

# Austria: power struggle within Haider's Freedom Party

Markus Salzmann, Ulrich Rippert  
2 September 2002

The extreme right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) first participated in government when it formed a coalition with the conservative People's Party (Volkspartei) in early 2000. Since then, it has staggered from crisis to crisis, mainly because, in contrast to their overblown promises before the elections, FP ministers have helped impose drastic tax increases and cuts in social services, and share responsibility for the growth of unemployment.

The leading figure of the FPÖ, Jörg Haider, renounced any personal involvement in national government and decided instead to head the government of the southern state of Carinthia (Kärnten). This position enabled him to come out in opposition to the government policy of his own party, an opportunity he exploited quite liberally.

In recent weeks, these differences have intensified to an unprecedented degree, culminating in a power struggle between the current party president, Austria's Vice Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer, and former FPÖ President Haider. On August 26, Haider threatened to convene a special party congress to mobilize the membership against the policies of the FPÖ government ministers.

The immediate background to the conflict is the damage from recent floods in the country. In a manner similar to the German government, the government led by Wolfgang Schüssel (People's Party) in Vienna decided to postpone tax cuts for businesses for one year in order to divert monies into an aid fund for the victims of the flood.

Haider voiced strong opposition against this postponement. In addition to a special party congress, he threatened to initiate a referendum on the tax cuts. This referendum, he said, could take place as early as the end of September or the beginning of October.

On closer examination, it turns out that Haider's real concern is neither the tax issue nor the financing of flood aid. Rather, he is prepared to make use of any issue that allows him to go onto the offensive against the government ministers of his own party. His aim is to position himself for the national elections that are due next year.

Over the past three years large sections of the population have become increasingly disillusioned with FPÖ government policy, and the party's poll numbers are falling. Haider is attempting to exploit this opposition for his own political purposes. His motto is: "Things will only get better if Haider becomes chancellor."

To this end, Haider collaborates closely with various right-wing and neo-fascist parties from several European countries. He wants to unite the extreme right throughout Europe and place himself at the head of a movement against the European Union on a European level.

In early August, Haider met with Filip Dewinter, the president of the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, who promotes openly racist policies, and with representatives of the Italian Lega Nord (Northern League), the Spanish People's Party and the Partido Popular of Portugal, which joined the government last year.

Amongst other things, they discussed the possibilities of collaboration with other right-wing parties in Europe. For a variety of reasons, some of these parties, including the Swiss SVP (Schweizer Volkspartei, Swiss People's Party) under Christoph Blocher and the Danish People's Party under Pia Kjærsgaard, have so far rejected collaboration with Haider.

After the event, the initiator of the meeting, leading FPÖ demagogue Andreas Mölzer, proposed

collaboration with Le Pen in France, because he stood for “a similar political content as the FPÖ.”

As was the case with Haider’s sudden visit to Iraqi head of state Saddam Hussein in early summer, FPÖ President Susanne Riess-Passer had not been informed of the European meeting in advance. In an interview with the Austrian public television channel ORF, Haider commented: “I usually take decisions by myself.”

Having conceded leadership of the party to his companion Riess-Passer two-and-a-half years ago for tactical reasons, Haider is now working for his return. As he said in an interview with the *News* magazine, as early as last June he suggested to Riess-Passer that he retake the post of presidency of the party until national elections in 2003. According to Haider, the vice chancellor rejected this offer for fear of “appearing downgraded in public.”

Haider reacted by organizing the right wing of the FPÖ. Thus he demonstratively supported the candidacy of Ewald Stadler in the elections for Lower Austria, the largest state in the nation. Stadler had drawn heavy criticism even from the FPÖ’s ranks when he publicly trivialized the crimes of Nazi rule, declaring: “In 1945—and this has become official state ideology—we were supposedly liberated from fascism and tyranny, and ended up with the next tyranny.”

The inner-party struggle—between the “old” cadre adhering to racism, anti-Semitism and social demagoguery and the camp of young social climbers who promote neo-liberal policies in the interest of big business—is growing in intensity.

The deeply divided right-wing government can cling to power only because there is no alternative political party representing the interests of the working people. The program of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) is essentially no different from that of the conservatives. Its economic policies are in essence the same as those of the FPÖ. The SPÖ proposes tax cuts for businesses, further privatisations of public enterprises, the deregulation of the health service and an increasing commitment by Austria to military interventions on a global scale.

Austria is a clear example of a development currently taking place throughout Europe. Only three years ago, as many as 13 countries in Europe were headed by social democratic governments, but it is precisely these

governments with their right-wing policies, geared to the interests of big business and the banks, which have paved the way for the most reactionary right-wing forces.



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