

## Learning from Salzburg

KPÖ Plus becomes the second strongest force in the municipal council and mayoral elections in Salzburg

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«Einer, der sich ums Wohnen kümmert» Nicht nur im Wahlkampf ist Kay-Michael Dankl präsent in den Wohnbezirken. Der KPÖ-Kandidat für das Bürgermeisteramt in Salzburg erzielte bei den Gemeinderatswahlen am 10. März 28 Prozent und zog in die Stichwahl ein, wo er gegen den Kandidaten der SPÖ antritt.

FOTO: KPÖ

Kay-Michael Dankl is greeted with cheers as he arrives on his bike at the Volksheim community centre in Salzburg. Several hundred friends and comrades have gathered at the venue on the evening of 10 March to celebrate election night.

On this evening, KPÖ Plus (an electoral alliance between the Austrian Communist Party and the Young Greens) notched up its second triumph in as many years, following up on the success of last year's regional elections. It became the second-strongest party in the municipal council and mayoral elections, increasing its 2019 result sixfold to 23.1 percent. This gave the party ten seats in the municipal council, previously, it had occupied just a single seat. Its candidate for mayor, Kay-Michael Dankl, even managed to get 28 percent of the primary vote, meaning he now progresses to the run-off, where he will go up against the candidate from the SPÖ (Social Democratic Party of Austria).

The result shows that in just a few short years, KPÖ Plus has emerged as a political force to be reckoned with, putting pressure on the established parties and mobilizing voters who had previously turned their backs on politics. With this, it has once again managed a feat

that had already attracted national attention after its results in the 2021 local elections in Graz: regaining political trust through a credible and pragmatic approach.

This political success is not solely due to the charisma of the candidate at the top of their ticket, as is demonstrated by the results achieved by the rest of the party. It is also worth noting that KPÖ Plus managed to make particularly strong gains in traditionally working-class districts. It has managed to win (back) non-voters, as well as voters who had previously supported the radical right-wing FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria). A strong left-wing voice is thus proving to be the **most effective means** against the rise of the right — and all without playing into their narratives. Instead, the party succeeded in making housing and affordable rents into an election issue that the other parties were unable to ignore.

## Winning Votes through Credibility

Though the success of the Communist Party might come as a surprise, it shouldn't. For some time now, **many left-wingers, including Germans, have been visiting Graz and Salzburg** to take a closer look at the "KPÖ model". It could almost be described as a sort of "communist tourism".

It is pretty apparent that their recipe for success is a combination of three factors: daily grassroots work, a style of politics that is fundamentally different to that of the other parties, and credible representatives. As in Graz, the party's elected representatives limit their salaries as politicians to the average salary of a skilled worker (2,300 euros), with the remainder going into a social fund that provides direct assistance to people in need. In most cases, however, it is not just financial help that is needed: the party offers regular consultation sessions, where people come to talk about housing, to seek help in dealing with government agencies, or for support with everyday matters. The Mayor of Graz, Elke Kahr, also opens her doors twice a week for these consultation hours. This shows that making yourself available to constituents can make a radical difference at the ballot box.

These consultation sessions also allow the party to gain knowledge that it can then take into parliament, an example being its prioritization of the interests and perspectives of tenants on the issue of housing, drawing its political material directly from real life rather than from the political circus. And in Graz, as in Salzburg, the KPÖ has not allowed itself to be distracted from the work at hand: it consistently sticks to its issues and demands even when the media discourse is focused on other topics.

They also put forward credible representatives, each with their own policy priorities. Kay-Michael Dankl, for example, has been campaigning for social housing for years, allowing him to build significant trust among voters. His election posters even read: "A candidate who cares about housing". And together with his team, he does not just campaign in the weeks leading up to a vote, but

also regularly gets out and about between election cycles, especially in those districts where the poverty rate and the proportion of non-voters are particularly high.

The party not only comes across as credible and approachable, it also presents itself as friendly and willing to listen to people's concerns. The many photos of their activities from recent weeks bear witness to this. On so-called *Aktionswochenenden* (activity weekends), the Salzburg team was also able to mobilize volunteers from all over the country for the election campaign. Older comrades who were previously inactive got involved, and large numbers of younger people joined via the Young Left.

## The Youth Factor

The Young Left is indeed a decisive factor: its growth and success was a result of the expulsion of the Young Greens from the Green Party over five years ago. These young, well-educated Greens then found their way to independence, before joining forces with the KPÖ. What is described in some media coverage as a "rejuvenation treatment" by the former Young Greens is in reality a process of moving closer to the Graz model — the former Greens joined the Communist Party, not the other way round. Their joining the party is part of a transformation process gripping the entire KPÖ, which was preceded by the success of the Styrian model under Ernst Kaltenegger and later Elke Kahr.

To interpret the process as evidence of the **success of the movement model or an organizing-based approach** is to overlook the fact that the success of the model lies more in a return to key issues than in mere rejuvenation. Attempts to characterize the approach as "service-oriented politics" are likewise somewhat off the mark. The close contact with voters and consultation hours are not just a means to an end, but are a product of the conviction that this is a party that is connected with people's everyday lives, with a view to ultimately improving them. In short, the comrades share a political model that is expressed in a shared practice.

In the newly renovated Volksheim, this concept is put into practice in straightforward ways: people cook together, there is a games night for girls, Marxist reading circles, and party meetings. The election campaign is professional, but it's also supposed to be enjoyable for those running it. And there is a place for everyone — whether at the information stand, handing out flyers, sticking up election posters, or supporting the other volunteers. This political work is pragmatic and avoids getting bogged down in petty discussions. In this way, the Salzburg KPÖ has managed to achieve in just a few years what the Graz party organization had previously built up over more than 30 years of local politics.

## Instructive, but Not Replicable

The example of Salzburg illustrates that in a medium-sized city, it takes about a dozen well-trained individuals to build a functioning and unifying party organization within a few years. The fact that something similar is currently being attempted in Innsbruck shows that the KPÖ is not reading to rest on its laurels — a hopeful sign for the German-speaking and European Left, which is currently characterized by division and defeat.

However, the model has so far only been applied to local politics, and it remains to be seen if it will also be successful in the upcoming national elections in the autumn. At the state and federal levels, conflicts await that the KPÖ has thus far been able to avoid, but which the German Left, for example, has already experienced through its involvement in various governing coalitions. The young Salzburg KPÖ Plus has also survived the major debates on foreign and peace policy more or less unscathed in the local election campaign; whether this will be the case at the national elections remains to be seen.

Despite the peculiarities of the Austrian context, the KPÖ's approach is quite promising because it does not depend on individual personalities, instead focusing on the systematic and long-term development of political power among the populace, largely ignoring the cycles of public debate and societal "trigger points" (Mau/Lux/Westheuser). The party-building process is bringing a new style of politics to bear that can evidently be successful, even over shorter periods of time. And this political style is in principle not limited to the Salzburg region, but also offers plenty of lessons that the German Left would do well to learn from.

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*Translated by Juan Diego Otero & Joel Scott for **Gegensatz Translation Collective**.*

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