

Austria: Greens bid for coalition with conservative ÖVP

By Markus Salzmann
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Following elections in November and the clear victory of the ruling ÖVP (conservative Austrian Peoples Party), Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel has been involved in continuous talks to find a coalition partner for the next four years.

On the basis of representation in the Austrian parliament, any of the parties could be regarded as potential coalition partners. Nevertheless, the formation of a government is proving complicated. Because of the tense social and political situation in Austria, every combination of parties involves considerable risks. This is why the talks with the Social Democrats (SPÖ—Social Democratic Party of Austria) and previous coalition partner FP (Austrian Freedom Party) have been so protracted.

Directly after the elections, while taking into consideration the changed conditions for a coalition, Schüssel made no attempt to conceal his wish to continue his party's collaboration with the FP. He would like to strengthen his Peoples Party and reduce the influence of the FP, whose vote total fell from the previous election by nearly two thirds. However, severe conflicts within the FP, the unpredictable behaviour of its former chairman, Jörg Haider, and the negative stance of the FP toward plans by the European Union (EU) for expansion into Eastern Europe make collaboration difficult.

On the other hand, a coalition with the Social Democrats brings the danger of the FP regaining support as a right-wing opposition party and dominating the political agenda within the conservative camp.

As a result of Schüssel's difficulties in forming a government, the Austrian Green Party is now regarded as a serious coalition candidate. The party could become part of a ruling coalition for the first time in its history.

In the election campaign the Greens were bidding to become partners in a coalition led by the SPÖ. When this became impossible following the dismal showing of the SPÖ and the gains made by Schüssel's ÖVP, the leadership of the Greens began to indicate their willingness to form a coalition government with the conservatives. The Green Party leadership is not in the least perturbed by the fact that they would become the partner of a chancellor who played a leading role in making the radical right politically acceptable in Europe.

In recent weeks a number of discussions have taken place

between a negotiating group of the Greens, led by its chairman, Alexander van der Bellen, and Schüssel and other representatives of the ÖVP. The most recent meeting was held on the Tuesday before Christmas. As the Austrian newspaper *Standard* reported, van der Bellen declared afterward that further moves toward an ÖVP-Green coalition would depend on the results of negotiations between the ÖVP and the FP. If these negotiations lead nowhere the Green Party is prepared to begin negotiations for a coalition with the ÖVP "in complete earnest," he said.

Van der Bellen did not mention that the party leadership had temporarily halted negotiations because it was surprised by the extent of resistance from sections of the Green Party rank and file. Immediately after the negotiations with Schüssel had been made public, the youth organisation of the Greens in Vienna occupied the party headquarters to protest against the talks. Stefan Schennach, a Green member of parliament from the district of Vienna/Döbling, warned that a coalition with the ÖVP at the present time would tear the Green Party apart.

More prominent Greens, however, are urging van der Bellen to form a coalition with the conservatives. In an interview, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who is a leading member of the French Greens in the European parliament, told the Austrian party not to be "frightened of Schüssel" and to tackle EU plans for eastward expansion together with him "to prevent an anti-European party like the FP from having any say in this historical situation."

Hans Christian Ströbele, a Green member of the German parliament who has a reputation as a left-winger, has remained ambiguous in his remarks regarding the situation in Austria, merely declaring: "There are other possibilities than SPD-Green coalitions." There is no harm, he continued, in the Austrian party leadership attempting to find out "what can be achieved with the ÖVP."

It is no coincidence that the European Greens, especially the Germans, are following the situation in Austria very carefully. Cohn-Bendit, a prominent figure among the European Greens, has been calling for coalitions with conservatives for a long time. Following the communal elections of March 2001 in Frankfurt, he was one of the most vehement supporters of a coalition of the German Greens with the conservative CDU

(Christian Democratic Union).

An Austrian government consisting of conservatives and Greens would make it easier for the Hessian Greens to form a coalition with the minister president of Hessian, Roland Koch, a notorious right-winger. Many Greens are contemplating such an option because both the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and the FDP (German Liberal Party) are expected to register heavy losses in upcoming regional elections.

Politically, the Greens and conservatives—in Germany as well as in Austria—have been moving closer to one another for some time. The declarations from Austrian Greens of their commitment to pro-big business policies, as well as their eagerness to “reform” the social welfare system, have won them many friends in conservative circles. Schüssel’s predecessor, Erhard Busek, the head of the liberal wing of the ÖVP, has called a coalition with the Greens his “first preference”.

The Austrian media have also welcomed the possibility of an ÖVP-Green Party government and reacted with dismay and annoyance following the temporary suspension of negotiations by the Greens.

A commentary by Alfred J. Noll, a professor from Vienna, is typical. He regards the participation of the Greens in a conservative government as the means to halt a further shift to the right. He writes that a decision by the Greens to remain in opposition would be instrumental in allowing the Haider FP to remain a powerful force in Austria and would allow “the ÖVP to be pushed further to the right”.

Commentaries in daily papers have been urging the Greens to leave their “infantile ways” behind them, equating continued opposition with a demonstration of their “incapacity to govern responsibly”.

The magazine *Falter*, whose editor-in-chief, Armin Thurnher, is one of the most vehement advocates of an ÖVP-Green government, pointed to the fact that ÖVP-Green coalitions have already been tested on a communal level. Götzis, a small town with 10,000 inhabitants, was run by a harmonious coalition of local ÖVP and Green politicians from 1990 to 2000.

Up to now, the Greens have generally masked their adaptation to the conservatives with talk of “ecological improvements”. Similar arguments have been used by the chairman of the Greens in Vienna, Christoph Chorherr, to justify collaboration with the ÖVP.

The transformation of the Austrian Greens from a “left-wing” protest party into a conservative party of the establishment is hardly surprising. As was the case in Germany, the Austrian party was formed from various groups. The Green List was initially formed in 1986. The founders were a collection of ecological farmers, prominent figures such as the actor Herbert Fux, veteran left-wingers like Andreas Wabl and peace activists such as Peter Pilz. (Today Pilz is championing a professional army for international

interventions.)

Through all the internal struggles and splits, the party’s basic bourgeois character remained, to some extent veiled by the use of ecological issues as a lowest common political denominator. The question of the class orientation of the party was evaded.

In 1993, former Social Democrat and economics professor van der Bellen joined the Greens to replace Christoph Chorherr as the party’s chairman. Since then the party has turned increasingly towards wealthier social layers and embraced the interests of big business. A growing number of left-wing critics have been removed from the party. A report by the Austrian television channel ORF noted: “Under his (van der Bellen’s) leadership the Greens became a completely normal party.”

In recent years the party has jettisoned its anti-militarism, defence of minorities and advocacy of social reform. Today the Green Party’s policies are, for the most part, to the right of the Social Democrats. Their willingness to form a coalition with the conservative ÖVP marks a further shift. Instead of confronting the organised right wing in Austrian politics, the Greens offer their services as ally and subordinate.

Over the past three years the ÖVP has also moved far to the right, in many aspects adopting the reactionary policies of the FP. This is clearly seen in the immigration policies pushed through by Minister of the Interior Ernst Strasser, as well as the nomination of a former member of the FP as minister of the exchequer. The ÖVP is a strict defender of “free market” economic liberalism. Eager to oblige the demands of big business to cut back the social system and make the job market more flexible, the minister of economics, Bartenstein, has already announced that a wide-ranging deregulation of labour relations will be enacted in the next parliamentary term.

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