

Austria: Green Party continues deportation policy of the far-right Freedom Party

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The brutal deportation of three Austrian-born minors last week clearly shows that the parties involved in the Austrian coalition government—including, above all the Greens—have fully adopted the policies of the far-right Freedom Party.

Last Thursday, a group of people, including three minors, were taken from a deportation centre in Vienna-Simmering and flown to Georgia and Armenia. Around 160 people protested against the deportations.

The deportation of women and children was carried out with precision and extreme brutality by a large contingent of police. According to several observers at the scene, special police units were present wearing masks and accompanied by police dogs. Witnesses compared the police action to an “anti-terrorist operation.” According to several participants in the protests, the security forces made fun of their victims, making clearly audible, derogatory remarks aimed at provoking resistance.

When sit-ins were organised in front of the deportation centre to prevent the group from being forced to travel to the airport, police brutally attacked the peaceful protesters. According to a report in the German weekly *Der Freitag*, shortly before 5 a.m. police declared that “this assembly had assumed a character threatening public order” and would be dispersed.

Shortly afterwards, according to the report, “everything happened very quickly. Someone shouted an incomprehensible command. then there were kicks, blows and screams. The police forcefully dragged people away, along the asphalt. Individual policemen beat peaceful demonstrators who fell to the ground or were only just caught from hitting the ground by bystanders. Some young people fought back, but only briefly.” Then the vehicles left for the airport.

The deportations have been sharply criticised and on the same day, around 1,000 people gathered in the centre of Vienna to demonstrate against this inhumane policy.

Among those grabbed for deportation were two girls, Tina (12) and Lea (5), as well as their mother. They were flown to Georgia, their mother’s home country. Both children were born and raised in Austria. Numerous classmates, teachers and friends campaigned for the family to be able to stay in Vienna. Just one day before the deportations, several classmates came to the deportation prison to say goodbye to Tina through barred windows. Many expressed their bewilderment, anger and sadness in interviews.

The family lacks any prospects for the future in Georgia—a country which is completely foreign to the children. The former Soviet republic, ruled by rival cliques of oligarchs, is plagued by disastrous political, economic and social conditions. Although the Georgian authorities regularly and brutally suppress all forms of opposition, the country was classified as a “safe country of origin” by Austria in 2016.

Half of all workers are employed in agriculture, working largely under precarious conditions. Unemployment and poverty are rampant, and the coronavirus pandemic has merely exacerbated the situation. According to the World Bank, Georgia’s gross domestic product fell by about 6 percent last year and according to official figures, the coronavirus has claimed more than 3,000 lives in the country.

The situation is even worse in Armenia, where another child was deported. The Austrian Foreign Ministry has currently issued a level 6 travel warning for the country. Even after the end of recent hostilities with neighbouring Azerbaijan, the situation remains highly unstable. Tens of thousands who fled the

contested areas have still not returned, and the war has further aggravated an already dire social and economic situation. The pandemic rages unchecked, and in January, hundreds of sick people could no longer be treated in the country's clinics.

Undeterred, the governing coalition in Austria of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens justified the deportations. The notoriously right-wing interior minister, Karl Nehammer (ÖVP), blamed the family for the deportation, brazenly declaring it was a case of "asylum abuse."

As they have done many times before, the Greens tried to hide their involvement in right-wing government policies with a few crocodile tears. Green Federal President Alexander van der Bellen declared in a video on Twitter: "I cannot and will not believe that we live in a country where this is really necessary in this form." Other Greens, such as Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler, also joined the chorus of hypocrisy, declaring that the deportation had been "inhumane."

This posturing, however, cannot hide the fact that the Greens have taken over the role of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), which quit the government in 2019. From the start of their period in government, the ÖVP and the Greens agreed to continue the right-wing programme of the FPÖ with regard to immigration and asylum policy. Like other ÖVP ministers, Nehammer explicitly emphasised at the beginning of the coalition that he would not change course.

At the same time, Kogler has left no doubt that he plans to continue the coalition despite the deportations. In the past, the existing asylum laws had been passed without his party's consent, the vice-chancellor said. Other parliamentary majorities would be needed to change the laws.

The Green minister of health, Rudolf Anschober, argued in similar fashion. In an interview with *Puls 24*, he said, "My God, we are in government so we can contribute to making things better. That succeeds on many days, on some days unfortunately not."

In 2020, the ÖVP and the Greens gave their consent to around 900 deportations. The fact that fewer people were deported in 2020 than in previous years was only due to the pandemic. Apparently, however, the ÖVP and the Greens want to increase the number of deportations again this year, as the opposition FPÖ recently demanded. Last year, the Greens, together with

the ÖVP and FPÖ, voted against accepting refugees from the Greek refugee camp Moria.

The transparent attempt by Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner to make political capital out of the deportations is doomed to fail. "As a mother, I am stunned that well-integrated children are torn away and deported to a foreign country," Rendi-Wagner wrote on Twitter.

In fact, the Social Democrats together with the ÖVP have constantly tightened asylum legislation in recent years and laid the groundwork for the deportations. In 2016, the SPÖ and ÖVP agreed to the so-called emergency regulation to limit asylum applications. This means that only a few groups of refugees are now given an opportunity to apply for asylum if the government sees a threat to public order and internal security in Austria due to an increased number of asylum seekers.

Vienna's SPÖ mayor Michael Ludwig also spoke out against the deportations. In fact, Ludwig has long been an advocate of a strict asylum and immigration policy. Last spring, together with his party colleague and right-wing hardliner, Hans Peter Doskozil, head of the Burgenland provincial government, Ludwig spoke out against accepting asylum seekers from the Greek islands. Ludwig said at the time that, although there were free capacities in Austria, he saw no reason for such a step.



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