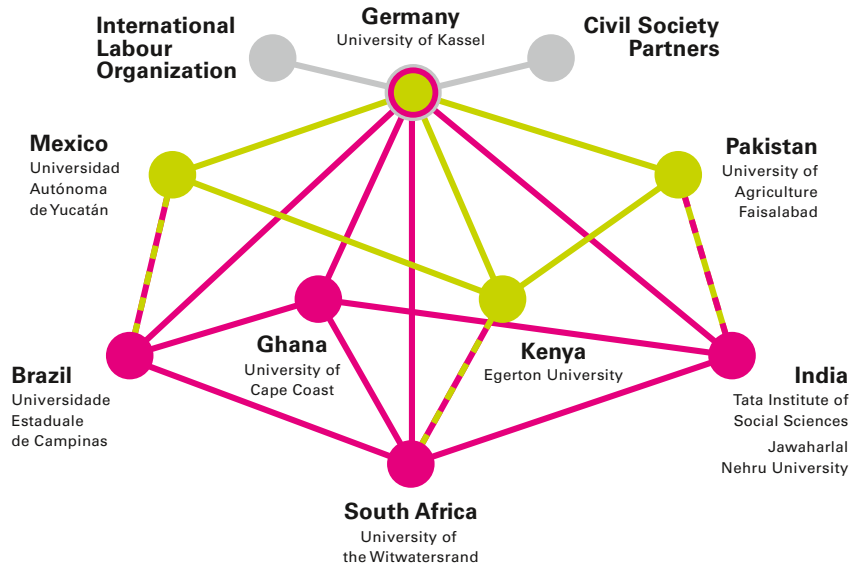
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