# Austria: Far-right FPÖ gains support in European elections

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In the European elections on May 25, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) increased its vote significantly. Compared with 2009, the party led by Christian Strache increased its vote by 7 percent, winning 19.7 percent of the vote.

With this result, the FPÖ came in third place behind the conservative Austrian Peoples' Party (ÖVP), which held on to first place with 27 percent, despite a loss of 3 percent in support, and the social democrats (SPÖ), whose vote stagnated at around 24 percent. Voter participation stood at 45.4 percent.

The Hans Peter Martin List, the European Union (EU)-sceptic party of the right-wing former social democrat of the same name, which achieved almost 18 percent of the vote in 2009, is no longer represented in the European Parliament. After an alleged corruption scandal and fierce internal party disputes, Martin withdrew from politics.

Along with the FPÖ, two other parties not involved in Austria's grand coalition government of the ÖVP and SPÖ profited from the decline of the Martin List. The Green vote increased by 4.6 percent to 14.5 percent, and the liberal party Neos, running in the European elections for the first time, won 8.1 percent.

By contrast the party of the now deceased head of the state of Kärnten, Jörg Haider, the BZÖ, a split from the FPÖ, is politically finished. Its support dropped from 4.6 percent to 0.5 percent. The party lost 20 percent even in its stronghold of Kärnten. Immediately after the election, the party leadership announced they would discuss the dissolution of the party by the autumn.

In the capital Vienna, traditionally a stronghold of the SPÖ, the social democrats suffered further losses, but remained the strongest party with 27 percent. The Greens came second with 20 percent and in some districts were able to overtake the SPÖ. The third largest party in Vienna is the FPÖ, with around 18 percent. The ÖVP received only 16.6 percent and remained the largest party in the city centre and the residential districts of Döbling and Hietzing.

In Graz, Austria's second largest city, the Greens won with 25 percent, ahead of the FPÖ and ÖVP (both with 19 percent). The SPÖ, who have held the position of mayor for decades, came fourth with 18 percent.

According to polls, voters under 29 mainly voted for the FPÖ. The SPÖ and ÖVP find much less support among these layers. Through austerity measures and social attacks over recent years, both parties have robbed youth of any perspective. At the end of last year, the grand coalition agreed further measures to consolidate the budget. Resources for schools and universities were also cut.

The growth in support for the FPÖ provoked a discussion within the SPÖ over the future direction of the party. The right-wing course and austerity policies supported by the FPÖ were not called into question. The conflict within the SPÖ was much more focused on whether they should continue to pursue coalitions with the ÖVP, or work more closely with the right-wing extremists. A growing number of voices in the SPÖ are complaining about the "standstill" in the grand coalition and demanding more decisive spending cuts.

The SPÖ was not deterred from the possibility of collaborating with the FPÖ, in spite of their aggressive European election campaign. One example was the resignation of the FPÖ's original lead candidate, Andreas Mölzer, after he described the EU as a "nigger conglomerate" and racially insulted Austrian national footballer David Alaba in an article.

On the FPÖ's good performance in Vienna, mayor Michael Häupl told public broadcaster ORF, "We can live with it. It is what it is, as a democrat one has to

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accept that.” He thereby made clear that he is prepared to accept the FPÖ as a potential ally.

Chancellor Werner Feymann (SPÖ), who forged the coalition agreement with the ÖVP and has always defended it until now, is coming under increased criticism. Several state politicians have called for the coalition with the ÖVP to be abandoned and for new majorities in parliament to be sought. “In principle, coalitions should be formed to do something for the people, regardless of party,” said Günther Goach, president of the official employee representation body in Kärnten.

The SPÖ leader in Burgenland, Hans Niessl, is already planning a vote within the party membership as to whether the SPÖ should conduct coalition talks with the FPÖ after next year’s state elections.

The ÖVP, which governed in a coalition between 2000 and 2007 with the FPÖ (and the BZÖ), feels it has been strengthened to play a more active role in government in spite of its own loss of votes. The SPÖ and ÖVP are united in intensifying the austerity measures. Vice Chancellor Michael Spindelegger (ÖVP) announced that administrative reform—i.e., job cuts in the public sector—was to be enforced.

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