

# Far-right Austrian Freedom Party on the verge of heading the government

**Markus Salzmann****6 January 2025**

After the failure of coalition negotiations and the subsequent resignation of Chancellor Karl Nehammer (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP), all signs now point to the formation of a government led by the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ).

On Monday, President Alexander van der Bellen, a former Green Party member, met with Freedom Party leader Herbert Kickl and officially tasked him with forming a government. “I did not take this step lightly,” claimed Van der Bellen, as anti-fascist protesters rallied in front of the Hofburg palace in Vienna. “Respect for the voters’ vote requires that the federal president respects the majority.”

On Sunday, van der Bellen said he had the impression that the voices within the ÖVP that ruled out working with Kickl had become significantly quieter. “This in turn means that a new path may be opening up,” said van der Bellen. It’s clear what this “new path” is all about: the ruling class is seeking to establish a far-right government to implement the policy of rearmament and social cuts pursued by all parties.

The FPÖ made significant gains in September’s parliamentary elections, emerging as the winner. After neither the ÖVP nor the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) initially wanted to form a coalition with the FPÖ under its leader Kickl, incumbent Chancellor Karl Nehammer received the government mandate. In mid-November, he entered into coalition negotiations with the SPÖ and the right-wing NEOS (New Austria and Liberal Forum).

On Friday, NEOS pulled out of the negotiations. On Saturday, Nehammer also ended the talks between the ÖVP and SPÖ, which had been continuing in the meantime. Although all three parties have no fundamental differences, the negotiations ultimately failed on the question of how and over what period of time the planned austerity measures should be implemented against the

population.

The ÖVP and NEOS called for a brutal and rapid austerity programme to avoid an EU deficit procedure, which Austria is facing due to exceeding the 3 percent limit. The EU Commission expects a budget deficit of 3.7 percent for 2025 and 3.5 percent for 2026.

The SPÖ advocated offsetting the deficit over a longer period. Essentially, this would mean the same burdens for the population; the government would merely have more leeway to avoid a social confrontation.

In addition, the SPÖ called for the introduction of a wealth tax to balance the budget. Although this would never be more than symbolic, the proposal was vehemently rejected by the ÖVP and NEOS.

NEOS party leader Beate Meinl-Reisinger justified her party’s withdrawal by saying the social attacks were not comprehensive enough. The party is considered the most aggressive defender of the interests of the upper-middle class, which views any social equalisation measures as a curtailment of its own wealth and interests.

Observers of the negotiations noted that NEOS wanted to push through its programme—brutal pension cuts, curtailment of public healthcare and public education, and the end of the country’s military neutrality—without any compromises.

Nehammer gave similar reasons for his resignation and the failure of the talks with the SPÖ, saying it was “evident that the destructive forces in the SPÖ have gained the upper hand.” His party would not sign a programme that was “hostile to business, competition and achievement.”

In fact, the SPÖ does not in any way advocate such a programme. It simply considers such an open attack on the working class to be too risky, as it would inevitably trigger massive opposition that the trade unions might no longer be able to control. The SPÖ is concerned with better disguising the anti-working class and militaristic

policies in order to stifle resistance to them.

Nehammer's resignation has now cleared the way for a government of the far right able to push ahead with radical budget cuts, rearmament, increasing state powers at home and a tightening of restrictive anti-refugee policies.

Kickl himself is on the far-right of the European far right. He began his political career as a speechwriter for Jörg Haider, who transformed the FPÖ into an openly far-right party. He later fell out with Haider and attacked him from the right. From December 2017 to May 2019, he served as Austrian interior minister under ÖVP chancellor Sebastian Kurz, making a name for himself as a law-and-order politician, pursuing an aggressive anti-refugee policy and getting involved in several scandals. In June 2021, he was elected FPÖ leader.

Kickl has appeared at demonstrations against coronavirus protection measures and maintains close ties to German and European neo-Nazis. In 2016, for example, he spoke at the "Defenders of Europe" congress in Linz, which was also attended by well-known right-wing extremists such as *Compact* editor Jürgen Elsässer, far-right ideologue Götz Kubitschek, the Identitarian Movement and the German network "One percent for our country."

The ÖVP leadership met at the Federal Chancellery on Sunday and quickly agreed on Nehammer's successor, the party's current Secretary General Christian Stocker, considered a loyal representative of the right wing of the party.

For a short time, former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was considered for this position. According to the dpa news agency, however, he was unavailable. As could be seen from press releases, Kurz would only have been willing to take over the party chairmanship if he simultaneously held the office of Federal Chancellor.

Although Stocker had previously spoken out against negotiations with an FPÖ led by Kickl, he now stated he was ready to negotiate with them. He said that they would be willing to hold such talks if invited to do so and assumed Kickl would be tasked with forming a government.

Stocker emphasised that the Alpine republic now urgently needed a government, and that this was the priority, saying the ÖVP would not shirk this national duty. He did not address the question of whether he would be available as vice chancellor in such a government.

If the ÖVP and FPÖ are unable to form a coalition, fresh elections would likely be the alternative. According

to the latest polls, the FPÖ would increase its lead further and win around 35 percent.

In September, the FPÖ gained around 13 percentage points compared to the 2019 election, taking it to 29 percent, while the ÖVP, which had previously governed with the Greens, lost almost as much. The SPÖ was also unable to capitalise on its role in opposition, losing half a percentage point since the last election.

Since then, the far-right has already been heavily integrated into the government and entrusted with important offices. Walter Rosenkranz, a representative of the far-right, holds the office of President of the National Council, the second-highest in the state. In a secret ballot, 100 of the 183 parliamentarians voted for Rosenkranz. The FPÖ itself has only 57 seats, so he received at least 43 votes from other factions.

The party is now part of five state governments in Austria, and in Styria it even provides the state governor.

Developments in Austria are not an isolated case. Across Europe, the rise of far-right extremist forces has been driven by the right-wing and anti-working class policies of the establishment parties and their pseudo-left appendages. Similar to the dissolution of the French parliament by Emmanuel Macron, the calling of new elections in Germany was also guided by the consideration of bringing a government to power that can aggressively enforce a brutal policy of war and austerity against the population.

After the election victory of Donald Trump in the USA, the entire ruling class in Europe is shifting further to the right.

"The possible FPÖ government in Austria is a serious warning for the whole continent. Everywhere the rulers are relying more and more openly on fascist forces to enforce their policies of war and cuts against the population," Christoph Vandreier, the leader of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany, said in a statement. "The only way to stop the fascist danger is therefore the independent mobilization of the international working class against capitalism, the root of fascism and war."



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