



The Far-Right Electoral Victory in Austria and Its Potential Ramifications

In Austria, the recent legislative election results have led to celebration, anger, and a cloud of uncertainty across the country. The two ruling parties, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens, suffered heavy losses. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) made gains at their expense, earning the best result any far-right party has ever achieved in the country post-WWII. On Sunday night, supporters of FPÖ cheered with their leader, Herbert Kickl. At the same time, several hundred anti-right-wing protesters marched in Vienna with signs such as “Kickl is a Nazi” and “Don’t let Nazis rule.” These refer to more than just the far-right positions of the FPÖ, as the party was founded by former Nazis in post-war Austria in 1956, making the FPÖ one of the oldest far-right parties in Europe. The party did shift over time from its extreme-right origins towards the center, but in 1986, it moved back to the far-right, capitalizing on rising anti-immigration and Euroscepticism. The FPÖ has been in the federal government before working with ÖVP. However, this is the first time that the FPÖ earned the most seats, giving them greater influence than ever before, possibly including the position of chancellor.

The party’s recent success is similar to that of other far-right parties in Europe. Many Austrians are increasingly frustrated at what they see as out-of-control immigration, the rising cost of living, slow economic growth, and the failure of mainstream parties to address these issues. FPÖ has campaigned heavily on these issues, blaming immigrants abusing social services and the War in Ukraine for the rising cost of living. It is important to note that Austria is a non-NATO member and officially neutral, as enshrined in its constitution. The party also promises to oppose all sanctions and other actions against Russia, and create “Fortress Austria” with new strict laws aimed at homogeneity in Austria. This would consist of suspending the right of asylum, refusing the EU’s new asylum pact, and attaching an expiration date to asylum seekers, preventing them from becoming citizens.

Will the FPÖ make it into government? There appear to be two main possibilities. The first is a center-right to far-right government between the ÖVP and FPÖ. In such an agreement, the FPÖ will demand the position of chancellor, given that they are now the largest party. ÖVP party leader Karl Nehammer has said that he is willing to work with the FPÖ, but has ruled out any government headed by Kickl, calling him a security risk. This appears to be a deal-breaking issue, as all signs show that Kickl hopes to become the next chancellor. He would likely refuse any offer to stand down to form a government, since he was the one who led the FPÖ into its recent electoral triumph. Kickl might have been hoping the ÖVP oust its own leader, Nehammer, with someone more willing to negotiate, but these hopes appear dashed for now as the ÖVP expressed confidence in Nehammer’s leadership on Tuesday. After the 2023 Dutch elections, the anti-immigration and anti-Islam far-right Party for Freedom entered into government after its leader, the highly controversial Geert Wilders, agreed not to become prime minister. It is too soon to say if Kickl will agree to form a government with someone else taking the position of chancellor.

The second option is a center-right to center-left government between the ÖVP, the third-place Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), and likely even the fourth-place NEOS – a centrist party that came in fourth, as a government between only ÖVP and SPÖ would meet the minimum for a majority. However, there are risks of either falling apart or being ineffective due to the vast political spectrum it would hold. In Italy, the far-right Brothers of Italy, a small party in 2018, grew while in opposition. In the Italian case, the small party chose not to participate in a broad coalition government. It is a different case in Austria, but if the FPÖ is not included in the

government then it could have a similar effect, allowing the party to become the primary voice of opposition against an overly large coalition and this could translate into an even bigger showing during the next election if the coalition government does not produce effective results.

In Austria, the political future is uncertain. Whichever government option is chosen, neither is ideal for most Austrian politicians. The ÖVP will have to either work as the smaller party with the FPÖ or try to form a vast center-right to center-left coalition that could collapse over its weight and attract criticism for excluding the largest party. Either way, the FPÖ is too big to ignore. The Austrian president is set to begin coalition talks today, meeting first with FPÖ and then the other party leaders next week. The president made clear that it is time for “compromises to be found.” He also stresses that any future government should respect the rule of law, minority rights, independent media, and EU membership – a signal many take as his reluctance to appoint an FPÖ-led government. The election in Austria is just the latest example of a European country’s shift to the right. In 2024 alone, the far-right has made notable gains in France, the EU parliament, various German states, and now in Austria. For Europe and the EU, Austria will likely join Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his allies in opposing aid to Ukraine and further European integration and expansion. Democracy, freedom, and the rule of law in the country could come under threat if FPÖ seeks to emulate Orbán’s crackdown on the press and opposition.