

Austria's far-right Freedom Party wins first round of presidential election

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Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), has clearly won the first round of the Austrian presidential election. With 36 percent of the vote, he is far ahead of the candidate of the Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen, who received around 20 percent. Both men face off on May 22 in the second round.

The candidates of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), which together form the government in Vienna, trailed far behind with 11 and 10 percent of the vote, respectively. This is the first time since the end of World War II that representatives of Austria's so-called "People's parties" have failed to assume the post of president.

On Sunday, 6.4 million Austrians aged 16 and over were called upon to vote. The federal president is elected for six years and cannot run again after two terms. The incumbent Heinz Fischer retires in July after 12 years in office. The head of state has largely ceremonial duties, but according to the constitution is supreme commander of the armed forces and can dissolve parliament in certain cases.

It is expected that the disastrous result for their candidates will lead to bitter inner-party conflicts in the SPÖ and the ÖVP. The presidential candidate of the ÖVP, Andreas Khol, who has played a leading role in the party for decades, resigned from all his political posts on election night.

The result is the best ever for the far-right at a federal level. In recent months, polls have also indicated that the FPÖ could emerge as the strongest party in parliamentary elections due in two years' time. The FPÖ had already notched up significant gains in recent state elections, at the expense of the SPÖ and ÖVP.

The FPÖ has benefited mainly from the massive rejection of the governing parties. The *Neue Zürcher*

Zeitung commented: "The next House of Representatives election may still be two years away, but given the inability of the government to solve the urgent problems in terms of unemployment, economic growth and education, discontent will only increase; on Sunday three-quarters of the electorate stated they were either disappointed or angry with the government."

The grand coalition has responded to rising unemployment and the increasing difficulties of the Austrian economy in recent years with attacks on the population and a marked shift to the right.

According to the Sora Institute, Hofer won the support of workers and clerical employees in every age group. A total of 72 percent of workers voted for Hofer compared to just 5 percent for the SPÖ candidate Rudolf Hundstorfer and Green candidate Van der Bellen. Just 2 percent voted for Khol. Van der Bellen was only able to win more votes than Hofer from self-employed and better-off public employees.

The politics and the election campaign of the two government parties have played into the hands of the FPÖ. Initially the Austrian government under SPÖ Chancellor Werner Faymann supported the refugee policy of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which rejected the closing of internal European borders. But then, in the space of a few weeks, it carried out a sharp U-turn and placed itself at the head of those Eastern European countries demanding the closure of borders and the so-called Balkan route.

Faymann's government has since announced it will fast-track the deportation of refugees to the Austrian border. The aim of the grand coalition is to permanently reduce the influx of immigrants, as the news agency dpa reported.

The FPÖ based itself on this policy and propagated the slogan "Austria First" against refugees in the

election. In the election campaign, Hofer proclaimed that Islam has no place in Austria, and he called for better protection of Austrian borders. He railed against the “EU debt and liability Union” and declared that he would take action against “economic refugees” who “destroy the social system.” He also promised to build up the army to defend the country.

The nominee of the Greens, Van der Bellen, ran his campaign under the patriotic slogan “Homeland.” The former leader of the Greens is considered to be a supporter of the policy of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and backs the sealing off of the EU’s external borders and the EU’s foul refugee deal struck with Turkey.

The moderate performance of the 72-year-old economics professor was well below expectations and makes clear that the Greens are not perceived as an alternative to the ruling parties by broad layers.

In third place, ahead of the candidate of the SPÖ and ÖVP, is Irmgard Griss, who entered the presidential race as an independent candidate. Griss is regarded as ultra-conservative. The former Supreme Court president was supported by the right wing of the ÖVP and by business circles. Griss has long been subject to criticism because of statements in which she has trivialized Nazism.

On the refugee issue Griss attacked the government from the right. She called the passage of refugees through Austria a clear “breach of the law” and demanded faster asylum procedures aimed at “deterrence.”

There are currently no reliable predictions about the outcome of the runoff. Hofer has announced that as president he would make use of his right to dissolve parliament and call new elections. The 45-year-old son of a local ÖVP politician began his political career in the Freedom Party in 1994 in Burgenland, where he held several offices up to vice chairman of the party.

The election on Sunday has tossed the country’s political system into turmoil. In particular, the Social Democrats face disaster. The conservative press remarked: “The truth for the SPÖ and ÖVP reads simply: Your time is up”. *Zeit Online* sees the “dissolution of the Austrian post-war order” within reach.

In the SPÖ there are already calls for the replacement of Chancellor Faymann. “Werner Faymann cannot

pretend that this has nothing to do with him because he was not even standing for election. This defeat has a lot to do with government policy,” declared the former SPÖ leadership politician and Siemens manager Brigitte Ederer.

The Vienna SPÖ councillor Tanja Wehsely demanded immediate consequences after the debacle and the resignation of the chancellor. The Burgenland governor Hans Niessl (SPÖ), who governs in a coalition with the far-right Freedom Party, proposed a survey of members on the future of the party, in order to move it even further to the right.

The election in Austria has confirmed that the result of the policies of the social democratic and other supposed leftist bourgeois parties is a strengthening of far-right forces and increased national conflicts within the European Union.



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