

Austria on the eve of parliamentary elections

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National parliamentary elections take place in Austria tomorrow. The Social Democrats (SPÖ) have governed in a coalition with the conservative Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP) since 2007, first under Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer, and since December 2008 under Werner Faymann (both SPÖ). Both parties could see their share of the vote drop below 50 percent for the first time since 1945. It is therefore questionable whether the grand coalition will be able to continue.

The Greens are expected to profit, having increased their support in regional elections this year. Currently they have representatives in five regional governments and are the strongest party in cities such as Salzburg, Innsbruck and Klagenfurt. In the latest polls their support stood at 16 percent.

Along with the Social Democrats, Conservatives and Greens, there are several explicitly right-wing parties that expect to surpass the 4 percent barrier for parliamentary representation.

Team Stronach is taking part in national elections for the first time. Its founder, Canadian-Austrian billionaire Peter Stronach, stands for a mixture of neo-liberal economics and right-wing populist rhetoric. Although the party was only founded a year ago, it already has five representatives in parliament. The 81-year-old Stronach won one SPÖ parliamentarian and four from the right-wing BZÖ to his party. Other deputies have reported that Stronach offered them large sums of money to join his party's fraction.

Stronach is likely to take votes from the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Alliance for Austria's Future (BZÖ). Both of these parties had ties with the right-wing populist Jörg Haider. The FPÖ has stabilised in recent years and could become the third strongest group in parliament. The BZÖ, a split-off from the FPÖ, could, by contrast, find it difficult to surpass the 4 percent hurdle.

The right-wing liberal New Austria (NEOS) is

another new party. Similar to the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo in Italy, it is standing against the "established cadre parties" and their "blind obedience", and organises mainly over the Internet. Its chairman Matthias Stolz was previously active around the ÖVP. NEOS have also presented themselves as a liberal party. Along with calls for better education, the party stands for a reduction of pensions.

It is unclear if NEOS and the Pirate Party, which is also running, will make it into parliament.

Like the federal election in Germany, the programmes of the competing parties are very similar. They represent the interests of business and the privileged middle class, while the needs of workers, the unemployed, youth and pensioners find no expression.

In the election campaign, the established parties have formed a conspiracy of silence. Important issues have been left out. Instead, the television debates of the leading candidates gave the impression that coalition discussions had begun prematurely. The SPÖ and ÖVP exchanged compliments about their "successful" five years of cooperation.

By contrast, the European crisis, the massive debts of Austrian banks due to their investments in Eastern Europe and the war preparations against Syria did not feature in the public debate. Instead, much more time was spent discussing the demand by Stronach for the introduction of the death penalty for "serial killers."

If the Social Democrats and Conservatives lose their current majority, almost any of the parties could form a coalition with each other. A coalition of the SPÖ and Greens, as in the capital Vienna, would be just as likely as a coalition between the ÖVP and extreme right-wing FPÖ, as there was from 2000 to 2007. A coalition of the SPÖ and BZÖ, which governed in the state of Kärnten for years, or an alliance between the ÖVP, Greens and Team Stronach, is also conceivable. The latter coalition has ruled Salzburg since the middle of

this year.

The new government will differ clearly from its predecessors, regardless of its composition. It will sharply intensify the austerity policies of recent years. All parties are united on this issue.

“The country faces great challenges in austerity policy”, noted euractiv.de. It is the declared aim of the governing parties to eliminate the budget deficit by 2016, meaning massive spending cuts must be implemented.

The ÖVP and SPÖ have already announced an assault on pensions. Both parties argue that the retirement age in Austria is below the EU (European Union) average and that by lengthening the working life of the population by one year, €1 billion could be saved. Further cuts are also planned in education through the amalgamation of schools, in the budget for universities and in the health sector.

The example of the Hypo/Alpe/Adria bank makes clear where the money that is saved will be directed. To date, €3.1 billion of taxpayers’ money has flowed into the bank, which was saved from bankruptcy by an “emergency nationalisation” in 2009, having been formerly owned by the Bavarian state bank. There is no end in sight to the assistance required. At the beginning of September, the EU commission authorised up to a further €8.6 billion in state aid.

The FPÖ and its leader Heinz-Christian Strache have been relying on anti-immigrant and openly racist slogans. Strache is pictured on their election placards with the declaration, “Love your neighbours, for me that means us Austrians.” Like the FPÖ, the BZÖ argues against further assistance to Greece and other European states.

The governing parties are also encouraging anti-immigrant sentiments. Both parties have explicitly distanced themselves from the use of election material in the Turkish language, which had been produced by their own members with immigrant roots at their own initiative to support the campaign.

The ÖVP and SPÖ have dominated the Alpine republic for decades in close collaboration with the trade unions. One of the two parties has provided the head of government since 1945, and they have governed together in a grand coalition for a total of 38 years.

Their right-wing, anti-working class politics have

undermined their status and created fertile ground for chauvinist parties of the extreme right. Above all since 2009, when the global economic crisis hit Austria and Eastern Europe, Chancellor Faymann adopted budget cuts and savings in social spending. At the same time, his government increased taxes that fell most heavily on those with low and middle incomes.

The Social Democrats suffered historic losses as a consequence. The Social Democratic stronghold of Vienna is a prime example. The SPÖ had governed alone for 16 years in the city where a quarter of all Austrians live. In 2010, support for the SPÖ dropped by 5 percent and they are now reliant on the backing of the Greens.

This is the only explanation for the strengthening of the far right. After their participation in government, the FPÖ lost all support and showed signs of breaking up. Due to the decline of the SPÖ, they have now been able to win back support. Stronach’s emergence on the political stage is also bound up with the rightward shift of the SPÖ, and the absence of any political alternative for broad sections of the population.

In spite of this, the Social Democrats and Peoples’ Party are striving for a continuation of their right-wing policies. Representatives of both parties welcomed the victory of Angela Merkel in Germany last Sunday. They drew parallels between their government’s policies and those of Merkel, explaining that Merkel had achieved victory by campaigning on the same issues as Austrian Chancellor Faymann and Vice Chancellor Michael Spindelegger.



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