

Election in Vienna: Haider's anti-Semitic agitation backfires

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The election in the Austrian capital of Vienna, held Sunday, March 25, ended in a debacle for the extreme right Freedom Party (FPÖ). Vienna is both the capital of Austria and constitutionally the country's single most important state.

Electoral support for the party led by Jörg Haider fell by nearly 8 percent to 20.1 percent, i.e., the party lost almost a third of its previous vote. The Vienna election brought the heaviest losses for the FPÖ since the party joined the Austrian coalition government a year ago, and follows a decline in votes for the party in state elections in Burgenland and Steiermark.

Much to its own surprise, the Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) was able to increase its vote by 7.7 percent. With the acquisition of an additional nine mandates, the social democrats are once again in a position to govern the capital alone. Ten years ago the SPÖ lost its monopoly of government in so-called "red Vienna" and has since formed coalition governments in the city with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

The governing ÖVP of Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel was able to win only 16.3 percent of the vote. Even this low total was an improvement by 1.1 percent over the party's vote in similar elections held five years ago.

The Austrian Green Party won 12.4 percent (a gain of 4.5 percent) and are already talking about the possibility of a coalition with the SPÖ on a national level to replace the existing FPÖ-ÖVP coalition government. A large proportion of the increased vote for the Greens came from the camp of the Liberal Party, whose vote fell by 4.5 percent to a total of only 3.4 percent of the votes cast. Having failed to meet the 5 percent threshold, the Liberals lost their representation in parliament.

Voter participation was 66.5 percent, a very low figure for elections in Austria, and 2 percent below the total for 1996. In the period following the Second World War elections in Vienna often drew 90 percent of the voters. Even as late as 1983, 85 percent of the population took part in elections. In the latest election a third of the total electorate of 1.1 million did not turn out, and the total of non-voters (approximately 360,000) exceeded the number who voted for the SPÖ (337,000).

A precise statistical breakdown of the change in voting patterns is not yet available, but it is clear that at least a percentage of traditional SPÖ voters who five years ago voted for Haider's FPÖ, in protest at the widespread corruption and nepotism of SPÖ-governed Vienna, gave their votes to the social democrats this time around. Once again the main workers' areas in Vienna, such as

Simmering and Favoriten, which are dominated by public housing schemes, voted in the majority for the SPÖ.

Five years ago the FPÖ conducted an openly racist campaign and in areas of the city with a high proportion of foreign workers was able to obtain an above average increase in votes. Haider boasted of being the "new workers' leader in Vienna". Now the FPÖ has lost most of its votes precisely in those areas, such as the suburb of Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus, where a third of the population consists of foreign-born workers and their families.

The drop in votes for the Freedom Party expresses a growing opposition to attacks on the Austrian welfare state carried out by the ruling coalition. In the past Haider liked to pose as the advocate of the "little man", but as a party in government the FPÖ has assisted in implementing neo-liberal policies based on the interests of the financial markets and transnational corporations. The government has proceeded rapidly to privatise the most lucrative public enterprises and attack the social security system, while abridging democratic rights.

The pension age has been raised and pensions have been cut for those taking early retirement, as have benefits for widows, orphans and invalids. Sickness benefits have been cut, and the ill are expected to pay more for medicine and medical treatment. In addition, unemployment pay has been cut, taxes have been increased, subsidies for communal institutions have been slashed, and student fees have been introduced. Freedom of speech and expression has come under attack via the introduction of a state-run media authority.

Haider's anti-Semitic agitation

A few weeks before the election there were already indications of a possible dramatic decline in the FPÖ vote. Haider's reaction was to begin an odious anti-Semitic campaign, going far beyond the excesses of his previous racist demagoguery. In a speech to his party faithful he openly attacked the president of the Jewish community in Austria, Ariel Muzicant. Alluding to a popular brand of washing powder, he bellowed in front of a raucous, beer-swilling FPÖ audience, "I just can't understand how someone named Ariel could be involved in so much dirty business".

Muzicant firmly rejected Haider's claim that he was involved in dubious speculative business affairs and immediately lodged a legal suit against the FPÖ leader. A number of Jewish organisations in Europe and America angrily rejected the accusations against Muzicant, leading Haider to describe his remark as a "joke" and then provocatively adding that nobody

could object to Jewish jokes.

As anger increased over his anti-Semitic tirade, Haider declared, in an interview with the Vienna daily paper *Die Presse*, that he would not allow anybody to forbid him “criticising a representative of a religious community when the person in question has declared war on a democratically elected government”. With his allusion to a so-called “declaration of war” by the Jews, Haider recalled the propaganda of the Nazis, who used such phrases to justify their crimes against the Jews. Haider was deliberately seeking to stir up neo-fascist elements in Austrian society.

Such a development does not come out of the blue. According to a March 23 background article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, anti-Semitism in Austria has played an important political role for some time. At its birth, the second Austrian republic promoted the claim that Austria was the “first victim of National Socialism (Nazism)”, and used this legend to deny any form of compensation to Jewish victims of the Nazi occupation of the country. It is only recently that a debate has begun about the crimes committed by Austria against Jews in Vienna, and the extent of Nazi appropriations of Jewish property.

Following the Nazi annexation of Austria, from 1938 to 1945, over 50 synagogues were destroyed. In Vienna alone 600 Jewish organisations, foundations and funds were dissolved. It is estimated that the financial losses of the Jewish community in Vienna as a result of the process of “Arianisation” and other attacks on the Jews amounts to one billion German marks.

After 1945 the destruction of Jewish property continued by means of a “quiet liquidation”. The largely decimated community was forced to dispose of over two thirds of its remaining wealth between 1945 and 1981 in order to cover the running losses of its remaining businesses. On most occasions it was the Austrian state that “benevolently” took over Jewish real estate and other forms of property.

When Ariel Muzicant took over the organisation of finances for the Jewish community in 1981 he put an end to the “quiet liquidation” by conducting emergency sales, while simultaneously demanding compensation—up to the present without success. As a result of Muzicant's efforts to retain Jewish property, the organisation he heads has accumulated a debt of more than 20 million marks, a fact which Haider sought to exploit in his anti-Semitic tirade.

Haider coupled his attack on the president of the Jewish community with the neo-liberal ideology of zero deficits and the shedding of debt. The indebtedness of state industries and public institutions is used to impose rapid privatisation, while the acquisition of debts is described as “typically Jewish behaviour”.

Moreover, the attempt to implicate the property broker Muzicant in dubious business deals serves to revive the old anti-Semitic slander, according to which supposedly long-established and “creative” national capital is juxtaposed to “greedy”, restless and speculative “Jewish” capital.

In his election speeches Haider also gave a new interpretation of the European Union (EU) sanctions that were imposed for a time against Austria after his party entered the national government. The propagators of the sanctions were no longer the “socialist”

governments of the EU, but rather the East Coast of America, an Austrian code word for the “World Jewish Conspiracy”.

Haider relied heavily on anti-Semitic propaganda to revive his election hopes, but his plan backfired. He mobilised more opponents than supporters. On the eve of the election, several thousand Haider opponents demonstrated in front of the Vienna seat of government and recalled the crimes of the Nazis and their Austrian supporters. On election day many took up the call to use their vote as a protest against anti-Semitic agitation.

The election result has revealed the narrowness of the social base of Haider's FPÖ. His powerful and sometimes dominant influence on Austrian politics is a result of the refusal of the other official parties to seriously take him on. Chancellor Schüssel, who recently justified his coalition with the FPÖ by claiming that it was a means of integrating the extremists into the “democratic fold”, has refused to react. He has remained silent over the issue of Haider's anti-Semitism.

On the evening of the election Haider was obviously shaken by the extent of his party's loss. For the following three days he claimed he was ill. When he finally appeared March 28 to make a comment, it was clear that the outcome of the election would do more than simply intensify existing conflicts within the FPÖ. The party's balancing act between populist-style demagogy and anti-social, pro-business policies is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. In order to exploit the time that remains in the current legislative period, the FPÖ will intensify its turn to the right and take an even more aggressive stance in the government's assault on social and democratic rights.

Neither the social democrats nor the Greens have any alternative to offer. Michael Häupl, the Vienna head of the SPÖ, has called for his local party to have greater influence in national politics, including a say in the nomination of future social democratic candidates for chancellor. At his party's last state conference, however, Häupl pushed through an economic policy virtually identical in many respects to the plans of the national conservative-extreme right government.

See Also:

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