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NEO-CORPORATISM AND POLITICAL PARTIES: SLOVENIA AND AUSTRIA**

Abstract. *The article analyses the rise, erosion and contestation of neo-corporatism in Austria and Slovenia from a régulationist perspective to highlight the role of political parties. The various relationships between key organisations of capital and labour on one hand and political parties on the other are shown to play a key role in understanding the different dynamics of the contesting of neo-corporatism in the two countries. While organisations of capital and labour have strong links with political parties in Austria, this is not the case in Slovenia. These distinctions have led to a crucial difference in the phase of declining neo-corporatism. The links between organisations of capital and labour with major political parties have contributed to the (precarious) institutional stabilisation of neo-corporatist arrangements in Austria, whereas in Slovenia the key right-wing party managed to destabilise a vital pillar of neo-corporatism.*

Keywords: neo-corporatism, Austria, Slovenia, political parties.

INTRODUCTION

Neo-corporatism is a specific mode of regulating capital–labour relations and of macro-economic management involving tripartite bodies of capital, labour and the state. Neo-corporatist arrangements are found at the intersection of civil society and the state (cf. Schmitter 1979, 9). As the only country in Central and Eastern Europe, Slovenia has been classified as “neo-corporatist” in comparative capitalism research (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). However, in Slovenia neo-corporatism only arrived in the 1990s as part of the capitalist transformation. At the time, neo-corporatism already had its ‘golden years’ behind it in long-established European capitalist states. In Austria, a model country of neo-corporatism, social scientists had already in the mid-1980s observed that the “social partnership” (Gerlich 1985), namely, the Austrian version of neo-corporatism, was “in crisis” (Gerlich et al. 1985). The blossoming of neo-corporatism in Slovenia

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was brief. In the early 2000s, a period of erosion and contestation of neo-corporatist arrangements started in Slovenia.

The article aims to trace the politico-economic “conjonctures” (in the broader sense of the French term) of the rise, blossoming and erosion of neo-corporatism and to identify the actors advocating and contesting neo-corporatism in a partly diachronic comparative analysis of Slovenia and Austria. It associates the rise and decline of neo-corporatist arrangements with struggles about the “strategic selectivity” (Jessop 2002, 40) of the state. Attention is paid to the role of the organisations of capital and labour on one side and political parties on the other, as well as their interaction. While one may find substantial research on the role of parties in Austrian neo-corporatism, this issue has hardly been considered in the case of Slovenia. The trajectory of Slovenian neo-corporatism is accordingly to be analysed from a new angle. The two countries were chosen because they are small, industrialised, export-oriented economies and regarded as model cases of neo-corporatism. The French theory of régulation provides the theoretical framework of the article.

NEO-CORPORATISM: A RÉGULATIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Neo-corporatism is understood as a specific mode of regulating capital-labour relations and macroeconomic management that involves capital, labour and the state (Schmitter 1979). This form of interest mediation is characterised by “*ex ante concertation*” of decisions of the actors involved (Jessop and Sum 2006, 112). Therefore, it embodies social or class compromises.

Neo-corporatist studies in a narrower sense have focused on institutional arrangements viewed as favourable to the stability of neo-corporatist tripartite arrangements. Such arrangements were the existence of centralised labour and capital organisations along with centralised collective bargaining arrangements (Royo 2001, 4 f.). Thus, the institutional focus has tended to be confined to the civil-society side of the tripartite arrangements. However, business organisations and trade unions often maintain strong links to “political society” in the Gramscian sense, including political parties. Their role has tended to be under-theorised (cf. Grande and Müller 1985, 25; Ortega Riquelme 1997, 42 f.). Political parties can themselves be key actors propelling neo-corporatist arrangements, especially in order to create stable socio-political conditions for smooth capital accumulation.

The major crisis and restructuring of European economies in the 1970s triggered discussions on the crisis of neo-corporatism. Since key neo-corporatist institutions and social compromise-making were situated on the level of the nation state, internationalisation was viewed as a factor contributing to erode neo-corporatism. The strengthening of EU institutions and resultant forms of multi-level governance were seen as a further challenge to neo-corporatist arrangements in Europe (Karlhofer and Tálos 1996).

To understand the dynamics entailed in the rise and decline of neo-corporatist

arrangements, a theoretical framework conceptually encompassing the interaction between accumulation dynamics, interest formation, and the state is required. The theory of régulation provides such a framework. With its roots in Marxism, it later partially developed in an institutional direction (Becker 2024a). The concepts are on the level of intermediate abstraction. For régulationists, specific forms and strategies of accumulation (also of social reproduction) require particular sets of social and legal norms and policies, i.e., a fitting “mode of regulation” (Boyer 1986, 23, 54 ff.) or “dispositive of regulation” (Becker 2002, 122 ff.).

Regimes of accumulation can be classified along different dimensions (Becker 2002, 64 ff.). For the analysis of neo-corporatist dynamics, two dimensions are crucial: the productive or financialised character of accumulation and the extra- or introverted character of accumulation. Accumulation can be primarily based on productive activities and productive investment or be geared to financial placements. In the former case, accumulation would be primarily productive, in the latter case, it would be primarily financialised. Financialisation has emerged in situations when productive accumulation had become exhausted and capital was looking for flexible forms of investment (Becker 2002, 74 ff.). Historically, neo-corporatism emerged in constellations when and where productive accumulation with quite a long-term time horizon of investment and the corresponding interest of capital in stable institutional arrangements dominated. The second crucial dimension for neo-corporatist arrangements is whether accumulation is chiefly geared to the domestic market or outward-looking. In Western Europe, neo-corporatism arose when accumulation had a strongly introverted character and the internationalisation of production was low.

Capital interests try to ensure social norms and legal norms as well as policies that would sustain their accumulation strategies. From the side of labour, issues of social reproduction – wages, social security arrangements – play a key role. For both sides, gaining privileged access to the state is essential. Big corporations often enjoy direct access to state decision-making centres, whereas both smaller companies and workers must rely on interest organisations to influence the political agenda and state policymaking. Capital and labour organisations seek to shape the access channels to the state in their own interests. Struggles over access channels to state decision-making centres and the strategic selectivity of the state are particularly intense at times of great crises because accumulation strategies are substantially re-adjusted and social blocs reconfigured. The distribution of competences between different territorial levels of the state (sub-national, national, European) also impacts the state’s strategic selectivity.

Neo-corporatism is a certain form which influences the access of capital and labour – and of specific fractions or groups with capital and labour – to the state. As civil society organisations, business associations and trade unions might also try to obtain – at least indirectly – access to state decision-making centres via political parties, which are part of “political society” in the Gramscian sense. Simultaneously, political parties might try to broaden their influence through

ideologically close civil society organisations, notably business organisations and trade unions. In the post-war years, the links between mass parties and civil society organisations tended to be strong (cf. Mair 2013, 77 ff.). It was amid this constellation that neo-corporatism in Western Europe started to flourish. Business organisations and trade unions were often closely linked to certain parties, and cadre of specific parties held key positions in the representative bodies of capital and labour. In this way, party representatives could be vital actors within trade unions and business organisations and parties could thus indirectly, via civil society organisations, be part of neo-corporatist arrangements. This tended to be conducive to the stability of neo-corporatist arrangements (cf. Lehmbruch 1985, 104 f.). With socio-economic changes and the neo-liberalisation of states, political parties began to loosen their links with associated groups (Mair 2013, 85 ff.) and focused increasingly on media-based campaigning. Pedullà and Urbinati (2024, 116 f.) call such parties “light parties”. These changes in the party systems have an impact on neo-corporatist arrangements.

Initiatives for establishing neo-corporatist arrangements and for their weakening/demise can be commenced by both actors on the civil society side – trade unions or business organisations – and on the political side (especially political parties). Specific class-based interest organisations and parties might also act in unison so as to strengthen or weaken neo-corporatist arrangements. This depends on the concrete economic and political “conjuncture” in place.

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND RISE OF NEO-CORPORATISM IN AUSTRIA

Following the Second World War, Austria's uncertain international status created strong political pressures for domestic concertation between political parties and organisations of capital and labour. The Republic of Austria was re-established directly after the war. A provisional government encompassing the social democrats, conservatives and the communists was formed. Within the government, social democrats and conservatives were the main forces, thereby confining representatives of the Kommunistische Partei Österreichs (KPÖ) to a marginal role (Murgauer 2020). In the post-war years, Austria was under the control of the four Allied powers. Austria's full sovereignty was only re-established in 1955. In face of the insecure international status, the two main parties strived for domestic political and social compromises in order to enhance their international negotiation position. The two main Austria parties and the Allied occupation powers (including the Soviet Union) accorded priority to re-stabilisation (cf. Rathkolb 1996, 172).

This required a radical break with the interwar years, that is, a period characterised by sharp social and political conflicts. The two political right-wing currents – political Catholicism and the German-national current – had developed into fascist forces. In Austria, two fascist regimes were subsequently established in the 1930s. In 1934, the forces of political Catholicism set up an Austro-fascist

regime that ruthlessly suppressed the social democracy and trade unions. In 1938, Austria was annexed by Germany and a Nazi fascist regime put in place.

The social democrats suffered massively from the two fascist regimes. On a symbolic level, the Sozialistische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ) was able to assure continuity. However, it was the right wing of the party that dominated in the post-war years. The forces of political Catholicism broke symbolically with the past and founded a new party, Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP). The core cadre of ÖVP, however, stemmed from Austro-Fascism, albeit not from the top leadership (cf. Müller 1991, 227). Political concertation led to these two parties forming coalition governments until the mid-1960s. They in essence carved up the state into spheres of influence. A two-pronged party state was established. Both parties developed huge clientelist networks on all levels of the state (Ulram 1996). Likewise, a two-pronged civil society with organic links to the two political camps emerged. Reflecting the respective class bases, SPÖ was particularly strong among labour organisations whereas ÖVP dominated in peasant and business organisations. Even today, associations representing business, agriculturalists and the wage earners are at the very organisational core of ÖVP (cf. Puller 2018). Both parties were hence mass parties with strong civil society links – in line with Mair's typology. The German national current was also revived – first in 1949 as Verband der Unabhängigen (VdU), then in 1956 as Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ). FPÖ was even more explicitly the party of the "Formers" ("Ehemaligen"), i.e., ex-members of NSDAP (cf. Reiter 2019). From the outset, VdU and FPÖ enjoyed the support of ideologically aligned industrialists (Reiter 2019, 76). Unlike SPÖ and ÖVP, FPÖ has not been embedded in a strong civil society network (Becker 2025, 22).

In the post-war years, a substantial sector of state-owned companies was established. The parties opted for a strategy relying heavily on the steel industries, which had been built up during the Nazi fascist rule (Weber 1996). Private Austrian capital was not strong enough in those years to take these big industries over. The industries were also to be shielded against possible Soviet claims. The state-owned sector also encompassed major banks, endowing the state with extra economic leverage. The parties' spheres of influence further extended into the state-owned sector. Trade unions gained a stronghold in the state-owned heavy industry. Vast segments of small and medium-scale capital enjoyed strong protection (Traxler 1993, 105). For the economically splintered domestic capital, social and political interest representation was very important.

The post-war reorganisation of labour and capital associations was in line with an orientation towards interest concertation. Highly centralised labour and business organisations were formed. Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB) is the sole trade union federation. Political currents are present within ÖGB via 'fractions'. Concerning business organisations, a key ÖVP official, Julius Raab, favoured a centralised business association, Wirtschaftsbund, linked to the party (Rathkolb 2025, 218). The three chambers – Chamber of Labour (Arbeiterkammer, AK), Chamber of Business (Wirtschaftskammer, WKÖ) and

Chamber of Agriculture (Landwirtschaftskammer) – were based on obligatory membership. Since WKÖ is also a contracting partner for collective agreements, the coverage by collective agreements has remained very high (approx. 98%) until today (Glassner and Hofmann 2023, 95, Tab. 2.1). ÖGB and the three chambers have been involved in the institutionally changing neo-corporatist arrangements. This has implied a form of political symmetry – with ÖGB and AK being under the hegemony of the social democracy and the Chambers of Commerce and Agriculture under ÖVP control. Up to the mid-1980s, interlocking memberships between SPÖ and ÖVP (and their members of parliament) and the interest organisations of labour and capital were very strong (yet have weakened since; Pelinka 1993, 73). The organisation representing bigger industrial firms, Vereinigung österreichischer Industrieller (VÖI), remained outside the neo-corporatist arrangements. On the political side, the FPÖ-aligned list remained marginal in the Chambers and ÖGB.

The first neo-corporatist arrangements appeared in 1947 in the form of five successive wage and price agreements. These agreements clearly prioritised the government's wage and price stabilisation aims. In exchange for institutionalised consultation and being accorded with supporting social policy measures, ÖGB accepted restrictive wage policies. In 1950, more militant workers defied the ÖGB course and organised strikes for higher wages. The strike movement was defeated and denounced as “communist” inspired, even though it enjoyed support far beyond communist trade unionist circles (Tálos 1993, 19 f.; Tálos and Hinterseer 2019; 19 ff; Murgauer 2020, 643 ff.).

Shortly after the strikes, an economic directory with broad coordination agendas was to be established on a formal legal base, albeit only for a limited period. SPÖ, the Chamber of Labour, and ÖGB were strongly in favour of it because they wanted to institutionalise the voice of the labour side in economic affairs. In 1952, the Constitutional Court ruled that this arrangement was not in line with the Constitution as it bound the ministers to the recommendations of the economic directory (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 23ff.). As a consequence, later arrangements of neo-corporatism have taken less far-reaching and more informal forms.

In the mid-1950s, a new initiative of neo-corporatist concertation was launched. In particular, wanting to enhance its role in economic policymaking, ÖGB pushed for this. The ÖGB strategy clearly privileged building institutional power via neo-corporatist arrangements. The side of capital only agreed to renewed neo-corporatist initiatives in 1957 after inflation had surged. Issues of wage and price policies formed the core of the new arrangements, which were then extended to other areas of economic and social policies (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 26 ff.). Controlled wage development aimed at facilitating exports in an ever more export-oriented version of Fordism. The wage policy, which was aligned with productivity growth, enabled wage growth. This proved beneficial for domestic consumer good industries (Becker and Novy 1999, 135 f.).

In their blossoming years, the functioning of the neo-corporatist arrangements was not substantially affected by the end of the ÖVP-SPÖ coalition arrangements in 1966. First, ÖVP governed alone. In 1970, the ÖVP intermezzo was followed by more than a decade of SPÖ governments. These governments brought democratisation and the social opening up of spheres like universities, together with liberal societal reforms.

EROSION OF NEO-CORPORATISM: THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF CAPITAL, ENTRY TO THE EU, AND THE WEAKENING OF UNIONS

The neo-corporatist arrangements helped to weather the first phase of the crises in the 1970s by supporting a mix of Keynesian anti-cyclical policies, a hard currency policy, and cautious wage policies (which still entailed real wage growth). The fiscal policies were to stabilise domestic demand whereas the fixed parity between the Schilling and Deutsche Mark was to push industrial companies towards stronger productivity growth and provide a stable monetary framework for the increasingly important Western European (esp. German) economic links (Becker and Novy 1999, 135). After 1979, this policy ran increasingly into trouble due to current account deficits. The external constraints began to bite.

In the 1970s, the international restructuring in the wake of the crisis gradually eroded the main conditions of the neo-corporatist arrangement. Industrial capital reacted to the crisis by internationalising production. The social democrat Austrian government was opening the economy ever more to German capital. Austrian industry increasingly became a supplier to German industry (Becker and Novy 1999, 135). This changed the balance of forces among the different capital fractions – largely in favour of foreign capital and to the detriment of domestic inward-looking capital. In the 1980s, the state-owned heavy industry sector, like in many other European countries, faced a serious crisis. Companies were privatised and factories closed down (Scherb and Morawetz 1986). This weakened the trade unions, which had some of the most important strongholds in the state-owned steel industry. Neo-corporatist arrangements lost their effectiveness in shielding workers from the effects of the industrial restructuring and crisis.

Workers were less content with neo-corporatism. Trade union membership and density started to decline. Unionisation (without counting pensioned union members) declined from 48.5% in 1985 to 44.0% in 1991 (Karlhofer 1993, 123) and to 37% in 2000 (Glassner and Hoffmann 2023, 95, Tab. 2.1). More generally, resentment with the two-pronged party state and its clientelist practice grew. FPÖ was the party which was to take up the discontent. With Jörg Haider taking over the party's leadership in 1986, FPÖ began to campaign aggressively against migration, social partnership, and the pervasive influence of SPÖ and ÖVP. In a clearly neo-liberal vein, FPÖ advocated “unfettered competition as the ultimate principle for solving societal problems” (Ptak and Schui 1998, 100). The party criticised the neo-corporatist arrangements in its 1985 programme as a

“dictatorship of the apparatuses” (cited in Ptak and Schui 1998, 101). Regarding labour relations, FPÖ took an aggressive neo-liberal stance already in the mid-1980s (cf. on conceptual issues Becker 2024b). FPÖ may be regarded as an early example of a political force combining neo-liberalism with an aggressive anti-migrant stance (on the ideological background, cf. Slobodian 2025).

With the FPÖ turning further to the right, SPÖ ended its short-lived coalition with it. SPÖ and ÖVP again formed a coalition government. Seeking EU accession became the basis of this renewed coalition formula. This was not in the least a reaction to the formation of the EU Single Market, which substantially increased the entry barriers for businesses in Austria. In particular, capital groups strongly oriented to the EU favoured rapid EU entry. VÖI, representing big business, spearheaded the pro-EU camp. In the more heterogeneous Chamber of Business, the issue of EU accession caused more debate. In the end, WKÖ also positioned itself clearly in favour EU entry (Karlhofer and Tálos 1996, 52 f.).

For Austria to accede to the EU, a referendum was mandatory. The two governing parties, which turned gradually and unevenly towards neo-liberal positions and displayed the erosion of their links with organisations of capital and labour, sought the political endorsement of the “social partners” – i.e., the Chambers and ÖGB. Even though initially there were some reservations in ÖGB, the labour side finally came out in favour of EU accession. The strongest reservations were articulated in the Chamber of Agriculture since many Austrian agriculturalists feared they would be outcompeted by (larger) agriculturalists in other EU countries operating under more favourable agro-ecological conditions. Finally, all “social partners” endorsed EU accession (Karlhofer and Tálos 1996, 50 ff.). Joining the EU in 1995 reduced the possibilities of national economic policy concertation – and, in turn, the scope of the Austrian neo-corporatist arrangements. At the same time, it shifted power relations in favour of (Europeanised) capital to the detriment of labour (Tálos 2015, 186 ff.; Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 92 ff.). Austria’s EU accession thus changed the strategic selectivity of the state.

AFTER EU ACCESSION: CONTESTATION OF NEO-CORPORATISM IN AUSTRIA

The internationalisation of capital, which included outward investment by Austrian firms, especially banks, in Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of state socialism, related strengthening of Europeanised capital, weakening of unions, rise of an openly anti-neo-corporatist political force, and entry to the EU, led a third phase of Austrian neo-corporatism that saw the neo-corporatist arrangements being openly contested.

On the level of interest organisations, VÖI as the representative of Europeanised capital groups spearheaded moves to weaken the neo-corporatist arrangements. On the level of political parties, the far-right wing, largely neo-liberal FPÖ (Becker 2018, 20 ff.) came out most vocally against neo-corporatism. A

smaller (neo-)liberal political force, Neos (founded in 2012) has also been highly critical of neo-corporatism and shown anti-union sentiments. Neos has close links with VÖI (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 87).

On the level of interest organisations, ÖGB, which continued to lose members and saw the level of (net) unionisation of the increasingly heterogeneous workforce being reduced to 27% in 2019 (Glassner and Hofmann 2023, 102), and the Chamber of Labour have consistently defended the neo-corporatist arrangements as their strategy has continued to hinge on preserving institutional power. On the party-political level, SPÖ and the Greens have been supportive of the neo-corporatist arrangements.

ÖVP has turned into a key battlefield over the future of neo-corporatism. Within the party, forces close to the neo-liberal policy demands of VÖI, but also willing to at least side-line the neo-corporatist arrangements, have become stronger. Wirtschaftsbund, which is intimately linked to the Chamber of Business and represents a much broader array of business interests, shares many of the economic policy demands of VÖI, but defends the crucial role of the neo-corporatist arrangements. As Tálos (2015, 193) notes, the “social partnership” is crucial for WKÖ in order “to preserve its traditional dominant position in political decision-making in Austria vis-à-vis VÖI”. Thus, a crucial conflict between the neo-liberal and conservative concepts of labour relations (cf. Becker 2024b) has emerged in ÖVP.

The contending interests have also clashed about the form of the party. The strongly neo-liberal current has repeatedly sought to diminish the influence of the “Bünde”, representing specific socio-economic interests, in the party and to strengthen the role of the federal executive, e.g., in selecting candidates for parliamentary representation. It also has put greater emphasis on campaigning and marketing techniques. The “Bünde” have tried to preserve their role. They still play a vital role in the party’s presence on the ground (cf. Puller 2018).

Depending on the Balance of Forces, ÖVP has Formed Coalitions Either with FPÖ or SPÖ, Respectively the Greens. Under the leadership of Wolfgang Schüssel, the first coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ was formed in 2000. The government had a strong neo-liberal profile accelerating privatisations, selectively cutting and neo-liberalising the welfare state and pursuing a regressive fiscal policy (cf. Tálos 2019). This was to enhance the export-oriented accumulation model and promote financialisation. In order to facilitate the strongly neo-liberal strategy, the Schüssel governments sidelined the neo-corporatist arrangements – particularly the trade unions and the Chamber of Labour – on key issues, but did not dismantle the institutional arrangements (Pernicka 2006; Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 100 ff., 132 ff.). It tried to change the composition of the main bodies of the self-governed social insurance in favour of the business representatives (and indirectly in favour of ÖVP members representing the business side). The Constitutional Court ruled that important parts of this reform were not in line with the Constitution (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 107).

The side-lining of the “social partners” was asymmetrical because the Chamber of Business and the Chamber of Agriculture still had privileged access to ÖVP (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 133). ÖGB and the Chamber of Labour reacted in a two-fold manner. On one hand, ÖGB organised massive protests and a strike against the highly unpopular pension reform (Glassner and Hofmann 2023, 103). On the other hand, the Chamber of Labour (and ÖGB) sought to establish an axis with the Chamber of Business in defence of the neo-corporatist arrangements and were able to find common ground. According to Stern and Hofmann (2018, 41), the Chamber of Business “continued to pursue social partnership-oriented negotiation strategy”.

Over time, the coalition policymaking produced major tensions within FPÖ. In 2005, FPÖ government representatives and large parts of the parliamentary club left the party and formed Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ). In 2006, the strongly right-wing-oriented government came to an end.

For more than a decade, a period of coalition governments between SPÖ and ÖVP ensued. They softened the neo-liberal approach. They re-activated neo-corporatist consultation arrangements (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 109 ff.). In 2007, SPÖ and ÖVP took – with the explicit backing of the Chamber of Business, Chamber of Agriculture, Chamber of Labour and ÖGB – steps to strengthen the institutionalisation of the Chambers and the system of social partnership. Through a constitutional amendment, the existence of Chambers as self-governing bodies is guaranteed. The role of “social partner” is also explicitly recognised (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 80 f.). The government relied on the neo-corporatist arrangements in order to deal with the international financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, and these arrangements contributed to attenuating its domestic consequences (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 127).

The rise of Sebastian Kurz in ÖVP made the pendulum swing back to an ÖVP/FPÖ coalition. Kurz pursued a radical neo-liberal agenda. Inside the party, he reduced the influence of the “social partners” (cf. Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 103). He relied on orchestrated media campaigns. A strongly pro-business stance and aggressive anti-migration campaigning provided firm common ground between ÖVP and FPÖ.

Like the first ÖVP-FPÖ government, the Kurz-led ÖVP-FPÖ coalition systematically side-lined the neo-corporatist arrangements. It moved even more decisively against the trade unions and the Chamber of Labour. Further, it centralised and changed the balance between capital and labour in the self-governed social insurance system in favour of capital (and indirectly strengthened the influence of ÖVP in the social insurance system). The government excluded the representatives of labour, but not of business from a few public bodies, like the insolvency fund (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 131 f.). On the highly controversial issue of increasing the maximum admissible working time, the Chamber of Business sided with VÖI (Tálos and Hinterseer 2019, 134). Access to state decision-making centres became even more asymmetrical in favour of capital

interests, which could rely on their channels in ÖVP. While the agenda of ÖVP and FPÖ overlapped in many socio-economic issues, the two parties clashed on competing attempts to entrench their influence in the state apparatuses, especially in the realm of the security apparatuses (Becker 2025, 25).

After a major scandal in FPÖ (and partly due to the struggles over the security apparatuses), the government collapsed in 2019. Following a short technical government and fresh elections, ÖVP formed a coalition with the Greens. Almost right at its very start, the new coalition was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. To deal with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, the coalition sought close cooperation with the “social partners”. The resulting packages were fairly encompassing (Podvršič et al. 2020, 9 ff.). The coalition reactivated the neo-corporatist arrangement also beyond the acute crisis.

The balance of power in ÖVP remained very unstable, as shown by attempts to form a coalition after the 2024 general elections. Partisans of a coalition with SPÖ and Neos and partisans of governing with FPÖ clashed openly. ÖVP started to negotiate with SPÖ and Neos. After Neos left the negotiations because they were dissatisfied with the progress towards a hard-core neo-liberal agenda, the ÖVP partisans of forming a government with FPÖ gained the upper hand. ÖVP stopped negotiating with SPÖ and commenced talks with FPÖ. The common base with FPÖ was a broad consensus on neo-liberal economic policies. A vocal fraction in VÖI favoured this option, as did parts of the Chamber of Business. However, FPÖ insisted on controlling the key ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior, aiming at expanding its own branch of a party state. This was unacceptable to ÖVP. In addition, there were disagreements on areas like the EU and more generally foreign policy and the neo-corporatist arrangements. According to media reports, FPÖ demanded an end to the obligatory Chamber membership and cuts to the financial base of the Chambers. ÖVP objected to this (cf. Becker 2025, 28). The negotiations between the two parties failed. In the end, ÖVP formed a coalition with SPÖ and Neos. The initial steps of the new government show that the neo-corporatist arrangements are set to continue.

In the wake of the failed ÖVP-FPÖ negotiations, rifts between VÖI and the Chamber of Business became more visible than ever before. In an interview with Kurier, VÖI President Georg Knill openly disagreed with the retrospective diagnosis of WKÖ president Harald Mader that FPÖ had been in a “Machtrausch” – “power ecstasy” and lacked the capability to govern (Hager 2025, 4). The partial disagreements between the business organisations representing big Europeanised and smaller capital are part of the unstable Austrian power relations.

Following EU accession, the forces hostile to neo-corporatism and forces striving to preserve neo-corporatist arrangements can be observed to be in an open contestation. Depending on the power relations in ÖVP, the changing relationships between VÖI and the Chamber of business and the resultant formation of coalitions, the neo-corporatism pendulum has swung quite strongly.

Tendentiously, the position of the labour organisations has been weakened. They continue to focus on shoring up their institutional power via neo-corporatist arrangements. This brings serious risks (Glassner and Hofmann 2023, 122).

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND RISE OF NEO-CORPORATISM IN SLOVENIA

After the country's declaration of independence in 1991 and conflict with the Yugoslav federal government, the Slovenian government was in a complicated position. The systemic transformation was in full swing, the new multi-party system still in formation. On one side, new parties emerged from the transformed Communist Party and previous societal organisations (like the youth organisation) while, on the other side, new anti-communist parties were founded. The 1991 government was formed by parties belonging to the second camp. Initially, the form of privatisation to be adopted was the main issue of political contestation. There were those in support of a form of 'insider' privatisation, which would preserve domestic ownership. This form of privatisation was especially favoured by the directors of existing firms that hitherto held the type of social property. They could be viewed as aspirants to a domestic bourgeoisie. Significant segments of the anti-communist right wanted a strong rupture on the institutional and cadre levels and preferred a form of privatisation that instead would have benefitted foreign capital (Bembič 2018, 365 ff.). The external economic position was precarious. Foreign exchange reserves were low. The economic disintegration of Yugoslavia brought also considerable economic problems for Slovenian firms, notably those strongly geared to the Yugoslav market. Slovenian exporting firms tried to re-orient towards Western European markets. The government pursued restrictive economic policies, in particular a wage freeze, which were to facilitate enhanced exports.

In 1992, workers staged a massive wave of strikes. Workers in the big factories, which were markedly affected by the demise of the Yugoslav market, were particularly engaged in the strike wave (Stanojević 2010, 117). The main trade union federation – Zveza svobodnih sindikatov Slovenije (ZSSS) – organised a general strike against the wage freeze policy. Despite two other trade union confederations – Konfederacija novih sindikatov Slovenije (KNSS) and Pergam – boycotting the strike, it produced a strong response. The government had to abandon the wage freeze policy (Breznik and Mance 2020). It became evident that a viable price and wage policy needed to involve the trade unions. Already in 1991, the trade unions had also organised protests against the proposed privatisation model (Podvršič 2023, 115).

In 1992, a compromise was finally struck on the privatisation law that proved relatively favourable to insider privatisation and to keeping enterprises operable. "From the perspective of social convergence, insider ownership attenuated the socially disruptive of this transition [to a capitalist economy] and ensured socially more sustainable outcomes", states Bembič (2019, 335). Especially in

highly conflictive enterprises, workers could take a significant part of the shares. According to Stanojević (2010, 118), this helped to pacify the strike wave.

After the right-wing government had collapsed in the face of strong social mobilisation, the balance of political forces changed with elections held at the end of 1992. Liberalno demokratska stranka (LDS), with its roots in the youth organisation of later socialist times, became the politically hegemonic force. LDS was close to the interests of the emerging domestic bourgeoisie. At its first congress, it stressed the role of private enterprise and advocated a limited role for the state (cf. Zajc 2020, 264). In office, it pursued a policy of only selectively linking up with foreign capital. It preserved an important state-controlled banking sector, which acted as the very heart of the new Slovenian capitalism. LDS initially formed a broad coalition that also included key right-wing parties, including Socialdemokratska stranka Slovenije (SDSS), later renamed into Slovenska demokratska stranka (SDS), which was to become the main force of the political right in coming years.

The LDS-led governments were willing to cooperate with the trade unions (Stanojević 2020, 160). They viewed cooperation with the trade unions as potentially conducive for stabilising the economy and getting inflation under control. For restrictive wage policies, the LDS-led government was prepared to institutionalise neo-corporatist arrangements and through this give trade unions an institutionalised voice in economic and social policies (Bembič 2019, 335). In 1994, the tripartite Economic and Social Council (ESC) was established. Institutionally, concertation was facilitated by the relatively high level of centralisation on both the labour side – with one dominant trade union federation ZSSS – and the capital side where the Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Gospodarska zbornica Slovenije (GZS) could rely on obligatory membership. Differently from Austria, interest organisations were not intimately linked to political parties.

After 1994, several social pacts were concluded and the neo-corporatist groups were involved in drafting key legislation. The trade unions agreed to quite restrictive wage development – initially involving real wage losses. On the level of macro policies, the Slovenian government adopted complementary measures to prevent a currency revaluation. These measures temporarily included even a mild form of capital control. Nevertheless, wage policies with equalising elements – e.g., on the level of minimum wage policies – were also introduced. In the field of social policies, the trade unions were able to achieve some successes. The neo-corporatist organisations were systematically included in the drafting of legislation (cf. Bembič 2019, 335 f.; Breznik and Mance 2020).

Neo-corporatism was established in Slovenia at a time when its peak was already behind it in Western Europe. Stanojević (2010, 108) calls it “belated neo-corporatism”. It was put in place as a reaction to the labour militancy and trade union pressures, which were quite exceptional in the region. Trade unions suffered in the first half of the 1990s from lost membership – with trade

unionisation going down from 60% in 1992 to just over 40%. Unionisation then stabilised at that level and reached 42% in 2000 (Stanojević et al. 2023, 980, Tab. 26.1 and 990, Tab. 26.3). The emerging domestic bourgeoisie also saw key interests safeguarded because the economic and social situation as well as their own position were stabilised. The main political force of the 1990s was looking for a stabilising social compromise.

The key political and social forces aimed for the country to join the EU. As the accession talks progressed, some crucial requisites of the early transformation model started to erode because the national government gradually lost control over key economic instruments (like controlling capital flows; Bembič 2019, 338). This entailed a weakening of the fundaments of neo-corporatism.

AFTER EU ACCESSION: THE EROSION AND CONTESTATION OF NEO-CORPORATISM IN SLOVENIA

Like in Austria, EU accession drastically reduced the scope for concertation policies and changed the balance of forces. Shortly after EU accession in 2004, the political balance of forces also changed. The right-wing SDS, which could be counted among nationalist right-wing forces with a strong neo-liberal profile with some conservative elements (cf. Becker 2018, 48 f.) was able to form a coalition government. In the area of economic policies, it pursued a radicalised neo-liberal agenda, e.g., a flat income tax.

The SDS-led government reduced consultation within the neo-corporatist arrangements and tried to unilaterally impose a package of far-reaching neo-liberal reforms. For example, it tried to push through the flat tax unilaterally. Faced with strong trade union protests, it had to abandon that proposal (Bembič 2019, 339).

During the SDS-dominated legislative period 2004 to 2008, a vital institutional pillar of Slovenian neo-corporatism was altered. In 2006, the obligatory membership of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry was abolished. This happened on the initiative of the government and against the explicit wishes of GZS. The SDS-led government explicitly wanted a systemic change in the organisation of business interests, taking the Anglo-Saxon countries as a model (cf. Skledar 2005; Breznik and Mance 2020). The key capital organisation side was weakened and started to operate on a partly different rationality. With a view to retaining existing members and gaining new ones, it radicalised its demands (Stanojević 2010, 131). Trade unions which encountered an increasingly heterogeneous labour force suffered a substantial loss of membership, especially in industry (Stanojević 2010, 131 f.). In 2005, the employers' organisations cancelled the encompassing private sector collective agreement leading to both lower coverage by collective agreements (about 70% in 2019; Stanojević et al. 2023, 997) and their decentralisation.

The post-accession high capital inflows stimulated a credit-led boom. In particular, the corporate sector took on high levels of credit. This produced a double

external vulnerability: high external refinancing of the banks and a considerable current account deficit. Due to these vulnerabilities, Slovenia was hard hit by the international financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent Eurozone crisis (cf. Kržan 2014).

Independent of their political orientation, Slovenian governments opted for orthodox economic policy responses to the double-dip crisis. The reactions to the eurozone crisis held much more lasting structural consequences. In exchange for consenting to state recapitalisation, the European Commission demanded the privatisation of the biggest banks. As an outcome, the major domestic banks came under the control of foreign capital (Podvršič 2023, 199 ff). Since the state-controlled banking sector had been a key articulating and funding element for domestic capital, the role of domestic capital has become structurally weaker. Privatisations were not confined to the banking sector. The role of foreign capital generally grew in the Slovenian economy (cf. Podvršič 2023, 197 ff.). In addition, the segment of small companies expanded. As Stanojević and Furlan (2016, 17) point out, they face particularly strong competitive pressures and have vehemently advocated the flexibilisation of dismissals and lower taxes.

These changes have affected the capital side of the neo-corporatist arrangements. As then outgoing ZSSS President Lidiya Jerkič noted in an interview with the weekly *Mladina*, considerable fragmentation on the side of the business organisations could be observed (Mekina 2025a, 38). Unlike Austria, the bilateral international Chambers of Commerce have taken on an increasingly visible role in shaping Slovenian economic policies. This is typical of peripheral dependent economies (cf. Delteil 2018).

In the face of crisis and the growth of precarious employment, trade unions have continued to lose members. Until 2019, the degree of unionisation had declined to 21% (Stanojević et al. 2023, 980, Tab. 26.1, 990, Tab. 26.1). De-unionisation has been much stronger in the private than in the public sector. The private service sector has been more affected by the loss of members than industry (Stanojević et al. 2023, 993 f.). Unions organised the last strong wave of strikes in response to the 2009 austerity measures (Stanojević 2020, 159 f.). During the strong social protests of 2012/2013, actors beyond the trade unions played a much more prominent role than in the 2005 protests against the Janša government. Trade unions have continued mobilisations on a smaller scale. “Since 2013”, however, as Breznik and Mance (2020) state, “trade unions have not been able to regain their past anti-systemic power”.

The double-dip crisis also led to major changes in the party system. The main political force of “national capitalism” vanished with the weakening of domestic capital. The orthodox crisis policies undermined the credibility of the liberal parties. Following the crisis, new liberal parties – conforming to the model of “light parties” with a focus on a leading personality, few members and a strong emphasis on marketing – proliferated. They have shown a pattern of a rapid rise and an equally rapid decline (Fink Hafner 2020). Some key personalities in these

new parties have had quite visible links to specific businesses (cf. Gašparič and Kustec 2020, 307). Even though parties like Stranka Mira Cerarja proclaimed a centre-left profile, their economic measures were right-wing neo-liberal (Fink Hafner 2020, 19; Podvršič 2023, 205). As regards the neo-liberal economic policy approach, there has been a considerable overlap between the strongly right-wing SDS and the new liberal formations. It is telling that some key cadre of SMC after the decline of the party joined SDS (Mekina 2025b). Differently from other countries in the region, a force on the left, Levica, also emerged from the social protests. It has concentrated on social issues (Podvršič 2023, 231). In the existing party spectrum, it is the closest to trade union positions. Since EU accession, the strongest political force has been the ever more right-wing-oriented SDS. After 2008, the party radicalised its anti-migrant stance. Unlike nationalist right-wing parties in Central and Eastern European countries outside the eurozone, like Fidesz and PiS, it has not developed heterodox policies and adheres to neoliberal orthodoxy (cf. Podvršič 2013, 214 ff.). Its approach to labour relations is neo-liberal and hostile to trade unions and neo-corporatism. It belongs to the nationalist political current that combines neo-liberal economic and social policy approaches with a strong anti-migrant position (cf. Becker 2018, 4 ff, 48 f.). Its political profile is very similar to FPÖ.

Since 2008, the approach taken by Slovenian governments has depended on both the economic situation and their political composition. During the financial crisis, the governments – independently of their political orientation albeit even more strongly in the case of the nominally centre-left government – marginalised the neo-corporatist arrangements. Bembič (2019, 343) states: “Social dialogue all but collapsed in 2008–2013”. Afterwards, the successive unstable liberal governments revived the neo-corporatist arrangements bringing about partial accords (Bembič 2019, 343 f.). An SDS-led government took over immediately after the beginning of the COVID crisis. In its crisis management, it relied on an *ad hoc* expert group. Tripartite consultation started late and remained quite marginal (Podvršič et al. 2020, 14). The following centre-left government led by Golob again reactivated neo-corporatist consultations. As former ZSSS President Lidija Jerkič shows, the business side uses the different approaches of the political forces strategically. It expects more from investing in government change rather than finding an agreement with the trade unions. “The employers’ side does not really need social dialogue”, Jerkič underlined in an interview with Mladina (Mekina 2025a, 38). Thus, business engages selectively in neo-corporatist negotiations. During the Golob government, which includes a minister from Levica in the key Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, a pension reform was agreed on in the tripartite formula. While trade unions signed, a few of them publicly objected to the result (Trampuš 2025, 26). The support for neo-corporatist-based solutions accordingly is showing the first fissures on the side most favourable to neo-corporatism. Nonetheless, at the 2025 ZSSS congress the candidate favouring a strong focus on neo-corporatist negotiations prevailed at the

elections for the presidency of the federation (cf. Kocbek 2025, 4). Overall, the erosion of the neo-corporatist arrangements is more advanced in Slovenia than in Austria.

CONCLUSIONS

The broad régulationist approach with an emphasis on struggles over the strategic selectivity of the state and the role of political parties proved to be adequate for analysing the dynamics of neo-corporatism in Austria and Slovenia. In each case, the insecure political, economic, social and international circumstances played a role in instituting neo-corporatist arrangements. In Austria, both the key political parties and organisations of capital and labour shared a broad consensus for finding formulas conducive to concertation in the immediate post-war period. In a second phase, many of the trade unions strove for the firm institutionalisation of neo-corporatist arrangements. In Slovenia, workers' militancy and trade unions' demands led to the institutionalisation of neo-corporatist institutions. The main liberal political force had an accommodating role in establishing and institutionalising the neo-corporatist arrangements and practices. In both Austria and Slovenia, the labour side has been the main force striving for neo-corporatist arrangements. It has sought these arrangements in order to institutionalise its voice in economic and social policies. Thus, pro-neo-corporatist stances of labour have been a form of shaping the strategic selectivity of the state in its favour. In exchange, trade unions especially offered restraint on wage issues. In the initial phase of instituting and consolidating neo-corporatism, key forces of domestic capital likewise viewed neo-corporatism as a device for gaining institutionalised access to state economic and social policymaking, which would help to consolidate their position. Yet, the two neo-corporatist configurations differed in one vital aspect: In Austria, the interest organisations involved in the neo-corporatist arrangements have been closely linked to specific political parties – to ÖVP in the case of business and agricultural organisations, to SPÖ in the case of labour. In Slovenia, such organic links between organisations of capital and labour on one side and political parties on the other have not developed. This difference was to have a major impact on the evolution in the phase of eroding neo-corporatism.

In each case, the internationalisation of capital and EU accession talks weakened the neo-corporatist arrangements. EU accession fundamentally changed the strategic selectivity of the state in favour of transnational capital and to the detriment of labour. It also drastically limited the policy areas that could be covered by concertation practices on the national level. In both countries, capital forces aiming to weaken neo-corporatism grew stronger. For the first time, political parties openly hostile to neo-corporatism became major forces in governments. In Austria, FPÖ was this political force. The other right-wing party, ÖVP, has continued to be a terrain of a struggle between business forces defending and attacking neo-corporatism. Due to its organic links in ÖVP, the

pro-neo-corporatist Chamber of Business was able to preserve its obligatory membership and reshape the neo-corporatist arrangements to its own advantage. In Slovenia, SDS dismantled the obligatory membership in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and thereby managed to alter the political dynamics on the capital side. The business side is now less inclined to neo-corporatism. Differently from Austria, incipient fissures regarding agreements negotiated in the neo-corporatist arrangement can be observed on the labour side in Slovenia. The erosion of neo-corporatism is more advanced in Slovenia.

The different roles of the parties are crucial for understanding these dynamics. Thus, political parties – and their different relationships to the organisations of capital and labour – matter for understanding the up- and downturn of neo-corporatism. In particular, they matter in the downturn. The strong links between the Chamber of Business and ÖVP have played a crucial role in preserving key institutional neo-corporatist arrangements. Pro-neo-corporatist business interests in Slovenia did not have such traction in the party-political camp. This facilitated the anti-neo-corporatist strategy of the main right-wing political force: SDS. Strong links between the interest organisations of capital and labour are, however, no guarantee for preserving neo-corporatism. How far they can be used depends on the concrete conjuncture in place.

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NEOKORPORATIVIZEM IN POLITIČNE STRANKE V SLOVENIJI IN AVSTRIJI

Povzetek. Članek proučuje vzpon, erozijo in izpodbijanje neokorporativizma v Avstriji in Slovenije iz regulacionistične perspektive, ki poudarja vlogo političnih strank. Članek pokaže, da imajo različni odnosi med ključnimi organizacijami kapitala in dela na eni strani in političnimi strankami na drugi strani ključen vpliv na različne dinamike izpodbijanja in nasprotovanja neokorporativizmu v obeh državah. Organizacije kapitala in delavstva v Avstriji imajo močne povezave s političnimi strankami, v Sloveniji pa temu ni tako. Te razlike so imele ključen vpliv v fazu, ko je neokorporativizem postal šibkejši. Povezave med organizacijami kapitala in delavstva na eni strani in ključnimi političnimi strankami na drugi strani so prišpomogle k (negotovi) institucionalni stabilizaciji neokorporativističnih ureditev v Avstriji, medtem ko je ključni desničarski stranki uspelo destabilizirati ključni steber neokorporativizma v Sloveniji.

Ključni pojmi: neokorporativizem, Avstria, Slovenija, politične stranke.