



CLIMATE VANGUARD

KIG!

The Communist Party of Austria

PARTIES OF THE PEOPLE
PT. 3/6

UNSERE STÄRKE
SOLIDARITÄT

Photo: KPÖ members holding a "Our Strength is Solidarity." sign. Communist Party of Austria, KPÖ.



The Communist Party of Austria (Kommunistische Partei Österreichs, or KPÖ), is among the most promising left political projects in Europe. From base-building to strategic electoral engagement, it offers some important lessons on effective left party organising in the 21st century.

E: ARITÄT! KPÖ



The KPÖ's political fortunes differ depending on which scale you look at. At the national level, the party has earned just 1% of the vote for decades. However, in Graz, Austria's second largest city, the KPÖ has earned about 20% of the vote since the early 2000s.

In 2021, the party won the Graz city council with 28% of the vote and the KPÖ's Elke Kahr was elected mayor.

This localised success is the result of a consistent multi-decade strategy for building popular power. Here's how →



A Useful Party

In the 1990s, the KPÖ's chapter in Graz diagnosed that it "wasn't rooted among the population." So it set out to become "a useful party for everyday life."

It aimed to become a positive force in the lives of working-class Austrians, rather than just shouting about its politics from the sidelines.

In particular, the KPÖ focused its limited resources on a widespread material issue: access to decent, affordable housing.



The KPÖ set up a tenant's hotline, provided legal counsel for renters facing eviction, and won a bill in the city council to cap public-housing rent at a third of the occupants' income.

Strong community organising translated to an electoral breakthrough, with the KPÖ winning 7.9% of the vote in the 1998 Graz election. By securing key positions on the city council, including head of the city's housing department, the KPÖ was able to make further progress.

For example, they guaranteed that each public-housing unit requires its own bathroom.



Strategic Electoral Engagement

Electoral victories in Graz allowed the KPÖ to push its community-organising strategy further, continuing to prove itself as a concrete force for positive change. It did this in a few ways:

Wage cap:

The salary of all elected KPÖ officials is capped at that of the average skilled worker in Austria (€2,500 per month). This ensures that all elected officials remain materially connected with the average person and allows the KPÖ to pool surplus salary into a social fund that supports those in need.

Office hours:

Local KPÖ officials have office hours where people can raise issues directly. They try to provide immediate support, from “providing [people] with legal advice, helping them fill out applications, or giving them direct financial support.” Local officials in Graz see thousands of people every year.

“The social fund basically works like this: when a retiree who can’t afford a hearing aid comes to us, I transfer her €300 for the co-payment. Or when a woman has her power shut off, I call the energy company and ask them to please turn the woman’s electricity back on, tell them I’ll transfer them however much money — and then it gets done.”

– Elke Kahr, Graz Mayor





The 'Styrian Model'

By organising around key issues that affect people's daily lives, the KPÖ has built a popular base among workers and those previously disenfranchised from politics. They've achieved this in a traditionally conservative city, which lacks strong progressive movements and unions.

This has given way to electoral success, which they treat not as an end, but a means to further their strategy of building social power (i.e. campaigns that meet people's needs, build community, and politicise life).

The KPÖ's strategy in Graz has been coined the 'Styrian model'* and is now being replicated in other parts of Austria.

***Note:** Styria is the municipality where Graz is located.



A National Project

In Salzburg, the KPÖ has spent the last few years campaigning hard for housing rights, while also building their base through neighbourhood kitchens, repair cafés, and street parties. In 2023, they won 11.7% of the vote in Salzburg (up from 0.4% in 2018).

Crucially, the KPÖ are clear-eyed about the need to develop a national political project to win more radical transformations. In the words of a KPÖ Graz city councilor, “we don’t preach socialism in one city or something like a municipal transition to socialism.”

However, the party is establishing local power on which a national project can be built.



The KPÖ offers some key lessons for organisers seeking to build an effective mass left party elsewhere:

This is part 3 of 6 in our series analysing leftwing parties from around the world.

Focus your efforts:

Do not fight a battle on every front. Focus resources and capacity on a unifying issue that affects people's everyday lives.

Make yourself useful:

Become a practical force for improving the lives of the working and oppressed classes. This establishes a popular base while drawing support away from the far right.

Strategic electoralism:

Treat elections as a litmus test to gauge the efficacy of base-building efforts. In cases where elections are won, use governing power to further the broader strategy of building power.

Building from below:

A national project must be rooted at the local level, where the organisation can enter into people's everyday lives.