

The Risks of growing Populism and the European elections:

Populism, Elites and Euroscepticism: the case of Austria

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# Populism, Elites and Euroscepticism: the case of Austria

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*Populism is a spreading phenomenon across Europe. Much of it is directed against the European Union, as austerity and economic stagnation seem to fuel anti-EU protest votes. The Austrian case, however, demonstrates that populism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be dismissed as a product of socio-economic malaise. Rather, its presence points at a profound discontent with the political system and distrust of political elites. Furthermore, its root causes are to be found in the 'wounded' relationship between elites and peoples. The lessons drawn at national level hold true for the EU, too. The time of 'permissive consensus' is over and European elites need to mend fences with the broader public, if they are seriously concerned about the risks of populism.*

## Introduction

Since the emergence of the euro crisis electoral successes of populist parties are making headlines all over Europe.<sup>2</sup> Old and new populist parties are mushrooming across the continent. The *Front National* under Marine Le Pen is strengthening its foothold in French politics, and so are the Dutch Party for Freedom, Golden Dawn in Greece, the True Finns, and the Freedom Party in Austria, just to name a few. While these parties present many differences in their ideologies and the extent of their radicalism, they are united in their opposition to the European Union and related policies.

The correlation between rising anti-EU populism and economic crisis has led to the simplistic assumptions about populism and euroscepticism. The recurring argument goes as follows: austerity policies commanded by EU institutions fuel—at best—populism (garnished with an anti-Europe touch) or even outright extremism. Consequently, the backlash against EU institutions is to be ascribed solely to deteriorating economic conditions. In other words, should EU institutions deliver on economic performance, populism and euroscepticism would vanish as quickly as they appeared. This argument—admittedly, stylized—is deeply flawed.<sup>3</sup> While socio-economic grievances may certainly fuel populism (in particular in its far-right version), they are rarely the root causes neither for populism nor for euroscepticism.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Elisabeth Gamperl, "Europas neue Anti-Parteien," *Die Zeit* May 23, 2013; The Economist, "Turning right: Europe's populist insurgents," January 4, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Cas Mudde, "The myth of Weimar Europe," *openDemocracy* (August 20, 2013).

The Austrian case is very revealing in this respect. In fact, economically speaking Austria is one of the most successful countries in Europe. Its per capita GDP is about a third higher than the EU average making it the second most prosperous EU country.<sup>4</sup> Economic growth has been modest but positive, and is projected to pick up in 2014. The unemployment rate at 4.8 percent in 2013 is very low, especially by European comparison.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore the country is one of the most competitive economies worldwide ranking 16<sup>th</sup> in the Global Competitiveness Index.<sup>6</sup> Overall, Austria has weathered the financial and euro crisis almost unscathed. Nevertheless, levels of populism (and related euroscepticism) have reached a record high in the latest election of September 2013.

This paper suggests that answers are to be found in the distortion of the relationship between the elites and the peoples, which is an expression of the de-politicization of Western democracies.

In the first section, this paper will analyze the presence of populism and euroscepticism in Austria. The term 'populism' will be defined and the key features of Austria's populist parties will be discussed on the basis of the populist discourse. Further, the socio-economic profile of the average populist voter will be discussed. In a next step, the origins of euroscepticism in Austria will be analyzed. The second section is devoted to the emerging risks stemming from populism and euroscepticism, notably the impact of populist vote in the European parliamentary elections in 2014. Lastly, this paper will discuss the implications of the lessons drawn from the Austrian case on the European 'permissive consensus.'

## **Part 1: Populism and euroscepticism in Austria, discourse and causes**

Austria is no exception to the European populist trend. In fact, three parties considered 'populist' dominated the national election of September 2013. Taken together, these parties accounted for a staggering 30 per cent of the vote. Even though populism in Austria is primarily associated with the radical right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), the populist landscape has become increasingly crowded in recent years. The Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ) emerged from the Haider's split from the FPÖ in 2005. It enjoyed successes in its first years but is now struggling to survive its charismatic leader. In fact, in the past election it did not pass the 4 per cent threshold to enter parliament. The

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<sup>4</sup> "GDP per capita, consumption per capita and price level indices" - Statistics Explained (2014/1/5) [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/GDP\\_per\\_capita\\_consumption\\_per\\_capita\\_and\\_price\\_level\\_indices](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/GDP_per_capita_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices)

<sup>5</sup> OECD, "Austria - Economic forecast summary (November 2013)," in *Economic outlook, analysis and forecasts* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum, "Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014," (2013).

new player Team Stronach, founded by the Austro-Canadian billionaire Frank Stronach, on the other hand, managed a breakthrough gaining close to 6 per cent of the vote.<sup>7</sup> With 51 out of 183 seats in parliament, populists have gained considerable weight in Austria's current legislative period.

### **Defining populism**

While the FPÖ has a longstanding tradition in Austria's political landscape, the BZÖ is a product of its founder, the controversial Jörg Haider, and Frank Stronach is a complete newcomer to politics, all of them share the 'populist' label. So what does unite these quite distinct political actors and why do they qualify as populists? In current media, populism is a ubiquitous term; almost any politician has been branded a populist at some point or other. It usually has a derogatory connotation, but has also been used as a synonym for 'popular.'<sup>8</sup>

In the academic literature, too, populism figures prominently with great variations in its definition: from ideology to discursive style and political strategy, scholars have given manifold interpretations to the notion of populism.<sup>9</sup> Two key features, however, are held constant among different authors: 'the elites' and 'the people.' Most importantly, to be worthy of their name, populists have to champion the people's side at all costs.<sup>10</sup> In an influential paper, Cas Mudde defines populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', which separates society in two antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.' Furthermore, populism calls for politics as 'expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.'<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, populism is essentially anti-elitist and anti-establishment. Beyond that, it claims to express the true *vox populi* and appeals to the common sense of the ordinary man. In this respect, populism is not tied to a political ideology neither on the right nor on the left, but can accommodate ideology flexibly. Charismatic leadership, emotional appeal as well as vast simplification of complex issues through rhetorical style contribute to the success of populist forces.

As Fieschi describes it, the populist juxtaposition of 'elites' and 'people' determines a quite distinctive *Weltanschauung*: 'one in which no form of representation can be trusted; one in which a hunger for power, together with elite manipulations, are really the only driver of politics.'<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, another characteristic feature is the populists' essentially illiberal understanding of

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<sup>7</sup> Results of Austria's 2013 national elections available at <http://orf.at/wahl/nr13/ergebnisse/#ergebnis>

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Fieschi, "Who's afraid of the populist wolf," *openDemocracy*(2013).

<sup>9</sup> For overview of the literature, see: Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, "Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda," *Working Paper Series, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University*, no. 0004 (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Fieschi, "Who's afraid of the populist wolf".

<sup>11</sup> Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Fieschi, "Who's afraid of the populist wolf".

democracy. On the one hand, their claim to be the sole interpreter of the will of the people prompts them to support forms of direct democracy; on the other, political representation is understood as an ‘imperative mandate’ that leaves no room for debate.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond its defining characteristic as ‘Manichean outlook’ of ordinary people against evil elites,<sup>14</sup> populism comes with country-specific facets. In fact, populism does not grow in a vacuum and is closely tied to the political reality of a determined context. The emergence of radical right-wing populist parties across Europe is a case in point: for instance, the *Lega Nord*, *Front National* as well as the FPÖ share a number of common elements, yet each of these parties has its distinct characteristics, which are derived from their national context.

Following this definition, in Austria only the FPÖ fully qualifies as ‘populists,’ as it applies the entire worldview described above. Team Stronach, on the other hand, has not (yet) developed into a full-fledged populist ideology, even though it relies heavily on anti-establishment and anti-EU rhetoric.<sup>15</sup> Given that the BZÖ is vanishing from the political scene, it will not be assessed in this analysis.

### **Discourse of Austrian populism**

In order to identify key aspects of populism in Austria, this paper will first focus on the ‘supply side’ of populism by analyzing recurring populist elements in the political discourse. The themes such as ‘corrupt elites,’ the ‘heartland’ and ‘common sense’ and ‘unspoken truths’ are part of the populist repertoire and used consistently by the FPÖ and to some extent by the Team Stronach. ‘Anti-immigration’ and ‘Austro-patriotism’ instead are typical of the radical right. Looking at its discourse allows drawing conclusions on the specific features of Austrian populism.

#### ***1. ‘Die da oben’ -- Critique to corrupt elite***

Given the nature of populism, the elite is the main target of populist attacks. The ‘elite’ as a blanket term can take many forms, from the ruling political establishment, to powerful business elites as well as Brussels technocrats, depending on where the scapegoating of ‘the other’ resonates better. As Fieschi puts it, partisan politics are perceived as simply a ‘smokescreen for elites

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<sup>13</sup> Jan-Werber Müller cited in Lisa Mayr, "Der Populismus sieht nur demokratisch aus," *DerStandard* November 26, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

<sup>15</sup> Reinhard Heinisch, "Austrian Right-wing Populism: A Surprising Comeback und a New Leader," in *Exposing the Demagogues: Right-wing and National Populist Parties in Europe*, ed. Karsten Grabow and Florian Hartleb (Centre for European Studies, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013).

machinations,' which have 'betrayed the trust of the people' and work only for their personal gain.<sup>16</sup> In fact, dissatisfaction with the political system runs high in Austria, despite the country being economically and politically stable. A series of corruption scandals and the stalemate produced by years of grand coalition governments have led to rapidly declining trust in national government and parliament.<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, the FPÖ 2013 electoral campaign was based strongly on anti-establishment tones with slogans such as 'red-black [the grand coalition SPÖ-ÖVP] have sold and betrayed us.'<sup>18</sup> The newcomer Stronach used similar rhetoric for his campaign: in a television spot he claimed that Austria is run behind closed doors by a power-hungry and corrupt elite.<sup>19</sup>

But the discontent with the political class has deeper roots than the current grievances. Much of it can be traced back to Austria's particular institutional and societal structure, i.e. to its 'consociational democracy.' Since the postwar years, Austria has been characterized by a system of power sharing (*Proporz*) between the two 'catch-all' parties, i.e. the Christian-conservatives (ÖVP) and the socialists (SPÖ). *Proporz* is short for proportionality and describes a political system, whereby appointments in personnel are political in nature and allotted proportionally to the electoral result. Given the deep entrenchment of the two main political parties in Austrian society, these appointments are not only reserved for political functions, but for many posts across society, such as the bureaucracy, labour market associations and public enterprises. Thus, the ÖVP and SPÖ were able to develop a web of control over virtually all areas of public life.<sup>20</sup> The term '*Proporzdemokratie*' coined by Gerhard Lehmbuch precisely describes this system of hegemony by the two main political parties.<sup>21</sup> This culture of political compromise was further strengthened by the strong corporatist orientation in business (*Sozialpartnerschaft*).<sup>22</sup> Both the *Proporz* system and the *Sozialpartnerschaft* were envisioned to guarantee stability in a country torn apart by the war. Perhaps more importantly, they served as a cornerstone for the construction of the identity of the

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<sup>16</sup> Fieschi, "Who's afraid of the populist wolf".

<sup>17</sup> Eurobarometer, "Country Factsheet Austria," in *Standard EB 75* (2011); ———, "Country Factsheet Austria," in *Standard EB 77* (2012); ———, "Country Factsheet Austria," in *Standard EB 79* (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Fabio Wolkenstein, "The success of anti-system parties in the Austrian election reflects very real problems with political corruption," (LSE EUROPP Blog, October 9, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See the Videospot: Team Stronach, "Wahl 2013 Motto," (2013). Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzIkRqhpNk>

<sup>20</sup> Reinhard Heinisch, "Austria: The Structure and Agency of Austrian Populism," in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard Lehmbuch, *Proporzdemokratie. Politisches System und politische Kultur in der Schweiz und in Österreich* (Tübingen: Mohn-Siebeck, 1967).

<sup>22</sup> Anton Pelinka, "Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich: Zwischen Rechtspopulismus, Deutschnationalismus und Österreich-Patriotismus," *conflict&communication online* 1, no. 1 (2002).

newborn Republic.<sup>23</sup> Yet, by the 1980s the institutionalized compromise between the socialist and the conservatives had entered a severe crisis of legitimation. Declining party membership meant that parties were losing grip on society, yet their political influence remained largely intact.<sup>24</sup> As a result, resentment against this hyper-stable and clientelistic political system was growing high. The FPÖ managed very successfully to interpret the protest mood and re-branded itself as the champion of the ‘common man’ against the ‘unaccountable elites.’<sup>25</sup> This was a significant departure from its tradition. In fact, until the mid eighties the FPÖ had constituted a third minor force in Austrian politics, the pan-German ‘camp’ (*Lager*), which had always been excluded from power given its affinity to and sympathy for Nazism.<sup>26</sup>

The complex system of European governance with its nontransparent and unaccountable nature is another typical prey of the populist anti-elite, anti-establishment critique. The FPÖ has been riding the anti-EU tide since 1992, thereby radically shifting course from its earlier supportive stance.<sup>27</sup> This U-turn was in line with the broad transformation of the party into a populist force. Again, by opposing European integration the FPÖ successfully expressed popular anxieties towards a supranational entity, which was largely alien to Austrian people until the collapse of Communism. The critical attitude towards the EU allows the FPÖ to pitch itself as ‘the representative of the peoples’ in opposition to ‘EU-traitors’ (*Volksvertreter statt EU-Verräter*).

## 2. The ‘heartland’

In stark contrast to the evil elites, ‘the people’ are the source of all good in populist rhetoric. This reference, however, depicts much more an imaginary community, rather than a real population. Paul Taggart speaks of the ‘heartland’ as a place, where the in populists’ eyes a ‘virtuous and unified population resides.’<sup>28</sup> Thus, the ‘heartland’ in Austria is seen a ‘harmonious unity of hard-working, moral, native community,’ which must be protected from damaging external influences.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Susanne Fröhlich-Steffen, "Rechtspopulistische Herausforderer in Konkordanzdemokratien. Erfahrungen aus Österreich, der Schweiz und den Niederlanden," in *Populismus: Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches Korrektiv?*, ed. Franz Decker (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Heinisch, "Austria: The Structure and Agency of Austrian Populism," 69.

<sup>26</sup> Pelinka, "Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich: Zwischen Rechtspopulismus, Deutschnationalismus und Österreich-Patriotismus."

<sup>27</sup> Susanne Fröhlich-Steffen, "Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 33, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

<sup>29</sup> Roberta Pasquare, "Austrian Populism after the Victory of the FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) in 1999: the Political Success of the Discursive Strategy of Exclusion," in *The Changing Faces of Populism: Systemic Challengers in Europe and the U.S.*, ed. Hedwig Giusto, David Kitching, and Stefano Rizzo (FEPS, CRS, Fondazione Italianeuropei, 2013).

Beyond the imaginary community of the ‘pure people,’ populist rhetoric by the FPÖ presents itself markedly Austro-patriotic. Once again, the FPÖ under Jörg Haider performed a skillful metamorphosis: by the mid-1990s the party had abandoned its position as the stronghold of pan-Germanism and instead became the starkest defender of Austro-nationalism.<sup>30</sup> In fact, references to the ‘homeland,’ ‘our people,’ ‘Austria first’ are ubiquitous in FPÖ’s rhetoric.<sup>31</sup> Moreover the party defines itself as the ‘social homeland party’ (*soziale Heimatpartei*).<sup>32</sup> Thanks to the shift to Austro-patriotism, the FPÖ appeals to a much larger audience than with its previous borderline extremist position. The strong resonance of the patriotic message is very much connected to Austria’s ambiguous relationship with its national identity. Modern day Austria has little history—or a rather shameful one—from which to draw its creation myth. Instead, its identity relies heavily on a ‘collection of customs, values, habits and social mores’ that make up ‘the Austrian way of life’ or *Lebensart*.<sup>33</sup> The shaky national identity, however, results in greater ‘collective vulnerability’ *vis-à-vis* foreign influences.<sup>34</sup> Thus, with its emphasis on safeguarding national heritage the FPÖ exploits voters’ fears stemming from the potential ‘cultural leveling’ of globalization.<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Anti-immigration, xenophobia and right-wing extremism**

The ugly face of Austro-nationalism is the xenophobic streak of the FPÖ, which often presents itself as welfare chauvinism. To be fair, xenophobia and tough talk on immigration are less traits of populism *per se*, but are part of the creation of ‘the other’ as a scapegoat. In the FPÖ’s rhetoric, lazy ‘foreigners’ are characterized as parasites to the Austrian welfare state (*Sozialschmarotzer*) that rob taxpayer of their money and services while threatening cultural integrity. Well-known controversial elements of the FPÖ campaign in 2008 are the slogans ‘daham statt Islam’ (Home instead of Islam) and ‘Abendland in Christenhand’ or even the rap songs of FPÖ leader H.C. Strache. The most recent campaign had Christian charity as its theme—clearly intended for Austrians only. As Heinisch observes, anti-immigration is the strongest ‘brand’ of the FPÖ.<sup>36</sup> While the FPÖ’s xenophobic stance can be seen primarily as political expediency aimed at luring voters that are confronted with immigration and related problems, it hints at the extremist wing in

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<sup>30</sup> Fröhlich-Steffen, "Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus."

<sup>31</sup> In this study, 27 references were coded for the broad term ‘the people’ in Austria. *See*: Jasper de Raadt, David Hollanders, and André Krouwel, "Varieties of Populism: An Analysis of the Programmatic Character of Six European Parties," *Working Papers Political Science*, no. 04 (2004).

<sup>32</sup> FPÖ, "<http://www.fpoe.at/>," (Accessed January 27, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Heinisch, "Austria: The Structure and Agency of Austrian Populism."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Fröhlich-Steffen, "Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus."

<sup>36</sup> Heinisch, "Austrian Right-wing Populism: A Surprising Comeback und a New Leader."



the party. As discussed above, the FPÖ has undergone a significant ideological shift that separated it from pan-German and neo-Nazi ideology. Nevertheless the FPÖ maintains a radical core, as the party leadership is mostly recruited from far-right fraternities. In this respect, recurring expressions of xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism may suggest more than just populist politics.

#### 4. 'Common sense' and 'unspoken truths'

At the heart of the populist worldview lies the 'conviction that ordinary people and common sense have all the answers' and are in fact to be regarded as the only 'true political compass.'<sup>37</sup> Consequently, populists present *by default* simplified and quick-fix solutions to complex problems, as in-depth analysis and debate would be 'anathema to common sense.'<sup>38</sup> This is easily found in the discourse of Austrian populists. In fact, the Team Stronach ran its campaign by appealing to emotions and common sense ('*Herz und Hausverstand*').<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, provocative stances, for instance on immigration and Islam in the FPÖ's case, gives the party the chance to play another typical populist card: it allows them to claim that 'they alone have the courage to say what everyone is 'really' thinking.'<sup>40</sup> In this respect, the taboos of politically correct are seen as a limitation to one's right of expression. Jörg Haider was making this point already in 1994 by claiming that people no longer had the right to express themselves freely, especially concerning critical opinions towards the government.<sup>41</sup> His brilliant tactic—now copied by Strache—works as follows: political opponents are provoked to the point that they overreact with outright indignation to non-politically correct remarks. In turn, the populist FPÖ leader portrays himself, but perhaps more importantly, his sympathizers and potential voters as victims that are unrightfully marked as Nazis. As a result, latent radicals are strengthened in their choice of a populist party.<sup>42</sup> The slogan 'They are against him, because HE is for YOU' captures this mood perfectly. Interestingly, according to a survey of the newspaper *Profil* about a third of Austria's population believes that media—generally unsympathetic to the FPÖ apart from the influential tabloid *Krone*—is treating the Freedom Party unfairly.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Catherine Fieschi, "A plague on both your populisms," *openDemocracy*(2012).

<sup>38</sup> "H.C. Strache: Ein Drittel ortet Ungleichbehandlung in den Medien," *Profil online* 30 November 2013.

<sup>39</sup> "Weigerstorfer will mit "Herz und Hausverstand" punkten," *DerStandard* 29 November 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Tim Bale, "Countering populism: Snog, Marry, Avoid?," in *Policy Network Observatory* (April 24, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Fröhlich-Steffen, "Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus."

<sup>42</sup> Michael Fleischhacker, "Strache gewinnt mit Haiders Spiel," *Die Presse* Mai 29, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> "H.C. Strache: Ein Drittel ortet Ungleichbehandlung in den Medien."

## Voters' profiles and motivations: A typology

### **1. Modernization losers?**

Voters of rightwing populist parties have often been described as 'modernization losers,' who are susceptible to radical ideology given their perceived or factual downward mobility in society. Populist rightwing and far-right parties seem to offer the best protection against the challenges of rapid societal change, if only in rhetoric. To a large extent this can be claimed for Austria's FPÖ. By looking at the socio-economic status of its electorate, it appears that blue-collar workers are the largest FPÖ supporters with a share of 33 percent in the 2013 elections.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the FPÖ managed to surpass the traditionally working class party SPÖ. The second most represented groups are white-collar workers (25 percent) and self-employed professionals (18 percent). Furthermore, the level of education of the average FPÖ voter is modest: 15 percent completed compulsory education, while 35 percent have vocational training, 21 percent have attained advanced-secondary education, 19 percent A-level, and only 4 per cent have a university degree.<sup>45</sup>

While the correlation between low levels education and low-skilled work holds true, thus confirming the 'modernization losers' hypothesis, economic motivations do not appear to be the primary driver for FPÖ vote. Instead, immigration is mentioned as *the* key variable that prompts radical right-wing support.<sup>46</sup> In line with this, the study conducted by Oesch on working class support for radical right-wing parties suggests FPÖ vote is motivated above all by the perceived threats stemming from cultural loss due to immigration. On the other hand, the potential negative impact of immigration on workers' economic condition (i.e. competition for jobs and for welfare provisions) is less a reason for voting FPÖ.<sup>47</sup> These findings are coherent with a Chatham House report as well as with a study of online radical activism by the think tank Demos: fears related to loss of cultural identity trump economic woes.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> SORA/ISA, "Wahlanalyse Nationalratswahlen 2013," (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Oesch, "Explaining Workers' Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland," *International Political Science Review* 29, no. 349 (2008).

<sup>48</sup> Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Mark Littler, "The New Face of Digital Populism," (London: Demos, 2011); Matthew Goodwin, "Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe," (London: Chatham House, 2011).

In terms of cleavages, it appears that liberalization and modernization of the economy since the 1990s have created a dividing line between employees: on the one hand, those in flexible and innovative jobs have benefited from this development, on the other workers in vulnerable economic sectors have reacted with calls for protection.<sup>49</sup> According to Betz, both these categories are drawn to right-wing populism, the former attracted by a neo-liberal agenda, and the latter by anti-foreign attitudes.<sup>50</sup> Findings by the *Institut für Strategie-Analyse*, in fact, suggest that FPÖ voters on a 'downwardly mobile' and 'upwardly mobile' path were almost equally represented in the 2008 elections with 14 and 12 percent respectively.<sup>51</sup>

Statistics show that the FPÖ scores significantly higher with men.<sup>52</sup> However, it is not clear why. The journalists Vlasich, Eisenreich and Hamann attempted an explanation through reportage in the Viennese outskirts. It appears that girls and women in general are less 'rebellious' and even more 'obedient to authority.'<sup>53</sup> In this sense, they are less drawn to a party of outcasts. On the other hand, women have a stronger track record than men with respect to education, both in terms of performance but also in the pursuit of higher education.<sup>54</sup> These findings seem to point at psychological explanations for the attraction of radicalism. However, given their anecdotal character, they cannot provide a complete account of the situation and further academic research is needed in order to address the question more thoroughly.

## **2. Stronach voter?**

Running on an anti-corruption and the anti-establishment platform, Frank Stronach aimed at capitalizing protest votes of those who oppose the red-black grand coalition, but are neither comfortable voting the far-right nor share anything with the Greens.<sup>55</sup> In terms of demographics, there is a gender gap with men twice more likely to vote for Frank, but no significant differences in terms of age. Stronach was most successful with the self-employed (13 percent) and workers (10 percent).<sup>56</sup> The level of formal education is low among Frank voters, too: those who have completed compulsory schooling support the Team Stronach disproportionately.<sup>57</sup> Overall Pelinka

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<sup>49</sup> Heinisch, "Austrian Right-wing Populism: A Surprising Comeback und a New Leader."

<sup>50</sup> Hans-George Betz, "The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>51</sup> Heinisch, "Austrian Right-wing Populism: A Surprising Comeback und a New Leader."

<sup>52</sup> SORA/ISA, "Wahlanalyse Nationalratswahlen 2013."

<sup>53</sup> Konstantin Vlasich, Ruth Eisenreich, and Sibylle Hamann, "Die Rache der Burschen," *Falter* 41(2013).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Anton Pelinka, "Der bessere Populist," *Die Zeit* March 9, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> SORA/ISA, "Wahlanalyse Nationalratswahlen 2013."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

holds that the stereotypical Stronach voter corresponds to the cliché Strache supporter, i.e. male, anti-intellectual and angry.<sup>58</sup>

### *Euroscepticism in Austria*

Euroscepticism in Austria is far from a populist prerogative. In fact, Austria is consistently one of the most critical countries of the EU. In the 2009 Eurobarometer survey, only 42 percent of the population thought that EU membership was positive compared to the 53 percent EU average.<sup>59</sup> In 2013, distrust of the EU towards was at 55 percent, thus marking an increase from 49 percent in 2005.<sup>60</sup> Scepticism towards the European Union runs deep among Austrians despite their 'utilitarian' gains from membership. Admittedly, Austria is a net contributor—and the populists never forget to mention that—nevertheless, the economic benefits from the common market and enlargement to the East are by far greater than paltry contributions to the EU budget.

Thus, Austria's critical attitude towards Europe needs to be examined in the light of its historical trajectory. In fact, much of the eurosceptic stance derives from the country's different experience of the Cold War compared to the rest of Western Europe. As a result of the post-war settlement, the Austrian Republic is permanently neutral and has built much of its national identity on its neutrality. Further, Austria's position as 'front-line' to the Iron Curtain shaped its self-understanding as a buffer zone between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Even though it was ideologically tied to the West and deeply anchored in the European tradition, it had no formal commitment to 'Europe.' In fact, Austria sought EU membership only in 1989 and eventually joined the EU in 1995.<sup>61</sup> The European course championed by the ÖVP and the SPÖ in the wake of the collapse of Communism was strongly elite-driven, as the political class recognized the enormous economic, political and security benefits of membership. Instead, popular identification with the EU was low and had to be countered through ad-hoc pro-EU campaigns.<sup>62</sup> This 'europeanization' of national elites, however, destabilized Austria's already vulnerable national identity.<sup>63</sup> While the mainstream parties were shifting their focus to Europe, the FPÖ—previously a supporter of EU membership— was turning to Austro-patriotism. Furthermore, the FPÖ's patriotic outlook initially consisted almost exclusively of opposition to supra-national European

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<sup>58</sup> Pelinka, "Der bessere Populist."

<sup>59</sup> Eurobarometer, "National Report Executive Summary Austria," in *Eurobarometer 72* (2009).

<sup>60</sup> ———, "Country Factsheet Austria." ———, "Eurobarometer 64," (2006).

<sup>61</sup> Anton Pelinka, "Austrian Euroscepticism: The Shift from the Left to the Right," *European Studies* 20(2004).

<sup>62</sup> Fröhlich-Steffen, "Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus."

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

institutions.<sup>64</sup> Given 40 years of separated paths from European peers and the top-down European integration orchestrated by political elites, Austria's distanced attitude towards the EU should not come as a surprise.

As discussed, anti-EU tones have been part of the populist arsenal since the 1990s, yet the significance of anti-EU sentiment should not be overestimated. According to Wert et al., euroscepticism only ranks third as motive for populist vote;<sup>65</sup> it is fear over immigration and loss of national culture that drives people into populist arms, less so Brussels bureaucrats. In fact, the EU only played a marginal role in the 2013 campaign for national elections.<sup>66</sup> Even Stronach, who gained initial notoriety by being very vocal against the euro, chose to run his electoral campaign on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform. In addition to the FPÖ's usual anti-EU rhetoric (defense of national sovereignty against supra-nationalism, abandoning Judeo-Christian roots, the evils of Europe without borders, and attack to government as coward EU-traitors), the euro crisis gave motive for another quintessentially populist truism: the hardworking Austrian taxpayer has to foot the bill of lazy Southerners.<sup>67</sup> But apart from enriching the populist imagery, the advent of the euro crisis and euroscepticism in general have little explanatory power for the populist advance in Austria.

### **Populism and elites: de-politicization and 'wounded' relationship**

The consistent success of the radical right-wing FPÖ builds on a number of structural factors. Consociational democracy has led to mounting frustration with the political system, in particular since the 'de-pillarization' of society has undermined the legitimacy of such a system. Further, Austria's troubled national identity makes it more vulnerable to perceived cultural threats; the FPÖ capitalizes very successfully on Austro-patriotism and related xenophobia. Furthermore, the bulk of its voters are working class 'modernization losers': fearful to lose their Austrian *Lebensart* at the hands of rising immigration they turn to the party that addresses these concerns. Euroscepticism, too, has its historical roots in Austria's neutrality and its experience of the Cold War.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Han Werts, Peer Scheepers, and Marcel Lubbers, "Euro-scepticism and radical right-wing voting in Europe, 2002-2008: Social cleavages, socio-political attitudes and contextual characteristics determining voting for the radical right," *European Union Politics* 14, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>66</sup> Markus Wagner, "The Eurosceptics' victory in Austria," in *Policy Network Observatory* (October 14, 2013).

<sup>67</sup> H.C. Strache: "Why do the Austrians, as well as the Germans or the Dutch, constantly have to pay for the bottomless pit of the southern European countries?" Cited in: Peter Walker and Matthew Taylor, "Far right on rise in Europe, say report," *The Guardian* November 6, 2011.

Finally, rising support for populism (in particular rightwing) has little to do with socio-economic conditions given Austria's prosperous economy. Moreover, Mudde finds that relationship between worsening economic conditions and rise of the far right does not hold the empirical test in a number of European countries.<sup>68</sup> Instead, the recent surge in populism is to be interpreted primarily as frustration with the political class and its clientelistic *modus operandi*.<sup>69</sup>

But beyond contingent frustration with politics, it is worth reflecting on the relationship between elites and people. In what Mudde calls the 'populist Zeitgeist' an irrevocable fracture between citizens and governing elites occurred.<sup>70</sup> Two dynamics are happening that contribute to a 'wounded' relationship: citizens—regardless of their formal education—are increasingly confident enough to question the authority of elites, while the latter practice TINA (There is no alternative) politics in favor of hard-fought battling for ideas.<sup>71</sup>

Thanks to the universalization of education, people today are more educated and emancipated than ever before. Moreover, as Inglehart argued, the post-modern value shift towards individualization is accompanied by the questioning of 'authority.'<sup>72</sup> Thus, the perceived distance between political elites and average electors has diminished significantly.<sup>73</sup> Egalitarianism on the one hand, and loosened ties to institutionalized structures such as parties on the other, further contributed to widen the gap.

Today's citizen feels more competent to judge politicians and no longer 'blindly swallows what the elites tell them.'<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Mudde argues, the 'emancipation of the citizens has undermined the elite's competence or at least their perception of it.' In other words, the leader's qualifications to perform his or her job are no longer held in high esteem—in particular the formal ones. As a result, another type of authority is gaining the upper hand: charisma.<sup>75</sup>

In this sense, populists profit from their role as taboo breakers and defender of common sense against politically correctness. Arguably, by taking on populist views, people seem motivated by defying the authorities—on purpose, just because they can. All of the above, however, indicates that the poorly educated are more susceptible to the easy promises of populist messages, and will continue to remain so.

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<sup>68</sup> Mudde, "The myth of Weimar Europe".

<sup>69</sup> Wagner, "The Eurosceptics' victory in Austria." Harald Edinger, "Austrian politics - don't get too excited," in *Politics and Strategy The Survival Editors' Blog*, ed. IISS (October 17, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

<sup>71</sup> René Cuperus, "The populist deficiency of European social democracy," *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 3(2003).

<sup>72</sup> Ronald Inglehart, "Postmodernization Erodes Respect for Authority, But Increases Support for Democracy," in *Critical Citizen: Global Support for Democratic Government*, ed. Pippa Norris (1999).

<sup>73</sup> Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Admittedly, the job of elites has gotten more difficult. On the one hand elites are having a tougher time in steering their peoples, as they are confronted with a more critical and demanding mass yet at the same time they face the ‘straitjacket’ of external constraints such as globalization; on the other, they have blatantly failed the people—at least in some respects. Globalization forces are increasingly reducing the space for political and ideological maneuvering on the left and the right. In fact, many authors have noted an ongoing process of ‘de-ideologization’ and ‘technocratization.’<sup>76</sup> The catch-all parties increasingly resemble one another in terms of political offering; this was epitomized by the so-called ‘Third Way.’ Furthermore, many aspects of current politics fall under the category of TINA, i.e. ‘there is no alternative.’

Nevertheless, political elites have failed to address difficult issues, which could cause them to lose votes. As Cuperus describes it, the parties maxim in running their affairs has become ‘risk management,’ instead of fostering an ‘open and intellectual debate.’ Moreover, party politics resembles more and more a ‘marketplace’ of political entrepreneurs chasing ‘consumer-voters’ instead of a battleground for political ideas.<sup>77</sup> Modern parties no longer really need to be loyal to their founding principles (*‘grundsatztreu’*); instead they are becoming more pragmatic in their decision-making. In this respect, even mainstream parties are subject to populism, argues Wolfgang Schäuble, the German Minister of Finance.<sup>78</sup>

## **Part 2: Risks and implications of anti-EU populism**

### ***Self-hating parliament?***

Warning cries about rising populism are being raised from all sides, including personalities such as Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy and EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso. The outcry is particularly acute since the European parliamentary elections in May 2014 are approaching. Anti-EU populists are expected to be the winners at the upcoming European elections, especially since these are perceived as ‘a poll without consequences’ by a large part of the European electorate. Therefore, voters are more inclined to cast a vote for parties at the fringes of the political spectrum.<sup>1</sup> Commentators have been painting various scenarios for a ‘self-hating parliament’ ranging from game as usual to a US-

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<sup>76</sup> Cuperus, "The populist deficiency of European social democracy."

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Fleischhacker, "Können die etablierten Parteien im Populismuscontest bestehen?," *Die Presse* May 6, 2013.

style ‘shutdown.’<sup>79</sup> While it is expected that this year’s EP election anti-EU populist parties will gain a record share of votes (ranging from 16 to 25 percent),<sup>80</sup> the concrete implications for such an anti-European parliament are still anyone’s guess. If a significant number of Eurosceptic MEPs manage to coalesce as the French *Front National* and Dutch PVV they are planning to do,<sup>81</sup> stalemate is the likely result. If, on the other hand, the populist share of votes will be more modest than currently hyped, no significant changes are to be expected. A study on past voting behavior of anti-European MEPs concluded that so far their impact on policy making has been little: ‘populist radical right focuses its role on gaining publicity rather than participating in policy-making activities in the European Parliament.’<sup>82</sup> Above all, it is far from certain that the anti-EU populist groups will be able to cooperate. Even in the run up to the elections, ideological cracks are beginning to appear between the different parties, which may undermine a united anti-EU front.

Provided that the EP will be able to cope with its internal ‘dissenters,’ the likely *modus vivendi* after the 2014 elections will see greater cooperation among the two main parties, the European People’s Party (EPP) and the social democrats resembling something like a grand coalition. This may not have a significant impact in terms of the EP’s ability to carry out its parliamentary duties, but it would certainly be detrimental to European politics over the long-term. People across Europe are turning to populists because they sense that mainstream politics offers no meaningful alternatives to a prescribed course. A grand coalition at European level might therefore exacerbate what is already felt now: a mounting gap between elites and people and no choice to select political alternatives.

### ***Permissive consensus?***

As discussed, populism has to be understood as a symptom of the wounded relationship between the elites and the people, which is exacerbated by lack of political discussion and choice. The European system of governance epitomizes this kind of distorted relationship between elites and peoples. In a functioning political system, political parties would distil different political opinions and resulting choices as well as mediate among those. Yet, lacking proper parties,

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<sup>79</sup> See for instance: Jan-Werner Müller, "How Europe could face its own shutdown," *The Guardian* October 21, 2013. Mark Leonard, "Europe's self-hating parliament," *ECFR* (November 21, 2013).

<sup>80</sup> The Economist, "Turning right: Europe's populist insurgents."

<sup>81</sup> See for instance Reuters, "Le Pen, Wilders eye eurosceptic alliance for EU elections," (November 13, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> Marley Morris, "Conflicted Politicians: the populist radical right in the European Parliament," ed. Counterpoint (2013).



government and a public sphere, the European system is structurally flawed in this respect.<sup>83</sup> For decades the European project has been carried out under the auspices of a ‘permissive consensus’ driven by ‘enlightened and far-sighted elites.’<sup>84</sup> This kind of unquestioned support can no longer be taken for granted. The popular rejection of the European constitution was a clear signal in this respect. Similarly to national politics, European citizens no longer accept elites deciding for them. Instead they are demanding ‘re-politicization of politics.’ As long as these underlying causes of anti-EU sentiment are not properly addressed, European elites will only be muddling through from one crisis to the next. This seemed to have worked up until now, but it is certainly not a recipe for a well-functioning, sustainable and democratic institution—albeit *sui-generis*, which the European Union strives to be.

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<sup>83</sup> Jose Ignacio Torreblanca and Mark Leonard, "The continent-wide rise of euroscepticism," *ECFR*(2013).

<sup>84</sup> Antonio Missiroli, "The rise of anti-EU populism: why, and what to do about it," *Policy Brief, European Policy Centre* (2011).

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