

Far-right candidate defeated in Austrian presidential election

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The former chairman of the Austrian Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen, yesterday won the presidential election against his rival from the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer.

The 72-year-old won by a projected 53.4 percent of the vote to Hofer's 46.6 percent. The projection takes account of the 700,000 postal votes that will only be counted today.

Van der Bellen's lead is much larger than in May, when he won the run-off election for the position of head of state with just 50.4 percent of the vote. The FPÖ successfully challenged the election result due to irregularities. A planned date of October 2 for the second run-off was postponed after the envelopes for postal votes failed to stick properly, raising fears of a further legal challenge.

On this occasion, Hofer acknowledged his defeat half an hour after the closure of polls and congratulated Van der Bellen on his victory.

Van der Bellen benefitted from both a rise in voter turnout by 2 percentage points to 75 percent and a movement of existing voters determined to prevent the election of the first extreme-right head of state in Europe since 1945.

Young people in the cities in particular voted for Van der Bellen. In the capital Vienna, where almost one in five Austrians live, he won 65 percent of the vote, 1.6 percent higher than the original run-off. Numerous voters who abstained last time around marked their ballots in favour of Van der Bellen so as to stop the right-wing extremist candidate.

The election in Austria was viewed as a test as to whether the election of Donald Trump in the United States would further strengthen the European far right. At least in Austria, the opposite appears to have occurred, as fully 30 percent of Van der Bellen's voters

stated they voted for him to prevent such a shift to the right.

Leading European politicians expressed their relief at the outcome of the election. Though a small country, the political mood in Austria is seen as an indication of the possible fortunes of parties such as the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France, which are opposed to the European Union and champion national protectionist strategies while utilising populist rhetoric as a means of appealing to the social distress created by the eight-year-old economic crisis and austerity measures.

The leader of Germany's Social Democrats, Sigmar Gabriel, wrote on Twitter, "Victory of reason and a weight has been lifted from my heart."

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, the prospective presidential candidate for the Socialist Party, wrote, "Populism is not an unavoidable fate for Europe."

Hofer heads a party whose origins are in the Austrian Nazi movement, and he advances far right and extreme nationalist positions, despite efforts to portray himself as a moderate bourgeois politician. He is a member of the "Marko Germania" fraternity, an organisation that describes post-war Austria as an "ahistorical fiction." He repeatedly wore a blue cornflower on his lapel, which was the sign for the Nazis in Austria when they were banned in the 1930s.

Although the Austrian president enjoys mainly representative powers, the constitution provides the power for its holder to dissolve the government. Hofer, unlike his predecessors, threatened during the campaign to sack the present coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and precipitate a general election.

Hofer and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache agitated in the election campaign against refugees and

attacked the EU. Hofer thanked various right-wing governments for sealing off the refugee routes through the Balkans, called for rapid deportations of refugees from Austria and urged the exclusion of foreign workers from the social welfare system.

Van der Bellen benefitted from public hostility to such measures, but he deserves no political support. His election victory by no means signifies an end of the attacks on refugees or on the working population. Just a few days ago, he declared that Austria could not accept any economic migrants.

Most importantly for Europe's ruling elites, Van der Bellen is a vehement defender of the EU and its austerity policies. Indeed, he was supported by the Austrian and European business and political elites primarily because they calculate that their offensive against the working class can be implemented more successfully under him.

For this reason, the election of Van der Bellen will resolve none of the problems that led to the FPÖ's rise. He was left to run against Hofer, as the supposed candidate of the "political centre," because the candidates of the Social Democrats and People's Party (ÖVP), which have held the position of president over the past 70 years, were eliminated in the first round.

Both parties are widely hated for their record in imposing social attacks. Both are deeply divided. A large section of the ÖVP backed Hofer's election. There is also a strong faction in the ÖVP in favour of the dissolution of the current coalition and fresh elections. In addition, support for party chairman Reinhold Mitterlehner is falling. An increasing number of major figures in the party are backing the notoriously right-wing Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz.

For its part, the SPÖ, under Chancellor Christian Kern, has turned ever more rapidly to the right. Just days prior to the presidential election, the party made clear that it was ready to collaborate with the FPÖ and even to form a coalition. Kern declared that the SPÖ sees room for "discussion with the party leadership" of the FPÖ and expressed his admiration for Strache for "seeking to promote Austria."

Van der Bellen himself welcomed potential cooperation between the SPÖ and FPÖ. More importantly, the continuation of austerity by the coalition government under his presidency will only serve to ultimately strengthen the far right. The

likelihood that new parliamentary elections will be held prior to the regular timetable of October 2018 is high. In an article titled "After the election is before the election," the Vienna-based *Standard* noted, "The federal government cannot survive. Both coalition partners, the SPÖ and ÖVP, are preparing for all eventualities."

The FPÖ is presently the leading party in the polls, with around 30 percent of the vote, and would possibly appoint the chancellor after an election.



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