
AUSTRIA SHIFTS FURTHER TO THE RIGHT WITH HARDLINE ASYLUM POLICY

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20.04.2018

Deutsche Welle (19 April 2018)

Austria's far-right FPÖ is still adjusting to its new role in government, moderating its language but not its positions. The party's anti-immigrant stance still seems to resonate with many people in the country.

Austrian Interior Minister Herbert Kickl, a member of Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) who was once notorious for his provocative language, has become almost unrecognizably tame. On Wednesday, he presented the country's new asylum law to journalists in a sober, factual press conference. The new legislation, Kickl said, closes loopholes in the asylum process, just as the government promised it would do. "We want a restrictive asylum policy," he said.

Only once did Kickl revert to his old self when he said he hoped those seeing integration through rose colored glasses would soon come to their senses. In the past, Kickl's talent as a polemicist had him writing speeches and coining catchy phrases for former FPÖ leader Jörg Haider. And his knack for controversial slogans like "Homeland instead of Islam" and "Occident under Christian control" helped his party's current leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, win one election after another.

After years in the opposition, the FPÖ joined with Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in December as junior partners in a coalition government. Both the party and Kickl are still getting used to this new role as they seek to tone down the hardline rhetoric that helped put them in power. In January, Kickl drew backlash for demanding asylum seekers be "concentrated" in one place. Since then, he has become more cautious with his words. That restraint has not extended to his policies, however. The FPÖ has always focused on migration and asylum issues, and now many Austrians regard the party's tough stance no longer as extreme but appropriate. Kickl's announcement that the country's asylum law will be made much tougher barely made headlines in Austria.

Quick wins

Vienna-based political consultant Thomas Hofer told DW he thinks the government "is doing the right thing judging by prevailing public opinion." There's further evidence to support his analysis. Austria's opposition is conspicuously silent, possibly because the country is doing what some states within Germany are already doing, including forcing asylum-seekers to hand over their cash on arrival and analyzing geodata saved on their smart phones to reconstruct their travel routes.

Requesting Austrian hospitals and doctors to report how long asylum-seekers are undergoing

treatment, however, seems to be a more controversial issue. The Austrian Medical Chamber has warned that divulging such information could breach doctor-patient confidentiality.

Other than that, criticism has remained muted, even after Kickl demanded a bold step be taken in European asylum law last week by saying he wants no new asylum applications to be made on European soil. This demand, too, will probably gain the backing of most Austrians. A study on the parliamentary elections in October 2017 showed that ÖVP and FPÖ supporters in particular care most about migration and integration issues.

Accordingly, the new ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government swiftly went about addressing this policy area within the first few months in power. Aside from a tougher stance on asylum seekers, the government plans to ban headscarves for girls in kindergarten and primary school and it has drastically cut the integration budget. "These are quick wins for the government," said Hofer. "It appeals to both parties' clientele."

A shift to the right

In 1993, policies like these would not have found much support. Back then, the former FPÖ leader Haider initiated an "Austria First" petition listing 12 demands, including a call to immediately stop all immigration. Austria's Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the ÖVP fiercely rejected the petition, and some 250,000 demonstrators took to the streets to protest against Haider and the FPÖ. It was Austria's largest post-war protest.

Ultimately, only 8 percent of the electorate backed Haider's petition — a major defeat. Today, some of the policies outlined in that document are already in place, and the government intends to go further. It plans to open classes for students who don't speak German well enough, for instance. "The FPÖ has managed to get all its proposals implemented," said Hofer.

During last year's election campaign Sebastian Kurz's ÖVP notably shifted to the right. So much in fact that the far-right FPÖ began urging voters to "stick to the original" on its campaign posters.

Austria's young chancellor underwent a radical transformation from centrism to the right in the summer of 2015, when large numbers of asylum seekers were entering the country. Serving as the country's foreign minister, he had initially stressed the importance of a "welcome culture." In 2013, he rejected an FPÖ bill in parliament proposing a Burqa ban, dismissing the move as reflecting an "artificial debate."

Yet later on, he became the political antagonist to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's open door refugee policy. And in 2017, Kurz played an important part in pushing through Austria's burqa ban, which, incidentally, was passed by the country's then grand coalition led by SPÖ Chancellor Christian Kern. "Austria's entire political spectrum shifted to the right, including the Social Democrats" after Haider's unsuccessful petition in 1993, said Hofer.

A stable coalition?

There still are many in Kurz's ÖVP who have major issues with the FPÖ. But so far, only Austria's influential state governors, such as Tyrol's Günther Platter, have publicly commented on the FPÖ.

Austria's government has remained silent even though FPÖ members in the coalition have provoked one scandal after another, including when it emerged that party members belonged to fraternities with songbooks containing anti-Semitic lyrics.

"Granted, the ÖVP will occasionally be appalled by the FPÖ. But maintaining a harmonious working relationship will remain a priority," said Hofer. And both parties certainly see eye-to-eye when it comes Austria's tough migration policy, an issue where they can demonstrate their shared worldview. Chancellor Kurz has also announced future reforms in other areas, including social policy, a topic where the ÖVP and FPÖ traditionally target a different audiences. The far-right party generally advocates on behalf of the "common man", while the conservatives tend to favor the wealthy. These reforms will show just how stable the coalition really is, and whether the former FPÖ rabble-rousers really become more moderate.

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