

Austria abolishes right to asylum

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The Austrian government has responded to the success of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the first round of the presidential election by embracing its far-right politics and thereby further strengthening it.

The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)/Social Democrat (SPÖ) coalition rushed a law through parliament on Wednesday which practically abolishes the right to asylum. The government can now declare a state of emergency if "public order and the protection of internal security" can no longer be guaranteed due to high refugee numbers. In practice, this means this takes effect when the government's self-imposed upper limit of 37,500 refugees per year is reached.

Refugees will then no longer be allowed into the country. Asylum applications would be reviewed in a one-hour procedure at the border and only accepted if the applicant can prove they face the threat of torture in their homeland, or if close relatives live in Austria. All others will be immediately turned away.

The state of emergency is initially limited to six months, but can be lengthened for a period up to two years.

The law also proposes that irrespective of the state of emergency, refugees will only receive protection for three years. At that point, the basis for asylum will once again be reviewed. Family reunification will also be made much more difficult. In addition, the period for processing asylum applications will be increased from six to 15 months.

Due to earlier radical right-wing measures to deter refugees, the number of asylum applications in Austria has already declined significantly. While last November a total of 12,000 applications were filed, by February it was just 5,000.

As well as hermetically sealing off the eastern border with Hungary, the grand coalition in Vienna is acting similarly at the southern border with Italy. On the Brenner motorway, one of Europe's most important

arteries, they are building a 370-metre-long, four-metre-high fence and three checkpoints on the highway that runs from Italy. Another checkpoint is being built on the federal highway. Trains crossing from Italy into Austria will also be checked.

The police director in Tyrol, Helmut Tomac, declared that border controls on the Brenner could be reintroduced at any time. New Austrian Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobodka (ÖVP) stated that waiting rooms and registration centres were in the process of construction. Austria did not wish to be taken by surprise by an influx of refugees, he said.

"According to our information, between 200,000 and 1 million potential refugees are ready to set off in the direction of Europe from Libya," said Sobodka, without providing any evidence for these figures. The interior minister made clear that he would continue the ruthless policies of his predecessor, Johanna Mikl-Leitner. He explained the closing of the borders for refugees with the justification, "The country's security interests come first."

Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) said that after the Balkan route, the southern route had to be secured. "If it is clear that the road to Central Europe is no longer open, then there will be fewer people with an interest in coming to Central Europe." Austria applied pressure last year on the states of the former Yugoslavia to shut down the so-called Balkan route to stop the flow of refugees to Austria.

The charitable organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned of the danger of the Brenner becoming a "new Idomeni" in the event of a border closure. The Greek town has become a synonym for the European Union's refugee policy. "If we don't create legal and secure routes through which the refugees can reach Europe, unbelievable situations could arise," the organisation warned.

In parliament, the SPÖ and ÖVP unanimously

supported the asylum measures. The right-wing extremist FPÖ wanted to go even further. It demanded an upper limit of “zero” for the influx of refugees.

Only the Greens opposed the legislation in parliament. But they are not concerned with the right to asylum, but rather the maintenance of the EU, which they consider to be at risk with the sealing off of the national borders.

The Italian government protested against the Austrian measures to seal the border. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi stated it was a blatant violation of EU regulations. The president of Italy’s chamber of deputies, Laura Boldrini, said they were ill conceived, because they imposed divisions. Interior minister Angelino Alfano warned of the closure of the Brenner by stating, “Europe’s future is at stake.”

By contrast, the Austrian government received support from the far right. State president of Lombardi, Roberto Maroni of the xenophobic Lega Nord, declared, “Austria is simply doing what normal countries do: it is controlling its borders. We are the only ones who appear surprised when Austria does what its citizens consider to be worthwhile.”

With its right-wing policies, the Vienna government is playing directly into the hands of the far right. Even the Greens’ Alexander Von der Bellen, who is involved in a run-off election on May 22 for the presidency with the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer, did not fundamentally oppose the measures. In a debate broadcast by public broadcaster Ö1, both were agreed that the concept of “home,” under which Van der Bellen is conducting his campaign, contained a positive message.

Van der Bellen declared he thought borders on the Brenner were superfluous, because Italy was fulfilling all European requirements. At the same time, he noted—in agreement with Hofer—that in the face of high unemployment, economic migrants must be firmly rejected.



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