

Austrian state elections: Far-right Freedom Party makes significant gains

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The right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) made significant gains in Austrian state elections in Styria and Burgenland held last weekend. In Burgenland, the governing Social Democrats (SPÖ) are preparing to enter a coalition with the far-right party.

In Styria, the FPÖ's percentage of the vote almost trebled. With more than 27 percent, it was just behind the SPÖ (29.2 percent) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP, 28.5 percent), which govern in a grand coalition in Graz. In Burgenland, the FPÖ increased its vote by 6 percentage points, achieving 15 percent. The Social Democrats remained the strongest party with almost 42 percent, while the ÖVP received 29.1 percent of the vote.

The SPÖ and ÖVP, which govern Austria in a grand coalition, both suffered significant losses. In Styria, both parties saw their vote drop by more than 9 percentage points. With a loss of 5.5 percent, the ÖVP fell below 30 percent in Burgenland for the first time in several decades. The SPÖ lost 6.4 percentage points.

The Greens were unable to take advantage of the SPÖ's poor result. In both states, the party achieved only minimal gains. The neo-liberal party Neos, founded two years ago, failed to make it into parliament in both states, which is generally viewed as the beginning of the end for the party.

The FPÖ once again ran a disgusting anti-immigrant campaign, combined with anti-European Union (EU) demagoguery. The party promoted slogans such as "new homes instead of new mosques" and "jobs for our folks." FPÖ head Hans-Christian Strache stated that his first priority if he became chancellor would be to renegotiate EU treaties.

The governing parties had nothing with which to combat the extreme right-wing campaign. On the contrary, the SPÖ and ÖVP have largely adopted the

FPÖ's policies.

This was sharply illustrated earlier this year when a number of refugees from Kosovo fled to Austria to escape the catastrophic conditions in their own country. Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner (ÖVP) initiated a campaign against the immigrants on behalf of the government. She said it was their "mission" to prevent the surge of immigrants from Kosovo. To this end, she ordered the distribution of statements in Kosovo explicitly stating that immigrants were not wanted in Austria and could face criminal prosecution.

The SPÖ's decline was expressed particularly clearly in the election result. Sixty percent of workers voted for the right, with only 20 percent voting for the social democrats, which have played a dominant role since the Second World War. Both the SPÖ and ÖVP have sharply reduced the living standards of workers and young people with austerity measures and social cuts. The grand coalition agreed on additional measures earlier in the year to consolidate the budget.

The economic and social situation in Austria is drastically deteriorating. Unemployment has increased further over recent months. It currently stands at 9.2 percent, the highest rate in the history of the Second Republic.

Within this there is a sharp east-west divide. While unemployment in western Austria has increased relatively little, there has been a double-digit increase in eastern Austria. Unemployment in Tyrol rose by 0.2 percent, in contrast to 7.6 percent in Styria, 11.1 percent in Burgenland, 12.2 percent in Upper Austria and 13.9 percent in Lower Austria. The sharpest rise in unemployment occurred in Vienna, where at the end of May, 23.9 percent more people were unemployed compared to the same time last year.

State elections are also due this year in Upper Austria

and Vienna. The latter is considered to be important for federal politics. In the capital, traditionally a SPÖ stronghold, the social democrats have been steadily losing support in recent elections and were even overtaken by the Greens in some districts.

In this context, the SPÖ has decided to move even further right by entering a government with the FPÖ. Burgenland's state premier, Hans Niessl, told *Die Presse*: "A coalition with the FPÖ has not become less likely due to the election results."

There were clearly talks between the two parties prior to the election. Niessl remarked that he was aware from informal talks that the Freedom Party would not make any extreme demands. "I don't see any hurdle that cannot be overcome," he said. The first coalition talks with the FPÖ began on Wednesday.

A possible coalition with the FPÖ is backed by Chancellor Werner Feymann (SPÖ). He made it clear that he had absolutely no objection. Niessl referred to joint agreements with other parties in the past, including the FPÖ. Feymann had stated clearly that a coalition with the FPÖ was possible, Niessl said. In Carinthia, the SPÖ and FPÖ reached a coalition deal after the state election in 2004 that saw Jörg Haider, the former FPÖ leader, elected as state premier.

Such a government on the federal level would be welcomed by sections of the political establishment and media in order to overcome the delay in reforms under the grand coalition. The online edition of *Kurier* on Sunday evening raised the demand for an SPÖ-FPÖ coalition: "The election result urgently cries out for political action, and also on a federal level," it declared. There had been mistakes made on the immigration issue, and now Chancellor Feymann and Deputy Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner (ÖVP) had to personally tackle the issue of refugees, the lead article stated.



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