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INTRAPARTY COMMUNICATION AND PERMEABILITY IN THE SPÖ FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LOCAL POLITICAL ACTORS

ABSTRACT

The Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) has seen its electorate steadily decline in recent years. As the party struggles to communicate clear messages to voters, debates about the internal party's communication and leadership are increasingly being played out in the media. This study examines the perceptions of local political actors of the SPÖ regarding intra-party communication between organizational levels. The research methodology includes problem-centered interviews and group discussions with 12 local SPÖ actors from Lower Austria and Vienna. The results of the study shed light on key issues such as the need for improved intra-party communication and better transition structures for activists within the party organization. The recent success of the Communist Party (KPÖ Plus) in the federal state of Salzburg in April 2023 underscores the challenges facing the SPÖ in the current situation. Two of the three candidates for the membership referendum from April 24-May 10, 2023, in which the party base will make a preliminary decision on the future leadership of the SPÖ in order to end internal strife, argue for breaking through elitist bubbles and creating a grassroots participatory party that reflects the grassroots sentiment surveyed in this study.

Keywords: social democracy, organizational communication, organizational crisis

INTRODUCTION

The Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) currently seems to be at the peak of an internal party crisis that has been slowly gathering momentum for years (Baier-Fuchs, 2013; Micus, 2011) and now threatens to reach escalation (Imwinkelried, 2023; Kroisleitner et al., 2023; Mittelstaedt, 2023). In the current situation, there seems to be a lack of professional strategy in dealing with this party crisis in terms of crisis communication (Schreyögg & Ostermann, 2013). It is about the role and mediation of credibility by the party leadership, which currently is held by a woman for the first time in party history. Alongside the still unanswered question within the party about its positioning with regard to the migration issue, it is a matter of party ideological directional decisions in the categories “left” and “right”, political catchwords such as loyalty and solidarity and about a dynamic “from below” that, as a kind of party-internal grassroots movement, demands a new “left” center for the party and urges to leave old organizational and communication patterns behind once and for all. To put it in the words of former Federal Chancellor (SPÖ) Dr. Fred Szynovatz: „Ich weiß schon, meine Damen und Herren, das alles ist sehr kompliziert so wie diese Welt, in der wir leben und handeln, und die Gesellschaft, in der wir uns entfalten wollen.“ (Stenographisches Protokoll. 2. Sitzung des Nationalrates der Republik Österreich, 1983). Therefore, the SP is in an election campaign; however, it is not about convincing voters of its own political issues, but rather about orienting party members and actors as active members of this society who must decide between three factions during an orientation survey prior to a party conference. This article aims to shed light on the local actors who contribute to the parties’ so-called grassroots work for and with the people at the local level and thus away from the elites of the party organization at the top organizational level. Qualitative data came from the author’s doctoral study, collected between February 2021 and December 2022. Interviews and group discussions were conducted with local political parties and their actors of the SPÖ in two federal states of Austria. This article aims to create a differentiated understanding

of the internal situation of actors in the SP by examining how internal communication within the party organization at the local, district and state levels is experienced from the perspective of actors at the local level and, furthermore, how permeability for actors within the party is perceived.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (SPÖ)

Since 1945, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) has decisively shaped the political landscape of the country. The origins of the party can be traced back to the late 19th century when the workers’ movement across Europe began to organize to advocate for the interests of the working class. The predecessor organization of the SP, the Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SDAP), was initially a Marxist party, but gradually moved towards a more moderate stance. At the beginning of the 20th century, the party played an important role in the founding of the First Austrian Republic and contributed significantly to the drafting of the constitution and the enshrinement of essential rights of the country. With its social democratic principles, the party emphasizes the importance of the welfare state: the SPÖ advocates comprehensive health, education, and social insurance systems and the rights of workers. The SPÖ also promoted developments in women’s politics and gender equality. A success story of social democracy is the era of “Red Vienna” (1918-1934), in which the city government introduced various social reforms. The construction of municipal housing was encouraged by the public sector to ensure affordable housing for the citizens of the city. Similarly, the SPÖ introduced general unemployment insurance by law. Under the leadership of Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983), the SPÖ implemented numerous measures, including the further expansion of the welfare state or investments in the Austrian education system to enable education for all. (Konrad, 2008; Maimann, 1988; Puller & Wenninger, 2019; Sandner, 2018). As one of Austria’s (former) two major parties, along with the conservative Austrian People’s Party (VP), the SPÖ has been part of coalition governments from 1945 to 2000

with a short interruption from 1966 to 1970. Due to the strengthening of the right-wing forces in the form of the Freedom Party (FPÖ), the largely familiar division of Austrian political power into large coalitions since 1945 has become increasingly unstable. As a result, the SPÖ has been represented in only four of the 11 federal governments since 2000 (Regierungen Seit 1945 - Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, n.d.). Again and again, the Social Democrats were “replaced” by the right-leaning FPÖ as a coalition partner, with the ÖVP having formed a federal government with them four times so far (1983-1986, 2000-2003, 2003-2005, 2017-2019). ÖVP-led Governments with the FPÖ as junior-coalition-partner have repeatedly been accompanied by scandals, most recently in the course of the Ibiza affair¹ (Obermaier et al., 2019; Özkeçeci, 2019). Despite the turbulent domestic political developments of recent years and the deep crises of the ÖVP and FPÖ parties, the SPÖ does not seem to be able to use the crises to its advantage.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS IN CRISIS

Literature offers a large number of studies on the crisis of social democracy, its causes, and evaluations of future developments. Bandau (2019) provides a valuable systematic overview of the main social science contributions to this debate. Keating and McCrone (2013) noted already ten years ago that in western Europe, due to the crisis for social democracy in general, very few parties of the left spectrum are in power. Based on their analysis of the 1975-2014 period, Loxbo et al. (2019) conclude that the welfare state was key to the growth of social democratic parties in the past, but the recent decline of these parties

is due to a reversal of their earlier success. For example, Bremer (2018) examined the programmatic response of European social democratic parties to the 2009 recession in 11 Western European countries and found that the Great Recession and the austerity that prevailed in response contributed to the crisis of social democracy in Europe. Rennwald (2020) analyses the class base of social democracy at the beginning of the 21st century using data from the European Social Survey. Thus, the explanations for the crisis of social democracy seem to be multiple (Kitschelt, 1994; Sassoon, 2013; Walter, 2021). Moschonas (2002) wrote 20 years ago that the adoption of neoliberal ideas and the takeover of party leadership by representatives of the new middle class irreversibly damaged the core identity of social democratic parties. Optimistic observers, however, see opportunities for programmatic renewal and a shift away from neoliberalism, with social democracy (based on the German SPD) likely to be supported by several parties in the future due to social change, according to Walter (2018, p. 377). Moschonas considers the disappearance of the unique sociological identity of social democratic organizations to be central to their weakening and estimates that the revival of their political programs through a reconnection to social issues to be less successful. The latter, it is argued, is actually hindered rather than helped by the new sociology of social democratic organizations. Mouffe (2021) therefore locates the need for left populism in light of the crisis of the social-liberal parties and the debate on identity politics, but also sees a general institutional and intellectual inertia of social democracy in the sense of an inability to seriously question existing conditions in order to offer voters a political alternative. In the current Austrian situation of the SPÖ in 2023, such left-wing populism is indicated in the course of an inner-party power and direction dispute that has flared up at the federal level, in which the leadership question of the party is to be fought out publicly (in the media) in the run-up to an extraordinary party conference and decided on the basis of a membership poll. Based on the three candidates standing for election to the party leadership, the SPÖ's membership base currently

1 The Ibiza affair had far-reaching consequences for Austrian politics. The resignation of the vice chancellor and FPÖ party leader, the dissolution of the governing coalition between the ÖVP and FPÖ, the subsequent new elections and the investigations against politicians and parties FPÖ and ÖVP were some of the consequences. In the end, Sebastian Kurz, despite everything, was once again chancellor of the successor government with the Greens, as an accused: the Economic and Corruption Prosecution Office (WKStA) suspects the chancellor of making false statements to the Ibiza investigation committee.

seems to be in danger of publicly tearing itself apart (Imwinkelried, 2023) over the question of “left or right” in the media spotlight, to the delight of its equally crisis-ridden competitors. Meanwhile, in the structurally conservative state of Salzburg, the Communists (*Landtagswahl 2023*, 2023) won 11.7 percent (Mittelstaedt, 2023; Vichtl, 2023) in the state election from a standing start (0.4%) and enter the state parliament, while the SPÖ and ÖVP, as former major parties, continue to lose votes. Burgenland’s state governor (SPÖ) Hans Peter Doskozil, who is criticized for taking right-wing positions in dealing with the migration issue, but who governs with an absolute majority, reminds Rüb’s (2012) view of the (SPÖ’s) transformation from a party of mass integration to a party of the people to a party of cartels as a process of degeneration. Doskozil speaks of the need to dissolve “elitist bubbles” (Marchart & Mittelstaedt, 2023) within the SPÖ because the party elites and the electorate are becoming increasingly distant from each other. Andreas Babler, the third candidate for the party leadership, also calls for a party from the grassroots, a party whose future is not only decided by the big shots in the back rooms of the party headquarters, and formulates this as a “participatory party”. The recent success of the Communist Party (KPÖ Plus) in the federal state of Salzburg in April 2023 underscores the challenges facing the SPÖ in the current situation. Both candidates, Doskozil and Babler, have similar ideas and are revolting against the current party leader, Pamela Rendi-Wagner, who, as a less successful lateral newcomer to the party, has the reputation of being this elitist, disconnected party leader from the capital of Vienna who is distanced from the grassroots (Kroisleitner et al., 2023). In the view of the author of this article, the political messages of the two candidates challenging the party leader are directed less at the electorate than at party members and actors who are actively seeking guidance in this party crisis.

RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

This article explores the question of how the internal lines of communication within the SPÖ,

as experienced from the local perspective of the actors, relate to the current demands for more anti-elitist permeability within the party organization of the SPÖ. The data material comes from the author’s dissertation study and was collected between February 2021 and December 2022. Thus, this article is based on research material collected before the current intensification of the crisis. Data collection methods include problem-centered interviews and group discussions. To answer this research question, statements from a total of 12 actors from two local municipal SPÖ organizations from Lower Austria and Vienna were examined and coded in regard to the aim of this paper’s topic. During the coding process, four interviews were identified in which specific statements were made about intraparty communication and permeability within party structures. As part of the original dissertation study, the highest confidentiality was agreed upon, which also applies to this contribution, and that is why all data are anonymized. The methodological evaluation of the anonymized transcripts was carried out using the qualitative content structure analysis by Kuckartz (2018). In the following chapter, the results will be presented and discussed based on the coded segments derived from the interviews mentioned above.

FINDINGS

The interviews reveal a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by local party actors within the SP, touching on aspects of intraparty communication and permeability. Regarding transitional structures for youth organizations, a participant (P1) expresses concern about inadequate transitional structures for members who want to move from youth organizations to party organizations. The need for a platform is emphasized, which should be aimed at all young party members and should bridge the gap between the party and youth organizations. Furthermore, the organizational subdivision of the party into state parties is criticized as a result of the federal structure of the Republic of Austria, using Vienna and Lower Austria as examples. Such separation and distin-

ction hinder intraparty communication and cooperation. It is suggested that the party should recognize the relevance of continuous exchange between regions and that this should be reflected in party structures to promote permeability for the actors. Regarding talent management and growth, P1 expresses that the SPÖ does not actively search for talents but only allows individuals to participate if they approach the party themselves. In the case of Vienna, it is particularly difficult to become an active party member, which the interviewee expressed as follows: "I think the SPÖ Vienna does not bring anyone in. They graciously let someone participate. They don't bring anyone in. It is not like that at all." Therefore, the respondent actor believes that the party should make a greater effort to attract and promote talents in order to continue growing and being successful. P1 also talks about his and his group's contribution of criticism or opinions in meetings of the district committee by doing this verbally or in writing and that this actually works quite well. Of course, it had occasionally led to conflicts. P1 appreciates the opportunity for discussions on the district committee, as it allows everyone to speak without restrictions and encourages participation of everyone. The interviewee adds that this is not the case everywhere, as one usually needs to be elected to be delegated and invited to a party's district committee. However, there is a risk that people might make endless statements, turning the discussion into a long series of comments without real conversation. This would require more moderation effort, especially online. However, P1 is grateful that their district party chairs do not ignore or suppress them, allowing their criticism to be heard and accepted. Another party actor at the local level (P2) mentions that coordinating with party management in the district is time consuming and challenging. The interviewee believes that communication and understanding between younger and older members can be improved through personal meetings, where they can discuss various topics and share experiences. They emphasize the need to bring together the enthusiasm of younger members with the expertise and broader perspective of older members, which could give the party a significant boost. According to

P2, there is a general lack of awareness about the various *Sektionen* or the party's organizational units within the party, and the interviewee suggests that fostering intra-party communication can lead to improvement both internally and externally. P3 talks about his political socialization within the Social Democratic Party in rural Lower Austria and the outdated organizational structure of the regional SPÖ he experienced there, which was not receptive to the ideas of younger actors. This ultimately led to the establishment of an independent citizens' list that operated within the social democratic context but was essentially independent. The interviewee describes the constitution of the rural local SPÖ in his hometown of Lower Austria as structurally weak, with poor communication between the local and district levels. The interviewee, who holds a Ph.D., also spoke of his move to Vienna. In this context, he reported on his experiences of actively trying to join the party in Vienna, but his attempts to contact the Vienna SPÖ remained unanswered. When he learned about the establishment of an activist social-democratic thematic section in a Viennese municipal district, he joined it. Nevertheless, he continued to participate in activities with his former Lower Austrian party members and helped organize discussion events and parties in his hometown remotely from Vienna. The interviewee emphasizes the importance of maintaining connections and remaining active within the party structure despite the challenges. In this conversation, another actor (P4) discusses his experiences with the district party, expressing frustration over its perceived lack of political involvement and ineffective communication. They feel that if they had more resources at their disposal, such as skilled communicators and graphic designers, it would vastly improve the local party's ability to communicate and engage with the public. The interviewee shares that they have encountered challenges in obtaining timely support and responses from the district party. The actor suggests some system that could be established to facilitate better sharing of resources and collaboration between local parties, which would strengthen inter-party communication and address the lack of resources available to individual local parties. The actor also emphasizes

the importance of breaking down regional issues to the community level and organizing local press conferences or events. They believe that this approach would help local parties better connect with their constituents and address issues relevant to their communities. However, the interviewee has not had much success implementing these ideas and feels that improved collaboration between local parties is essential to achieve these goals.

CONCLUSIONS

This study, set against the backdrop of the crisis of Austrian social democracy, examines the challenges and opportunities within the SPÖ. The literature highlights various factors contributing to the decline of social democratic parties, such as the adoption of neoliberal ideas, the disconnection of the leadership from the party base, and the erosion of membership. Interviews reveal key themes such as the need for better intra-party communication, improved transition structures for youth organizations, and a focus on talent management. In the current Austrian context, the SPÖ faces an internal power struggle and the potential fracturing of its membership base. The recent success of the Communists in Salzburg demonstrates the challenges for the SPÖ by losing terrain against new competitors entering the arena from the left. Two of the three candidates for the future leadership of the SP, Hans Peter Doskozil and Andreas Babler, advocate breaking through elitist bubbles and creating a more grassroots, participatory party that takes advantage of the grassroots sentiment surveyed in this study. The data material for this study was collected in 2021 and 2022, i.e., before the current escalation of the party crisis. This paper encourages conducting further interview studies regarding the internal perception of political actors in relation to internal SP party communication toward SPÖ actors as internal stakeholders, after the Federal Party Congress on June 3, 2023.

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UNUTARNJA KOMUNIKACIJA I PROPUSNOST U SPÖ S PERSPEKTIVE LOKALNIH POLITIČKIH AKTERA

SAŽETAK

Austrijska Socijaldemokratska stranka (SPÖ) u posljednjih nekoliko godina bilježi postupan pad broja svojih birača. Kako se stranka bori da bi prenijela jasne poruke biračima, rasprave o komunikaciji i vođstvu stranke sve se više vode u medijima. Ovo istraživanje ispituje percepcije lokalnih političkih aktera SPÖ-a u vezi s unutarnjom komunikacijom stranke. Metodologija istraživanja uključuje problem-orientirane intervju i grupne rasprave s 12 lokalnih SPÖ-ovih aktera iz Donje Austrije i Beča. Rezultati studije osvjetljavaju ključna pitanja poput potrebe za poboljšanom unutarstranačkom komunikacijom i boljim strukturama prijelaza za aktiviste unutar organizacije stranke. Nedavni uspjeh komunista u Salzburgu naglašava izazove s kojima se SPÖ suočava u sadašnjoj situaciji. Dvojica od tri kandidata za referendum za članstvo od 24. travnja do 10. svibnja 2023., u kojem će baza stranke donijeti preliminarnu odluku o budućem vođstvu SPÖ-a kako bi se okončale unutarnje nesuglasice, zagovaraju probijanje elitnih balona i stvaranje tršćanski orijentirane, sudioničke stranke koja odražava tršćanski sentiment koji je istraživani u ovom studiji.

Ključne riječi: socijaldemokracija, organizacijska komunikacija, organizacijska kriza