

Haider brings down the Austrian government

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After three years in power the Austrian government, composed of a coalition of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the extreme-right Freedom Party (FP), has collapsed. New elections have been called for the beginning of November. Until that time the existing government under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) will remain in power.

Responsibility for the abrupt end of the Vienna-based government rests with Jörg Haider, the long-time leader of the FP and current governor for the region of Kärnten. Haider—who occupies no official party position and is no longer a member of the government—instigated a form of putsch, and with a series of deliberate provocations drove a number of members of his own party to resign. Among those who resigned their posts last week were Austrian vice chancellor and head of the FP, Susanne Riess-Passer, Finance Minister Karl-Heinz Grasser, Transport Minister Mathias Reichhold, and the head of the FP parliamentary fraction, Peter Westenthaler.

In many media commentaries the putsch undertaken by Haider against his own ministers has been described as the actions of an unpredictable egomaniac running amok and arrogantly destroying his own life's work. Such interpretations, however, underestimate Haider, who is deliberately working to push the entire political spectrum to the right and in doing so is prepared to ruthlessly sacrifice even members of his own party.

Haider's aim is to sabotage the plans for the eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) in order to retain the privileged position of Austria in comparison to its immediate east European neighbours. To this end, he is collaborating closely with other extreme-right organisations in Europe. In effect his politics are aimed at the Balkanisation and re-division of Europe, along the lines of the process which has taken place in Yugoslavia.

Haider had already threatened in January this year to call for a veto aimed at boycotting the entry of the Czech Republic into the EU. His actions provoked a considerable political crisis for the government. He then put into motion the demand for a referendum—a “Veto against Temelin”. The veto called for the closure of a nuclear power plant in the Czech region of Temelin as a prerequisite for allowing the Czech Republic admittance to the EU. Haider used widespread anxieties regarding the plant, which lies close to the Austrian border, in order to propagate anti-EU sentiments, although expansion of the EU is a central element of the coalition treaty signed between the FP and the ÖVP on coming to power.

Support for the anti-Temelin referendum was extraordinarily large, although it had been opposed by the governing People's Party as well as the opposition Austrian social democrats and

Green Party. Although the referendum required a total of 100,000 signatures, in fact one million voters supported the initiative.

Feeling strengthened, Haider proceeded to find a new theme with which to put pressure on the government.

In August this year large parts of Austria, as in many European countries, were badly hit by floods, ruining many small businesses, farmers and traders. In similar fashion to the German government, the Austrian coalition decided to delay the implementation of planned tax cuts to make money available to the victims of the flood.

Haider immediately expressed his opposition to the plan, arguing that the tax cuts had been agreed and it was no longer acceptable for the government to reverse promises it had made in the course of its election campaign. Following the refusal by members of the FP sitting in government to follow his line, Haider threatened to call a special party conference to discuss the issue.

When FP ministers continued to resist the campaign launched by Haider, the latter drummed up an “extraordinary delegates meeting”—although such a gathering is not part of the party's official constitution. This meeting then called upon the FP government members to orientate themselves in all their decisions to the opinion of the party as a whole. An intimate co-worker of Haider, Ewald Stadler, was appointed as “supervisor” of the party members in government.

Stadler belongs to the extreme-right wing of the FP. He had made headlines just a few weeks previously following his appearance at a “mid-summer festival”, where he sought to relativise the crimes of the Nazis. He maintained that it was an open question as to who were worse—the Nazis or the allies.

Immediately after the passage of the resolution at the delegates meeting, party Chairman Riess-Passer resigned and the next day the remaining FP ministers quit their posts. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, who had tried up until the last minute to prevent the resignations, was left with no other alternative than to declare the collapse of his right-wing, conservative government.

Since then, conflicts inside the FP have intensified. The former FP members of the government have accused Haider of wantonly and unnecessarily sabotaging and destroying the work of a successful government, while Haider has sought to group together the most right-wing forces inside the party for his political offensive.

This is not the first time that Haider has taken considerable risks and been prepared to accept losses inside his own party in order to achieve his political aims.

In September 1986, and relying on his post as governor of Kärnten, Haider toppled the chairman of the FP at that time,

Norbert Steger, and took over the leadership of the party—at the risk of ending the national government. At that time the FP functioned in the government as junior partner of the Austrian social democrats (SPÖ). Chancellor Franz Vranitzky's response to Haider's right-wing leanings was to put an end to collaboration with the FP. In the elections which followed the FP was able to double its share of the vote, from 4.9 to nearly 10 percent.

In the following years Haider honed his party from an orthodox liberal party similar to the Free Democratic Party in Germany to an organisation with openly nationalist and xenophobic politics.

In the summer of 1991, Haider was the target of hefty protest after he had praised the “effective employment policies in the Third Reich”. At this point he was forced to resign as governor of Kärnten. Three years later, in national council elections in the autumn of 1994, the FP share of the vote rose to 22.6 percent. Five years later, in national elections in October 1999, the FP overtook the ÖVP for the first time. It won the second biggest vote with 26.9 percent, directly behind the social democrats who won 33 percent, the party's worst result in post-war Austrian history.

Following this result the FP joined the government. The post of chancellor, however, went to the leader of the ÖVP, although the party had received less votes than the FP. Haider refrained from taking any position in government and instead returned to his post as governor of Kärnten, where he had been re-elected in 1999. Later he gave up the chairmanship of the FP in favour of his closest associate, Susanne Riess-Passer.

Many regarded Haider's actions at that time as a concession on his part to the powerful political and diplomatic pressure by a number of European countries in protest at FP participation in the Austrian government. In reality Haider was pursuing a double strategy. He did not want to remain in opposition at a point where the FP was at the summit of its electoral success. At the same time he was not prepared to subordinate himself to the role of junior partner following the guidelines of an ÖVP chancellor. He was in favour of government participation, but not subordination to the actual policies of the government.

This is why he sent members of his party into government while continuing to conduct an opposition course from his base in Kärnten. In particular, Haider pursued a confrontation course with the government over the issue of Europe attacking the “bureaucracy in Brussels” in an increasingly sharper manner.

Haider can largely thank Austria's social democrats for the success of his strategy up until now. It is the latter's right-wing policies, directed against the supporters of their own party, which have enabled Haider to win disillusioned and desperate voters attracted to his right-wing populist demagogic.

It is also reasonable to assume that Haider is now quite prepared to accept a victory by the social democrats in the newly planned elections and a short-term reverse for his own party. Under the existing conditions, an SPÖ-led government would, in common with the policies of social democratic parties in many other European countries, introduce policies designed to intensify the social crisis and destruction of basic democratic rights. In opposition Haider could seek to isolate the ÖVP, which has governed in coalition with the SPÖ for many years, and win the ideological leadership of the bourgeois camp. His aim remains to

enter the Vienna government as chancellor and head of government.

In this respect Haider has detected favourable changes in other European countries. From a total of 13 social-democratic governments which ruled European countries just two years ago, only 5 remain. The others have been replaced by conservative governments, a number of which have struck coalitions with parties of the extreme right. In general the political power influenced by these parties bears no relation to their level of popular support. They lack any mass base but have been able to exploit instead the existing political vacuum left behind by social democracy.

Haider's most recent project is the construction of a “European coalition of the right”. At the beginning of August he conducted extensive talks with Filip Dewinter, the leading ideologist of the Belgian Vlaams Blok. The subject of their discussions was the development of close forms of collaboration between extreme-right parties in Europe, including mutual support for election campaigns and joint elections meetings. Also taking part in the discussions at the exclusive hotel Seefel am Wörthersee were Mario Borghezio, ideologist of the Italian Northern League, representatives of the controversial Danish Peoples Party led by Pia Kjaersgaard, as well as deputies from the Portuguese Popular Party and the right wing of the Spanish Peoples Party.

Just three years ago the majority of European countries rejected collaboration with the FP and threatened to impose sanctions. Today Haider is collaborating with extreme right-wing parties, some of which are participating in European governments. This development indicates the profound changes which have taken place in Europe recently and confirms that the thoroughly anti-social policies carried out over years by social democratic-led governments in Europe have opened the path for the most reactionary political forces.



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