

Presentation: "Antisemitism in Austrian Politics and public re(action)" / Florian Zeller

Introduction:

In my presentation, I will start of with a brief introduction of the Austrian political situation, to get you a feeling when I talk about the Government what kind of coalition we are having or had in the past years. In a next step I will explain in my opinion important actions been taken by the Government and what were the Effects. After that I will analyze and critique these measures and discuss some of the question being raised in the first Paper to this Conference. *"From Statements to Enforcement: Official Measures in Combating Antisemitism"*

(Is Antisemitism in the center stage of politics and is it Instrumentalized? Discrepancy's between Actions and the reality on the Ground? Anti-Semitic motives in election Campaigning and so on)

Recent Events:

First of I will start with the current situation because I think it's important so that you can understand how the government is linked to the situation on Antisemitism.

Austria is a little Country and domestic politics is not that often under international media attention. But now this changed I assume at least some of you heard about the Ibiza corruption scandal. Were the leader of the right-wing freedom party Heinz Christian Strache got videotaped on Ibiza talking to a supposed Russian rich oligarch about influencing media by buying a newspaper Companie and other corruption deals. After that so called Ibiza corruption Scandel in May 2019 the coalition between Freedom Party (in german FPÖ) and the Peoples Party (ÖVP) broke.

There were new elections in which the Peoples Party with its leader Sebastian Kurz finished as the great successor despite his government coalition just failed. What we saw was that many people who couldn't trust the corrupt freedom Party anymore voted for Sebastian Kurz and the weak social democratic campaign helped him to gain 6% and reached 37% of the voters. Now they try to form a coalition with the Green party which gained 10% with a total of 14%. The right extremist freedom party lost 10% and came in 3. Place with still 16% losing one share to Sebastian Kurz and one share to non-Voting segment.¹ If we talk about a future government at the moment it seems like we will have an coalition between Sebastian Kurz People Party and the green Party. Sebastian Kurz himself said several times the peoples party as a middle-right Party would prefer to lead a coalition with the freedom Party, but they do not want join Government since they lost 10% of their voters. That's just to keep in mind because a future Government will be under Sebastian Kurz leadership.

¹ <https://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen/waehlerstromanalysen/eu-wahl19.html>

However, when I analyse measures been taken against Antisemitism by the government it's the actions been taken by the coalition of the Austrian People's Party and the far-right Freedom Party. That's why I will give you a short introduction on those Parties.

Under this Coalition, we could see a rapid shift towards the far-right in Austrian party politics. This transformation is accompanied by a process of normalization that enables previously as politically unimaginable regarded opinions into the so-called political centre. Extreme-right content was not only promoted by the far-right freedom Party, but was to some extent integrated into the Austrian People's Party agenda and shifts the Party towards right-wing populism. Especially his anti-migration and economic cutbacks for minorities and worker. This discursive shift is described by the political scientist and linguist Ruth Wodak as a process of "Shameless Normalization". This shameless normalization is normalizing right extremism and thereby also antisemitism.² However, this does not mean that anti-Semitic articulations within other political spectra should be ignored, but since we are looking from a Government perspective this is the coalition I will focus on.

FPÖ Freedom Party in Government:

As I mentioned with Sebastian Kurz the Peoples party is transforming from an Christian conservative party to an right populist Party. His favourite coalition partner the Freedom Party however is ideological deeply rooted in Antisemitism.

Historically after the second world war there was the so called pan-Germanist "Third Camp" which was revived in 1949 in form of the party Federation of Independents (Verband der Unabhängigen). It was a gathering point for former National Socialists, German Nationalists as well as a smaller fraction of liberals. The party collapsed after an internal strife between the liberal and the German Nationalist fraction and the freedom party was founded in 1955/56 as a successor party of the VdU and as the new representative of the "third Camp" they were very closely linked to former National Socialists and the milieu of German National fraternities. (Fraternities are not like in the US movies, in Austria the German National fraternities are men's society's some of them having an antisemitic and "Völkische" tradition and today for example the fraternity Olympia has entanglements wit the neo-Nazi movement. (First FPÖ chairmen Anton Reintaller, former member NSDAP as well SS)³

As we can see the Freedom Party has a right extremist history, there were also some changes and shifts in the past 60 years but today they enforced their commitment to German Nationalist views. Furthermore they did not try to hide their ideological views and had about 80 public incidents of Antisemitism in the past one and a half year. Out of the party's 51 MPs 18 were members of right-wing fraternities, including five of its six chairmen. And this includes the described openly pan-German fraternities. (Kantor Report 2017)

Government actions Against Antisemitism:

² <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11615-018-0079-7>

³ Reiter, Margit. *Die Ehemaligen : Der Nationalsozialismus Und Die Anfänge Der FPÖ*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019. Print.

I Think now you have a feeling for what kind of Government was in power the past years and one of the obvious problems is that an Antisemitic party like the freedom party was in Government responsibility. Still I want to take a step back and describe the actions been taken by the last Government against Antisemitism.

Because on the Surface the measures been taken primally by the Peoples Party and the former and almost sure future Chancellor Sebastian Kurz seem not so bad, but I think there is a discrepancy between official declarations and demonstrations of support from above, and messages being used in election campaigning.

But first the Positive Steps been taken:

In 2017 council of ministers agreed to the Antisemitism Definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and former Secretary of State Sebastian Kurz announced a “zero tolerance towards anti-Semitism”⁴.

1. When Austria was holding the EU Council Presidency Sebastian Kurz invited to a conference in Vienna on the topic “Fight against antisemitism and antizionism”. He Invited Netanjahu and he send an video message calling him a true friend of Israel and a friend in the fight against Antisemitism.⁵
2. With support of Sebastian Kurz the President of the National Council Wolfgang Sobotka from the Peoples Party ordered an empirical study about Antisemitism in Austria. I will go more in to detail later. ⁶
3. They started an education program called “Democracy in motion” with an two hour workshop program called “education against prejudice” to educate about the Shoa, I asked if they already have an evaluation how the workshop is perceived they have not evaluated but many schools applied and did the seminar.⁷

Beside the mentioned measures there are many more organizations which are getting funded by the State like the organization ZARA which does mainly anti-racist work and councils cases of hate speech, or different organizations who educate at memorials. I think in the NGO sector the problem for many Organizations is that they are always depend on new funding from the State.

Analyze and Critique

As we see there were many important steps against Antisemitism. Hwever now I want to discuse and Analyse the the last Government in Power an formulate a Critique on the measures been taken so far. First, I want to come to the question of is Antisemitism in the Center-stage of Politics and is it political instrumentalized?

Unfortunately I have to say in my opinion its highly instrumentalized.

⁴ <https://www.heute.at/politik/news/story/Kurz---Null-Toleranz-fuer-Antisemitismus--43187603>

⁵ <https://www.diepresse.com/5534069/antisemitismus-konferenz-kampfansage-gegen-den-judenhass>

⁶ <https://www.antisemitismus2018.at/>

⁷ https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20190911_OT0097/parlament-sobotka-praesentiert-neue-initiative-gegen-antisemitismus

The Freedom Party

So when we see Antisemitism in the Center-Stage of Politics it is in a bad way because in the last years we had countless antisemitic “Incidents” by the freedom Party. Now that they are in government responsibility this Incidents promote the already described normalization of antisemitism, since antisemitism is promoted by the Government. They instrumentalize antisemitism by using conspiracy theory and antisemitic stereotypes to fight their political opponents and as Ideological worldview. But the interesting part of instrumentalization is, that they try to establish a Pro-Israel course (Since 2014) within the party. The reason for that is that they want to focus on anti-Muslim rhetoric combined with a pro-Israel image to enable a big right-wing alliance in the European Union.⁸

(Incidents collected by the Austrian Mauthausen Committee this year underline that anti-Semitism is still very alive in the Party and emerged more openly in the past year. On a discursive level, there were many cases in which FPÖ officials used national socialist terminology or referred to conspiracy theories this year. Interior minister Herbert Kickl wants to “concentrate” asylum seekers and is hinting thereby to concentration camps . Also Gottfried Waldhäusl member of the state parliament played with Nazi-wordings. He demanded a special treatment “Sonderbehandlung” for refugees. This term was used as a euphemism for mass murder by Nazi functionaries . Miriam Rydl, FPÖ official in the city Tulln uses the term “Untermensch” in an online posting . Martin Glier FPÖ Spokesman uses the word “Blutzeuge” and Vice President Strache called his opponent a “well-poisoner” “Brunnenvergifter”.)

The Peoples Party

For the Peoples party in Austria I see contradicting positions on the one hand as I described bevor they took measures on national and European level to confront Antisemitism. But on the other hand, they agreed to build a coalition with the extreme right Freedom Party which is obviously Antisemitic. So the declaration and demonstration of Support against Antisemitism seems not very trust worthy.

Sebastian Kurz

To sharpen this Argument I want to focus on the Party leader and expected future Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in most cases while being in coalition with the Freedom party he remained very cautious when anti-Semitic incidents happened.(Exampels: Udo Landbauer⁹, Herbert Kickl¹⁰ and Johann Gudenus¹¹). Also he is until now pronouncing that the Government with the Freedom party was very good and productive, despite the corruption and Antisemitic positions of the Freedom party.

⁸ Schiedel, Heribert. Extreme Rechte in Europa. Wien: Ed. Steinbauer, 2011. Print.

⁹ <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/kurz-sieht-landbauers-fpoe-zukunft-nicht-als-seine-sache/309.022.473>

¹⁰ https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5352413/Kurz-zu-KonzentrierenSager_Kickl-hat-Aussage-klargestellt

¹¹ <https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5409914/Gudenus-und-die-SorosVerschwuerungen>

And I think the most Striking Argument is that he used antisemitic motifs to denounce his political Opponents. He is doing so by using the Name of the Israeli Tal Silberstein which is a political campaign advisor and did dirty campaigning for the social democrats. Since that happened he is using his Name in my opinion in a conspiracy and antisemitic way.

After the Government broke he claimed it was the work of Tal Silberstein and the Social Democrats who tried to frame him¹², when he was criticized from the Liberal Party “Neos” he tried to denounce them by saying they used Silberstein in a Campaign “one of the most expensive Campaign Advisors of the world, an Israeli who makes Campaigns in America, East Europe and Austria as an “mercenary” Campaigner.¹³ Also in a election campaigning speech he said: The Election is also an election about if we want Silbersteins in Austria or not.¹⁴ To sum this up I think the Name Tal Silberstein is an antisemitic Code he is using.

Study Antisemitism Deflecting “Lying with the Truth”

In a next step I want to give a quick evaluation of the antisemitism Study I already mentioned. The Study was commissioned by Wolfgang Sobotka, President of the National Council and member of the Peoples Party.

In my opinion, there are two problems with the study firstly from a political science perspective it has mythological flaws because one part of the Study is not representative and still, they are compared with each other and the onomastic selection by Names could corrupt the Arabic and Turkish data blocs.

And secondly, I think the results of the Study is to some extend instrumentalized. We know this instrumentalization especially from the Freedom Party it’s a strategy which I and some of my colleges would call “Lining with the Truth”. Because besides a general Study about Antisemitism in Austria they added two groups with 300 people being asked in arabic language and turkish to investigate so called “Imported Antisemitism”. Since it’s true that there is an specific form of Antisemitism in Turkish or Arabic Community’s which needs to be addressed. The problem and the lie is that the Study emphasizes the high percentage of Arabic and Turkish Antisemitism. By doing so they cover up that in total numbers Antisemitism is a serious problem in Austria as a whole. So they “Lining with the Truth” by highlighting Antisemitism by Turkish and Arabic people without admitting that in total numbers Antisemitism is in the center of Austrian society and has a Tradition there. These strategies of deflecting Antisemitism as something that is “imported” rather than something that the society has in common in Austria follows in my opinion the logic of secondary Antisemitism. Like described from the Frankfurt School as "guilt-defensiveness anti-Semitism" and is motivated by a deflection of guilt. But I think in this case it has transformed to affiliate antisemitism mainly with Muslims and immigrants to deflect Antisemitism which is rooted in the middle of Society and is much larger in numbers than the few migrants living in Austria.

¹² <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/kultur/das-silberstein-komplott/>

¹³ <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000108715579/kurz-verbindet-neos-mit-silberstein-meinl-reisinger-gruene-mit-kommunismus>

¹⁴ <https://orf.at/stories/3123320/>

(Turkey 247.500¹⁵ and Arabic no numbers but much smaller since turkey is the third biggest minority in Austria)

„Die Juden beherrschen die internationale Geschäftswelt.“	Trifft voll und ganz/ eher schon zu in Prozent	Trifft eher nicht/ überhaupt nicht zu in Prozent
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“Jews control the international Finance Sector”

Agree and Disagree

Befragte ÖSTERREICH REPRÄSENTATIV	39	39
Befragte TÜRKISCH SPRECHENDE	63	14
Befragte ARABISCH SPRECHENDE	64	27

Austrian representative Study result in percentage

Turkish not representative result in percentage

Arabic not representative result in percentage

Public Reaction:

Finally, I want to talk about public reactions and how Antisemitism is perceived in the public discourse. For that I want to explain individual events which I think have explanatory quality for the general discourse in Austria.

Antisemitism in the Media:

I think in general we see effects of normalization, one Example is we now see the third Antisemitic songbook being found by a high rank freedom Party Member, the Media is still covering this story's but in general the public is used to scandals like these and with every scandal there are less consequences for the people involved. When the first time an Antisemitic songbook appeared at least a politician stepped down for a year and later came back. Now Wolfgang Zanger member of parliament for the freedom party says he is not even ashamed and stays in office, despite public reactions demanding him to step down.¹⁶

Another Problem is that the press freedom got attacked under the past Government so Reporters without Borders” sees an incising pressure on journalists by the right-wing government and therefore Austria dropped from place 11 to 16 in the index.¹⁷ One shocking case was when the Reporter Amin Wolf confronted Harald Vilimsky from the Freedom Party with the similarities of a Freedom party Poster and an Image of the National Socialist magazine the Stürmer. The reaction was intimidation and demands that the reporter should resign from office.¹⁸

¹⁵ <https://www.diepresse.com/609154/turken-in-osterreich-zahlen-und-fakten>

¹⁶ <https://orf.at/stories/3142966/>

¹⁷ <http://www.rog.at/pm/austria-attacks-on-press-freedom/>

¹⁸ <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2019-04/oesterreich-fpoe-politiker-rauswurf-armin-wolf-orf-forderungen>

NGO and Civil society:

The last government also took serious cut backs in the sector of democratic and civil society organizations. But there were also Actions and a rise of civil actions, like the Donnerstag demonstrations, Antifascist mobilizations and students protesting against antisemitism at the university. Also the Youth organization of the Muslim Community organized a big campaign against Antisemitism in the own community together with the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance and for example when in the inner city portrait pictures of survivor of the shoa got vandalized they set up camp to protect them. ¹⁹

Also interesting is that especially some writer like Michael Köhlmeier and Doron Rabinovici spoke out against Antisemitism and criticizing the coalition with the Freedom party. So I think that's positive examples, when especially famous Artists speaking up against Antisemitism in Public to create a discourse against Antisemitism. ²⁰²¹

Jewish reaction to the climate

I think its difficult to say what is the feeling among the Jewish Community in general.

Head of Jewish Community Vienna Oscar Deutsch says in general Vianna is a save City for Jews, but they are spending 23% of their budget for security measures which is about 3 Million euros.²²

Also there is the Fundamentel Rights Agency Report about Anti-Semitism where they asked self-identified Jews in Austria:

73 percent of the respondents described antisemitism as the biggest problem in Austria and three quarters are of the opinion that antisemitism in Austria has increased in the last five years. The survey also showed that 40 percent of the participants either have considered emigrating or prefer not to stay in Austria, because they were not feeling safe in the past five years. I have to say that the results a not representative but can give a vague feeling of how it is to live in Austria.²³

Summary

To sum up the Situation in Austria I would say the coalition with a right-wing Antisemitic Party had a big negative impact on how present antisemitism is in the daily live because of the representation of antisemitic acts coming from high ranks of Politics. The counter Actions been taken by the Peoples Party is inconsistent if they support the Anti-Semitic course of the Freedom Party in general and anti-Semitic motifs are used by many political Parties in election campaigning. The Impact on the Public discourse is a normalization of Antisemitism accompanied by more pressure on the Media and at least if we believe the results of the fundamental rights agency a feeling of increasing antisemitism in Austria in the Jewish community. But we still see a civil society

¹⁹ <https://wien.orf.at/v2/news/stories/2983882/>

²⁰ <https://orf.at/stories/3123320/>

²¹ <https://www.diepresse.com/5417399/sturmischer-applaus-fur-fpo-kritik-michael-kohlmeiers>

²² <https://religion.orf.at/stories/2992755/>

²³ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/2nd-survey-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews>

speaking up against Antisemitism and there are many organizations in Austria doing important work to tackle the situation.