

Government crisis in Austria

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The hasty withdrawal from Austrian politics of Sebastian Kurz and his closest cronies has, like the bursting of a boil, brought to the surface the musty stench and rot of democracy in the Alpine republic and throughout Europe.

There is no longer any doubt that for four years, the country was ruled by a criminal gang that spared no means to pave its way to power. Prosecutorial investigations, the publication of internal chats and other revelations have shown the unscrupulous methods they used.

Discredited is not only the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP), which elected Kurz as its leader and made him Chancellor and granted him unlimited powers, but also all the other parties that paved his way to power and—in the case of the Greens—secured his power even when the extent of the criminality had long been known.

Kurz had resigned—or, as he called it, “stepped aside”—as Federal Chancellor on 9 October after the Public Prosecutor’s Office for Economic Affairs and Corruption had opened investigations into him on suspicion of corruption and searched his offices. However, he retained all the levers of power. He remained ÖVP chairman and also had himself elected Klubobmann, i.e., parliamentary group chairman in the National Council (federal legislature). His close confidant Alexander Schallenberg, the former Foreign Minister, became Chancellor.

On Thursday, Kurz announced that he was resigning from all his political offices and withdrawing completely from politics. He cited the birth of his first son a few days ago, to whom he now wants to devote more time, as a flimsy reason.

The resignations followed one after the other. Only two hours after Kurz, Schallenberg also announced his resignation, thus confirming that he had never been more than a shadow chancellor by Kurz’s grace. He was followed by Finance Minister Gernot Blümel, who resigned all his posts with immediate effect, including that of Vienna ÖVP leader. The 40-year-old Blümel, who is also being investigated by the public prosecutor’s office on suspicion of corruption and bribery, was among Kurz’s closest circle of friends from the beginning.

Sebastian Kurz, now 35, was long celebrated by the Austrian and international media as a political wunderkind.

The law school dropout was the country’s youngest secretary of state at 25, youngest foreign minister at 27 and youngest chancellor at 31.

In the meantime, we know the methods Kurz and his conspiratorial circle of friends used to make their way to the top: With intrigues in the party and government, whereby alleged party friends were bullied and dubbed “asses”; with falsified surveys and paid-for media reports financed by taxpayers’ money; and with the mutual passing on of lucrative posts in state-owned enterprises. The prosecution is investigating them for false testimony, post rigging, breach of trust and bribery.

Kurz and his circle embody a clique of power and money-obsessed social climbers who grew up after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, never experienced major class struggles and therefore know no social scruples and believe they can get away with anything. Kurz’s immediate circle also includes the 44-year-old real estate speculator and multi-millionaire René Benko, as well as the Wirecard managers Markus Braun (52) and Jan Marsalek (41), who pulled off a billion-dollar fraudulent bankruptcy.

Intrigue and fraud alone, however, would not have been enough to pave Kurz’s way into the highest Austrian government office. Rather, he proved to be a useful instrument to carry out a political shift to the right, which is endorsed by all sections of the ruling class. That is why he was celebrated internationally and named a “Next Generation Leader” by *Time* in 2017. The “statesman of a new kind” has found a new way to deal with the refugee crisis that is being adopted by other European politicians, the US magazine praised.

Kurz, who outwardly always appeared calm, polite and spic and span, knew how to mobilise the dregs of society for the most reactionary goals. In 2015, when numerous war refugees from the Middle East sought asylum in Europe, he became the forerunner of the brutal isolationist policy that is now common practice throughout Europe and has cost tens of thousands of lives.

After taking over the presidency of the ÖVP in 2017, Kurz formed an alliance with the extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and had them elect him as

chancellor. From then on, their fascist course determined the government's immigration policy. "Kurz lets the coalition partner FPÖ say the bad things, but remains silent about it himself," German news weekly *Der Spiegel* described the division of labour between the chancellor and the right-wing extremists at the time.

Kurz gave the interior ministry to FPÖ politician Herbert Kickl, a notorious racist, who ensured that the police were oriented accordingly. The alliance of ÖVP and FPÖ also took harsh action against the working class. For example, it decided to make working hours more flexible, allowing daily shifts of up to twelve hours.

It was only in May 2019, when the so-called Ibiza video exposed the venality of the FPÖ, that the alliance with the FPÖ was shattered. Kurz had to dismiss its leader, Heinz-Christian Strache and Interior Minister Kickl and subsequently lost a vote of no confidence in parliament. Temporarily, a transitional government under the non-partisan lawyer Brigitte Bierlein took over.

But finally, the Greens came to Kurz's aid. The party that had always claimed to be the antithesis of the FPÖ formed a government coalition with Kurz at the beginning of 2020, continuing the FPÖ's right-wing policies on all essential issues.

Kurz's career, however, could not be saved, even by the Greens. Ever new allegations of corruption, growing social tensions and above all the devastating consequences of its murderous coronavirus policy caused the ÖVP's poll ratings to plummet.

The government's refusal to take effective measures against the pandemic made Austria one of the countries with the highest infection rates worldwide. At the end of November, the nationwide seven-day incidence rate rose above 1,000 per 100,000 inhabitants, in some regions peaking at 1,800.

Fierce resistance developed against this. On 10 November, health workers in hospitals nationwide protested against "government inaction" under the slogan "It's 5 past 12." The 400,000 employees were physically and psychologically at the limit.

In opinion polls, an overwhelming majority favoured tougher measures to counter the virus. In the third week of November, Unique Research found that only 6 percent of respondents thought the existing measures were sufficient. The mood among the population had "long since tilted towards clear and swift measures to combat the pandemic," commented the newspaper *Heute*, which had commissioned the survey.

Chancellor Schallenberg, who went to a meeting of state leaders in Tyrol with the firm intention of not allowing a lock-down for vaccinated people, could not get his way. In

order to calm the explosive situation, they agreed on a partial lock-down, which also applies to vaccinated people. Businesses and schools, however, remained largely open.

Now, even the ÖVP's provincial leaders moved away from Kurz and his closest confidants. After their resignation, the ÖVP party executive on Friday appointed former Interior Minister Karl Nehammer as the new party leader and head of government. Alexander Schallenberg will again become Foreign Minister.

Nehammer, a former professional soldier, is considered a domestic policy hardliner who has seamlessly continued the line of his predecessor in office, Kickl. He is known for his tough stance on immigrants and Muslims and, by his own admission, "admired" Kurz. His appointment as head of government is in preparation for a massive confrontation with the working class.

Nehammer, unlike Kurz, also has good connections to the Social Democrats. However, the Greens have already given assurances that they will continue the coalition with the ÖVP. Green Party leader Werner Kogler praised the always good cooperation with Nehammer, even if they sometimes argued about asylum issues.

The rapid formation of a new government will not solve the deep crisis in Austrian politics. Beneath the constant tremors on the surface are deep tectonic shifts in the social base of society. While social antagonisms continue to intensify under the devastating effects of the pandemic, all the establishment parties are deeply discredited. This applies not only to the conservatives and the Greens, but also to the Social Democrats, who in Austria, as in all other European countries, have transformed themselves into a right-wing, bourgeois party. Between 2015 and 2020, they governed in Burgenland with the FPÖ, i.e., the same right-wing and fascist forces that Kurz brought into government at the federal level.

The sharp turn to the right of the entire ruling class can only be stopped by an independent offensive of the working class. The vast majority of the Austrian population, as in Europe and all over the world, is far to the left of official politics. It is looking for ways to fight against social inequality, militarism, state armament and the politics of deliberate mass infection. For this, it needs its own party, an Austrian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and an international, socialist perspective.



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