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# **Austria: The rise of respectable fascism? - “There is a real danger that the capital city becomes the major focus for anti-fascist struggle, while the main struggle lies in the provinces”**

Monday 4 July 2016, by [SABATINI Joe](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2016).

**Joe Sabatini reflects on the social, demographic and ideological issues behind the Austrian Presidential Election, and considers strategies to oppose the far right.**

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On 22 May the Austrian electorate came within a percentage point of electing Europe’s first fascist head of state since the 1930s. On 1 July, the results of the second round of voting were annulled by the Constitutional Court of Austria, requiring the election’s second round to be re-held.[1]

With the spread of the far-right across Europe and the political system in Britain reeling after Brexit, Austria is providing a mirror that reveals a number of disturbing tendencies that are becoming all too familiar.

During the first round of voting, Norbert Hofer, the candidate for the Freedom Party (FPÖ) secured over 30 percent of the vote, ousting Austria’s two historic parties of government (the Social Democrats, SPÖ, and the conservative ÖVP)[2]. The sequel was a presidential run-off between Hofer and Alexander van der Bellen, an independent whose campaign was supported by the Green Party.

The events which are still unfolding have been long in the making, and reflect the European crisis of social democracy, and the failure of 1990s model of third way politics to answer the needs of working class people today.[3]

## **The political strategy of the Austrian Far Right**

Although the Austrian president is nominally ceremonial, the 1929 constitution includes powers to

dissolve parliament, and appoint the chancellor and cabinet.[4]

For this reason winning the presidency is part of a 'march of the institutions', in which the FPÖ is targeting the presidency, in order to force a showdown with the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition, and call an election on their terms.

For the FPÖ, a Hofer presidency will act as a springboard to hand executive power to the party's leader Heinz-Christian Strache.[5]

When the FPÖ lost the election, the general view was that this provided the Austrians much needed breathing space, but as we shall see, there is no coherent strategy to tackle them. This means that the momentum remained with the FPÖ, who launched a legal challenge claiming that there were irregularities with the postal votes. With the constitutional court upholding the challenge, Austria is for the first time declaring a complete national re-election that overturns the original vote.[6]

### **De-nazification and the roots of the FPÖ**

We should be in no doubt that the FPÖ is a party with its roots in Austria's Nazi past. Its first leader was a former SS officer, and its core membership has consisted of layers of Austrian society that were not de-nazified after the war.[7]

In 1946 there were 518,000 registered members of the Nazi party, of whom 18 percent were party members before the Anschluss of 1938 (when Hitler annexed Austria).[8] In 1948 there was an amnesty for most former Nazis, and by 1955 all proceedings to prosecute Nazis were halted. The FPÖ was founded the following year.

What we are seeing today is the result of a fascist party that has been allowed to build up a social base in Austrian society that combines several demographic groups who came together in the presidential election.

### **The social and demographic base for the FPÖ**

Analysis of the breakdown of voting points to four main pillars of support for Hofer: rural voters, older voters, workers in unskilled occupations and young males.[9]

Firstly, and most strongly, there is the country vote. Austria is largely an alpine country, with strong local communities that have evolved from peasant forms of production.[10] In tourist areas such as the Tirol, there is limited penetration of multinational influence, and many hotels are multi-generational family businesses, with a strong patriarchal flavour.[11]

The same goes for what remains a powerful agricultural sector based on family businesses, which, in large part, act as a supply chain for the forestry industry.[12]

The second strand of support comes from older people, and this reflects voting patterns across Europe, not least as we have seen with the EU Referendum in the UK.

The third is based on levels of education, with workers who have had elementary education being most likely to vote for Hofer, and people with a university education being solidly behind van der Bellen. The fact that Austria's unemployment is the highest since the war, albeit at 5.8%, and its GDP was 0.9% in 2015, should be factored in which thinking about this group.[13] Although

protected against neoliberalism to a greater extent than the leave voters in de-industrial areas of England and Wales, there is a similar pattern of voting in a simple two-way contest, and this reflects a similar fracturing of social forces.

The final demographic that turned out for Hofer were males under 29. Over 60% of all young males voted for Hofer, while the largest age and gender group to vote for van der Bellen were females below the age of 29. So far I have failed to notice any meaningful attempt to understand the gender politics at work here, and it also is the only serious difference I could find with the UK's EU referendum, which did not evidence a majority of young males voting Brexit across all geographies and social categories.

## **Migration and ideology in Austria**

As with the rise of the 'populist' right elsewhere, immigration is an immediate issue, which the FPÖ has yoked to ideological themes that are deeply rooted in the country's history. Before exploring this, it is important that we theorise the rise of the far right in the current conjuncture in terms of general trends across developed capitalist states, and issues that are specific to each state and its history.

Austria's is a landlocked country that lies along a number of ethnic, geopolitical and religious fault-lines. As a nation it has only existed in its current form, as a majority speaking German catholic country, between the wars and after 1955.[14]

Questions about the relationship between Austria and Germany are complex, as are the relations with Italy, who annexed parts of the Tirol after the First World War.

To the east there are two sharp cultural divides, between Germanic and Slavic and Hungarian speakers, and with countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire.[15]

In the minds of nationalist Austrians, they are on the front line in a clash of civilisations. This was key to the ideological formation of Hitler, who grew up in, and witnessed first-hand, the political disintegration of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian empire.

Nonetheless, it would be conceding too much to the FPÖ if we thought that migration and cultural history were sufficient to explain their rise. Rather we need to understand the failure of the main political parties in terms of the political and social system they have presided over. In particular, we have to factor in the failure of social democracy, and see Austria as a dangerous instance of a wider trend.

## **The failure of Red-Black consensus politics**

Since 1955 the government in Austria has been dominated by the Conservative ÖVP and the social democratic SPÖ, who have long ruled in coalitions – often with each other.

The social system that evolved under this political settlement was similar to Greece, in that people seeking public sector jobs joined one of the political parties, and the country has one of the largest public sectors in Europe.

With Austria's late entry into the EU (1995) it has progressively neoliberalised, but the public sector remains strong, and there is a social cleavage between those who benefit directly, through jobs and

services, and those who do not and feel excluded.

As a party that can position itself ideologically as true Austrians, while playing on its outsider status, the FPÖ are able to mobilise the votes of people who feel excluded by the patronage system.

This is a combination that is being pursued by parties like UKIP who trade on being anti-establishment, while claiming the national heritage from those self-same elites they claim to oppose. As we have seen from Brexit, this has allowed for the popular expression of conservative rural voters aligning with urban voters in areas that have low levels of investment, or skills. A fascist victory in Austria would be the greatest step forward to date in the development of these trends.

However fascism is never solely to blame for its rise, and attention has to be focused on its opponents, which includes looking at the opposition from above, the mainstream liberal and social democrats, and from below.

## **Responses and strategies**

The first point to note, in terms of the perspective from above, is that while those reading UK and German newspapers would pick up on the sense of alarm, inside Austria the main tone is one of suppression and denial.

The main left learning national newspaper, *Der Standard*, is arguing this line in its op-eds. At the time of the election, Günter Traxler, who is one of their main columnists (and a kind of Polly Toynbee figure), used his regular column to say that the only group claiming that the country is split is the FPÖ. In the article he claims that Van der Bellen should deny this, create unity and help the country to move on.[16] The article concluded that this should be done in the name of 'Austria's humanitarian traditions.'

This is a disastrous line, which flies in the face of reporting by the Munich based *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which has tracked the demographic splits and grassroots tensions in Austrian society.[17]

It is also the line that is most likely to influence the SPÖ who most recently went into coalition with the FPÖ in the Burgenland province (yes – social democrats and fascists in a provincial government!).

Anyone with a sense of history will see how these developed echo the SPÖ's strategic failure in 1934, when they failed to back a workers' uprising against the proto-fascist Dolfuss regime (which paved the way to the Anschluss).[18] All the signs are that the liberals and social democrats are committing to a repetition of history as tragedy.

The view from below is a minoritarian one, but sections of the far-left in German speaking countries are calling for an '*Aufstand der Anständigen*,' or 'assault on the establishment'. [19] This is being supported by Marx21 in Germany and neue Linkswende in Austria. This would involve demonstrations, organising within trade unions, and unmasking Hofer's connections with far-right student organisations, along with his wearing of a blue flower that signifies Nazi loyalties. A key part of this strategy would be to split those conservatives who want union with Germany against those who want Austria to remain separate.[20]

Within the Austrian left this debate is being played out, with some calls in the SPÖ to follow the British Labour Party and elect a Corbyn figure.[21] Whether this can work will depend on whether there is a strong enough left inside the party, and whether this could win back the low skilled

workers in Vienna and other cities.

Beyond the SPÖ the left is historically weak, and comparable to the British far left, though in Graz,[22] the Stalinist Communist Party polls around 20%, and have shown some recovery of support since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As with the Brexit vote, there is a real danger that the capital city becomes the major focus for anti-fascist struggle, while the main struggle lies in the provinces. Looking at the voting breakdown, it is clear that all the regional cities like Innsbrück, Klagenfurt and Graz van der Bellen voted overwhelmingly for van der Bellen. Unlike the British cities that voted Remain, these are nestled within large rural areas that voted for Hofer. They could act as regional hubs from which anti-fascist activity that could radiate into the heartlands of the FPÖ support.

The other line of attack would need to be against the sexism which is so critical to the ideology of the Austrian *Heimat*, and the strict division of labour between genders in the economy and society. Mobilisation of the women aged under 29 who voted overwhelmingly for van der Bellen, will be critical in articulating a progressive vision to counter the FPÖ.

Combining these various lines into a coherent strategy will be a critical task in the coming period.

## **Conclusions**

It clear that the 50:50 split in the election reflects the social, political and ideological divisions that runs deep in Austria.

As with Britain we are seeing this being cast in terms of a pro-and anti-EU agenda. Van der Bellen is positioning himself as a pro-European, while the FPÖ are joining other far right parties in reflecting [rejecting?] the EU.

The main danger in terms of working class voters, is that they are fragmenting into a diminishing section of SPÖ supporters, who are in the public sector, urban young and educated voters (mainly female) who are being drawn into a defence of the EU and liberalism, and a large body of unskilled workers who are being drawn to the FPÖ.

Breaking out of this will be the challenge for the left if Austria is to avoid the slide towards fascism, or an ever deepening crisis in its welfare state model.

For the rest of Europe and Britain in particular, we should be following Austria carefully.

**Joe Sabatini**

*Notes*

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian\\_presidential\\_election,\\_2016](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian_presidential_election,_2016)

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/24/austrian-far-right-wins-first-round-presidential-election-norbert-hofer>

[3] <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/10/are-austrian-fpo-party-really-nazis>

[4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution\\_of\\_Austria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Austria)

- [5] <https://www.marx21.de/oesterreich-zurueck-in-die-dreissigerjahre/>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/austrian-presidential-election-result-overturned-and-must-be-held-again-hofer-van-der-bellen>
- [7] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_Party\\_of\\_Austria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Party_of_Austria)
- [8] <http://www.entnazifizierung.at/denazification-in-austria/>
- [9] <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wahl-in-oesterreich-hofers-anhaenger-jung-maennlich-aengstlich-1.3003139>
- [10] <http://countrystudies.us/austria/55.htm>
- [11] <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1016/S1057-1922%2807%2913012-2>
- [12] [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/supply-wood/austria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/analysis/external/supply-wood/austria_en.pdf)
- [13] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/au.html>
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- [15] <http://www.historytoday.com/walter-leitsch/1683-siege-vienna>
- [16] <http://derstandard.at/2000037699811/Wahlentscheidung-Die-Zerreissprobe>
- [17] <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wahl-in-oesterreich-das-kleine-oesterreich-sendet-ein-signal-in-die-grosse-welt-1.3002288-2>
- [18] <https://www.marx21.de/oesterreich-zurueck-in-die-dreissigerjahre/>
- [19] <https://www.marx21.de/oesterreich-zurueck-in-die-dreissigerjahre/>
- [20] <http://linkswende.org/grossdemo-19-mai-wir-koennen-norbert-hofer-entlarven-und-demontieren/>
- [21] <https://www.marx21.de/oesterreich-zurueck-in-die-dreissigerjahre/>
- [22] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist\\_Party\\_of\\_Austria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_of_Austria)

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**P.S.**

\* rs21 on July 3, 2016:

<https://rs21.org.uk/2016/07/03/austria-the-rise-of-respectable-fascism/>