

Disinformation campaign scandal shakes Austrian Social Democrats

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Just a few days before parliamentary elections on 15 October, a scandal has shaken the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

According to news magazine *Profil* and daily newspaper *Die Presse*, a “special unit” controlled by SPÖ policy adviser Tal Silberstein is responsible for two fake Facebook pages in a disinformation campaign against Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz, the lead candidate of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP).

One page, “We are for Sebastian Kurz,” presented itself as a fan site for the ÖVP leader. Because of its racist and anti-Semitic tone, the originator was originally suspected of being part of the right-wing milieu. Posts demanded the immediate closure of the Austrian border at the Brenner Pass and attacked the SPÖ lead candidate with hateful comments. The other page, “The Truth About Sebastian Kurz,” attacked Kurz employing right-wing propaganda.

Silberstein is a flamboyant international figure. He also advises right-wing governments in Israel, Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine and politicians in Romania. According to Wikipedia, in the 2002 Bolivian election campaign, he advised the candidate Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to start a “dirty campaign” against his opponent. Silberstein was arrested in Israel on 14 August, on the charge of bribing the president of Guinea.

Silberstein has been active with the SPÖ regularly for over 15 years. Among others, he has advised the party’s long-standing mayor of Vienna Michael Häupl and former Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer. According to *Profil*, Kern and the SPÖ provided Silberstein with extensive powers and a budget of 500,000 euros for the current campaign, but claim not to have known anything about Silberstein’s dirty campaign.

“Silberstein has acted without any mandate and without the knowledge of the federal executive director,” the party said in a statement.

The SPÖ could not explain why the party’s executive director and election head, Georg Niedermühlbichler, announced his resignation immediately after news of the scandal broke. The party had officially parted ways with Silberstein after he had been arrested in Israel.

Regardless of who knew what in the SPÖ, the fact that it was using such a dubious political adviser casts a harsh light on the state of the party. Being already completely discredited by its right-wing policies and unable to offer voters a positive perspective, its election campaign is based on charlatans and manipulation.

The appointment of Kern as government and party leader already spoke volumes about the right-wing character of the SPÖ. The former railway boss set his goals as carrying through radical austerity measures, boosting the powers of the state and, above all, working together with the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

For months, the SPÖ and the other parties have been seeking to outdo each other in whipping up anti-refugee sentiment and the call for more state powers. Both the Social Democrats and the Conservatives are in principle prepared to form a government with the far-right FPÖ. The FPÖ’s chief, Heinz-Christian Strache, has pointed out in interviews that the ÖVP and SPÖ have adopted many policies for which his party was criticized earlier as being racist.

According to recent surveys published before the scandal broke, the SPÖ and the FPÖ were on a par with 20 percent, while the ÖVP lay clearly ahead. The media is already assuming that the election will prove “devastating” for the SPÖ. “Kern no longer has a chance,” said Wolfgang Bachmayer in the *Kurier*

newspaper.

Among young people, the decline of the Social Democrats is even clearer. According to a survey conducted by Youth Trend Monitor, the ÖVP and the FPÖ reach 24 percent among 14- to 29-year-olds, and the SPÖ just 13 percent.

The current SPÖ-ÖVP grand coalition in Vienna is already implementing the FPÖ's programme. Recently, it drastically tightened up the asylum law, cut social benefits for migrants and adopted a so-called "Burka ban." Representatives of the SPÖ right-wing, such as Defence Minister Hans Peter Doskozil, and the influential trade union wing, propound xenophobia and law-and-order policies, just like the FPÖ.

Kern himself calls for the country's borders to be policed more stringently against refugees. He explicitly supported the closure of the Balkan route by right-wing governments in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. On the grounds that the SPÖ will not accept "economic migrants," the SPÖ is supporting tougher action against refugees in the Mediterranean.

The bankruptcy of the SPÖ is symptomatic of the entire political establishment in Austria, which stands completely aloof from the population.

The Greens, who had already reached 12 percent in the 2013 elections, and whose candidate Alexander van der Bellen is federal president, are threatened with failing to clear the four percent hurdle for entry into parliament. The Green Youth Association left the party some time ago and joined with the Austrian Communist Party, a reactionary Stalinist remnant, as the "KPÖ Plus". This alliance is mainly fishing for support from SPÖ bureaucrats who are disappointed and fear for their posts.

Former Green Peter Pilz may also enter parliament on his own slate. He left the Greens because, in his opinion, they did not move quickly enough to the right. Pilz, a former Pabloite, together with ex Greens, Social Democrats and business figures, opposes "political Islam" and "false tolerance" towards refugees.



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