‘Keep right and carry on!’

How Austria’s right-wing populists have changed the entire political culture

As the playwright Friedrich Hebbel’s once quipped: ‘Austria is a world unto itself – in which the world itself holds its dress rehearsals’.

When it comes to how the country has dealt with the challenge of the right-wing populist Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ), his witticism contains more than a grain of truth.

Whilst other Western democracies are only beginning to grapple with the appropriate response to elected far-right politicians, Austrians have been asking the same questions for decades: does the media help the far-right by reporting on it (what Margaret Thatcher termed the ‘oxygen of publicity’), or is media scrutiny the best way to discredit extremist policies?

The rise of social media has been a boon for the FPÖ. The party now communicates primarily through Facebook, sidestepping established media channels and creating a bubble in which its own opinions go unchallenged.

The FPÖ’s political opponents have tried every conceivable tactic to limit its influence. Over the past seventy years mainstream parties have variously shut the FPÖ out of government, distanced themselves from its views, wooed it and aped it. They have even gone into coalition with the FPÖ: once in the 1980s, and once at the beginning of the 2000s. Each strategy has aimed to weaken the far-right; each one has failed to do so.

That means moderates from the Austrian social democrats and conservatives have little concrete advice to offer their cousins in Berlin, who were left reeling after the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) won over 90 seats in the German Bundestag last month.

Waltzing with the enemy

Founded in 1949, the FPÖ has always played some sort of role in Austrian post-war politics. Issuing from the Verband der Unabhängigen (Federation of Independents – VdU), a kind of holding tank for former Nazis, the party still recruits its functionaries primarily from nationalist, often extremist student fellowships known as Burschenschaften. Austria's Allied occupiers and even the Social Democrats tolerated the VdU, hoping it would split and weaken the right. So in a way, Austria's post-war socialists were partly responsible for creating a party that, in the 1990s, would go on to rob them of their working class electoral base. Historian Oliver Rathkolb has called this the 'original sin' of Austria's post-war Second Republic.

Until the late 1960s, the FPÖ remained a minor nationalist, liberal force. It provided the two main parties of government – the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (Social Democratic Party of Austria, SPÖ) and the conservative Österreichische Volkspartei (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) – with a useful foil. 'Accept an SPÖ/ÖVP coalition', they would tell voters, 'or we'll rule with the nasty party!'

The first politician to make good on this threat was the SPÖ's Bruno Kreisky, who spent years trying to refashion the FPÖ into a liberal-democratic party along the lines of Germany's FDP. He wanted to create a plausible alternative to a coalition with the conservative ÖVP.

Following the 1970 election, Kreisky became Chancellor of a minority social-democratic government, which the FPÖ supported in a confidence and supply arrangement. A year later Kreisky called fresh elections, won an outright majority, and spent the next 13 years steering Austria through a series of progressive reforms – including equality legislation, decriminalising homosexuality and abortion, and reducing the working week. Following losses in the 1983 election, Kreisky's successor Fred Sinowatz entered into coalition with the FPÖ.

Three years later the charismatic Jörg Haider took over the FPÖ leadership, putting to an end Kreisky's attempts to liberalise the right-wing party. Franz Vanitzky, the SPÖ's new leader, immediately exited the coalition, and promised never to let his party govern with Haider.

As magnetic as he was ruthless, Haider moulded the FPÖ into the right-wing populist party it is today. By the 1999 general election, the party had garnered 27 per cent of the vote. It became the second-largest party in the Austrian parliament and joined a coalition for the second time,

this time with the conservative ÖVP under Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel.

Schüssel justified his decision to include the FPÖ by arguing the hard work of governing a country would 'subdue' the right-wingers. Indeed, FPÖ ministers found themselves utterly out of their depth. Meanwhile, much of the FPÖ's membership dropped its support, angered that ministers had compromised on hard-line policies whilst in government.

In 2002 the party's leadership resigned, leading to fresh elections. Support for the FPÖ sank to just 10 per cent. Nonetheless, it continued its coalition with the ÖVP.

In 2005, Haider split off from the FPÖ and set up his own party – the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (Alliance for the Future of Austria, BZÖ). His rival Heinz-Christian Strache took over the FPÖ leadership.

When Haider died in a car accident in 2008, many predicted the end of Austrian right-wing nationalism. But under Strache the FPÖ regained its standing. Progressives were forced to admit they had been too hasty in writing the party off.

How boredom breeds rebellion

So how is right-wing populism able to flourish in a wealthy, stable, and peaceful country such as Austria?

In a way, it is the country's very stability that breeds its extremist tendencies. Since the end of World War II, Austrian politics has been dominated by the two largest parties, SPÖ and ÖVP, who tend to rule together in grand coalitions. Alternatives necessarily come from the fringes.

At the same time, Austrian voters have a remarkably authoritarian streak, documented in several sociological studies. Austria's history of monarchy, aristocracy and strong social stratification – and of course its time under National Socialism – have produced a longing for a 'strong man' at the helm.

Post-1945, Austria did not go through the same process of re-education and de-Nazification as Western Germany did. It wasn't until the 1970s that Austria developed a plural media landscape comparable with that of its northern neighbour. And left-wing protest parties have always struggled to make themselves heard. Even the Austrian Greens are fairly

conservative.

Whilst current FPÖ leader Strache lacks Jörg Haider's charisma and intellect, he is a tenacious and adaptable opposition politician who has professionalised his operations to a high degree. He has swapped Haider's anti-Semitism for anti-Islamism, and traded his predecessor's somewhat outmoded Greater German Nationalism for a folkloric Austrian patriotism. In the 2013 general elections, the FPÖ got a 20 per cent share of the vote. Current polls have it running at 25 per cent, ahead of nationwide elections to be held on 15 October 2017.

Kern and Kurz: 'last rolls of the dice'

Both the SPÖ and the ÖVP are heading into the elections with new leaders – effectively 'last rolls of the dice' for Austria's two main parties – as they try to retain their dominance.

SPÖ-chief Christian Kern, who became Chancellor last year, has put an end to the cordon sanitaire established by Vranitzky in 1986. Not all social democrats are happy with the move, especially the younger generation who have learnt to 'keep their hands clean' of the far-right.

The doctrine of 'exclusion' has also proved useful for the FPÖ. Haider loved nothing more than to play the martyr, portraying his party as the victim of an Establishment stitch-up.

Kern replaced the Vranitzky doctrine with list of criteria for coalition talks – and then launched an undisguised sally into the FPÖ's electoral territory, addressing its voters as lost social democrats. His strategy was to treat FPÖ voters as equals, rather than talk down to them as racists, or as those 'left-behind' by modern politics.

At the SPÖ conference in June 2016, Kern said his party should not tell FPÖ voters they need to believe in multiculturalism or that they have somehow 'misunderstood' centre-left policies. Rather, 'we have to show them that we always were their party and that we now want to work with and for them again'. In September this year, Kern challenged Strache to a TV debate, treading an increasingly fine line between listening to the concerns of FPÖ voters and needlessly improving the standing of their leader.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em

Sebastian Kurz, Austria's 31-year-old foreign minister and head of the

ÖVP, has chosen a far easier path in his dealings with the FPÖ. Rather than trying to attract the party's voters whilst remaining true to his own convictions, Kurz is simply adopting FPÖ positions. Under his leadership, the ÖVP is looking like a more successful version of the FPÖ, leaving Strache little other recourse than to boo from the side-lines that he is the original and Kurz the copy.

It's clear why the two major parties are courting FPÖ voters. They feel threatened. Throughout 2016, the FPÖ was polling at between 30 and 35 per cent. The refugee crisis put its core values – safety, integration, migration – at the centre of public discourse.

The 2016 presidential elections were a clear sign voters are fed up with the status quo. For the first time in Austria's post-war history, neither candidate from the two main parties made it into the second round. Instead, the FPÖ's Norbert Hofer stood against the eventual winner, Alexander Van der Bellen – an independent nominated by the Greens.

Current polls show Kurz well in the lead. He has pulled the entire political discourse in Austria further to the right, while the FPÖ's panicked cries ring ever shriller.

No matter how the SPÖ and ÖVP try to hem in the FPÖ, it always bounces back. The general election on 15 October will show which of the current strategies – Kurz's aping of far-right policies, or Kern's direct appeals to their voters – will pay off.



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