

Austrian municipalities impose ban on refugees using swimming pools

Markus Salzmann
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The Austrian towns of Korneuburg and Mödling have imposed a ban on refugees using their public swimming pools. Refugees are allowed to use these facilities only if accompanied by an “escort.”

In Mödling, Councilor Robert Mayer of the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) announced the measure by issuing instructions to the town’s employees. He had an order posted on notice boards stipulating the ban on unaccompanied people “with immigrant backgrounds.”

He justified the measure by saying that young refugees from two nearby facilities had jumped into the pool in underwear or sweatpants. He also claimed a female member of the cleaning staff had been threatened and refugees had tried to break into vending machines.

The situation is similar in Korneuburg. Because bathers allegedly felt harassed and molested, a general ban on refugees was imposed. Officials told the media that bathers, including refugees, had gone on a rampage and harassed other visitors. The daily *Kurier* also reported that the ladies’ shower had been stormed.

The web portal Vienna.at cited police officials who claimed that eight Afghan asylum-seekers had misbehaved, making noise and jumping from the edge of the pool, which is forbidden. It was also claimed that a man had gotten lost and wandered into the women’s changing room. The police acknowledged that there had been no criminal assaults and no charges had been filed.

On the basis of these flimsy pretexts, the city imposed a blanket ban on refugees and hired a security service to enforce it.

On social media, thousands have reacted angrily to the ban and the right-wing officials who imposed it. Many have drawn parallels to the methods employed

by the Nazis against the Jews. However, ÖVP Mayor Christian Gepp has defended the racist measures.

Such discrimination against refugees is not limited to Austria. In Bornheim near Bonn in Germany, the town’s social affairs department, which is controlled by the Green Party, has banned adult male refugees from using the public swimming pool. Here too there have been no legal complaints.

The same week in which the bans were imposed, the Austrian government closed the country’s borders to refugees. At a refugee summit, leaders of the governing parties—the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP)—agreed to introduce a ceiling for refugees. As Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) told the press, Austria will take in only 37,500 asylum-seekers in this year. This number, added to the 90,000 refugees who have remained in the country in the past year, brings the total to the limit of 1.5 percent of the population set by the government.

The ruling parties are now following the line of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). The Greens, who are closely linked with the government parties at the provincial and district level, are joining in the witch-hunting of refugees.

Green Party politician Efgani Dönmez, who until last year was a member of the Federal Council, the upper chamber of parliament, appeared Friday as a guest speaker at an FPÖ event in Linz. The Green politician Alexander van der Bellen announced his candidacy for the presidential election in 2016 in a speech dripping with nationalist bathos. The speech was titled “Courage for These New Times”—a quote from the third verse of the Austrian national anthem.

Burgenland, where the Social Democrats are in an alliance with the far-right FPÖ in the state government, has announced that it intends to set up neighbourhood

watch groups in its municipalities. According to the state premier Hans Niessl (SPÖ), “security partners” will carry out a broad range of tasks. The details of the powers they will have are currently being negotiated, but they will definitely include the power to check identity cards. Even arming the civil militia is under discussion.

The deputy state premier Johann Tschürtz (FPÖ) announced that the project would initially be introduced in nine municipalities. The municipalities selected include Schattendorf, where, on January 30, 1927, members of the fascist Veterans Association shot into a Social Democratic meeting, killing a worker and a six-year-old child.

The introduction of neighbourhood watch groups evokes memories of this dark chapter in Austrian history. The acquittal of the murderers by the judiciary in 1927 led to a mass demonstration in Vienna, against which the police carried out a massacre, killing 89 workers.

Tschürtz explained that the makeup of the “security partners” remained unclear, but might involve private security companies. It is likely that the FPÖ will use its close ties to the neo-Nazi scene to recruit thugs from this milieu for the neighbourhood watch groups. Last year, FPÖ politician Ralph Schäfer tried to establish a neighbourhood watch group in the city of Wels that included right-wing extremists known to the police.

The links between the FPÖ and the extreme right are well documented. In his book *Strache: The Brown Swamp*, author Hans-Henning Scharsach details “many, many points of contact with the neo-Nazi scene.” Heinz-Christian Strache is the leader of the FPÖ.



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