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The Options for Canada Engaging Austria's New  
Coalition Government**

by Roger Hilton  
February 2018

# POLICY UPDATE

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## **AVOIDING RUDENESS IN VIENNA: THE OPTIONS FOR CANADA ENGAGING AUSTRIA'S NEW COALITION GOVERNMENT**

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**A**ny visit to Vienna is incomplete without experiencing a dash of rudeness. This “Viennese charm” found in the famous café houses and stellar museums is part of what makes the city so special. It would be understandable if foreign governments reciprocated this rudeness against the new Austrian coalition government that was sworn in, in December 2017, led by millennial Sebastian Kurz of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). A sign of this reciprocal rudeness materialized shortly after the party’s inauguration, when a collection of former senior European leaders signed a letter urging current EU governments not to receive the six ministers of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) led by Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache. Among the signatories was former Canadian prime minister Kim Campbell. The letter, published in [Le Monde](#), also called for the boycott of Austria’s EU presidency that is slated to commence in the second half of 2018. The result of this potential boycott leaves the Trudeau government in an awkward predicament: publicly voice disapproval, but risk igniting a diplomatic row. Are Canadian values best defended abroad and European interests better served by engaging with extreme-right colleagues in Austria or by their outright diplomatic ostracization?

Ottawa’s relationship with Vienna is not a make-or-break linchpin of Canada’s overall strategy in Europe. Despite having diplomatic relations for 65 years, trade relations are modest and there is a lack of prevalent shared cultural attachment to one another compared to France or Italy. Although Austria is a non-NATO member, Canada’s security and foreign policy interests with Austria merge through a collection of institutional bodies like the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Wassenaar Arrangement, as well as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which Austria chaired for the second half of 2017. Despite the overlap in international institutions, Austria’s minority coalition partner, the (FPÖ), expounds upon values diametrically opposed to those of the Trudeau government.

When analyzing the government personnel, the roster of FPÖ cabinet ministers is a cause for concern. While some proposed cabinet members such as Harald Vilimsky and Johann Gudenus were deemed too extreme and rejected by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, other controversial nominees were accepted. The confirmation of Herbert Kickl as Interior Minister and Mario Kunasek as Minister for National Defence represents the manifestation of some of the most radical ideological elements in the coalition. Their outspoken hostility towards a more humane treatment of migrants and refugees could not contrast with Canada’s position more clearly.

Speaking in early January, Kickl, formerly the FPÖ’s chief strategist, declared that the new government’s refugee policy was [designed](#) “to hold refugees in one concentrated place” in the name of efficiency. The comments sparked a cascade of outrage across Europe. In addition to the controversial selection of the word “concentration”, his intentional use of the verb “halten” in German applied to refugees is more commonly used when describing animal enclosures. Another disqualifying feature of the FPÖ cabinet ministers and their aides is their well-documented participation in extreme *Burschenschaften* activities. Founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century



as a student fraternity to cultivate support for a united German national state, the *Burschenschaften* of today encompass varying degrees of inclusiveness and doctrine, with fringe segments spewing ultra pan-Germanism ideology. Those *Burschenschaften* fraternities found outside of Germany tend to subscribe to a more hardcore commitment to their founding principles. Confirmation of this can be found with the FPÖ's chief coalition negotiator Harald Stefan whose [fraternity](#) has openly called for Poland and Austria to be reunified within a greater Germany.



*Figure 1: An image of the Hofburg, the former imperial palace in the centre of Vienna, Austria. This palace was a venue for a gathering of extreme right-wing sympathizers in 2018. (Wikimedia Commons)*

The highlight of *Burschenschaften* activities within Austria reached its pinnacle with the 2018 edition of the [Academics Ball](#), which gathers extreme right-wing sympathizers in the Viennese Hofburg. In addition to the likes of [Marine Le Pen](#), Strache participated despite the international stigma associated with attending the ball. More recently, this pan-Germanism and anti-Semitic spirit found its way into the provincial elections of Lower Austria. The FPÖ's candidate for governor, Udo Landbauer, was [linked](#) to a songbook containing lyrics that glorified the Holocaust: "Step on the gas, you old Teutons, so we can make it to seven million". Despite the utterly horrific comments, the FPÖ finished third and actually gained six points from their 2013 result. Based on the litany of controversial elements found in Austria's junior coalition partner, there is ample evidence necessitating a diplomatic response from Ottawa. Failure to respond is akin to tacit endorsement.

The current coalition government is not Austria's first flirtation with a controversy of this kind since regaining its sovereignty in 1955. The FPÖ was founded in 1956 by former Nazi SS officer



Anton Reinthaller, whose vision for the country represented the “Third Camp” of Austrian politics. Their rejection of the role of socialism and Catholic clericalism was replaced by the promotion of pan-Germanism themes. Despite the fresh wounds of the Second World War and the taboo undertones of the FPÖ ideology, they began to arrive on the national political scene in 1986. That year, Jörg Haider, a dangerously charismatic persuader, assumed the party leadership. He slowly began converting support into electoral success, which hinged on repackaging anti-immigrant sentiment in a modern tone. Nowhere was this more evident than in his home province of Carinthia, where he lobbied aggressively as governor to minimize the Slovene minority's equal [language rights](#), despite both being EU members.

Haider's strategy would reach a watershed moment during the 1999 legislative election when the FPÖ won 26.9 per cent of the vote, narrowly beating the traditional centre-right source of power, the ÖVP. Although Haider should have been in line for the chancellery, the groundswell of international criticism forced the FPÖ to cede it to the ÖVP. Their establishment of a coalition government was a disastrous example of impotent governing. It also brought unwanted scrutiny, as the coalition government received the undistinguished honour of being the first member of the EU to be sanctioned by the then 14 members. The disbanding of the government to normalize relations with Brussels resulted in Haider creating a spinoff party and Strache taking over.

Although the composition of the EU and international landscape has changed dramatically since 1999, the FPÖ's approach to campaigning has remained nationalistic and built on fear mongering. Riding on the coattails of populism sweeping the European continent, the FPÖ successfully pandered to anti-EU and anti-immigrant rhetoric, allowing them to finish third in the October 2017 parliamentary election. Subsequently, they secured participation in the next government. As a sign of their domestic legislative priorities upon entering into coalition talks, the FPÖ agreed not to force a referendum on the CETA accord in exchange for the ÖVP delaying a ban on smoking inside restaurants and cafes.

Unsurprisingly, the FPÖ's ineptness at crafting policy extends to foreign affairs. Within the EU, Austria's coalition government will defy Brussels' wishes and press ahead with [plans](#) to offer citizenship to the German-speaking minority in South Tyrol. The dual-citizenship initiative for the northern Italian region of Alto Adige is considered an unneeded diplomatic distraction within the EU, which is already preoccupied with securing an advantageous Brexit deal and defending the rule-of-law principle against member state Poland. Prior to his ascension as vice-chancellor, in September of 2017 Strache [called](#) for the dissolution of Bosnia Herzegovina and the independence of the Srpska Republic. His rejection of the 1995 Dayton peace accords contradicted Austria's long-standing position on the issue and unnecessarily injected instability into an already fragile region. To compound anxiety, the FPÖ has a [co-operation agreement](#) with Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, which actively looks to sow discord and fracture EU unity.

Against the backdrop of this bilateral quagmire, Global Affairs Canada should use everything in its diplomatic toolbox, both formal and informal, to advocate for its position. A useful starting point of reference for Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland is the policy assumed under her



predecessor Lloyd Axworthy in 2000. During his tenure, [he](#) banned bilateral ministerial contacts and declared that Canada would not support Austrian candidates for international organizations. This downgrading of relations elicited such anxiety that it forced then-FPÖ leader Haider to backtrack on his Nazi atrocity comments. It even prompted a visit to Canada to reform his image among the Jewish community.



## Freedom Party Performance in Austrian Parliamentary Elections (1956-2017)

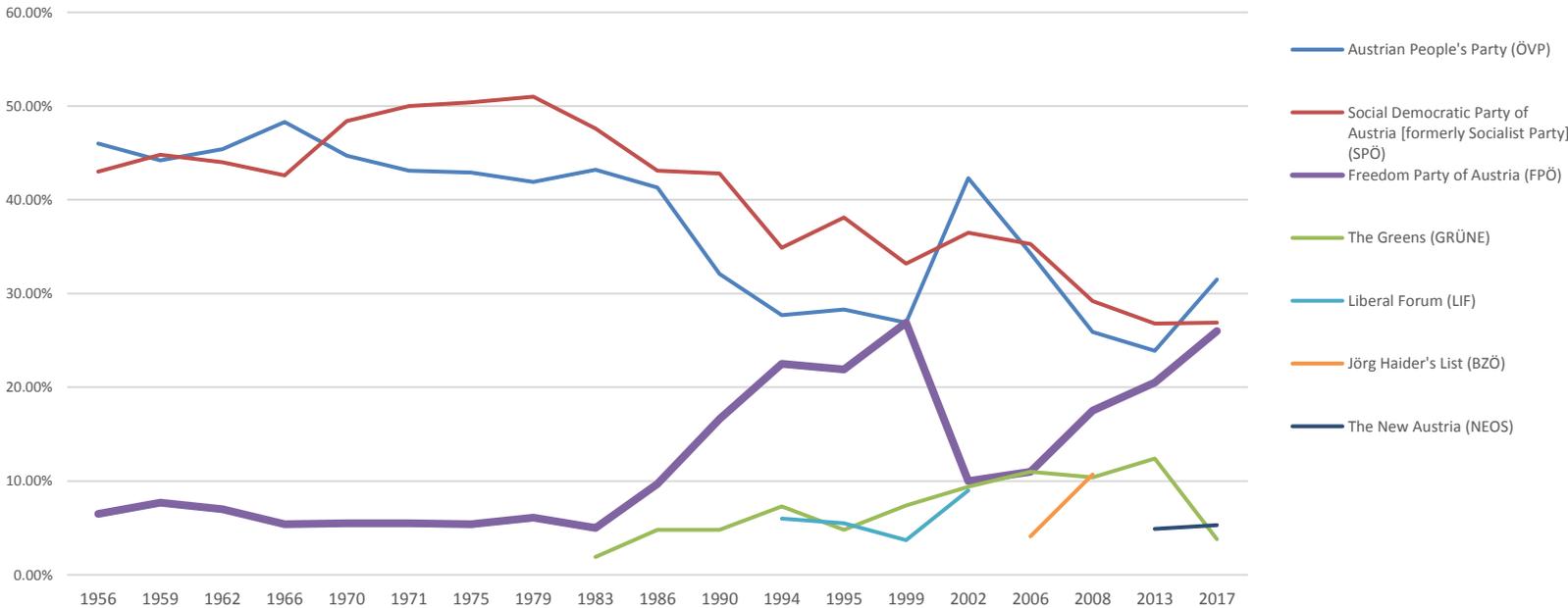


Figure 2: A graphic illustration of the Freedom Party's (FPÖ) electoral results from 1956 to 2017. (Source: Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, Canadian Global Affairs Institute)

While this option remains today and aligns with the request of the proposed international boycott, its effectiveness in curbing outrageous FPÖ behaviour is unlikely. A string of illiberal democracies already governs across Europe and they fear little diplomatic repercussions for their national policies. As a *fait accompli* in the EU, the coalition government would more than likely be unmoved by Ottawa's downgrading of relations. If such a policy were adopted, Ottawa should expect to feel the retaliation much sooner than Austria. With Canada prepared to [campaign](#) for the 2021 UN Security Council seat against Ireland and Norway within the Western European and Others Group (WEG), Austria would certainly cast its vote against Canada's candidacy. With voting exceptionally competitive, failure to secure the seat would be an embarrassment to the Trudeau government and pursuit of one its overarching foreign policy targets. If diplomatic tensions lingered, Canada could only respond in 2026 when Austria will be a WEG pool candidate for the 2027-2028 term.

Another option at the disposal of Global Affairs Canada would be to summon Austrian Ambassador Stefan Pehringer to convey Canada's displeasure with the activity of the FPÖ's



more radical cabinet ministers. As this amounts to a slap on the wrist, it would allow the Trudeau government to save face publicly while simultaneously causing little to no diplomatic fallout. In what would be an extreme and unlikely response, the Austrian foreign minister under FPÖ-leaning Karin Kneissl (non-party member) could demand a reduction in the number of Canadian diplomats working in Vienna. The Canadian embassy in Austria, which is also responsible for Slovakia, is the jumping-off point for Canadian involvement in various international institutions where the effects of a reduced staff would be felt immediately. Such a demand would be unprecedented in the history of bilateral relations.

Outside of our borders, Canada can attempt to encourage the European Commission to invoke Article 7.1 of the Lisbon Treaty. Canadian Ambassador to the EU Daniel Costello could try to make the case that the coalition government is in “clear risk of serious breach of EU values”, resulting in the suspension of certain rights. However, the European Commission has no appetite to entertain such a plan of action, given the sympathetic political climate toward Vienna. Additionally, Ottawa could explore compliance mechanism options in CETA that would try to restrict the financial opportunities available to the FPÖ.

Within the informal sphere of communications, policy options should not be discounted. Capitalizing on the upcoming Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang or the Munich Security Conference offers a variety of avenues because senior-level politicians from both countries will be present. Also, in the name of creativity, the Alpine ski season is in full motion with future events scheduled for Lake Louise as well as in Austria. On the cultural level, the Vienna Philharmonic will be touring New York City at the end of February, which also lends itself to be the meeting point of senior diplomatic personnel. Although farfetched, history has proven that at times informal networks provide superior diplomatic channels for foreign ministries and embassies.

Finally, Ottawa could assume complete complacency towards the new coalition government. Global Affairs Canada could ignore the issue entirely and hope that the government fails of its own accord through mismanaged policies and unpopular governance. This would perhaps be the weakest response and the most cowardly. As the legislative period in Austria is five years between elections, this choice would simultaneously be an exercise in patience. With hate crimes and anti-Semitic [incidents](#) on the rise throughout Austria and likely to continue under the coalition government, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government can hardly pretend to champion these values at home but remain selective on lobbying them abroad.

As Ottawa mulls policy options, it must be remembered that the manifestation of the Austrian coalition government is the will of the people. Although a tough reality, it is vital not to stifle democracy if it's not in your favour when addressing this sensitive topic. If the Trump presidency has taught Western liberals anything, it is that disavowing and marginalizing supporters of extreme parties only emboldens them. More critically, this position makes it less likely that voters will be persuaded to vote differently in the future.



Against the quagmire facing Ottawa of engagement or ostracization with their colleagues in Vienna, perhaps the most sensible way forward would be a policy of “protest but participate”. It declares Canada’s dissatisfaction with segments of the FPÖ that compose the coalition government, without giving FPÖ surrogates and media outlets an opportunity to attack Western values. By keeping the lines of communication open with Vienna, Ottawa cannot be accused of ignoring the will of the Austrian electorate. It also reinforces the message globally that Canada will not be intimidated and will defend principles it deems unnegotiable. For these reasons, the Canadian government should ignore the international boycott and adopt a policy of “protest but participate” as it introduces the optimal amount of rudeness and diplomatic space toward Kurz and the ÖVP.

Despite the bleak outlook surrounding Austria’s coalition government, Anton Pelinka, a political science professor at Central European University, offers a more optimistic view of the political landscape: “The situation in Europe today – including Central Europe – is very different from the 1920s and 1930s. Despite all the authoritarian (populistic) tendencies which became stronger in many parts of Europe, totalitarian movements (like historic fascism/Nazism) are no threat as there is no threat of military intervention from the outside (like in the past from Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, or the USSR) – at the moment as well as in the foreseeable future. Of course, democracy is never guaranteed, but democracy in Europe today is significantly stronger than 80 or 90 years ago.”

## ► About the Author

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