

Austria's far-right Freedom Party regains national momentum

By EMILY SCHULTHEIS an hour ago





BERLIN (AP) — Nearly four years ago, Austria's populist far-right Freedom Party was ousted from the national coalition government over a major corruption scandal, and voters punished it at the ballot box.

But the party's nearly double-digit gains in Sunday's regional election in the province of Lower Austria confirmed a political trend on the national level. In recent months, the Freedom Party has regained its previous momentum — and, according to recent polls, is now the strongest party in the small Alpine nation.

In Lower Austria it won 24.2% of the vote, up 9.4 percentage points from the last state-level election in 2018. The conservative People's Party, meanwhile, which leads the national government, lost its long-held absolute majority in the region and dropped 9.7 percentage points to 39.9%.

Nationally, the Freedom Party's growth is even more pronounced. The party has led national polls since this fall, averaging around 27% in most surveys ahead of the center-left Social Democrats with around 25% and the People's Party at around 21%.

Founded in the 1950s, the Freedom Party was led by former Nazis in the postwar period. It adopted the populist, nativist right-wing rhetoric it's known for today in the 1980s under its charismatic former leader, Joerg Haider. It became one of the first and most successful populist right-wing parties in Europe and has served in Austria's governing coalition twice, in the early 2000s and from 2017 to 2019.

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Experts say the party has managed these gains by applying its populist, Austria-first rhetoric to the various crises hitting Europe in recent months and years. Its leaders criticize European Union sanctions against Russia, stress the impact of inflation and rising energy prices, express skepticism about vaccines and pandemic-related restrictions, and hold hardline positions on migration.

“You have two issues where the (Freedom Party) ... distinguishes itself from all other parties: the coronavirus and the Ukraine war,” said Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, a political scientist at the University of Vienna. “And then there’s the return of the migration issue, where the (Freedom Party) is also most favorably positioned to reap all the benefits.”

“I think those are all the ingredients you need for a pretty good electoral result,” he added.

The far-right party has also benefited from the troubles of Austria’s other major parties. The governing People’s Party, in particular, has been embroiled in a long-standing corruption scandal that has made the Freedom Party’s own past issues with graft less salient.

“The Freedom Party always advances or reaches larger groups of voters when there’s a thematic and personality vacuum in the two traditional parties, the People’s Party and the Social Democrats,” said Peter Hajek, a Vienna-based pollster.

Back in 2017, the Freedom Party won nearly 26% in parliamentary elections and became the junior governing partner of the People’s Party under then-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

But in May 2019, secret video recordings emerged of the Freedom Party’s leader appearing to offer favors to a purported Russian investor in a villa on the Spanish island of Ibiza. The so-called “Ibiza affair” [brought down the governing coalition](#) and triggered elections in which the Freedom Party dropped to 16%.

After that, the People’s Party formed a coalition with the Greens, a government that has been in place since early 2020.

Since then, however, the Freedom Party’s rhetoric on the pandemic, Ukraine and migration has helped it appeal to those who supported in the past, slowly but steadily regaining its previous position in the polls.

What’s more, ongoing allegations of corruption within the governing People’s Party have brought many previously disaffected voters back to the Freedom Party.

In 2021, [Kurz resigned](#) after he became the central figure in a corruption probe. Since then, investigators have released a steady trickle of revelations about Kurz and his close allies,

which continues to harm the image of Chancellor Karl Nehammer and the rest of the People's Party.

“Now there are voters from the conservative camp who are disappointed because they feel betrayed” by the People's Party, Hajek said.

The Freedom Party's own past scandals didn't seem to bother Lower Austria voters on Sunday. Its top candidate, Udo Landbauer, had resigned his post in 2018 over [his ties to a far-right fraternity](#) that used an antisemitic songbook.

Whether it can maintain its current strength until Austria's next elections, currently slated for 2024, remains to be seen. If it does, it could join other far-right parties around Europe, including the Brothers of Italy and the Sweden Democrats, in gaining — or, in the Freedom Party's case, regaining — greater influence.

Hajek, the pollster, said the Freedom Party's position feels like the latest iteration in an electoral pattern for the party: “It happens every 10 or 15 years: the rise of the Freedom Party, the peak, the fall; the rise, the peak, the fall,” he said. “It's always the same.”