

Austrian presidential election: Social Democrats court the far-right Freedom Party

By Markus Salzmann
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Just days before the presidential election, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) has paved the way for cooperation with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). This significantly increases the risk that a far-right party candidate will become head of state in Vienna for the first time in post-war history after the vote on December 4.

The runoff election is being contested by FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer and the former Green Party chairman Alexander Van der Bellen. The latter had already won the runoff election in May by 50.3 to 47.7 percent, but Hofer successfully challenged the result because of breaches of the rules. A new date was then postponed, due to a problem with non-adhesive absentee ballot envelopes, meaning that the election has now dragged on for nine months.

Most opinion polls put Hofer slightly in front. An electoral success for the FPÖ politician is widely seen as a prelude to fundamental changes in the balance of power in the Alpine republic but there are no reliable predictions concerning the outcome.

In polls the FPÖ is running ahead of the SPÖ and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), who currently govern the country in a grand coalition and whose presidential candidates were eliminated in the first round of voting. If parliamentary elections were also held on Sunday, the FPÖ would emerge as the strongest party with more than 30 percent of the vote. The SPÖ has responded by continuing to move to the right and seeking to collaborate with the FPÖ.

The Chancellor and SPÖ leader Christian Kern has publicly declared that the SPÖ sees room for "discussion with the party leadership" of the FPÖ. Asked about possibly forming a government with the Freedom Party, Kern told broadcaster ORF, he respected FPÖ party leader Heinz-Christian Strache

and acknowledged that he was "seeking to promote Austria". Previously, the SPÖ had for decades ruled out forming a coalition with the FPÖ at federal level.

Above all, the party's right-wing trade union wing has responded enthusiastically to the approaches being made to the FPÖ. The talks were a departure from the "past policy of exclusion" and were a signal to the SPÖ rank-and-file, chairman of the Building Trade Union Josef Muchitsch said. The SPÖ state leader in Tirol, Elisabeth Blanik, expressed her "admiration" for the new objectivity in dealing with the FPÖ and Strache.

The notorious right-wing Burgenland SPÖ state premier Hans Niessl has called openly for forming a coalition government with the Freedom Party at the earliest opportunity at federal level. Such a possibility could now be re-evaluated, Niessl said, who already rules in Burgenland in alliance with the FPÖ, and pursues an extreme right-wing agenda. "It is impossible to distinguish whether a proposal comes from the SPÖ or the FPÖ," commented Regina Petrik, chair of the Greens in the Burgenland state assembly.

Other SPÖ politicians have made similar comments. The Carinthian SPÖ leader Peter Kaiser said on ORF radio, the new path signalled a "culture of debate", which made listening and watching "exciting and tolerable in a positive sense."

Last week, Kern and Strache appeared together on the Ö1 broadcast "Plain Text" under the slogan "Red-Blue—a temptation?" Political agreement between the two parties was so considerable that most media had to place the word "duel" in quotation marks.

Strache said that in the six months in which Kern has been chancellor, he has spoken with him more often than with his predecessor Werner Faymann in seven and a half years. Observers evaluate the approach being made by the SPÖ to the FPÖ as benefiting the

presidential candidate of the Freedom Party. Political consultant Thomas Hofer told ORF, this was now “a problem for Alexander Van der Bellen.”

Last week, an SPÖ internal working group met for the first time. The group has been tasked with drawing up a list of criteria that the FPÖ must satisfy in the event of a coalition. Politically, hardly anything now separates both parties. Kern has largely adopted the views of the FPÖ concerning refugee policy. “I am clearly in favour of limiting immigration,” he remarked recently to the *Kleine Zeitung*. He has adopted the long-standing proposal of the FPÖ to make refugees undertake mandatory community service. “Our model provides for this,” Kern commented.

At the same time, Kern advocates radical social attacks, shown by the current discussions about Minimum Support, i.e. the social assistance system. The federal government is forcing state legislatures to limit it to a maximum of €1,500 per person, where previously, they could make higher payments. Asylum seekers would only receive €520.

In Lower Austria, where a coalition of the ÖVP and SPÖ rules, it was also decided that only those residing in Austria for more than five years could receive the Minimum Support. Moreover, in future, beneficiaries in this state must undertake community service.

The federal government is currently working on a labour programme which could also have come from the FPÖ, including increased deportation detention for asylum seekers, the use of local militias and health care reform.

The Green Van der Bellen has nothing to oppose these policies, and advocates much the same. He has commented sympathetically on the discussions between Kern and Strache. In recent weeks, it has become increasingly clear that with the exception of the attitude towards the European Union, there are hardly any differences between Hofer and Van der Bellen.

In an interview with the *Courier*, Van der Bellen indirectly supported the demand of the SPÖ and FPÖ for a ceiling on the numbers of refugees. “The upper limit has not yet been reached. What is fundamentally important is that we distinguish between asylum seekers and migrant workers. Because of record unemployment, people who come for economic reasons have no chance of being accepted,” he said. He also advocates a stronger militarization of Europe.

“Strengthening the common foreign policy in Europe is now the watchword,” he told the *Courier*.

Since Van der Bellen entered the runoff election he has received support spanning from the right-wing of the ÖVP to various pseudo-left groups; now there is growing support for Hofer from other parties, just a few days before the crucial ballot. ÖVP parliamentary faction leader Reinhold Loptaka told the *Kronen-Zeitung*, for him, Hofer was clearly the “better candidate”. He had “shown, as Third National Assembly President, that he is suitable for high office.”

The Styrian state premier Hermann Schützenhöfer (ÖVP) has also called for similar support from his party. He described the approach by the SPÖ to the FPÖ as a “strategically good move by Christian Kern”. The ÖVP must now watch out it was “not relegated to the level of spectator”. Businessman Norbert van Hande (ÖVP) has established the initiative “Christians for Norbert Hofer.”

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