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**Changing minds and political  
institutions: political development  
in Austria since 1945**

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In my presentation, I will analyse the post-1945 history of Austria from the viewpoint of two concepts: Austrification and Westernization. Both elements can be found throughout the history of the last 64 years – as complementary and contradicting at the same time.

By Austrification, I mean the tendency to form Austria in a specific way – different from most of the rest of Europe. Domestically, Austrification is the tendency to prefer consensus orientation over conflict orientation with regards to politics. Internationally, Austrification has to be seen as the insistence on a specific role in Europe and in the world – as expressed in Austria's neutrality.

By Westernization, I mean the preference Austria has for – to put it very generally – “the West”. Domestically, this implied a liberal democracy Western style – despite or because of Austria's immediate four Northern, Eastern and South-Eastern neighbours who had been under communist rule for more than four decades. Internationally, Westernization is the economic and – beginning with the late 1980s also political – priority for links to the West, as especially exemplified in Austria's application for EU membership in 1989.

In the first decades after 1945, Austrification played a stronger and especially more visible role than Westernization. But even from the very beginning, Westernization also had an impact – as could be seen in the electoral disaster of the Austrian Communist Party in November 1945; and Austria's participation in the Marshall Plan from 1947 on. And even during the last twenty years, when Westernization must be seen as the dominant trend, many elements of Austrification still have an impact – for instance, as visible in the low level of industrial conflicts.

Austrification, beginning with 1945, was also the trend to overcome the Austrian Pan-Germanism; Austria's inferiority complex vis a vis Germany; and the development of a rather robust Austrian patriotism. Westernization (and Europeanization) means the co-existence of Austria's patriotism with an orientation towards an all-European multi-level political system – a coexistence exemplified especially in 1994, when two third of the Austrian electorate opted for Austria's EU membership.

### 1945: A very special beginning

As a consequence of the outcome of World War II and as expressed in the Moscow Declaration of 1943, Austria was re-established in 1945 as an independent state within the borders of 1937. Re-establishing Austria's independence was part of the allied agenda for the last 18 months of their war against Hitler-Germany. To underline the domestic consensus of this internationally designed result, already on 27 April 1945 – more than one week before V-E Day, before the capitulation of the German armed forces – the Provisional Austrian Government declared Austria's independence. It also declared that Austria would return to the constitution of 1920 which implied that Austria underlines the continuity between the First Republic, which came to an end in 1934, and the Second Republic from 1945 on.

This international as well as domestic decision voided the "Anschluss" – Austria's annexation of 1938. Austria was reborn as a sovereign state after seven years of German occupation. The domestic decision voided also the development of the years of 1934 and 1938: Austria's democracy was reconstructed after four years of authoritarian rule between 1934 and 1938 as well as the seven years of totalitarian Nazi regime.

The continuity can be seen on different levels:

- Internationally, Austria was recognized in the borders of 1937. Neither did Austria win new territories – as some had hoped with respect to South Tyrol; nor did Austria lose any territory – as some had feared considering the Yugoslav intention regarding parts of Carinthia. The geopolitical decisions from the Treaty of St. Germain were confirmed.

- Constitutionally, Austria re-started where the Republic of Austria had ended in 1934. Austria, unlike France, Italy and other European countries, did not restructure its constitutional framework. With respect to its constitution, the Second Republic was just the same as the First.
- Politically, Austria was controlled domestically by political elites deeply rooted in the last period of the Habsburg Empire as well as in the First Republic. Karl Renner, the Second Republic's first head of government and first head of state, had been member of the Austrian Parliament beginning in 1907, head of the First Republic's first government, and President – Speaker – of the First Republic's last National Council. Julius Raab, the Second Republic's chancellor between 1953 and 1961, had been member of the First Republic's National Council since 1927 and – significantly – member of Kurt Schuschnigg's last government in 1938.

Renner (and other Social Democrats) stood for the continuity of the left which was repressed by the authoritarian regime which Dollfuß and Schuschnigg had built and controlled from 1934 until 1938. Julius Raab (and other Catholic Conservatives) represented the continuity of the right which also included the four years immediately before the Nazi takeover and the occupation by Germany.

But the continuity of the political elites represented a new element as well: A new political style; a consensus orientation, not known from the years of the First Republic. According to Arend Lijphart's typology, the First Republic was a prototype of a centrifugal democracy.

The political competition, the conflict between the major political parties, was not balanced by a basic consensus. Beginning with 1945, the same elites from the right and from the left, who had been unable to stabilize the First Republic's centrifugal democracy, radically changed their attitudes and their behaviour. They followed a pattern which had been (and still is) identified with Switzerland.

Power Sharing became the rule of the game in the first decades after 1945. The two major parties representing the social democratic as well as the catholic-conservative tradition developed a certain understanding of democracy – less competitive and more consensual. It clearly was not Westminster democracy:

For more than 20 years there was no change of government. The two major parties, representing more or less 90 percent of the electorate, ruled together in a “grand coalition” – a form of government that could be seen as the Austrian version of a “national government”.

And it was a popular form of government. From 1949 to 1966, the power of the two governing parties increased – until the logic of the common growth resulted in its predictable consequence: In 1966, one of the two parties – the Austrian People’s Party – reached more than 50 percent of the seats in the National Council. The result could have been Westminster democracy – one party in power, the other as the major opposition waiting for its chance to govern. And until 1983, this was the case: first, the conservative People’s Party ruled, and then – during what became known as the Kreisky Era – the Social Democrats were in power.

The almost two decades of one party governments had been characterized by two major elements:

- There was no danger whatsoever that the break up of the grand coalition could have led to the return of the centrifugal democracy of the First Republic. The democratic consensus among the major political actors as well as within society had been already stabilized. The Second Republic did not follow the path of the First.
- But the end of the grand coalition was not the end of the specific Austrian version of power sharing. Outside parliament, the network between the so called social partners – business, labour, agriculture – established after 1945 lived on although or perhaps even because the two major parties had ended their coalition. The Austrian way became seen in its specificity, different from the Swiss way: The emphasis was not so much on inter-party cooperation but rather more on the permanent cooperation between labour unions and the chambers of labour, both dominated by Social Democrats, and the chambers of business and of agriculture, dominated by the People’s Party.

## The post-post-war period

What can be seen as the Austrification of Austria – Austria's stabilization politically and economically by an elitist consensus orientation – started to be reversed in the 1980s. It was not the end of Austria's specific form of elite cooperation – but it could be seen as the beginning of the end. The visible indicators of the beginning of a reversed trend were:

- In 1986, the small Freedom Party – founded by former Austrian Nazis and backed by about one third or half of the former Austrian members of the Nazi Party – changed its strategic outlook. Instead of the dominant interest to become accepted and respected by the two major parties, as had been the party's strategy until 1986, the FPÖ began what became known as its right-wing populist orientation, a policy outlook rightfully associated with the name Jörg Haider. And this strategic change paid off: The FPÖ, limited to about 5 percent of the electorate for 30 years, began to grow.
- Also in 1986, a new party entered parliament – a party without any link to Austria's traditional political structure: The Greens. Using the system of proportional representation which doesn't create significant obstacles for new parties, the Greens soon became a small or even medium sized party, changing the strategic potential of the whole political system

Both developments of the year 1986 signalled a significant cleavage – the generation gap. Beginning with the 1980s, electoral research demonstrates an almost dramatic difference between the political behaviour of older and younger voters. The young generation was disproportionately attracted by the renewed FPÖ – and by the Greens. And, in a peculiar reversal of the traditional left-right pattern, the rightist FPÖ attracted (and still attracts) especially lesser educated voters with a proletarian outlook. The Greens, on the other side, for understandable reasons seen on the left side of the political spectrum, became the favourite of better educated young voters most of them with a “bourgeois” family background.

The changes beginning in 1986 – the rise of the FPÖ as well as of the Greens – had been the major reason for the return of the grand coalition. SPÖ and ÖVP restarted their cooperation on the level of government because the

only alternative to this coalition would have been a coalition with the FPÖ. This – in 1986 – was not seen as a feasible option, especially for two reasons:

- The election of Kurt Waldheim to the Federal Presidency had opened a Pandora's box. Austria was seen especially in Western Europe and the United States as a country of unreformed Nazis. Of course, this was – especially regarding Waldheim's role – a crude oversimplification. But the dominant interpretation of this situation in Austria in 1986 – and especially within the two major parties – had been that accepting the Haider-FPÖ as a coalition partner would add to the already negative international image Austria had to deal with as a consequence of Waldheim's election.
- The changing European situation, determined by the Gorbachev factor and the decline of the East West conflict was seen as a possibility for Austria to redefine its relationship with the European Community. Neutrality, for political reasons seen as an obstacle for Austria's membership in what was still seen as a West-European bloc, didn't seem to be as decisive in defining Austria's international and European position as before. But to forge an Austrian consensus – to build the best possible domestic conditions for an application for EC-membership – a grand coalition seemed to be the best possible form of government.

The main task of the first grand coalition, beginning in 1945, was to overcome the experience of the First Republic's failure – and to find a stable international position for Austria, between the Western and the Eastern military alliances. The State Treaty and the Declaration of Neutrality had been – in 1955 – the fulfilling of the grand coalition's international function. The main task of the second grand coalition was to bring Austria into the EU. And once more the coalition succeeded: In 1994, Austria signed the Accession Treaty; and almost two third of the Austrian electorate – more than in Finland and Sweden, not to speak of Norway – followed by accepting Austria's EU membership in a referendum.

But the second grand coalition did not benefit from this success. Unlike with the grand coalition until 1966, the voters turned increasingly to opposition parties. The FPÖ and the Greens profited from the fatigue with the two major parties which the voters – and especially the younger ones – demonstrated at the

polls. As after 1995, after Austria had become member of the European Union and the grand coalition's main international function had been consumed, it was – once more – a question of time until the grand coalition was substituted by a different form of government. But as neither of the major parties in their decline could hope for an overall majority in parliament, the end of the grand coalition had to come by bringing a third party into the government. Precisely this happened after the general elections in 1999, when the People's Party and the FPÖ formed a coalition. It was the governing role of the FPÖ, for good reasons considered all over Europe a right extremist party with a tendency to mix xenophobic and anti-European attitudes with a rhetoric that appeared to defend the Nazi past, which provoked the European uproar – the diplomatic boycott declared by the other 14 EU governments.

### De-Austrification as self-elimination by success

The developments from 1986 on indicated a kind of De-Austrification: The elitist consensus between the major parties and the social partners still did exist; but the elites were less and less able to control the political behaviour of significant segments of society. The membership in both major parties declined dramatically between 1980 and 2009: Three decades ago, the major parties between themselves could claim 1.5 million card carrying members. Now, the membership is about 50 percent of that figure. The younger generation not only stopped more and more to follow the signals sent by the Social Democrats and the Conservatives; they also became more polarized – as their dis-proportional preference for the FPÖ, a party right of the ÖVP, and the Greens, a party left of the SPÖ, signalled. And the electorate in general – after 1945 one of the most disciplined in Europe with a turnout of more than 90 percent – started to decline to a rather average turnout of less than 80 percent in general elections.

The De-Austrification was the decline of a benevolent democratic elite cartel. The founders of the Second Republic – the catholic-conservative as well as the social democratic elites – lost control. This has to be seen as a kind of self-elimination by success. If we see the benevolent democratic elite cartel as the necessary instrument to stabilize a country which – in the interwar period – was an example of failure; of political failure especially; a failure due to lack of self-confidence but also due to the lack of a democratic culture: Then the Second Republic must be perceived as a success. The democratic process has become self-evident. The confidence in Austria as a nation – before 1938 overshadowed by Austrian Pan-Germanism – is visible. Austrian patriotism, too weak in the

past, sometimes borders patriotic self-righteousness. Austria, defined in 1919 by Georges Clemenceau as the “rest”, has become a rather normalized medium sized democratic nation in the centre of Europe. There doesn’t seem too much of a need anymore for a special Austrian pattern of benign guidance from above.

But this success came at a price. And the price had been the dealing with intellectual and moral inconsistencies – inconsistencies linked to the Nazi past.

When Austria was liberated in 1945, a significant part of the opponents of the Nazi rule were either dead or in exile. The leading figures who re-defined Austria’s democracy came in some cases from the different anti-Nazi resistance groups, in other cases they were just survivors without being on record for resistance activities – like Karl Renner. But for all of them it was clear that they had to succeed in a balancing act: On the one side, strengthening Austria’s international standing as well as the national consensus by distancing Austria as much as possible from the Nazi regime. But on the other side, they had to live within a society in which former Nazis and anti-Nazis – perpetrators, victims, and bystanders – coexisted in a delicate way. And – as they were bound to establish Austria as a democracy – they had to win elections.

In 1945, almost 15 percent of the Austrian electorate consisted of former members of the Nazi party. Due to a special law, they were excluded from the first elections in November 1945. But was it possible to exclude 15 percent of the society permanently from the democratic process? In 1949, most of the former members of the Nazi party were re-enfranchised. In 1945, there was no party to speak on behalf of the interests of the former Nazis. In 1949, a new party was founded – the League of Independents, VDU. It was actually not a very new party at all: Most, but not all of the founders had a history within the Nazi Party. In 1955, the VDU became the FPÖ. To underline the rule of continuity, the FPÖ’s first chairman was Anton Reinthaller, a leading member of the Nazi Party in the rank of SS general.

ÖVP and SPÖ had tried to win some of the former Nazis for their own ranks. To a certain extent they succeeded. But the consequence was that no “cordon sanitaire” was established: As ÖVP and SPÖ had their own former Nazis, they were unable to draw a clear line between themselves and the FPÖ. The result was the tendency to play down, to neglect, to try to forget. In the 1960s, the last trials against Nazi criminals ended in acquittal – due to decisions of the jury.

The result: The Austrian government stopped the persecution of Nazi crimes altogether.

There is enough reason to criticise this development. But there is also enough reason to ask for the roots of such a policy. It was the consequence of building a democracy in a society in which significant parts considered democracy a naïve pipe dream. It was the consequence of building a nation state in which significant parts considered the very existence of this state a defeat – a defeat of their former beliefs and deeds on behalf of Greater Germany.

The founding elites of the Second Republic opted to accept but also re-interpret the Moscow Declaration: Austria as Hitler's first victim. By using the first part of the declaration and by neglecting the second part – that dealt with Austria's co-responsibility for Hitler's aggressive war, the Austrian elites had found a recipe which worked in the short run; but which created difficulties in the long run.

The moral and intellectual difficulties came out into the open when a new generation – socialized after 1945 – entered the political process. Members of this generation did not have personal taboos. They did not have to defend an active role in the Wehrmacht. They did not have to justify anything they might be held responsible for from the years before 1945. The new generation was free to confront the contradictions of the Second Republic: How come that prominent Nazis could play a role in the political system of Hitler's first victim? How come that leading SS officers, deeply involved in the holocaust, could be acquitted by Austrian courts?

The new generation asked questions. Not all members of this generation – but more and more of them. And then the Waldheim affair happened. Waldheim was the personification of Austria's inconsistencies: a person – wrongly accused of war crimes by some of the international media – who was neither a Nazi nor a resistance fighter. He was a survivor, who – to be able to survive – worked in the Nazi war machine not in a top position but not in a very minor position either. The problem was not the history of his survival. The problem was his failure to understand after 1945 that it would have been necessary to confront such a history. His history could have been made understandable – understandable for the critical parts of the younger generation; understandable for the choir of the international media; understandable even for the World Jewish Congress or for the mainstream opinion in Israel. But he did not speak about it,

but instead tried to forget about it. And he even seemed to have forgotten – for instance about the fate of the Ghetto in Thessalonica where he was stationed as an intelligence officer of the German army.

But enough of the tragic figure of Waldheim. Yet it is important to underline that Waldheim was prototypical for Austria's success – an Austrian who had been Secretary General of the UN, backed by all major powers; but an Austrian who had not realized that a new generation made a new openness necessary.

With Waldheim's election, its polarizing effect within Austria and its international impact, the main elements of Austria's national narrative changed. Official representatives like Franz Vranitzky and Thomas Klestil in their official capacity spoke out that Austria as a society had to accept co-responsibility for the Nazi past. School curricula confronted the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general and the history of the rise of the Nazi party, World War II and the holocaust in particular. Already beginning in the 1970s, Mauthausen – the major concentration camp on Austrian territory – was redesigned as a centre of learning. During the last three decades, most Austrian school classes had visited the camp.

Confronting the Nazi past with the delay of one generation after the liberation of Auschwitz is not specifically Austrian. It was Jacques Chirac in the 1990s, who – as the first French head of state – dared to speak out publicly about the deep inroads collaboration with Nazi Germany had made in France. In the United States, the debate about the uncritical acceptance of prominent Nazis like Wernher von Braun did not start before the 1970s. The Holocaust – the according to Yehuda Bauer “unprecedented crime” – did not become a dominant moral and political issue worldwide before a new generation began to have an impact on the public discourse – in Austria and elsewhere.

## Changing institutions and minds

As Austria's development must not be understood as being too different from others, this can be seen as part of Austria's already ongoing Westernization. Elements of this process are the parallels in the debate about Switzerland's role as a safe haven for Nazi gold – and about Austria's negligence in returning Jewish assets to their rightful owners. It was in the 1990s that this discourse became dominant – again, not only concerning Austria.

Westernization implies participating in international institutions. Already beginning in 1947, Austria decided to participate in the Marshall Plan – a decision leading to Austria’s membership in the OEEC, now OECD. It was Austria’s declaration of neutrality, which prevented the country from joining the European Economic Community in 1957 – but neutrality did not prevent Austria from joining the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), a kind of soft version of West European integration.

As the main impact of Austrian neutrality was to abstain from joining any military bloc system, the developments – started by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s – were decisive for Austria’s decision to apply for membership in what soon should become the European Union. As the Cold War approached its end, neutrality – the product of the Cold War – was no longer an obstacle to joining the European Union.

Westernization also means following certain trends – megatrends – which significantly characterise Western Europe. Some major trends exemplify this:

- Feminism: The decline of gender-specific differences in politics and society.
- Post-Materialism: The rise of values not primarily dominated by material interests.
- Secularism: The decline of religion in general as one of the most defining and mobilising factors in politics.

Austrian politics have significantly changed as the result of feminization. From the 1970s on, the percentage of female members of the Austrian parliament has risen from less than 10 percent to about 30 percent. Women have taken over leading roles in the executive branches of government – like female governors in the Austrian provinces of Styria and Salzburg. No federal cabinet seems to be possible anymore if it does not include a significant number of female ministers.

Post-Materialism is signified in Austrian politics like elsewhere in Western Europe by the rise and stabilization of a Green Party, focusing on environmental issues as well as on issues such as universal human rights and – again – feminism. And, like in other countries, the traditional Austrian parties have also, to a certain extent, become “green” – due to fear of losing influence over the post-materialist segments of society: younger and better educated Austrians.

Secularism has become an Austrian phenomenon despite the still visible dominance of the Catholic Church. But less than 20 percent of the Austrian population now go to church regularly. And especially the Catholic Church has become anxious not to be identified with a specific political party – a marked difference from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Austria's First Republic.

### Austria – still a special case?

What has been left of Austria's specificities? Not too much, I am afraid, but something.

The two major parties are more or less integrated into the European mainstream. The ÖVP is a rather significant member of the European People's Party as the SPÖ is a member of the Party of European Socialists. The Austrian Greens fit quite smoothly into the Party of the European Greens. That brings us to the phenomenon of Austria's far right. If we see the BZÖ – the Alliance Future Austria – as a more or less regional phenomenon of Carinthia, the particular Austrian specificity regarding political parties still is the FPÖ. Is the FPÖ a specific Austrian problem?

Yes and No. No – the FPÖ is the Austrian version of what is in France the Front National; in Belgium, the Vlaams Belang; in Bulgaria, Ataka; in Italy, the Lega Nord; in Hungary, Jobbik; in Denmark, The Danish People's Party. It is exactly this group of parties with which the FPÖ is trying to form a European alliance. But, yes: The FPÖ in many respects is at least one of the most successful, perhaps the most successful party within this group of far right parties in Europe. It is not the FPÖ – it is the FPÖ's electoral success that makes this party a specifically Austrian problem.

What is left of the institutions so typical of the Austrian post-war period? What is left of social partnership? This very Austrian institution has lost some of its capabilities – a result of the wave of privatization, starting in the 1980s, and of the implications of a globalized economy. But in its core business – wage policy – the Austrian social partnership is very much alive. And this means that there is still a significant impact on economic and social policies – an impact which can be seen in the low intensity of Austrian industrial conflicts.

Austria's political institutions have undergone some dramatic changes – linked to the country's integration into the EU. But otherwise, the institutional framework is rather stable – the rules of the game are unchallenged. Low-key federalism and parliamentary rule, both embedded in the constitution, have not been changed.

But what about the minds? It is still the success of the far right which provokes most of the serious questions. And it is still the answer which had to be given in 1986, the year of Haider's first national success, and in 1999, when Haider signed the coalition agreement with Schüssel and the ÖVP: The rules of democracy are not in danger. But within these rules, a party flourishes which is very prominent among the European parties of the far, of the extreme right.

The FPÖ may have some unique qualities – especially the tendency to play down the Nazi crimes. But at the same time, the FPÖ is rather similar to other successful European parties, lingering between right wing populism and far right extremism.

Nevertheless: The Front National has been completely isolated by the “cordon sanitaire” the Gaullists and the Socialists have managed to contain Jean Marie Le Pen's party. The Front National, despite its electoral successes in the 1980s and 1990s, never had a chance to shape government policy directly. But, again: neither in Italy nor in Slovakia has the far right been excluded from joining governing coalitions.

What I think necessary is an open discourse about the possibilities of a consistent “cordon sanitaire” in Austria. In the last 20 and more years, the two major parties have sometimes tried to build such a “cordon sanitaire” – and sometimes they have used the FPÖ as a bargaining chip. One day, the FPÖ was defined as an unacceptable partner for any kind of agreement – and the next day, the FPÖ was accepted as a possible coalition partner.

## Summary

The Second Republic has been a success story. It has been Austria's ability not to fall into the traps of the First Republic. Austria has become a stable, predictable member of the concert of European democracies. This success has its darker sides – the delay of facing Austria's responsibilities and the accept-

ance of the far right by a sometimes shockingly huge number of voters. But in its positive as well as in its negative aspects: Austria very much looks like an average European democracy.

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