

Austria's right-wing government marks one year in office

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When the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) entered into the Vienna government a year ago, it was widely predicted that this step would draw the teeth of Jörg Haider's extreme right-wing party—infamous for its racist propaganda—and rein it in to the system of “democratic responsibility”. One year on, it is clear that precisely the opposite has occurred.

Rather than the Freedom Party being tamed, it is the “democrats” who have been intimidated. Notwithstanding deep conflicts within the FPÖ—the at times massive loss of votes in state parliamentary elections, the initiation of criminal proceedings, and the fact that the right-wingers had to replace three of their six ministers in the first year of government—the party has energetically and rapidly effected a significant move to the right in Austrian politics. Since assuming office, they have systematically filled key positions with their own followers at all levels of the state apparatus, the economy and society in general.

The European Union has done absolutely nothing to prevent this from happening. When the EU lifted its largely symbolic sanctions six months ago and the right-wing conservative government came off with good marks in the report of the European Commission, Jörg Haider was able to triumph and set about demanding an apology from Brussels. This was denied him. However, while social-democratic governments ran into increasing difficulties with their austerity programs and cost-cutting measures, a circle was growing within Europe's political and commercial elite which viewed the Vienna experiment in a favourable light.

The Freedom Party's political ascent to a powerful position within the Vienna government was based on demagogic campaigns in which Haider—a multimillionaire and large-scale landowner—presented himself and his party as the representative of the “common man”. In doing this, he exploited widespread public resentment of corruption and nepotism. Both the major parties—the social-democratic Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) and the clerical conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)—had shared political power for 60 years and have governed together in an autocratic Grand Coalition for the past 12. Haider intentionally channelled growing hostility towards prevailing social and political conditions along racist lines.

One year after the right-wing conservative government of Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) and the Haider governor, Susanne Riess-Passer (FPÖ), took over government, the real program underlying the Freedom Party's populist slogans has become clear. “In principle, the government is following a course

of neo-liberal politics, serving above all the interests of the finance markets and transnational corporations,” explained Kurt Rothschild, the Austrian professor of economics who was also keen to deny any relationship to the Rothschild banking dynasty.

Three things lie at the heart of this brand of politics: the radical dismantling of Austria's extensive social security system, privatisation of the most lucrative state-owned businesses and a drastic curtailment of democratic rights. All this is being negotiated under the slogan of “the modernisation of Austria.”

Assault on the welfare state

In only one year of government, unprecedented attacks on social services have taken place. The Grand Coalition had certainly instigated severe cuts in social welfare in past years. But the social democrats, in particular, were often too bound up with the trade unions and workers' associations to be able to promote the interests of the business world on a consistent basis.

With the advent of the ÖVP/FPÖ government, far-reaching changes were made or planned in nearly all branches of society. Last October the age for receiving pensions was raised by one and a half years and cutbacks were made to early retirement opportunities as well as to pensions for widows, orphans and invalids. Apart from a further increase in the age of pension entitlement that is already under discussion, what is particularly being sought is the transformation from state to private pensions for the aged. This was already the declared aim of both coalition parties in the government's program.

Within the health system “corrections”—obviously directed against the public in general and the sick and socially deprived in particular—were also implemented: the introduction of self-payment (that is, increases in partial payments for medicines) and cuts in sick pay, to mention only two of the measures. In this area even more radical changes are foreseen.

The debate concerning the necessity of reform within the Austrian health system has recently been given new impetus from the leading association of social insurance providers. This is a set-up emanating from the government's social partnership commission whose leadership is appointed by the Social Service Ministry which, in turn, is granted a say in the interests of social insurance.

In former times, this association served to extend the system of proportional representation of both major parties on all levels and thereby to secure their power. Of central concern at the moment is the debate over the replacement of the president of the association,

Franz Sallmutter (SPÖ), who is also head of the white-collar union, and his replacement by Reinhard Gaugg (FPÖ), who is strongly advocating the complete abolition of the association.

Sallmutter is seen as being responsible for the increasing deficit in the state health insurance scheme. All parties, including the social democrats, are united in demanding “reform” of the health system—which, in their language, is synonymous with privatisation and deregulation. In this regard, the Freedom Party speaks for those sections of the business community that want to sweep away each and every restriction on firms in one fell swoop.

However, other sections of business want to adhere to the present system—at least in part. Thus Reinhold Mitterlehner (ÖVP), the acting general secretary of the Chamber of Economics, described the smashing of the association to the *Kurier* newspaper as “an affront to the social partner”. To criticise the government directly for the shortcomings of the system would be “to encourage party-political point-scoring which would in turn be detrimental to the maintenance of continuity in this sensitive area”. Of course, he also pleads for wide-ranging changes and cost-cutting measures.

The list of cuts to social welfare programs continues to grow: the introduction of university fees, making higher learning almost impossible for the socially disadvantaged; cuts to unemployment benefits; termination of financing for charity organisations; increases in taxation, etc. Further cuts in social services will follow in the course of budgetary consolidation up to 2002 and have already been announced.

According to media and legal circles, even more alarming are the far-reaching changes to be addressed in Austria in only a few months' time. The FPÖ is quite openly advocating media censorship and restrictions on the freedom of speech. In this respect, the establishment of a so-called media authority is currently being planned. In the opinion of Gerhard Weis, director of the Austrian radio station ORF, this authority will aim to secure state control over radio and television. Peter Westenthaler, the FPÖ faction leader who represents his party in the Radio Broadcasting Council, has already shut down a live discussion during transmission in preemptory fashion.

When Anton Pelinka, the Innsbruck political scientist, in an interview with the US news channel CNN spoke of “elements of national socialism [Nazi] ideology” in the FPÖ, he was immediately condemned to a heavy fine. At a press conference after his court case, he raised the question as to how critical journalists would be able to express their opinions freely under conditions of constant intimidation and readiness to prosecute on the part of the FPÖ. In the meantime, 35 well-known US scientists have addressed themselves in an open letter to the Austrian federal president, Thomas Klestil, and requested “the setting of the widest possible limits to political criticism of persons occupying public office”. However, they received a sobering reaction. Klestil merely informed them that he refused to comment on the verdicts of independent courts.

In his capacity as minister for justice, Dieter Böhmendorfer, former lawyer for the FPÖ, is taking care of transformations within the realm of jurisprudence. Böhmendorfer, a former Sudeten German and ex-member of the notoriously right-wing *Burschenschaft*

student fraternity, was active with Jörg Haider in the “Südmark” association and—as lawyer for the FPÖ—has overwhelmed every political opponent of the party with a barrage of litigation. In his role as minister for justice he is trying to revise reforms previously passed with the aid of votes from the FPÖ's coalition partner, the ÖVP. Among other things, he is striving to enforce life-long imprisonment for drug dealers, more severe punishment for sexual offences and more stringent laws in relation to youth custody sentencing. Even harmless critics such as the artist André Heller and others have had to face prosecution.

The FPÖ in crisis

For the FPÖ the balancing act between its demagogic instincts and neo-liberal politics has becoming increasingly problematic. Since the National Council election, this contradiction has also been evident in the two state elections which have taken place. In Styria the party lost 5 percent of the vote and almost a third of its voters. With the December election in Burgenland, both governing parties had to bear heavy losses. According to forecasts, this trend is set to continue in the Vienna state parliamentary election on March 25.

The defeats have led to serious conflicts within the FPÖ. The most recent example of this concerns the resignation of Hilmar Kabas from the post of leading candidate for the Vienna branch of the FPÖ. Kabas, who has already come under public criticism owing to his patently racist remarks, has now also lost the support of his own party and has decided to step down—as he himself says—because he “is worried about the operation of Styrian conditions” in the capital. Kabas was also at the centre of the so-called “informer affair”, whereby it was demonstrated that the FPÖ had stolen police computer data which it subsequently used in its campaign against foreigners and left-wing critics. On the insistence of Jörg Haider, Kabas was succeeded by Helene Partik-Pable, the security spokesperson for the Freedom Party, who—in Haider's opinion—was particularly suited for the candidacy because of her “restrictive policies concerning foreigners”.

Since entry into government, the FPÖ has been torn apart by increasingly bitter conflicts between the two wings of the party. Splits in the movement have deepened even further owing to the two election defeats and the “informer affair”. The election struggle in Vienna—conducted under the motto “Austria first” and aided by top party members gathered around Haider with slogans extremely hostile to foreigners—shows that the more its popular support diminishes, the further the FPÖ is moving to the right.

However, in spite of its growing difficulties, the FPÖ has been able to hold on to government and is setting the tone in many important domains of political life. Neither the social democrats nor the trade unions are offering any serious opposition, and actually agree with many of the economic reforms sponsored by the FPÖ—even though they deign to criticise the provocative methods of Haider's party.



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