

25 years later – Austria's shift to the populist right: national characteristics of a pan-European trend

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Abstract: *The year 1995 rather coincidentally tags both the foundation of the Central European Political Science Association and the accedence of Austria, one of its founding members, to the European Union. Austria has particularly benefitted from its membership and the following EU enlargement rounds which also welcomed the other CEPSA members to the club. However, it seems that these advantages have not yet been fully appreciated, neither by a significant part of the political elite nor by the majority of the Austrian population. Increasing Euroscepticism and EU bashing can be observed during the last two and a half decades. The rise of the populist far-right, EU-hostile Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) was simultaneous. Of course, the political success of right-wing populism in combination with strong Euroscepticism has become a pan-European phenomenon since at least the last two decades. It is certainly not purely an Austrian phenomenon. Nevertheless, one can observe national differences. Since a systematic comparison of the development of right-wing populist patterns and related political trends between Austria and other CEPSA member countries would go beyond the scope of this essay, the focus of the paper is on relevant Austrian characteristics pertinent to this phenomenon.*

Keywords: *Austria, Euroscepticism, right-wing populism, far-right, political parties, political mainstream*

Preface

Back in 1995 when CEPSA was established by six Political Science Associations of the CEE region¹, Austria was the only EU member among the founding countries. The others joined the club about a decade later than Austria, most of them in 2004 with Croatia following in 2012. However, Austria was an EU newcomer in 1995. After having submitted the application for membership to the European Community in 1989 the country started official negotiations in 1993, successfully completed them within two years and joined the European Union together with Finland and Sweden the same year CEPSA was founded. Naturally, this can be seen as a mere coincidence. Nevertheless, the year 2020 does not only mark the 25th anniversary of CEPSA, but also the 25th anniversary of the EU membership of one of its founding members. Thus, it is the right time to look back and to discuss some major characteristics of the country's political development since it became an EU member 25 years ago.

While focusing on the successes of a right-wing populist to extremist party, and the subsequent shift of the Austrian political mainstream to the right during the last decades the essay highlights a still rising phenomenon which is of crucial importance not only for Austria, but for the entire CEE region and, moreover, for the EU and Europe as a whole (Cabada 2020). The political phenomenon of right-wing populism and extremism has emerged as a core concern in the (Central) European political sphere.² The (extreme) populist right has, however, not only challenged the previous transition countries, it has also troubled well consolidated, 'traditional' democracies such as those in Western Europe, given the electoral success of respective parties on both the national and the supranational level.

As regards Austria, the far-right Freedom Party has rather collapsed in the wake of the Ibiza scandal in May 2019. However, this does not mean that the country got rid of right-wing populism as a major factor influencing politics. On the contrary, some political stances of the FPÖ and to some degree the typical FPÖ political rhetoric have been adopted by the Austrian People's Party, which is currently leading a coalition government including the Greens as junior partner.

1 CEPSA was founded by political science associations from Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia. Croatia and Lithuania joined shortly after.

2 Populism is a rather vague term referring to a variety of phenomena. However, it always points at a constructed confrontation between 'the people' (conceived as a morally good force) and 'the establishment/the elites' (seen as morally bad and self-serving). It is anti-elitist and suggests that powerful minorities are working against the will of the common people and the 'nation' (Kaltwasser – Mudde 2012b). Populism appears in a twofold manner, as an ideological construct (cf. Heinisch – Holtz-Bacha – Mazzoleni 2017; Judis 2016; Kaltwasser – Mudde 2012a and 2012b; Mudde – Kaltwasser 2018) and as a distinct political style (cf. Moffitt 2016).

From positive attitudes towards the EU to populist Euroscepticism and EU bashing

Austria's EU membership can, overall, certainly be considered a success story. It began with a 66.58% vote by the Austrian population in favour of accession to the EU (Austrian Embassy Washington 2015) and continued with increased opportunities for Austria's economy. Twenty years after the country's accession to the EU a significant number of relevant studies evidenced that the Austrian economy 'profits significantly from its involvement in the growing internal market which is also reflected in the creation of jobs' (ibid.). More than two third of Austria's foreign trade in 2015 was with EU member states and exports to EU countries had tripled since 1995 (ibid.). Especially the 2004 enlargement was to the advantage of Austria, as the following quotation illustrates: 'Austrian direct investments in the region have increased from 0.5 billion Euros in 1990 to 66 billion Euros in 2012.' The latter sum represents about half of Austrian foreign direct investment (<https://www.austria.org/eu-enlargement>). Though the so-called Eastern enlargement has been particularly beneficial to Austria one needs to recall that the country had not been very supportive of this process. Though during Austria's first EU presidency in the second half of 1998 the government presented its agenda for the presidency with a clear commitment to the enlargement of the European Union (Wodak et al. 2009: 234), it eventually did not turn its verbal commitment into political reality. The essayist Karl Markus Gauss commented on this issue as follows: 'We could have been the benevolent relative in the integration of the reform states of Eastern Europe; instead, we have shortsightedly endeavoured to style ourselves as the nay-saying guards' (Gauss 1999: 177ff.) Political scientist Anton Pelinka characterised this attitude as 'being a brakeman' instead of 'being a promotor' (cf. Wodak et al. 2009: 234). The government, for example, demanded long transitional periods for the opening of the Austrian labour market, which can be seen as a populist signal principally targeted at domestic politics (Brechelmacher 2001: 155). With the exception of Hungary, the former socialist single-party states of Central Europe were not really welcome as new EU members in the opinion of the majority of Austrians (cf. Hintermann et al. 2001). Anyway, the 2007 enlargement round was also an asset in terms of economic growth: 'According to the Austrian Economic Chamber (WKÖ), the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 contribute to a yearly growth of real GDP in Austria by +0.4%' (<https://www.austria.org/eu-enlargement>). Exports from Austria to countries of the CEE region tripled between 2005 and 2015, those to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia quadrupled between 1995 and 2012 (ibid.). Apparently, during the last two and a half decades, the country has greatly benefitted from both its membership in and the further enlargement of the European Union. Despite the several crises the EU and its members have faced since the turn of

the millennium, from a macroeconomic perspective Austrian EU membership and the following enlargement rounds have had mainly positive effects on the national economy (Breuss 2020).³

Notwithstanding these favourable developments, the initially very positive attitudes of a remarkable number of both Austrian politicians and citizens towards the EU shifted rather quickly to Euroscepticism, EU-bashing and scapegoating. This process occurred in parallel to the rise of the right-wing populist, if not extremist, Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). It has to be underscored that the FPÖ is certainly not the only national populist party in the CEE region or elsewhere in Europe which has constantly opposed European Union policies (Wodak et al. 2009: vii). In fact, 'Brussels' has served as a strategically useful scapegoat for right-wing populists and right-wing extremists throughout Europe. The rise of right-wing populism in combination with Euroscepticism or EU hostility has become a pan-European phenomenon over the last 25 years. Nevertheless, one can observe both national and regional differences concerning this matter. Since a systematic comparison of respective commonalities and differences in the development of populist patterns and related political trends between Austria and other CEPSA member countries would go beyond the scope of the essay, the focus of this paper is on the specifics of the Austrian-style right-wing populism and its characteristics. In the first decade of the 21st century, the successful Austrian right-wing populist movement had also 'served as a model for other right-wing populist parties across Europe' (Wodak et al. 2009: 203). The label 'Haiderisation' (which refers to the family name of a former party leader) was used for describing protest movements 'which endorse nationalism, chauvinism, revisionism, EU-scepticism and racist, xenophobic beliefs' (ibid.).

As regards Eurosepticism it is striking that from the outset most Austrian parties' campaigns for the European Parliament elections were characterised by featuring domestic issues instead of European concerns. Moreover, Austrian interests were often pitted against European ones, and alleged threats to Austria or Austrian identity due to European policies were constructed and used as arguments by candidates (cf. Hadj-Abdou – Liebhart – Pribersky 2006). Such strategies worked well since they were (and still are) in line with some tabloid media which blamed (and still blame) 'the EU' for unpopular reforms or political measures. Such scapegoating reinforces a constructed conflict between Austrian interests and EU interests in a broad field of policies. What is more, it serves populist rhetoric strategies which continuously characterise the EU as overly bureaucratic, unresponsive and far away from the needs of citizens.

In Austria, especially the parliamentary election in fall 1999 flags the beginning of a particular period of right-wing national populism directed against the European Union. The far-right Austrian Freedom Party gained the second-

3 The respective policy paper had been written before the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis.

-highest number of votes (nearly 27%, <http://www.bmi.gv.at/412>) and eventually became junior partner in a coalition government with the third-ranked conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). This was the first time in the EC/EU history that a party with ties to the National Socialist past was accepted as a coalition partner on the national level. In reaction to this break of taboo, the other fourteen EU member states fiercely protested. Between February and September 2000, they imposed political measures on bilateral bases, such as no official contact with a government that included the FPÖ, no support for Austrian applicants to international organisations, and Austrian ambassadors only to be received for technical (not for political) deliberations (Kopeinig – Kotanko 2000: 21; cf. also Happold 2000). It was the first time that political 'measures' were taken against a member state which seemed to have not behaved according to basic EU political values (Wodak et al. 2009, 231). This first direct intervention in the internal affairs of a member state in the history of the European Community/European Union were in Austria falsely reframed as so-called 'EU-sanctions'.⁴

Representatives of the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government reacted with populist appeals to the citizens. Those appeals referred to national unity in view of an alleged unjustified wrong that came from abroad (Wodak et al. 2009: 222): 'This nationalist attitude, which in Austria is strongly connected with right-wing populism, is expressed and played upon by appealing to the "people as a nation" in the sense of a homogeneous, essentialised point of reference for political legitimisation and justification' (ibid.: 223). As a reaction, 'a nationalist, chauvinist discourse evolved, drawing on a patriotic "fatherland rhetoric" claiming that the "EU" was "attacking Austria" and demanding a "national closing of ranks"' (ibid.: 242, cf. also Wodak – Pelinka 2002).⁵

Using populist resentment against the EU has indeed not been limited to the years of the first ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government (2000–2006). The Socialdemocratic Party (SPÖ) which led the subsequent coalition with the ÖVP, made a U-turn in 2008 with respect to its party line on European politics. The pro-EU leadership of the party 'suddenly and unexpectedly supported a referendum on the EU reform treaty, should this be resurrected after the Irish no vote' (Wodak et al. 2009: 242). Furthermore, leading SPÖ politicians demanded a referendum on Turkey's possible EU accession. They wrote an open letter to

4 Political scientist Robert M. Entman (1993: 51ff.) suggested that frames 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. Frames foreground particular aspects of issues, encourage certain interpretations and discourage others.

5 This type of political rhetoric also included the construction of an 'internal enemy' (the opposition party SPÖ) for whom derogatory metaphors, such as 'Vaterlandsverräter' ('traitors to the fatherland'), 'Nestbeschmutzer' ('nest foulers') or 'Österreichvernaderer' ('informers betraying Austria') were used (Wodak et al. 2009: 225, 229).

the publisher of the *Kronen Zeitung*, the Austrian tabloid newspaper with the highest circulation, an outspoken critic of the Treaty of Lisbon, and stated that ‘(t)he SPÖ took these concerns seriously (...) and would attempt “to ensure that the EU responded actively to the criticisms” and “that future changes to treaties which affected Austrian interests would be decided by means of a referendum in Austria”’ (Der Standard 2008, quoted in Wodak et al. 2009: 242). It can be assumed that survey results which showed that only a minority of Austrian voters considered Austria’s EU membership a good thing at that time (cf. Der Standard 2008) had an impact on this political change. Moreover, it can be seen as an indicator that more than a decade after Austria’s EU accession a considerable number of members of the political elite had still not really arrived in Europe (Wodak et al. 2009: 243). The populist turn was apparently intended to win back voters from the EU hostile FPÖ, but ended up rather unsuccessfully for the Social Democrats. The ÖVP took the initiative as an occasion to dissolve the coalition which had already previously suffered from internal conflicts and disputes.

Bashing Europe is still a popular game in Austria, as is the case in several EU member states. Challenges such as the financial and economic crisis in the wake of 2008, the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, Brexit and its potential consequences and last but not least the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for European societies and economies have mainly been discussed within a nationalist frame and, hence, have fueled Eurosceptic discourses. Populist politicians including those from mainstream parties have frequently blamed ‘Brussels’ while attributing political responsibility for crises and related problems to the EU and evoking stereotyped resentments to mobilise voters (<https://www.ihs.ac.at/ru/european-governance-and-public-finance/projects/euroscepticism-austria/>).

Framework conditions: the constant rise of right-wing populism in Austria

National-populist party politics have a decades-long tradition in Austria, though the Freedom Party, which later became the epitome of far-right populism, played a rather minor role in Austrian politics until the mid 1980s. Compared to many other successful far-right parties in Europe (such as the Swiss Peoples’ Party/SVP, the AfD/Alternative for Germany, the French National Rally, the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Hungarian Fidesz or the Polish PiS, which have no direct tradition lines to fascist or National Socialist predecessors, the Austrian Freedom Party is different. The party, established in 1955/1956 is a successor to the Federation of Independents (VdU, founded in 1949), among the founders of the latter were some former National Socialists, the first two chairmen were former SS officers. An exception are the years 1983 to 1986 when the FPÖ

put forward more liberal stances and served as a junior partner in an SPÖ led coalition government.

The short liberal period ended abruptly in 1986 when Jörg Haider became party leader by achieving a landslide victory at the national party convention. This resulted in the revocation of the coalition by the Social Democratic chancellor Franz Vranitzky and a snap election. The FPÖ from that moment onwards became a significant actor in Austrian politics. Jörg Haider permanently shaped the party's explicitly right-wing populist and nationalist image. He instantly initiated an ideological turn (Wodak – Pelinka 2002). Haider centred his rhetoric around immigration and integration issues, subsequently around anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments, on the one hand, and harsh criticism of the political establishment on the other. Such rhetoric was based on the promotion of an ethnically defined, discrete Austrian national identity instead of a superordinate German nation, which was apparently liked by a relevant part of the Austrian electorate (Kritzinger – Liebhart 2015: 381f.).

In the Carinthia state election in 1989 the FPÖ won 29% of the vote, and Jörg Haider became Governor of Carinthia and led a coalition government with the ÖVP. The FPÖ further fueled the migration issue which over the years advanced to become the most heatedly debated topic in Austrian political discourse and successfully served as the campaign focus of the FPÖ in the 1990 legislative election (*ibid.*). In 1993, the FPÖ initiated the referendum 'Austria First!' that called for a more restrictive immigration policy. As a consequence, five FPÖ MPs, who opposed such political ideas, left the party and founded the Liberal Forum LIF which would more than two decades later merge with the NEOS, a liberally/neoliberally oriented party. By the end of the 1990s, the FPÖ put forward a focus on an alleged threat of the 'Islamization' of Austria and Europe, and linked the topic with the debate on Turkey's potential EU membership. Over the years the FPÖ became more and more far-right, aggressively used stereotypical images that mingled Islamic religion, national/ethnic identity constructions and politics, and portrayed Islam as a religion-based, violent and extremist ideology and Muslims as alien to Europe (cf. Krzyzanowski 2013). Furthermore, the party began attacking the EU, especially Brussels' alleged oversized bureaucracy, and blaming it for every bad. This mixture of anti-Islam/anti-Muslim rhetoric, backed by anti-immigration stances, and hostility towards the EU led the party to remarkable electoral successes both at the local and national level (Kritzinger – Liebhart: 2015). Eventually – as has already been mentioned – the FPÖ became the second strongest party after the SPÖ in the 1999 general elections with nearly 27% of the vote, which brought the party into government.

This aforementioned coalition government which was built in 2000 broke with the FPÖ's pariah status (Liebhart 2018). However, the shift from an anti-establishment party in opposition to a party in power, which suddenly also supported neo-liberal economic reforms, led to severe inter-party conflicts,

subsequent party instability and significant decrease in electoral support. Their ruling policy apparently contradicted previous political claims. In the 2002 general elections the party lost nearly two-thirds of the votes compared to 1999 (Heinisch 2004). Nevertheless, the party decided to continue the coalition with the ÖVP. In 2005 the FPÖ split, when all their ministers including the deputy chancellor followed former party leader Jörg Haider and founded the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) which substituted the FPÖ in the coalition government. The new party again significantly lost electoral support after the unexpected death of its chairman Jörg Haider in a car accident in 2008. The BZÖ did not pass the 4% threshold in the 2013 general election (<http://www.bmi.gv.at/412/>).

After the split, the FPÖ elected Heinz-Christian Strache as new chairman, who further radicalised the party while intensifying anti-immigration stances and anti-Muslimism, and fostering Euroscepticism. This strategy paid off at the polls in regional, federal and European elections. The FPÖ reached, for example, 25.8% and the second place in Austria's capital Vienna in 2010 (<https://www.wien.gv.at/wahl/NET/GR101/GR101-109.htm>), and even 30.8% in 2015 (<http://www.bmi.gv.at/412>). It further won 19.7% in the 2014 European Parliament elections (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-at-2014.html>). The main campaign topics remained the same in every election: anti-immigration, anti-Muslimism and Euroscepticism. Between 2006 and 2013 the FPÖ and the BZÖ were both represented in the Austrian parliament. At the 2008 general election, FPÖ and BZÖ together reached 28.2% (FPÖ 17.5%, BZÖ 10.7% (cf. Kritzinger – Liebhart 2015). Furthermore, the FPÖ reached 20.5% in the 2013 general election. The success story continued in the years to follow in several state elections (<http://www.bmi.gv.at/412>), notwithstanding the Hypo Alpe-Adria scandal, Austria's worst post-war financial scandal in which high profile FPÖ politicians were involved and several scandals related to national-socialist reactivation ('Wiederbetätigung') performed by leading party representatives (cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/25/austrias-far-right-fraternities-brace-for-protests-at-annual-ball>). The election results also enabled the FPÖ in Burgenland and Upper Austria to enter SPÖ- or ÖVP-led governments, which finally contributed to the end of the so-called 'cordon sanitaire' (Liebhart 2018).

Political representatives of the Freedom Party consistently and successfully communicated the same message. They suggested that they were the only ones who were willing to protect the 'native Austrians' against both illegal immigrants (especially from Muslim countries) and 'Brussels' and defend the ethnically defined Austrian identity. In almost every election campaign (local, regional, national, European) the FPÖ regularly used xenophobic, in particular anti-Islam, slogans and images (cf. Krzyzanowski 2013). Heinz-Christian Strache frequently also claimed that Muslims would attempt to create an Islamic 'parallel

society' in Austria. All of this happened years before the so-called refugee crisis unfolded in 2015 and fostered relevant discourses.

However, the FPÖ's biggest victory to date was Norbert Hofer's 31.1% in the first round of the 2016 presidential election (Troianovski 2016). Notwithstanding Hofer was eventually defeated by his opponent, the independent, Green-backed candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. Hofer scored 49.7% and 46.2% respectively in the two run-off elections (https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Bundespraesidentenwahlen/Bundespraesidentenwahl_2016/start.aspx#pk_01). Political leaders throughout Europe and abroad reacted gladly to Alexander Van der Bellen's victory. They considered his election a 'defeat of nationalism and anti-European, backward-looking populism' and a sign of Austrian people's 'open-mindedness'. The Guardian saw 'some hope for Europe' and underscored the fact that 'Austria interrupted the march of right-wing populism', and showed 'that the victory of the radical right is not inevitable' (<https://www.dw.com/en/eu-leaders-rejoice-at-alexander-van-der-bellen-in-austrian-election/a-36651022>; Cato 2016; Jones 2016). Nevertheless, Cas Mudde (2016) recalled 'that Hofer achieved the best result of any populist radical right candidate in an established European democracy'.

From 'Time for something new' to 'IbizaGate' – the collapse of the FPÖ, but not of right-wing populist politics

The FPÖ's electoral success continued. Given that general elections in which different parties compete naturally cannot be compared to run-off elections for the federal presidency with only two candidates, the Freedom Party recorded its next big achievement in 2017 when the party won 26% of the vote, which meant third place and a result close to that of the Socialdemocrats (26.9%) (<https://orf.at/wahlergebnisse/nr17/>). The Austrian People's Party clearly came out ahead with 31.5% (ibid.). Both the ÖVP and the FPÖ had focused their election campaigns on anti-immigration policy and rhetoric, a strategy that had been well-established within the Freedom Party for decades, but was rather new for the People's Party. According to Anton Pelinka, the People's Party's built its successful election campaign on 'stealing talking points from the FPÖ and presenting them in more moderate garments and with better manners' (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/15/sebastian-kurz-could-31-year-olds-audacious-bid-to-lead-austria-pay-off>). The quote highlights the recent process of convergence between the far-right populist FPÖ and the centre-right ÖVP, at least in regard to the nationalist-populist framing of migration and asylum policy. Moreover, it draws attention to the fact that right-wing populist appeals to nationalist sentiments have certainly reached the political mainstream in Austria. Especially under Kurz's leadership, the mainstream party ÖVP has admittedly altered both its policy positions and its political communication

style to meet the populist challenge. Sebastian Kurz, who had taken leadership of the People's Party only about six months before the election, successfully rebranded the party into a political 'movement for Austria', completely focused on him as a person. He renamed it 'Sebastian Kurz List – the New People's Party', and changed the color from black to turquoise. The brand 'Sebastian Kurz' proved strong, and support among potential voters increased dramatically, from around 20% to 31.5% (<https://wahl17.bmi.gv.at/>). Kurz called a snap election and ran a populist campaign, completely focused on him as a person, and under the heading of change. A slogan suggested that it is 'Time for something new', notwithstanding that he himself had served as a member of the previous government for more than three years. Kurz, however, cultivated an image as a political outsider and also used slogans like 'Now or never!' (ibid.) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/15/sebastian-kurz-could-31-year-olds-audacious-bid-to-lead-austria-pay-off>). He emphasised the word 'movement' following a trend, which takes into consideration that voters have long become disillusioned with conventional political parties. Kurz 'won on a populist-lite platform' (Gady 2018). Except a 'tough stance on illegal migration' his campaign 'lacked both depth and scope' (ibid.). The chairman of the rebranded Austrian People's Party, and long-time member of the previous SPÖ/ÖVP coalition governments (as State Secretary for Integration Affairs, and later Foreign Minister) successfully made immigration his signature issue while pursuing a right-wing populist strategy, which also appealed to xenophobic feelings. He repeatedly claimed that it was he who had closed down to refugees the 'Balkan route' to Europe, called for even tougher border controls and fiercely spoke out against alleged activities of 'political Islam' as a threat against both Austrian democracy and European values (ibid.). The 'polished, anti-immigration millennial' (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/austria-immigration-sebastian-kurz/542964/>) used the widespread anti-refugee sentiment in Austria to direct the Austrian People's Party sharply to the right, and managed 'to co-opt the political space previously monopolized by the Freedom Party' (ibid.). Such a message was very welcomed by a significant part of the electorate. The Austrian Freedom Party, which had mostly ranked first in the polls since 2014, also polled strongly in Austria's general election in late 2017, and the latter eventually resulted in the formation of an overall right-wing populist coalition government, led by Sebastian Kurz, with the far-right FPÖ as a junior partner. Kurz became Europe's youngest head of government. The FPÖ's party leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, became deputy chancellor in the new coalition government, and the Freedom Party controlled the key departments of foreign affairs, defense and internal affairs.

The inauguration of the ÖVP – FPÖ government at the end of 2017 was the second time the FPÖ came to power since 2000. The weekly Economist (<https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21732834-austria-edging-closer-nationalist>

-governments-eastern-europe-new-coalition. 19 December 2017) commented as follows: 'Vienna Calling. A new coalition in Austria brings the far-right in from the cold'. The fact that the announcement of the establishment of the coalition between the rebranded People's Party and the far-right Austrian Freedom Party hardly caused any protests by EU member states can be seen as an indicator that the acceptance and inclusion of far-right parties has become so normal over the years in Europe that the Austrian case was no longer perceived as exceptional. This stands in sharp contrast to the year 2000, when diplomatic reactions were quick, but also reflects 'the general move to the right of the European political electorate' (Gady 2018). After the 2017 legislative election, Austria was simply seen as a symbol of a wider trend. However, it was also discussed whether the integration of the far-right Freedom Party and its representatives in key political positions in the government has turned Austria into a more Eurosceptic and anti-immigration country, aligning more closely to countries such as Poland and Hungary (*ibid.*).

The fact that the People's Party, the senior coalition partner, had significantly shifted to the right definitely made life easier for the FPÖ.⁶ For about one and a half year it seemed that the coalition government operated overall in harmony. Moreover, it also seemed that the Freedom Party performed better this time in balancing the requirements of participating in government and the expectations of their supporters.

Anyway, there were a number of so-called 'isolated cases' as the coalition partners euphemistically named frequent anti-Semitic, anti-Islam and xenophobic remarks by FPÖ party members (Gady 2019). The important role which members of far-right students' fraternities (*Burschenschaften*) played in government and parliament and other institutions of the Republic of Austria gave further reason for justified concern.⁷ Many of these far-right fraternities still uphold anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes, deny that Austria is a nation of its own and claim a sense of belonging to a 'Greater Germany'.⁸ In most cases of far-right utterances from FPÖ members deputy chancellor Strache has aimed to remediate and present the party as more moderate and certainly democratic. He also asserted several times that anti-Semitism and racism have no place in the FPÖ. Nevertheless, a leading FPÖ politician, Johann Gudenus, has even

6 Markus Wagner and Thomas Meyer have shown that the ÖVP has steadily been moving to the right since 1986, the year Jörg Haider took leadership of the FPÖ and, hence, made the party more competitive (<https://manifesto-roject.wzb.eu/>, Wagner – Meyer 2018).

7 These student organisations are for men only. They propagate an outdated, sexist understanding of maleness, organise fencing duels among members and show their dueling scars openly. Wearing a uniform unique to the fraternity on official occasions completes the picture (<http://www.dw.com/en/inside-the-secretive-fraternities-of-germany-and-austria/a-42447338>).

8 High numbers of FPÖ-politicians have close bonds with far-right student fraternities. In 2017, out of the party's 51 members of parliament, more than a third (18) were active members of right-wing to extreme right fraternities.

openly endorsed anti-Semitic Soros-conspiracy ‘theories’ (<https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5409914/Gudenus-und-die-Soros-Verschwoerungen>). Almost no contradictory political views of coalition partners could be observed in regard to the topical issue of migration. Recently, the two parties agreed on further restricting access to asylum seekers in the Austrian labor market, on cutting funds for integration initiatives such as German-language courses and on accelerating the expulsion of undocumented immigrants. The decision to follow Hungary and the United States in rejecting the global migration pact underlined relevant political stances (<https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1N5111-OZATP>). There were also almost no differences in the field of family policy as both parties shared a conservative approach to this policy field. The government also managed Austria’s third EU presidency in the second half of 2018 without major problems, though the commitment to the European Union in the case of the Freedom Party was never fully credible, given the party’s particularly Eurosceptic course for years and its close alignment with other Eurosceptic parties on the European level, such as Alternative for Germany and French National Rally. One of the core political topics of the Freedom Party, the strengthening of direct democracy tools such as plebiscites in order to weaken representative democracy, was postponed by the senior coalition partner to the end of the legislative period (<https://derstandard.at/2000070508180/regierungsprogramm-oevp-fpoe-kurz-strache-direkte-demokratie>). Eventually, though Strache and other party members attacked the public service broadcaster ORF and critical journalists, they did not succeed in reorganising the ORF fundamentally (<https://www.srf.ch/news/international/fpoe-angriffe-auf-orf-es-geht-um-die-pressefreiheit-in-oesterreich>). Probably the most critical occurrence was the incident which concerned the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism, Austria’s domestic intelligence agency, and the illegal seizure of agency intelligence on right-wing extremist groups in Austria (supposedly including FPÖ members) during an illegal police raid initiated by party members. This has to be seen against the background of the FPÖ Minister of Interior Herbert Kickl’s attempts to appoint a new head of the organisation by discrediting the incumbent one (<https://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/politik/innenpolitik/BVT-Affaere-Goldgrubers-schwieriges-Verhaeltnis-zur-Extremismus-Ermittlerin>).

Hence, overall, the coalition looked stable until May 2019 when the so-called Ibiza affair or Ibiza-gate blew up the partnership between ÖVP and FPÖ, and subsequently led to the dismissal of the government and a further split of the FPÖ. Ibiza-gate is a political scandal (which is currently – July 2020 – being investigated by a fact-finding committee of the Austrian parliament) that involved former deputy chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and former deputy mayor of Vienna and deputy leader of the Freedom Party Johann Gudenus. On 17 May 2019 two German print media outlets (Süddeutsche, Der Spiegel) pub-

lished a secretly recorded video of a meeting in Ibiza in July 2017 which they had received from a deep throat and checked several times for authenticity. The video showed the then opposition politicians Strache and Gudenus apparently discussing their intentions to make some deals with a woman whom they believed is a niece of a Russian oligarch. They would be ready to offer government contracts and sell Austrian water in return for the provision of positive news coverage. The 'vodka –and-Red-Bull-fueled night on the Spanish island' (Gady 2019) caused the biggest political crisis in Austria since 1945 (ibid.) and eventually a snap election. In a no-confidence-vote the government Kurz was voted out of office and a caretaker government led by Austria's first female federal chancellor, Brigitte Bierlein, was appointed (<https://orf.at/stories/3125471/>).

As the political developments since then have clearly demonstrated, the FPÖ was not able to convincingly become a responsible governmental party. The FPÖ suspended Heinz-Christian Strache in December 2019 (<https://orf.at/stories/3147497/>) due to Ibizagate and several financial irregularities. Strache in turn founded a new party 'Team HC Strache – Alliance for Austria' (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000117506066/straches-neue-partei-heisst-offenbar-team-hc-strache-allianz-fuer>) and announced a run for the Viennese local election in fall 2020. The FPÖ also severely struggled on the state level of party organisation (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2006274/fpoe-chaos-breitet-sich-aus-landesgruppen-zerfallen>). Moreover, FPÖ representatives continued using hate speech: the secretary general recommended the use of 'herbicide' against uncontrolled immigration (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000118624127/hofer-verteidigt-schnedlitz-mit-unkraut-waren-nicht-menschen-gemeint>) and the chairman of the party, former presidential candidate and minister in the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition government from 2017 to 2019, Norbert Hofer called the Koran more dangerous than the coronavirus (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000118151481/koran-sager-hofer-sieht-sich-nach-morddrohungen-bestaetigt>). Apparently, nothing has changed concerning such 'party traditions'.

Strangely, Sebastian Kurz, who had invited the FPÖ to build a coalition with the People's Party, has not been damaged at all by the unethical and awful performance of his coalition partner. He remained Austria's most popular politician and the ÖVP succeeded anew in the legislative election in 2019 by earning over 37% of the votes (Gady 2019). Subsequently Kurz built a coalition with the Green Party.

If the inauguration of the second ÖVP-FPÖ government in 2017 indicated a significant shift to the right in Austria, does the new ÖVP/Greens coalition indicate a reverse trend? Unfortunately, this question cannot be affirmed clearly.

The most sustainable achievement of the Austrian Freedom Party is certainly that its leading politicians have succeeded in changing the political discourse and reframing the political debate in the country. The legislative election of

2017 has already shown that right-wing populist views are no longer limited to the fringes of the political landscape, they have directly reached the political mainstream (Murphy 2017). While the FPÖ and its offspring ‘Team HC Strache – Alliance for Austria’ may still be called the epitome of racist, anti-immigrant and especially anti-Muslim populist-national rhetoric the latter has by now become so normalised that representatives of other parties also make use of it. Hence, it can be underscored that the FPÖ has first and foremost achieved an ideological victory. Both mainstream parties, the ÖVP under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz and also some groups within the SPÖ have significantly turned to the right, use FPÖ-like rhetoric style and promote ideas originally introduced by the Freedom Party. Discursive constructions that characterise ongoing political debates about ‘islamic parallel societies’ and ‘imported threats’ – to mention just two examples – testify to this assumption. In general, anti-pluralistic tendencies have become more and more apparent in Austrian society, while pluralistic political concepts that aim at establishing frames for discussing and managing differences are to an increasing degree subject to criticism.

However, this has to be seen within the context of wider European developments: Ruth Wodak pointed to the consequences of the Europe-wide swing towards anti-establishment parties which has normalised right-wing populist political stances, especially in regard to more restrictive immigration policies and correspondent offensive rhetoric: ‘Some of the policies that right-wing populists have endorsed have already been taken over and implemented. (...) Certain taboos have been broken and now it’s seemingly okay to say certain very discriminatory things, even without a big scandal’. Wodak continues: ‘The levels have lowered of taboos and conventions, normalization is on its way’ (<http://www.euronews.com/2018/03/15/explained-the-rise-and-rise-of-populism-in-europe>).

Postface

The development depicted in the previous section can be observed rather throughout Europe. Meanwhile, the political mainstream has gone populist, with nationalist tendencies. This can be considered a success of the far-right, which has impacted on both the political discourse and factual politics. Markus Wagner and Thomas Meyer have already drawn attention to the ‘right turn in the ideological makeup of European party systems over the past 30 years’ (Wagner – Meyer 2018).

Apart from this phenomenon, the far-right is still very alive in almost all European regions. The election to the European Parliament 2014 was termed a ‘Eurosceptic “earthquake”’ by the BBC to highlight that especially ‘(a)nti-immigration parties hostile to the EU’ have succeeded (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27559714>). Apparently economic issues were by far not the

only reason (cf. Mudde 2014), since far-right parties achieved the best electoral results in countries that had been only moderately affected by the economic crisis; among them Austria, and some Northern European countries (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-at-2014.html>). Against the background of recent political developments in Europe (including the so-called refugee crisis, terrorist attacks and Brexit) it was expected that the EP 2019 elections would foster this trend. Surprisingly they did not bring about the further rise of populism in Europe. Notwithstanding some wins for far-right populists, it was not a dramatic win throughout Europe. Right-wing populists fell short of expectations in Austria (shortly after IbizaGate), Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. They came out as clear winner only in Poland, Hungary, France, Italy and the UK. Also Marine le Pen's National Rally, which became the strongest party in France, did not reach the result of 2014. Nevertheless, the elections also showed that far-right populism has to be considered as an important political force on the European level that will stay for the years to come (cf. Smith 2019). It is also certainly not impossible that a far-right party will again rise in Austria, notwithstanding the recent terrible performance of the FPÖ and its leading political representatives.

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