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The far right in Austria: small on the streets, big in parliament



This is the ninth article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Bernhard Weidinger

Since around 1990, the state of the Austrian far right¹ has been characterized by the strength of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, more precisely translated as Freedomite Party of Austria²) and the relative weakness of extra-parliamentarian far right activism. Far from a mere coincidence, these two features are to be understood as closely linked: the FPÖ's electoral successes have brought far right causes and talking points unto the political center stage on a national level, given them ample media coverage and made street militancy increasingly pointless. Insofar, the Austrian far right spectrum could – at least until recently – be described as a photographic negative of the situation in Germany: successful party politics, weak bottom-up mobilizations and a comparatively low incidence of street violence. Currently, however, the long held hopes of German right-wingers for a party both in the mold, and strength, of the FPÖ are apparently being fulfilled by the emergence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Conversely, both legal and illegal street activism have been on the rise in Austria in recent years, particularly since the start of the asylum crisis in Europe. Numerous violent incidents were reported in 2015, including a minimum of **25 attacks on housing facilities for asylum seekers**.

FPÖ: the Austrian far right's center of gravity

The FPÖ won 20.5% of the vote in the last national parliamentary elections of 2013 – a moderate increase from their 2008 results, but still well below the 26.9% obtained under Haider in 1999. Thirteen years prior to his biggest victory on the national stage, Haider had taken over a party which had never even once reached the double-digits in elections to the Nationalrat. In the following years, he had skillfully ridden nativist resentment and dissatisfaction with the 'Grand Coalition' of social democrats (SPÖ) and Christian conservatives (ÖVP) to near the top. In 2000, the party entered federal government in a coalition with the ÖVP. With polling and regional election results plummeting, Haider then broke away from the FPÖ in 2005 to found the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), which took over all formerly Freedomite government positions and a large majority of the parliamentary faction. Since Haider's death by accident in 2009, the BZÖ has waned quickly, and is now all but defunct. The FPÖ, on the other hand, underwent an impressive recovery, winning election after election, and has been leading all national polls for months with record numbers around 30%. It also cleared the 30% threshold in the two most recent regional elections (Vienna and Upper Austria) in the fall of 2015. The key question remaining is, whether or not the Freedomites would find a partner willing to take the junior role in a coalition government. The ÖVP again appears as the most likely, if not the only candidate. While the SPÖ has thus far ruled out coalitions with the FPÖ on a national level, this commitment seems to be crumbling, particularly since the SPÖ in the Eastern region of Burgenland

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decided to form a coalition with the Freedomites last June. The rest of what has never been a French- or Belgian-style anti-far right firewall is rapidly eroding, consequently building on a policy alignment that had been going on for many years. Even as an opposition party, the FPÖ has managed to exert considerable influence on governmental politics since the Haider era. Just like during the 1990s, social democrats and conservatives are currently trying to slow the Freedomite momentum by shifting their own policies, particularly those concerning migration issues, rightwards. This strategy is apparently failing now, as it did back then, insofar it effectively legitimizes far right stances rather than weakening their party-political representatives.

Beyond its electoral victories, the FPÖ has, over the course of its rapid ascent under Haider, managed to integrate large parts of the far right in Austria. It acts as an amplifier for far right talking points and demands, shares its recruiting grounds (and repeatedly has boasted personnel overlaps) with extra-parliamentary far right groups, including neo-Nazi ones, and, rather unsurprisingly, is endorsed by those groups on a regular basis. As of late, the party has, however, demonstrated an increased willingness to **rid itself of representatives hurting its governmental aspirations with all too open hate speech**, or the display of neo-Nazi inclinations.

Pan-German student fraternities: the party's core

As an interesting peculiarity of Austrian far right politics, the central role of student fraternities (and, to a much lesser extent, sororities), is worth mentioning. An important part of the still-existent German-nationalist camp in Austria, which also includes a number of sports, arts, and folk culture organizations, they have been a notorious hotbed for far right activists since the 19th century. The *Burschenschaften* in particular, as the most political fraternity type in Austria, have been the primary recruitment base for high-ranking Freedomite officeholders since the founding of the FPÖ in 1956. This status diminished somewhat in the second half of the Haider era (1986 through 1999), and the subsequent participation of the FPÖ in federal government (2000 through 2005). Under chairman Heinz-Christian Strache, a *Burschenschafter* himself, the party has been leaning heavily on fraternity members again. Unlike Haider, Strache has remained loyal to them also as election victories kept coming, and the propensity towards a broader, vote-maximising approach to personnel and policy decisions grew stronger. As of April 2016, at least **18 of 38 Freedomite MPs and a majority of the federal party board (19 of 35)** are fraternity/sorority members. On a programmatic level, fraternity influence has contributed decisively to maintaining the German-nationalist and anti-Semitic tradition of thought within the FPÖ. The emergence of anti-Muslim racism as a central Freedomite topic and agitation tool over the past eleven years has pushed anti-Semitism to the background, yet **complemented rather than replaced it**. This holds true despite a **tactical courting of Israel** that some party strategists endorse (and that large segments of the party base frown upon).

The far right media scene: in state of transformation

Their privileged relation with the FPÖ is what has so far saved the fraternities from sharing the political irrelevance of other extra-parliamentary far right groups and traditional print publications such as Phoenix and fakten which almost exclusively preach to the choir. *DIREKT*, kicked off just a year ago, may have a higher ceiling due to its timely makeup and transmedia (print and online) approach. Both in content and style, it resembles the German *COMPACT* magazine: a strong penchant for conspiracy phantasies and left/right transgressions in rhetoric and topics, fervently anti-American and Putin-cheering to an extent that lets one

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wonder whether financial aid from Russia may be in play here. In general, the Austrian far right, including the FPÖ, has abandoned its traditional Russophobia in recent years, idolizing Vladimir Putin as a strong leader with a clear vision and a value system compatible with the European far right.

The internet in general, and social media in particular, have emerged as key propaganda tools for the far right all over the world, with Austria being no exception. The FPÖ, which chronically complains about an alleged media misrepresentation, particularly by public service broadcaster ORF, entertains a highly popular youtube channel, and Strache has more fans on Facebook than all current members of the federal government combined and leads all Austrian politicians by a wide margin in that regard. Still, the importance of the (social) web is arguably even more crucial for smaller groups due to the potentially big impact it affords at little to no cost, as well as the difficulties legal authorities often encounter in terms of tracing online hate speech and neo-Nazi activities. Facebook groups can rapidly reach big audiences – but also often turn out to be Potemkin villages when trying to transfer online resentment to the streets. The ‘Patriotic Europeans against the islamization of the Occident’ (PEGIDA), for instance, acquired a large amount of Facebook likes (and media coverage based on it) in Austria in no time, and still could not manage to mobilize more than a couple of hundreds for a manifestation. Hate speech in social media, both by groups and individuals, is epidemic also in Austria and has propelled a reform of anti-incitement legislation in force since January 2016. Together with the (NS-)Prohibition Act of 1947, the respective penal code paragraph (‘Verhetzung’, §283) is the most important legal instrument for combating (certain) far right activities in Austria.

The ‘Identitarian Movement’: fascism’s fresh face?

Finally, the so-called ‘identitarians’, an offshoot of the French Bloc Identitaire, deserve attention both for their media exposure and for their (potential) appeal to Austrian youths. While presenting themselves as ‘new right’, or ‘neither right nor left’, they are actually quite classical far right both in their theoretical references (Ernst Jünger, Julius Evola and other masterminds of fascism) and their demands (sealed-off borders, large-scale deportations, ethnic homogeneity). What sets them apart from the traditional Austrian far right is their relatively unambiguous rejection of Nazism (individual biographical episodes with neo-Nazism notwithstanding), their willingness to cooperate with, among others, Slovenian and **Italian fascists (Casa Pound)** in spite of historical border issues, a modernized rhetoric (‘pro-identity’ instead of anti-foreigners), a poppy, hipsteresque style and competent usage of online tools.

The asylum crisis has fueled the already rampant popular discontent over the Grand Coalition administration even further, and provided a boost for ‘identitarians’ as well as for the far right as a whole. Not least an effect of the former’s mobilizations, 2015 has seen a surge in the (traditionally low) number of far right manifestations in Austria, including some events in the countryside that reflect intentions to establish the ‘Identitarian Movement’ beyond Austria’s university cities. As the low turnout for these manifestations suggests, ‘identitarian’ social media coverage of their own activities and the excessively alarmist coverage by mainstream media inflate the group’s actual importance.

The FPÖ is sympathetic to them, presenting their activities as evidence of popular dissatisfaction with the federal government and honoring their efforts to politicize and activate young people who will, in all likelihood, vote Freedomite. At the same time, it is precisely the FPÖ and its strength that puts a low ceiling on the ‘identitarian’ aspirations. ‘We are the real PEGIDA’, **Strache claimed in 2015**. Likewise, they are arguably also the ‘real

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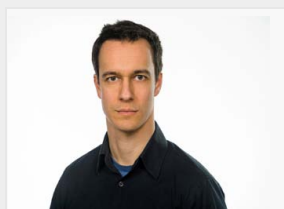




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1. In line with this blog series’ practice, far right is understood here as an umbrella term for the political spectrum ranging from ‘populist radical right parties’ (Cas Mudde and others) that operate within the realms of democratic institutions and procedures to openly fascist fringe groups. Ideologically, this spectrum, in my understanding, centers around three key features: anti-egalitarianism (most commonly as racism, including the latter’s ‘ethno-pluralist’ modernization, anti-semitism and sexism), authoritarianism and nativism. 
2. Apart from mirroring the German name more accurately, the term “freedomite” (“freiheitlich”) accentuates the blend of liberal and nationalist traditions of thought that is characteristic of the FPÖ and that, among other things, distinguishes it from liberal parties in other European countries. Other than liberalism, freedomite ideology emphasizes the collective dimension of freedom (the freedom of a people in an ethnic sense) at the expense of individual rights and freedoms. 

 Tags: [AfD](#), [Austria](#), [Burschenschaften](#), [facebook](#), [FPÖ](#), [hate speech](#), [Heinz-Christian Strache](#), [identitarians](#), [Jörg Haider](#), [social media](#), [student fraternities](#)

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