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In Election, Austria's Nazi Past Raises Its Head

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD OCT. 16, 2017

An anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim party won the Austrian elections on Sunday, and its leader might form a government with a party founded by ex-Nazis.

So much for the hopes of spring that election results in the Netherlands and France hinted that the political tide in Europe had turned away from the far right. Last month, Alternative for Germany became the first far-right party to enter Germany's Parliament since World War II, winning 13 percent of the vote and 94 parliamentary seats.

In Austria, the leader of the victorious People's Party, Sebastian Kurz, 31, has tried to put a fresh, young face on his stodgy conservative party, changing its traditional black color to a trendy turquoise. But there's nothing forward-looking about his platform, which taps into the fears that the 90,000 migrants Austria took in from 2015 to 2016 are siphoning away social benefits from hard-working Austrians, and that Muslims pose a cultural and security threat.

And according to preliminary results, the Freedom Party, founded by ex-Nazis in the 1950s, was in a race for second, with about 26 percent of the vote, to the People's Party's more than 31 percent. A coalition government of the two parties could be in the cards.

Like right-wing extremists elsewhere in Europe, the Freedom Party enjoys good relations with people close to President Trump. A delegation of Freedom Party leaders attended an election-night party in Trump Tower last November, and a party leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, posted on Facebook that he had met with Mr. Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn. And, like other right-wing European parties, it has close ties with President Vladimir Putin of Russia.

This presents a challenge to Mr. Kurz. "We have to establish a new political style in this country," he told supporters on Sunday, "we have to create a new culture." But if this is what he really wants to achieve, he must reject the Freedom Party, its ugly past, its unholy relationships with the Kremlin and with the baser impulses of the Trump administration, and form — as he well can — his new government with either the center-left Social Democrats, which received nearly 27 percent of the vote, or in coalition with a group of smaller parties.

Mr. Kurz is staunchly pro-European. Only by rejecting the hatred and divisions of the past can his new government play a constructive role in shaping a future for Austria and for Europe, where nationalist fears must be tackled by addressing citizens' legitimate concerns about security and economic fairness without ceding ground to xenophobes.

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