

## Cansu Civelek

### **“My heart is with the Reis [Erdoğan] in Turkey, but in Austria I’m with Ludwig”: Question of representation and Turkish conservative groups in Vienna’s 2020 local elections**

In late September 2020, I stroll along one Vienna’s crowded shopping streets with a close friend and witness election activities by various political parties. The Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) – governing Vienna’s Municipality uninterruptedly since 1919 except for the dictatorship periods 1934-1945 – gathers the largest crowd. Two of their activists ask us which party we will vote for. My friend replies, “we cannot vote”. The activists assume we are tourists. We reply that both of us have lived and worked in Vienna for almost ten years but we aren’t allowed to vote. Puzzled, they ask why. “Because we’re not citizens of Austria: One of us is from Turkey and the other from Mexico.” They claim that “foreigners can also vote” in local elections. We insist that we are prevented from voting as we are non-EU citizens. They seem even more puzzled and ask “really?”, “are you sure?”

With a population of 1.9 million, Vienna is one of the EU’s largest cities, and resident non-citizens are a significant proportion of its population. According to official statistics, “as of early 2019, 30.2 percent or 572,834 residents of Vienna did not hold Austrian citizenship. 251,129 of them were citizens of EU or EFTA countries and 312,705 persons were third-country nationals”<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, almost one third of voting-age residents are not Austrian citizens and cannot vote in any of Austria’s federal or state elections. At local elections, those residents with EU/EFTA citizenship (13.2%) can vote for district councils, but not in federal state elections, nor for Vienna’s municipal council. Non-EU residents (almost 17%), such as myself, cannot vote in any election.

With exceptions of northern EU countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) and few others (Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Lithuania, and Slovenia) which grant the right to vote to all foreign residents, Austria is one of many EU countries which do not extend non-EU residents the right to vote in local elections. This leads to a serious problem of non-representation in EU. In Austria, for instance, in some parts of the so-called *Ausländerbezirke* (“foreigners’ districts”), such as Vienna’s 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> districts, the proportion of non-voters exceeds 50%. Although in 2002, the City’s administration (then: SPÖ and Greens) tried to grant non-EU nationals the right to vote at the district level, ensuing legal conflicts with the federal government ruled by right-wing parties ended with the Constitutional Court’s rejection of Vienna’s proposal. Almost two decades later, the current SPÖ mayor of Vienna, Michael Ludwig, stated: “Personally, I still think that the right to vote in legislative bodies should be linked to Austrian citizenship.”<sup>2</sup> Ludwig’s statement represents a shift away from previously more inclusive politics.

How do minorities with migration background – those who acquired Austrian citizenship and who have not – situate themselves within these debates of representation? In public debates, Austrian citizens of Turkish origin are accused of having lower political engagements and

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<sup>1</sup> According to the information taken from City of Vienna: <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/social/integration/facts-figures/population-migration.html>

<sup>2</sup> Source of the news: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000119882076/buergermeister-ludwig-gegen-auslaenderwahlrecht-in-wien>

voting turnouts. This discussion will explain changing dynamics among voters and non-voters of Turkish origin regarding issues of (non)representation, party choice, and political expectations. Considering the questions of representation, which have ambiguously occupied public and political arenas, it is significant to understand electoral tendencies among migration descendants. Do Turkish communities display disinterest in Austrian politics, as perceived in the media public?

In addition to this question, there are two other significant points to consider. First, many people of Turkish origin, in Austria as in other European countries such as Germany, Netherlands, or Belgium, tend to support conservative and nationalist parties in Turkey whilst mainly voting for social democrats and other parties of the left in their present countries of residence. Social and welfare policies of social democratic parties based on minority and human rights have attracted the conservative Turkish communities who mainly make a living as industrial laborers. That attraction has been a pragmatic choice based on expectations of socio-economic advancement and upward social mobility rather than on class consciousness (Civelek 2017).

Second, as parties on the right have gained ground around the world and across the EU, contradictions regarding minorities' voting tendencies have been examined more closely. Relevant questions have asked why ethnic and religious minorities and those with migration background would vote for parties on the right, rather than the left – those that have historically claimed to represent their interests. In fact, some of them did vote for the “leave” campaign in Britain, or supported Marine Le Pen or Donald Trump (Molas 2020). Anthropologists have increasingly studied people's motivations towards right and far-right politics and intersectional relationship among class, race, ethnic differences, social stratification, e.g. Delouis (2012) examined voters of the Front National in France. Meanwhile, ethical and methodological questions also arrived asking how to study “people we tend not to like” (Gusterson 2017: 213) or “unlikable others” (Pasiëka 2019).

Following these debates about the rise of populist and far-right movements including authoritarian governments and their exclusionary policies, I tackle the question of these minorities' involvement with right wing politics. More specifically, through the example of Vienna, I scrutinize to what extent the legacy of SPÖ affinity continues among conservative people with Turkish origin, and whether they prefer right-wing or far-right parties. What are the issues and rationales behind their electoral choices? Which channels and mechanisms of agency impact their political orientation? Which would be the preferred choice for those still prohibited from voting, if they were granted a right to vote?

## **From Austria's 2016 Presidential Elections to the 2020 Local Elections in Vienna: What has changed?**

Before the 2016 presidential elections in Austria, I conducted research among the conservative Turkish community in Vienna. The research revealed emerging support for the far-right Freedom Party of Austria's (FPÖ) candidate Norbert Hofer among the conservative Turkish community whose political orientation is pro-Erdoğan or for pro-Islamist and nationalist parties in Turkey (Civelek 2017). Although the FPÖ has scapegoated them through anti-Islam campaigns, the main reasons for this support were the FPÖ's “law and order” promises, anti-refugee politics, and religious references. People with shifting sympathies expressed disappointment with social democratic and leftist parties for failing to address people's realities, leaving them as undesired citizens.

For the 2020 Vienna local election, I undertook follow-up research among those who can vote in Austria and those who cannot to understand opinions on representation and expectations regarding the elections.

My field research was carried out in Vienna's 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> districts, where a significant proportion of Turkish origin residents live. This involved visiting cafes, restaurants, bazaars, shops, mosques, and hometown associations. I also used social media and online platforms to reach a larger population. I closely followed two Vienna-based women's groups on Facebook. One of them has over 20,000 members, attracting women of second and third generation migration backgrounds who mainly call themselves "Turkish" and display conservative and religious tendencies. The other has around 4,000 members and welcomes mainly Turkish-born women who moved to Vienna in the later stages of their lives for educational and occupational reasons.

Among these women's groups, I created a pollster and offered a choice between – "I am a resident of Austria and I have the right to vote/ I do not have a right to vote." While 400 women participated from the first group, 100 attended from the second group. In the first group, two thirds had the right to vote, but only one third of the second group. While the first group showed significant interest in the SPÖ, the new local Viennese pro-Turkish/pro-Muslim/pro-migrant party SÖZ – Social Austria of the Future – was also regarded favourably. Interlocutors from the second group were less excited by the SÖZ but rather supported the SPÖ, the Greens and the Left Party, *Links*.

In a poll for the first group on Facebook, open only half an hour as group administrators sought to avoid heavy political conflicts, some 300 women discussed whether they would vote for SPÖ or SÖZ. Over two thirds were SPÖ voters, with the rest supporting SÖZ. SPÖ voters felt that SPÖ supported local Turkish-Muslim minority interests, whereas SÖZ supporters wanted to give a chance to a new party which "truly emerges from the Turks and Muslims while voicing the problems of Turkish society", as one woman explained. SÖZ supporters also expressed disappointment about the SPÖ, by suggesting: "Nothing has changed for the improvement of the Turks after all those years of voting for them. It is time to show Austria that Turks are capable of getting involved in politics by their own means." Some SPÖ supporters, however, were not convinced of the ability of a new party to make "real politics" and did not want to "split the vote".

Some SPÖ supporters who strongly sympathize with Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP's politics in Turkey were worried about the founding leaders of the SÖZ, questioning those of Turkish background for not openly advocating official Turkey's agenda or not showing enough sympathy for President Erdoğan. Following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, some SÖZ leaders resigned from the Union of International Democrats (UID, formerly UETD), a pro-AKP organization. Many in the Facebook group questioned whether they belonged to the terrorist organization FETÖ, accused of organizing the coup, suggesting they were against the interests of Turkey and its leader. Furthermore, the non-Turkish Austrian founders of the SÖZ were also suspect as one founder previously had served the Green Party. Therefore, she was suspected by conservative Turks to hold an "anti-Turkey, anti-Erdoğan, pro-Kurdish" position.

Visits to hometown associations, particularly from the Black Sea region in Turkey allowed me to meet second and third generation immigrant descendants in Vienna, mainly men. Usually, when I entered, a Turkish TV channel would be broadcasting speeches of Erdoğan, news, or a football game. Many openly and proudly expressed their support and gratitude to President Erdoğan. Although some people expressed their general faith in the nationalist party in Turkey, they mostly seemed to support "Erdoğan's war" as a world leader against "foreign forces", in the words of one.

When I turned the topic to Viennese local elections, the same man and his Erdoğan-supporting friends quickly switched the conversation towards Austrian politics. These men were following election dynamics closely, contrary to the Austrian media's portrayal of Turkish disinterest. Some had not obtained voting rights, unable to pass a required language test. They criticized the fact that, despite living and working in Vienna for over thirty years, paying taxes, and creating families, they have no right to vote in elections: "A random EU student who just moved to this city a few months ago having no idea about Austrian politics can vote but we cannot." When I asked whose responsibility this is, they generally agreed that the local Vienna government had not taken the problem seriously, and that SPÖ was hypocritical: "They give so-called lessons to Turkey about democracy. But what do they do themselves? Hypocrisy." Recalling SPÖ's pro-minority politics in the 1960s and 70s had led many to vote for it despite their criticisms: "For me, my heart is with the Reis [Erdoğan] in Turkey, but in Austria I'm with Ludwig."

Many found other leftist parties as unsuited to their own conservative attitudes, whereas SÖZ was considered inexperienced and small. Austrian right-wing parties were criticized for their anti-Muslim politics:

Voting for SÖZ to me is throwing your vote into the garbage. I would rather vote for a traditionally strong party [...] among the other big parties I would not vote for any others. Have you seen FPÖ's and Strache Team's election campaigns? ÖVP is doing the same. They are all anti-Muslims. So, who would vote for these. Nobody. At least I wouldn't.

A former ÖVP supporter stated:

Exactly. I voted for ÖVP before because what they say about Austria made sense to me. I thought that all they do is to protect certain values of this country and as a conservative person I agree with them because I want the same things for Turkey too. But then, I got very disappointed by their coalition with FPÖ and the following scandals etc. Now, they're no different from FPÖ. Especially the double citizenship problems and anti-Islamic talks made me very upset. Whenever they need a political show, they talk about Islam or Turkey or reis [Erdoğan]. We're tired after all.

Clearly, then, debates around Islam and Turkish politics have been one of the major concerns of people in this pre-election context when deciding which party to vote for.

Hometown associations themselves have an impact on people's voting preferences, with some having close political ties to certain political parties, allowing mainly the SPÖ and SÖZ to visit them before the elections to distribute flyers and answer people's questions. When members were undecided about which party to vote for, some asked for suggestions to leaders of the association. As one man in his late 40s explained:

In our association people mainly support SPÖ. It's a traditional thing [...] Our president also advocates to vote for SPÖ. Because they are strong and if we [i.e. the association] need anything, we just have to knock on its doors.

In addition to the associations, the Union of International Democrats (UID), known for its close relationship to the AKP, was an influential organization that not only implicitly supported the SPÖ but also created an election team that actively distributed flyers, organized seminars and panels as well as breakfast parties claiming "the votes by people of Turkish background would determine the election results". Although they used party-neutral language in their election programs, their stance against SÖZ could be observed in their social media platforms. When

asked whether the UID recommended any political party to the people, one leader said to a newspaper:

We don't have a right to say to people you should vote for this or that party. This is a democratic election. However, to be represented better and not waste our votes, we recommend voting for one of the mainstream parties. And voting for a party that has been closer to minorities would be rightfully our choice.<sup>3</sup>

By one of the "mainstream parties" "that has been close to minorities", he clearly indicated the SPÖ. UID's influence on people could also be observed when I talked to groups of men at one of the biggest mosques of Vienna. One retired man explained:

If you heard, ÖVP started a financial investigation in our mosque just a few weeks ago. Right before the elections because of political reasons, to get the votes of those who would vote for FPÖ. But we are tired of these attacks [...] Our organization [UID] told us to not divide our votes by voting for new parties. We don't want to vote for the enemies of Islam. We are all SPÖ voters here.

I visited the same mosque again on the last Friday before the elections. Hundreds of men of all ages were gathered to pray first and discuss the approaching elections afterwards. I joined a discussion between a leader of the SÖZ and dozens of men, some of whom had affinities to the UID. From the SÖZ's side, the main issue was to convince people that it is time for people with migrant background to form a party and run in the elections whereas the others were convinced that voting for a new party would divide people and a stronger party would be an advantage. People asked questions about what the SÖZ can do that the SPÖ cannot. The SÖZ leader answered that they are fighting against racism and discrimination:

We are against the fact that just because a woman wears a headscarf, she is less likely to find a job. We are against the situation that a school kid is discriminated because his name is Muhammed but not Christian.

Several other men came over to ask questions about EU-Turkey relations, terror organization FETÖ, or Armenian genocide. As the majority of these men strongly support Erdoğan, questions about him were especially pronounced. Some suggested that the SÖZ should have chosen its party leaders more carefully:

Maybe then you should have been careful who's your party founder. If you touch people's most sensitive sides, people give an answer to you [He refers to SÖZ's so-called anti-Erdoğan leader] [Mr. Erdoğan] is a world leader, a guardian angel!! That's why people are jealous of him. Why does gold take more attention than silver? Because it shines better. Why does a stone sink in the water better than wood? Because it weighs more. This is similar to Reis. People are against him because he is strong [...]

After more than two hours of discussions at the mosque I walked with the leader of the SÖZ around the 10<sup>th</sup> District. We talked about their stance against racism and discrimination, which was primarily conveyed through ethnic and religious references, rather than a more inclusive language of anti-discrimination.

The overall turnout for the 2020 Municipal Council elections (Table I) was 65% which means that only 45% of a total among all Vienna residents voted.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview in Turkish: <https://www.virgulat.com/uid-viyana-dan-sandiga-git-kampanyasi/8231/>



Final results of the City Electoral Commission – tables							
	Entitled to vote	Votes cast		Valid votes		Invalid votes	
2020	1.133.010	739.485	65,27%	725.501	98,11%	13.984	1,89%
2015	1.143.076	854.406	74,75%	832.987	97,49%	21.419	2,51%
+/-	-10.066	-114.921	-9,48%	-107.486	+0,62%	-7.435	-0,62%

Table 1 The voter turnouts in 2015 and 2020 elections of Vienna. <https://www.wien.gv.at/wahlergebnis/en/GR201/index.html>

The SPÖ increased its percentage of votes by 2% compared to the previous elections, receiving 41.6% (See Tables 2 and 3 below). Although most media interpreted this as a “victory”, the party in fact received almost 28,000 votes less than in 2015. The FPÖ decreased its votes by 23.6%. Many far-right voters stayed at home, because of the former FPÖ vice chancellor’s political scandals that had resulted in the ÖVP-FPÖ Austrian federal coalition government’s collapse in 2019. Considering the lower turnout of far-right supporters, SPÖ’s rising votes in percentage cannot be seriously praised as a victory.

In addition, with 8,742 votes the SÖZ received 1.2% of all votes. This is assessed as a small but significant start by the party: “The Greens also started out very small. Today they are in the government.”<sup>4</sup> The SÖZ will have seven representatives in six district councils and receive 400,000 Euro per year as state party funding. With 46 seats in the municipal council, SPÖ’s relative majority again required the formation of a Municipality’s government coalition. Unlike the previous SPÖ- Greens coalition, the SPÖ now sought a coalition with NEOS, which is a liberal party. On social media groups, the coalition with NEOS rather than the Greens has been positively received by the conservative parts of the Turkish community, since many consider the Green Party as pro-Kurdish.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000120920899/kleinparteien-ganz-gross-was-links-soez-bier-und-strache-planen>

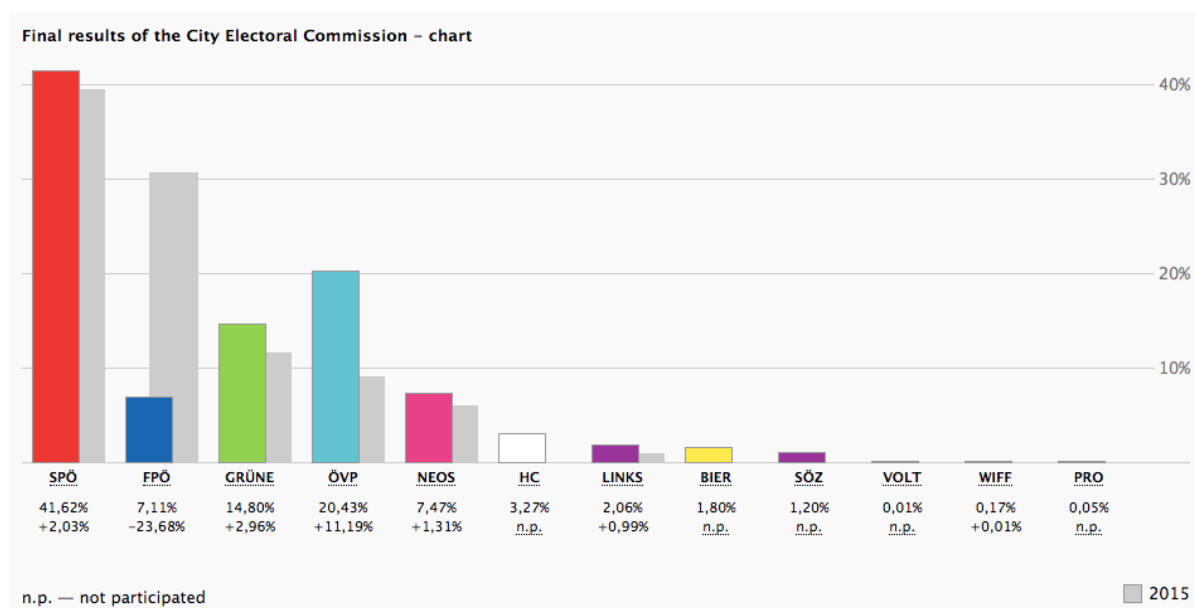


Table 2 Results of the election by percentage for 2020 (in colours) and 2015 (in grey).  
<https://www.wien.gv.at/wahlergebnis/en/GR201/index.html>

	2020		2015		+/-	
<b>SPÖ</b>	301.967	41,62%	329.773	39,59%	-27.806	+2,03%
<b>FPÖ</b>	51.603	7,11%	256.451	30,79%	-204.848	-23,68%
<b>GRÜNE</b>	107.397	14,80%	98.626	11,84%	8.771	+2,96%
<b>ÖVP</b>	148.238	20,43%	76.959	9,24%	71.279	+11,19%
<b>NEOS</b>	54.173	7,47%	51.305	6,16%	2.868	+1,31%
<b>HC</b>	23.688	3,27%	n.p.	n.p.	23.688	+3,27%
<b>LINKS</b>	14.919	2,06%	8.937	1,07%	5.982	+0,99%
<b>BIER</b>	13.095	1,80%	n.p.	n.p.	13.095	+1,80%
<b>SÖZ</b>	8.742	1,20%	n.p.	n.p.	8.742	+1,20%
<b>VOLT</b>	102	0,01%	n.p.	n.p.	102	+0,01%
<b>WIFF</b>	1.201	0,17%	1.346	0,16%	-145	+0,01%
<b>PRO</b>	376	0,05%	n.p.	n.p.	376	+0,05%

n.p. — not participated

Table 3 Number of the votes per party. <https://www.wien.gv.at/wahlergebnis/en/GR201/index.html>

## Conclusions

Research insights help in understanding social and political transformations in today's global political environment by detecting the rationales informing migrant minorities' political behaviour. SPÖ's distancing from its previous position for a more inclusive representational system is an example of social-democratic and centre left parties' evolving politics towards right-wing ideology, such as now promoting an exclusionary representation system. Research shows how this in the long run is harmful to left wing parties, if evidence from non-voters is considered. For a European city asserting to have a mature democracy, it is particularly contradictory to be governed by those who achieved less than half of its residents' voters' support. Despite the problem of representation and SPÖ's contradictory position within these debates, in-situ and online research shows that, among non-voters, both traditional labour migrants, newcomers and high-skilled migrants continue to express sympathy with SPÖ while they do not show interest in right-wing and far-right parties. Among the high-skilled migrants, in addition to SPÖ, more left leaning parties, i.e. Links and the Greens, were pronounced as favourable parties, especially on district levels.

While the election date approached, anti-Islam and anti-refugee debates as well as discussion of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies grew louder. This heightened sensitivities in the conservative Turkish community towards elections and political parties. Some of the former conservative non-voters thereby became convinced to go to the polls: two parties, SPÖ and SÖZ, became the main beneficiaries of this tendency. The SÖZ's adoption from leftist ideology's anti-discrimination and anti-racism discourse, yet mainly situating them within religious and ethnic categories, attracted some conservative voters.

On the other hand, despite ambiguous and conflicting explanations about question of representation and people's dissatisfaction about social policies, SPÖ's established ties with the Turkish community benefitted the party to receive the votes of many. By contrast, former ÖVP supporters expressed disappointment and switched to other parties, while FPÖ voters vanished entirely. Although previously, some people voted for right-wing parties, such support is fragile, instable, and often navigated by the political developments of the day.

By consequence, it is important to move beyond polarized understandings of minority groups such as conservative Turkish communities in Austria, depicting them as "depoliticized" and "non-voters" or focusing on them during dramatic events including grey-wolves' (Turkish nationalists) violent protests or terror attacks. Conservative Turkish groups are no longer merely de-politicized workers and tax-payers who allegedly are exclusively attached to the politics of their country of origin. They have been increasingly involved in Austrian politics, developing strong agency through their associations and organizations and determined to re-shape and influence the political agenda. The fact that Turkish conservative groups have promoted pro-SPÖ voting is not based on ideological reasons. Instead, it primarily had developed from opportunistic expectations, pragmatic considerations, established networks, and ongoing political debates in society.

Turkish immigrant's descendants often are categorized as a "cultural other" that internally homogenizes otherwise diverse groups and interests. In such a political atmosphere they often are seen by almost all mainstream parties as unified "voting blocs". Divisions among the so-called Turkish community stay latent while their various forms of political reasoning and different orientations are not recognized. When pointing out incompleteness of anthropology, Gusterson (2017: 213) advocates to study "conservative Other" which would help encountering menacing political trends. However, we should neither exoticize nor overgeneralize these categories as we need to move away from the mistakes of governments and political parties and



recognize people's unrecognized realities and unseen divisions. As this case study reveals, socioeconomic realities, agency of people, pragmatic expectations, and different takes from political conflicts display unseen, fragmented voting behaviours that deconstruct assumptions of homogenous political tendencies. Switching voting preferences within the range of centre left to far-right from one election to another, inclining to vote for newly emerging parties with a conservative background, such as SÖZ, and supporting SPÖ due to pragmatic expectations has shown some of the divisions and contradictions among these minority groups. Neither SPÖ nor other social-democratic and centre-left parties in Europe, therefore, should take conservative minorities' voters support for granted. Instead of attracting votes based on networking, they need to distance themselves from right-wing ideologies and reactivate anti-discriminatory, inclusive socio-political and economic policies, including voting rights.

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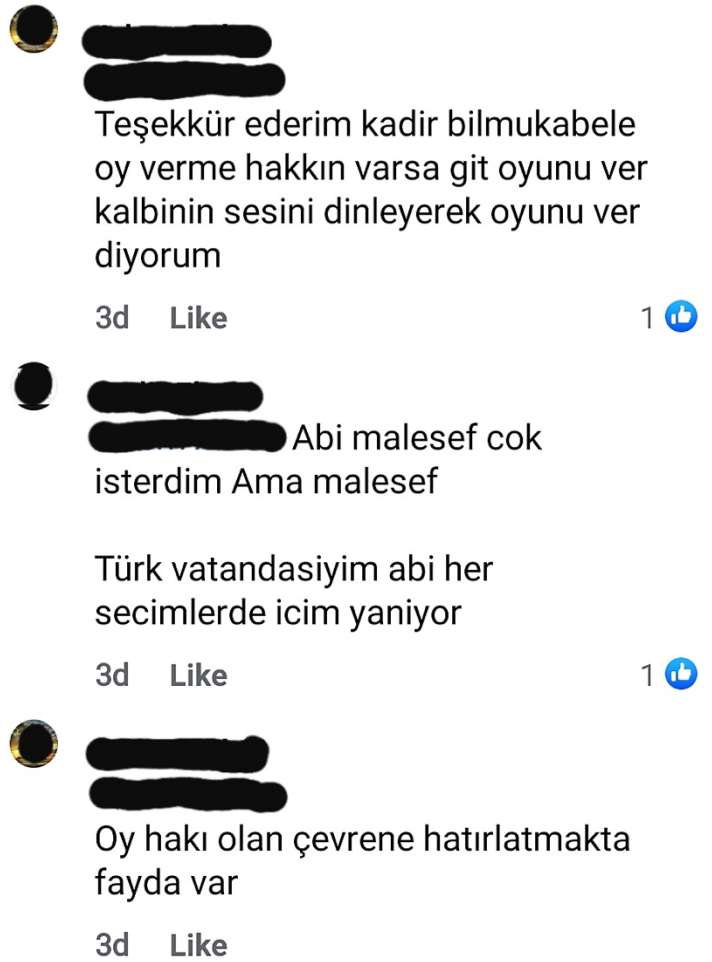
## Figures



*Figure 1* One of the election posters of the FPÖ. “SPÖ, ÖVP & Greens: Radical Islam. FPÖ: Our Home!”



*Figure 2* Another election poster of the FPÖ. The first picture depicts the Mayor of Vienna in front of Turkish flags, whereas the candidate of the FPÖ is depicted in a family picture. “SPÖ: His Vienna. FPÖ: Our Vienna”.



*Photo 1* A conversation on Facebook: - “If you have a right to vote listen to your heart and go for voting”. – “Brother, I would love to but unfortunately I am a citizen of Turkey. It kills my heart at every elections”. – “Then remind others who have a right to vote”. Photo taken by Cansu Civelek.



*Photo 2* ÖVP's campaign in Vienna's 10<sup>th</sup> District. "Fuck AKP" tag in the background. Photo taken by Cansu Civelek.





Photo 3 Ballot papers of Vienna's local elections, 2020. Photo taken by Cansu Civelek.

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