

Austria: Anti-refugee hate campaign dominates elections

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According to opinion polls, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) could emerge as the strongest party in this Sunday's elections to the National Council, Austria's parliament. The entire election campaign has made clear that the country's main parties have strengthened the FPÖ with their right-wing policies and are intent on continuing and intensifying these policies—with or without the FPÖ in government.

According to the latest polls, the FPÖ is expected to receive between 27 and 29 percent of the vote, an increase of 10 to 12 percent compared to the last election. The ruling conservative ÖVP (Austrian Peoples Party) of Chancellor Karl Nehammer is losing just as many percentage points but is still expected to receive between 22 and 24 percent. The coalition partner in the government, the Greens, are losing about half their votes and are now expected to receive about 7 percent.

The opposition Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) would repeat its result of the last parliamentary elections, with around 20 percent, as would the right-wing liberal NEOS, with around 10 percent. Mathematically, an alliance of the FPÖ with both the ÖVP and the Social Democrats would be possible. Without the inclusion of the FPÖ, a coalition of the ÖVP and SPÖ would remain, together in each case with either with the inclusion of the Greens or the NEOS.

Despite occasional protestations to the contrary by the ÖVP and SPÖ, all these options are politically possible. Apart from the fact that both parties have already made pacts with the far right at a federal and state level, it is particularly evident in the refugee issue that there are no fundamental differences between the parties.

The FPÖ and its top candidate Herbert Kickl set the tone with fascist tirades against refugees. “We need

remigration,” Kickl declared publicly at the presentation of his party's election programme, titled “Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom.” At meetings he reiterated the demand to immediately reject every asylum application in Austria, regardless of legal regulations, and seal the country's borders against refugees.

During the election campaign, Kickl referred to himself as the “People's Chancellor,” a deliberate allusion to Hitler, who also used this title.

The ruling ÖVP-Green government has also made the baiting of refugees the centrepiece of its election campaign. After the government in Germany announced that it would set up border controls and rigorously turn away refugees, the government in Vienna declared that it would not take back people who had been turned away at the German border. “There is no leeway here,” said Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner (ÖVP). He had instructed the head of the Austrian Federal Police “not to carry out any handovers.”

Nehammer reiterated that Austria would do the same in the event that Germany invoked the emergency clause to seal its borders. “We will quite clearly protect our borders” against rejections from the neighbouring country, said the chancellor.

Minister of Constitutional Affairs Karoline Edtstadler (ÖVP) wants to convene a constitutional convention in the next legislative period and make access to Austrian citizenship virtually impossible for refugees. According to Edtstadler, the Geneva Refugee Convention dates from “pre-globalised times” and needs to be “further developed”—a euphemism for the FPÖ's demand to abolish the convention.

The SPÖ is no different. In terms of asylum policy, the two notoriously right-wing state politicians Hans

Peter Doskozil and Peter Kaiser set the tone. Their document on the issue differs only in nuances from the demands of the FPÖ.

In a summer interview with the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), leading candidate and SPÖ leader Andreas Babler declared that he wanted to sue Hungary for sending “tens of thousands” of people to Austria. He attacked the ÖVP and FPÖ from the right, accusing them of maintaining relations with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, although he is responsible for the increasing number of refugees in Austria.

In this climate, it is not surprising that the number of far-right crimes in Austria rose sharply in the first half of 2024, from 386 in the first half of 2023 to 556.

Additional grist to the FPÖ’s mill is the unreserved support for the war policy by the ÖVP, SPÖ, Greens and NEOS. All parties fully support the NATO war against Russia and the escalation of war and genocide in the Middle East by Israel.

Although Austria is formally constitutionally obliged to maintain military neutrality, it authorises the transit of arms shipments and supports Kiev with military infrastructure. Among other assistance, Austria has supplied Ukraine with 10,000 protective helmets and 9,000 flak jackets. It also contributes to the costs of the European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM), which trains Ukrainian soldiers.

At a political level, representatives of all parties in the EU Parliament support resolutions for rearmament and warfare. In the UN General Assembly, Austria repeatedly voted against an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the condemnation of the actions of the Israeli military.

Military rearmament has increased massively in the Alpine Republic in recent years. Since 2022, around €17 billion have been earmarked for the rearmament of the Austrian Armed Forces. Austria also joined the Sky Shield initiative, a German-European missile defence shield in which 21 other states are participating alongside Austria.

With the exception of the NEOS, which openly call for an end to the country’s military neutrality and the establishment of an EU army, all parties declare that they do not want to touch neutrality. In fact, such demands are repeatedly made behind closed doors by all parties.

This is in stark contrast to the mood among the population. Despite the media drumbeat for war and rearmament, according to a survey conducted at the beginning of 2024, 80 percent of Austrians want to maintain neutrality; 50 percent would “definitely not” defend their country with weapons.

The potential electoral success of the FPÖ is the result of the shift to the right of the entire bourgeoisie. Refugees are being made the scapegoat for the social crisis that the parties themselves have caused. The ruling class is consciously strengthening the most right-wing forces in order to suppress the growing opposition among the population.

The war drive requires ever more severe social attacks to finance rearmament. Added to this is an economic downturn, involving an increase in plant closures and job cuts. For the first time since the end of World War II, Austria’s economy has been shrinking for two consecutive years. As in Germany and other European countries, companies are closing and/or preparing mass layoffs. These are just a few current examples:

- The Austrian subsidiary of the US electric automaker Fisker has recently filed for bankruptcy. Four hundred fifty employees have already had to leave the company, and now another 500 jobs are on the verge of being cut.

- Hammerer Aluminium Industries (HAI), based in Ranshofen, plans to cut 250 of 2,100 jobs across the group in the course of the year, including 100 of the 750 jobs in the Innviertel region of Upper Austria. The group operates eight sites in Austria, Germany, Romania and Poland. Demand has collapsed since the second half of 2023.

- The Upper Austrian technology group Fronius is also cutting jobs. In June, 350 employees in the solar division were laid off, and now the group is cutting a further 450 jobs in Austria and 200 in subsidiaries in Germany and the Czech Republic.



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