

Austrian Social Democrats form coalition with far-right party

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Less than a week after regional elections in the Austrian state of Burgenland, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) has concluded a coalition with the extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). Coalition talks took just 48 hours. The alliance marks a sharp shift to the right by the SPÖ.

An SPÖ party conference resolution, passed in 2004 and reaffirmed in 2014, describes the FPÖ as “right-wing extremist” and rejected “any coalition with the right-wing populist FPÖ at all political levels.” However, the adoption of this resolution has not prevented the Burgenland SPÖ from jumping into bed with the FPÖ, following an election in which the SPÖ saw its share of the vote drop sharply while the FPÖ gained ground.

Although Burgenland is located in the east of Austria on the border with Hungary and is the country’s smallest state with less than 300,000 residents, the coalition deal has national significance. It prepares the way for similar coalitions in other states, in the capital, Vienna, and at the federal level.

SPÖ chairman and current Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann approved the coalition with the right-wing extremists. At the same time, he encouraged the party to take an explicitly right-wing course. The issues of asylum seekers and the labour market could not be left to the FPÖ, he declared.

SPÖ federal operations leader Norbert Darabos resigned his post to join the Burgenland government as minister for social affairs and health. The fact that Darabos, who was Austrian defence minister for six years, has joined the government in the politically insignificant state of Burgenland, shows that the party views this as a strategic question. For his part, Darabos stated that the coalition could be a “worthwhile experiment.”

In Styria, where elections took place at the same time, both the SPÖ and the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) are pressing for a coalition with the FPÖ. While the ÖVP has already been calling for a coalition with the FPÖ, SPÖ state President Franz Voves praised the “good atmosphere” at initial talks.

The influential mayor of Vienna, Michael Häupl, said that one would wait and see if the coalition damages the SPÖ. The SPÖ is also expecting significant losses in elections in Upper Austria and Vienna set for the autumn. For the first time in over 40 years, the capital may no longer have a social-democratic government.

While the SPÖ’s trade union wing officially spoke out against the coalition with the FPÖ, its behind-the-scenes support is considered certain. The daily *Die Presse* commented, not without justification, “Some trade unionists are contemplating a red-blue [the colour of the FPÖ] option.”

The events in Austria are symptomatic of a development throughout Europe. The establishment parties have virtually no differences with each other. Any party can form a coalition with any other. Concepts such as left and right have become meaningless.

Fifteen years ago, when Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) brought the FPÖ into the federal government, he provoked a scandal across Europe. Other European Union (EU) states imposed sanctions on Austria. Today, the Social Democrats are supporting the right-wing extremists in government office without a single voice of protest in Europe being raised. The FPÖ has in the meantime shifted even further to the right. Since Heinz-Christian Strache took over as leader 10 years ago from Jörg Haider, anti-immigrant chauvinism and Islamophobia have dominated its election campaigns.

The SPÖ bears responsibility for allowing the FPÖ,

which 10 years ago was in a deep crisis when its vote fell from 23 percent to 6 percent in the 2004 European elections, to regain influence. The SPÖ has driven voters disgusted by its anti-social policies to support the FPÖ, and adopt its anti-immigrant slogans.

The elections in Burgenland and Styria on June 1 resulted in a debacle for the SPÖ and ÖVP, which jointly form the Austrian government. While both parties lost significant numbers of votes, the FPÖ was able to treble its vote share in Styria. In Burgenland, its support rose by 6 percentage points. According to a poll by the “market” Institute, the FPÖ is 5 percentage points ahead of the SPÖ and ÖVP on a federal level.

The Social Democrats and Christian Democrats have either taken turns in governing or have jointly ruled Austria for decades. They have responded to growing social and political tensions by moving further right. The demands for more restrictions on immigration and the rapid deportation of asylum seekers has become official government policy in Vienna.

Earlier this year, interior minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner (ÖVP) stated that it was her “mission” to stop the flood of immigrants from Kosovo.

Styrian ÖVP head Hermann Schützenhöfer, who is striving for an alliance with the FPÖ, demanded after the election the immediate imposition of a ceiling on the number of immigrants in the country. Austria had more than fulfilled the planned European quota, according to Schützenhöfer.

In its 40-page coalition agreement, in which considerable attention is given to the issues of asylum seekers and security, the new Burgenland government calls on interior minister Mikl-Leitner to strengthen regulations on asylum and migrants. This includes a sped-up procedure to determine within 10 days whether an asylum seeker has come to Austria from another EU country or due to economic reasons.

In addition, the SPÖ and FPÖ have agreed to implement drastic reforms to pensions, health care and education, and introduce new attacks on wages and living standards.

At over 9 percent, unemployment in Austria is higher than at any time since 1953. Economic output is barely growing, and the crisis surrounding the Hypo Alpe Adria bank in the state of Carinthia threatens to become a multi-billion-euro burden. The losses of the previously nationalised regional bank now amount to at

least €14 billion.

Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* recently stated that HGAA would “force Carinthia into bankruptcy.” The newspaper continued, “Austria is in the process of becoming Europe’s latest debt nightmare.”



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