# The Austrian ultra-rightist Haider and Europe

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The entrance of Jörg Haider's Freiheitliche Partei (Freedom Party—FPÖ) into the Austrian government marks the second time in six years that the extreme right have taken on government responsibility within the European Union. In 1994 the National Alliance in Italy, whose roots go back to the fascist party of Benito Mussolini, became junior partners in the government of the media baron Silvio Berlusconi.

But while in 1994 international reaction was muted, the coalition between the FPÖ and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has provoked a sharp international protest. For the first time, the European Union has interfered directly in the internal policy of a member country. The 14 other European Union (EU) members want to isolate Austria politically by freezing bilateral relations.

From Europe's capitals resound statements of shock that a party espousing an xenophobic, discriminatory and offensive ideology should participate in the government of a European Union member. In the meantime, the boycott does not affect Austria's participation in the EU committees through which almost all intra-European affairs are conducted.

Looking at the real state of affairs throughout Europe, the official expressions of indignation regarding Haider's anti-foreigner tirades cannot be taken too seriously. Much that he professes has long been practised in Europe.

Refugees, asylum-seekers and other foreigners are systematically kept away from the continent and enjoy hardly any political rights. Haider's xenophobic campaigns have also found their imitators. Last year's petition campaign, by which the German Christian Democrats opposed the introduction of dual nationality for some foreign residents, took Haider's referendum against *Überfremdung* (being swamped by foreigners) as its model.

Nevertheless, the agitation against Haider is not simply hypocrisy. What concerns the European governments is less the content of his policies than the political methods he employs and the social milieu on which he rests.

Haider disrupts what in the language of European policy is called "democratic consent"—the conventional means of regulating all-important questions within the framework of the existing institutions and parties. He utilises, for the time being, predominantly parliamentary methods, but appeals unrestrainedly to suppressed moods and latent prejudices in the population. Thus he conjures up the spectre of political instability and social unrest so characteristic of Europe in the 1920s and 30s.

The European governments face a dilemma in Haider. They are afraid of his methods, yet they created the conditions for his ascent—and they are dependent on him to maintain themselves. Haider's success brings to the surface a deep political crisis, which grips not only Austria with its eight million inhabitants, but all Europe.

The process of European unification, taking place under the sign of the global companies and financial institutions, has already pushed broad social layers onto the scrap heap and cut them off from official politics. The question of how mounting anger over the social consequences of globalisation can be contained and controlled increasingly dominates public discussion. This issue was the focal point of the recent world economic forum in Davos, Switzerland.

However, all suggestions that the social consequences of globalisation might be moderated by a return to the policy of social equilibrium and a form of global Keynesianism falter on an economic reality in which

one large corporate merger chases the next; and the continuation of the stock exchange boom has become the chief economic imperative. In the meantime, it is not just the fate of individual speculators that depends on constantly rising share values, but also the old-age provisions of millions of pensioners, and the fate of whole national economies.

All political parties—whether social democratic or conservative—have submitted to this development and champion a policy of welfare cuts, which alienates them from the needs of the population.

The crisis of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is living proof of this development. The CDU is not the first, but— following the Italian Christian Democrats, the British Tories and the French Gaullists—the latest traditional conservative mass party to verge on collapse. The CDU financial scandal wasn't the real reason for the political crisis, but rather the event that finally triggered it. The crisis exposes the fact that the CDU's social base as a "people's party" is crumbling.

In Austria, where the social democratic SPÖ and conservative ÖVP have governed for thirteen years in a great coalition, the alienation of these parties from the population is particularly apparent. Thus a political vacuum developed, into which Haider stepped.

Leon Trotsky once wrote that communism is the party of hope and fascism, as a mass movement, is the party of despair. This characterisation also applies to Haider. His political skill consists in directing the despair of the masses into reactionary channels. He stirs up the fears of the little man, who is threatened by the consequences of globalisation and abandoned by the traditional parties.

According to the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, Haider "considers himself a tribune of the people, a voice for those without a voice, the dissatisfied, the social losers". In an interview with *Die Zeit*, he explained boldly: "We are Austria's new social democracy... We follow in the footsteps of the present SPÖ. Our voters include an above average number of workers and women."