The growth of right-wing extremism in Austria

What lies behind the recent successes for Jörg Haider's Freedom Party?

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The large increase in votes for the extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in recent national elections has led to wide-scale expressions of consternation and concern extending far beyond the borders of this alpine republic.

Employing a mixture of racist agitation against foreigners, social demagogy and a campaign against corruption and nepotism, Austrian Freedom Party chairman Jörg Haider won more than a quarter of the votes, successfully capitalising on widespread disillusionment with the traditional governing parties of Austria.

Apart from a few short periods, for the last 50 years Austria has been governed by a “grand coalition” of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ), who share all official posts between them. Since Haider's FPÖ has replaced the conservatives as Austria's second largest party, discussions over the formation of a new government have dragged on in Vienna.

Up until now, attempts to explain the rise of the racist demagogues in the FPÖ have remained very inadequate. Hardly a single one of the numerous editorials and election analyses addresses the question why the extreme right wing has been able to develop its influence in Austria, a country where the social democrats have been in power for decades and have provided the chancellor for the past 14 years.

Some commentaries recall that Jörg Haider was forced to resign as prime minister from the Kärnten state parliament in 1991 after he described the “social policies of Adolf Hitler” as “exemplary”. But more often they conclude that the FPÖ should be allowed to participate in the federal government in order to “disenchant” it.

A closer look at social relations in Austria clearly shows that mere reference to the neo-fascist traditions of the party are not sufficient to characterise the organisation today. The party's programmatic conceptions bear the imprint of influential employers' organisations and neo-liberal social theories. In this respect, “yesterday's men” could very possibly become the party of tomorrow. Should Europe's social-democratic governments prove incapable of dismantling the structures of the welfare state against the resistance of the general population, right-wing parties similar to the FPÖ could arise elsewhere, or be created.

Despite all the peculiarities of Austria, the rise of the FPÖ is bound up with the end of the post-war policies of social equilibrium and the collapse of the traditional party system in many countries.

The election success of the FPÖ at the beginning of October was no surprise. Rather, it formed the pinnacle of a series of election successes for the party over the last 15 years. Since its foundation in 1956 up until the 80s, the FPÖ regularly polled between 5.5 and 7.5 percent of the vote. In federal elections in November 1986 it increased its vote to nearly 10 percent, beginning a course that has led to it becoming the second largest party in Austria.

Since its election success in Kärnten (29 percent), where FPÖ leader Haider was once again elected to the post of state prime minister this spring, the FPÖ likes to describe itself as the most successful right-wing party in western Europe.

That the roots of the FPÖ are to be found in the fascist milieu of the immediate post-war years is incontrovertible. There is an organised and deeply anchored German-nationalist camp in Austrian society, whose origins reach back into the nineteenth century. During the period of Nazi rule most of its supporters were members of Hitler's own NSDAP.

Following the war, the Organisation of Independents (VDU—Verband der Unabhängigen), founded in 1949, played an important role in grouping together the right-wing spectrum in Austria. The VDU was dissolved to become the Freedom Party in 1956, and the new organisation's chairman was the high-ranking NSDAP functionary Anton Reinthaller.

At this time, the FPÖ concentrated on campaigns for the rehabilitation of “former” Nazis. Reinthaller's replacement as chairman (between 1958 and 1978) was Frederich Peter, a former officer in Hitler's Waffen SS.

The 70s witnessed the emergence of a liberal wing, primarily amongst the party intellectuals, the so-called “Attersee Circle”. At the beginning of the 80s they were able to take over leadership of the party and entered a coalition with the SPÖ in 1983. However, under the leadership of Haider, the right wing in the party was quickly reorganised and just three years later he won control of the party. Since 1986 Haider has dominated the FPÖ and imposed his own authoritarian style of leadership.

The rapid growth of the FPÖ is closely bound up with particular conditions existing in Austria.

Following defeat in World War Two and the collapse of the Nazi regime, there was even less of an attempt in Austria than was the case in Germany to seriously address the issue of fascism, despite the intimate collaboration of the Austrian ruling classes with Hitler. The common aim of all parties was to move on to political “business as usual” as soon as possible, and after the war the pre-war constitution of the First Republic was adopted once again.

Until 1966 Austria was exclusively governed by a grand coalition under the leadership of the ÖVP.

This consensus “was supported by all important political forces and developed the basis for all policies”.[1] All public offices and functions in the state sector (nationalised companies) were filled following consultations between the parties. The system of proportional representation, written into the Austrian constitution since 1920, was elevated to the function of an overriding principle.

“Posts are allocated according to party political criteria and spheres of economic interest distributed according to ideological expediency.... Social Democrats and Christian Democrats hold the balance of power at

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the top levels of the bureaucracy."[2]

None of the social democratic governments that followed were prepared to rock the boat. On the contrary, the close mesh of party and state bureaucracy at the head of the economy and society was steadily built up and established the basis for a rapid and all-embracing corruption.

Austria's economy is characterised by a large number of small and medium-sized factories that co-exist with the substantial sector of the economy in state hands. Because of their relative weakness in terms of capital, the private factories are primarily orientated to the domestic market. The opening up of the east European states after the collapse of Stalinism, the entry of Austria into the European Union and the consequences of globalisation have increased competition and reduced the political and economic room for manoeuvre for traditional forms of social collaboration in Austria.

A part of the *Mittelstand* (middle class) feels that its social status and its material security are under threat. It is among such layers that the FPÖ has won new supporters and voters.

Since the 80s, the coalition government led by the social democrats has undertaken drastic changes to the economy. The new formula was to consolidate the national budget through cutting back state debt and reducing the level of new debt. As in all other European countries social security payments were cut. The social climate became increasingly bleak.

The system of proportional representation served basically to maintain the existing relations of power of the big parties and to prevent opposition against the government policies. Increasingly the political establishment developed into a stronghold for economic favouritism and nepotism and more and more took the form of an organised conspiracy against the people as a whole.

From the beginning, FPÖ policy under Haider was aimed at the "uncontrolled dictatorship of the apparatus". The party equated the mechanisms of social equilibrium, i.e., the achievements of the welfare state, with the "domination of the proportional [representation] parties" and demanded: " Yes to freedom, no to compulsion!"

In this way the FPÖ was able to capitalise on growing dissatisfaction with the totally decrepit party system. Haider repeatedly emphasised that "the aim is to complete the liberal ideas of constitutional and free rights through the liberation of the people from the political parties.... By this means the power cartels of the grand coalition, into which both the main parties have fled in order to maintain their areas of power, will be stripped of their significance."[3]

In 1985 the FPÖ agreed on a programme at its Salzburg conference that can be described as a synthesis of national and neo-liberal components. Together with the Haider's 1992 Vienna statement, this forms the theoretical basis of the political conceptions of the FPÖ.

The party's social and political conceptions are generally directed against every form of social egalitarianism, and in particular against the welfare state. In Austria, social partnership is regulated through a bureaucratic system and compulsory membership of various *Kammern* ("chambers"). Alongside the national economic chamber there are various other chambers for commerce and industry, as well as labour. Thus the FPÖ describes every measure concerning the welfare state as compulsion and a threat to freedom. Their campaign against welfare-state regulations is presented as a "struggle for freedom".

"Egalitarianism is the enemy of freedom" according to the FPÖ programme. "According to how you interpret the issue and take the concept of equality not in the sense of equal status, but rather literally, then liberty and equality are not only incompatible, but contradict one another.... Regarded generally, the consequence of freedom can never be equality," explained Dr. Gerulf Stix, one of the theoreticians of the FPÖ.[4]

The FPÖ wants a new "Third Republic", by which it understands an authoritarian society based on neo-liberal theories and dominated by market relations. The most important element of a "free economy" for the FPÖ is private property.

"The recognition of private property is a basic requirement for every form of free society. We want as much property as possible in a variety of forms to reside in private hands and be broadly distributed, especially the means of production"; "Politics should not be limited to the protection of existing property, but should ensure that every individual can, through their own efforts, actually acquire property."[5]

Such conceptions strongly recall Margaret Thatcher's propaganda about "people's capitalism", by which the former British Prime Minister mobilised sections of the middle class in a campaign to dismantle the welfare state system. The FPÖ is also seeking to find broad acceptance for measures such as rationalisation, flexibility, wage cuts and the abolition of measures designed to protect the rights and conditions of ordinary workers.

The dismantling of social standards is directly bound up with attacks on democratic rights and parliamentary structures. While it vigorously attacks the role of the state in the sphere of social issues, the FPÖ demands, in the main, a stronger state apparatus designed to subordinate working people to the discipline of international finance interests.

The systematic racist agitation and deliberate stirring up of every form of hostility to foreign workers carried out by the FPÖ since the end of the 80s must be understood in light of the party's economic and social policies. Firstly, their racism serves to mobilise the most backward sections of society and to transform growing social tensions into the division of all the oppressed.

Secondly, through the introduction of a so-called "seasonal model", the stripping away of all rights for foreign workers is envisaged as a means of establishing a cheap wage sector which, in turn, can be utilised to negate the existing union-employer contract system governing wages and conditions.

"Residence and work permits for persons coming from non-EU countries should be allocated on the basis of seasonal demand, the capacities of the various branches of the economy and the supply situation on the Austrian jobs market"; " Fundamentally, it is an issue of establishing a cheap, and extremely flexible reserve army possessing no legal rights which is at the disposition of the Austrian economy."[6]

Above all, it is the issue of foreign workers that makes clear who really bears responsibility for the rapid growth of the right-wing radicals. The reaction of the social democrats to the increasing influence of Haider is to adopt the FPÖ's slogans and, as they say themselves, seek "to make them superfluous". In this way, the SPÖ plays an essential role in spreading the poison of racism in society and drives political relations further and further to the right. Haider looks on approvingly and applauds.

Therefore it is hopeless to attempt to undermine the influence of the FPÖ by strengthening the hand of the traditional parties. The rise of the ultra-right is a consequence of the political dilapidation and rottenness of these parties. What is necessary is the political renewal of the workers movement on the basis of a socialist programme that opposes the right-wing demagogues with an international strategy for the working class.

Notes:

1. Ralf Ptak, *Wollt ihr den totalen Markt? Der Neoliberalismus und die extreme Rechte*, (*Do you want the total market? Neo-liberalism and the extreme right*) Munich, p. 200
2. Hubertus Czernin, *Der Haidermacher* (*The Haider-maker*), Vienna, 1997, p. 143
3. Freiheitliches Bildungswerk, *Freiheitliche Thesen zur politischen Erneuerung Austria* (*Liberal theses for the political renewal of Austria*), Vienna, 1994, p. 4
4. Gerulf Stix, *Die Stunde des EuroLiberalismus. Liberalismus und Nationalismus im neuen Europa* (*The hour of Euro-liberalism. Liberalism and nationalism in the new Europe*), Vienna, 1991

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5. Programme of the Austrian Freedom Party, 1985
6. Ralf Ptak, loc. cit., p. 220

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