

European Union lifts sanctions against Austria

A blank cheque for Jörg Haider

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The 14 European Union governments lifted their sanctions against Austria on September 12.

On the fringes of a conference of European Union (EU) Finance Ministers in Versailles last weekend, the EU partners discussed their further conduct in relation to the right-wing conservative government in Austria. The French President Jacques Chirac and his Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine had taken receipt of the 45-page report by the “three wise men”, which recommended the imminent lifting of the sanctions against Austria.

In July, the European Court of Human Right had assigned the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, ex Spanish Foreign Minister Marcelino Oreja and the German expert in international law Jochen Frowein to examine the situation regarding human rights in Austria following the entry into government of the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Their report warns of the “nationalist sentiments” in Austria that were unleashed by the EU sanctions because these were “falsely understood as being directed against the Austrian people”. The effect of the sanctions “would be counter-productive if they were maintained, which is why they should be ended”. According to the report, the FPÖ should continue to be called a “populist right-wing party with radical elements,” since it had utilised xenophobic tendencies in its election campaign and had thus produced an “anti-foreigner atmosphere” and “a great deal of insecurity”. However, the FPÖ Ministers in Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel's (ÖVP) government were given a clean bill of health for their adherence to the values of the European Union.

In Vienna, in the final judgement of the report,

human rights and minority rights were dealt with no worse than elsewhere in the European Union. The report even comes to the conclusion that “in some areas, particularly regarding the rights of national minorities, Austria's standards can be regarded as superior to those in other European Union states.”

The blank cheque could hardly have been more unambiguous for Jörg Haider and his rightwing FPÖ.

“A victory all the way down the line,” and, “some apologies are probably now due”, were former FPÖ chairman Haider's comments from his office as state premier in Carinthia after the final report was released. Responding to Chirac's warning that the report was not a licence to do as he pleased and that reservations remained regarding the FPÖ's participation in government, Haider answered that the French “shirt pocket Napoleon” had better be more restrained after experiencing his own “debacle” and “Waterloo”.

Haider's placeman at the head of the FPÖ and Austrian Vice-chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer stressed in the Viennese magazine *Format*: “if the sanctions are not removed or are only temporarily lifted by the Biarritz summit, a referendum will be carried out.” Federal Chancellor Schüssel supported the ultimatum: “we will wait until the European Union summit in Biarritz in mid October.”

In only six months, diplomatic sanctions against Austria have brought about exactly the opposite of their authors' stated aims. Instead of putting a stop to rightwing populism, it is stronger today than ever before. The reason for this is the aggravation of social and political tensions in Europe. From the outset the anger of the European governments with Haider was not directed against his xenophobia and intolerance,

since the persecution of and discrimination against foreigners belongs to everyday political life in the European Union. Rather they were afraid of the social tensions that Haider had brought to the surface, nearly winning him the Austrian chancellorship.

Over the course of the last months the political climate in Europe has intensified. For the bulk of the population, the process of European unification, which is taking place completely under the sign of the global corporations and financial institutions, means ever newer and harder burdens in the form of tax rises, cuts in social security benefits and rising unemployment. The constant fall in the value of the single European currency the euro is accelerating this development further. Regardless of the present advantages the low value of the euro brings for exports, it is a result of the enormous pressure of the international financial markets to create American conditions throughout Europe and to eliminate the last remnants of state regulation and social security.

In such a way, broad social layers are pushed to the margins and have not the slightest possibility of affecting political decisions. They are completely cut off from official policy-making.

The planned expansion of the European Union to the East will continue to strengthen the fears and rejectionist tendencies towards the EU. One needs only to look at East Germany, where ten years after reunification unemployment is still twice as high as in the West, in order to estimate the social and political consequences that the integration of Eastern Europe into the EU will bring. Southern and northern European countries already fear that expansion into the East will devour EU funds previously used to subsidise agriculture or for structural adjustment programmes that have been started in their countries.

In Austria, Jörg Haider directed these fears and the increasing despair of a majority of the population into reactionary channels. His rightwing populism is the reviled but legitimate offspring of official European policy.

Thus at the end of the sanctions, the rightwing chorus has grown stronger and more numerous in Europe. In Italy, Haider not only enjoys the support of the Northern League of Umberto Bossi, but the influence of Berlusconi and his *Forza Italia* is increasing strongly again. In Belgium the hard right *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish

Bloc) has recorded some successes and Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen expects to see strong gains by the anti-foreigner People's Party of Pia Kjaersgars in September's referendum about entry into the euro-zone. In Norway the rightwing Progress Party is the second-strongest force in parliament and has taken first place in recent opinion polls.

In the British Conservative Party's new election manifesto, refusal to adopt the euro is made the focal point of extremely rightwing policies. And also in Germany, the influence of right-wing populist views is increasing. Before the "three wise men" submitted their final report, the Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber from the Christian Social Union was welcomed in Vienna where he received the highest Austrian order. Chancellor Schüssel stressed on this occasion, that it was Stoiber who had first recommended that the ÖVP form a coalition government with the FPÖ and that he had also proposed the form this should take—a coalition with the FPÖ, but without Haider's personal participation.

The lifting of sanctions forestalls the loss of a majority of their proponents and heralds a new stage of aggressive quarrels about the further development of European unification.



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