

Austria's right-wing Freedom Party riven by disputes

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One year since its entry into the Austrian government, the ultra-right Freedom Party is in the midst of a sharp internal crisis.

The Austrian magazine *Format* recently wrote of the Freedom Party (FP): “Chaos in the FP. Can this party govern at all?” The Swiss weekly *Weltwoche* declared, “The Freedom Party has failed miserably in its attempt to change from an irritating opposition party into one capable of exercising government responsibility.”

Over the past few months things have been going downhill for the Freedom Party and Jörg Haider, who gave up his post as party leader as a tactical move after the FP's entry into the Vienna government.

After suffering heavy losses in state elections in Styria, Burgenland and Vienna (altogether the party lost almost a quarter of its supporters in a year), a fierce dispute has broken out over what course the party should pursue to counter this downward trend.

For some time a battle has been raging within the party between the old demagogic wing centred around Haider and a section of conservative free-marketers whose most prominent representative is Karl-Heinz Grasser, the finance minister. Susanne Riess-Passer, leader of the FP, has been trying to mediate between the two sides in order to uphold the party's sagging public image. However, this task is proving increasingly difficult and her critics are growing more vociferous.

The most contentious issue concerns the federal government's social policy. During the 12 months in which the conservative-ultra-right coalition government has held power, an unprecedented attack on social welfare provisions has taken place. Finance Minister Grasser's budget policies have placed increasingly heavy burdens on the population, and the social security system has been continually hit by cutbacks.

Confronted with the demands of people like Reinhart Gaugg—the FP spokesman for social services who calls for

“measures to aid the socially weak” and appeals directly to the finance minister—Grasser remains unmoved and determined to persist with his chosen course. He is finding support not only from leading members of the Freedom Party such as Prinzhorn and Gorbach, but also from its coalition partner, the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party).

The recent decision to tax accident benefits has exposed deep rifts within the party. This tax will affect over 100,000 people in Austria and is an overt cut in the modest pension allowance. Although the taxation policy clearly bears the stamp of the Freedom Party, it has stirred up opposition within the party's ranks.

After Haider criticised this tax law as “the epitome of heartless governing”, it was revised. Those with a total monthly income of less than 20,000 schillings (\$1,200) will now be reimbursed for the tax on accident benefits. However, those receiving large benefit claims after serious accidents—and whose income is above the designated monthly limit—will receive no reimbursement.

Gaugg considers the law an infringement on the constitution. He has already severely criticised the government for introducing fees for outpatients, and even demanded the resignation of Haupt, the minister for social affairs, as well as Finance Minister Grasser.

Under the slogan “politics with a heart”, Haider and Gaug are once again presenting themselves as politicians concerned with the welfare of the “ordinary man”. In doing so, Haider is adopting the pose he exploited to win growing influence during the years before his party entered government. Rallying behind him is a substantial section of the Freedom Party's base at the state and federal level—including politicians who either fear losing their posts or have already lost them.

Within the state chapters of the party conditions are particularly chaotic. One example is the return of Harald Fischl, the Freedom Party's chief in the Austrian state of

Styria, who gave up his seat in the National Council after the state election fiasco a few months ago. Fischl resigned over differences between himself and the federal and state leadership. A supporter of Haider, Fischl reproached party leader Riess-Passer for “a certain decadence”, and is now making a resolute return to leadership of the battered Styrian section of the party in order to mount a struggle against the national leadership.

Haider is once again combining populist-style demagoguery with crass forms of xenophobia and racism. In Kärnten, where he heads the provincial government, Haider made a guest appearance at a panel discussion organised by the Homeland Association and the Defence Federation—two racist groupings—and spoke out against the “creeping Slovenization” of Kärnten. The background to this outburst was a decision by the Constitutional Court to introduce Slovenian as an administrative language and to erect bilingual signposts as a concession to the size of the Slovenian minority in Kärnten.

The FP has not been able to develop a unified policy in relation to Austria's current immigration debate. Party representative Peter Westenthaler is demanding that asylum-seekers and people wanting to immigrate from non-EU (European Union) countries be required to sign an “integration contract”. What he has in mind is a compulsory German language course as well as instruction about “the country and its people”. Those failing to abide by the contract are to be punished by having their financial benefits cut or being summarily expelled.

Westenthaler knows full well that Austria lacks the facilities for German courses and foreigners have only a very limited access to the labour market and social benefits. This, however, is the way Westenthaler intends to reduce immigration into Austria.

Opposing Westenthaler is a large section of the business community, the ÖVP and the official leadership of his own party, who want to increase immigration in some areas to reduce the country's workforce deficit. These elements will try to exploit the immigration debate in order to draw into the country only those foreigners deemed useful to the economy, and to further undermine the right to asylum. But even this is too much for a party that has always spoken out against immigration. The continuing debate will undoubtedly prove to be explosive.

Riess-Passer, the party leader, has been torn between the two fronts for a long time. One side considers her to be Haider's puppet, the other sees her as a traitor to the course being pursued by the head of the Kärntner

government.

Aping American practice, the FP is planning to pull itself out of the crisis by setting up a “think-tank”, a group of supposed strategy experts. Along with Haider and Riess-Passer, Peter Sichrovsky—the party's general secretary—will be among its members. It is not clear who will make up the rest of the group. Apart from core members consisting of FP notables, foreign experts are also expected to be invited. Sichrovsky is considering conservative American political advisers as well as “modern thinkers” ideologically in line with the political environment and strategy of the FP.

Under these conditions, the election victory of Silvio Berlusconi and his alliance of right-wing parties in Italy has come at exactly the right time for Haider, who took an enthusiastic and active role in the Italian election campaign. He participated in election rallies held by Italy's Northern League, adding his support to the racist demagoguery of Umberto Bossi on a number of occasions.

Haider spent election night at Milan's famous La Scala Opera House, listening to the music of Giuseppe Verdi's “A Masked Ball”. As the final bars of the opera were fading away and initial election results came in, Haider began to applaud ostentatiously. He later told journalists that Berlusconi's election victory was extremely welcome and could be the beginning of “a positive era for Europe.”

Following the restrained reaction of the European Union to the Berlusconi victory, Haider told a correspondent of the conservative German newspaper *Die Welt*: “Obviously people in Brussels and elsewhere have recognised that the result of a democratic election among democratic parties has to be respected.” Haider did not want to comment on the fact that the Northern League had suffered a substantial loss of votes. For him the important thing was that the right-wing alliance had won.



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