

History in the Making #3**Some Wrongs that Made the Right: Austria's 2016 Election and the Global Intensification of the Political Right**

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On May 22, 2016, Alexander Van der Bellen, a pro-EU independent backed by the Greens, narrowly defeated Freedom Party leader Norbert Hofer, an opposition far-right candidate, in Austria's presidential election. The Austrian interior ministry reported that Van der Bellen won 50.3% of the vote while Hofer managed to capture 49.7%. As a result of this victory, Van der Bellen effectively prevented Austria from electing the European Union's first far-right head of state.¹

These election results are not only surprising when one takes into consideration Austria's national socialist past, but also alarming when cast against the backdrop of the recent upsurge of far-right politics on the international stage.

The son of a local Austrian People's Party councilor and electric power station director, Hofer was raised in a middle class family in Pinkafeld, Burgenland. He graduated from the Technical College of Aviation Technology in Eisenstadt as a trained aeronautical engineer, and from 1990 until 1991 served as a soldier on the Hungarian border.

A self-proclaimed Margaret Thatcher fan and gun enthusiast, Hofer garnered much of his support primarily among male manual workers. His politics promised to "put Austria first," and promoted anti-EU sentiment along with a very aggressive fear campaign targeting migrants. Though

a progressive candidate was ultimately victorious, Hofer, a man who during his swearing-in ceremony as Freedom Party candidate wore a cornflower (a Nazi symbol from the 1930s) in his lapel, lost the Austrian presidential election by a mere 0.6%.² It is unsettling to think that nearly half of the Austrians who voted in the election have perhaps forgotten what atrocities can occur when a nation is directed down a path of extremist nationalism with very strict regulations regarding the type of individual who is worthy of being a citizen.

As the current Brexit crisis would suggest, the election in Austria is indicative of a broader divide throughout Europe and much of the rest of the world on matters of how to deal with the migrant crisis, the economy, and how to balance wide-ranging national interests. There is an undeniable desire for swift action and strong leadership. People are demanding reforms in all sectors from education, to health care, to the job market. With tensions rising to a boiling point, many are seeking a group to blame for the current state of disarray. Sadly, in attempting to offer a resolution for western capitalism's current woes, the far-right have chosen to target the same groups of people who so desperately need our aid; asylum seekers, displaced people, and migrants.

While Europe and the rest of the world attempts to cope with the latest

humanitarian crises, especially those in the Middle East and Africa, the recurring question of how best to manage the rising numbers of refugees and migrants is a common issue of concern. The increase in migrant populations and the growing cost of resources have tested the domestic and international policies of many core European nations. The resulting responses have many on the left arguing for the provision of aid to all those in need, and many on the right who wish to shut all borders in order to prevent any physical, economic, or political threats from potentially entering into, and devastating, a country they call their own.

In promising to “put Austria first,” Hofer and his Freedom Party echo the right-wing sentiments that have become popular worldwide. The Freedom Party portrays itself as the protector of Austrian identity while simultaneously committing their party to the rebuilding of a social welfare state—something that they argue cannot be achieved if current immigration policies continue unabated. More specifically, Hofer manipulated the facts behind the recent refugee crisis in order to benefit his political ambitions after an estimated 90,000 migrants applied for asylum within Austria’s borders. Hofer emphasized and encouraged waning public empathy and made assertions that Austria did not have enough resources to sustain the needs of both Austrians and newcomers. Arguing that migrants would undermine the vitality of the nation, Hofer endorsed a very fascistic immigration policy, one which focused on “identity,” thus excluding a vast majority of displaced peoples. What is most surprising, however, is that Hofer and the Freedom Party’s lack of compassion

towards fleeing refugees is not an unpopular sentiment. Ethnic discrimination is alarmingly commonplace on a global scale and has undoubtedly become a growing factor in the ways in which public policy is formulated.

It is truly unfortunate that many local and national media outlets are often found encouraging the radical right’s message, both in Austria and elsewhere, that all immigrants are a possible danger by flooding broadcasts and webpages with negative images of refugees and the horrifying violence they have experienced. By presenting one-dimensional representations of the chaos refugees have come from, the media only helps to reinforce notions of fear in western audiences by implying that the chaos will simply come with them. In turn, Western media chooses to broadcast news of terrorist violence committed against the West, but blatantly disregards events such as the violent protests for education reform in Oaxaca, Mexico or the humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic (just to mention two examples).

A main fault lays in the fact that the media often refers to refugees in terms of statistics and costs, rather than as people, and rarely discusses the positive impacts that a rise in immigration can lead to. Many migrants, for example, arrive with skills and abilities that only help to enhance the human capital of the host country. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) supported this argument by providing evidence from the United States that suggests that skilled immigrants contribute to boosting research and

innovation, as well as technological progress.³

As is apparent to many, Hofer and his principles are not alone. Donald Trump for the American Republican Party, Marine Le Pen of France's Front National, and the Jobbik leader Gábor Vona of Hungary all subscribe to similar ultra-nationalistic, highly racialized, and discriminatory sexist policies. Recent developments like the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU will potentially lead to an even greater shift to the right and even deeper divides among already divided nations. Although it would be easy to equate the radical right to the insane squawking of unsympathetic people who have lost touch with reality, the sheer number of supporters indicates that the issue is not so simple. Those who choose not to associate with right-wing politics find themselves fearing that many have fallen prey to the alluring sounds of the pied piper.

Further reading:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/austria-president-vote-alexander-van-der-bellen-1.3596410>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/22/who-is-norbert-hofer-and-should-europe-be-worried-about-him-beco/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/23/immigrants-in-austria-relieved-after-norbert-hofer-defeat>

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1ca5e202-1cbe-11e6-b286-cddde55ca122.html#axzz4D5MzHkEV>

¹To access a more detailed review of the events of the Austrian election, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/world/europe/austria-presidential-election.html>

² For further reading on the Austrian election, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36362505>

³ For a comprehensive analysis of the benefits and limitations of mass migration, visit the website of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) <https://www.oecd.org>