

Far Right FPÖ doubles vote in Austrian regional election

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The right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) almost doubled its vote in the regional election in Upper Austria, increasing its tally from 15 percent at the last poll to almost 30 percent. Coalition talks immediately began with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

The ÖVP by contrast, led by state premier Josef Pühringer who has governed to date in coalition with the Greens, suffered severe losses. The party's vote fell from 47 percent to 36 percent, its worst result in the state since the Second World War. The ÖVP nonetheless remained the largest party.

The FPÖ won a plurality of the vote in the four electoral districts of Braunau, Schärding, Wels and Steyr. The Social Democrats (SPÖ) failed to gain first place in any electoral district.

Upper Austria was previously considered an industrial state, with several Social Democratic strongholds. The SPÖ fell to an historic low in the election with 18.4 percent of the vote, and was reduced to third-strongest party. As in 2009, it lost close to a quarter of its voters. The Greens were unable to profit from the losses of the SPÖ and ÖVP, retaining their previous support of around 10 percent.

The election in Upper Austria was seen as a trial run for the election in Vienna, which is the most important state election. This will take place in less than a week. The capital city is the most populous state, and the mayor of Vienna has considerable influence in federal politics.

In Vienna, FPÖ leader Hans-Christian Strache is heading his party's list with the aim of defeating current SPÖ mayor Michael Häupl. Experts expect a neck-and-neck race and consider it possible that "red Vienna" will not be governed by the Social Democrats for the first time since the founding of the second

Austrian republic in 1955.

With slogans like "secure borders, safe home," and calls for border fences to guard against migrants, the FPÖ conducted an extreme right-wing campaign in Upper Austria. The SPÖ and ÖVP, which form the federal government, were not far behind.

The government in Vienna is responsible for the scandalous treatment of refugees. The refugee camp at Traiskirchen near Vienna has become infamous. Thousands of refugees live there in the open air, with inadequate medical care. Rubbish is not cleared, and sanitary facilities are virtually non-existent.

The SPÖ-ÖVP government, led by Chancellor Werner Faymann, has carried out a repulsive anti-refugee campaign over recent months.

The campaign was spearheaded by interior minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner (ÖVP). She declared that Austria would immediately stop accepting asylum applications, and instead concentrate on returning and deportations.

The state premier of Burgenland, Hans Niessl, argued that it was necessary to distinguish more clearly between war refugees and economic migrants, grant temporary asylum more often and send back those who do not have asylum status.

The anti-refugee policies put forward by the government and right-wing opposition stand in stark contrast to the widespread solidarity within the population towards the refugees. They have been almost exclusively cared for by private individuals and aid organisations.

As was already the case in the wake of the regional elections in Styria and Burgenland, the SPÖ and ÖVP are exploiting the FPÖ's success to move even further to the right. They are pressing for cooperation with the right-wing extremists. A ruling coalition between the SPÖ and FPÖ was concluded in Burgenland in July.

In Upper Austria, the ÖVP is now striving for a coalition with the FPÖ. State representative Manfred Haimbuchner placed clear demands on the ÖVP for the formation of a coalition. These included a restriction of asylum laws, as well as the deregulation of business.

Lead ÖVP coalition negotiator Michael Strugl told the *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* prior to the beginning of talks that he felt the FPÖ was more willing to pursue reforms than the SPÖ. The FPÖ had supported all of his projects thus far. He dismissed the option of an ÖVP-SPÖ-Green coalition, which is also theoretically possible.

Strugl made clear that an ÖVP-FPÖ government would push strict policies against asylum seekers and foreigners as well as deep budget cutting. “The politics of distributing increases is over, because there is no longer growth,” said Strugl. State funding would therefore be severely cut. Haimbuchner confirmed the friendly atmosphere of the talks. “I believe that there is nothing in the way of cooperation.” The decisive question was with whom would it be possible to draft an agenda for reform, according to Haimbuchner.

Calls are growing within the ÖVP to bring the FPÖ into federal government and abandon the coalition with the SPÖ. ÖVP leader Reinhold Mitterlehner threatened the SPÖ and Chancellor Feymann with the breakdown of the coalition in the *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*.



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