

Austria: Conservatives discuss coalition with the extreme right

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Ten days after the Austrian parliamentary elections, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) has begun negotiations on the formation of a coalition government with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ).

The 31-year-old leader of the ÖVP, Sebastian Kurz, had already largely adopted the xenophobic slogans of the far right during the election campaign. Now, he wants to form a government with the FPÖ, which along with even more strident policies against refugees and foreigners, intends to impose further austerity measures plus a massive buildup of the state forces.

The ÖVP is a member of the European People's Party and aligned with the German conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union. It is a conservative party with one of the longest histories in Europe. For its part, the FPÖ is allied in the European parliament to the French National Front, the Italian Northern League, the far-right Dutch PVV led by Geert Wilders and other far-right parties. By opening the door to government participation in Austria, the ÖVP is also preparing the path for the integration of the far right into government in other European countries.

Kurz, who is seeking to head the new government with the support of the far right, promised talks "on an equal footing". After the first round of talks on Wednesday, he said: "It was a positive round, it was a positive atmosphere". The leader of the FPÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache, described the meeting as a "positive way of getting to know one another". Both men emphasised that the new alliance should be in place by Christmas.

Both the content of the negotiations and those taking part reveal the course of the future government. Firstly, a "budget inventory" is planned as the basis for further discussions. The two parties have agreed in principle to massively reduce the country's debt burden.

Five subgroups were formed to decide policy on a range of social and security issues. The Freedom Party is

demanding that the coalition agreement reflect its own political priorities, in particular in the spheres of domestic and social policy. The party is striving to fill the post of interior minister by its leader, Strache.

This means an extreme right-winger will assume responsibility for refugee and immigrant policy in the Alpine Republic. Strache, who took over the leadership of the party in 2005, had joined a German nationalist fraternity at the age of 17 and participated in far-right paramilitary training camps. He joined the FPÖ in 1989 and was to the right of its leader at the time, Jörg Haider.

In addition to a further tightening of the country's already restrictive asylum laws, the FPÖ aims to cut back on social benefits. Among other measures, the party plans to reduce the "political influence of social partnership structures". By such structures the FPÖ means pensions, health care, labour rights and social housing and not the corrupt clique of trade unions, social democrats, and ÖVP and business heads who have consistently attacked and sought to paralyse the working class.

FPÖ Secretary-General Herbert Kickl, a member of the negotiating team, is favourite for the post of social minister. Kickl is a far-right ideologue. He is a former speechwriter for Jörg Haider and is behind the xenophobic election campaign slogans of the FPÖ. He heads the party's education unit and advocates massive cuts in the social sector. In the coalition talks, Kickl lamented "uncontrolled immigration from non-EU states as well as the utterly rash opening of the labour market for Eastern EU states".

Another member of the negotiating team is Norbert Hofer of the FPÖ. At the beginning of the year, Hofer narrowly lost the race for the office of president against the Green Party candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. Hofer is regarded as a candidate for the post of foreign minister.

Norbert Nemeth is also involved in the negotiations.

The parliamentary leader of the FPÖ is a member of the Olympia fraternity, which the Austrian Resistance Documentation Archive has described as right-wing extremist. According to the magazine *profil*, Nemeth declared in 1996 his solidarity with the then-imprisoned Holocaust denier Gottfried Küssel and attacked the law banning denial of the mass murder of the Jews.

Freedom Party member Anneliese Kitzmüller is also on the negotiating team. She has close links with far-right nationalist circles. She writes for the right-wing academic magazine *Aula* and plays a leading role in two German nationalist academies for girls. One of the schools “Iduna zu Linz” has a penchant for ancient Germanic customs. “Strictly right-wing, traditionalist and against the anti-fascist culture of remembrance, Kitzmüller—as a negotiator of the coalition pact—can be seen as an indicator of the FPÖ’s government orientation”, *profil* wrote.

There is already considerable agreement between the two parties on the issue of strengthening the state. ÖVP Minister Wolfgang Brandstetter has called for a “security package”, the focus of which is the extensive monitoring of Internet communication. Police and security agencies are to receive virtually unlimited surveillance powers.

In the election nearly two weeks ago, the FPÖ won 26 percent of the vote just behind the Social Democrats (SPÖ) with 26.9 percent and the first-placed party, the ÖVP with 31.5 percent. Theoretically, a coalition of the ÖVP and SPÖ or the SPÖ and FPÖ would have a majority for a new government. Prior to the election, both the Social Democrats and the conservatives had ruled out any continuation of the previous Grand Coalition of the two parties. The Social Democrats are also not averse to forming an alliance with the far right, but this is unlikely at the moment due to internal divisions in the party.



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