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## Old News?

Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) – the indirect successor to Austria's National Socialist German Workers' Party – used to generate apocalyptic headlines. Its successes were once treated as major news stories on both sides of the Atlantic, especially when the party was led by the telegenic Jörg Haider. A generational political talent, he led a campaign to force a referendum on restricting immigration in 1993 and pioneered a tanned, yuppy brand of right-wing politics that looks awfully familiar these days. Prior to Haider taking the helm in 1986, the FPÖ was a traditional bourgeois party dominated by decrepit Nazis and stodgy pan-German nationalists. But under his leadership, it was transformed into a modern populist outfit fuelled by xenophobia and entertainment. Haider, the *New York Times* magazine noted in 2000, 'knows the glib, politics-as-pop-culture temper of his times'. 'Europe, land of ghosts, is aghast.'

The Carinthian multi-millionaire was Austria's wealthiest politician but styled himself a champion of the people, comfortable in the company of both the Viennese bourgeoisie and the clientele of rural beer halls. He poached support from the Socialist Party's (SPÖ) traditional base with his economic populism, but was most successful with the middle class, who, in the years approaching the new millennium, feared losing jobs, status and state welfare as a result of immigration, European Union membership and globalization. The party's dramatic metamorphosis under Haider was a spectacular electoral success, with results in the double digits and rising throughout the 90s. In 2000, having secured 27%, they entered government in coalition with the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), upending the country's post-war political consensus, which had been built on the joint dominance of the ÖVP and SPÖ. Fourteen member states of the EU issued coordinated

sanctions against Austria in response – in actuality, more of a partial diplomatic quarantine: shunning handshakes and photo-ops. The policy was abandoned just a few months later. Haider asserted that it had ‘ended as a complete flop’.

Haider himself had a way of turning defeat into victory. His ‘Austria First’ campaign in the 1990s for a plebiscite on the country’s immigration policies had failed miserably, with just 7% of Austrians signing a petition for it. The campaign’s ugly rhetoric was met with historic levels of dismay in the liberal capital: some 300,000 took to the streets of Vienna in the ‘Sea of Light’ demonstration, the largest against racism and the right in the post-war era. But even amid such pushback, Haider’s anti-immigration crusade produced results. Eager to neutralize the rising xenophobic discontent stirred up by Haider’s rhetoric, the ÖVP–SPÖ government dramatically tightened immigration from non-EU/EFTA countries at the height of the Bosnian war, as an unprecedented number of refugees fled to Austria. Under the banner ‘integration before new immigration’, the government restricted migration to so-called ‘key workers’, family members and seasonal labourers. Haider’s ‘Austria First’ campaign had succeeded in moving the political mainstream to the right.

Over the past few decades, the FPÖ has successfully shifted the terms of public debate, leading the political centre to adopt some of its positions, and now secures bigger victories than ever. In the parliamentary election on 29 September, the party took first place, earning a record 29% of the vote, with the conservative ÖVP trailing on 26%, and the SPÖ on 21%, the worst result in its history. The FPÖ’s win marked the first time the Austrian far-right had won a national election since World War II. Yet, in contrast to the Haider days, the FPÖ’s triumph prompted no outcry in the international media and inspired scant concern in Brussels.

Superficially, it looks like the centre will hold. Since the FPÖ fell short of an outright majority, they require coalition partners to govern, and no other parties are willing to join them. Chancellor Karl Nehammer, who is also the leader of the ÖVP, has repeatedly ruled out the possibility of forming a government with the FPÖ’s firebrand leader, Herbert Kickl. Now, the Austrian President, Alexander Van der Bellen, has asked Nehammer to begin negotiations with the SPÖ in preparation for the formation of an old-fashioned grand coalition, along with the fourth-placed liberal NEOS, who scored 9%. Kickl has said such a government would be ‘a coalition of losers’.

Kickl, 56, is no Haider. For one, the former interior minister lacks Haider’s charisma. He is wiry, bespectacled and pale; the host of the German late-night satirical show ZDF Magazin Royale skewered Kickl for his blandness: ‘he doesn’t need testosterone or Red Bull; he gets his kick out of comparing retirement insurance plans.’ But looks deceive: the slight,

seemingly docile leader is a vicious provocateur. During the campaign, he stoked resentment over the government's Covid response; he has lauded the supposedly curative properties of ivermectin. The party has christened Kickl *Volkskanzler*, or 'people's chancellor', the term the Nazis used to describe Hitler.

The FPÖ's victory can be partially attributed to its laser-focus on the topic most important to voters according to polling: immigration. Immigration has increased in Austria in recent years. In 2022, asylum applications tripled. A series of high-profile terrorist attacks and thwarted plots have fuelled discontent, inflamed by lurid tabloid headlines. Just weeks before the election, an ISIS-connected group had reportedly planned to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, which was cancelled, leaving tens of thousands of Swifties tearfully singing 'Cruel Summer' on the streets of the capital.

While Kickl called for 'remigration' – returning migrants to their home countries – the SPÖ attempted to redirect voters' ire from immigrants and Muslims to the rich. The party's left-wing leader Andreas Babler, sometimes likened to Jeremy Corbyn, attempted to attract voters from the FPÖ by targeting the elite, campaigning on generous asylum policies alongside proposals to increase the wealth and inheritance tax on the top 2%. But the strategy failed. Indeed, the SPÖ's vote share, in secular decline, fell to a historic low. As political scientist Eszter Kováts has written, voter analysis reveals that, since the last election in 2019, the SPÖ gained a meagre 29,000 voters from the FPÖ, while losing 65,000 of its own voters to the far-right. Another 180,000 – of 6.3 million eligible voters – who supported the SPÖ in 2019 abstained in 2024. According to the most recent data, half of all workers in Austria now support the FPÖ. Meanwhile, the Communist Party failed to cross the 5% threshold necessary to enter the national parliament, though it has seen a dramatic increase in support at the local level in Salzburg and Graz in recent years.

The mainstream conservatives in the ÖVP object more to the crude, conspiracist rhetoric employed by Kickl than they do the party's immigration policies. Where the 'respectable right' diverges from the far-right most clearly is on relations with Russia. Austria is a neutral country – it is not a member of NATO – and therefore even its centre-right and centre-left are viewed by the European establishment as insufficiently hawkish on Russia. But the FPÖ are considered beyond the pale. The party signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia in 2016 and officials have generally blamed Ukraine and the West for the war, opposing sanctions on Russia and further military aid to Ukraine. The FPÖ tends to see Putin's Russia as ideological kin: both are staunch opponents of Atlanticism and liberalism. There are also material ties: Austria is among the EU countries most reliant on Russian gas,

which, as of July, still made up 83% of its gas imports. The country is under considerable political pressure to lessen its energy dependence on Russia but the FPÖ has opposed any dramatic diversification efforts. The party has stressed that Austria is already suffering from a cost-of-living crisis caused by inflation above the EU average and low growth, meaning there is little appetite among voters to undertake an expensive energy transition. And they have been partially successful in linking the cost-of-living crisis to immigration and the war in Ukraine in the public imagination.

Even as the FPÖ faces exclusion from government, the party has succeeded in shaping public discourse and the political agenda. On election night, Nehammer said that the ÖVP took the concerns of the almost 30% of voters who supported the FPÖ ‘seriously, very seriously’. After all, the ÖVP had also campaigned on stopping illegal immigration and hardening asylum policies. It is a trend that extends far beyond Austria of course. Ursula von Der Leyen of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) secured another five years as head of the European Commission by courting segments of the far-right like Giorgia Meloni, and moving further to the right herself. Last week, von Der Leyen said that the 27 member states would have to explore ‘innovative solutions to countering irregular migration’ and look into the possibility of creating ‘return hubs outside of the EU’ – i.e., detention centres in non-EU countries where migrants would await the processing of asylum claims and possible repatriation. She recommended ‘solutions’ like a new bilateral agreement – recently struck down by judges in Rome – allowing Italy to deport asylum seekers to northern Albania. A year ago, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the country needed to start deporting migrants ‘on a large scale’. In Haider’s day, the FPÖ was treated as an Alpine curiosity in a sea of enlightened Euro-Atlantic liberalism. Yet times have changed. The FPÖ’s success is no longer frontpage news because some of its core views are now a part of the European mainstream.

*Read on: Slavoj Žižek, ‘Why We All Love to Hate Haider’, NLR 2.*  
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