

Following recent local elections

Conservatives and Greens form coalition government in Upper Austria

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Only weeks after regional elections in Upper Austria, the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the Green Party have agreed to form a local coalition government. This decision will accelerate these parties joining forces on a national level.

In elections held in Austria's third biggest state, the ÖVP and Jörg Haider's ultra-right Freedom Party (FP)—the two parties forming the national coalition government—suffered considerable losses, paying the penalty for the continuous cuts that have been made to the Austrian welfare state. The Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Greens were able to make gains as a result of popular discontent with policies carried out by the government in Vienna.

For the first time, the Greens overtook the FP and become the third strongest party behind the SPÖ and the ÖVP. The votes they gained were for the most part bound up with the hopes of many voters that the Greens would act as a counterweight to the ruthless policies carried out by the government of Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP). The fact that the Greens are now ignoring the mandate of their voters and are helping a conservative minister president to power reveals their true political character. Together with their sister party in neighbouring Germany, the Austrian Greens are offering their services as a reliable prop for bourgeois rule.

The regional executive of the Greens came to a remarkably quick agreement with the ÖVP. To prevent protests on behalf of the rank and file, the membership of the party wasn't informed about the development of negotiations until they had been concluded. The Greens' party chairman, Alexander van der Bellen, expressly advocated an ÖVP-Green coalition. He congratulated Rudi Anschober, the party's regional chairman in Upper Austria, for forming a coalition with the conservatives and

declared that Anschober enjoys his "full confidence."

The 42-year-old Anschober, who has for a long time advocated the Greens moving closer to the ÖVP, is characteristic of the Greens' evolution—and not only in Austria. The son of an ÖVP-councillor, he began his political career as a member of an action group opposing atomic power. Following the catastrophe in Chernobyl in 1986, many people who later were to become members of the Greens felt threatened by the construction of an atomic power plant in neighbouring Temelin.

Anschober joined the Greens and also wrote for the German daily paper *Tageszeitung (taz)*. As a result of his long involvement within the anti-atomic power movement, he was elected to the Austrian parliament in 1990 and became the Green Party's spokesman for atomic and security policies. In 1997, he retired to regional politics and steered the Greens within Upper Austria onto a rightward course; and for the first time, he became a member of a regional parliament.

Hardly any political friction could be seen when, in the middle of October, Anschober and minister president Josef Pühringer presented the first conservative-Green government programme. Both declared that the first priority was "sustainable financial policies with a balanced budget" and made clear that in their opinion there is only one way to repair the budget deficit: decisive cuts in social services. Under the slogan "free of debts," the most intensive attacks on the welfare state have been carried out by the federal minister of finance Karl Heinz Grassner (former FP member, now independent). Anschober gives the impression that he completely identifies with the political course of the ÖVP. The only prerequisite demanded by him during negotiations was a slightly larger environmental department for the Green Party.

All the attempts made by representatives of the ÖVP and the Greens to play down the significance of this coalition and to portray it as resulting from special circumstances on a regional level cannot hide the fact that a conservative-Green coalition is also seen as a possibility in Vienna.

The state secretary Helmut Kuckaka (ÖVP) has explicitly stated that an ÖVP-Green coalition is a “possibility on a national level.” An increasing number of leading ÖVP members are thinking about a “change in midstream” of their coalition partner in Vienna (i.e., replacing the FP with the Greens before the next elections). For a long time now, business circles have been unhappy with the current coalition, and especially with the FP.

At the beginning of this year, the Greens already made clear that they were not in principle opposed to collaborating with the ÖVP on a national level when they offered to form a coalition with Chancellor Schüssel. And now again, high-ranking Greens, among them vice-chair Eva Glawischnig, have expressed their approval of a conservative-Green coalition government.

The actions and words of party spokesman van der Bellen have revealed the extent to which the possibility of the Green Party forming part of a coalition on a national level is taken seriously. He has begun to distribute future jobs and government offices, and has explained that some “obstacles” may exist regarding a conservative-Green coalition, but that he will take over the job as party whip.

The majority of the political and economic establishment view Haider’s FP as unusable for the moment because of its endless internal squabbles, scandals and general political instability. Haider’s party has done its job—at least for the time being—and has pushed the entire Austrian political spectrum far to the right. The FP is in a severe crisis, having lost support from big business and the media, but also as a result of severe losses in recent elections. Herbert Haupt had to yield the job of vice-chancellor to Hubert Gorbach, and now Haider’s sister, Ursula Haubner, has taken over the job as party chair.

Despite these moves, Chancellor Schüssel still confronts the danger that the internal crisis and power struggles inside the FP could rapidly cause his government to fall apart, as it did last year.

The Greens view the crisis of the FP as their big chance and hope to take its place alongside the conservatives. Apparently, they are not disturbed by the fact that the conservatives have already to a large degree adopted the

policies of the FP—exemplified in the new asylum law passed by parliament that severely restricts the rights of refugees. Justifiably, refugee and human rights organisations sharply criticised this law as a violation of both the European Human Rights and Geneva Convention for Refugees. They aim to institute proceedings against this law at the Austrian constitutional court.

The new law reduces the time period during which a decision has to be made regarding an application for asylum to 72 hours. And if the application is rejected, there is to be no further protection against deportation. This means that a refugee can be deported even if he or she has appealed the authorities’ decision. In addition, no further claims or arguments can be made after the 72-hour period has passed, and the measures will considerably worsen the prospects of refugees at the Austrian border.

Instead of opposing this law, the Greens’ van der Bellen is offering his own proposal regarding the asylum laws, which in fact aim to tighten these laws even further. He demands a fixed quota of immigrants to be taken in and the establishment of additional criteria, “so that everybody knows if they have a chance to be accepted.” This demand mainly aims to make it possible for low-paid, well-trained workers to enter Austria—something in the interests of big business.

The Austrian Greens’ decision to join a coalition in a region where they have traditionally claimed to represent a progressive alternative demonstrates how far to the right this party has moved. They are also offering to be a reliable partner with Schüssel in the field of fiscal and taxation policies. The chancellor has been demanding for some time now that taxes for companies and people with big incomes be lowered. Although recently published research on the taxation of assets established that Austria collects the lowest level of taxes in Europe, Schüssel is now aiming to implement further tax cuts for the rich. For its own populist purposes, the FP is at least attempting to block this. The Greens, on the other hand, have already made clear that they will not oppose further tax cuts for the rich.



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