

# Far-right poised to enter government following Austrian election

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Sunday's election in Austria has produced a sharp shift to the right. It is expected that a right-wing government of a kind not seen since the fall of Hitler and the restoration of Austrian independence will be installed.

The consensus view is that the election campaign was the filthiest in the country's history. Incapable of addressing the devastating social consequences of the global capitalist crisis, the major parties sought to outdo one another with attacks on refugees and mutual mud-slinging. One commentator spoke of a "hysterical Austria-First atmosphere" dominating official politics.

As of this writing, the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), with 31.4 percent of the vote, has emerged from the balloting with a clear lead. It gained 7.4 percent over its result in the last national election, in 2013. The final result will not be known until Monday, when the postal vote is counted.

Thirty-one-year-old Sebastian Kurz, who is currently foreign minister in the grand coalition with the Social Democrats (SPÖ), is likely to become the new prime minister. Kurz assumed the leadership of the ÖVP in May in what amounted to an internal party coup. He centered his campaign around his personality. Its sole political focus was hostility to immigrants, refugees and Muslims. Kurz attempted to outflank the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) from the right.

Kurz boasted that he secured the closure of the Balkan route used by refugees fleeing the catastrophic conditions in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa resulting from the US-led and NATO-backed wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. He touted his close ties to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and promised a range of discriminatory measures against refugees. He vowed to restrict the number of immigrants, reduce social benefits for asylum seekers and close Islamic kindergartens. He also pledged to massively strengthen the police and security apparatus.

In second place is the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). It has increased its vote by 6.9 percent to 27.4 percent and overtaken the Social Democrats (26.7 percent), who received the same vote as four years ago. Since neither the Conservatives nor the Social Democrats want to continue the grand coalition, which has governed the country for ten years, it is likely that the right-wing extremists will be part of the next government.

The FPÖ entered the government in Vienna once before, from 2000 to 2007, when the party was led by Jörg Haider. At the time, its acceptance into government triggered Europe-wide protests and the European Union imposed sanctions. Since then, the party has moved significantly further to the right.

Forty-eight-year-old Heinz-Christian Strache, who broke with Haider in 2005 and took over as party leader, was, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, part of the militant neo-Nazi scene when he began his career in the FPÖ.

As a 17-year-old, Strache joined the German nationalist student fraternity Vandalia in Vienna. He maintained close contact with well known right-wing extremist Norbert Burger and was the partner of his daughter for seven years. He had ties to the neo-Nazi Viking Youth, which was banned in Germany in 1994, and participated in paramilitary exercises with well known neo-Nazis. Since photos exist of him in uniform, Strache later tried to dismiss his paramilitary activities as harmless paintball play-acting.

Strache joined the FPÖ in 1989, but the FPÖ's youth organization, Youth Circle of Freedom (RFJ), turned him away. "At that time, Strache was too right-wing for us and blustered too much," future Defence Minister Herbert Scheibner said of the decision.

A government alliance between Kurz and Strache—the most likely outcome of the election—would be roughly equivalent to a coalition between the Christian Social

Union's Markus Söder and the Alternative for Germany's Bernd Höcke in Germany; or between Nicolas Sarkozy and Marine le Pen in France. In a country that was annexed by Hitler in 1938, all inhibitions about the crimes of the past are being dropped.

This development can be understood only in the context of the bankruptcy of the organisations that once described themselves as "left" or representative of the working class.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Austrian Social Democracy was among the most powerful sections of the Second International. Even after the First World War, which the Austrian Social Democracy supported, the party dominated "red Vienna," where one in four residents was a member. In the 1970s, by which time the party had declared its unconditional defence of the bourgeois order but still carried through limited social reforms, SPÖ leader Bruno Kreisky was one of the most well known figures in international Social Democracy.

Now the SPÖ has paved the way for the rise of the right-wing extremists by abandoning even the pretense of defending workers' rights. Instead, it has adopted xenophobic slogans, pledging prior to the election its readiness to form a coalition with the FPÖ.

Like the other parties, the Social Democrats called in the election campaign for the strengthening of borders against refugees. They supported the closure of the Balkan route by the region's right-wing governments and pushed for a tougher stance against refugees in the Mediterranean, claiming that they were engaged in "economic migration."

In June, Chancellor and SPÖ leader Christian Kern, a former rail industry executive, abandoned the more than 30-year-old "Vranitzky doctrine," according to which the Social Democrats would not cooperate with the FPÖ. Leading SPÖ officials openly called for an alliance with the right-wing extremists. This was particularly the case among representatives of the influential trade union wing, such as construction union chief Josef Muchitsch and the leader of the metalworkers union, Rainer Wimmer. At the state level, the SPÖ already formed a coalition with the FPÖ in Burgenland in 2015. Both parties have hailed their close cooperation.

In the election, the SPÖ resorted to a filthy campaign that blew up in its face after it was exposed. In August, Tal Silberstein, a highly-paid SPÖ campaign consultant, was arrested in Israel on corruption charges and it was revealed that he operated anonymous Facebook pages that spread lies about ÖVP candidate Kurz, painting him as an

anti-Semite.

There is no possibility of forming a majority in the new parliament by aligning one of the three major parties with one or more of the smaller parties, because the votes recorded by the latter were too low.

The neo-liberal Neos, a protest party made up of well-off middle-class elements, which adapted itself to the anti-refugee campaign, will reenter parliament with 5.0 percent of the vote, the same result as in the last election.

The Greens, whose former chairman Alexander Van der Bellen was elected Austrian president in December of 2016, lost 9.1 percent. With a total of 3.3 percent, they have fallen short of the 4 percent needed to enter parliament. The list of Peter Pilz, a former member of the Pabloite Revolutionary Marxist Group, who split from the Greens because their policies on refugees and Turkey were not sufficiently right-wing, received 4.1 percent.

The Team Stronach, set up by a right-wing businessman, which received 5.7 percent in the last election, did not stand in Sunday's election.

The rightward shift in Austria is symptomatic of Europe as a whole. In the Alpine republic, with its close to 9 million residents, the full extent of the rot of bourgeois politics is on display. In the face of deepening international and social tensions, all of the parties defending capitalism are turning to policies of nationalism, xenophobia, militarism and the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus.

The dissatisfaction and social needs of the masses find no expression in the traditional ruling parties, allowing them to be exploited by far-right demagogues. This is true not only in Austria, where the FPÖ is winning support in former SPÖ strongholds, but also in France, where the National Front won votes in run-down industrial areas, and in Germany, where the AfD's strongholds are in impoverished parts of eastern Germany.



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