

Austria's "Ibiza Affair" and the rightward shift of the political establishment

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The political mudslinging around Austria's so-called "Ibiza affair" confirms the central point of the analysis made by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) during the European election campaign. There is no progressive or less reactionary faction within the European bourgeoisie. Under conditions of rising tensions between the major powers, the acute war danger in the Middle East, and the growth of opposition to social inequality and militarism, all factions of the European bourgeoisie are moving further to the right and preparing to intensify their anti-working-class agenda after the elections.

Following the publication of a video that exposed far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) leader and Austrian Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, as a corrupt politician, he was forced to resign all his positions.

The so-called "pro-European parties" rushed to criticise the FPÖ. But such criticism is thoroughly hypocritical. The reality is that the very same political forces which are now crying foul over "the stupidity and moral degeneracy of the far-right" (German Social Democrat deputy leader Ralf Stegner), bear chief responsibility for the projected entry of record numbers from right-wing extremist parties like Matteo Salvini's Lega from Italy, France's Rassemblement National under Marine le Pen, and Nigel Farage's Brexit Party into the European Parliament following Sunday's election.

The establishment political forces have not only paved the way for the far-right with their own right-wing policies, but they also cooperate with right-wing extremists and rehabilitate European fascism against mounting opposition from workers and young people. Already nine EU states have right-wing extremist parties in their governments.

Leading politicians like French President Emmanuel Macron and European Parliament President Antonio Tajani praise the fascist leaders Philippe Pétain and Benito Mussolini. In Germany, the grand coalition of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, with the support of the Greens and Left Party, is enforcing the policies of the far-right Alternative for Germany. Their refugee policy is just as much an element of the AfD's platform as its strengthening of the police and intelligence agencies, or the massive rearmament of the army.

The closeness of the collaboration between the ruling elite and the far-right is on full display in Austria. Over the past 18 months, the coalition of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) with the FPÖ

has shifted politics far to the right, with the full backing of the EU—including during the second half of 2018 when Austria held the presidency of the EU Council.

The government increased military spending, handed key ministries such as the interior, foreign affairs, and defence to the right-wing extremists, and imposed draconian labour market reforms. The FPÖ agitation against refugees, which they described as "rats" among other things, was reminiscent of the Nazis' propaganda. Despite this, all established parties cooperated closely with the government. Even after Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced the end of the coalition with the FPÖ at the federal level, the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) insisted they would maintain a coalition with the FPÖ in the state of Burgenland. In Lower Austria, the ÖVP and SPÖ continue to govern with the FPÖ, while in Upper Austria even the Greens are involved in a coalition with the right-wing extremists.

Although the conflicts with the FPÖ ahead of the European elections are growing, they are not about whether the far-right policies, which all of the parties in essence endorse, should be continued. The issue is how they can be enforced against the mounting opposition among the population, which party will have control of the European governments and the EU, and which foreign and military policy interests will be pursued.

At its party congress last October, the German section of the ICFI, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) adopted a resolution titled, "No to EU, social inequality, fascism, and war! For socialism and the unity of the European working class!", which declares, "The European Union does not embody the 'unity of Europe.' It is the arena in which the struggle for supremacy over Europe takes place."

The resolution went on to explain, "Claims that the introduction of a single market, a common currency and a gigantic bureaucracy in Brussels would overcome the division of the continent into 50 competing nation states, equalize living conditions and secure peace, have proven to be a political fraud. The EU strengthens the centrifugal forces it claims to overcome."

On the eve of the European elections, these national centrifugal forces are at the breaking point. The Strache video was published by German media outlets immediately ahead of the rally of far-right government and opposition parties in Milan, Italy, organised by Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. Attendees included le Pen, Geert Wilders from the Dutch Party for Freedom, and AfD and FPÖ representatives. Salvini declared that he wanted to win

the majority of seats in the European Parliament for a far-right faction called “European Alliance of Nations and Peoples.” One of his main goals is to “return to the regulations prior to Maastricht,” the budget deficit rules that formed the basis of Germany’s austerity dictates following the 2008-09 financial crisis.

Salvini, like the far-right as a whole, is no opponent of austerity policies. But he wants to organise it under conditions that enable the Italian bourgeoisie to expand its influence in Europe. Germany and its allies immediately interpreted the proposal as an attack on their claim to dominate Europe economically and politically. Salvini’s demand to relax the Euro stability criteria are “an utter absurdity and a danger for Europe as a whole,” declared, of all people, Sebastian Kurz. Salvini’s approach is “dangerous” and “wrong.” They would “pursue a different course,” and continue to sanction clear violations of the stability criteria.

There are also bitter conflicts over the direction of foreign and security policy. While the right-wing extremist parties call for a rearmament of the European states within their national borders and NATO, and explicitly oppose the creation of a European army—a section of the AfD’s programme is entitled “No to a European army” —Macron and the German government support this step so as to pursue their economic and geostrategic interests around the world with military force. In the lead-up to the elections, Berlin and Paris continue to push ahead firmly with their plans.

In an opinion piece published on Wednesday headlined, “A defenceless Europe is our greatest threat,” French Defence Minister Florence Parly went so far as to declare the European elections a referendum on European defence and a European army. “What kind of army has 17 types of tank, 29 types of destroyer and frigates, and 20 types of fighter jet? An army that doesn’t exist: a European army,” she wrote. Currently, “Europe is a superpower that is not asserting itself geopolitically. But everything is moving forward. Fighter jets, drones, and tanks are now jointly built by the European powers.” She concluded with the appeal, “If you don’t want a defenceless Europe, go to the polls on Sunday and vote Renaissance (Macron’s list for the European election)!”

The German government is also pressing ahead with its militarist offensive in the lead-up to the election. On Monday, Chancellor Angela Merkel visited the German army’s tank brigade in Munster, which is leading NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the military alliance’s spearhead directed at Russia. In a speech to an armada of tanks and heavily-armed soldiers, she announced a further increase in military spending and declared that Germany must be prepared once again to wage war. “It isn’t enough to talk about peace, we must prove that we are ready to defend this peace,” she said.

The German government is above all here concerned with the rising tensions between the major powers. “We need a strong, solidarity-driven, and independent Europe. Because we understand that the European voice only counts if we stand together. And we need weight if we want to assert ourselves in a geopolitical context which is characterised by intensifying conflicts between the major powers and an international order under growing pressure,” said Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at a meeting entitled “Together with the Baltic states for a united Europe” in Berlin on Tuesday.

The imposition of an independent German-European foreign and defence policy, which is reminiscent of German war plans prior to the two world wars of the last century, requires an aggressive nationalist programme and cooperation with the fascists. Part of the newly formed Estonian government, which appeared alongside Maas in Hamburg, is the far-right Estonian People’s Party (EKRE). Its leader, Mart Helme, who is also Estonian Interior Minister, advocates “zero tolerance” for refugees, and blusters about an “Islamic invasion.” His son, Martin Helme, the new Finance Minister, promises that the country will stay “a white country.”

To press ahead with their own imperialist agenda, the “pro-European” parties in Paris and Berlin even manage to attack the far-right parties from the right. They would betray European national interests and fail to stand up firmly enough to external powers. “Behind the nationalists ... there is submission to foreign forces, submission of the French nation,” French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told BFMTV. “Fundamentally, there is real capitulation. The nationalists have given up on the European continent being independent and sovereign in the face of China and the United States.”

The nationalist campaign against the fascists also has another goal. It is aimed at suppressing all popular opposition to the far-right and preventing the entry of the working class as an independent force into political events, armed with a socialist programme directed against the entire ruling class.

This is precisely the perspective fought for by the SGP and the ICFI. In our statement for the European elections, we declare, “We are not trying to improve the symptoms of a diseased order, but advocate the overthrow of the capitalist system. The return of fascism and war arises out of a deep crisis of the capitalist system. Humanity is once again confronted with the alternative posed by Rosa Luxemburg during World War I: socialism or barbarism. Only if the working class unites across Europe and fights for the United Socialist States of Europe can a catastrophe be prevented.”



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