

Election in Austria: Freedom Party demonstrates its close links to the Identitarian movement

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A new parliament is due to be elected in Austria on September 29. Following the revelations of corrupt practices in the so-called Ibiza Affair the ruling coalition of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) collapsed and was replaced at the beginning of June by a government of experts.

There are many indications that the former coalition will be back in place after the election. The ÖVP led by Sebastian Kurz is clearly ahead in the polls with 35 percent, followed by the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the FPÖ, each with just over 20 percent. The Greens and the neo-liberal Neos are also expected to gain seats in parliament with about 10 percent each.

Under these circumstances, a stable majority is only really possible in the form of a coalition between the ÖVP and its favoured partner, the FPÖ. "I want to continue our work," Kurz said, warning against a left-centre coalition.

There are an increasing number of SPÖ functionaries who support an alliance with the far right, despite denials made by SPÖ leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner. At the moment, however, such a coalition lacks a majority.

With good prospects of belonging to the next government, the FPÖ is increasingly demonstrating its proximity to the extreme right-wing Identitarian movement, whose leader Martin Sellner maintained contact with the Christchurch assassin Branton Tarrant, the murderer of over 50 people in two mosques in New Zealand.

Last Saturday, the Vienna FPÖ councilor Ursula Stenzel gave a speech at a march by Identitarian supporters commemorating the liberation of Vienna from the Turks. The battle against the Turks in 1683 is

celebrated by right-wing extremists around the world as a victory over Islamism. The leader of the Austrian Identitarian movement thanked Stenzel via Twitter for her "terrific words" at the far-right rally.

There are numerous personal and political points of contact between the FPÖ and the Identitarian movement, but the speech given by an experienced FPÖ official to a group of several dozen neo-Nazis shortly before the election sends a clear signal. For over 20 years Stenzel worked at the public broadcaster ORF and then on behalf of EU deputies from the conservative ÖVP. The FPÖ has made clear with this latest provocation that it is intent on relying even more on extreme right forces to implement its reactionary program. Even the Austrian domestic intelligence agency has described the Identitarian movement as the "essential bearer of modernized right-wing extremism" in Austria.

After calls for her resignation were made immediately after her speech, Stenzel defended her participation in the demonstration by saying that she had "set an example" and was intent on propagating this kind of "historical awareness" among young people. FPÖ party leader Norbert Hofer and former Interior Minister Herbert Kickl also defended Stenzel. They said her appearance was "quite in order," and that there was "nothing wrong" with it.

Kickl is once again seeking to take over the post of interior minister after the elections. He had already ensured that key positions in the last government—the police, military and intelligence services—were filled by individuals close to the FPÖ. As interior minister he doubled his staff in just under a half year, according to the current Interior Minister Wolfgang Peschorn. Kickl's ministry had 18 employees in January 2018

and 37 by the end of his term in May 2019.

A central figure in the interior ministry is Peter Goldgruber. He is a founding member of the FPÖ-affiliated free Executive Union and was adviser to the FPÖ in Vienna, which is on the right of this already far-right party. According to the *Kurier* newspaper, on his last day in office, Kickl secured posts for 14 members of his cabinet in the interior ministry before leaving his own position.

Kickl also ensured that FPÖ members took leading positions in the police and occupied posts at the expense of more senior colleagues. As the news magazine *Profil* noted, in the event of posts being refilled “membership of the FPÖ police union can work wonders.”

As interior minister, Kickl plans to create an extensive surveillance state apparatus. At the heart of his project is the expansion and reorganisation of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the fight against terrorism (BAT). According to the *Kronen Zeitung*, Kickl checking the possibility of carrying out large-scale eavesdropping and surveillance attacks, secret searches and covert invasion of apartments for the purpose of installing image and sound recorders, and all without court approval. Even his own legal experts have warned against such measures. They rated the plans as “unworkable,” “questionable,” and even “unconstitutional.”

A marked turn to the right is also observable in the Social Democratic SPÖ. The best example is the Tyrolean SPÖ Chairman Georg Dornauer. He recently gave an interview to the right-wing extremist magazine *info-direkt* in which he claimed that a coalition with the FPÖ was possible. Dornauer is just one of many prominent SPÖ figures whose policies differ only in nuance from those of the FPÖ.

Dornauer immediately received backing from SPÖ federal manager Thomas Drozda, who declared that the federal party stood behind him. The notorious right wing of the trade unions, which has for the most part long been in favor of closer cooperation with the FPÖ, also backed Dornauer.

The continuous shift to the right by parties in Austria allows any form of coalition after the elections. All parties represent a right-wing, reactionary program. Both the ÖVP and FPÖ are in favour of increasing military spending. For the FPÖ this requirement is even

a condition for its joining a coalition. The ÖVP wants to enforce a “noticeable increase in the budget for the army.”

The SPÖ and the right-wing neo-liberal Neos have also called for an increase in the army budget. They are following the lead of the acting Defence Minister Thomas Starlinger, who has called for a massive increase in funds for the army, otherwise the country could not carry out its interventions abroad. Starlinger was previously adjutant to President Alexander van der Bellen (Green Party).



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