

Electoral defeat in Vienna for Austria's far-right Freedom Party

Markus Salzmann**23 October 2020**

The extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) has suffered a defeat in the state and municipal elections in the Austrian capital of Vienna on October 11.

That is neither a reason for complacency, nor should it cause the underestimation of the danger that comes from the extreme right. Rather it makes it quite clear just how much the established parties have implemented the program of the former. That will only strengthen it, unless the working class intervenes as an independent political force.

The Social Democrats (SPÖ) took first place in the election with roughly 41 percent of the vote. The conservative ÖVP came in second with around 20 percent. The Greens who have been governing in Vienna with the SPÖ since 2015 reached 14.8 percent, while the liberal Neos got about half of that.

The FPÖ lost almost 24 percentage points compared to the last elections, reaching only 7.1 percent. The former FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache and his "Team Strache" clearly failed to reach their objective of making a comeback onto the political scene. With only 3 percent of the vote, the former vice chancellor will not enter the "Landtag" (parliament).

Numerous commentaries proclaimed that the defeat of the right-wing extremists was reason to "hope" and added to that illusions about the Social Democratic Party, which could "win again" and thus undo the rightward shift of the recent years. These assessments are not only wrong, but also dangerous.

First of all, one can hardly speak of an SPÖ "victory." The voter turnout of 65 percent fell by nearly 10 percent. With 395,000 people, the group of nonvoters is by far the largest. In terms of absolute values, the SPÖ lost around 70,000 votes. According to the Voter Flow Analysis, the SPÖ could not get any

significant number of former FPÖ voters, despite the fact that the latter had largely won votes in traditional working-class districts in 2015. Around 30 percent of former FPÖ voters voted for the ÖVP, while the rest stayed away from the polls.

Also, a large part of the people living in Vienna are simply denied their right to vote. A third of Viennese 16 years of age and up are not allowed to vote, because they are not Austrian citizens. In some parts of the city, this includes more than half of young people there. Many among those were born in Vienna. 80 percent of people unable to vote are living in Vienna for over five years.

Secondly, the SPÖ has long ago ceased being a left, social or democratic party. Even though the defeat of the FPÖ demonstrates that the far right lacks a broad base of support within the population, the SPÖ and the entire political establishment of Austria have moved extremely rightward. Positions that years ago used to be exclusive to the FPÖ, have since become official government policy on both the state and national level, implemented by the ÖVP, SPÖ and the Greens.

The ÖVP, which governed with the FPÖ from 2017 until spring 2019, has fully implemented the latter's program. A racist refugee policy, attacks on living conditions such as the twelve-hour workday and the repeal of social rights dominated that period. After the publication of the so-called Ibiza Video brought down the ÖVP-FPÖ government, the parties became even closer.

Before the elections in September of last year, the SPÖ and the ÖVP were competing to be on the good side of the FPÖ, while showing their readiness to build a coalition government with the right-wing extremists. After the FPÖ's massive defeat in those national elections, ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz opted for a

government with the Greens. The latter have continued the anti-social, right-wing, law-and-order policies of the FPÖ ever since.

Several parties in Vienna also underwent a major rightward shift. The election campaign of the ÖVP was indistinguishable from that of the FPÖ. The ÖVP's leading candidate in Vienna, Finance Minister Gernot Blümel, was fishing for right-wing votes, by demanding in his platform that apartments in municipal housing units only be given to German-speaking applicants. Blümel's campaign replayed the "ABC's of right-wing populists: homeland, parallel societies and welcoming culture" as the magazine *News* pointed out.

The SPÖ and the Greens, who have been in power in the capital since 2015, are hardly lagging behind the ÖVP in that respect. The former—and likely remaining—mayor, Michael Ludwig, is part of the SPÖ's right wing. In his refugee policy, he is in league with the ÖVP and FPÖ. During his election campaign he once again made clear his opposition for voting rights without citizenship.

Since 2015, the building of social apartments in Vienna has been more and more connected to nationality under the Red-Green coalition government. "The longer you are registered in Vienna, the further you move up the waiting list," *Vienna Online* remarked.

Not without reason, Ludwig found support in FPÖ circles. In the last city council election, he received 81 of 98 valid votes in the municipal council, including votes from FPÖ members of parliament. Even though Ludwig excluded a coalition with the FPÖ, this means little. The SPÖ has already made pacts with the right-wing extremists at the state and municipal level on several occasions.

Ludwig's rise from an inconspicuous, arch-conservative party bureaucrat to one of the most influential state princes is characteristic of the Social Democrats' right-wing development. In 2018, Ludwig and Andreas Schieder, who is considered a party left-winger, agreed on a fight for the succession of the long-time head of the Vienna SPÖ, Michael Häupl, which Ludwig won by a narrow majority.

Since then, social and immigration policies in Vienna have rapidly moved to the right. After the election, Ludwig immediately received praise from the

notoriously right-wing Burgenland Premier Hans-Peter Doskozil, a proponent of coalitions with the FPÖ, who called for the more deportations of refugees and better protection of the EU's external borders.

In the coronavirus pandemic, the Red-Green Viennese government fully supported the Kurz government, which ensured an extreme increase in the number of cases by relaxing protective measures. With more than one third of all Austrian deaths, Vienna is a hotspot of infections.

Against this background, the defeat of the right-wingers must not hide the danger they pose. The policies of the SPÖ, ÖVP and the Greens have already strengthened the FPÖ on several occasions. In 2005 the party was in a deep crisis, which led to the splitting off of the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) around Jörg Haider, and was on the verge of political and financial collapse. It was only thanks to the policies of the SPÖ and ÖVP, which increasingly adopted their course, that the FPÖ could regain its strength.

The only way to fight the right-wing danger is the intervention of the working class as an independent political force. For that, workers must reject all illusions in the established parties and break with the pseudo-left organizations in and around the Social Democrats as well as the unions. This requires the building of an Austrian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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