

Coalition talks between the conservative ÖVP and far-right FPÖ in Austria have failed

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Coalition government negotiations between Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) have failed.

The collapse in talks was announced by FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl after a meeting with Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen in Vienna last Wednesday. The FPÖ won the federal election in September last year with 28.8 percent of the vote, against 26.3 for the ÖVP. With Kickl unable to secure a coalition agreement, the Alpine Republic still has no government more than four months later.

Immediately after the announcement, Van der Bellen invited the party leaders of the ÖVP, Social Democrats (SPÖ), Greens and Neos (New Austria and Liberal Forum) to his Hofburg official residency to explore the possibilities for new negotiations. He emphasised the urgency of establishing a stable government as quickly as possible.

The options are new elections, from which the Freedom Party would be the only party to benefit according to current polls, the formation of a minority government dependent on securing vote by vote support from parliament, the convening of a technocratic "government of experts" or a further attempt to form a coalition without the Freedom Party.

According to press reports, the ÖVP and SPÖ resumed discussion on a possible coalition on Monday. "Talks are ongoing on whether or not cooperation and the conclusion of a government agreement are possible," said the ÖVP. The SPÖ, which came third in the election, also confirmed the talks.

An alliance between the ÖVP and SPÖ would have a majority of only one vote in the National Council (lower house of parliament). In January, negotiations between the ÖVP, SPÖ and Neos on budget issues had failed. Regardless of whether the ÖVP and SPÖ form a

government or whether there will be a different government coalition or new elections, social cuts, anti-refugee agitation and increasing military spending will be at the centre of the government's agenda.

This became clear after the tragic knife attack in the southern Austrian town of Villach on Saturday, in which a 14-year-old was killed and five others injured. Although no reliable information was available about possible motives, the fact that the suspect was a 23-year-old Syrian immigrant with a valid residence permit was enough to launch an aggressive smear campaign against refugees. Representatives of all parties vied with each other to call for tougher punishments and deportations.

"Lock up and deport" is now the motto, said acting Interior Minister Gerhard Karner (ÖVP). He also announced that, with immediate effect, there would be "massive random checks" across the country. Cynically, Karner justified this far-reaching measure by saying that the perpetrator had not previously come to the attention of the police.

The FPÖ and ÖVP had already agreed on much of the future government's agenda, which would include far-reaching cuts in the social, health and education sectors. They had already agreed to adopt the FPÖ's programme in full when it came to refugee and asylum policies. They had also agreed on a far-reaching expansion of the security authorities and a massive increase in their powers.

If the FPÖ is not included in the government after all, it is not because of its racist, inhuman policies and the fact that the party has close ties to neo-Nazi circles. And it is also not because of its demand to destroy the last remnants of the welfare state and enforce this against all opposition in the population.

The reason is the FPÖ's relationship with Russia, which is perceived in Austria and the EU as an obstacle

to a further military escalation in the context of the NATO war in Ukraine.

The trigger for the talks to fall apart was the FPÖ's demand to lead the Interior Ministry and the Finance Ministry. In particular, the claim to head the Interior Ministry triggered fierce tensions, since this ministry controls the secret services.

In order to avoid jeopardising the coalition agreement, the ÖVP proposed that the FPÖ be given its own asylum and migration ministry as a concession. In return, the ÖVP would head the interior ministry with control over the security authorities and secret services.

On Wednesday, ÖVP leader Christian Stocker stated that foreign partners had issued very clear warnings that Austria would be excluded from the international flow of information between secret services if the FPÖ were to gain control over the secret services. According to Stocker, foreign representatives had made this very clear even before the elections.

Konstantin Kuhle, deputy leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) parliamentary group in Germany and a member of the parliamentary intelligence oversight committee, had already told finance daily *Handelsblatt* shortly after the October elections that if the FPÖ entered government, Germany would also have to "reevaluate its intelligence cooperation with its neighbour."

The chairman of the secret service committee, Konstantin von Notz of Germany's Green Party, expressed a similar view. "In times of a war of aggression in Europe that is contrary to international law and massive influence and disinformation campaigns, especially from Russia, the FPÖ in government would certainly be a considerable security problem for Austrian authorities, but also for its partners," von Notz told *Handelsblatt*.

When Kickl was Interior Minister under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) from 2017 to 2019, he authorised a raid on the intelligence service BVT (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism). This was carried out by a police unit under the command of an FPÖ official. What happened to the files and data seized at the time remains unclear to this day.

At the same time, a secret unit was set up under Kickl, staffed with FPÖ cadres. It was later revealed that this unit worked closely with Russian services. In

the wake of these events, in 2018, the BVT was excluded from the so-called Bern Club, an informal association of Western domestic intelligence services. The successor organisation of BVT is currently working on a renewed approach to the association.

The FPÖ's Eurosceptic stance and its call for an end to sanctions against Russia have already caused conflicts between the parties in the past. The FPÖ opposes the EU sending arms to be used against Russia. It also maintains a friendship treaty with the pro-Putin party United Russia and numerous high-ranking FPÖ members have close personal contacts in the Kremlin.

In this context, tensions over the "Sky Shield" missile defence system resurfaced during the coalition negotiations. Launched by Germany in 2022, this joint missile defence and airspace data exchange project now involves 21 European nations. Although neither a NATO nor an EU project, it is clearly aimed at further escalating the war against Russia.

In the context of the growing conflict between the US and Europe, the implications of a possible FPÖ government within the EU are also being viewed with concern. Harald Vilimsky, an FPÖ member of the European Parliament, welcomed Trump's initiative to negotiate directly with Russia, describing it as a "historic opportunity" that deserved "the highest respect." Vilimsky said that the negative reaction of EU leaders to this development was therefore all the more incomprehensible.

Trump's announcement that he would negotiate with Putin over the heads of the Europeans has further exacerbated the crisis within the EU and there are growing calls for a strong and united Europe to assert European interests not only vis-à-vis Russia but also against the US. The FPÖ's orientation towards Trump and Putin is seen as an obstacle in this regard.



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