

Austrian Social Democrats suffer massive losses in local elections

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In regional elections on May 5 in Salzburg, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP) recorded the largest loss of support since the Second World War. The so-called peoples' parties, which also rule Austria in a grand coalition at the federal level, lost 23 percent of the vote.

The elections in Salzburg were brought forward after the regional finance minister, David Brenner, resigned in January over a finance scandal. It was revealed in December that highly speculative investments resulted in losses totaling €340 million (US\$439 million) for the region with a populace of 500,000.

The state government led by President Gabi Burgstaller placed responsibility for the scandal on the "criminal energy" of one employee in the finance department who had been responsible since 2003 for the finances of the state. The employee was immediately fired and charged. Doubts about other state employees were, however, ignored or quashed by the politicians responsible.

Burgstaller responded to the shortfall in state finances with an austerity programme at the expense of the population. She imposed a pay freeze for public sector workers and announced drastic spending cuts for the upcoming budget. She paid the price for these policies in the election.

The SPÖ lost 15.6 percent, receiving only 23.8 percent of the vote. According to an analysis of the vote by SORA, only half of those who voted in 2009 for the Social Democrats did so again this time.

Despite losses of 7.5 percent, the ÖVP emerged as the strongest party, and Wilfried Hasslauer is expected to be the next state president.

The Greens were the main winners in the election, increasing their support by 12.8 percent, finishing just behind the Social Democrats at 20.2 percent. It was the

best electoral result for the Austrian Greens in their history. The extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) increased its vote slightly to 17 percent, and the right-wing party of billionaire Peter Stronach made it into parliament with 8.3 percent of the vote. Participation in the election declined from 75 to 71 percent.

In previous elections in the states of Tyrol, Lower Austria and Kärnten, which took place earlier in the year, the Social Democrats were the main losers along with the ÖVP. The ability of the rightward-leaning Team Stronach to enter parliament in Salzburg is the result of the right-wing policies of the SPÖ and ÖVP. Facing deepening social and economic tensions, Stronach represents the interests of the financial elite and has received support from business circles. The party recruits its personnel from all of the established parties.

The ÖVP is currently negotiating intensively with all parties represented in the Salzburg parliament. Future president Hasslauer has not ruled out a coalition with the Greens or Team Stronach. "All combinations are possible. I am not ruling anything out," Hasslauer said.

SPÖ federal chancellor Werner Faymann gave public backing to Burgstaller, who resigned shortly after the electoral defeat. "I have great respect for the abilities of Gabi Burgstaller," he stated.

Immediately after their success in the election, the Greens signalled that they were ready to work with the defeated SPÖ. Having demanded the removal of the SPÖ/ÖVP coalition during the campaign, they are now calling for an ÖVP/SPÖ/Green coalition. Leading candidate Astrid Rüssler stated that the preference for a coalition with the SPÖ and ÖVP was "a decision of our party committee."

The Greens intend to send a clear message for the upcoming federal elections in the autumn with their

participation in government in Salzburg. Green chairwoman Eva Glavischnig recently declared that the formation of an SPÖ/ÖVP/Green coalition at the federal level was the aim of their election campaign.

The Greens would be the right wing of such a coalition. They are even more right wing than the SPÖ on economic and social policy. The Greens have criticised the government in Vienna for not going far enough with reforms in the face of the economic crisis.

During the past two-and-a-half years, the grand coalition has adopted several austerity packages. Funding was severely cut in the areas of education and social spending. For some Green politicians, the cuts did not go far enough. In the early months of this year, several Greens went over to the newly founded Neos alliance. This neo-liberal party calls for radical free-market policies, including tax cuts and no upper limits on rent for properties.

Compared to last year, there has been an increase of those out of work by almost 10 percent. The unemployment rate of 7.3 percent is at a record high. The unemployment rate among young people under 25 also increased by over 5 percent.

Increasing numbers of Austrians can only find part-time work and can barely make ends meet. While the number of full-time jobs has dropped by roughly 15,000, 113,000 part-time jobs have been added. More than half of the workers in a part-time job are “involuntarily” working part-time and searching for a full-time position.



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