

Austria's far-right Freedom Party challenges presidential election result

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14 June 2016

The right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ) has filed a challenge against the result of Austria's presidential election. The 150-page complaint focuses on the run-off vote in particular, a spokesman for the court confirmed. The country's highest court must decide within four weeks whether the election must be repeated in full, partially, or not at all.

The FPÖ is attempting to force a full or partial re-run on the basis of potential irregularities related in particular to the counting of postal votes in the run-off. In the run-off vote May 22, Alexander Van der Bellen, who was nominated by the Greens, won with 50.3 percent of the vote. FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer obtained 49.7 percent of the vote. Van der Bellen was well behind Hofer on election night with 48 percent of the vote. Only with the counting of the postal votes did he secure victory. Van der Bellen won the election with a lead of 31,000 votes out of a total of 4.4 million voters.

Van der Bellen's narrow victory prevented a right-wing extremist from assuming the highest office in a Western European country for the first time since 1945. By challenging the election outcome, the FPÖ is now trying to overturn this. It feels strengthened by the policies of the Social Democratic (SPÖ)/conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) coalition government, which has in essence implemented many of its right-wing initiatives.

FPÖ Chairman Heinz-Christian Strache stated that "countless numbers of violations" had been determined, the extent of which was "horrificing." In 94 of 117 district electoral offices, irregularities had been identified with the counting of postal votes, according to Strache. According to the version presented by FPÖ lawyer, former justice minister Dieter Böhmdorfer, there were 120,000 cases in which the outermost of the

two envelopes on the postal votes had already been opened on election day. In 82 district election offices, the postal votes were sorted before the meeting of the electoral commission, which does not conform to the law.

Election head Robert Stein declared that based on the facts presented, a court ruling prior to the inauguration of the president could lead to a partial re-run of the election in the areas affected. However, this would impact enough votes to make a different election result possible. The new president is scheduled to be inaugurated on July 8. In an emergency, the presidium of the National Council (Nationalrat) can assume the powers of the head of state. Norbert Hofer is among its members.

It is significant that even Van der Bellen's legal adviser has spoken of a genuine scandal and defended the FPÖ's right to challenge the result. The Interior Ministry also acknowledged mistakes and irregularities a week after the vote. Specifically, the Interior Ministry stated that in some electoral districts, the counting of postal votes did not begin on Monday, but already on election day.

All possible violations of the election laws were made public immediately after the vote. Postal voting has long been a topic of discussion because irregularities have emerged. The challenging of the election result is only possible in a political climate in which the FPÖ and its right-wing politics are being promoted.

Recently appointed Social Democrat Chancellor Christian Kern is intensifying the political course that is leading to the strengthening of the far right. At the same time, he is preparing the ground to form a coalition with them and impose this course against all opposition. After Van der Bellen's election, Kern stated, "I must say to the voters of Mr. engineer

Norbert Hofer, if the protest has been articulated in this way: we have understood it and we will orient our corresponding policies appropriately.”

For his part, Van der Bellen made clear in his first interviews as president elect that while he would practice his powers prudently, he intended to press the government to implement reforms, particularly in the area of the economy: “We don’t have an eternity. Yes, months and years have past without important steps being taken, that has to come to an end. And if I have understood new Chancellor Christian Kern correctly, that is precisely his programme.”

Kern announced “major reform plans” to the *Tiroler Zeitung*. The health care system is to be reformed in the summer. The intention is to make state health insurance more efficient. According to the government, there is a critical “reform blockage” in this area. In alliance with big business, Kern intends to take action against social partnership.

On issues of asylum and refugee policy, the government is fully in line with the FPÖ. A day after his appeal for a rapid emergency law on asylum, according to which most asylum seekers in Austria would no longer have any right to apply for asylum, Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP) continued to agitate against refugees. They should no longer be granted access to the labour market, because this amounted to a plea to “come to Austria.”

In line with this, Kern announced a fundamental reorientation of his Social Democrats towards the FPÖ. The party congress decision banning coalitions with the FPÖ is now finally to be overturned. With repeated instances of SPÖ/FPÖ coalitions at the state level, the vast majority of the SPÖ—including its trade union wing—is campaigning for closer collaboration with the FPÖ.



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