



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Austria is following the European shift to the right in the elections, but how far will it go in this regard?



The severe **flooding** in Austria has briefly interrupted campaigning ahead of next week's parliamentary elections, but major political events will soon overshadow the floods.

On Sunday, 29 September, the far-right will in all likelihood become the strongest political party in Austria for the first time since WW2.

One week before the **election**, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has a stable, but narrow, lead over the now ruling conservatives from the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the third-strongest Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

The rise of the far-right and its leader Herbert Kickl is expected to be the biggest historic shift in Austrian politics, although the country already has experience with their participation in government, both at the regional level and within the conservative coalition in the federal government.

The picture in the forthcoming elections on Sunday is unlikely to differ significantly from that in June, when Austrians **voted** for the European Parliament. Then the far-right FPÖ received the most votes with less than 1 per cent, ahead of the conservative ÖVP.

Even though the three largest Austrian parties are close to each other and will each win 20–26% in the parliamentary elections, the majority of Austrians will vote for right-wing policies.

Deep roots

The far-right candidate Kickl thus continues a series of election victories from the same political spectrum across Europe. His rise, as well as that of his party, confirm the stable and reliable growth of far-right forces in Europe, following similar results and trends in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France.

Unlike the rest of the European right-wing populist family, the FPÖ traces its roots back to the 1950s, when the party was founded by Nazi functionaries and SS officers from the Third Reich era.

Kickl himself entered politics, inspired by the charisma of his compatriot from the southern province of Carinthia, Jörg Haider. During his career, the FPÖ achieved its current level. He is a role model for most right-wing populists in Europe.

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Of course, anti-immigration policy is at the heart of the FPÖ's platform and its greatest hope in next week's elections. Kickl and his colleagues promised in their August **programme** to make Austria a "fortress" against immigration, frequently portraying themselves as Europe's guardians against the influx of new immigrants.

All the previous restrictive mechanisms against migrants seen in Europe can be found in the FPÖ platform: reducing asylum applications to zero, swift deportation of all illegal immigrants, favouring 'homogeneity' over diversity, and preferential treatment of Austrians, not migrants, in the social sphere.

"Our goal has to be to carve out the healthy seed of asylum from the rotten fruit of mass migration," said Kickl in the campaign.

Another Orbán at the head of the EU

With his appointment as head of the Austrian government, the EU would have another Viktor Orbán in its ranks, as Kickl himself has stated that the Hungarian prime minister is very close to him in terms of his policies and beliefs.

This would mean a new serious obstacle for the functioning of the EU, as the FPÖ does not believe in solid European integration; it prefers the union of "nations" to the system of shared institutions on which the EU is based today.

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The EU scepticism of the Austrian far-right is most evident in the FPÖ's opposition to the Union's support for Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression.

From the first day of the Russian attack on Ukraine, they insisted that neither Austria nor Europe should confront Putin too much, seeking refuge in Austria's military neutrality and the fact that the country is not a member of NATO.

Such a policy further characterises the FPÖ as a pro-Russian element in Austrian politics, which is nothing new. One of the most convincing confirmations of the Austrian far-right's tendency towards Russia was the arrival of Vladimir Putin in 2018 at the **wedding** of Karin Kneissl, who was appointed as foreign minister by the FPÖ in the conservative government at the time.

Difficult to achieve coalition government

However, Kickl's far-right wing will find it difficult to gather enough allies to form and lead a new government. Their extremist positions on many issues distance potential partners, and Herbert Kickl rejects the possibility that he could give parliamentary support to another group to form a government along the lines of the Dutch model.

Another factor complicating the FPÖ's plans to form a government is the President of Austria, 80-year-old Alexander Van der Bellen of the Greens, who, contrary to the tradition of giving the mandate to form a government to the strongest party, has announced that he will place his trust in those forces that stand for values or democracy, and the European Union.



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Herbert Kickl and his FPÖ do not belong to this group of which they are aware. The party leader has already declared that he will call himself the "Volkskanzler" (people's chancellor) and continue the fight against the mainstream parties if he does not win the chancellorship.

If the current poll results are confirmed in next Sunday's elections, the coalition of the currently governing conservatives and their liberal government partner, the NEOS Party, together with the Social Democratic SPÖ party, have the best chance of winning.

With this three-party alliance Austria would certainly remain on a strong pro-EU course, especially in strategic policies regarding Ukraine, the green transition, and energy. But regardless of the fact that there will be no far-right in this government, its migration policy will remain firm, even rigid.

Apart from the prevailing trend of tightening regulations on migrants in all EU member states, the pressure regarding the reception of migrants and asylum seekers will be even greater after Sunday's elections, from potentially the strongest party in the country, belonging to the extreme right.