

Austria's far-right Freedom Party wins parliamentary election

Peter Schwarz
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The result of last Sunday's Austrian parliamentary elections followed the same pattern as the elections in Italy in 2022, the Netherlands in 2023, and the German states of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg in 2024.

The widespread opposition to the war in Ukraine, falling real wages and social cuts led to a dramatic decline in support for the established parties. Since the trade unions suppress the class struggle and all established parties have adopted the fascist refugee policy of the extreme right, the latter were able to gain ground. Their electoral success is not the result of a right-wing mass movement, but of the rightward shift of the ruling elites.

Five years after being kicked out of the government because of the Ibiza scandal, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) became the strongest party on Sunday with 29.2 percent of the vote. Compared to the 2019 election, the FPÖ gained 13 percentage points. It performed particularly strongly in rural regions and among the generation of 35- to 59-year-olds. Among workers, it scored 50 percent.

The FPÖ has moved further to the right under its new leader Herbert Kickl. The 55-year-old former student of politics and philosophy is close to identitarians who advocate biologically justified racism. He placed the battle cry of "remigration" at the centre of his election campaign and called for the mass deportation of foreigners. The FPÖ election programme was named "Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom." It argued that asylum applications should no longer be approved in Austria at all.

Kickl presented himself as the future "People's Chancellor"—an allusion to Adolf Hitler—and railed against the "system parties" and against COVID public health measures. At the same time, he opposed further support for Ukraine in the war against Russia.

Kickl has been working for the FPÖ for 30 years and served as a speechwriter and adviser to Jörg Haider, under whom the party swung sharply to the right. From 2017 to 2019, he was Austrian minister of the interior under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) and made a name for himself with draconian deportations, the rearmament of the police and several scandals.

The ÖVP and the Greens, who have ruled Austria together since the beginning of 2020, suffered record losses on Sunday. The ÖVP fell from 37.5 to 26.5 percent, the Greens from 13.9 to 8 percent.

The main reasons include the high real wage losses and rising poverty due to war-related inflation. Austria has experienced one of the highest inflation rates in Europe in recent years, with prices for rents, food and energy skyrocketing, in particular, putting significant strain on low-income families. In 2023, one in five children in Austria was considered at risk of poverty.

A year ago, a video was published in which Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) mocked poor families and mothers who work part-time. He advised them to work more and eat at McDonald's. Although this is not healthy, it is "the cheapest hot meal" you can get in Austria, he asserted. The ÖVP defended his statement.

After the FPÖ left the Federal Government, Nehammer took over the Ministry of the Interior from Kickl in 2020 and continued his rigorous deportation policy. At the end of 2021, he then succeeded Sebastian Kurz as chancellor. In the recent election campaign, Nehammer continued to agitate against refugees.

The Greens under Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler, a close confidant of German Economy Minister Robert Habeck, have fully supported the right-wing course of the ÖVP on both the social and refugee issues.

The Social Democrats (SPÖ), who have held the position of chancellor for 40 years since 1970, achieved the worst election result in their history with 21 percent. Their last chancellor, the business manager Christian Kern, who was voted out in 2017, pursued a brutal austerity policy and drew close to the FPÖ.

In Sunday's election, the SPÖ ran with Andreas Babler as its lead candidate. The mayor of a small town with 20,000 inhabitants surprisingly replaced Pamela Rendi-Wagner at the head of the SPÖ in the summer of 2023 with a "left" party conference speech. Babler refers to Bruno Kreisky, who opened the era of social democratic chancellors in 1970. During the election campaign, he promised measures against child poverty, a wealth tax for the rich, shorter working hours and easier access to specialist doctors.

But voters were not fooled by the leftist rhetoric. They have long experience with the anti-worker policies of the SPÖ, which also sits in numerous state governments and local administrations, where it also cooperates with the FPÖ.

Forming a new government based on the election result will be difficult. So far, all parties have asserted that they oppose a coalition with the FPÖ under Kickl. However, the ÖVP has not ruled out such a coalition, provided Kickl renounces the chancellorship. It would be the sixth such government since 1983, with the ÖVP, as the stronger party, always having nominated the chancellor. In three federal states, the ÖVP already governs together with the FPÖ. It is also possible that Nehammer's party will replace him with a member who is willing to cooperate with Kickl.

A coalition of the ÖVP and the SPÖ would have a narrow majority of 93 deputies in the new parliament, one more than is necessary for an absolute majority. It would be a coalition of election losers that would immediately provoke enormous resistance.

A coalition of the ÖVP, SPÖ and NEOS is also being discussed. The NEOS, an economically liberal party, which is mainly supported by younger urban voters from the middle class, gained 1 percent and reached 9 percent of the vote.

But regardless of how the formation of the government ultimately turns out, it will not stop the lurch to the right. The deep, global crisis of the capitalist system is pushing all parties that support capitalism towards war, social cuts and dictatorship.

Only an independent movement of the international working class, fighting for a socialist perspective, can prevent the return to barbarism.



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