

# Palace coup in the Austrian People's Party

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On Sunday, the Presidium of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) elected 30-year-old Sebastian Kurz as the new party leader, granting him dictatorial powers. Kurz has a free hand in the selection of leading personnel, the content of the party programme, the details of electoral slates, conducting coalition negotiations and the selection of ministers. Editorials speak of a "one-man party."

The new party leader will take part in the next national election with a slate named after him (The Kurz/New Peoples Party slate), which will be supported by the ÖVP, but which can also nominate non-party members. "The ÖVP will continue to function as a framework and financial donor, but only one person will determine the direction of travel: Sebastian Kurz," commented the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Kurz, who has been foreign minister for three years in the grand coalition of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), had been preparing the putsch-like takeover of the party presidency for months. He sought to distinguish himself through an aggressive refugee policy, which hardly differs from that of the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), touring through the federal states and conspiring against former party chair Reinhold Mitterlehner.

On Wednesday, an exasperated Mitterlehner finally quit the party chairmanship, as well as his offices as vice chancellor and economics minister, making way for Kurz. Kurz then presented the party with a seven-point ultimatum, to secure himself unlimited power over the party.

Point 3 reads: "The party leader shall have the right to determine personnel decisions, he alone shall be responsible for the federal slate [of candidates] and shall have a veto on provincial slates." According to point 4, he chooses "the General Secretary and the government team and no longer needs a decision of the executive committee." Point 5 gives him a "free hand

for negotiating coalitions" and point 6, the right to "specify the political direction of the party."

In an interview with *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria's most prominent tabloid, Kurz explained that his conditions were "non-negotiable." He would be "no longer available to the party" if they were not fulfilled. On Sunday evening, the party presidency accepted the ultimatum at a crisis meeting and unanimously selected Kurz as the new party leader.

Kurz is now seeking the dissolution of the grand coalition and early elections this autumn. Both the SPÖ and the FPÖ have indicated that they agree. The election is expected to pave the way for the right-wing extremist FPÖ into government, which is currently running at 30 percent in the polls, ahead of the Social Democrats (28 percent) and the ÖVP (21 percent). Less than a year after the defeat of the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer in the presidential election, the FPÖ would thus be able to enter government.

Kurz has left no doubt that he is prepared to form a government together with the right-wing extremists. However, he only wants to do so if he can take over the office of chancellor. To expand his parliamentary base, he has already begun inviting representatives of other parties to his election slate. Matthias Strolz, head of the liberal NEOS party, which, with 5 percent of the vote, has been represented in parliament since 2013, complained on Twitter: "Sebastian Kurz, stop calling our people. That is shameless and scheming."

The SPÖ is also prepared to form a government with the FPÖ. It has already done this at state level in Burgenland, and Chancellor Christian Kern, a former manager, has repeatedly made clear that he would also be ready to do so at federal level.

The transformation of the ÖVP into an authoritarian election association serves to prepare the way for an extremely right-wing government, which will pursue anti-working class, anti-democratic and militarist

policies. A party leader who neither accepts democratic decisions nor brooks opposition in the ranks of his own organisation will not do so as head of government.

The ÖVP is one of the major, traditional conservative parties of Europe, and has repeatedly headed the Austrian government since 1945. The fact that it is now undergoing such a profound change shows how far advanced is the erosion of democratic principles in ruling circles.

The bourgeois media tirelessly denounces Turkish President Erdogan, Russian President Putin, and Hungarian government leader Orbán for the use of authoritarian methods and heading parties that follow lockstep in their path. But when this happens on their own doorstep, they not only keep silent, but support it.

The daily *Die Presse* came to the defence of the ÖVP against the accusation that what was now going on in its ranks “was a pre-fascist coup, an authoritarian turn, the return of the 1930s” and that “its protagonist is located somewhere between Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.”

This, according to *Die Presse*, is pure hatred, because “Every boss of a larger company in Austria has that: sovereignty over personnel questions and the strategic direction of his company. Yes, he can even choose the name of his company. The ÖVP leader is now getting something like this.”

Presenting the command structure of a company as a model for the organisation of a political party—one cannot formulate the breakdown of any form of democracy more clearly. President Donald Trump acts according to the same principles, viewing any unwanted parliamentary or judicial decision as an interference with his authority and the business interests of his family, and is increasingly turning to authoritarian methods of rule.

The erosion of bourgeois democracy is a result of the deep, international crisis of capitalist society and heralds fierce class battles. After decades of a tiny minority enriching themselves at the expense of the majority, social tensions are approaching the boiling point. The ruling elites are reacting by drawing closer together and turning to the right.

In Austria, the mechanisms of social partnership and political compromise were institutionalised after the Second World War in a manner only otherwise seen in Scandinavia or Germany. Time and again, social

democrats and conservatives ruled in a grand coalition, developing an impenetrable network of nepotism and corruption. The anger and frustration that this generated are now being exploited by Kurz in the call for a strong man. His politics, however, are not directed against the privileges of the ruling elites, but against the remaining social achievements of the working class.

Sebastian Kurz, who began his political career 14 years ago in the ÖVP youth organisation and who was promoted by today’s European Commissioner Johannes Hahn and other party officials, is often compared with the new French president, Emmanuel Macron. Macron also began his political career in the ranks of the establishment, only now to present himself as a “new face” standing above the old parties. Both look for their real base within the security apparatus and the military.

In Germany as well, Kurz’s authoritarian aspirations meet with sympathy. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) praised him, saying he stood “for freshness and a new beginning.” Although Austria is smaller than the German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, it enjoys “nine federal states and countless groups of influence alongside the federal administration.” To “provide fresh wind...these federal structures” should be broken up.” “Only then,” concluded the *FAZ*, “will Austria modernise, as is urgently needed. This applies primarily to the economy and the state finances.”

In other words, an authoritarian party and a right-wing, dictatorial regime are necessary to restructure the economy and state finances at the expense of the working class.



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