

# Austria: Socialist Party in free-fall in regional elections

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The regional elections in the Austrian states of Carinthia and Salzburg last weekend ended in a debacle for the social-democratic Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ). As was the case in the national election held last September, the extreme right has been able to profit from the decline of the social democrats.

The extreme-right Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), which split from the ultra-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 2005, won a larger percent of the vote (45.5 percent) in Carinthia than was ever the case when the party was led by the populist Jörg Haider. Haider died in a drunk-driving accident in last October. The SPÖ lost almost 10 percent of its support and achieved just 28.6 percent of the vote. Following severe losses in the last election, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) was able to win back some ground and gained 16.5 percent. The Greens only just scraped over the 4 percent barrier necessary for participation in the state parliament.

The FPÖ failed to clear the 4 percent hurdle. As a result, the BZÖ in Carinthia has close to an absolute majority. The party controls 18 seats. Jointly the SPÖ and ÖVP have the same total.

At the same time the victory of the BZÖ has little to do with the posthumous "heritage" of Jörg Haider, as much of the media has claimed. Rather the election result reflects the political vacuum left by the decline of the SPÖ. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper noted quite correctly: "There is barely any left organization to identify in the Austrian political spectrum." The paper then declares that it is the "nationally-tinted seductive social ideology of the right wing" that has been able to exploit this political vacuum.

A total of 22,000 former SPÖ voters cast their votes this time for the BZÖ. In addition, 17,000 who

abstained at the last state election gave their vote to the BZÖ. Communities previously dominated by SPÖ also fell to the right wing, including the state capital of Klagenfurt.

The victory for the BZÖ came after the party had massive problems finding a successor for Haider. Only after prolonged disputes did the party agree on the figure of Gerhard Dörfler, a former savings bank director. Dörfler is an unknown political quantity who had distinguished himself solely by his slavish subordination to Haider.

Predictably, he has promised to continue the right-wing policies of his idol. He intends, for example, to maintain the controversial home for asylum-seekers set up by his predecessor. Human right groups and other organizations have criticized the home, which is sealed off by police in order to protect the local population from alleged "potentially criminal" immigrants.

The SPÖ also lost 6 percent of its support in the state of Salzburg where the party has ruled with a relatively popular candidate, Gabi Burgstaller. In Salzburg a section of former SPÖ voters also turned to the right—around 6,000 voted for either the FPÖ or BZÖ. An additional 5,000 voters who formerly supported the social democrats did not turn out to vote this time round.

The SPÖ were only able to retain the largest share of the vote in Salzburg because of the losses suffered by the conservatives, who received 36 percent—slightly less than the vote for the social democrats. The FPÖ was able to increase its vote by 5 percent, and with 13.2 percent ranked in third place. Standing for the first time in the state the BZÖ obtained just over 3 percent.

After the election result was declared, the SPÖ leadership strained to present its catastrophic results in the best possible light. SPÖ leading candidate Reinhart

Rohr declared that "irrationality" had evidently played a role in the Carinthia election, where "the Haider factor obviously played" a decisive role. SPÖ chairman Werner Faymann told the Viennese *Standard* that, while the party could not be satisfied with its losses in Salzburg, it "would be pleased to receive a similar result at a national level."

The increased support for extreme right-wing parties is first and foremost the responsibility of the social democrats, who have lost all popular support following years of right-wing and socially destructive policies.

In less than two years of a grand coalition with the conservatives, the SPÖ, with its reactionary and opportunist politics, created the conditions whereby two parties of the extreme-right facing imminent collapse were able to regain support. In the National Council election last September the SPÖ lost 171,000 votes to the FPÖ and 75,000 to the BZÖ. Amongst young voters—for the first time the voting age was lowered to 16 years in 2008—the FPÖ was able to win the most support, well ahead of the SPÖ.

Even following such a catastrophic defeat, Faymann and the SPÖ are neither willing nor in a position to change political course. In fact, immediately after the election they expressed their support for a new edition of the grand coalition with the ÖVP, i.e., precisely the political constellation that has just been voted out at a state level.

At the same time the party is moving to the right at breathtaking speed. Faymann enjoys his own close links to the populist right-wing *Krone* newspaper, which for many years supported Jörg Haider's right-wing campaigns. Gabi Burgstaller—known as "red Gabi" by fellow SPÖ members—went so far as to describe the deceased Haider as one of the "greatest political talents of the last decades."

In the present government program there are a number of policies regarding immigrant and refugee issues that just a few years ago were demands raised by the extreme right. In domestic and social politics the SPÖ has moved so far to the right that the party no longer rules out alliances with the FPÖ or the BZÖ. Before the latest election Burgstaller also made clear that she did not rule out a coalition with the FPÖ.

The current economic crisis will only intensify this rush to the right. Austria has heavily invested in Eastern Europe, and in order to rein in the country's

increasing indebtedness the grand coalition has already called for a halt in new civil service employment this year. Faymann also declared that his government was intent on denationalising the goods transport section of Austrian Railways.

Simultaneously social conflicts are intensifying, with broad resistance developing to the government's plans to shut down 3,000 postal service branches with the loss of thousands of jobs.



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