

Austrian government falls over video exposing corruption of far-right politician Christian Strache

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The Austrian government collapsed on Saturday, the day after German media published videos of July 2017 discussions between far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) leader and Vice-Chancellor Hans-Christian Strache and a woman falsely claiming to be a Russian investor.

The video shows Strache planning influence-peddling with the woman, whom he believed was tied to Russian President Vladimir Putin, at a luxury vacation villa she rented in Ibiza, Spain. Posing as Alyona Makarova, the niece of billionaire Igor Makarov, she was offering to invest €250 million in Austria. Strache proposes that she buy the *Krone Zeitung* paper with a portion of the money, use control of the paper to promote the FPÖ into power, and reap the benefits by accepting public contracts then steered her way.

On Friday, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* and newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) published a small portion of the video showing Strache drinking and smoking, and exposing him as the corrupt politician he is.

Strache called the publication of the video a “political assassination,” but had no choice but to step down as vice-chancellor, minister, and chairman of the FPÖ. Shortly afterwards Chancellor Sebastian Kurz of the Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei-OVP) announced the end of the coalition with the FPÖ. On Sunday President Alexander Van der Bellen called new elections for September to “restore confidence in public institutions.”

The campaign that has been mounted against Strache and the FPÖ since has definite echoes of the Democratic Party’s campaign to seek Donald Trump’s removal as US president over his alleged ties with Russia. There is nothing progressive in this conflict between bourgeois factions. It is not aimed at the fascistic policies of the FPÖ and similar far-right forces, but part of the attempt of Paris and Berlin to secure their domination of the European Union under conditions of growing nationalist divisions within Europe. The focus is put firmly on corruption and susceptibility to Russian influence in order to stifle growing popular opposition to the extreme right and prevent an independent movement of the working class against all factions of the political establishment.

The FPÖ is a right-wing extremist party, which has close ties to neo-Nazi forces such as the Austrian Identitarian Movement (IBÖ). Strache himself shared videos of the Identitarians and was active in neo-Nazi circles in his youth. It was revealed that IBÖ leader Martin Sellner received a donation from Christchurch mass murderer Brenton Tarrant and invited him “for a coffee or beer” to Vienna.

In the past one and a half years the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition has shifted politics in Austria sharply to the right with the full support of the EU. The Kurz-Strache government has increased military spending, handed over the police and secret services to the far-right and pushed through draconian labour “reforms” such as the introduction of the 12-hour workday. Its anti-immigrant policies bear all the hallmarks of the 1930s. The Austrian government passed a law tying welfare payments to German language skills and banned the headscarf in primary schools. FPÖ politicians describe migrants and refugees as “rats.”

Despite this record, the official media and the “pro-EU” establishment parties manage to attack the FPÖ from the right! Raising no criticism of their extremist agenda, the main criticism levelled against the FPÖ and other far-right parties in the European elections is that they betray European interests and are bought by the Kremlin. “How the FPÖ learned to love Russia,” headlined the online edition of *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on Monday. Manfred Weber, (Christian Social Union/CSU, and head of the conservative European People’s Party/EPP, faction in the European Parliament) declared that the Ibiza video showed that the far-right are “not patriots, but politicians who sell out their country.”

In *Le Point*, which is close to French President Emmanuel Macron, Luc de Barochez wrote: “They claim to be patriots, they are willing to sell their countries to Russian oligarchs.”

The dispute is not about whether to implement reactionary policies and promote nationalism throughout Europe in the face of growing working-class opposition, but who is in control of the EU and the European governments. The campaign in the week leading up to the European elections is aimed against far-right parties critical of the current German-French domination

of Europe. It comes as pro-EU parties across Europe are losing public support because of their pro-austerity and pro-militarist policies, and far-right governing and opposition parties, posing as critics of a German-led EU and which sometimes pose as opponents of austerity—like Matteo Salvini’s Lega in Italy, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) in France and Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party—lead the polls in several countries.

The video was published shortly before the rally of European neo-fascist parties, hosted in Milan on Saturday by Interior Minister Salvini’s Lega, and attended by Le Pen, Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and representatives of the FPÖ and Alternative for Germany (AfD). Salvini declared that his goal in the European elections is to win the majority of the European Parliament for the European Alliance of Peoples and Nations (EAPN), which is yet to be formed, and could also draw in Poland’s far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Le Pen called on Macron to resign if his party, La République en Marche, lands behind her RN, as recent polls suggest.

It is unclear who filmed and leaked the video or if state forces were involved. The operation targeting Strache, however, involved vast resources. The villa was booked for €3,000 per day from July 22-25, 2017. Multiple high-end luxury cars were parked in the property so that Strache and leading FPÖ official Johann Gudenus were fooled into believing they were dealing with multi-billionaire oligarchs.

The SZ writes, “The meeting in Ibiza appears to have served the sole purpose of deceiving Strache and Gudenus in a professionally staged and technically elaborate spectacle. Hidden cameras and microphones were installed in the villa in light switches and in a mobile phone charging station. The microphones recorded almost every word spoken.”

After receiving the video from unidentified sources, the German publications held it for an unspecified length of time—supposedly for “evaluation of the material and verification of its authenticity by two experts,” according to the SZ. Finally, the SZ and *Der Spiegel* sprung the trap set in 2017, nearly two years after the video was shot.

The Strache affair exposes all factions of the European bourgeoisie as utterly reactionary and enemies of the working class. The Berlin-Paris axis’s hypocritical opposition to Strache and the far-right is based on their own imperialist agenda. The anti-immigrant policies of sealing borders and letting refugees drown in the Mediterranean, pioneered by the Italian and Austrian governments, like their policies of austerity and massive military spending increases, are shared by all the EU governments, especially Paris and Berlin.

In Germany the Grand Coalition government—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD)—is implementing the policies of the far-right. Its refugee policy is set by the AfD as is its rearming of police, intelligence agencies and the army. In France Macron is hailing French fascist dictator Philippe Pétain

while bloodily repressing “yellow vest” protests. The central goals pursued by the French-German axis are the strengthening of the “fortress Europe” policy against refugees, the intensification of austerity and the creation of a joint European army to defend its imperialist interests against Russia, China and the US.

To enforce this programme against growing working-class opposition to social inequality and militarism, all factions of the bourgeoisie are intensifying their collaboration with far-right and even fascistic forces.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) visited the capital of Croatia, Zagreb, over the weekend to seal cordial relations with Premier Adrej Plenkovic. Plenkovic’s Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) is notorious for its close ties with the Ustashe movement that collaborated with the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia—carrying out mass murders of Jews, Serbs and Roma. Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic (HDZ) was at the centre of a scandal in November 2016 when she publicly posed smiling with the Ustashe flag.

The fact that the entire ruling class is heading once again towards authoritarian and even fascistic forms of rule confirms the political perspective fought for by the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in the European elections. We insist that the struggle against the far-right can only be waged by an independent, international movement of the working class and requires a socialist perspective.

The statement of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, PGP) on the European elections declares: “The SGP is standing in the European elections in May 2019 to oppose the rise of the far-right, the growth of militarism, and glaring social inequality. Together with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, we fight across Europe against the EU and for the unification of the continent on a socialist basis. This is the only way to prevent a relapse into fascist barbarism and war.”



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