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Austria

National elections in Austria: A disaster for democracy and the welfare state – and for the left

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The right-wing extremist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) under Herbert Kickl received 29% of the vote and was elected by 1.4 million, almost twice as many voters as five years ago. This is the best result for the FPÖ since its founding in 1955; in 2019, it was 770,000. Compared to the last election for the National Council (the parliament of the Federal Republic of Austria), where did the voters come from? 76% voted for the FPÖ again, 443,000 came from the conservative party ÖVP and 258,000 from non-voters.

It was mainly workers who voted for the FPÖ, employees with apprenticeships and without A-levels, the 35 to 59 age group and almost equally women and men. The latter is new; women had previously been less likely to vote for the party. The party was less well received by older people, pensioners and people with A-levels or a university degree.

The main reasons for voting were dissatisfaction with the coronavirus policy, rising prices, particularly for housing and energy, deteriorations in the healthcare system, migration/refugees (this topic has recently been linked to terrorist attacks), but also the issues of war and Austrian neutrality.

The FPÖ has become significantly more radical under Herbert Kickl, its 'federal party leader' since June 2021, and publicly advocates conspiracy theories (about the coronavirus), recommended horse medicine instead of vaccinations, calls for the 'remigration' of refugees, wants to set up a reporting office for politicising teachers, and to deprive public broadcasting of funding by cancelling licence fees. He also played an important role in the regrouping of the far-right factions in the EU Parliament to provide Orbán with a forum and a parliamentary faction.

He represents a sharply neoliberal policy, veiled with folksy slogans for tax cuts like 'more net from the gross,' which would rob the social system of its financing. Similar to the AfD, he plays the 'peace party,' wants to lower energy prices by importing even more gas from Russia, and is very sympathetic to Putin's war in Ukraine. Like many right-wing populists, he considers climate protection to be nonsense. Kickl likes to call himself the 'People's Chancellor' and wants to 'keep refugees in camps' – deliberately provocative allusions to Nazi language. The Identitarians now appear to have established themselves as the ideological core of the FPÖ, with the party leader characterising them as a 'desirable NGO'.

The success of the FPÖ is not explained by the special abilities of its leader Kickl, but primarily by the political vacuum and the rightward development of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). Since December 2021, the ÖVP has been in a coalition with the Greens, with the chancellor coming from the ÖVP. The ÖVP is increasingly adopting topics and, to some extent, terminology from the far right. It wants to detain refugees in camps at the EU's external borders, stirs up hatred against young climate activists and tries to criminalise them, while talking about 'Autoland Austria'. So far, attempts at neoliberal 'reforms' and increased electronic surveillance have been blocked by the Green coalition partner.

The ÖVP is facing serious corruption allegations and a series of court cases involving its leading figures, both as a party and as individuals, from the time of its coalition with the FPÖ under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (2017 to 2019). It also lost more than a quarter of its voters – to the FPÖ (and to the group of non-voters), of all people – due to its poor management of the coronavirus and inflation, the weakening of the (good) public health system, poor economic data and an uncredible political agenda.

The ÖVP chancellor surprised everyone on election night by stating that he did not want to enter into a (widely expected) coalition with the FPÖ under Herbert Kickl. It is not yet possible to say whether this is meant seriously or is

just a tactical manoeuvre vis-à-vis the Social Democrats, in order to force them into serious concessions by engaging in mock negotiations with the FPÖ, only to suddenly form a coalition with the FPÖ after all (as was already the case under Chancellor Schüssel from 2000 to 2006).

The Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), led by the new, self-confident and combative reformist Andi Babler, stagnated at its worst election result in decades (21.1%) and was unable to benefit from the ÖVP's losses. Although a third of the Green Party's voters have left, the gain from this group just about made up for the losses to non-voters, but could not be used to strengthen the party. Babler was marginalised by the media as a political outlaw because of his – very moderate – reform proposals, while infighting and intrigue within the party have robbed the SPÖ's election campaign of any momentum.

Groups to the left of the Social Democrats failed to clear the 4% hurdle. The Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) tripled its result, achieving almost 115,700 votes or 2.4% (up 1.7%), but this is not enough to enter the National Council. The lists 'Gaza' (0.4%) and 'Keine' (0.6%) also failed.

On 20 September, one week before the election, 13,000 people demonstrated in Vienna – a joint action of the climate strike movement with dozens of local 'Defend Democracy' initiatives from all over Austria. Compared to the 'sea of lights' in January 1993 with over 100,000 participants, it was unfortunately still far too few. This alliance is a tender plant, but it could mark the beginning of a resistance movement against the right-wing development if the cooperation is developed and social issues are also taken up. There is a threat of a massive weakening of the welfare state and democratic achievements.

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