

Austrian Green Party in power adopts policies of the far right Freedom Party

By Markus Salzmann
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Anyone who thought that the entry by the Austrian Green Party into a ruling coalition with the right-wing conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) headed by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, would mean an end to the policies of the far-right Freedom Party (FP), has been rapidly disillusioned following the swearing in of the new government in Vienna.

For many years the Green Party presented itself as a left-wing, liberal political alternative with a leadership largely recruited from former members of parties and groups who—at least verbally—expressed some sort of adherence to socialism. Now in government this very same party is implementing thoroughly anti-social, authoritarian policies.

One of the first acts of the Greens in government was to provide political cover for the FP's criminal activities revealed in the so-called "Ibiza affair." The scandal surrounding the affair led to the breakup of the former ÖVP-FP coalition last spring.

The opposition Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the NEOS party exercised their right to set up a committee of inquiry into the "Ibiza affair." It was supposed to investigate numerous cases of horse trading over official positions and corruption on the part of the ÖVP-FP coalition. The Greens and ÖVP then used their government majority to limit the remit of the committee to examining the filling of posts at the part-state owned Casinos Austria AG. In particular, the aim was to remove from the line of fire the FP and its former chairman Heinz-Christian Strache, along with other high-ranking representatives of the FP and ÖVP.

The government justified its obstruction of the committee's work, declaring that the requested form of the committee was "unconstitutional." This was an obvious excuse aimed at sabotaging a proper investigation into political influence peddling in the

wake of the Ibiza video. The SPÖ and NEOS have lodged an appeal with the country's constitutional court, but any judgment is expected at the earliest in six weeks.

Coming to the defence of the FP flows logically from the program of the Greens. In a coalition with Kurz, the party is continuing the policies of the FP. This can be seen most clearly in the case of the government's so-called "preventive detention" law, which allows alleged "dangerous persons" to be detained without trial. When in opposition, Green Party leader Werner Kogler described the law as unconstitutional and inhumane. Today he enforces the very same law used to imprison thousands in Austria under the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s.

The new government also wants to make a fresh attempt to introduce its so-called "Trojan horse" surveillance law. In December, the same law proposed by Kurz and Strache was stopped by the constitutional court. The judges ruled that the extent of the spying on private data represented a profound encroachment on individual rights and was incompatible with the law.

But that's not all. The coalition is also seeking to force network operators to make it impossible to hide IP addresses and allow security agencies to access data "immediately" without any judicial review. Acoustic monitoring of vehicles is also planned, another measure which has not been permitted in Austria to date.

Refugees are also under ruthless attack with the Greens in government. According to Netzpolitik.org, they will "be digitally screened even more in future." In this context, unspecified "technical tools" are to be introduced to monitor the EU's internal borders as well as automated data exchange with national and international databases. All the biometric information collected will then be compared with the databases of

suspected criminals and stored for at least five years. The aim is to build a huge database covering all aspects of life for refugees. Refugees are generally suspected of being criminals.

The coalition's program reads like that of the FP. Both parties are committed to the brutal exclusionary policies of Fortress Europe and have announced additional funding for FRONTEX border police. Like other European governments, the Austrian government is calling for the expansion of holding camps in so-called countries of origin to prevent migration to Europe. The government program also calls for "intensified protection of Europe's external borders" and a stepped up struggle against smuggling and illegal migration.

A few days after the new government took office the Austrian education minister Heinz Fassmann (Independent) confirmed his intention of extending the ban on headscarves in schools to girls up to 14 years of age. A ban on headscarves was first introduced by the ÖVP-FP coalition. Following criticism by leading social scientists, Fassmann replied: "Science should not be overstretched—it cannot and should not interfere everywhere. Politics still has own its parameters."

According to Fassmann tuition fees should also be increased. The ÖVP and Greens have agreed on the retention of tuition fees and their "regular valorisation." Since the introduction of tuition fees by the former ÖVP-FP government in 2000, such fees have risen to 363 euros per semester today. If the amount had been regularly adjusted in accordance with the consumer price index, it would be 523 euros and experts expect an increase of this magnitude. The situation is particularly dramatic for foreign students who are already paying 726.72 euros per semester.

The Greens are also backing reactionary economic policies. Under the pretext of an ecological fair policy, they are preparing to redistribute wealth from the bottom to the top. As part of its "Greening of the tax system aimed at more environmental protection," it plans a reorganisation of fees for ordinary commuters.

This cut particularly affects workers and families in rural areas who have to travel long distances to work and are dependent on their auto. The main aim of the measure is to finance massive tax cuts for companies. While tax relief for small and medium-sized incomes remains minimal, the corporate income tax rate is to be

reduced from the current 25 to 21 percent. This tax gift amounts to 300 million euros per percentage point, i.e., a total of 1.2 billion euros.

Corporate taxes have only been reduced more in Austria on one previous occasion. Two decades ago, then finance minister, Karl-Heinz Grasser, reduced it from 34 to 25 percent. At the time, Grasser was a member of the FP, which had formed a coalition with the ÖVP for the first time. The coalition was met with criticism and protests, with the Greens prominent in the massive demonstrations against the government in Vienna. Since then the party has undertaken a lurch to the right. Today the Greens constitute a profoundly reactionary party that is continuing and intensifying the policies of the far right.

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