

The Far Right in Austria Did Not Have a Rendezvous With History

Danger signals are being displayed in Europe warning that their countries are politically polarized and may be sliding to politically far-right authoritarian political systems. The torchlight in May 2016 was on Austria, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler in 1889, a country divided down the middle that almost gave birth to a victory for a populist, far right party, the Freedom Party (FPÖ), that was founded by a Nazi and still is considered to have pro-Nazi overtones. The FPÖ victory would have been a political earthquake in a country that has been dominated since 1945 by two mainstream political parties that now cannot deal effectively with the migrant crisis among other issues.

On May 21, 2016 Norbert Hofer, the 45 year old aeronautical engineer and candidate of the FPÖ, lost in a very close contest in the run off, second round of elections for President of Austria. In the first electoral round a month earlier, Hofer had gained 35.1 % of the vote while his rival the 72 year old ecologist Green Party candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, son of refugees who fled the Soviet controlled Estonia, had got 21 percent.

The two mainstream parties, the center left Social Democratic party (SPÖ) and the center right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) only received a combined 23 per cent in this first round election. The two parties are declining in popularity. In 2002 they received almost 80% of the poll: in the 2013 parliamentary election they got only 50%.

Hofer exalted in the fact that his was the highest number of votes previously achieved by a right wing party. Hofer

remarked "We had a rendezvous with history." However, he narrowly lost the second round, obtaining 49.7% while his opponent Van der Bellen won with 50.3 %.

Populist politics in Europe are gaining strength. In all countries the appeal is similar: opposition to the status quo, to the so called Establishment, and to the mainstream parties that have been in power since the end of World War II: economic discontent; growing unemployment; and above all demands for control over immigration and limitation of entrance of Muslims.

The European populist parties are anti-liberal, are opposed to conventional politics, critical of the European Union, conscious of political corruption, fear terrorist attacks, and anxious about job insecurity. Most are opposed to TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), the agreement between the EU and the U.S.

The vital question for Europe and for the democratic world is whether Hofer's strong performance will embolden further anti-immigration rhetoric in other countries and be the harbinger of more activity by the nationalist anti-establishment movement in Europe. Future elections will decide if the far right parties will be central in political life, or will remain simply extreme fringe parties.

Hofer would have been the first far-right politician to be elected president in the history of the EU, and his virtue tie in the election is likely to reinforce the ambitions of other far right parties that are similarly opposed to mass immigration and to what they see as the unacceptable effects of forced multiculturalism and globalization.

Using political results in some European countries, the numbers show the trend.

In Austria itself, the FPÖ got 30 % in local elections in 2015 and has 45 seats in the European Parliament. In France, Marine

Le Pen's party, the National Front (FN) got 14 % of the vote and has 2 seats in the national assembly. Le Pen is expected to make a strong run for the French Presidency.

In Hungary, the extreme party Jobbik got 21 %. In Finland, The Finns got 18%, and the party leader is foreign minister. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany, (AfD) launched as recently as 2013, under the leadership of Frauke Petry, got 4.7%. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party got 21%. In Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party got 29% and gained 65 of the 200 seats in the lower house of parliament. In Greece, the Golden Dawn got 7%, and is the third largest political group. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats got 13%. And in the Netherlands, the Freedom Party led by the energetic Geert Wilders got 10 %.

In all these countries the far right focuses on the same main foes: highest among them is immigration in general and increase in number of Muslims in particular. For these parties Islam has no place in Europe, nor should there be any "welcome culture" for Muslims.

Certainly, the migration and Muslim issues are central for Hofer and his party. Immigrants constitute one-fifth of the 8.6 million population of Austria, and another 90,000 immigrants came into the country last year. In Vienna, more than half of the first year students in schools are from immigrant backgrounds.

Hofer is a telegenic personality, a partially disabled man who walks with a cane following a gliding accident and who always carries a Glock 9mm pistol for protection. Hofer has been absolutely clear: "To those in Austria who go to war for the Islamic state or rape women, I say...this is not your home."

The Freedom Party tried to change its spots and erase the memory that it was founded in 1956 by a former Nazi minister of agriculture who was an SS officer. Hofer in drafting the

Freedom Party manifesto in 2011 focused on “identity”, code for native Austrians, not immigrants. He wrote of the commitment to a German people and cultural community, using the word *Volksgemeinschaft*, (people’s community), a term used by Nazi Germany to indicate a racially unified body in which the interests of the nation are superior to those of individuals.

In recent years the Austrian FPÖ, for electoral reasons or otherwise, has tried to overcome the memory of its former leader Jörg Haider, fairly regarded as pro Nazi and anti-Semitic. At that time Israel withdrew its ambassador in Austria in 2000 when Haider joined the government coalition. The present leaders of the Party suggest that they have tried to overcome allegations of antisemitism by their Party.

Hofer and party leader Heinz-Christian Strache claim to support Israel and both have visited Israel. Ironically, Strache who posted an anti-Semitic cartoon on Facebook paid a private visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Hofer has said that a visit to Israel would be a high priority if he became president.

Hofer is the golden boy of the far right, the well-dressed personality who speaks in moderate tones, the engineer with a friendly face and polite manners, but there are ominous signs. He has sometimes used symbols, such as wearing the blue cornflower, a nationalist symbol used by Nazis to recognize each other when the Nazi Party was banned during the 1930s, and used language familiar in the Nazi movement.

Hofer is not a historian but he and his party may have a particular memory. In September 1683 a Christian Coalition, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, scored a decisive victory in Vienna by defeating the Ottoman forces that had been besieging the city for two months. Many commentators have seen this as a turning point in history when the Ottoman Muslims ceased to be menace to the world. Hofer’s defeat

showed that history is not yet repeating itself in Vienna.