

# Austria: behind the split in the Freedom Party

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Sharp conflicts within the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FP) have ended in an open split. On April 4, former FP chairman and Carinthian state leader Jörg Haider appeared before the press in Vienna and announced the establishment of a new organisation with the name “Alliance for Austria’s Future” (AAF).

Some weeks earlier, Haider had made comments about the establishment of a new party and declared that the old FP “had been closed down.” At first, this was interpreted as just one of many threats made by the right-wing populist to intimidate his internal party adversaries. The fact that his comments were to be taken seriously this time surprised political circles in Vienna.

Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (APP), who has governed the country for five years in a coalition with the FP, called for an explanation. Haider insisted that all FP cabinet members would transfer to the new organisation, and that the only changes for the government alliance would be in terms of name and colour. The Freedom Party’s favoured colour—blue—is to be replaced by the orange of the Alliance for Austria’s Future.

A short time later, the parliamentary group of FP deputies voted almost unanimously against new elections and announced it would follow in parliament the line of the AAF. As a result, the coalition of the People’s Party and AAF has a sufficient parliamentary majority to continue governing.

Many media commentators consider the establishment of the new organisation as the beginning of the end for Haider, whose “boundless egocentrism” (*Neue Züricher Zeitung*) has long dogged his political career. Under the headline “Haider’s End,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that the new party logo of the AAF resembled that of the “Bee Breeder Federation of Austria.” The party, “which, together

with its leader, has frightened half of Europe for 15 years,” has virtually torn itself apart because of a “lack of any programmatic ideas and internal warfare.”

At first sight, the re-founding of Haider’s party looks like an impulsive reaction to the conflicts and power struggles within the FP. Tensions within the party have constantly increased since it joined the government five years ago.

The FP rose to prominence in the 1990s because it was able to channel widespread discontent with the nepotism and anti-social policies of the “grand coalition” of the Social Democrats and People’s Party in a right-wing, nationalist direction. As a government party, however, the FP responded to the interests of big business and the banks and imposed social cuts and economic measures that met with broad popular resistance. This led to substantial election losses and a decline in party membership.

Since joining the government in 2000, the party has lost some two thirds of its voter base. While the party was able to record 27 percent in National Council elections in 1999, its share of the vote sank to just 10 percent three years later. With the exception of Carinthia, Haider’s power base, the FP has lost a series of elections. Alongside the loss in votes and members, the party’s indebtedness has grown—to the sum of least 3 million euros.

The devastating defeats for the FP in local council elections in Lower Austria and the Steiermark at the end of February made clear that the party’s internal crisis could no longer be patched over by temporary changes in personnel.

In recent months, a wing around the Viennese party chief Heinz Christian Strache and the European Union delegate and former “chief ideologist” Andreas Mölzer achieved growing influence with their call for the FP to pull out of the government coalition and go into opposition. There were many indications that Haider

would lose his majority at the party congress planned for the end of April. Strache had already announced his candidacy for the post of party president, currently held by Haider's sister, Ursula Haubner, who is also Austria's social minister.

These conflicts must be considered against the background of a growing social and political crisis in Austria.

The extension of the European Union to the east, which came into effect last May, has had enormous repercussions for Austria. Four of the 10 new European Union member countries share borders with Austria: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. Increasingly porous cross-border relations have severely affected Austria's social structure. Many Austrian employers use low-wage labour from neighbouring eastern European countries as a lever to drastically depress Austrian wages and social standards. Average wages in the adjacent countries are far lower than the Austrian wage level.

Smaller enterprises, farmers and the self-employed fear ruinous competition from cheap products. This also provides a fertile basis for the right-wing, nationalist and anti-European agitation of FP functionaries such as Strache and Mölzer.

At the same time, resistance to social cuts continues to increase. When the government announced huge cuts to the country's pension system barely two years ago, the result was the first large-scale political strike in Austria in more than 50 years. Around half a million took part in protests—far more than the trade unions expected.

Against a background of increased social tensions, the political establishment in Vienna has closed ranks. This is why Haider now opposes the anti-European Union course of the FP and the attempt by Strache and Mölzer to break up the government coalition. Haider was quite prepared to use his own right-wing extremist demagoguery at the end of the 1990s to undermine the grand coalition, but as a multimillionaire, he was always sensitive to preserving the stability of the political order and the interests of big business.

He maintains close relations with both of the big parties. While Haider's party has governed in Vienna for five years alongside the People's Party, his coalition for the past year in Carinthia has been with the Social Democrats. And Haider has political

influence in both major parties.

Two years ago, a wing of the People's Party opposed any continuation of the coalition with the FP, but were overruled by Schüssel, who insisted on maintaining the alliance with Haider. Then, last year, when a large number of Social Democrats rejected going into a coalition with Haider in Carinthia, the national executive of the Socialist Party intervened and gave the green light for cooperation with the FP.

Over the past few years, Haider has brought about a clear shift to the right in Austrian politics. Now, with his Alliance for Austria's Future, which is designed to function without a clear party structure, he hopes to develop a new all-embracing national movement. Despite predictions to the contrary, it could well be that the establishment of the AAF will not mean the end of Haider's political career. On the contrary, such a movement could play an important role in defending the Austrian economic and political elite against increasing popular pressure as part of a government of national unity.



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