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Austria

Austria's Right Turn

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With the two parties of the Right entering into a coalition government, Austrians can expect more neoliberalism and more xenophobia.

We will remember the general election of October 22 in Austria as a turning point in the nation's postwar history, the culmination of a political dynamic that dates back to the 1980s, when the [far-right Freedom Party of Austria](#) (FPÖ) began its rise.

Austrian voters have elected the most right-wing parliament since 1945. The FPÖ gained 5.5 points, totaling 26 percent of the vote. But the undisputed winner was the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), which rose from 24 percent in 2013 to 31.5 percent.

With a combined share of 57.5 percent of the vote and 103 (out of 183) MPs, the right bloc has never been larger. After you add in the neoliberal, pro-business "Neos," who entered parliament with 5.3 percent, right-wing elements enjoy a two-thirds majority, giving them the power to potentially change constitutional law.

The ÖVP's recent transformation makes these results even more worrying. Sebastian Kurz captured the traditional party of Austrian conservatism in a coup earlier this year. The thirty-one-year-old former leader of the party's youth organization became Austria's youngest member of government when he was appointed State Secretary for Integration in 2011. Now he will become the country's youngest head of government.

When Kurz took over as party chairman in May, the ÖVP capitulated to his vision, and he promised to lead it to new glory. He changed the party's name on the ballot to "Liste Kurz – The New People's Party"; he replaced the party's traditional black with hip turquoise; and he claimed veto power over the list of candidates.

Kurz accomplished all this because he managed to become almost autonomous from the party's old structures and resources. He and his team of allies won full support "and significant donations" from large sections of big capital, which saw him as their best shot for liberating the ÖVP from their seemingly eternal coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

The change in internal structure and outward appearance came with a new political profile. Kurz and his team of loyal followers realized that they could only win mass support for their pro-capital, antiwelfare program if they fully adopted the racist, authoritarian, and antimigrant positions of the FPÖ, which, until Kurz's takeover, had been leading every national poll for almost two years.

The plan worked. With Kurz, Austrian voters could vote for the FPÖ's program without associating themselves with the far right or fascism. The [extreme right's](#) preferred topics "Islam, [migration](#), refugees" dominated the campaign. Both Kurz and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache presented closed borders and [Islamophobic](#) laws as the best solution to the country's social and political problems.

Their rhetoric shifted public opinion in Austria even further to the right, allowing Kurz's "new" ÖVP to win without hurting the FPÖ. Strache himself gave the best summary of the election when he declared, "Tonight, almost 60 percent voted for the FPÖ's platform."

In my [2015 article on the FPÖ's rise](#), I wrote:

Across the border, some one hundred kilometers from Vienna, Viktor Orbán has transformed the Hungarian Republic into a semi-authoritarian regime, strangling progressive elements of civil society, marginalizing the opposition, and curtailing civil liberties. The FPÖ leadership has explicitly and repeatedly stated its affinity for Orbán's project. . . . They will aim not to be part of a government, but to "become the state," as Gramsci said.

This analysis left one question open: how will the extreme right implement such a deep transformation of the state by democratic means? The election results reveal one possible answer.

Right-wing authoritarian populism is no longer limited to one party. This political, social, and cultural force now controls two parties in parliament, and they will most likely form a coalition government within the next weeks.

Pessimism of the Intellect

Two elements sit at the center of this new configuration of authoritarian populism in Austria: [neoliberal](#) reform and racist exclusion.

Both the FPÖ and ÖVP have announced plans to drastically cut unemployment benefits and introduce flexible labor legislation, raising the maximum working time for employees from eight to twelve hours per day and from forty to sixty hours per week.

The new right-wing government will also target Austria's system of collective bargaining, a key component of wage regulation in a country where 97 percent of all employment contracts are covered by a minimum union wage. Together, these reforms will create a low-wage sector with a highly flexible "read: precarious" workforce, which will drive up profits from global export markets.

At the same time, the FPÖ and ÖVP plan to slash public spending for social benefits, cut corporate tax rates, and unravel tenancy laws that have kept rent in Austrian cities comparatively low.

All of these measures, of course, serve the interests of those factions of capital that have backed both parties over the past few years: export-oriented industrial capital looking for cheaper wages and flexible workers, [finance capital](#) looking for new ways to financialize social reproduction, and real estate capital looking to raise rents and create new incentives for home ownership.

This radical attack on living standards will come with a deepening of authoritarianism and racist exclusion. Internally, Muslims have been the focus of these measures. The SPÖ-ÖVP coalition government already introduced laws that specifically target Islamic associations and places of worship.

The newly reformed *Islamgesetz* ("Islam law") created special regulations and provisions that don't apply to any other religion, and both Kurz and Strache promised that they would reform this legislation to make it easier to shut down Islamic organizations. Most recently, Austria outlawed wearing face veils in all public spaces with the full support of the SPÖ.

During the election campaign, both the ÖVP and the FPÖ pushed their Islamophobic agenda relentlessly. In one of

many episodes of moral panic, Kurz demanded that the state close the kindergartens run by Muslim providers, claiming that they were indoctrinating toddlers with the values of "political Islam." Meanwhile, Strache banged on about "Muslim sex predators" threatening "our women."

This constant wave of Islamophobic rhetoric and policy has already created a climate of fear for many Muslim Austrians, who make up six hundred thousand of the country's population of eight million.

Class warfare and racist exclusion are structurally connected. To shore up support for potentially unpopular social cuts, the state increases its attacks on Muslims and refugees. The right-wing parties have already proposed authoritarian measures like expanding police surveillance, curtailing the right to protest, and controlling public broadcasting, and the new ÖVP-FPÖ government is likely to implement them. Resistance to these measures has, until now, remained very limited.

Optimism of the Will

Where, in this dire situation, is the Left? It has not been weaker since the end of World War II.

At first glance, the SPÖ , which has led the government since 2007, seemed to have maintained its support from the 2013 election, when it lost five seats. But a closer look shows that a significant number of voters abandoned the Social Democrats for the two right-wing parties, and the SPÖ made up the difference with votes from former Green party supporters.

For the Greens, this meant total meltdown. After thirty-one years in parliament, the party born from the environmental and peace movements of the 1980s fell below the 4 percent threshold, losing more than two-thirds of its voters. They will no longer have any representation in Austria's *Nationalrat*. In their stead, the Liste Pilz, a party founded by former Green politician Peter Pilz just this July, will enter.

Pilz ran on a platform of "protecting the homeland" against both the "right-wing populists" and "political Islam." Pandering to the prevailing anti-Muslim sentiment, he managed to win 4.4 percent of the vote.

Further to the left, the communist KPÖ ran in an alliance with the Greens' former youth branch and independent leftists. Despite this broader base and an impressive campaign, KPÖ Plus, as this coalition was called, actually *lost* from their already marginal position, receiving less than 1 percent of the vote.

Authoritarian right-wing populism has now become a truly hegemonic, cross-class project. 74 percent of blue-collar workers voted for one of the two right-wing parties, as did 64 percent of entrepreneurs. Shockingly, the FPÖ won among voters 16 to 29 years old with 30 percent of the vote. Add Kurz's 28 percent, and you have a 58 percent majority for authoritarian right-wing populism among young people. The only demographic that liked the Social Democrats were pensioners. This is what deep, right-wing hegemony looks like.

How stable this hegemony proves to be remains to be seen. The coming attacks on wages and pensions, on the welfare state and social security, will provoke resistance.

If and how this resistance fuels a resurgent Austrian left will depend on a number of factors: will the Left successfully cut through the Right's racist scaremongering to garner support? Will the Social Democrats and trade unions actively

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fight government attacks? Will the shattered Greens reconstitute themselves as a party that stands for real social and ecological change? Will the different parts of the Left inside and outside of political parties manage to come together into a popular, more unified project? These will be the challenges facing any political force aiming to build a real alternative to Austria's right-wing hegemony.

23 October 2017

[Jacobin](#)

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