

New Austrian government will implement right-wing programme

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3 March 2025

Five months after the parliamentary elections in Austria, for the first time, a three-party coalition will be sworn in consisting of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP), the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS). Christian Stocker (ÖVP) will be the head of government, with SPÖ leader Andreas Babler taking over the post of vice-chancellor.

In November, President Alexander Van der Bellen had already tasked the conservative ÖVP with forming a government. However, these initial negotiations with the Social Democrats and NEOS failed because the latter withdrew due to disagreements on financial issues. The ÖVP then also ended talks with the SPÖ; together, these two have only a wafer-thin majority of one vote in parliament.

Van der Bellen then asked Herbert Kickl, leader of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), to form a government. The ÖVP was immediately willing to negotiate with the right-wing extremists and agreement was reached very quickly in almost all areas.

Ultimately, the formation of this coalition failed because of the Freedom Party's demand to take over the Interior Ministry. This would have given them control over the security apparatus and the secret services, which met with resistance from the ÖVP and, above all, from European governments due to the FPÖ's close ties to Moscow.

In hastily convened crisis talks, Van der Bellen and the leaders of the ÖVP, SPÖ and NEOS then agreed to renewed coalition negotiations. At the same time, the Greens, who were also available as coalition partners, declared that they would support the government from the opposition and would not vote together with the FPÖ in the event of a vote of no confidence.

Even though the FPÖ is not part of the administration, the new government programme clearly bears its hallmark. Large parts of it were already found in the agreements between the FPÖ and the ÖVP and were penned by the right-wing extremists around Kickl. The new Austrian government will be the most right-wing since the end of the Second World War. Its programme provides for comprehensive cuts, extensive rearmament spending, the curtailment of democratic rights and attacks on refugees and migrants.

The three parties have agreed on massive budget cuts. This

year, €6.4 billion will be slashed, with at least another €2 billion set to be cut next year. The cuts will primarily affect pensions, health, social services and education.

A frontal assault on pensions is planned. The retirement age is to be increased through a “mix of measures.” Pension cuts and an increase in the retirement age are simply being hidden behind various buzzwords such as “partial pension” and “partial retirement.” This is made clear by the so-called “sustainability mechanism”: If pension expenditure is higher than budgeted, there will be further “mandatory” measures.

Furthermore, the health insurance contribution for pensioners will rise from 5.1 to 6 percent as of June 1. In addition, pension increases will be slowed down. In the first year of retirement, only half of the inflation rate will be considered.

There are also to be fundamental changes to the health service. Following the latest “reforms” in Germany, which have led to an unprecedented number of hospital closures, the coalition parties in Austria say they want to promote care outside of hospital. In order to plan drastic cuts, there are to be “expert groups to develop new forms of financing.”

The cuts to the poorest sections of society, on which the FPÖ and ÖVP had agreed, can now also be found in the incoming government programme.

Social assistance is to be significantly reduced for a large number of people. Instead of the current €1,209, a single recipient is to receive only €950 per month. Those affected by this are mainly asylum seekers and those entitled to subsidiary protection, who, for example, make up around 44 percent of all social assistance recipients in Vienna. They are to receive only reduced support during an “integration phase” of up to three years.

Recipients of state support are also to be obliged to work or do community service. At the same time, family allowance is to be offset against social assistance in the future, which in effect means a reduction in benefits for poor families.

All measures, no matter how small, that could mitigate climate change are falling victim to the cuts. For example, the climate bonus, a special payment made to all Austrian residents to help with the cost of climate change, is being abolished without replacement. So-called eco-subsidies are also being cancelled or radically reduced.

One of those responsible for these social attacks is Social Affairs Minister Korinna Schumann. The fact that the leader of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) has accepted this post indicates that the new government will be closely involving the trade unions in order to push through the cuts.

While broad sections of the population will be affected by the massive cuts, the rich, corporations and banks are being spared. Regarding the much-discussed bank levy, the governing parties agreed on a contribution of €500 million over the next two years. To speak of this being a symbolic amount would be a gross exaggeration. In 2023 alone, Austrian banks made a profit of €12.6 billion.

On the issues of domestic security, asylum and migration, the government programme is almost identical to that of the FPÖ. For example, family reunification for migrants is to be suspended with immediate effect and a “quota system” developed. The official goal is to “reduce the number of asylum applications in the country to zero.” The outgoing and now incoming interior minister, Gerhard Karner (ÖVP), said his motto was: “Lock up and deport.”

Detention pending deportation in repatriation centres, which has been criticised by human rights organisations, is to be used more frequently and for longer periods. The rules for basic welfare support are to be standardised, i.e., adjusted downwards. Even minor violations are to lead to severe penalties and deportation.

Girls up to the age of 14 will no longer be allowed to wear headscarves in Austria. A corresponding ban is being drafted to protect girls “from segregation and oppression,” representatives of the future government cynically explained.

Furthermore, it is planned that migrants and refugees must sign a declaration against antisemitism. This is particularly noteworthy considering that antisemitism is virtually the foundational politics of the FPÖ, with which the party of the new head of government had sought a coalition. The current president of the National Council (federal parliament), Walter Rosenkranz (FPÖ), who was also elected with votes from the current governing parties, has compiled a list of “high achievers” from the 1930s, which includes several avowed antisemites and members of the then illegal Nazi Party.

While radical cuts are being made in all areas, funding for the police and secret service apparatus will be massively increased. This will be accompanied by drastic attacks on fundamental democratic rights.

Among other things, the coalition agreement provides for an increase in the budget of the security apparatus, in terms of both finance and personnel. Body cameras and additional weapons such as tasers are to be introduced across the board.

Under the pretext of fighting crime, more video and drone surveillance is to be used at the country’s borders, along with “more comprehensive data analysis.” There are also plans to make it mandatory to search the mobile phones of asylum seekers.

So-called “Bundestrojaner” (federal Trojan programs) are also to be used, which the coalition agreement refers to as the “constitutional surveillance of potential offenders.” This means that virtually anyone can be spied upon.

While the real danger of right-wing terrorism is being ignored, further measures under the pretense of combating Islamic terrorism are planned. For example, there are to be new penal provisions and extended powers for the intelligence services. A reform of the Political Parties Act, intended to make it easier to ban parties, is also a possibility.

The money from the cuts will mainly be used for arms spending. The new coalition is explicitly committed to further rearmament of the Austrian armed forces and to participation in the Sky Shield European air defence initiative.

The new government programme states that the “2032+ development plan,” which provides for around €17 billion in additional investments in the armed forces by 2032, will continue to be pursued. In addition, the government wants to establish a new standby force made up of professional soldiers and parts of the militia. Austria would also be more involved in foreign missions and international peacekeeping operations.

With NEOS leader Beate Meinl-Reisinger entering office, a hardliner is taking over the foreign ministry. The NEOS, along with the Greens, are the most vehement supporters of rearmament and war. They demand an end to Austrian neutrality and advocate an independent, aggressive war policy for the EU.

Most recently, Meinl-Reisinger railed in parliament against President Donald Trump’s negotiations with Russia. She said the EU must now take responsibility for its own security. There had been much talk of wake-up calls and a turning point in history, she said, but now “words must be followed by action.”



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