

Austria: heavy losses for Haider's party in provincial elections

Marcus Salzmann**31 October 2000**

The results of the Steiermark (Styria) Province parliamentary elections have triggered a crisis in the Austrian federal government and within Jörg Haider's Freedom Party.

The October 15 elections were the first since the Popular Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) formed a coalition national government in Vienna. Consequently, they were seen as a test of public opinion. The results were devastating for the FPÖ, which lost nearly a third of its votes, slumping from 17 to 12 percent.

Votes for the opposition Social Democrats (SPÖ) were also down 4 points to 32 percent, the SPÖ's worst election result since 1945. The ÖVP is the undisputed winner of the elections, increasing its votes by more than 11 percent to a total of 47 percent. The Green Party received just under 6 percent of the votes, and the Liberal Forum (LIF) and Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) got 1 percent each.

The good performance of the ÖVP is partially attributed to regional issues. Waltraud Klasnic, the party's top candidate, is the incumbent head of the Styria provincial government and is considered very popular. But national considerations also played a role in the elections. During her campaign, Klasnic repeatedly distanced herself from the federal government's austerity policies and promised to make a special effort to improve the lot of the socially disadvantaged.

The popular indignation over the federal government's austerity policies thus appears to have been directed almost entirely against the FPÖ. Haider's party is now paying the price for having first presented itself as the "champion of the common man", only to fully support the dismantling of the social welfare system once it was in government.

The fact that the SPÖ was not able to make any gains from the discontent over the federal government's policies shows how thoroughly discredited this party now is. Even in its former bastions like Graz its results were no better. It has lost thousands of its traditional voters.

Taken as a whole, the Styria election results reflect estrangement from the big parties, and not a resurgence of popular support for the ÖVP. This is revealed most clearly by the drastic decline in voter turnout. At the last elections in Styria five years ago, 90 percent of those eligible to vote went to the polls. This time it was only 75 percent.

The FPÖ's election defeat has resulted in considerable friction within the party. There were immediate calls for Jörg Haider to take the party leadership again, including from Karl Schnell, the provincial party chairman in Salzburg. Haider had resigned from his office as national party chairman in late February of this year, allegedly in order to fully apply himself to his work as the head of the Carinthia province government. He was replaced by Susanne Riess-Passer, a devoted follower of Haider.

Haider's withdrawal from national politics was in part a reaction to international pressure. The main reason, however, was that he wanted to still be able to criticise a government that includes his own people, thus acting, so to speak, both as government and as opposition. This plan appears to have failed. Even though Haider declared that he has no intention of returning to Vienna at the moment, the very fact that he is now openly taking control of the party's affairs again is a clear indication of the crisis within the FPÖ.

Immediately after his party's election defeat, Haider started issuing harsh criticisms of the FPÖ's coalition partner, the ÖVP. Because Klasnic and other provincial

politicians of the ÖVP had criticised the government's national policies, Haider accused Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel's ÖVP of pursuing a "dual strategy" and threatened to end the coalition, which would mean new national elections. Schüssel and Vice Chancellor Riess-Passer tried to calm things down after this outburst, and emphasised that the coalition government was not in danger. But this situation marked the end of "business as usual".

Within the FPÖ, a faction fight that has been going on for some time now behind closed doors is coming out into the open. On the one side are the representatives of Jörg Haider's "old" populist line, on the other the "moderates" who are more loyal to the government. The latter group includes high-ranking officials such as Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser as well as FPÖ Secretary General Peter Sichrovsky, who has voiced his opposition to Haider returning to national politics.

Over the past 15 years Haider has ruled the FPÖ autocratically. He dictated the contents of the party's policies and who was to represent them. When the FPÖ began to gain influence at the provincial and then national level because of the anti-social policies of the previous ÖVP/SPÖ coalition government, and then even entered the national government, he had to bring forward a number of predominantly young party members who were capable of holding such political offices. Most of these people are careerists for whom a high-ranking office is more important than the content of a political programme.

The best example of this type is Thomas Prinzhorn, currently the vice-speaker of Austria's parliament, the *Nationalrat*. Prinzhorn had already been banished from the FPÖ because of conflicts with Jörg Haider when he was brought back—for lack of a better candidate—to stand as the party's front-runner in the national elections. Another example is Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser, who is only interested in pursuing a rigorous austerity policy. He can do this much better with the ÖVP than with the FPÖ, which has to continually make great efforts at squaring its pretence of representing the interests of the common man with its actual politics and programme.

Haider is now attempting to push the FPÖ further to the right. A few days after the elections in Styria he appeared at a public meeting in Vienna, where

provincial parliamentary elections are to be held next year, in support of the local party chairman Hilmar Kabas. During the last national election, Kabas swamped Vienna with an openly racist campaign in which he vituperated against foreigners and asylum-seekers. In the current campaign, the FPÖ is also striking an extremely xenophobic note in Vienna with its slogan "Austria first".

In his speech, Haider castigated immigration policies that are "getting out of hand", and stated that he saw his party's task in "consistent elimination" of such policies. He also repeated his demand for a popular referendum on the extension of the European Union to Eastern Europe. Haider declared his unmitigated support for Kabas, who has repeatedly railed against the "multi-cultural society" and calls for subsidised housing to be made available for Austrians only.

Exactly one week after the elections in Styria, Minister of Social Affairs Elisabeth Sickl was expelled from the FPÖ and replaced by Herbert Haupt. Haupt, who has belonged to the FPÖ leadership along with Haider since 1986, stated that he intends to drive out some "spanners in the works" among the FPÖ government ministers. Already at the beginning of this year, Michael Krüger was dismissed from his office as minister of justice and replaced by the non-party attorney Dieter Bohmdörfer, a close confidant of Haider.

This strengthening of the extreme right-wing forces in the FPÖ, who propagate xenophobia and racism, has the potential for severe conflicts with the ÖVP. A fight within the coalition over immigration policy is a foregone conclusion. Interior Minister Ernst Strasser (ÖVP) intends to increase the immigration quota in the interests of big business and permit about 2,000 foreign computer experts and their families to settle in Austria. Last week, Chancellor Schüssel voiced his opposition to these plans in order to avoid a further deepening of the gulf between the ÖVP and the FPÖ.



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