

Austria: Poll shows far-right FP as strongest party

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According to a survey from late May, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), led by Heinz-Christian Strache, has become the strongest Austrian party. The party registers slightly more support than the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). The last time the party scored such a high approval rating was in the late 1990s, when it was led by Jörg Haider, and prior to its participation in the Austrian government in 2000.

According to figures by the polling firm OGM, 29 percent of respondents would vote for the FPÖ in an imminent parliamentary election. The same survey reported that the SPÖ would receive 28 percent, the ÖVP 23 percent, the Greens 13 percent, and the FPÖ split-off party, Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), 5 percent.

Growing support for the FPÖ was already perceptible during the last two years. The party gained a large number of votes in several state elections. In October 2010, the far-right party gained considerable support in the Viennese state election. With 200,000 votes, it was able to almost double its result from 2005.

The FPÖ had been largely discredited through its participation in government from 2000 to 2006, and was on the verge of bankruptcy. Its days seemed numbered when its long-time chairman Jörg Haider formed a new party, the BZÖ, in 2005. Its current re-emergence is mostly due to the policies of the Social Democrats and Greens, whose right-wing character is playing into the hands of the FPÖ.

During their tenure in government, the ÖVP and FPÖ had massively dismantled social and democratic rights. In the 2006 parliamentary election, the FPÖ's votes plummeted, and the SPÖ entered into a coalition government with the ÖVP. Any hopes for a change in policies on the part of layers of the population were

rudely dashed.

The Grand Coalition continued and even intensified the policies of its predecessor. In particular, Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) decided to implement massive cuts in budget and social spending following the economic crisis of 2008-2009. The Alpine republic and neighbouring eastern European regions, which are of great economic importance for Austria, were hit hard. At the same time, the grand coalition increased taxes primarily affecting low and medium-sized incomes.

The consequence of these policies was a series of historic electoral defeats for the Social Democrats, who had dominated Austrian politics throughout the entire post-war period. In the Social Democratic stronghold of Vienna, where the SPÖ held the mayor's office for 16 years, and were able to rule without coalition partners, the party lost 5 percentage points in 2010 and have since then depended on support from the Greens.

In 2009, the SPÖ also suffered heavy losses of votes in Carinthia, Salzburg, Vorarlberg and Upper Austria. In Vorarlberg, it received only 10 percent of votes, the worst result in the party's history.

The SPÖ is not only responsible for anti-social policies at a state and national level, it has also increasingly adopted the type of anti-immigrant politics advocated by the FPÖ.

SPÖ state leader Erich Haider has demanded that immigrants be obliged to undersign an official contract to guarantee their readiness to integrate. Aside from language courses, Haider also calls for a written obligation requiring immigrants to uphold the basic rules of social coexistence, maintain a steady job, and permit family members unhindered access to education. If these obligations are "broken," sanctions include the possibility of deportation.

All of the leading figures of the SPÖ have reacted to the series of electoral defeats with a sharp shift to the right. Josef Cap, SPÖ chairman of the parliamentary faction, declared that the SPÖ had to address the issue of immigrants more directly. He is patently seeking to adopt the FPÖ's anti-immigrant views and gain votes from the far-right fringe.

In practice, the Grand Coalition has drastically exacerbated the asylum laws. Since 1993, the number of granted requests for asylum has dropped by 55 percent. Scandals regarding conditions in asylum seekers' hostels are frequent. Heinz Patzelt, head of Amnesty International in Austria, recently stated that "our asylum law is beyond good and evil."

Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), secretary of state for integration, recently told the daily *Der Standard* that he and his government wanted to strip Strache and the FPÖ of their monopoly position concerning the issue of immigration. This means that they will take over the FPÖ's political positions. At the same time, Kurz also signalled that the ÖVP remained open for a coalition with the ultra-right party.

The Greens were hardly able to benefit from the SPÖ's losses. In many positions they stand to the right of the SPÖ and focus their policies on better-off layers of the middle class. In the Vienna state government, they are regarded as a force intent on pressuring the SPÖ to the right. They vehemently demand budget cuts at the expense of the poorest layers of the population.

The Greens are also quite capable of forming a coalition with the ÖVP. Following the 2002 parliamentary election, both parties negotiated for some time over a possible coalition government. At a state level, the Greens have been in coalition with the ÖVP since 2003 in Upper Austria, and several cities are also ruled by ÖVP/Green coalitions.

During the past few years, the SPÖ, Greens and ÖVP have orientated their political programmes exclusively according to the interests of the banks and big corporations. They are supported by the trade unions, which enjoy close links to the SPÖ.

In Styria, this broad coalition against the working population became very clear. In this state, the SPÖ/ÖVP state government decided upon draconian social cuts and enforced them with the aid of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), leading to massive protests. The ÖGB sought to suppress these

protests against the cuts and portray them as inevitable. The Greens publicly criticised the state government's austerity plans, but, in the state capital of Graz, worked closely with the ÖVP to impose them at a local level.

The Styrian state government then made some superficial cosmetic changes to its social budget. Afterwards, SPÖ state party leader Franz Voves and the ÖGB declared their satisfaction and called it a "reasonable compromise. The budget has not been "broken apart," but merely "redistributed."

While the population has to endure cuts, the government's policies have enabled a narrow layer of society to hugely increase its wealth. According to the Boston Consulting Group's recent Global Wealth Report, 297 of Austria's 3.5 million households had a fortune of more than \$100 million. Furthermore, in 2010, 37,000 dollar millionaires lived in Austria. The percentage of millionaires per population is only higher in Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Kuwait.

The emergence of right-wing forces in Austria is not merely a national phenomenon. In neighbouring Hungary, the right-wing government of Viktor Orban rules with a two-thirds majority, and in numerous other European countries, far-right parties are in parliament or government. In all of these countries, such forces have been able to benefit from the anger, frustration and political confusion caused by social democratic or pseudo-leftist parties.



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