

Austrian government intensifies crackdown on refugees

By Markus Salzmann
17 August 2015

The grand coalition government in Austria is mounting attacks on refugees all across the board, with the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and Conservatives adopting the xenophobic policies of the right-wing Freedom Party. Austria is implementing the EU's tightening up of refugee policy, which seeks to enforce deportations more effectively.

For months, the government has agitated against families who are desperate to escape the terrible conditions in their home countries. Leading the right-wing campaign is Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). She declared that Austria would no longer process any new applications for asylum, but concentrate on repatriations and deportations.

Refugees will be dealt with strictly according to the Dublin principle, i.e. sent back to the country in which they first entered the EU. "When one puts an emphasis on Dublin cases, this automatically leads to the fact that new applications and family reunification are halted," she told the press cynically.

The state premier of Styria, Hermann Schützenhöfer (ÖVP), together with the Austrian Social Democratic Party (ÖVP), urged the Social Democrats to crack down on refugees. He pointed to the increasing numbers of refugees and said that the situation was "highly explosive" and that "we all suffer." Mikl-Leitner had previously been a lone fighter, but she deserved the full support of all parties, Schützenhöfer said.

ÖVP Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz used the discussion to go one step further. He wants to limit the social benefits immigrants from EU countries such as Romania and Bulgaria can receive.

The SPÖ is also participating in this xenophobic campaign, calling not only for faster deportations but

also for the domestic use of the military. The SPÖ state premier of Burgenland, Hans Niessl, is pushing for an "assistance operation" by the armed forces to "relieve the police and Red Cross." He demanded a clearer distinction be made between those fleeing war and economic migrants, and demanded the introduction of "temporary asylum" and "more repatriations of those who do not gain asylum status."

The campaign by many state politicians against refugees and asylum seekers is leading to tensions with the federal government in Vienna. The Social Democratic Chancellor Werner Faymann announced a constitutional law that would regulate the admission of refugees. His official reason that this would improve the situation for refugees is simply a lie.

The disastrous conditions in the Traiskirchen refugee camp show how the government is really dealing with refugees. The largest refugee camp in Austria can be found twenty kilometres south of Vienna.

Officially, it can accommodate 1,800 people, but more than 4,500 refugees are currently being housed there. About 500 additional beds have been put up in tents. Despite these makeshift accommodations, more than 2,000 refugees have no beds; they must sleep out in the open air or in the corridors of housing units. Pictures that have come out of the camp show how people are lying on thin mattresses and blankets, under trees or in front of buildings. Children and babies are suffering along with adults with some 2,000 unaccompanied minors currently living in the camp.

The sanitary facilities are filthy, while the trash is not disposed of properly and is piling up in the camp. There are not enough showers available, and there is a shortage of toilet paper. Medical care is unavailable.

On Facebook, a worker from the charity Caritas portrayed their experiences in the camp: "An elderly

lady collapsed in front of us because she could no longer stand this heat on the meadow.” They tell about young people who say they want to kill themselves because they can no longer endure the conditions in the overcrowded camp. There are violent assaults, with officials showing little interest in what is happening. Many complain of stomach problems and diarrhoea. “We see children, exhausted and tired of being homeless,” the Caritas worker said.

Against this background, the demands of the Interior Minister are remarkable: Mikl-Leitner advocates lowering the standards in the camps even further. Accordingly, in the future, 20 refugees will share a toilet and a shower, rather than 10 as in the past.

Recently a mass brawl involving 300 people broke out in the Traiskirchen refugee camp, in which a Somali woman and a police officer were injured. These conflicts, which are a result of the inhuman conditions in the camps, are exploited by right-wing organizations to stir up hatred against the refugees even more. Especially in small villages and towns, right-wingers, usually those close to the Freedom Party (FPÖ), try to kindle a pogrom atmosphere against foreigners and asylum seekers.

The new law is inciting xenophobia and serves to extend the restrictive asylum policies across the country. To date, the federal government and municipalities have blamed each other for asylum matters. The fact is that the People’s Party and Social Democrats have adopted the extreme right-wing views of the FPÖ as their own. Foreign Minister Kurz confirmed this explicitly when he declared that as Minister for Integration it was normal that his initiatives were also well received by the FPÖ.

Following the state election in Burgenland in late May, the Social Democrats joined a coalition with the far-right FPÖ. The coalition negotiations lasted 48 hours and heralded another sharp shift to the right by the Social Democrats.

The continuing xenophobic campaign has already incited a right-wing mob sentiment. In Vienna’s Neustadt district, refugees from the Middle East were bombarded with plastic projectiles from so-called non-lethal weapons. Seven people were hit and injured, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. The reaction of Mikl-Leitner to the attack was to warn of violence by “left-wing activists” who support the refugees, since

this support is supposedly provoking the population.

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