

Austria: Collapse for Social Democrats in Vorarlberg state election

Markus Salzmann
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The election in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg last Sunday resulted in a new nadir for the country's Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ). The social democrats lost nearly 7 percent of their support and obtained just 10.1 percent of the vote—the party's worst result in the history of the post-war Austrian Second Republic.

The SPÖ is now the smallest parliamentary group in the Vorarlberg state parliament. The party trailed behind the Greens, which was able to maintain its result from four years earlier and won 10.3 percent. Despite substantial losses the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) defended its absolute majority in the rural region with its 370,000 inhabitants. State Governor Herbert Sausgruber (ÖVP) was able to win an absolute majority of 50.8 percent.

Once again the extreme-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) was able to profit from the slump in support for the SPÖ. The FPÖ won 25.2 percent, doubling its result compared to the previous election, and emerged as the party with the second-strongest level of support. A split off from the FPÖ—the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ)—received just 1.2 percent of the vote.

More than 6,000 voters who had formerly cast their ballots for the SPÖ switched their allegiance this time around to the FPÖ. In some electoral districts the SPÖ received only around 5 percent. It is the fourth electoral defeat for the social democrats since Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) took office at the end of 2008. The SPÖ had already suffered punishing losses in state elections in Salzburg, in Carinthia and in this year's European election. The next defeat for the SPÖ is looming this Sunday in Upper Austria, where polls predict that the party will lose a quarter of its support.

Following electoral defeat for the federal coalition of the People's Party and the FPÖ/BZÖ in 2006, and with the latter parties confronting complete political

collapse, two years of a grand coalition between the ÖVP and SPÖ was sufficient to help the FPÖ win back ground. In the national council elections in September 2008 the SPÖ lost 171,000 votes to the FPÖ and 75,000 to the BZÖ.

As has been the pattern following its most recent defeats, the SPÖ leadership has announced it will continue its current political course and ignore this latest snub from the electorate. Faymann tried to play down the result as a local exception and categorically ruled out drawing any consequences for the federal party, which has governed at a federal level for the past three years with the People's Party.

In fact, in its election campaign in Vorarlberg the SPÖ did nothing to counter the reactionary politics of the FPÖ. The FPÖ leading candidate Dieter Egger led an overtly anti-Semitic campaign against Hanno Loewy, the director of the Jewish museum in Hohenems, whom he publicly insulted as a "Jewish exile." Loewy had criticized the racist election posters of the FPÖ, which demanded an "end to tolerance" and "no Turkish interpreters," while calling for a stop on social security benefits for foreign workers and their families.

For its part, the SPÖ raised no objections to the FPÖ and its campaign. Instead it was the conservative ÖVP and its leading candidate Sausgruber who ruled out any cooperation with the FPÖ at a state level. Election observers assume that it was this stance that assured the ÖVP of an absolute majority.

The behaviour of the SPÖ in Vorarlberg was not coincidental. With each defeat the party has moved further to the right. Faymann has close contact with the right-wing populist *Kronen-Zeitung*, which supported the right-wing campaigns of former FPÖ leader Jörg Haider for many years. Following the latter's death in

an auto accident the head of the SPÖ in Salzburg, Gabi Burgstaller, had described Haider as one of the “greatest political talents in past decades.”

Since the Vorarlberg election the social democrats have been striving to take up the demands of the FPÖ. Defence Secretary Norbert Darabos announced that the SPÖ would draw up a new integration concept for its party congress in 2010. He had already been assigned the job of drawing up such a concept by party leader Faymann last spring.

According to Darabos, “concepts, projects and experiences” over the issue of integration are to be incorporated into a draft proposal for the party congress. It is already clear that the SPÖ is preparing to take up the traditional demands of nationalist circles and the ultra-right and that a sharpening up of Austrian law regarding migration and asylum policy is in the cards. As Faymann explained, one had to show citizens that the SPÖ is serious about implementing “a policy of integration, rules and order.”

One week before the election in Upper Austria his words are a clear signal to the political right. Another SPÖ state governor, Franz Voves, told the *Standard* newspaper, “We cannot continue to look the other way, we have to tackle these challenges directly.... There are problems in the schools, at the workplace and with regard to housing. If 90 percent of the pupils in a class do not have an Austrian background, then something is wrong. From residence policy to school selection policy. We will openly address these issues.”

The head of the SPÖ in Upper Austria, Erich Haider, has expressed his own preference for a “contractual” obligation of the part of immigrants to integrate. In addition to compulsory language courses, he also demands a comprehensive contract covering many aspects of everyday life—from employment to control of the family. Any immigrant “breaking” this contract will then be subject to sanctions.

Under these conditions it comes as no surprise that not only are many SPÖ members quitting the party, some are leaving to join the Freedom Party. The FPÖ even has a special form that can be filled out by former SPÖ members who want to join the ultra-right party.

While the SPÖ is increasingly finding common cause with the FPÖ over such issues as domestic and security policies, Faymann unceasingly defends the interests of Austrian big business with whom he maintains good

relations. Any initiative to tax the wealthy, either from within his own party or from outside forces, meets with bitter resistance from the chancellor. The federal coalition is also considering a series of proposals to increase consumer taxes.

At the same time, the government is intensifying its austerity measures in response to the economic crisis. Austrian banks are massively exposed in Eastern Europe where many economies are struggling. In order to cut public expenditure the grand coalition has already ordered a stop on recruitment to government service for this year.

Postal services and the Austrian Federal Railroads are also being prepared for complete privatization by the grand coalition in Vienna. The newspaper *Die Presse* noted recently that “a large amount of blood must flow” before the formerly state-owned post office is “competitive” on the market. With the backing of the government, post office boss George Pölzl is preparing to ratchet up the existing scheme of reconstruction by ridding the service of many of its relatively well-paid employees.



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