



Pegida in Austrian Politics: Invisible But There

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The failure of Pegida to play a direct role in Austrian politics is due to the dominant role that the Freedom Party, with their anti-immigration and Islamophobic discourse, already plays in the Austrian parliament.

After several rounds to elect the President of Austria, the Austrian electorate [recently voted](#) for a president from the Greens with a slight majority of approximately 53% of the votes. The polarized election campaign between a candidate of the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, and a candidate of the conservative-leftist Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen, was followed by the international press with intense scrutiny. When Van der Bellen, who was backed by the leftist camp and parts of the centrist-right Christian democrats, became president it was largely viewed as a halt to the ongoing success of Europe's far-right.

However, the FPÖ was leading in the polls for more than a year as the strongest party-elect, leaving both parties of the coalition, who had ruled the country for 10 years in different coalitions, behind. So in spite of the election defeat, Hofer's FPÖ remains a formidable force in Austrian politics and gaining 46.7% of the vote represents the party's best national election result to date. The strong role of the FPÖ in Austrian parliament since 1999 — which initially had led to a coalition from 2000-2005/7 — was also one of the many reasons, [why Pegida](#), an anti-Islam, far-right political movement originating in Germany, seemed to have not been able to mobilize on Austria's streets. This is nothing new for Austria's far right and extreme right.

Why does Pegida remain marginalised?

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Firstly, there is the dominant role the FPÖ already plays in the Austrian parliament. With the help of this central position in national parliament, the FPÖ's dominance on anti-immigration and Islamophobia issues in the public discourse is uncontested. This is also reflected in policy-making by the ruling parties that attempt to beat the right-wing populist FPÖ by coopting its policy claims. Another reason for the failure of Pegida to mobilize on Austria's streets was the relative scarcity of individuals capable of mass mobilization outside the spectrum of political parties.

Similar to Germany, the leadership of Pegida in Austria initially came from the hooligan scene. Although there were some contacts between FPÖ chapters and Pegida and even high-ranking FPÖ politicians participated in the few Pegida marches that only mobilized a few hundred protesters at most, Pegida was not fully supported by the party. The chairman of the FPÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache, even argued publicly: "We are the real Pegida". Hence, there was no need for a new right-wing movement, goes the logic of the FPÖ. At the same time, Strache embraced the policy claims of Pegida, while clearly stating that these policies had been part of the FPÖ's program for a long time.

The FPÖ has been leading in these issues since the 1990s and this has had a lasting effect on the rest of the political parties, especially those in power. The Social Democratic Party as well as the People's Party, which have both been in power since 2007, have introduced more restrictive policies in the field of immigration, integration, and Islam. And this has shown its effects. For years, the People's Party has managed to become the first in the polls again, after previously being left behind. A former member of the right-wing populist and leading thinker of the far-right camp, MEP Andres Mölzer, commented on the recent politics of the coalition: "It is very interesting that the Social Democrats

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and the People's Party do politics they would have condemned as being racist in the past". In fact, the current integration law under consideration would introduce a ban of the full-face veil in the public sphere. In addition, the government clarified that it would forbid the wearing of the hijab for Muslim women in the police force, and those working as attorneys in courtrooms.

Part of a broader trend?

One could legitimately now ask questions about what the 2016 election, where a far-right presidential candidate was prevented from gaining power, really means for Austrian politics. Considering Trump's election in the US, an especially pertinent question to ask is if there is some potential for a situation to emerge where those in positions of political power introduce policies in Austria similar to those advocated by Trump in the US. Trump's racism openly challenges the very foundations of democracy, and yet, as is the case with Pegida in Germany, it managed to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to protest against this far-right movement. Similarly, Hillary Clinton may have rescued some good politics like Obama's healthcare, but her presidency would rarely have woken up the people to face the existing problems of racism in the USA. Trump is not a new phenomenon, but rather an outcome of a movement that started long before his rise to power. This is the same in Europe and maybe the risk of having the far right in power will wake people up and force them to reflect upon the normative foundations of their democratic societies.

Meanwhile, political scientists can observe how formerly fringe positions of right-wing populist parties have become more and more mainstream. In fact, many of the restrictions on immigration, the securitization of Islam, and the cut in social welfare programs have become mainstream politics enacted by so called centrist left- and right parties in power. With this discursive success of

right-wing populist politics, one could even argue that their politics can already be seen in many social policies in Western democracies.

Image credit: [Bwag/Wikimedia](#).

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