

Austrian presidential run-off offers no alternative

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The second round of the presidential election will take place in Austria this Sunday. Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ), won the first round decisively with 35 percent of the vote. Second place was taken by the Green candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, who will now take on Hofer. The FPÖ candidate is currently around 13 percentage points ahead in the polls.

In a comment, the WSWs described the FPÖ's success in the first round as a "warning for the whole of Europe."

We wrote: "It shows that the rise of the right, as well as the return of nationalism, racism and war is unavoidable if the fate of Europe is left to the established parties and the working class does not intervene independently into political events."

The election campaign thus far has confirmed this warning. Politically discredited figures who are hated by the population have gathered behind the 72-year-old economics professor Van der Bellen, who has been a member of the Greens executive for many years but entered the race formally as an independent. Van der Bellen puts forward a right-wing programme hardly distinguishable from that of the FPÖ.

In the Green candidate's so-called committee of persons—made up of prominent figures campaigning for him—there are several leading figures from the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the social democratic SPÖ, two parties that have taken turns in government or ruled in coalition for decades, as well as leading figures in business.

Former ÖVP chairmen Erhard Busek, Wilhelm Molterer, Josef Riegler and Josef Pröll, former president of the Austrian National Bank Claus Raidl, general secretary of the association of savings banks Michael Ikrath, former Reve board member Werner Wutscher and former Siemens manager and SPÖ politician Brigitte Ederer have all backed Van der Bellen. The publishers of

the gourmet guide Gault-Millau, Karl and Martina Hohenlohe, are backing the Green candidate.

The Vienna Social Democrats have given him space on their placards for the election campaign. New SPÖ Chancellor Christian Kern has not issued an official endorsement, but he did publicly state, "I'm voting for Alexander Van der Bellen." At the same time, the former rail manager has made clear that under his leadership, the SPÖ is ready to cooperate more closely with the far-right, racist FPÖ.

The support of large sections of prominent political and business figures for the Green candidate has little to do with the desire to prevent a right-wing extremist from entering the presidential palace in Vienna. Instead, they take the view that the social attacks and other economic "reforms," which Kern has pledged to take up, can be implemented more easily under Van der Bellen than under a president Hofer.

An appeal to support Van der Bellen signed by several conservative politicians expressed the hope that he would push forward with much awaited reforms. They hoped for a solution to the problems that have built up, which "protests, 'saying no,' searching for scapegoats and empty slogans," could not achieve.

The head of state has largely ceremonial duties, but is, according to the constitution, commander of the Austrian army and can dissolve parliament in certain cases. Hofer has vowed in the election campaign to make extensive use of these powers.

The only fundamental difference between Hofer and Van der Bellen is in their attitude towards the European Union. While Hofer is campaigning as an opponent of the EU, Van der Bellen vehemently defends it, including the austerity measures imposed on Greece and other countries and the sealing off of its external borders to refugees.

Other than this, Van der Bellen's stance on the refugee issue is little different from that of Hofer, who has made

this a central focus in his election campaign.

In January, Hofer told the daily *Die Presse* that he would “invite the best constitutional jurists to the presidential palace” to implement a legal upper limit for refugees. In addition, he said that with 500,000 unemployed, one should accept economic migrants “very reluctantly.” On public broadcaster *Ö1's Morgenjournal*, he justified making a distinction between refugees from war and economic migrants. He denied that this was a new view, stating, “That has always been the case.”

Van der Bellen has been a right-wing figure within the Greens for years and enforced a hard-right policy on asylum. In an interview on the issue he stated that one had to “be able to name problems without injuring the ‘Green dignity’.”

The lack of differences between the two candidates was demonstrated in a debate Sunday on the commercial channel ATV, in which the two candidates duelled for 45 minutes without a moderator, rules or an audience.

Anyone expecting the distinguished economics professor to challenge the far-right demagogue with democratic principles would have been sorely disappointed. The programme was a fiasco. “Mud-slinging,” “the lowest level” and “embarrassing” were the most friendly remarks about the television appearance. Political scientist Thomas Hofer summed it up: “Both disgraced, office discredited.” Even the right-wing tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* called the broadcast an “undignified farce.”

The discussion was limited mainly to apolitical allegations and bickering. Hofer accused his opponent of being “condescending” and “blabbering on.” Van der Bellen said, “You know nothing about economic policy,” to which Hofer retorted, “You have never worked in business.”

Political issues were only briefly touched upon, with many commentators accusing Van der Bellen of sinking to Hofer’s level.



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