

# Austrian coalition government adopts right-wing programme

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Austria's grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) adopted a programme last month entitled "For Austria," which is to be implemented by the middle of the year. At its heart are attacks on refugees and asylum seekers, an easing of labour laws and the abolition of basic democratic rights.

The programme enabled SPÖ Chancellor Christian Kern to enforce large parts of his "Plan A," which he announced last month, marking a sharp rightward shift in the SPÖ.

The agreement was preceded by major disputes within the governing coalition. The coalition was on the verge of collapse. Kern pressured the ÖVP to either accept his terms or agree to new elections.

Kern speculated openly about the possibility of a coalition with the far-right FPÖ, if the government fell and new elections were called. It was only at the end of last year that the SPÖ leadership abolished a ban preventing the party from forming coalitions with the FPÖ. Such a coalition on a federal level, however, threatens to tear the SPÖ apart.

Fresh elections would have been disastrous for the ÖVP. The party is far behind the FPÖ and SPÖ in the polls—in an alliance with the FPÖ, the ÖVP would only be the junior partner. Such a step on the part of the conservative leadership "would be a very long shot," opined political scientist Peter Filzmaier recently on ORF.

The government's new programme contains massive attacks on labour laws. The current relatively restrictive lay-off protection is to be undermined. Workers over 50 years old will be the main targets, since they can be simply laid off or sent into early retirement. And it is precisely this group of workers which has the worst prospects of getting a new job.

At the same time, the so-called reasonableness regulations for the unemployed will be tightened. In the future, a monthly wage of €1,500 will be considered reasonable. Even if an unemployed person earned significantly more in the past, the authorities can threaten to cut off benefits if he or she does not accept the job.

The issues of a minimum wage and the flexibilisation of working hours will be outsourced to the social partners, the trade unions and employers' organisations. Among other things, they are to agree a comprehensive minimum wage by June of €1,500 a month. If no agreement is achieved, legal regulations will be imposed.

The trade unions stand on the far right of the SPÖ. They are well known for closely collaborating with the government and big business. Kern is above all relying on them to break with the legally-regulated working times. The introduction of a minimum wage of €1,500 a month is aimed at reducing the wages in the country, which are comparatively high by EU standards.

The right-wing character of the programme is especially evident with its attacks on immigrants and refugees. The highly exaggerated events of New Year's Eve in Cologne last year have been used by right-wing forces in Austria to legitimise a campaign against Muslims and refugees. Now there are to be stiffer penalties for "sexual assaults in groups."

In addition, "threatening persons," insofar as detention is not an option, must wear electronic ankle tags. However, it remains entirely unclear who will be deemed such a threat.

"The federal government will massively reduce the numbers of arriving and illegally residing migrants in Austria," the paper states further. To this end, a target of halving the current upper limit of 36,000 refugees

per year is being discussed in government circles.

For those entitled to asylum and asylum seekers “with a high likelihood of staying” a compulsory year of integration will be introduced. It will include courses in German and national values, as well as joint activities run by civilian national service operators. Those who refuse to participate will lose social welfare benefits.

Under the pretext of stopping the influx of refugees, the deployment of the army domestically will be codified. The so-called “assistance intervention” by the army to protect the borders will be expanded, above all to carry out surveillance on the land border and “support the registration and rejection” of refugees.

The proposed integration law makes clear the xenophobic orientation of the coalition’s programme. Plans include the banning of the full veil or the burka in public places and a headscarf ban for executives, judges and state prosecutors—a favourite demand of the extreme right.

The attack on democratic rights is directed not only against Muslims, but against the entire population. Video surveillance is therefore being significantly expanded. At border crossings where checkpoints are in place, vehicle number plates will automatically be recorded. “Electronic eavesdropping” will also be permitted in cars. For this, the police, intelligence agencies and security authorities will receive wide-ranging powers.

A new category of crime is to be created: “Founding or leadership activities in movements hostile to the state.” Under the pretext of the struggle against Islamist terrorism, it supplies the groundwork for the suppression and banning of all undesirable political groups and movements.

While some media outlets praised the “reform attempts” of the coalition in Vienna, there was also criticism from the right. The programme represented undoubted progress, but the “major reform building blocks” had been avoided, commented *Die Presse*. The Vienna-based *Standard* also thought the programme did not go far enough: the coalition was showing a readiness to work after “years of stalling.” But it was not guaranteed “that this will be maintained,” wrote the paper.

It is once again clear that the comprehensive plans in the areas of security and refugee policy are oriented

towards the far right FPÖ which has been ahead in polls for months. Even in Vienna, long a stronghold of the SPÖ, the FPÖ is ahead with 38 percent, while the SPÖ has collapsed to 25 percent. At the municipal election in 2015, the SPÖ won almost 40 percent of the vote.



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