



## Freedom Party of Austria Walks Out on Zelensky

Lawmakers from the conservative Freedom Party of Austria, otherwise known as the FPÖ, walked out of the lower house of Austria's Parliament during a speech by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Zelensky spoke to the chamber via video link on March 30, expressing his gratitude to Austria for its humanitarian aid and help with clearing land mines in Ukraine.

Days before Zelensky's address on Thursday, the FPÖ had cautioned that it would stage some form of opposition against the Ukrainian authoritarian leader. Thus, during Zelensky's speech, the FPÖ lawmakers attended the start of the speech walked out in protest, stating that the speech breached Austria's principle of neutrality.



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"It is sad that the FPÖ is the only party in parliament that takes our ever-lasting neutrality seriously, thereby also standing up for peace," FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl lamented in a statement on Tuesday.

Before walking out of the chamber, the lawmakers placed small placards on their desks showcasing the party logo and phrases such as "space for neutrality" or "space for peace."

On January 29 this year, the FPÖ emerged as the clear victor in the election in Lower Austria, the party's best result in the country's largest state to date. The only major political party represented in Austria's parliament protesting compulsory Covid-19 shots, mass migration, and sanctions against Russia gathered 24.2 percent of the vote, a rise of 9.4 percent over the previous election, propelling the party to become the second-largest political force in the state.

Although the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) ended up as the leading party in the vote, its share of the vote fell more than any party represented in Lower Austria's Landtag, plunging roughly 10 percentage points to 39.9 percent and losing its absolute majority. These figures marked the ÖVP worst result in the state since 1945.

As the ÖVP failed to get the necessary majority to govern, it joined forces with the FPÖ to govern Austria's largest state. With the FPÖ topping national polls, the coalition's terms — which entail a compensation package for draconian Covid measures enacted in the past couple of years — reveal that the FPÖ may lead future conservative political forces. Both parties unveiled their agreement on March 17.

Also, the Covid-19 compensation package, which amounts to €30 million, is poised to repay citizens who had been unconstitutionally fined under the Covid-19 lockdowns. "Lower Austria will be the first country to make up for the damage caused by the Corona policy," declared Udo Landbauer, the FPÖ Lower Austrian leader.

The FPÖ's website announced that this "agreement represents a fundamentally new course in Lower



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Austria's politics." The party's national leader, Herbert Kickl, commented:

Business as usual was not an option for the future of the people. Lower Austria's FPÖ has therefore brought its strength into the negotiation process and ensured that from now on the interests of its own population are at the center of the state's policy in all areas of politics.

Admittedly, Kickl's leadership seemed to be a driving force for his party. His animated speeches and vocal opposition to mass migration as well as stringent Covid-19 lockdowns have found their ground among many Austrians. *The Vienna Times* even quoted one political scientist as speculating that he "would not exclude the possibility of Kickl becoming chancellor after the next elections."

Of the five parties in parliament, the FPÖ presently holds the third-largest number of seats in the lower house. It also has a slight lead in opinion polls over the opposition Social Democrats that govern together with ÖVP and the left-wing Greens.

Mikl-Leitner, the regional ÖVP leader, remarked that the coalition agreement came after a "hard struggle to find a common path for Lower Austria."

Moreover, both parties would work toward a stronger integration policy, as it is vital that "everyone, no matter where they come from, obeys the law, speaks our language, accepts and respects our values and culture," said Mikl-Leitner.

The Central European country is poised to hold its next national elections in 2024. The next regional vote in Salzburg on April 23 will prove if Lower Austria's precedence will be followed.

Austria, a European Union (EU) member, works with NATO in various capacities and the country has been increasingly included in the EU's security framework.

Nonetheless, the country claims that its neutrality prevents military involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Although it has said that it backs Ukraine politically, it cannot provide Ukraine with arms in its fight against the Russians.

Such a stance has earned Austria the label of "free rider" by critics who resent the country's non-NATO membership status and neutrality.

According to an August report by *Al-Jazeera* last year, eighty percent of Austrians back staying out of NATO as the idea of neutrality remains popular among left-wing and conservative politicians.

On March 7, Chancellor Karl Nehammer tweeted that Austrian neutrality is "not up for debate" whereas the leader of the Social Democrats, Pamela Rendi-Wagner, has often stated that Vienna's neutrality is "non-negotiable."

"After the horrible experience of two World Wars and the Nazi terror regime, neutrality is deeply rooted in the mindset of the Austrian population," Wolfgang Pusztai, a security and policy analyst, said in an interview with *Al Jazeera*.

Neutrality has long been linked to Austria's freedom since the 1950s.

After World War II, Austria was divided into zones of occupation. In 1955, the United States, the U.K., France, and the USSR signed the Austrian State Treaty mandating Austria to maintain permanent neutrality and function as a buffer zone between the West and the East.



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Over the years, this foreign-policy stance has helped Austria maintain relatively low defense costs and integrate into the West's economic architecture. Concurrently, Austria has also benefitted from trade with the Soviet Union and later Russia.

As the first Western country to sign a natural-gas agreement with the USSR in 1968, Austria has still been reliant on Russian hydrocarbons. Considering Austria's gas dependence on Russia, the country has vested interests in not overly provoking Russian President Vladimir Putin's government in Moscow.

Besides, Austria's longstanding neutrality can be attributable to the fact that its neighbors are fellow EU-members, as well as Switzerland, and the micro-state of Liechtenstein.

However, the country's top leadership has maintained that its official neutral stance does not equate to passivity in wake of geopolitical circumstances.

Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg previously stated that Vienna is "helping [Ukraine] on a large scale but not with war munition and I think help for Ukraine cannot only be reduced to war munition."

Also, together with 140 other UN member-states, Austria voted to back the March 2022 General Assembly [resolution](#) condemning Russian actions in Ukraine.



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