

# Ultra-rightist Haider close to entering Austrian government

Max Rodenberg, Peter Schwarz  
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Almost four months after federal elections, the odds are greater than ever that extreme right-winger Jörg Haider's Freedom Party (FPÖ) will enter the Austrian government.

Plans to form a new version of the present coalition between the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ) finally collapsed late last month. Since January 25 the ÖVP has been negotiating with Haider's FPÖ about establishing a coalition government.

Austrian President Thomas Klestil has not officially instructed an ÖVP or FPÖ politician to form a new government. He wants to wait for the results of the current negotiations. Should these be concluded successfully, however, it is virtually guaranteed that the Freedom Party and People's Party will form a coalition government under ÖVP Chairman Wolfgang Schüssel.

Schüssel's appointment as chancellor would mean that the principal loser of last year's October 3 election would assume office. With just 27 percent of the vote, the People's Party fell into third place for the first time, falling behind the Freedom Party, which won only 415 more votes.

During the election campaign, Schüssel maintained that his party would go into opposition should it fall behind the Freedom Party. Based on this premise, he prolonged the coalition negotiations with the Social Democrats for three months. For their part, the Social Democrats emerged from the election with heavy losses, but with 33 percent of the vote remained the strongest party overall.

In the middle of January, a 400-page document finally emerged, providing a basis for maintaining the previous SPÖ-ÖVP grand coalition under ex-Chancellor Viktor Klima (SPÖ). Schüssel, however, continued to demand changes of personnel in the government, precipitating a collapse of the proposed agreement. He then threw himself into Haider's arms.

As his price for the chancellorship, Schüssel has opened the way for a man who has made a name for himself by spouting racist slogans and playing down the crimes of the Nazi regime. Haider can only profit from negotiations with the People's Party.

If they are successful, the Freedom Party, for the first time under Haider's chairmanship, will enter the federal government and shed its image as a right-wing outcast. Should the

negotiations fail, the most likely result will be the calling of new elections, where the Freedom Party could count on substantial gains in light of the general antipathy toward the grand coalition and anger over the torturous negotiations.

Under these circumstances, Haider is perfectly willing to allow Schüssel to assume the chancellorship, at least for the present. This is a means of overcoming international reservations about the Freedom Party joining the government. On the other hand, Haider will be able to distance himself from the most unpopular decisions of the government and later make his own challenge for the chancellery, having built a stronger base.

It is thus likely that Haider will not enter the government in person, but will remain in Kärnten, where he was elected state president last March. Businessman Thomas Prinzhorn, the FPÖ's lead candidate, would then take the vice-chancellorship.

Prinzhorn, who has had fall-outs with Haider in the past, stands shoulder to shoulder with the FPÖ chief when it comes to racism. He made a name for himself during the elections with his claim that foreigners in Austria were being deliberately supplied hormones to increase their birth rate as compared to native Austrians.

In light of the current developments, the months-long coalition negotiations between the Social Democrats and People's Party seem to have been an act serving to eliminate any influence the voters might have on the formation of a new government, utilising the argument that "there's no other way" to weaken widespread resistance to the FPÖ sharing power.

The main fear of Austrian President Klestil (ÖVP) is that participation in government by the FPÖ will result in the country being internationally isolated, as when former Nazi Kurt Waldheim was elected president. There is no shortage of warnings. Israel has threatened to recall its ambassador, and the Council of Europe, President Jacques Chirac of France and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder have all issued warnings. Similar admonishments have come from other European capitals.

Klestil, who stressed during the presidential election campaign two years ago that he considered Haider and the FPÖ suitable for government, has now publicly spoken out against their participation. After the failure of the negotiations between

the Social Democrats and People's Party, he asked former chancellor Klima to try and form a social-democratic minority government. This step, unique in Austrian history, caused an ÖVP functionary to remark that Klestil was moving "close to the edge of a putsch".

Klima soon abandoned the attempt. Klestil now says that he has exhausted all legal possibilities and can wash his hands of the affair if a coalition comes about between the People's Party and FPÖ.

Within the SPÖ, which for the first time in 30 years is threatened with going into opposition, indignation prevails about the recent turn of events. This could easily cost Viktor Klima the party chairmanship. Klima's inner-party opponents have not attacked him because negotiations with the People's Party broke down, rather they accuse him of failing to steal a march on Schüssel by approaching Haider first. Last Monday Interior Minister Karl Schloegl, an aspirant for the party presidency, called for negotiations between the Social Democrats and the FPÖ. This was a day before Haider opened discussions with Schüssel.

The head of the Austrian trade union federation, Fritz Verzetnitsch, also signalled his agreement to the new coalition with the words, "One can not alter election results."

The public expressions of indignation about Haider contain a large measure of hypocrisy. The German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* correctly remarked that "the SPÖ and ÖVP never really fought Haider politically, probably guided by the instinct that they might still need him sometime. Thus they made him indispensable. Today it is come to pass. They courted him so briskly, so shamelessly, as if there were nothing at all bad about him."

The same applies to the international protest. It is not so much Haider's hatred of foreigners that disturbs the European governments—the European Union (EU) long transformed itself into a fortress, in which foreigners are without rights. They are more afraid that his attacks on the Eastern European states could disturb their plans to extend the EU to the East, which requires unanimity of all member states, including Austria. Therefore Schüssel protested publicly that he would only enter a coalition with the FPÖ if they gave a written commitment to a "Yes to Europe".

In the long run, in a society dominated by money and the media, the political ascent of a man like Haider would not be possible if he did not have substantial support in ruling circles. Although the coalition negotiations between the People's Party and FPÖ had not been sanctioned by the federal president, and thus had no official standing, the talks were attended from the start by leading representatives of big business, including the secretary general of the Industrialists' Federation.

What makes Haider so valuable for these circles is his ability to link a neo-liberal economic programme with social and chauvinist demagogy, and thereby provide a certain support for pro-business policies. Haider and the FPÖ serve as levers to rip

up the welfare state, which in Austria has always been connected to a network of public posts under party control, nepotism, haggling over positions and corruption. Both the welfare state and the profusion of public posts under party control have become an obstacle for the international corporations and financial markets that dominate economic life today.

Haider is perfectly suited to this function. He is one of the richest men in Austria, but always puts himself forwards as the "representative of the little man", inveighs against corruption, presents himself as a man with clean hands and does not hesitate to promise social improvements. Like all right-wing demagogues, he appeals to the most backward prejudices and instincts, directs social fears into chauvinist channels, thunders against "criminal foreigners" and grumbles about Europe.

His real program hardly differs from that of the other right-wing parties. From what is thus far known, the coalition program of the People's Party and FPÖ could have been drafted by Bill Clinton, Tony Blair or Gerhard Schroeder. It calls for drastic cuts in the budget and in pensions, with the target of lowering new debt to 1.3 percent by 2003, and to zero in the long-term; large-scale privatisation of nationalised industries and institutions; tax cuts; lowering ancillary wage costs by reducing holiday pay and contributions to accident and unemployment insurance—all of which involves cuts and a general overhaul of state benefits.

According to a member of the FPÖ quoted in the Viennese newspaper *Die Presse*, Haider's slogans against the EU will soon dissolve into thin air. And with them, it can be confidently forecast the reservations of the European governments against Haider will also vanish.

The FPÖ, which made costly promises of social improvements in the election campaign, could find itself in some difficulty if their voters see that in practice they pursue policies in the interest of big business. It can also be forecast that the party's response will be to resort even more to xenophobia and law-and-order slogans in order to hold onto their supporters— this time, however, without international protests.

One aspect of the coalition agreement that has already been announced with special emphasis makes this clear: child molesters are to face life-long surveillance. Sexual offences, pornography and the like have always been a hobbyhorse of right-wing law-and-order fanatics.



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