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## "WORST CRISIS FOR AUSTRIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATS SINCE WWII"

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Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann, who has resigned, only stayed in office so long because he had no clear successor, says political scientist Reinhard C. Heinisch. His resignation doesn't solve Austria's problems.

### **Deutsche Welle: Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann has stepped down from all of his posts. Why did he do this?**

Reinhard C. Heinisch: This is clearly the worst crisis to hit Austria's Social Democratic Party since World War II. The party is deeply divided. Two issues are mainly to blame for this division. The first is how it has handled the right-wing populists in the Freedom Party (FPÖ). Since the 1990s, there's been a section of the party that has strictly rejected any coalition or cooperation with the FPÖ, but there's also been a faction that would very much like to do so.

The second main point is the handling of the refugee crisis. There's a group in the party that would like to continue a sort of welcome culture for refugees; they see this as a way to distinguish themselves from the right. But there's also a faction that wants just the opposite. They prefer to concentrate more on safety and security as well as the concerns of the population. There's a very large gulf between these two factions, and the chancellor tried to bridge them, taking first one position, then the other - trying to remain in the middle. But by staying in the middle, he lost more and more allies on both the right and the left until he was left standing on his own. This is all against the backdrop of a painful defeat during the first round of presidential elections in Austria, and around 18 losses in a row, turning what was once a large governing party into more of a small to mid-size party.

**Vienna's mayor, Michael Häupl, has been named the Social Democratic Party's acting leader, while Deputy Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner, a member of the junior coalition partner, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), will serve as interim chancellor. Does that solve the problems?**

One reason that Faymann stayed on so long as party leader and chancellor is there was and is no clear successor.

The prospects are really thin within the SPÖ. It's the first time that there's no logical successor for a departing chancellor. The handover of power for both chancellor and party leader is a matter of tradition in the SPÖ.

Usually, it was the case that a chancellor or party leader had reached the end, an election was lost, and the SPÖ would shake a bright new star out of its sleeve, and things would carry on nicely for a few more years.

**Is it normal for someone from the coalition partner to take over as the head of the government?**

It's an absolute novelty for a junior member of a coalition - in this case, the deputy chancellor - to become chancellor. To me, it's also not clear, even if the ÖVP is not saying so at the moment, whether the ÖVP would even support a future chancellor candidate from the SPÖ. There are even reasons now for the ÖVP to jump off if they wanted to. They could say, our agreement was with Faymann, and we're not prepared to make an agreement with another person.

**Are you expecting new elections?**

The likelihood has now become much bigger. The SPÖ isn't just divided into two factions, or different regions; the various organizations are also split, and that's what will make it very difficult to find a quick solution to this problem.

**How would the Freedom Party do, if new elections were to be held soon?**

The FPÖ has been in first place in the polls for a year now. If there were new elections, then it's likely that the FPÖ would emerge the winner. That's probably the only reason why the ÖVP is perhaps not interested in holding elections now, preferring to wait out the crisis. They might even be prepared to accept a new chancellor candidate from the SPÖ, because it's likely that the mainstream parties would suffer a massive defeat. The government likely wants to make it through the next two years in the hope that the overall political situation will have changed by then, and the crisis will have passed.

**Under Faymann, Austria introduced a restrictive refugee policy. What direction do you think it's going to go in now?**

I would assume that if there were to be a change of course, it would be in the direction of isolationism, or more controls. That has to do with different events. The extremely strong showing of the Freedom Party in the presidential election was seen as a warning that many people in the country do not support a welcome culture for refugees. There are voices across all the parties trying to signal security.

I cannot imagine that consensus can be built now by going down a different path. In Vienna there have been several cases of crimes and attacks, similar to those in Cologne on New Year's Eve, that have received a lot of attention from the media. Given the current atmosphere, I don't see any efforts to run contrary to the current course. You can see it in the discussions about border controls at the Brenner Pass. Austria is taking a tough line, trying to coordinate with the southern and eastern European states because that's now where it sees its allies. There's also relatively strong criticism being leveled at German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

*Reinhard C. Heinisch is a professor of Austrian Politics in Comparative European Perspective at the University of Salzburg. He is also the chairman of the Austrian Political Science Association.*

*Interview: Helena Baers*

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