

Austrian Chancellor Faymann resigns

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On Monday afternoon, Austrian government leader Werner Faymann announced his immediate resignation from all offices at a press conference in Vienna. As well as resigning as chancellor, he is also standing down as chairman of the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

Faymann's resignation is the result of a long rightward development of the SPÖ, which has led to a dramatic loss of votes. The highpoint of this development was the presidential election in late April. The SPÖ candidate Rudolf Hundstorfer, a longtime union bureaucrat, won just over 10 percent of the vote and failed to reach the second round.

Although the SPÖ has been almost completely ruined under Faymann's leadership, he said in his resignation statement that he was proud of his "work for the country." In a display of smugness that is hard to beat, he said that despite "structural deficits" the "social force of the country" had been strengthened. He said that wherever he went in Europe he was asked, "How did you manage that?"

Faymann took over as SPÖ chairman in the crisis year of 2008, and was elected chancellor shortly after. In coalition with the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP), he has pursued a strict austerity course at the cost of the working class. Under his government, the retirement age was raised, public jobs massively cut and wages curbed. Over the last five years, the number of unemployed rose from 300,000 to 475,000, meaning more than 10 percent are unemployed. At the same time, the wealth of those at the top of society has grown enormously.

Resistance to this policy has been expressed in one election defeat after another for the SPÖ. The *Wiener Standard* has shown that under Faymann, the SPÖ lost votes in 18 of 20 state, federal and European elections. A few days ago, Faymann was booed at the May Day rally outside Vienna's City Hall. He only completed

his speech with difficulty.

The right-wing policies that the SPÖ has pushed through with the ÖVP against all opposition have opened the way for the far-right FPÖ. This was particularly the case in immigration policy. After an initially liberal course, the Faymann government made an abrupt U-turn, sealed the borders to Hungary and Italy, imposed an upper limit for refugees, and eliminated the right to asylum, working closely with the right-wing government in Hungary and other Balkan states.

It was not only in terms of content that the Social Democrats have moved towards the right-wing extremists. In Burgenland, the SPÖ formed a coalition state government with the Freedom Party last year.

Under these circumstances, the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer won 35 percent of the vote in the first round of the recent presidential election, and has a good chance of winning the runoff on May 22. For the first time since the founding of the second Austrian republic 71 years ago, an extreme right-wing ideologue could enter the presidential palace at Hofburg who advocates Islamophobic and xenophobic views, sympathises with the far-right Pegida movement and rejects the EU.

Faymann and the Social Democrats have responded to the electoral success of the far-right with a further shift to the right. In the meantime, for all intents they have abolished the right to asylum. The government can now impose a state of emergency if "public order and the protection of domestic security" can no longer be guaranteed due to high numbers of refugees. In practice, this means this takes effect when the ceiling of 37,500 immigrants per year set by the government is reached.

Faymann explicitly defended the right-wing course of the party when he resigned. It was right, he said, to end the "welcoming culture" and enforce a restrictive refugee policy." It would have been irresponsible "not

to implement our own actions,” he said.

With Faymann’s resignation, the SPÖ is moving even closer to the FPÖ. The main topic at yesterday’s meeting of the Federal Executive was the so-called realignment of the party. This outlines closer collaboration with the right-wing extremists.

At the end of April, Faymann had announced the creation of a “strategy group” regarding further dealings with the FPÖ. This is directed towards overturning a previously binding party decision from 2014 banning any coalition with the FPÖ. In practice, it has had no relevance for a long time. But ending the official ban on forming a coalition with the FPÖ would be a sign that the Social Democratic Party leadership is moving even further to the right.

Chancellery Minister Josef Ostermayer had already indicated the lifting of the ban at the weekend. “It could go in the direction that the various levels—municipalities, federal states—decide themselves whether cooperation makes sense,” Ostermayer told the *Österreich* newspaper.

The Burgenland Social Democrats, who already govern together with the Freedom Party, had spoken out before becoming aware of Faymann’s resignation, saying it made sense to end the “exclusion” of the FPÖ at the federal level. Faction leader Robert Hergovich said on Monday in Eisenstadt: “We do not believe in leaving a strategic advantage to the ÖVP, by saying that we will work with no one but the ÖVP.” He said the time was “now ripe to formulate these pragmatic positions.”

Governor Hans Niessl (SPÖ), who has governed together with the FPÖ since last year, told the broadcaster Ö1 that it concerned the future of social democracy. Not everything was sorted out by changing one person, he said. It also concerned the future attitude of the SPÖ towards the FPÖ. Something had to change there, he said. The Social Democratic mayor of Steyr, Gerald Hackl, also stressed the “points of intersection” with the FPÖ, and called for cooperation.

Those calling most vehemently for a further sharp shift to the right are the trade unions. Erich Foglar, head of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), pleaded expressly for collaboration with the ultra-right. He told news magazine *profil* that a “government coalition with the FPÖ could not be ruled out.” According to Foglar, there was “nothing objectionable”

in an alliance with a party that advocates an openly xenophobic and nationalist programme.

In a guest commentary for *profil*, Josef Muchitsch (chairman of the construction workers union) railed against “left-wing dreamers” in the SPÖ and demanded Faymann’s resignation in order to facilitate moves towards the FPÖ. “The policy of exclusion towards the FPÖ is a mistake,” he wrote. “Demarcation where it is understandable, but general exclusion, no. If there are reasonable people at the municipal and state level in the FPÖ who support us in implementing our policies, that should not be prevented.”

The resignation of Faymann and the closer collaboration of the SPÖ and FPÖ heralds the final stage in the decline of the Austrian Social Democrats.



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