

Far Right in Austria. We Are Living in Dangerous Times

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In last couple of years, across European continent, we are witnessing steady rise of radical right. One of the most important examples of this phenomenon is Austria, where radical right became part of governing coalition after elections held in 2017. There are many signals that this situation is not something temporarily, but we are faced with fundamental political shift that will have lasting effects. One of the most important consequences of this process is normalisation of radical right whose presence in governments of EU member states stopped being cause for worry for European establishment.

We can no longer interpret the gains made by right-wing radical parties in Europe as sporadic phenomena restricted to a few individual countries. They represent a Europe-wide phenomenon. In the last fifteen years the proportion of seats held by right-wing radical parties in the European Parliament has more than doubled.

There are three new developments to observe in the run-up to the next European Parliament elections. First, in the 2017/2018 national elections in EU Member States radical right-wing parties increased their absolute number of votes from 10.3 to 22.14 million – more than twofold. [\[1\]](#) Second, great efforts have been undertaken by right-wing inter-party diplomacy to unite the majority of their MEPs, up to now divided among three groups in European Parliament: European Conservatives and Reformists, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy and Europe of Nations and Freedom. And third, in view of the proceedings against Poland and Hungary initiated for violation of the EU treaties, it is not impossible that the MEPs of the ruling parties of respective countries, Law and Justice and Fidesz, will be eager to join such a group.

Austrian example

Some aspects of the Austrian “case” can be considered paradigmatic for the radical right’s road to power. The formation of the joint ÖVP-FPÖ government represents a caesura in the post-war history of Austria. Nevertheless we should note that two-thirds of the ÖVP’s (Austrian People’s Party) and FPÖ’s (Freedom Party of Austria) gains in the 15 October 2017 elections came from two right-wing populist parties that no longer ran candidates. Voter migration from the opposition to the parties that formed the new rightist government amounts to no more than 3.5%.

Therefore, the generally established rightward shift has been mainly caused by this relatively small electoral shift. Nevertheless, the effect is indeed a resounding one. The SPÖ (Social Democratic Party of Austria) suddenly no longer occupied the post of head of government, which it had done for 41 of the 47 years since Bruno Kreisky’s electoral victory in 1970. The FPÖ has entered government again. The Greens, having been represented in Parliament for 31 years, have lost their seats. And the ÖVP and FPÖ, with 53% of votes, have 62% of seats in Parliament, which brings them close to the two-thirds majority needed to enact constitutional changes. This could be the beginning of a reconstruction of the whole political system of Austria’s Second Republic, which the Austrian

contemporary historian Gerhard Botz fittingly calls an “illiberal-neoliberal turning point”. [2]

In political science populism is defined as a ‘thin-centred ideology’. The FPÖ, however, is a highly ideologised party. What is populist is its political style. In contrast to the year 2000, when under Jörg Haider it entered government with the ÖVP for the first time, it has moved further to the right. According to research published by the Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands (Archive of the Austrian Resistance), 20 of the FPÖ’s 51 members of parliament belong to German-nationalist fraternities. [3]

The FPÖ is frequently identified with the *national camp* that existed in the interwar years. The concept is paradoxical. The nation to which the “national” camp in Austria feels committed is not its own but the German nation. In the party programme established in 2011 Austrians whose mother tongue is German are addressed as members of a “German cultural and ethnic community”. [4] The German-national outlook links the FPÖ to the subculture of the German fraternities, traditionalist clubs, and new-right periodicals, which constitute the sounding board of extreme right and neo-Nazi agitation in the country and a recruiting ground for their intellectual elites. [5]

In continuity with periods of Nazism and de-Nazification, German nationalism today still represents a sector of Austria’s elites and, moreover, today it is the reflection of a growing influence of German capital in the country’s economy and culture. 27.4% of university professors teaching in Austria come from Germany. At the University of Vienna they make up nearly 40%. [6] “Internationalisation among university staff means ‘Germanisation’ in very many cases”, Universitätenkonferenz (Uniko) researchers recently noted.

A precarious equilibrium

If the government’s ideological programme is disproportionately determined by the FPÖ, then the neoliberal orthodoxy of the programme’s chapter on economic and financial policy has the handwriting of the ÖVP on it. The editorial writer of the pro-corporate, conservative daily Die Presse is correct when he writes that the government programme corresponds to “what can be expected of a right-of-centre government: less state in entrepreneurial competition, more state in public security. The turquoise-blue government is not out of step here with the mainstream of European governments led by conservatives.” [7] This means a clear division of labour in the regime: “more state” is managed by the FPÖ, “less state” by the ÖVP.

In terms of social structure, the FPÖ’s electorate is like that of other comparable right-wing parties in Europe: it wins majorities among workers and lower-level employees, those with obligatory primary and vocational education, and people in former industrial regions outside urban agglomerations. This part of the population, which has experienced the developments of recent years as “overwhelmingly negative” and conditions in the country as “rather unjust”, [8] can only look forward to a further worsening of their quality of life from the deregulation and cuts announced in the government programme.

The government is hoping that economic growth will allow it to administer its planned interventions into the social security systems in gradual doses so that its effects will not immediately be felt and will not simultaneously hit all those affected.

And what about the left?

The traditional workers’ party, the SPÖ, lost 11% of its votes to the FPÖ. Despite this the SPÖ retained its overall vote share because it could compensate these votes by a gain of former Green votes. [9] But this is precisely the problem: To the extent that the SPÖ has shown little capacity to

ward off the right, it has all the more effectively damaged the left. The electoral alliance of the KPÖ (Communist Party of Austria) and the Young Greens (the former youth organisation of the Green Party) also fell victim to this effect. It had no success in a political climate mainly determined by worry over the looming right-wing coalition.

In the European context situation is partially different. The “radical left”, that is, the parties to the left of the social democrats and Greens, increased their support in the last electoral cycle from 9.4 to 10.7 million. [10] However it must be noted that at the same time the vote share of radical right parties have, as already said, more than doubled to reach more than 22 million. Are we therefore seeing a repeat of the inter-war crisis scenario of an asymmetric polarisation clearly tilted towards the right?

The radical right will have one of the strongest groups in the European Parliament. The neoliberal elites appear to be ignoring this evolution and are carrying on with the same policy that has brought European integration to its current crisis. In the face of this situation a division and fragmentation of the left would be politically irresponsible. We must all work towards the greatest possible political unity.

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P.S.

The New Right and the Old Left in South-East Europe, March 26, 2019

https://www.transform-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/the_new_right_and_the_old_left_online.pdf

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Footnotes

[1] These figures do not include the elections in Sweden that were held on 9 September. Here the Sweden Democrats were able to increase their vote share from 13% to 18%.

[2] Gerhard Botz, 'Es gibt eine neoliberale-illiberale Wende', *Der Standard*, 20 October 2017., <http://derstandard.at/2000066398076/Es-gibt-eine-illiberal-neoliberale-Wende>

[3] Kurier.at (25 October 2017), "So national wird der neue Nationalrat"
<https://kurier.at/politik/inland/fpoe-und-die-burschenschaften-so-national-wird-der-neue-nationalrat/294.000.877>

[4] Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei (FPÖ), Enacted at the federal party congress on 18 June 2011 in Graz,
https://www.fpoe.at/fileadmin/user_upload/www.fpoe.at/dokumente/2015/2011_graz_parteiprogramm_web.pdf

[5] Anton Pelinka, "Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich", *conflict & communication online*, 1/1 2002, www.cco.regener-online.de/2002_1/pdf_2002_1/pelinka.pdf

[6] Bernadette Bayrhammer, "Jeder vierte Professor ist Deutscher", *Die Presse*, 14 February 2017,
<http://diepresse.com/home/bildung/universitaet/5169827/Jeder-vierte-Professor-ist-Deutscher>

[7] Oliver Pink, "Dieser Weg wird kein linker sein" (editorial), *Die Presse*, 20 December 2017,
https://diepresse.com/home/meinung/kommentare/leitartikel/5341956/Leitartikel_Dieser-Wegwird-kein-linker-sein?from=suche.intern.portal

[8] SORA, *Wahlanalyse Nationalratswahl 2017*,
<http://strategieanalysen.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ISA-SORA-Wahlanalyse-NRW2017-2.pdf>

[9] SORA, *Nationalratswahl 2017: Wählerstromanalyse*,
<http://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen/waehlerstromanalysen/nrw17.html>

[10] These figures also without counting Sweden.