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Austria's Communists Are Showing How Class

Politics Is Done

In Sunday's state elections in Salzburg, Austria, the Communist Party scored 12% of the vote. Their success mobilizing around housing issues shows that a focus on working people's material needs can rally support even in long-conservative areas.



Communist Party of Austria leader Kay-Michael Dankl at a demonstration with fellow party members and supporters in Salzburg, Austria, in September, 2022. (@kay_dankl / Twitter)

On Sunday, April 23, Austria's political landscape was rocked by a true earthquake. In legislative elections in the state of Salzburg, where conservative and far-right parties combined currently control over 60 percent of the seats, the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) won 11.7 percent and thirty-one thousand of the votes cast. This result put the party in fourth place, behind the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP, 30.4 percent), the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, 25.7 percent), and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ, 17.9 percent) — yet ahead of the Greens, as well as NEOS, a libertarian party which missed the threshold to return to the state parliament.

This result is striking in many respects. The last and only time that the KPÖ had earned a mandate in a Salzburg state election was in 1945, off the back of the Allied victory in World War II, when it managed a modest 3.8 percent of the vote. In most Salzburg state elections since then, the Communists have not even cracked the 1 percent mark — when they have bothered to run at all. In the last election in 2018, they received a mere 0.4 percent and one thousand votes.

Yet the KPÖ's success is not just unprecedented for Salzburg state. Before Sunday, the party had never managed a double-digit result in any Austrian state election. Even in Styria — for decades the only Austrian state with Communist representatives in its legislature — the party won 6 percent of the vote and two mandates in 2019, the most recent election year. Now it will likely control four of the thirty-six seats in the next Salzburg state legislature.

Of the €1,800 he earns each month as a city councilmember, Communist Kay-Michael Dankl donates €400 to a social fund set up to provide financial assistance to people in need.

The KPÖ also gave a strong showing in the city of Salzburg itself — the fourth-largest in Austria, with over one hundred fifty thousand people. There, it came in second place with 21.5 percent of the vote, only three points behind the ÖVP. This result approaches typical KPÖ electoral performances in the Styrian capital of Graz, the Communists' national stronghold, where local party chair [Elke Kahr](#) won a surprise victory with 28.8 percent of the vote in the 2021 municipal election. Since then, Kahr has served as the only Communist mayor of a major European city. Yet with the next Salzburg municipal election scheduled for 2024, there is already speculation in national media about whether a second Austrian state capital could soon be governed by a Communist.

A Surprise With a Long Prehistory

Many analyses of the KPÖ's Salzburg surprise have focused on the young, charismatic candidate at the top of the party's electoral list, the thirty-four-year-old historian and museum tour guide Kay-Michael Dankl. A native of Salzburg city who spent part of his teenage years

in Tucson, Arizona, the plain-spoken Dankl comes off as authentic and genuine. According to the initial reactions on election night, he was especially successful in winning over voters who feel alienated from the political status quo.

Yet the fact that Dankl stood for election as a Communist was hardly inevitable. Dankl's political career began during his time at the University of Salzburg, where he became active in the student organization of Austria's Green Party. Later, from 2015–17, he headed the Greens' party school in Salzburg and served as the leader of their national youth organization, the Young Greens. But when the Young Greens criticized the Greens' lack of class politics and internal democracy several months prior to the 2017 Austrian parliamentary election, they were unceremoniously expelled from their mother party.

Just a few years ago, the Austrian Communists had no more than a few thousand, mostly older members and virtually zero national relevance — think Democratic Socialists of America prior to 2016.

Instead of giving up, Dankl and the Young Greens decided to campaign with the KPÖ under the auspices of an electoral alliance named [KPÖ PLUS](#) (PLUS stands for *Plattform Unabhängig und Solidarisch* or Independent Solidarity Platform). At the time, the KPÖ had no more than a few thousand, mostly older members and virtually zero national relevance — think Democratic Socialists of America prior to 2016. Though it stood candidates in parliamentary elections, it rarely earned more than 1 percent of the vote.

Outside of Styria, there was little consistent activity between elections, apart from the odd standing meeting that some local chapters still held at the district office or pub. Nevertheless, for the young activists looking to engage in class politics, the KPÖ ultimately seemed like a good fit. And in light of Austria's looming lurch to the right — which [came to pass](#) when ÖVP candidate Sebastian Kurz won the 2017 election and formed a coalition government with the FPÖ — they viewed precisely this kind of politics as the order of the day: according to the analysis of Dankl and other Young Greens at the time, “the rightward lurch in Austria can only be stopped by a strong [movement from below](#).”

KPÖ PLUS only finished with 0.7 percent in the 2017 parliamentary election. However, the electoral campaign itself initiated a process of mutual learning between the old, historically aware Communist cadre and the young, motivated activists, paving the way for future cooperation. Shortly thereafter in 2018, the Young Greens refounded themselves as the Young Left. They also began receiving financial support from the KPÖ and now function as a de facto youth organization of the party.

In recent years, a number of current and former members of the Young Greens/Young Left — including Dankl — have also joined the KPÖ. The merging of these two milieus — of the knowledge and experience of the older generation with the energy and enthusiasm of the younger — has formed the basis of an emergent left-wing force that was desperately missing from the Austrian political scene. And now, the years of work that have gone into building this force are starting to bear fruit.

Styrian Model

The majority of the new KPÖ activists from Young Greens/Young Left circles are not from Styria and were not socialized politically in the Styrian party organization's networks. Yet as most of them are too young to have firsthand experience of the infighting between the Styrian KPÖ and the national party leadership during the tumultuous 1990s, they have been able to more impartially adopt the far [more successful](#) approach of their Styrian comrades. Above all, this model entails a clear focus on issues that affect the day-to-day lives of all working people. Moreover, it's maintained outside of election campaigns through a highly concrete and personal form of engagement.

This is precisely the model that Dankl has pursued in Salzburg since 2019, when he first ran in a municipal election in the state capital. Similar to former KPÖ Graz chairman [Ernest Kaltenegger](#) in the 1980s, Dankl focused his campaign predominantly on housing — a logical choice given that Salzburg has the second-highest rent prices of any Austrian city. In doing so, he managed to win 3.7 percent of the vote and a seat on the city council. This strategy was based on the simple recognition that the KPÖ can use the issue of housing not only to drive a wedge through local politics but also to attract strong support outside of the Left's ever-dwindling core electorate.

By providing direct support for people in need and maintaining a focus on the issue of affordable housing over his four years as a city councilmember, Dankl has made his name as a genuine champion of the interests of working people.

As the only Communist member of the Salzburg city council, Dankl has placed great emphasis on grassroots work and personal contact with his constituents. Drawing on a long-established practice of the Styrian KPÖ, he holds regular office hours when people come by to discuss their everyday problems. Of the €1,800 he earns each month as a city councilmember, he donates €400 to a social fund set up to provide financial assistance to people in need.

Some leftists criticize this practice as a form of charity as opposed to politics. In fact, it is better understood as propaganda of the deed: by offering others concrete assistance with their

own resources, KPÖ politicians have proven their credibility and earned voters' trust. And although this practice will hardly bring about structural transformation in itself, it has helped Austria's Communists in office understand which structural transformations are most urgently needed, which has in turn influenced the specific demands of the party's electoral platforms.

By providing direct support in this manner and maintaining a focus on the issue of affordable housing over his four years as a city councilman, Dankl has made his name as a genuine champion of the interests of working people. To be sure, he and his party are far removed from having attracted the support of a broad majority of Austrians. Yet they have demonstrated that it is possible even in conservative regions to win people over to a left-wing project that unites reforms in the here and now with a vision of a different society. One can only hope that socialists elsewhere will take note.