

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The 2024 Austrian Elections and the Rise of the Freedom Party of Austria

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October 28, 2024

S*ummary*

The Freedom Party of Austria's (FPÖ) performance in the 2024 general elections reinforces the broader trend of the continental shift favouring a Eurosceptic and far-right worldview.

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) emerged as the largest party in the 2024 general elections, winning over 28 per cent of total votes (almost 13 per cent more than the previous election).¹ The Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) secured around 26 per cent of the vote share followed by Social Democrats with 21 per cent, the New Austrians with 9 per cent, and Greens with 8 per cent.² President Alexander Van der Bellen has entrusted Chancellor Karl Nehammer’s government with administrative duties (as a caretaker administration) until a new leader assumes charge. Notably, the Austrian constitution does not specify a time period within which a new government must be formed after election results are announced. It could vary depending on the pace and success (or failure) of negotiations between various parties.

The FPÖ was founded by Anton Reinthaller, a former SS Officer associated with the Nazi party.³ It was part of coalition governments in 2000 and during 2017–2019. While its primary support base is made up of people between the age of 35 and 59,⁴ it also acquired the largest support this year from a critical voting bloc—the youth and those part of the labour force—voters under 35. This development has spurred a wave of celebration among other far-right figures⁵ across Europe like Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán.

FPO’s performance shows that Austria’s political landscape is aligned with the broader shift to the far-right across Europe, with hardening anti-migrant rhetoric. Across Hungary, Italy, France and Germany, far-right politicians are steadily gaining ground amid the growing popularisation of conspiracy theories through social media, such as the Great Replacement⁶ and concepts such as Remigration.⁷ The recent policy measures introduced by the EU regarding immigration,⁸ which human rights organisations have decried, is a testament to disenchantment with the liberal democratic governance and globalisation.

¹ Julia Kaiser, “[Austrian Election Another Piece of the Mosaic in Far-Right Surge Across the EU](#)”, *The Parliament Magazine*, 1 October 2024.

² “[Austria: 2024 General Elections](#)”, *Politico*.

³ Jane McIntosh, “[Austria’s FPÖ: A Turbulent History](#)”, *DW*, 19 May 2019.

⁴ Deborah Cole and Ashifa Kassam, “[Austrian Parties to Begin Talks on Forming Government After Far-Right Win](#)”, *The Guardian*, 30 September 2024.

⁵ Csongor Körömi, “[Orbán, Le Pen and Wilders are Buzzing Over Austria’s Far Right Winning Election](#)”, *Politico*, 30 September 2024.

⁶ Steve Rose, “[A Deadly Ideology: How the Great Replacement Theory Went Mainstream](#)”, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2022.

⁷ “[Austria Far-Right Calls for EU Remigration Commissioner](#)”, *Euractiv*, 12 June 2024.

⁸ Laura Gozzi, “[EU Approves Major Overhaul of Migration Rules](#)”, *BBC News*, 10 April 2024.

These trends have been supplemented by a resurgence of tribalism⁹ and nationalism, rejection of multiculturalism, widening socio-economic marginalisation and misinformation and disinformation that have become rampant on social media platforms. As has been observed since the 1800s, far-right and populist policies have gained momentum following a period of upheaval or crisis. Concerns regarding the viability of the Bretton Woods system and rising immigration levels across Europe, which had begun simmering mainly after the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis, boiled over after the COVID-19 outbreak.

As parties across the continent faced backlash for the lockdown measures and imposition of vaccination drives, the locals’ disgruntlement and skepticism about the implications of COVID-19 vaccines and handling of the health crisis grew louder. The anti-government sentiments festered as governments found themselves increasingly challenged at countering the false narratives about the lockdown measures and vaccines being promoted by conspiracy theorists rampantly.

Austria was no exception to the pushback felt across the continent against vaccine mandates,¹⁰ and the far-right conservatives sought to capitalise on the resentment felt deeply by the populace in order to secure electoral benefits. The measure to impose a fine—ranging from 600 to 3,600—on those adults refusing vaccination, despite being quickly shelved, had evidently generated significant hostility among the people on the ground.

Furthermore, the paranoia generated by FPÖ about Muslim immigrants outnumbering the majority population, failure of these immigrants to assimilate into the national culture, and potential Islamist radicalisation, potentially contributed to its recent success. It would not be improbable to assume that the projections by the Austrian Academy of Science that Muslims could comprise 12 to 21 per cent¹¹ of the Austrian society by 2046, would have exacerbated the anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric that has extensively been propounded by far-right parties such as FPÖ as part of its Fortress Austria platform.¹²

At the same time, the rising cost of living and gas prices and socio-economic crisis have worked in FPÖ’s favour. In the background of the Ukraine conflict and Austria’s

⁹ Arash Javanbakht, “[The Politics of Fear: How It Manipulates Us To Tribalism](#)”, *The Conversation*, 19 March 2019.

¹⁰ Anna Noryskiewicz, “[Austria Election Results Put Far-Right Freedom Party on Top, But Leader Herbert Kickl Faces Coalition Hurdles](#)”, *CBS News*, 30 September 2024.

¹¹ Farid Hafez, Reinhard Heinisch and Erik Miklin, “[The New Right: Austria’s Freedom Party and Changing Perceptions of Islam](#)”, *Brookings*, 4 July 2019.

¹² Matthew Karnitsching, “[Austria Goes Back to the Future as Voters Embrace Far-Right Party Founded by Nazis](#)”, *Politico*, 29 September 2024.

dependence on Russian gas (surpassing the EU average), inflation and total household expenditures will surge as the bloc doubles down on Austrian consumption of Russian gas. Notably, FPÖ has argued favourably about continuing the purchase of Russian gas despite European attempts to diversify since 2022.¹³

Key Considerations

The possibility of the Social Democrats combining with ÖVP and other smaller parties like Greens to form an alternative coalition government to prevent the FPÖ from assuming office has been discussed. President Van der Bellen has proposed¹⁴ that ÖVP enter into a coalition government with Social Democrats. However, such ideologically opposing movements would find themselves at odds over key domestic and foreign policy issues and could bolster the FPO’s capacity to emerge much stronger moving forward. The ÖVP, The New Austria, Social Democratic Party, among others, profess differing views on issues such as immigration, climate change, economic policies and multiculturalism.¹⁵ In the event a pan-ideological coalition government takes charge, there seems little to suggest that it would be able to curb the rise of the far-right FPÖ while maintaining a consensus on policy issues. The FPÖ and the ÖVP came together as allies in a coalition government in 2000 and then in 2017.

Any political party hoping to enter into a coalition government would require to muster at least 92 out of 183 seats in the National Council (Legislature). At the moment, the FPÖ has the largest vote share with 57 seats. The ÖVP has 51 seats, the Social Democrats 41 seats, the New Austria Party 18 seats, followed by Greens with 16 seats.¹⁶ It remains to be seen whether the centre-right ÖVP will come to the aid of the FPÖ in exchange for concessions that involve a stake beyond the Chancellery.¹⁷

One of the key concessions, which seems unlikely at the moment, would require FPÖ’s leader, Herbert Kickl, to be sidelined from the subsequent coalition government. His party ran the campaign with him as Austria’s future leader.

¹³ Louis Van Boxel-Woolf, [“Austria Election Brings Into Focus Russian Gas Habit and a Sputtering Economy”](#), *Reuters*, 23 September 2024.

¹⁴ Bethany Bell, [“Austria Far Right Shunned for Coalition Despite Winning Election”](#), *BBC News*, 22 October 2024.

¹⁵ [“Austria: Political Parties at a Glance”](#), *PolitPro*.

¹⁶ [“Austria: 2024 General Elections”](#), *Politico*.

¹⁷ Sarah Shamim, [“Austria Election Results: Far-Right FPO Wins, What’s Next?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 30 September 2024.

Simultaneously, he could step aside from claims to leadership in the government, based on the precedent established by the party’s previous head, Jörg Haider, in 2000, while exercising power through a proxy. If no coalition government can be proposed, the country and its leaders could be thrust into another round of elections.

If negotiations between other political parties falter, Austria might find itself breaking ranks with the rest of the European Union members regarding the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The FPÖ has been critical of the sanctions against President Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin officials due to the Ukraine crisis. This makes Kickl’s party one of the few pro-Russian political factions in Europe. FPÖ’s potential presence in a future government would be perceived as another concerning development following Robert Fico’s victory in Slovakia last year. Fico had also campaigned on an anti-Ukrainian narrative. Furthermore, FPÖ has envisaged remodelling Austria as per the model of governance practiced in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. Several EU parliamentarians have criticised¹⁸ the erosion of liberal democracy under Orbán’s leadership and, therefore, would want Austria to presumably avoid the same fate.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the FPÖ can convert the zeitgeist favouring far-right populism to emerge as the single-largest party and form a government without external support following the next elections. This is because, despite the Austrian tilt towards the far-right over the past several years, some key factors continue hindering the far-right from sweeping into power single-handedly with a majority stake. This includes the stark reminders of the policies enacted during the Nazi era, continued resistance (with its ebbs and flows) by political and civil society actors against cooperating with the far-right across Europe, and a largely pro-Ukrainian worldview among Europeans. Widespread protests, with numbers ranging between 15,000 and 17,000,¹⁹ were held in Vienna to express outrage against the far-right’s victory and to display resistance to Kickl’s ambition to sweep into power. These trends indicate that the FPÖ has challenges in its path of power and unless significant compromises can be made on its ideological platform and tangible assurances given to the public, it is unlikely to secure a stake in the government in the immediate future.

¹⁸ [“MEPs: Hungary Can No Longer Be Considered A Full Democracy”](#), European Parliament, 15 September 2022.

¹⁹ [“Thousands Rally in Austria Against Far Right”](#), VOA News, 3 October 2024.

About the Author



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