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The FPÖ of Jörg Haider – Populist or Extreme Right-Winger?

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In his admirable article, Tony Judt has succeeded in portraying the essential characteristics of postwar Austrian politics, including the main problems of the country's domestic and foreign affairs. He has also dealt with the status and function of Jörg Haider's FPÖ, and attempted to place all these dimensions of Austrian political life in a European framework. While finding no fault with Judt's narrative or analysis, we consider it worthwhile to illuminate some key aspects of the development, structure, and politics of Haider's FPÖ. This is a democratic necessity, as Haider is adept at camouflaging his hidden agenda by dressing up his policies in democratic Austrian garb, thus deceiving not a few politicians and scholars at home and abroad. In the following pages, we attempt to show Haider's movement in its true colors, revealing the specifically Austrian contours of this "Ghost of the New Europe."

1986: The Shift Towards Racism and Right-Wing Extremism

The Innsbruck party congress of the FPÖ in September 1986 must be seen as a milestone in Austrian domestic politics. The change in the leadership of the FPÖ signaled a marked shift of that party to the extreme right, led to the termination of the SPÖ-FPÖ coalition government, and affected the ensuing general election, which produced a socialist-conservative administration of the SPÖ and ÖVP. Since then, Austrian politics has been characterized by an increasingly sharp and effective onslaught on the part of Haider's FPÖ against the government of the day. The attacks of the FPÖ are directed at the political system as a whole and have brought the party unprecedented electoral success and considerable political influence. The perspective of Haider's party coming

to power by means of the electoral process cannot be excluded. It is therefore of enormous significance for the future course of Austrian politics to examine the origins, structure, and goals of today's FPÖ, including its position in the political landscape. Countless evaluations of the Haiderite FPÖ have been published by politicians and scholars; the following summarizes our views.¹

The Complete Elimination of the Traditionally Liberal Wing in the FPÖ

Following the Innsbruck congress, the liberally-inclined group led by Norbert Steger was forced out of the party. Those liberals who did remain in the FPÖ finally left in 1993. Under the leadership of Heide Schmidt and Friedhelm Frischenschlager they formed a new party, the Liberal Forum. Ultimately, they split from Haider over his initiative to launch a xenophobic referendum on the question of foreign workers in Austria.

Restructuring the FPÖ from a Members' Party to an Authoritarian Movement under Haider's Diktat

Whereas the pre-1986 FPÖ was characterized by rival groups and political personalities in their own right, Haider's present dominance of the party is not in dispute, mainly because of the electoral gains attributed to his name. He demands unquestioning loyalty, and callously removes any (even potential) rivals (for example, his former Chief Whip, Norbert Gugerbauer) or even those who promoted his political career for many years (Friedrich Peter, Mario Ferrari-Brunnenfeld, and Kriemhild Trattning to name a few). All leading posts in the FPÖ are filled according to his whims, usually with people of low political caliber. Haider also decides the party line, and changes it abruptly and frequently. The 96 percent vote of acclamation he received as party leader at the Feldkirch congress of the FPÖ in November 1996 demonstrates that Jörg Haider is truly a "Führer" personality.

1 For greater detail, see Brigitte Bailer-Galanda, *Haider wörtlich, Führer in die Dritte Republik* (Vienna: Locker Verlag, 1995); *Handbuch des österreichischen Rechtsextremismus*, ed. Stiftung Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (Vienna: Deuticke Verlag, 1994); Brigitte Bailer-Galanda and Wolfgang Neugebauer, *Incorrigibly Right: Right-Wing Extremists, „Revisionists,” and Anti-Semites in Austrian Politics Today*, (Vienna: Stiftung Dokumentationsarchiv and New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1996).

The Integration of Extreme Right-Wing and Neo-Nazi Elements into the FPÖ

In the last ten years, there has been a reunification of sorts within the FPÖ's extreme right-wing Pan-Germanic groups, which had not been united for the preceding twenty years. Many persons mentioned in the *Handbuch des österreichischen Rechtsextremismus* can be found today in the FPÖ, including those who have made a career in the party or represent it in elected bodies at all levels. As the entry of such extremists into the FPÖ did not occur without the knowledge or consent of the domineering party leader, it is imprecise to speak here of infiltration tactics. In fact, it was more the case that traditional right-wing extremists were integrated into the FPÖ. Links between the party and neo-Nazi activists became evident. For example, it emerged that the youths who had desecrated the Jewish cemetery in Eisenstadt in 1992 (daubing the headstones with the swastika, the SS symbol and "Heil Haider!" slogans) were well-known to the then General Secretary of the FPÖ, Karl Schweitzer, subsequently removed by Haider. The accused had been taught by Schweitzer in secondary school, were members of the FPÖ youth organization (*Ring Freiheitlicher Jugend*), and one of them had stood for the FPÖ at elections. Many FPÖ politicians, not least Haider, received their political socialization in the Pan-Germanic *Burschenschaften* and other student or academic bodies, all of which consider the *Aula* magazine (published in Graz) to be their mouthpiece for propaganda and ideology. After the *Aula* manager had been convicted in court for neo-Nazi activities (Holocaust denial), Haider denied any links between the magazine and the FPÖ, despite the fact that he had supplied *Aula* with no less than twenty-five interviews or articles up to that juncture. The latest highpoint in the fusion of the extreme right with the FPÖ was an event to commemorate the onethousandth anniversary of the first mention of Austria (*Ostarrichi*) in a historical document. The *Festkommers* was organized by FPÖ members, the Pan-Germanic *Burschenschaftler*, and other extremist representatives of the "Third Lager," that is, those groups or parties not aligned to either the Left or Catholic conservatism. Haider was billed to speak at the *Festkommers* on 30 November, but declined under pressure. Many of the FPÖ parliamentary group were prominently in attendance and the party subsidized the spectacle with a large sum.

The FPÖ Moves Right: Haider Becomes Outspoken

The change of course in the FPÖ towards the far right is not only visible in terms of party personnel, but also in the utterances, actions, and policies of Haider himself. For our purposes, it suffices to refer to some of his better-known statements which disclose his extreme rightwing and neo-Nazi sympathies: defamation of the Austrian nation as “an ideological monstrosity,” his praising of “the proper employment policies of the Third Reich,” interpreting the world war Hitler launched as Europe’s war of defense against “Bolshevism,” finding words of praise for the traditions of the Waffen-SS, and condemning the verdicts passed at Nuremberg. Two key areas of Haider’s agitation have a special significance in connection with his public statements.

Haider’s Critique of Democracy

The permanent, systematic, and radical criticism of the “system” of representative democracy and of the political parties refounded at the beginning of the Second Republic in 1945 is of the utmost significance. At the heart of Haider’s fundamental opposition to the democratic system lies all anti-pluralistic concept of what politics should be, best expressed in his vision of an authoritarian “Third Republic” with builtin plebiscitary correctives. In spreading his views, Haider uses an aggressive political style which does not shrink from making unjustified, defamatory remarks or naming the victims of his vituperation in public.

The Anti-Foreigner Policy of the FPÖ

This aspect of Haiderite politics has overtly racist traits and aims similar to those pursued by the letter-bomb terrorists and neo-Nazis: the rejection of a multicultural society, a stance which has contributed greatly to a climate of latent or open violence against foreigners or those held to be friendly towards them. Haider rejects universal human rights unequivocally and on principle he has demanded that Austria withdraw its acceptance of the European Human Rights Convention. Presenting the FPÖ as a new “workers’ party” and calling for the establishment of trade unions under his control are two policies which Haider shares with Le Pen’s *Front National*.

In this context, one must address the question whether parallels exist between the policies of the FPÖ and those of National Socialism, not so much in respect to the mass murder carried out by the Nazi regime, but in the image the NSDAP projected before it gained state power. The historian Franz Schausberger, now Governor of Salzburg Province, has written a precise analysis of how the NSDAP helped to destroy the parliamentary system in Austria by means of the systematic agitation its elected members carried out in the provincial assemblies (*Landtage*) during the years 1932–33. These methods are quite similar to those used by the FPÖ: moving countless emergency motions in Parliament, tumultuous behavior in the Chamber, dramatizing real or alleged scandals and cases of corruption, campaigning against the salary scales of politicians or the privileges of the Austrian bureaucracy, attacking the cultural politics of central and local government, and making political capital out of cases of social welfare abuse. Other unmistakable characteristics of FPÖ politics are the leader-cult, the presentation of issues with propagandistic fanfare, and, of course, social demagoguery. The primarily anti-Semitic racism of the Nazis corresponds to the xenophobic campaigns of Haider, which are his best instrument for mobilizing voters at election time. Finally, but not conclusively, the dynamic of the NSDAP's growing influence up to 1933 can be compared to the successes of the FPÖ since 1986. In evaluating the policies of the Haiderite FPÖ, it is important to inquire whether Haider has moved away from his original political position, which was formed by the ex-NSDAP milieu of his youth and family. Peter Michael Lingens, a columnist in the Vienna daily newspaper *Der Standard*, who long believed that Haider was capable of changing for the better, wrote an article on this question under the title "A Run-of-the-mill Young Nazi." The piece, which Haider did not make the basis for a libel action although threatened to do so, contains the following key passage: "Haider is only pretending. When he speaks from the heart, he says things like those in his speech in Krumpendorf. Then he has to keep his hand firmly on the lectern, otherwise it would shoot up to salute."

In addition, Bruno Kreisky, in whose footsteps Haider maintains he himself is now treading, stated in 1988: "Then there are real Nazis, highly dangerous types In my opinion, Jörg Haider has become one of them."

The Camouflage as "Statesman" and "Austrian Patriot"

In reaction to the criticism voiced against the aggressive style and extreme right-wing content of Haider's policies, which impair his public image and

suitability as a partner in a coalition government, the FPÖ leader now and again announces his conversion to a moderate politician and statesman, thereby winning the approval of gullible parliamentary colleagues and journalists. His tendency to camouflage his real political intentions is most apparent in his newly-discovered “Austrian patriotism.” The traditional Pan-Germanism which molded the FPÖ since its inception – and Jörg Haider in his childhood – is still included in the FPÖ’s party program. The Pan-Germanic core of the “Third Lager” has proven to be a major stumbling-block in political debate, particularly as it now attracts only the stagnant segment of FPÖ traditionalists and is counterproductive in regard to the winning over of new voters. Haider realized this, deposed his ideological watchdog Andreas Mölzer, and stated that he rejected “jingoistic PanGermanism.” However, an analysis of his statements, those of his colleagues, and those from journals close to the FPÖ, indicates that this is not the case. According to the 15 November 1996 issue of *Junge Freiheit*, Haider, when renewing the traditional vow of his *Burschenschaft* (Silvania), said that one “must stand up for the preservation of German customs and traditions.” Hitherto, neither Haider nor his party have ever openly stated their allegiance to an independent Austrian nation fully detached from Germany, a statement which is a matter of course for all other political parties. Moreover, his utterances on Austrian patriotism are implausible, empty phrases, a playing with words.

The Austrian “patriotism” Haider now proclaims has two main political functions: first, to deceive the public about the consistently Pan-Germanic, and in the last instance, anti-Austrian, basic stance of the FPÖ; second, to mobilize or utilize xenophobic attitudes in the population. The fact that Haider’s right-wing politics dominate the FPÖ should not be taken as implying that the entire party or its voters share such views, nor that his electoral successes are primarily due to extreme right-wing politics or propaganda. Essentially, extreme right-wing positions within the FPÖ are held by old Pan-Germanic elements, by students, and by those extremists, mentioned earlier, who have been integrated into the party since 1986. On the other hand, many of the new party members have a hazy political profile and say that they are motivated by Haider’s personality and policies. His attractiveness is mainly based on the talent to present himself well in public, especially on television, where he slips into the role of crusader, fighting against shortcomings, corruption, and the system of privilege in public life, arguing like an advocate of the man in the street against all the injustice in the world. As many of the critical points he makes have substance and are, to a certain extent, subsequently rectified, he can easily promise what he, as an opposition politician, will not have to fulfil. He thus finds great resonance among

voters who are deeply troubled by the many changes in modern society or who have become the disadvantaged victims or “losers” of modernization.

Haider offers simple solutions for complex problems of a personal or economic nature. With its smear and hate campaign against foreign workers, who are portrayed as criminally inclined and who are unfavorably compared to the “decent, hard-working Austrians,” the FPÖ can latch on to authoritarian and racist feelings which are widespread in the country. With the assistance of the yellow press, the FPÖ can appeal to such prejudice and heighten its tone. In contrast, the antifascist criticism of the FPÖ, shared by only a part of the media, is obviously not getting across to the general public.

Haider knows that he will never gain power on his own strength, but will do so only in a coalition with others. He also knows that his lack of “respectability” is the greatest obstacle to this end. Apart from projecting himself as a democratic Austrian, Haider is also at pains to play the active Catholic, courting the favor of the right wing of Catholicism, that strain in the Austrian Church personified by Kurt Krenn, the Bishop of Sankt Pölten and a sympathizer of the FPÖ. On the other hand, Haider attempts to portray himself as Kreisky’s rightful heir, currying favor with frustrated social democrats. At any rate, Haider is determined to broaden the political spectrum of the FPÖ and has had some success in persuading respected personalities to stand for the party at elections—sportsmen, journalists, businessmen, managers, and judges, to mention a few. The candidature of Peter Sichrovsky, a journalist of Jewish origin, to stand for the FPÖ at the European Elections on 13 October 1996, was part of this new strategy. This candidate did not go down well with the FPÖ rank-and-file, but Haider hoped that the surprise of Sichrovsky would help the FPÖ to break out of the quarantine imposed on it by liberal, left-wing, and Jewish circles. The ploy was also designed to refute the charge of anti-Semitism leveled at the party and repair the negative image it has abroad. In this sense, the FPÖ can be seen to belong to the “New Right,” as an extreme right-wing party which is outwardly modern, but still disseminates the old message and slogans and endeavors to overcome the political stigmatization under which it has been placed since Haider’s ascendancy, so that it can win partners for a political alliance and increase its overall influence.

We admit that there are other evaluations of Haider’s FPÖ.² The extreme left, for example, is sometimes of the opinion that Haider is an ordinary poli-

2 See Gerd Kräh, *Die Freiheitlichen unter Jörg Haider. Rechtsextreme Gefahr oder Hoffnungsträger für Österreich*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Verlag, 1996); Markus Wilhelm, „Haider=Vranitzky,“ *Foehn* 21 (1995): 3–81; Max Riedlsperger, „The FPÖ and the Right,“

tician within the capitalist system, whose policies differ only slightly from those of the government; the formal anti-fascism of the State uses Haider as a decoy, in order to divert attention from the unsocial, anti-worker politics of the ruling coalition. Some social democratic politicians want to end the strategy of excluding Haider from democratic participation. They hope that the ÖVP would then be weakened, and do not rule out the prospects of some political deal between Haider and their own party which would consolidate the position of the declining SPÖ. Bourgeois commentators state that the FPÖ is a normal middle-class party, Haider just a populist without a political program or aims who wants to enter the government at all costs.

Such individual opinions do not stand up to rigorous analysis or answer the following question: What will happen when Haider is in power? The expectation that such a politician will sooner or later fail because of insoluble problems was the grave mistake made in Hitler's case and had disastrous consequences. Haider's contempt for humanity, specifically his targeting of party "rivals," political opponents, and foreigners, demonstrate what he now stands for in his oppositional role. We can only imagine with dread the wide-ranging measures he would put into effect as head of government: a profound change in Austria's political climate, the introduction of inhuman policies against foreign workers, and restrictions on the democratic rights of native Austrians. Haider has already announced what lies in store – forced labor for the unemployed and curtailing the freedom of the press, to give but two examples.

“The Ghost of the New Europe?”

By winning over 28 percent of the votes cast at the European Election last October, Haider's FPÖ has established itself as the most successful, extremely right-wing party in Europe, thus becoming a model for the far right in the other states of the European Community. Even if one does not agree with our estimation of the FPÖ as an extremely right-wing party threatening the contemporary political system, but maintains that it is a populist movement of the right striving to gain power by mobilizing as many voters as possible in order to enforce profound political change, there is little disagreement about the content and style of the policies of the FPÖ at the moment. The following components of

right-wing policies apply to Haider's movement, or serve as models for less successful parties of a similar political complexion:

- ethnocentrism, nationalism and chauvinism;
- smear and agitational campaigns with strong racist overtones against foreign workers, emigrants, and refugees, especially those from southeastern Europe, Asia, and Africa;
- rejection of the European Community, the Maastricht Treaty, and the common currency, the Euro;
- a permanent debasement of the parliamentary party system and of representative democracy, authoritarian tendencies, and hostility to pluralist politics;
- a social demagoguery which exploits the unpopularity of politicians and utilizes fears held by the population about the present and future economic climate;
- law-and-order sloganeering, overdramatizing criminal statistics in order to whip up fear and emotion;
- the charismatic leader, the cult of the leader, and propagating the need for „strongman“ government;
- portraying the world in black and white, propagating hatred and images or objects of hatred;
- an aggressive and offensive manner when confronting political opponents or enemies;
- staging politics like a show, especially during television appearances and appealing to the lowest instincts of the masses as practiced by the yellow press.

What political scientists call „de-alignment“ in Western Europe, that is, the erosion or collapse of the traditional links between parties and their voters and the „decline of great parties,“ has reached a climax in Italy. In Austria too, great inroads have been made into traditional voting patterns, a development which owes a great deal to the agitation of Haider's FPÖ. This process can be reversed. However, no signs of it are present just now. „The Ghost of the New Europe“ is indeed present in Jörg Haider's policies, in his reconstructed FPÖ. This perspective of a dangerously unstable political scene does not augur well for Austria's future.