

“Green against Blue” – Reflections on the 2016 Austrian Presidential Election

Written by Ruth Wodak

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RUTH WODAK, JUN 14 2016

The first round of the election for Austrian President on 24 April 2016 brought surprising results – unexpectedly, the candidate from the right-wing populist party FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*), Norbert Hofer, won a 35.05% majority. Austrian news immediately made the international headlines as they had twice before: first, in 1986, when Dr. Kurt Waldheim, former UN General Secretary, had become Austrian President, in spite (or because) of his involvement with the German Wehrmacht in the Balkans in 1943/1944 – which he had attempted unsuccessfully to deny over several months (Wodak 2011); second, in 2000, when the *black and blue* government coalition was formed in Austria, the first time a right-wing populist party actually participated in a government within the European Union. This coalition had included the FPÖ, a party well-known for being xenophobic, antisemitic, and endorsing revisionist narratives about World War II and National Socialism (Wodak & Pelinka 2002).

Understanding What Happened

The independent candidate, Professor Alexander Van der Bellen, a 72-year-old economist and retired professor of Vienna University and former leader of the Green Party, had been predicted in all opinion polls to win first place but only came out second with 21.34%. He thus lagged almost 14% behind Norbert Hofer, currently third President of the Austrian Parliament, vice-leader of the FPÖ, and more than 25 years younger than Van der Bellen. The third place (18.94%) went to Dr. Irmgard Griss, a lawyer and the only female and truly independent candidate, who had started a grass-roots movement from scratch. The candidates of the two mainstream parties, i.e. centre-right (ÖVP) and centre-left (SPÖ), each barely won over 10% of the vote. The last candidate, Richard Lugner, a rich entrepreneur, came 6th with 2.26% of the votes. Since no candidate had won an absolute majority, there was to be a run-off for the presidency. For the first time, a candidate from the extreme right had a chance of becoming the Austrian President; also for the first time, no candidate backed by the governing parties made it to the second round. Because of this unprecedented development, the election was clearly perceived as a *protest vote* against the coalition government.

No one believed that Van der Bellen would be able to catch up with Hofer on 22 May 2016, but it was clear that the race would be a decisive one for the country. The four weeks in between 24 April and 22 May proved to be full of stress and anxiety. International media crowded into Vienna, articles on the amazing victory of Hofer were already being drafted before the run-off results were actually announced. And yet, nobody had been able to predict the extremely close result of Sunday and the need to wait for the 800,000 postal votes to be counted in order to know the final results. Hence, everyone held their breath until May 23, 5pm, when the Minister of Interior Affairs finally declared the results: Van der Bellen had won, by a tiny margin of 0.6% (50.3%, ca 30 000 votes more than Hofer with 49.7%). The impression now is that Austria is divided, polarized into two almost equally large camps. How to account for and explain the success of Hofer and the FPÖ? There are of course many interpretations, some of which I discuss below.

Deconstructing the Narratives of the FPÖ?

Most commentators believed that the refugee crisis was to blame, i.e. the fact that more than 90,000 refugees had entered Austria in 2015 and applied for asylum. The FPÖ had been shouting warnings for many months, claiming that “the boat was full”, that Austria was not able to cope with the many refugees coming from Syria, Afghanistan and

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Iraq, that Islam *per se* was not compatible with European values, and that Muslim strangers posed a huge threat for social cohesion in Austria, a small country with a population of ca 8 million. More specifically, the events of 31 December 2015 in Cologne, i.e. the sexual harassment experienced by many women at the hands of former migrants from Northern Africa, were instrumentalized by the FPÖ as well as many other right-wing populist parties across Europe: “our women”, they argued, had to be protected against the influx of “masses of aggressive young men” from a completely different, essentially incompatible culture. For some, a welcome return to the well-known slogan of a “clash of cultures”!

By drawing on this and similar threat scenarios, the FPÖ and their candidate Norbert Hofer styled themselves as saviours of “the people” from a terrible danger – a danger which they had discursively constructed and widely disseminated via social media and the entire range of tabloids. If only migrants and refugees were kept out, then, they propagated, this would solve Austria’s and Europe’s problems. “The people”, as defined by Hofer and the FPÖ, i.e. “the real Austrians”, were juxtaposed to the “*Schickeria*”, a negatively connoted term implying the decadent and rich elites, the intellectuals, the “do-gooders”, the left-wing, and the establishment. Although Austrians were defined, as Hofer declared in a TV debate on 19 May 2016, by their Austrian citizenship, he excluded the “*Schickeria*” and all Muslims from this group (even if they held Austrian citizenship). Hofer, a divorced and remarried father of two, explicitly embraces traditional Christian values and vehemently opposes gay marriage as well as abortion.

Austria’s experience shows that the *politics of fear* (Wodak 2015) can quickly get out of control. It was, however, the mainstream coalition in power that did a handbrake turn in their treatment of refugees in early spring 2016, replacing the widely publicized welcome signs at Vienna main station from October 2015 with strict controls at the Brenner Pass from Italy and bilateral deals with Balkan neighbours to keep refugees from reaching Austria’s borders (Grabbe 2016). Austria’s new asylum law (implemented in June 1, 2016) sets limits on rights that, according to the European Commission and the UN, contravene the Geneva Convention. Unilateral measures that break international law have started Austria on a slippery slope down to open disrespect of EU and international norms of cooperation and rights protection. The logic pervading the public discourse across Europe is that “we” must build higher fences – both physical and metaphorical – to keep out external threats. The fears and resentment of the precariat are thus being channelled into blame of “the stranger”, i.e. migrants and refugees.

This general politics of fear is being mobilized against all new developments, a negative mobilization as argued by Comaroff (2011). This mobilization does not serve constructive programs but an anachronistic agenda attempting to preserve some illusionary past, infused with much nostalgia and anti-intellectualism. The “*arrogance of ignorance*”, as I have termed it, permeates many domains of our societies (Wodak 2015, 2016). It is obvious that when mainstream politicians join in the xenophobic chorus, they undermine norms of anti-racism and increase social tensions by encouraging prejudice and even attacks on ethnic minorities. In Austria, no *cordon sanitaire* exists against the extreme right, like in France. From a purely pragmatic point of view, voters prefer continuity over opportunists, as former Austrian Prime Minister Werner Faymann (SPÖ) discovered 10 days before the run-off election when he was forced to resign as Austria’s chancellor. It was obviously the case that the resignation of Faymann and the inauguration of former CEO Dr. Christian Kern, SPÖ, as new chancellor created a sense of optimism and positive awakening amongst the dissatisfied electorate and the Van der Bellen camp; the change at the top of the government certainly contributed to Van der Bellen’s victory.

However, this is certainly only part of the story. Many other factors have to be taken into account when trying to make sense of this recent turmoil: Broader global and European transnational as well as national and local problems have played a substantial role in an election that has been (rightly?) perceived as a decisive choice between a pro-European, internationally oriented, progressive world-view on the one hand, and a nationalistic, exclusionary and conservative stance on the other. Indeed, Van der Bellen was unapologetic about his stance on welcoming refugees, his support of the EU and conviction that the Schengen treaty is a cornerstone of Europe’s stability. Hofer, meanwhile, spoke just as clearly about what he regards as the urgency to secure and protect Austria’s borders and keep the EU from encroaching too much on Austria’s sovereignty, thus emphasizing an EU-sceptical position.

In this vein, right-wing populists are engaged in what one might call “*Project Victimhood*” (Müller 2016). Often enough, right-leaning majorities, as in Poland and Hungary, and possibly Austria and France (and the US!), behave

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like victimised minorities as if they were victims of worldwide conspiracies waiting for charismatic leaders (like Hofer, or indeed Trump) to save them from danger. Radical right populists always need enemies and conspiracies to explain why they aren't already in power, or, when they do get to rule, why their policies aren't succeeding and why there can't be any legitimate opposition. The EU has served them well in this matter. But it is certainly naive to believe that, even after getting rid of the supposed “dictatorship of Brussels” they would be satisfied. Populist nativist identity politics have been simultaneously directed against (supra)-national elites *and* migrants/refugees. As migration would not disappear after an exit from the Union as promised, for example, by the Brexiters, it's easy to imagine the obnoxious ways in which right-wing populists would mobilise their supporters once they might actually exit the EU.

The FPÖ also appealed to an old-fashioned nationalist tradition in Austrian culture: The pan-Germanic, nationalist fraternities or *Burschenschaften* promoting an idealized memory of a purified Teutonic and Aryan past, heavy with antisemitism and pro-Nazi sentiment. Mr. Hofer has courted them assiduously, arguing, for example, that the German-speaking Italian region of South Tyrol should be allowed to join Austria (a key nationalist goal) (Bieber 2016); indeed, Hofer is a member of the *Marko-Germania Pinkafeld Burschenschaft*. Moreover, at his inauguration as third President of the Parliament he wore a cornflower, a symbol of the illegal Nazis before the “Anschluss” 1938. And, finally, he declared repeatedly that May 8th (end of WWII, celebrated everywhere as a victory for democracy) could not be viewed as a joyful day of liberation from totalitarianism (many nationalistic fraternities actually view this day as day of defeat!). Furthermore, Hofer had announced that he would be an active President. The Austrian constitution (which has preserved a paragraph from 1929) allows the President to nominate a Prime Minister of his choice (regardless of majorities) and to dissolve the Parliament under specific circumstances. This announcement (*Ihr werdet Euch noch wundern* [you will still be surprised] implying shock at what Hofer would be prepared to do if elected), was interpreted by many as threat and insinuated collective memories of the Austro-fascist authoritarian state (“*Ständestaat*”) of the 1930s when the Parliament had been arbitrarily dissolved.

A Divided Society?

The Austrian election illustrates another troubling trend: a *widening class and gender divide*, and more specifically a struggle about the *right values*. While most well-educated city dwellers supported Van der Bellen, low-earning rural and working class Austrians backed Hofer. Austria hasn't seen such strong divisions in its electorate since the 1930s, when clashes between rightist and leftist parties and paramilitary groups triggered a civil war. *Gender divisions* also played a huge role. Significantly more women voted for Van der Bellen. The right-wing populist tendency to promote traditional gender roles, strong and strict fathers on the one hand, and caring mothers on the other hand (Lakoff 2004), implied – for many female voters – the patriarchal wish to control and discipline, once more, the female body in order to revive strong masculinities. Indeed, right-wing populist parties and their leaders (e.g. Marine Le Pen or Heinz-Christian Strache) seem to admire *strong political male leaders* such as Vladimir Putin, who manifest and implement (frequently against international human rights conventions) authoritarian, even dictatorial policies.

High unemployment amongst the young, less educated voters triggers both an understandable fear of the future and desires for change, frequently projected onto strong leaders. But it is not only the modernization-losers who tend to vote for the radical right (Betz 2013); in Austria – a country which weathered the financial crisis well – *themiddle class* is afraid of losing their work, property and status. And many envy the refugees for receiving protection and money which, they claim, should be distributed to “our people” instead of the foreigners. *Fear and envy* are easily converted into scapegoating and politically instrumentalized: “Others”, who take away “our” jobs, usually migrants, are identified as the root cause instead of inequality, austerity politics and neo-liberal policies.

Finally, it is important to emphasise the role of the *media*, both traditional and internet based ones. The complex interdependence between media, scandalization and a politics of fear (and threat) is a necessary and constitutive element for the rise of right-wing populist parties (Nohrstedt 2013). Nohrstedt provides ample evidence that “threats and dangers dominate in the political rhetoric. Political changes are driven by worst-case scenarios” (ibid). Media reproduce distrust and dissatisfaction amongst fellow citizens as individuals seem to feel more and more vulnerable and, indeed, feel completely and utterly at the mercy of unpredictable and unknown powers or developments which

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nobody could possibly influence.

Fear dominates the political agenda at the present historical juncture; and, of course, some of the dangers and threats associated with them should be taken seriously, such as climate change, poverty, fundamentalism, the widening gap between rich and poor, between the so-called “First World” and the “developing countries”. Mainstream parties would be well advised to address the many problems which have emerged due to recent global and local developments – they should not be swept under the carpet but confronted with alternative policies. Indeed, there is little doubt that the rising inequality across the globe is the primary cause of current social problems. As Judt rightly argues, “[I]nequality is corrosive. It rots societies from within” (2011, 6). Alternative policies and programs must be launched. If change reaches no deeper than the rhetoric, right-wing ideologies will merely become softer on the surface, more implicit and possibly even more difficult to deconstruct.

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