

Conservatives and Social Democrats court the far-right Austrian Freedom Party

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Barely six weeks before the elections to the Austrian parliament, the National Council, both the conservative ÖVP (Austrian Peoples Party) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ) are seeking to firm up an alliance with the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

Several opinion polls show the ÖVP and its lead candidate, ex-chancellor Sebastian Kurz, enjoying a clear advantage. In the race for second place, the SPÖ and FPÖ are running about equal. The most recent survey published in the news magazine *profil* sees the ÖVP at 37 percent, the FPÖ with 21 percent and the SPÖ with 20 percent. The Greens, with 11 percent, and the right-wing liberal NEOS, with 9 percent, would also enter parliament. The NOW slate of the ex-Green Peter Pilz would clearly fail the 4 percent hurdle required to win a seat.

Kurz and his party do not owe their lead to any broad public support, but to the decline of the SPÖ, which will probably see its worst result in recent history, and losses by the FPÖ. In the last elections, the extreme right had received over 26 percent of the vote.

The “black-blue” coalition government of the ÖVP and FPÖ broke up in May, after the so-called Ibiza Affair. It was triggered by a video, published in the German media, that had been recorded shortly before the parliamentary elections in 2017.

The video shows the FPÖ chief and later Vice-Chancellor Hans-Christian Strache talking to a woman who claims to be a Russian investor. She holds out the prospect of investing €250 million in Austria. Strache proposes the purchase of the daily *Kronen Zeitung* with a portion of this money and then to use the newspaper to bring the FPÖ to power. In return, she would subsequently receive public contracts.

After the affair broke, Strache and the FPÖ ministers left the government, leading to its collapse. The Kurz administration was not only Austria’s shortest reigning government since 1955, it was also the first time in the country’s history that a government was brought down by a vote of no confidence.

Subsequently, Federal President Alexander Van der

Bellen summoned an “expert government” to office, whose members he personally selected. The transitional government led by Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein, known as the “conservative bulwark” (according to German finance daily *Handelsblatt*), is supported by all parties represented in the National Council. She is tasked with taming the massive opposition to the right-wing and corrupt policies of the former government and, at the same time, preparing for the return of the FPÖ into government.

Bierlein, the former president of the Constitutional Court, is considered to hold “conservative values” and be a “staunch right-wing” jurist. In recent months, she has worked closely with representatives of the ÖVP and FPÖ. In 2002, she was appointed by the then-ÖVP-FPÖ government as vice-president of the Constitutional Court. Her promotion to head the court two years before her planned retirement is thought to be thanks to the FPÖ.

The current transport minister, Andreas Reichhardt, is a member of the FPÖ. From 2003, he was deputy head of cabinet and speaker in the Ministry of Transport under Hubert Gorbach (FPÖ) in the first right-wing-conservative government. In 2008, pictures were published that showed Reichhardt as a militarist fraternity member in a uniform shirt next to Heinz-Christian Strache and a convicted neo-Nazi.

Kurz already stated last month that his first choice would be another government with the FPÖ. He told broadcaster *ORF* that he did not rule out forming another coalition with the party any more than any other alliance.

It is assumed that there have been behind-the-scenes talks for weeks about another coalition of the ÖVP and the FPÖ. However, any future collaboration has repeatedly faced certain conditions being demanded from the ranks of the FPÖ. Former Minister of the Interior Herbert Kickl emphasised recently that one condition for a new edition of the coalition was that the FPÖ again be given the interior ministry portfolio. “This will be a position with which we enter into negotiations,” he explained to *oe24*. He himself wanted to take over the post again, Kickl affirmed. He is

considered a hard-line right-winger, above all in matters of asylum and immigration policy.

However, there are also those in the FPÖ who see themselves suffering after the collapse of the last government and are seeking a coalition with the SPÖ. The Burgenland FPÖ chairman Johann Tschürtz openly advocates a so-called red-blue coalition for the federal government after the elections. However, this should not be led by SPÖ head Pamela Rendi-Wagner, but by the Burgenland SPÖ state governor, Hans Peter Doskozil. “Perhaps, if the SPÖ gains a bit and we also grow a bit, I would even wish that there was a Chancellor Hans Peter Doskozil with a Vice Chancellor Norbert Hofer (FPÖ),” said Tschürtz.

Doskozil represents the very right wing of the SPÖ and governs in Burgenland in an alliance with the FPÖ. In matters of asylum, security and social policy, Doskozil has for a long time represented the same positions as the FPÖ. He embodies the extreme rightward shift of the SPÖ, which has recently become more and more open to an alliance with the FPÖ. In addition to the coalition in Burgenland, the Social Democrats and FPÖ have already governed together in Carinthia and in the city of Linz.

In public, the SPÖ is keeping quiet about forming any coalition, in order not to further plunge in the polls. The so-called black-blue government was hated like no other before. The introduction of the 12-hour day, the stepping up of state powers at home and the perpetual attacks on refugees and foreigners met with massive opposition among the population. But because the SPÖ supports these policies completely, it cannot benefit from this sentiment in the elections. On the contrary, it will continue to be punished.

In a future coalition, the SPÖ may also seek the interior ministry portfolio in order to push through its right-wing policies there. The SPÖ leader in the Tyrol, Georg Dornauer, recently called for a further tightening of security policy with more powers for the police and intelligence services. “The Social Democrats will have to take on this security policy agenda both in Austria and throughout Europe,” Dornauer decalred.

The Greens too are anything other than an alternative. After failing to enter the National Council in 2017, they have moved even further to the right following several internal party disputes. Today, they are openly seeking a coalition with Kurz. Green Parry lead candidate Kogler said the provincial governments in Vorarlberg, Tyrol and Salzburg had proven “that green-black, black-green is better than black-and-blue. And of course, we want to offer that at federal level as well.” A coalition of the ÖVP and the Greens would seamlessly continue the policies that Kurz had pursued with the FPÖ.

The attitude of the other parties towards the FPÖ is also very clear in their silence regarding the recently published report of the so-called Historical Commission, which had the task of clearing the FPÖ of its right-wing extremist connections.

The reason for the commission was the “songbook” affair last year. Shortly before the Lower Austrian provincial election, an anti-Semitic songbook from the militarist fraternity Germania had surfaced in FPÖ circles. In a clear reference to the murder of the Jews in the Holocaust, it contained the lines, “Give gas, you old Germans, we’ll make the seventh million.” The FPÖ lead candidate Udo Landbauer had been a member of this fraternity. He resigned after the scandal but is now party leader in Lower Austria.

The “Historical Commission,” which the FPÖ established after the affair, supposedly to “ruthlessly” work over the “dark spots,” consists of FPÖ members and their close associates. The chairman, Wilhelm Brauneder, is a long-time FPÖ member. From the work of the Commission, he concluded that the FPÖ was essentially a “party like any other” and accused the media of exaggerating “isolated cases” such as the songbook affair.

The FPÖ is using the report to downplay Nazism in the party’s history. For example, Brauneder explained that in order to judge the party, “much that is historically interesting was irrelevant.” This included the question of “whether one of the party founders had an honorary rank” in the National Socialists or not, he explained, in view of the SS past of FPÖ founding member Anton Reinthaller.

Commission co-author Thomas Grischany added that no one could “seriously claim that the FPÖ had ever been a National Socialist party or that the FPÖ of 2019 stood close to National Socialist ideas.” Even the statement that the FPÖ displayed “right-wing extremist” features, “does not withstand closer critical examination,” said Grischany, who was last employed in the cabinet of Heinz Christian Strache.

It is noteworthy that although many scholars reacted with indignation to the Commission’s historical falsification, no representative of the other parties has commented on it.



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