

On eve of national elections

Austria's Social Democrats, Greens shift to the right

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On the eve of the general election this Sunday, the political landscape in Austria has begun to shift significantly. The Social Democrats (SPÖ), who have the largest parliamentary faction, are leading the polls, and the Greens are gaining significantly.

The SPÖ leadership, however, has not committed itself to the kind of “Red-Green” coalition that exists in Berlin. Rather, it is toying with the idea of a grand coalition between the SPÖ and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP). The ÖVP, for its part, has not ruled out a continuation of its current coalition with Jörg Haider's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The past three years have seen a political turn to the right that was not limited to the parties of the conservative governing coalition, but also included the Social Democrats and the Greens. Their campaign statements are—with few exceptions—virtually indistinguishable from those of the traditional right-wing parties.

Following the last general election three years ago, the ÖVP invited Haider's party to join the government. (The FPÖ received almost 27 percent of the vote and became the second-largest party in parliament.) The ÖVP justified its decision to form a coalition with the FPÖ by claiming it would be able to “tame” the far-right party. But Haider failed to cooperate. While he sent his followers into the national government, he himself remained head of state in Carinthia, using it as a base from which to oppose the government and pressure it to the right.

This tactic provoked a deep crisis within the FPÖ. The polls predict a drop in its vote to between 10 and 15 percent, leaving it in fourth place behind the Social Democrats, the conservatives and the Greens. In spite of this, Haider is confident that the deepening social and political crisis will eventually work in his favour. All the other parties claim to combat the influence of the FPÖ by

assuming many of its political positions. This process leads to a further strengthening of the far right.

Haider used the election campaign to prepare his return to the national political arena. Only 40 days after his nomination, the leading candidate of the FPÖ, Mathias Reichhold, was withdrawn and replaced by Herbert Haupt, a long-time confidante of Haider. Haupt presented the right-wing populist program of the party far more aggressively than Reichhold, who is a rather pale political figure.

Haider himself has remained outside the party leadership for the time being and is not a candidate for the position of chancellor. After the expected electoral defeat of the party, he plans to first return to the leadership “with a group of loyal followers” and to reorganise the party, as he explained in a column for the national *Standard* newspaper.

Almost all of these “loyal followers” come from the far-right wing of the party. Their influence was already apparent in the election platform. Alongside xenophobia and further law-and-order measures, tax cuts for companies featured prominently.

Haupt is demanding a fundamental reform of the social security system, in particular privatisations in the area of old-age pensions and healthcare, as a precondition for remaining in coalition with the People's Party. At the same time, the FPÖ aggressively opposes the unification of Europe. The party demands that Austria veto the admission of Eastern European countries into the European Union and sometimes goes so far as to call for Austria to leave the EU.

The conservative ÖVP largely geared its election platform to its current coalition partner and adopted some of the FPÖ's programmatic statements in an attempt to win votes on the far right. Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel

(ÖVP) repeatedly stated his intention to win over disappointed FPÖ voters. A few weeks before the election, he asked the current finance minister Karl-Heinz Grasser (FPÖ) whether he would like to stay in his cabinet as an independent. Grasser immediately accepted.

In its election campaign, the People's Party played the racist card in the same manner as the FPÖ. In early October, minister of the interior Ernst Strasser (ÖVP) further restricted the right to asylum. Refugees who are deemed ineligible for asylum are now immediately deported. Strasser also stated his opposition to providing accommodations for asylum-seekers whose applications have been rejected. He was against "sending the wrong signals", he said in an interview with the *Standard*. "We have to make it clear to them that they cannot stay."

Since then, hundreds of asylum-seekers whose initial applications had been rejected and are therefore facing a long legal battle to stay in the country have been thrown out of the state accommodations and onto the streets, among them large numbers of women, children, the elderly or sick people.

Human rights organisations and social service groups such as Caritas, which are involved in providing housing and care for refugees, have bitterly protested the effects of the new law. In its endeavour to drastically reduce the number of applications for asylum, the ÖVP has adopted the position of the FPÖ.

As the FPÖ is expected to lose heavily, a continuation of the current coalition in Vienna requires a clear majority for the ÖVP in Sunday's election. According to all polls, however, the social democrats under Alfred Gusenbauer are leading.

Like all the social democratic parties throughout Europe, the SPÖ has shifted sharply to the right in recent years and feels obliged to put itself exclusively at the service of big business. Its new leader Gusenbauer has done nothing to change this line.

When former chancellor Franz Vranizky (SPÖ) called for a candidate who "symbolizes economic competence and is attractive to former FPÖ voters", Gusenbauer immediately called a joint press conference with the former social democratic finance minister Hannes Androsch. Androsch called for "painful measures" after the elections and said he favoured more "private initiative" in the health and pension systems.

Similar to their German counterparts, the Austrian Greens have abandoned their previous positions on issues such as anti-militarism, social justice and the defence of minorities. Led by Alexander van der Bellen, a professor

of economics, the party stands for the interests of the financial elite and the wealthy. The Greens have long been preparing for government responsibilities. The party has been in parliament for 10 years and currently has 14 MPs.

Van der Bellen described as "attractive" the "zero deficit" program of finance minister Grasser (FPÖ), which involves severe social service cuts. He also agrees with the privatisation projects of the right-wing/conservative government. "State property has lost a lot of its significance, not least because of globalisation", he said. "Locational and competitive factors have become far more decisive than property structures."

The Greens call for the abolition of the military draft and demand an effective professional army. Their spokesperson on matters of security policy, Peter Pilz, has repeatedly voiced his support for the creation of a European army and is in favour of Austria's purchase of 24 jet fighters for the air force. The party only changed its position on this last issue after confronting resistance from within its own ranks during the election campaign.

The social democrats and Greens pose no alternative to the xenophobic policies of the ÖVP and the FPÖ. The SPÖ wants to regulate immigration according to the needs of big business. Under the slogan "As much immigration as necessary" the social democrats call for an "orderly, legally regulated immigration in the interest of a sufficient, but not too large supply of labour".

When Chancellor Schüssel defended the reactionary asylum policy of his minister of the interior during a televised debate, the only objection of the Green representative was that the government did not inform asylum-seekers about Austria's closed borders while they were still in their home countries.

In the Austrian media, there is a lot of talk about "opposing camps" in the election. But neither the far-right/conservative nor the Red-Green camp have any interest in seriously tackling the problems confronting the majority of the population.



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