

# Anti-European agenda of the Freedom Party provokes government crisis in Austria

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The pending collapse last week of the Austrian governing coalition—the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the ultra-right-wing Freedom Party (FP)—was only averted by concerted efforts at the last minute.

The head of the Austrian province Carinthia and former leader of the FP, Jörg Haider, had declared that new elections would be necessary next month. Only after overnight emergency talks between the leaders of both ruling parties was it possible to avoid a break-up of the coalition. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP), Vice Chancellor Riess-Passer (FP) as well as fraction chairman Andreas Khol (ÖVP) and Peter Westenthaler (FP) stated last Thursday that the crisis had been averted.

Continuous threats by the FP to veto the proposed entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union (EU) was the cause of the government crisis.

For an entire week, up to January 21, a referendum organised by the FP was held in Austria—a “veto against Temelin”. Officially, the issue at stake was making the closure of the nuclear energy plant in Temelin in the Czech Republic a condition for Czech entry to the EU. The FP maintains, following a number of accidents, that the plant constitutes a grave security risk for the Austrian population.

Although the leaders of the Peoples Party, the Social Democrats and the Greens had officially opposed the referendum, the turnout to support the FP proposal was extraordinarily high. According to Austrian law, 100,000 signatures are sufficient to force an open discussion of the issue in parliament. Results showed 915,220 supported the petition, i.e., 15.5 percent of all those eligible to vote.

Election analysts showed that, compared to national elections held in 1999, 36 percent of FP voters followed the call by their party to support the referendum, but considerable numbers of voters from other parties also followed suit: 11 percent from the conservative Peoples Party, 13 percent of social democrats, and 14 percent from the Greens.

Powerful nationalist reactions in Austria towards its eastern neighbours are bound up with fears on the part of sections of Austria’s middle class regarding the entry by east European states into the EU. Four of the thirteen eastern European countries applying for EU membership share borders with Austria—Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. Small businessmen, craftsmen, farmers and a wide variety of independent producers feel that their very existence is threatened by the dissolution of

national borders. Above all they fear a ruinous spiral of competition unleashed by cheap goods. All of the Austrian parties are seeking to profile themselves as the representatives of these layers, although it is the FP which has operated most aggressively to openly transform these concerns into racism.

Sections of workers also feel under pressure, fearing that cheap wages from surrounding east European countries will be utilised by Austrian employers as a lever to lower wages and attack social conditions. Average wages in the neighbouring countries to the east are much lower than those in Austria. For its part, the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, the ÖGB, has also reacted to this state of affairs with a nationalist and protectionist campaign demanding restrictions on those travelling or seeking to move to Austria from east European countries.

With powerful support from the right-wing populist paper *Kronenzeitung*, which featured anti-Czech slogans on its front page for weeks on end, the FP campaigned for the referendum and conducted a vehemently nationalist witch-hunt. The result was a dramatic deterioration in relations between Austria and the Czech republic over the past few weeks.

The Czech social democratic prime minister, Milos Zeman, called ex-FP chairman Jörg Haider a “populist Nazi politician” and called those who signed the petition “idiots”. For his part, Haider called Zeman a “turncoat” and “communist”. FP representative Peter Westenthaler responded by describing Zeman’s comments as the “political running amok of a demented person” who is “more at home in the jungle than in the European Union”.

Austrian Chancellor Schüssel and President Thomas Klestil, who immediately left for a discussion with his Czech colleague Václav Havel, attempted unsuccessfully to smooth things over. Schüssel came to the defence of his coalition partner and described the reaction by the FP as understandable. He pointed out that Zeman would not be standing as a candidate in the upcoming parliamentary elections, so the problem would disappear by itself.

The conflict over the nuclear plant at Temelin has served to ignite nationalist sentiments and strengthen right-wing tendencies in both countries. According to a poll organised by a Prague institute, 70 percent of the Czech population are in favour of a complete installation and running of the nuclear plant, although up until now there has been widespread resistance by broad layers to nuclear power following a string of accidents in various east European plants.

To the same end—to encourage nationalism and strengthen right-wing tendencies—Haider and other FP politicians have raised the issue of the so-called Benes Decrees. Haider is now making the withdrawal of the decrees a condition for Czech entry to the EU. In an interview with the television channel ORF he said: “A Europe which is not prepared to resolve these problems [Temelin, Benes Decrees] is in any case a Europe of which we do not want to be a part.”

The so-called Benes Decrees are a series of edicts used by Czech President Edward Benes to govern the country at the end of the Second World War. Following his return from exile and lacking a constitution, Benes based his rule on the 143 decrees. Around 10 of these decrees, regarding the expropriation and driving out of predominately German layers of the population, were exploited by extreme-right organisations—above all the regional organisations of the Sudeten Germans—to raise demands going back to the period of former Nazi dictatorship and making territorial and financial demands on Czechoslovakia (as it was called at that time).

In an interview with the Austrian news magazine *Profil*, Zeman referred to the Sudeten Germans as “Hitler’s fifth column” and described their expulsion as a mild and fully justified punishment—comments which provoked vigorous criticism, and not only from the FP. Since being driven out the country after the war, regional organisations representing Sudeten Germans in Austria and Germany have been controlled by right-wing, reactionary forces—in Austria by the FP and the right wing of the ÖVP, and in Germany mainly by the Bayern-based Christian Social Union (CSU).

Last summer Bayern Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber, who has recently been selected as the main conservative candidate for forthcoming national elections in Germany, in typical fashion described the Benes Decrees as “a problem for Europe, yes a wound in Europe” (*Sudetendeutschen Zeitung*, 6 August 2001). The CSU has recently demanded that German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and the German SPD-Green Party coalition sharply rebuff Zeman for his comments.

In view of the threat of new elections involving likely heavy losses for the ÖVP—according to current opinion polls the most likely winners of such an election would be the Social Democrats and Green Party—the ÖVP backed down in face of the FP campaign. The ÖVP has officially sharply criticised Zeman and has pledged to the FP that it will reverse its former course and undertake further discussions with the Czechs over Temelin and the issue of the Benes Decrees.

Although the governing parties have struck a truce on this issue, the crisis of the coalition continues. The FP is determined to pursue its anti-EU course and prevent the expansion of the Union at all costs. One indicator of this trend is the increasingly probable return of Jörg Haider to Vienna and the political front stage. In a statement to the magazine *Format*, party representative and parliamentary whip Westenthaler declared: “We have the problem that our current head of party has been ditched by some when things have got hot. The work of (FP head) Susanne Riess-Passer is not sufficiently recognised inside the party.”

A broad layer of the extreme right-wing base of the FP are dissatisfied with the conciliatory line of FP head, Riess-Passer,

towards its coalition partner. They are calling for Haider’s return to take up the main FP post. Haider is increasingly pursuing an anti-Europe course and has successfully forced concessions from the ÖVP. On the news programme *ZIB* he emphasised that the coalition “must clarify its position as a whole” and that the FP and ÖVP must “seriously discuss what the path into the EU and expansion entails.” Haider said that it cannot mean that “we have to be at the beck and call of industrial unification”. He stated that any “rapid opening up of borders for the admission of cheap labour” would not be accepted by him and the FP. “Then we could not play along,” he said.

Behind the government crisis is the clash of consolidated interests. While Haider seeks to encourage anti-European sentiments in the interests of sections of the middle class, representatives of industry and trade organisations are calling for the unrestricted opening up of Europe towards the east. A number of Austrian managers and business representatives spoke out against the FP referendum and demanded that the head of government exert control over the lesser of the two coalition partners (FP).

The newspaper *Kurier* quoted the president of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, Christof Leitl, as saying that a hindrance of EU expansion would be “a shot in the foot” for Austria. The Chamber of Commerce is currently planning an export offensive with the aim of increasing exports by 4 percent. The events around the anti-Temelin referendum and the conflict over the so-called multi-language place names (a provocation organised by Haider against the Slovenian minority in Carinthia, concerning place name signs in two languages) are the cause for “concerns over Austria’s image abroad,” according to Leitl. He continued: “In the meantime we are holding the process back and there is no sympathy for this”. The Austrian economy needs European expansion of the Union, there is no “other alternative”.

The German government is also concerned at the growing anti-European sentiment emerging from Vienna. Following the start of the referendum over Temelin, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) travelled to the Austrian capital for the first time since the EU imposed sanctions on the FP-ÖVP government. In his latest trip, Fischer expressly warned against “new hindrances to EU admission” and “artificial delays” to expansion of the Union.

Fischer emphasised he is against the use of nuclear energy. He warned against “establishing links which are not founded on fact”. Against a background of louder anti-European noises from Italy, Fischer’s next port of call, the foreign minister stated that Europe “should not look back to the past”. During his stay in Vienna Fischer spoke with Austrian Foreign Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner (ÖVP), as well as President Klestil and representatives of the Greens. He conspicuously avoided contact with leading members of the FP in government.



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