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Far right

An ominous warning from Austria's elections

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The narrow defeat of the far-right Freedom Party highlights the failure of mainstream parties to challenge the politics of fear across Europe.

By an extremely narrow margin, Norbert Hofer, candidate of Austria's racist far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ, by its initials in German), lost the presidential election to Green Party-backed candidate Alexander Van der Bellen.

Van der Bellen won by just 0.6 percent of the vote—a margin of some 31,000 votes out of the more than 4.6 million cast. Candidates of the center-left Social Democratic Party and center-right Austrian People's Party, which have traditionally held power, were soundly rejected in the first round of voting, leading to a runoff election between the viciously anti-immigrant Hofer and Van der Bellen, who ran as an independent with the backing of the Greens.

Had he won, Hofer would have been the first far-right head of state elected in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

Opponents of racism and reaction are rightly breathing a sigh of relief, but the narrowness of Hofer's defeat is unprecedented considering his party's historic ties to fascism—the FPÖ was founded in the mid-1950s by former Nazis and nationalists.

The election outcome should be a warning about the ability of the far right to grow across Europe, as figures like Hofer seek to scapegoat refugees as the cause of the economic suffering of working people—and traditional center-left and center-right parties do little or nothing to oppose the right's hate.

Hofer HAS been credited with moving the FPÖ away from its more openly anti-Semitic and bigoted rhetoric, but make no mistake—the core politics of the party remain the same, even if party officials have become more savvy about how they package them.

Much like Marine Le Pen's attempts to camouflage the Holocaust denial and virulent racism of France's National Front in past years, Hofer has distanced the FPÖ from the more overtly hard-line rhetoric of former leader Christian Strache. His motives are likewise similar to Le Pen's—to construct an image that will appeal to a new generation of voters that might reject open fascism, but are disillusioned with mainstream parties.

The Guardian wrote that Hofer's "slick, unashamedly populist, Eurosceptic but largely uncontroversial campaign, promising to 'put Austria first' with the slogan 'Unspoiled, honest, good,' saw him collect 35 percent of the first-round vote in the presidential elections, his party's best national score since its formation in 1956."

But behind slogans like "Put Austria First" is the FPÖ's insistence that some people—especially immigrants and refugees—be put last.

During the campaign, Hofer used crude fear-mongering about the supposed threat of refugees, especially Muslim men, committing violent crimes like rape. He promised that, if he was elected, criminal penalties would be stiffened and assistance to refugees and immigrants would be cut.

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Hofer likewise said that "Islam has no place in Austria," while drawing comparisons to the anti-immigrant positions of Donald Trump in the U.S.

One big difference between Trump and Hofer, however, is that the Freedom Party has a more coherent base of support on the Austrian right and actual roots in fascism, even if Hofer is trying to present a different image. As Paul Hockenros wrote in *Foreign Policy*, Hofer:

conveys the Freedom Party's anti-immigrant message without the beer-hall ugliness of the old right or that of less-seasoned like-minded parties elsewhere in Europe. He stands behind vague slogans such as "Austria to Your Feet" and "Austria First," which sound harmless but convey the message that Austrians should do only what's best for them, not unfortunates from faraway lands. Austria, he says, should maintain and tighten the restrictive immigration regime of the current Social Democratic-Conservative government. But he says explicitly that Muslims are swamping Austria and that Islam cannot be at home in Austria, sentiments most Austrians agree with.

This last point is important to bear in mind. If many Austrians agree with racist and Islamophobic ideas, the blame must also rest with other political leaders and parties in Austria that have not just failed to challenge the far-right's scapegoating, but pandered to it.

In the presidential campaign, for example, Van der Bellen ceded political ground to Hofer on the issue of refugees. In one televised debate, Van der Bellen endorsed the idea that crimes committed by refugees—like the September rape of a 72-year-old woman by an Afghan refugee—required a particularly tough response "because that is an attempt to occupy a certain public space, and that we won't countenance."

The FPÖ— can get a hearing for its anti-immigrant appeal because the two main parties in Austrian politics—the center-right People's Party and center-left Social Democratic Party, one or both of which have run every Austrian government since the end of the Second World War—engage in their own scapegoating of refugees.

Plus, the two parties are implicated in the neoliberal economic measures imposed on Austria—which has allowed the FPÖ— to win support as an opponent of European Union-sponsored austerity. As Benjamin Opratko wrote for *Jacobin* last December, commenting on regional elections held in October:

Sometimes, it's even been difficult for left-wingers to disagree with some of their positions, such as their opposition to the bank bailouts, their attacks on the "neoliberal" and "corporate" European Union, and their assertion that "rescue packages" for Greek debt servicing in fact benefited German and French financial corporations. "Unser Geld für unsere Leut"—"Our money for our people"—became one of their more popular slogans.

In an environment in which support for European crisis management has been almost unequivocal among the Austrian political establishment, this has put [the FPÖ—] in a comfortable position to re-establish their populism. The operative term in their popular slogan, of course, is "our." Our money, our people—they've made it abundantly clear who is, and isn't, included in this pronoun.

Nor is the FPÖ—'s claimed opposition to austerity genuine—as the party's previous ascendance shows.

In 2000, riding a wave of anger at the reigning center-left government, the FPÖ—, behind then-leader Jörg Haider, did well enough in elections to join in a coalition government with the People's Party. The FPÖ—'s fortunes declined

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because of a corruption scandal and disillusionment over the party's failure to deliver on economic promisesâ€”as it became a booster of the same neoliberal policies it now criticizes.

THOUGH THE refugee issue was central to this campaign, it should be noted that the rise of far-right parties like the FPÃ–, both in Austria and Europe, predates the current period.

According to Opratko, prior to regional elections in Vienna last October, the FPÃ– also deployed propaganda against migrants and asylum seekers. But that alone didn't explain the FPÃ–'s success last year, Opratko wrote:

A year agoâ€”well before most of the current refugees arrived in Austriaâ€”polls in Upper Austria estimated the FPÃ–'s support at around 30 percent. Earlier this year, before the refugee situation dominated headlines, elections in the southern province of Styria saw the FPÃ– skyrocket from 10.7 to 28.8 percent, finishing just 2.5 percent behind the Social Democrats...

The idea that the FPÃ– is merely profiting from anxiety about migration therefore conveniently overlooks the far right's strength before the refugee crisis.

Across Europe, parties like the FPÃ–, the National Front in France, Poland's Law and Justice party, Hungary's Jobbik party, and Germany's more recent Alternative for Germany have exploited anger with the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis, disillusionment with EU policies and austerity, and the failure of centrist parties of either the left or right to provide any alternative in the interests of workers and the poor.

Now, the European far right is focused on the refugee crisis to sharpen its message, blaming immigrants and refugees for crime, a lack of jobs and more besides. But the right is playing to anti-immigrant sentiment that already exists because traditional political parties paved the wayâ€”either tacitly or explicitlyâ€”with calls for border clampdowns and restrictions on benefits for immigrants and refugees.

Commenting in the Financial Times, Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society European Policy Institute, wrote:

In a climate of crisis around migration...the open society is threatened not only by extremist parties getting into power but also by mainstream ones reinforcing the same xenophobic logic. Recent events in Austria show that the politics of fear can quickly run out of control. After all, it was mainstream parties that agreed to bilateral deals with the country's Balkan neighbors to keep out migrants. The governing coalition has drastically restricted the right of asylum, in contravention of the Geneva Convention, according to the European Commission and the UN.

The logic taking hold across Europe is that we must turn inwards and build higher fences, physical and virtual, to ward off external threats.

Though Hofer lost, the closeness of the vote is a sign that the far right, if it is not challenged, can grow and even win political power.

It's imperative for the left to have a responseâ€”one that not only confronts the right-wingers themselves,

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ideologically and practically, but also presents an alternative to the mainstream political parties by putting blame for the crisis squarely where it belongs and offering a political alternative based on solidarity and freedom, rather than scapegoating and repression.

The mass demonstrations and strikes in France, prompted by the government's attempt to strip away hard-won workers' rights, shows the potential for such an alternative. As French socialist Léon Crémieux wrote, the anti-government revolt has broken through a gloomy period dominated by the success of the National Front and the parallel rise of repression and Islamophobia in the name of "national security" following the Paris terrorist attacks last year.

In a Facebook post thanking his supporters after the election, Hofer said the work expended on his campaign was "not lost, but an investment in the future," according to an Associated Press translation.

Hofer is right—unless we can build opposition to discredit and drive back the likes of the FPÖ— and the rest of the far right in Europe. That requires championing the rights of refugees, challenging austerity and standing defiant against scapegoating and hate.

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