

Austrian government ties welfare payments to German language skills

Markus Salzmann
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Last week, the Austrian parliament agreed on a drastic reform of the so-called minimum income with the votes of the two right-wing governing parties. In future, it will be called “social assistance” and involves massive cuts for the poorest of the poor.

In place of the means-tested guaranteed minimum income introduced in 2010, the new law sets out a maximum entitlement to social assistance. The targets of the cuts are mainly foreigners and those with large families. As several experts noted, the new regulation does not provide any savings for the federal and state budgets but specifically disadvantages certain groups, especially immigrants.

In future, the monthly ceiling for social assistance will be €885.47 for single people and €1,239.66 for couples. Those who cannot prove adequate language skills in German or English will receive €300 less. The full amount is only awarded to those who can achieve level B1 in German or C1 in English. Child allowances decrease with the number of children; for the first child, €216 can be claimed, from the third, only €43. Single parents have no legal entitlement to higher payments. Some 70,000 children will be directly affected by the changes. Families in Vienna, for example, had previously received €233 for each child.

Welfare organisations have strongly criticised the law, pointing out the dramatic implications for the most vulnerable in society. The head of the SOS Children’s Village Austria, Irene Szimák, spoke of a “shame for Austria.” Hundreds of people recently demonstrated against the new law in Vienna and in several other Austrian cities.

Last year, more than 100,000 protested against the new labour law, introducing a work day of no more than 12 hours a day and a working week of up to 60 hours. Previously, regular working hours in Austria had

been 8 hours a day and 40 hours a week.

According to the government coalition of the People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ), the new social assistance regulation pursues “integration policy and foreign policy objectives.” Third-country nationals and European Union (EU) citizens face a five-year waiting period before they can receive benefits. Following the decision in the National Assembly, the law should come into force on June 1. The federal states will then have until the end of the year to introduce their own concrete implementation laws. In addition, the states themselves can set specific sanctions for “abuse” or “unwillingness to work,” thereby further lowering the amount received by those affected.

Another aim of the return to “social assistance” is the reduction of the general wages structure. The GPA-djp union, covering private sector administrative employees, printing, journalism and the paper industry, commented, “The federal government is using the new social assistance system on behalf of big business to put pressure on wages and salaries. It is speculating that employees would work in worse conditions if their fear of unemployment is greater.”

In order to prevent any resistance to these social attacks, the government is increasingly restricting democratic rights. Using the so-called digital disguise prohibition, it wants to force users of news sites, forums and social media to log their addresses, real names and phone numbers with each provider from 2020. Operators of these platforms can then be obliged to provide this data to the authorities at any time when demanded. According to *netzpolitik.org*, “the authority responsible for enforcement, KommAustria, can impose penalties of up to €500,000 and, in the event of a repeat offence, one million euros” on services that do

not comply with the obligation to register.

The law is not, as the government claims, aimed against “hate crime.” Rather, the police and intelligence services, whose collaboration and powers have already been strengthened under the current government, are to have full access to data from users who are deemed politically undesirable. The drastic tightening up of asylum and immigration law, as well as the welfare cuts, have been sharply condemned in comments and social media by thousands of people. The law now aims to intimidate and criminalise them. The police, intelligence services and military are under the control of ministers from the far-right FPÖ.

There is no reason to believe that the new powers of the state authorities will be directed against right-wing incendiaries, who usually come from the ranks of the FPÖ or its affiliated organisations.

For example, during the Easter holidays, Christian Schilcher, vice-mayor of the town of Braunau, published a poem in a party newspaper titled, “The Town Rats. Rodents with a sewerage background.” In it, migrants are compared with rats in a repulsive, racist manner. Among other things, it states, “Just as we live down here, other rats, as ‘guests’ or migrants, even those we did not even know, have to share the way of life with us! Or rush off quickly!”

Braunau is the birthplace of Adolf Hitler, and the newspaper was published there on April 20, Hitler’s birthday.

After fierce protests, Schilcher had to resign, but racist and nationalist positions are increasingly being advocated aggressively in the FPÖ. A few days after the distribution of the “Rat Poem,” the FPÖ attacked the well-known TV host Armin Wolf and demanded his dismissal from public broadcasting.

In the news programme “ZIB2,” Wolf had confronted the FPÖ’s lead candidate in the European elections, Harald Vilimsky, with the “Rat Poem” and similar “isolated incidents” in the FPÖ. He displayed a current cartoon of the FPÖ youth movement and an anti-Semitic drawing from the infamous Nazi newspaper the *Stormer*, which showed obvious parallels. As a result, Vilimsky threatened Wolf on air, saying this would have “consequences.”

While the right-wing government’s policy is met with massive opposition in the populace, the establishment parties are moving closer together. For

example, discussion about a far-reaching collaboration with the FPÖ has once again flared up in the Social Democrats (SPÖ). In 2017, the party had set its course for a coalition with the FPÖ. The then federal chancellor and SPÖ leader Christian Kern had announced “the long-awaited taboo breach,” that a coalition with the xenophobic and anti-Islamic FPÖ would no longer be excluded in principle.

The SPÖ is currently in government with the FPÖ in Burgenland and in the city of Linz. The SPÖ lead candidate in the European elections, Andreas Schieder, spoke out against alliances with the FPÖ for tactical electoral reasons, but Burgenland’s state leader Hans-Peter Doskozil and the Linz SPÖ mayor Klaus Luger declared immediately that they were working together with the right-wing party and that a “no” to such alliances was by no means the “party line.”



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