

*Themed Issue: The Limits of EUrope: Identities, Spaces, Values  
Part IV: Limits to Transformative and Normative Europe*

## RESEARCH

# Entering the ‘post-shame era’: the rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in EUrope

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The term ‘illiberal democracy’, coined by Fareed Zakaria in 1997, has gained much traction, specifically since its use by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán in 2014. Ever since, Orbán and his governing party Fidesz have been implementing this vision resulting in major cutdowns on free speech, freedom of press, of various NGOs which support human rights, and so forth. Moreover, Fidesz won the 2018 national election with a strong focus on anti-immigration policies. Although Orbán’s restrictive migration policies were widely criticised during the so-called refugee crisis 2015, many EU member states have started to follow the Hungarian policy of closing borders and protecting the EU from asylum-seekers and an alleged invasion by Muslims. Hence, I claim that formerly taboo subjects and expressions in mainstream discourse are being accepted more and more (‘normalisation’). Such normalisation goes hand in hand with a certain ‘shamelessness’: the limits of the sayable are shifting regarding both the frequency of lies and the violating of discourse conventions – as well as regarding repeated attacks on central democratic institutions. Normalising the assessment of migrants as a threat to inner security and a burden on the welfare state and education system must be perceived as an international development – generally instrumentalising a ‘politics of fear’.

**Key words** Illiberalism • authoritarianism • identity politics • dialogue • anti-politics • critical discourse studies • Austria • Austrian Freedom Party • metaphor • argumentation • euphemism

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## Introduction

On 17 July 2018, former US president Barack Obama was invited to give the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture in Johannesburg. In his speech, he warned that:

a politics of fear and resentment and retrenchment began to appear, and that kind of politics is now on the move ... I am not being alarmist, I am simply stating the facts. ... Strongman politics are ascendant suddenly, whereby elections and some pretence of democracy are maintained – the form of it – but those in power seek to undermine every institution or norm that gives democracy meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, Obama did not use the terms ‘illiberal democracy’, ‘neo-authoritarianism’ or ‘populism’ (or other terms which currently dominate social-science scholarship and media reporting), but he certainly put his finger on the drastic socio-political changes that have been taking place globally, including in EU member states, specifically since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018).

Indeed, as a study on ‘Fear not values’ conducted by de Vries and Hoffman (2016) in eight EU member states<sup>2</sup> illustrates, over 50% of the voters for far-right parties viewed *globalisation* as *the* major threat in the future.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, 53% of those who fear globalisation perceive *migration* as *the* major global challenge, and 54% display anti-foreigner sentiments. In a similar vein, political scientist Ivan Krastev concludes in his widely acknowledged essay *Europadämmerung* (2017: 48–49) that the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 might eventually lead to the destruction of the EU.

Although many politicians at EU and national levels, as well as other prominent public intellectuals, are explicitly warning against the European and global drift towards more (ethno-)nationalism, illiberal democracies and authoritarianism – and thus against violations of human rights, international treaties and EU norms and values (for example, Otmar Karas,<sup>4</sup> Emanuel Macron,<sup>5</sup> and Jürgen Habermas<sup>6</sup>) – official responses on the part of the EU have been slow and follow complex, institutionally defined procedures (Article 7 of the European Treaty).<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, Grabbe and Lehne (2017b: 8) state that:

EU actors must therefore explain why they have to protect core EU standards and make it clear that steps will be taken against any government that undermines EU law. Strong statements from other Central European governments would be particularly helpful. The EU can also counter claims of double standards by getting tougher on bad behaviour by member states across the board, particularly on corruption and misuse of public funds.

Due to space restrictions, I will have to neglect the institutional struggles on the EU level and the various attempts to negotiate with Hungary and Poland, but those have been covered extensively by Uitz (2015), Kerski (2018), and Möllers and Schneider (2018). Uitz (2015: 293–295) also provides compelling evidence for the impossibility of drawing on the agreed-upon conventions of *dialoguing*, *negotiating* and *compromising*, if one of the partners in these interactions does *not* want to comply with the established rules of such language games (Wodak, 2015a, 2017): this precludes that there is *no* ‘productive dialogue’ (Uitz, 2015: 294). The Hungarian and Polish governments seem convinced that these conventions do not apply to them and are driven ‘by the urge to establish exceptions, in the spirit of constitutional parochialism’ (Uitz, 2015: 296). In other words, context-dependent discursive strategies of blame avoidance, denial, Manichean division, victim-perpetrator reversal and eristic argumentation dominate

official communication, accompanied by ever-more nationalism, chauvinism and nativism.

In this vein, I claim that this kind of rejection of dialogue relates to a '*post-shame era*' rather than, as many scholars believe, merely to a 'post-truth era' (for example, Scheff, 2000; Hahl et al, 2018): anti-elitist and anti-pluralist/exclusionary rhetoric, symbolic politics (such as focusing on the 'headscarves' of Muslim women while neglecting complex socioeconomic issues associated with migration and integration), 'digital demagogy', 'bad manners' and 'anti-politics' support the non-complying behaviours of powerful politicians that frequently resonate as 'authentic' with the core followers of these politicians, their parties or governments. Instead of discussing and providing solutions for major socio-political problems such as globally rising inequality and youth unemployment, and the consequences of climate change for migration politics, refugees and migrants serve as *the* scapegoat and simplistic explanation for all woes. Against this background, 'anti-politics' is defined as a specific attitude and related discourse which systematically undermine democratic institutions (Diehl, 2017: 28–29). The state itself, the entire political system, is challenged, like in reality TV: shamelessness, humiliation of other participants, defamation, lies and ad hominem attacks dominate. Indeed, such shameless behaviour could be observed, for example, in several TV debates during the presidential election campaign in Austria in 2016, employed by the far-right populist candidate (for the Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ), Norbert Hofer (Wodak, 2017). Mastropaolo (2000: 36) mentions similar patterns of scandalisation, '*politicoainment*' and the decay of democratic procedures in Italian politics in the 1990s (Wodak, 2011).

In this paper, I trace the trajectory of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in its transformation into the 'New People's Party' under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, recently entering a coalition government with the populist extreme-right FPÖ. This allows me to identify the many small and large changes that Austria has undergone on the way from a constitutional liberal democracy since 1945 to a potentially Orbán-esque illiberal democracy, thus indicating some limits of the liberal democratic European project envisioned by the founding fathers. This, I argue, must be recognised as a process of '*normalisation*' – the normalisation of far-right ideologies in both content and form. This process can also be observed in the Netherlands, where Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) has exerted much influence on the mainstream, labelled the 'Geert Wilders-effect'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, specific patterns and stages of the Austrian trajectory can most probably be generalised to other EU member states. In this context, I will also discuss some constitutive discursive strategies of the *post-shame era*, the adaptation and integration of illiberalism and authoritarianism into formerly liberal democratic regimes. First, however, I shall briefly define the relevant concepts mentioned above and necessarily restrict myself to briefly elaborating on 'populism', 'authoritarianism/neo-authoritarianism' and 'illiberal democracy/managed democracy'.

## Defining relevant concepts

### *Populism*

There is no consensus as to whether 'far-right populism/populist right-wing extremism' is an ideology (*thin* or *thick*; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015: 5), a philosophy (Priester, 2007: 9), a specific media phenomenon (Pajnik and Sauer, 2017), a strategic

option for right-wing extremists like the strategies used by the Nazi Party in the 1930s and 1940s (Salzborn, 2018) or a specific political style (Moffitt, 2017; Brubaker, 2017: 3) that manifests mainly in performance and communication.

In their frequently cited approach, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 9–12) emphasise three parameters of populism: first, the opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’; second, a grounding in the *volonté générale* of the people; third, its character as a *thin* ideology, because it does not constitute a coherent structure of beliefs but assembles contradictory ideologemes in an eclectic fashion. As Mudde and Kaltwasser do not restrict their definition to the populist far right, the notion of ‘the people’ refers to the people as both sovereign (*demos*) and the common people. Moreover, it can refer to the people as *ethnos*. Furthermore, the notion of ‘the elite’ is differentiated into elites with (cultural, economic or social) power and elites defined on purely ethnic grounds. Finally, the *volonté générale* is equated with the general will of the people in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

This rather general definition must be specified – four dimensions are crucial in the context of recent political developments in the EU (Wodak, 2015a: 20–22, 25–33):

- *Nationalism/Nativism/Anti-pluralism*: Far-right populist parties stipulate a seemingly *homogenous ethnos*, a *populum* or *Volk*, which can be arbitrarily defined – often in nativist (blood-related) terms. Such parties value the *homeland* or *Heimat*, which seems to require protection from dangerous invaders. In this way, *threat scenarios* are constructed – the homeland or the ‘we’ is threatened by ‘others’: strangers within *and/or* outside society.
- *Anti-elitism*: Such parties share an anti-elitist and anti-intellectual attitude (*‘arrogance of ignorance’*; Wodak, 2015a) related to strong EU scepticism. According to these parties, democracy should essentially be reduced to the majoritarian principle, that is, the rule of the (arbitrarily defined) ‘true people’.
- *Authoritarianism*: A *saviour*, a *charismatic leader* is worshipped, alternating between the roles of Robin Hood (protecting the welfare state, supporting the ‘simple folk’) and the ‘strict father’ (Lakoff, 2004). Such charismatic leaders require a hierarchically structured party and government to guarantee ‘law and order’ and ‘security’.
- *Conservatism/Historical revisionism*: Far-right populist parties usually represent *conservative values* (emphasising family values) and insist on preserving the status quo or a return to former, ‘better’ times. The aim of protecting the homeland also builds on a *shared narrative of the past* in which ‘we’ are either heroes or victims of evil (a conspiracy, enemies of the *fatherland*, and so on). This transforms past suffering or defeat into stories of the successes of the people or into stories of betrayal and treachery by others. Social welfare, in the concomitant *welfare chauvinism*, should only be given to ‘true’ members of the *ethnos*.

Although not all far-right populist parties endorse all of the above, these – realised in specific combinations – can be generalised as typical ideologies of the far right. In all cases, such parties will advocate *change*, moving away from an allegedly dangerous path – a looming crisis – that would lead straight to catastrophe.

*Illiberal democracy*

The distinction between 'liberal/constitutional democracies' and 'illiberal democracies' is not new. The salient criterion for the existence of a liberal democracy is constitutionalism in the sense of checks and balances designed to protect the state and its society from the accumulation of power and the abuse of office. According to Zakaria (1997: 23–24), who coined the term, illiberal democracies are increasing around the world and are increasingly limiting the freedoms of the people they represent (such as civil liberties of speech or religion). Nevertheless, the term 'illiberal democracy' remains a contested concept (see Krastev, 2006).

Since its public use in 2014 by Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, leader of the far-right/nationalistic-conservative party Fidesz, 'illiberal democracy' has entered everyday discourse in Europe and has been appropriated by some politicians as a positive model to be followed; and as a political system to be vehemently opposed by others. In his speech on 30 July 2014, Orbán maintained that:

the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but instead includes a different, special, national approach.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Orbán defines 'illiberal democracy' as rejecting tolerance for minorities while supporting strong forms of majoritarianism. He emphasises his belief in nationalism (Hungary's uniqueness vis-à-vis the EU and the other 27 EU member states) and exceptionalism. The Hungarian Constitution, which was revised and accepted by the Hungarian Parliament on 25 April 2011, reflects Fidesz's illiberal values by, for example, cutting the freedom of the press, reforming the electoral system in unfair ways, and challenging and undermining the independence of justice (Uitz, 2015: 285–288; Grabbe and Lehne, 2017a). In Poland, similar developments are taking place under the nationalistic-conservative government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and its leader Jarosław Kaczyński (Grabbe and Lehne, 2017b; Kerski, 2018). Of course, gerrymandering and using the resources of the state on a very large scale to ensure a sweeping full-majority victory would not necessarily imply fraudulent elections in a formal sense, but the boundaries of legality are shamelessly pushed as far as possible (Uitz, 2015).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Sutowski (2018: 17–18) labels the new Polish way as 'neo-authoritarianism'.

Thus, liberal democracies cannot be defined solely by the fact that elections are *formally* held; as Möllers and Schneider (2018: 7–9) maintain, the protection of oppositional parties and movements, freedom of opinion and the press, fair elections and independence of the judicial system must be guaranteed. Therefore, the authors argue that *potential future majorities* must be protected: the opposition must retain the institutional opportunities to win majorities in a future election (pp 89–90). This specific criterion is necessary, the authors argue, to prevent the rise of an authoritarian system.

*(Neo-)Authoritarianism*

Fuchs (2018: 56–58) defines *right-wing/neo-authoritarianism* by drawing on the traditions of the Frankfurt School (specifically Franz Neumann and T.W. Adorno) along four similar dimensions, namely: *Nationalism*, *Friend/Enemy-Scheme*, *Authoritarian Leadership* and *Patriarchy and Militarism*. Two elements stand out in Fuchs' conceptual framework: *political fetishism* of the nation 'to deflect attention from class contradictions and power inequalities'; moreover, 'leader fetishism is used as a political organization principle that often extends to the organization of the capitalist economy, culture and everyday life' (p 56). Secondly, Fuchs emphasises the *glorification of the soldier and warrior*; indeed violence, imperialism and war are accepted 'as appropriate ways for organizing social relations' (p 57). Fuchs' neo-Marxist framework allows understanding the link between the neoliberal world order and the rise of illiberal democracies as well as neo-authoritarian regimes.

Mudde (2007: 22) also draws on the Frankfurt School but subscribes to a more socio-psychological tradition: authoritarianism is defined as 'a *general disposition to glorify, to be subservient to and remain uncritical towards authoritative figures of the ingroup and to take an attitude of punishing outgroup figures in the name of some moral authority*' (Adorno et al, 1969: 228, emphasis added). However, Mudde also points to Juan Linz's influential definition of authoritarianism as a *form of government* characterised by strong central power and limited individual freedoms. Following Linz (1964), four dimensions are emphasised as salient elements of an authoritarian government:

- *limited political pluralism* places constraints on political parties, interest groups and NGOs;
- *legitimacy* is largely dependent on *emotions*, on identification with the regime;
- *suppression of the opposition*; and,
- *vague and non-transparent definitions of the powers of the executive*.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, these criteria overlap with the definitions of illiberal democracy mentioned above.

Furthermore, Levitsky and Way (2002) point to another relevant concept: '*competitive authoritarianism*', which differs from so-called '*façade electoral regimes*' (also labelled 'pseudo-democracies', 'virtual democracies' and 'electoral authoritarian'), that is regimes in which electoral institutions exist but yield no meaningful contestation of power (such as Egypt, Singapore and Uzbekistan in the 1990s). Competitive authoritarianism implies regimes that are democratic in appearance but authoritarian in nature; thus, democratic institutions exist in form but not in substance, because the electoral, legislative, judicial, media and other institutions are so heavily skewed in favour of current power holders. Russia under President Vladimir Putin, the authors claim, would fall within the category of competitive authoritarianism.<sup>12</sup> In a detailed comparative study of media systems, Becker (2004: 149) regards the Russian press under Putin as a *neo-authoritarian media system*. He argues that 'state-owned media have limited autonomy, and appointments to key positions are linked to political loyalty. Access to the media may be open and private ownership may be tolerated, but other mechanisms are used to control messages.' Economic and legal pressures are

applied to suppress freedom of opinion. The regime also uses or tolerates violence against opposition journalists and editors. In this way, self-censorship is reinforced.

As will be elaborated later, the Austrian government coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ has placed severe controls on information and is attempting to intervene in the public state-owned media; this could certainly be regarded as a significant step in the direction of an illiberal democracy and a neo-authoritarian media system. Such developments clearly point to the limit of EUrope as envisioned and indeed as stipulated, for example, in the European Treaty of Lisbon 2008–09.<sup>13</sup>

## The turquoise-blue government in Austria, 2017–18

### *Looking back: the rise of the FPÖ*

The Austrian ‘Freedom Party’ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) must be distinguished from other populist far-right parties in terms of its history and continuous ties to National Socialism, as well as its nativist, anti-immigrant, anti-pluralist and white-supremacist ideology.<sup>14</sup> Today, one might consider labelling the party as populist extreme-right, owing to some of its ideological characteristics, as well as its leading members who belong to German-national duelling fraternities (see below).<sup>15</sup>

After Heinz-Christian (HC) Strache took control of the FPÖ in 2005, *frontstage activities* of the party saw a softening of extreme-right positions and an increase in the salient mobilisation of symbols of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995):<sup>16</sup> displaying the Austrian flag, singing the national anthem and utilizing an abundance of other symbols of national pride. In many instances, the respective texts and performances feature Strache himself wielding these symbols (see Figure 1), portraying the FPÖ politicians as brave, strong and skilled mountaineers who have climbed to the very mountain top, and subsequently addressing their role as the saviours of ‘true Austrians’.

**Figure 1:** Harald Vilimsky (Party Secretary and MEP, Europe of Nations and Freedom Party), HC Strache, Johann Gudenus (Deputy-Mayor of Vienna; since 2018, MP and FPÖ whip) and Herbert Kickl (Party Secretary; since 2018, Minister for Interior Affairs) brandishing the Austrian flag at the Großglockner peak, Austria’s highest mountain (Strache, 2017)





With Strache's leadership came a re-branding of the FPÖ as the '*Soziale Heimatpartei*', the Social Homeland Party (a label it shares with the extreme-right National Democratic Party of Germany, NPD). Further provocations relate to the use of religious imagery and symbols (for example, Strache carried a Christian cross during a demonstration against the building of a Mosque in Vienna; Wodak, 2015a: 140), as well as the redefining of religious concepts, such as *Nächstenliebe* (neighbourly love or charity) in nationalistic terms. The accompanying claims to represent and 'defend' the Christian heritage of Austria in the face of an alleged 'Islamic invasion' have been protested, inter alia, by the Catholic Church. Indeed, the FPÖ's 'othering' has come to focus strongly on Islam, cast as an ethnic other, medieval/pre-modern/barbaric and religious zealot/ fanatic or terrorist threat (Wodak, 2017: 116–117; Wodak and Rheindorf, 2018).

### *2017 parliamentary elections*

The Austrian parliamentary elections on 15 October 2017 exemplify the *shameless normalisation* of the previously far-right positionings of the FPÖ. The ÖVP (now rebranded as 'Ballot Sebastian Kurz – The New People's Party', strategically changing colour from black to turquoise) focused almost exclusively on migration issues (equating all refugees with so-called 'illegal migrants'<sup>17</sup>). This new programme changed the agenda and structure of the ÖVP,<sup>18</sup> which had been established immediately after the restoration of Austria's independence in 1945 and has been represented in parliament ever since. The ÖVP has consistently been the strongest or second-strongest party; as such, it has led or at least been a partner in most of Austria's governments (Grande et al, 2012: 52). Sebastian Kurz, who had strategically prepared to take over the ÖVP since mid-2016 (as was disclosed by newspapers in June 2017<sup>19</sup>), was elected as party leader on 1 July 2017, after his predecessor had resigned, and immediately changed the structure of the 'grand old party': he surrounded himself with an extremely loyal team of mostly young male supporters and with politically inexperienced career-changers who are completely dependent on him. He employs a large team of spin doctors who cleverly manage his online presence and his campaign, apparently copying many elements of US election rallies (see Horaczek and Tóth, 2017; Hofer and Tóth, 2017). In this way, the party has become identified with his persona to the point where Kurz *is* the new ÖVP with a strict centralised, hierarchical structure.

Apart from proposing to dismantle the social partnership (and thus one of the constitutive cornerstones of the Austrian social model) and support employers' organisations,<sup>20</sup> the new ÖVP repeatedly promised to close the 'Mediterranean route' to migration; to reduce the legally fixed minimum welfare (for recognised refugees but also for other people in need); moreover, to reduce the upper limit for asylum applicants, in effect since 2016, from 35,000 to zero (although the number of new arrivals since 2015 has decreased dramatically).<sup>21</sup> In so doing, Kurz adopted almost verbatim the programme of the FPÖ. It is thus fitting that the Green Party referred to Kurz during the 2017 election campaign as 'the better Strache'.<sup>22</sup>

*Fearmongering* was the persuasive macro-strategy in the FPÖ's and ÖVP's election campaigns in 2017 (Wodak, 2018a). They wilfully selected specific *scapegoats* as being responsible for the misery or threat identified: 'illegal migrants', Muslims and Islam, the Jewish philanthropist George Soros, NGOs, the EU and the media, as well as



the previous coalition government, in which Kurz had served six years as minister for foreign affairs, and the integration of migrants. Both Strache and Kurz staged themselves as *saviours* of the ‘true Austrian people’ (see Figures 1 and 2), ready to ‘solve’ the alleged problems by, for instance, closing borders and deporting ‘illegal migrants’. A new, positive narrative was created, which should raise *hope*, advertised as an unspecified *change*.

**Figure 2:** Poster with Sebastian Kurz: ‘Now or never! ÖVP, Ballot Sebastian Kurz, the new People’s Party. Movement for Austria!’ (personal photo)



The stirring up of resentment by Kurz and Strache was successful at the election.<sup>23</sup> The national-conservative ÖVP won a majority with 31.5%. The FPÖ took third place with 26%.<sup>24</sup> Due to the substantial overlap between the political programmes of the FPÖ and ÖVP, coalition talks began soon after. The new turquoise-blue government, albeit accompanied by loud protests, was inaugurated by President Van der Bellen on 18 December 2017.<sup>25</sup> During negotiations to form this government, President Alexander van der Bellen (in office since 26 January 2017) successfully prevented the Ministries of the Interior and Justice going to FPÖ officials as part of the coalition deal and pushed for the EU agenda to be relocated from the FPÖ-led Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Chancellery of Kurz. Despite all this, Van der Bellen did inaugurate the turquoise-blue coalition, notwithstanding frequent assurances to the contrary he had given while running for president.<sup>26</sup>

### *Moving towards ‘Orbánism’*

The ÖVP’s adoption of a far-right, nationalist-conservative agenda implies the *normalisation* of a previously extreme-right, taboo agenda. It is thus not surprising that the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) published an editorial on 6 July 2018 – after the beginning of Austria’s EU presidency on 1 July 2018 – with the headline ‘Austria: When good countries go bad’,<sup>27</sup> thus clearly indicating the limits of EUrope with respect to the officially accepted values of the European Treaty:

Concerns centre on a set of inter-related issues: the Austrian Government's stance on asylum and migration; its closeness to the demagogic leaders of certain countries; its underlying anti-EU stance; its courtship with Russia. The country's ability to play the role of the Presidency is questioned because its obsessive and biased approach to migration and its love-in with the extremists may preclude the neutrality required. ... while the threat from extremist-nationalists like the Freedom Party is clear ..., the anti-migration, anti-Europe agenda becomes far more powerful through the conversion of mainstream leaders and parties to the cause, along with their subsequent complicity in allowing institutional and political capture by the migration obsession of the bad company they decide to keep.

In the following, I briefly point to some salient indicators for Austria's move towards an illiberal democracy while focusing on the discursive and argumentative strategies accompanying new legislation.<sup>28</sup>

### *Fearmongering: Us and Them*

The new Austrian government propagates an extremely restrictive immigration policy (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018) and closed borders (even to Italy and South Tyrol), including the so-called Mediterranean route. Shamelessly, both the FPÖ and the new ÖVP are actively spreading rumours, strawman fallacies and erroneous reports about migrants and refugees – which all merge into a single threat scenario consisting of an imagined 'invasion' by so-called 'illegal migrants' (Wodak, 2018b). To sidestep the obligations of the Geneva Refugee Convention and prevent further loss of voters to the FPÖ, ÖVP politicians now define people who have been persecuted and are fleeing as 'illegal migrants' in their government programme.<sup>29</sup> This implies that they are claiming to be refugees but are in fact travelling to rich European countries to live off welfare and benefits, and thereby endanger the prosperity of those countries. Such fallacies foment resentment and envy: why should foreigners gain access to benefits that take something away from 'us'? Such exclusionary and xenophobic politics – sustained and implemented by the formerly Christian-social ÖVP – correspond to the welfare chauvinism of other far-right populists in Europe, such as the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Sweden Democrats or the Dutch PVV (Wodak, 2017, 2018a).

*Euphemisms* are used with the aim of making restrictive new migration policies acceptable: in a meeting of EU heads of state in Brussels on 28 June 2018, Kurz and his allies Orbán and Matteo Salvini (LEGA, Italy's Interior Minister) launched new terms, such as 'regional disembarkation platforms' instead of 'camps', to retain refugees in Northern Africa, thus preventing them from entering Europe. Moreover, facts about the plights of refugees are challenged and expert opinions neglected. For example, on 22 June 2018, in an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, editor-in-chief Giovanni Di Lorenzo asked Sebastian Kurz what he felt when confronted with videos and pictures of children who had been separated from their parents at the US–Mexico border.<sup>30</sup> Kurz argued that these accounts may have been 'fake news': 'I don't want to speculate, but I have devoted myself a lot to migration. I know that frequently the mistake is being made, that something is represented differently than it is.'<sup>31</sup> As Hannah Arendt (1971) asserted long ago, politicians can quickly change

facts into opinions that one can then oppose – quite shamelessly – with alternative viewpoints. In this way, she argues, scholarly and factual evidence can be blunted and even negated.

*Antisemitism/racism/historical revisionism*

As Hans-Hennig Scharsach (2017) argues in his book *Stille Machtergreifung* [*Quiet Coup*], the FPÖ's internal structures have changed significantly since HC Strache took over as leader in 2005, moving the party ever closer to the radical and extreme right:<sup>32</sup> members of duelling fraternities, which make up only 0.4% of the Austrian population, have effectively taken over the FPÖ. FPÖ politicians such as Strache, Norbert Hofer (Minister for Infrastructure), Johann Gudenus and Manfred Haimbuchner (vice-governor of Upper Austria) constitute the highest leadership body of the FPÖ. They all belong to duelling fraternities (*Schlagende Burschenschaften*; Rauscher, 2017).<sup>33</sup> Core characteristics of the extreme right, such as anti-liberalism, authoritarian leadership and subservience, a so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* (an ethno-culturally defined people), misogyny and racism apply to most duelling fraternities.

Immediately after the new government was formed on 18 December 2017, numerous scandals related to antisemitic and revisionist documents disrupted the everyday agenda of the government: this included Facebook posts as well as songbooks containing Nazi-songs with explicitly antisemitic stereotypes which are typical of such extreme-right duelling fraternities.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the FPÖ's Herbert Kickl, now Interior Minister, proposed 'to concentrate people who enter asylum procedures in one place, because it must be our common interest to reach a corresponding result very, very quickly'.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, the verb phrase 'to concentrate people' invites associations with the Nazi term 'concentration camp'. The centre-left broadsheet *Der Standard* maintains and continuously updates a list of euphemistically labelled 'singular events' [*Einzelfälle*] of antisemitism and revisionism which have been occurring on an almost weekly basis and keep the FPÖ in the headlines.<sup>36</sup> *Conspiracy theories* have become a salient strategy in this context. They draw on the traditional antisemitic world-conspiracy stereotype which also characterised and continues to characterize Nazi and fascist ideologies (Richardson, 2017). For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán published a list of 200 so-called 'Soros mercenaries'<sup>37</sup> (including scholars, journalists, intellectuals and NGOs, who allegedly supported the Jewish Hungarian-American philanthropist) who are trying to help refugees in Hungary. Indeed, Soros has been demonised via such traditional antisemitic conspiracy stereotypes as the primary *Feindbild* of Hungary and, subsequently, also of the FPÖ (Wodak, 2018b).<sup>38</sup>

*Symbolic politics* intentionally and strategically distract and divert from unpopular reforms implemented by the government and dominate the media. For example, Harald Waldhäusl, FPÖ councillor in Lower Austria, challenged the slaughtering of animals according to Jewish and Muslim rites, and proposed monitoring and registering orthodox Jews who bought such meat – as was to be expected, this provoked a media scandal and negative responses by the opposition and the Jewish community.<sup>39</sup> Another highly emotional issue relates to the Muslim headscarf: for years, the FPÖ has been protesting 'the headscarf' as a symbol of female oppression (an example of the 'right-wing populist *perpetuum mobile*'; see Wodak, 2015a). The government has proposed forbidding the headscarf in kindergarten<sup>40</sup> – although

nobody knows how many, if any, three-year-old Muslim girls are forced to wear a headscarf in kindergarten. On 24 July 2018, an FPÖ village councillor was finally expelled from the party after he had labelled the French soccer team that had won the World Cup as ‘Congo-monkeys’ (*Kongoaffen*).<sup>41</sup>

### Challenging press freedom

It is also part of the current government’s programme to ‘reform’ the media – which seems to be a euphemism for continuous and vicious attacks on established journalists and moderators. Figure 3 exemplifies such attacks by the FPÖ via social media, using the rhetorical strategy of ‘*calculated ambivalence*’. This strategy seeks to convey distinct messages to multiple audiences (the party’s extreme-right base and the public) while maintaining plausible deniability through ambiguity (Engel and Wodak, 2013). In this case, the meme posted by Strache (as Austrian Vice-Chancellor) was headed by the label ‘satire!’ and a smiling emoticon. Showing the well-known and internationally renowned journalist and moderator of the main news show of the Austrian public broadcaster ORF in the background to the right, the text reads ‘There is a place where lies become news. That is the ORF. The best of Fake News, lies and propaganda, pseudo-culture and involuntary fees. Regional and international. On television, radio and the Facebook profile of Armin Wolf.’

Both Armin Wolf and the ORF have sued Strache for libel and won. Strache had to apologise publicly and pay €10,000 to Armin Wolf, who donated this money to the *Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes* (DÖW), an NGO that documents neo-Nazi and extreme-right activities. Meanwhile, the FPÖ has continued to publicly campaign for the downsizing or privatisation of the ORF, while backchannel pressure on editors and journalists has been increased.<sup>42</sup>

Kurz and his government have also implemented a strategy of ‘*information management*’ (labeled, message control).<sup>43</sup> Each week, a specific topic is launched in

Figure 3: Facebook post by HC Strache, 13 February 2018.

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from the profile of Heinz-Christian Strache, dated 13 February 2018. The post is titled "Armin Wolf scored against Strache's first success in court" and includes the text: "At present, the court proceeds from libel and a claim for compensation. Strache must also publish on his profile the pending case against him." The post is dated 19:27, 24 February 2018. Below the text is a video thumbnail featuring a portrait of Armin Wolf and the text "ES GIBT EINEN ORT, AN DEM LÜGEN ZU NACHRICHTEN WERDEN." The post also includes a "Screenshot" label and a "Banggood.com" watermark at the bottom right.

a press conference and is then elaborated for one week, until being replaced with a new agenda seven days later. In this way, the media are kept busy and simultaneously distracted from other relevant news. Moreover, *access to information* is being severely restricted: government employees have been forbidden to speak with the press. Such rules come close to 'managed democracies' and their press policies, as defined earlier.

## **Conclusions: 'shameless normalisation' – paving the way to illiberalism**

Investigative journalist Florian Klenk aptly illustrates the strategies of *distraction and silence* employed by the coalition government when challenging the Austrian post-war liberal consensus and its open society.<sup>44</sup> For example, the Austrian government has pushed a new law through parliament (without the conventionally agreed-upon period for seeking expert opinions) which raises maximum daily working hours from 8 to 12 and maximum weekly working hours from 40 to 60. They have sought to legitimise this by appeals to 'flexibility' – a neoliberal notion – thus destroying an extremely important pillar of Austria's post-war democracy and 'guaranteed workers' rights. Raising the number of hours has predictably angered the electorate of the FPÖ. A first huge demonstration organised by the trade unions against this law took place on 30 June 2018. Specific populist measures such as the retraction of the anti-smoking law, which would have taken effect on 1 May 2018 – a concession the ÖVP made to the FPÖ despite the abundance of scientific evidence for the raised mortality caused by cigarettes – have not sufficiently appeased the FPÖ's core electorate.<sup>45</sup> One could thus speculate that the government has strategically decided to please its electorate with ever-more restrictive migration policies, while implementing many 'uncomfortable' policies even though the numbers of migrants and refugees have fallen drastically.

Interestingly, Chancellor Kurz usually remains silent when the FPÖ crosses a so-called 'red line', ignoring multiple requests for interviews or comment on false claims about 'illegal migration', revisionist or racist and antisemitic incidents, potential violations of human rights or attempted dismantling of the social welfare state. Moreover, the government does not take parliamentary enquiries posed by the opposition seriously, answering in vague and ambiguous terms. This blatant disregard forced even Wolfgang Sobotka, the ÖVP-nominated President of the Parliament, to reprimand Kurz and his ministers for not adequately fulfilling their parliamentary duties.<sup>46</sup>

As already observed by Uitz (2015) regarding Orbán's Hungary, dialogue with experts, the opposition and journalists also seems to be out of the question in Kurz' Austria; consultations with the trade unions, NGOs and other important organisations are not granted; rational discussion is mostly substituted by symbolic politics, impoliteness, eristic argumentation or denial. Legislation that is not sufficiently well worded is pushed through parliament; scientific empirical evidence is frequently neglected or ridiculed. It seems as if the ÖVP in its streamlined, strategically planned trajectory to power in the sense of leading the new government has either ignored or quietly accepted the kind of non-democratic ideologues they have aligned themselves with, thus normalising the previously unsayable and unacceptable.

Indeed, most of the breaches of constitutional order, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly, freedom of press and the independence of the legal system

in illiberal democracies (Poland and Hungary) are not announced explicitly; they are made in small – seemingly unimportant – steps like the intervention into the Supreme Court in Poland, where replacing irremovable judges was implemented through a small, banal paragraph about the retirement age of judges, although the Constitution sets a fixed term for supreme court judges.<sup>47</sup> In this case, some of the supreme court judges resisted, and thus this incident made international headlines.<sup>48</sup> As Grabbe and Lehne (2017b: 3) argue, these changes imply ‘mind-closing narratives’ which are obviously ‘gaining force as formerly liberal politicians run after populists’.

Such a dynamic corresponds to – what I have labelled elsewhere – ‘*shameless normalisation*’ (Wodak, 2018a), to be observed not only in the Central and Eastern European countries but also in Austria, the UK, Italy and the Netherlands. The non-compliance with European values and the yearning for exceptionalism vehemently challenge the European project; the rejection of all dialogue, agreed norms and established conventions seems to render negotiations impossible and to pave the way for illiberalism and neo-authoritarianism. New narratives, new public spaces, new communication modes and – most importantly – new policies are urgently needed to protect the achievements of enlightenment and pluralistic liberal democracies.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> See [www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-full-speech-south-africa/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-full-speech-south-africa/)
- <sup>2</sup> Voters in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Hungary and the UK were interviewed: countries from the East, West and South – but none of the Scandinavian countries.
- <sup>3</sup> 78% of AfD voters, 76% of FN (Front National) voters, 69% of FPÖ voters, 66% of LEGA Nord voters, 57% of PVV voters, 58% of PiS voters, 61% of Fidesz, 50% of Jobbik voters and 50% of UKIP voters fear migration more than war, poverty, financial crises or climate change (de Vries and Hoffman, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/karas-zu-orbans-eu-politik-ignorant-und-uneinsichtig/309.059.190>
- <sup>5</sup> [www.presseportal.de/pm/6511/3938672](http://www.presseportal.de/pm/6511/3938672)
- <sup>6</sup> [www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-07/european-union-germany-challenges-loyalty-solidarity](http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-07/european-union-germany-challenges-loyalty-solidarity)
- <sup>7</sup> For more information, see the so-called Tavares Report (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2013-0229+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>) and the role of the Venice Commission (Nergelius, 2015: 291–294; Closa et al, 2014: 19).
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/13/the-geert-wilders-effect/>
- <sup>9</sup> See <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2014/07/31/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-xxv-balvanyos-free-summer-university-and-youth-camp-july-26-2014-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo/>
- <sup>10</sup> For the Hungarian case, see [www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/europe/hungary-election-orban-fidesz.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/europe/hungary-election-orban-fidesz.html)



- <sup>11</sup> Gasiorowski (2006: 110–11) mentions the distinction between *personalistic authoritarian regimes* characterised by arbitrary rule and authority exercised 'mainly through patronage networks and coercion rather than through institutions and formal rules' (such as in post-colonial Africa) and *populist authoritarian regimes* defined as 'mobilizational regimes in which a strong, charismatic, manipulative leader rules through a coalition involving key lower-class groups' (for example, Argentina under Peron, Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro).
- <sup>12</sup> Krastev (2006), however, prefers the label of '*managed democracy*' for 21st century Russia (and challenges Zakaria's approach to illiberal democracies; see for example Nisnevich and Ryabov, 2017 for details on developments in Russia since 1989). A managed democracy, Krastev argues, functions like an autocracy; thus, governments are legitimised by elections that, however, do not impact on the state's policies and agenda.
- <sup>13</sup> See [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:88f94461-564b-4b75-ae77-c957de8e339d.0006.01/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:88f94461-564b-4b75-ae77-c957de8e339d.0006.01/DOC_1&format=PDF)
- <sup>14</sup> Among the vast literature on the FPÖ, see Forchtner et al (2013), Wodak (2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), Scharsach (2017), Wodak and Pelinka (2002), Ötsch and Horacek (2017), Reisigl and Wodak (2001), Ottomeyer (2000), and Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2009).
- <sup>15</sup> See Rheindorf and Wodak (2018) for the history of the FPÖ after 1945.
- <sup>16</sup> Backstage, nativist, racist, misogynistic and antisemitic ideologies remained explicit (Rheindorf and Wodak, forthcoming).
- <sup>17</sup> See the third part of the ÖVP's election programme on order and security: [https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/documents/131008/569203/Regierungsprogramm\\_2017-2022.pdf/b2fe3f65-5a04-47b6-913d-2fe512ff4ce6](https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/documents/131008/569203/Regierungsprogramm_2017-2022.pdf/b2fe3f65-5a04-47b6-913d-2fe512ff4ce6)
- <sup>18</sup> The ÖVP is the successor party to the Christian-Social Party, a staunchly conservative and antisemitic movement founded in 1893 by the then mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger, a highly controversial right-wing populist. Between the two World Wars, most of the members of the Austrian People's party also belonged to the *Vaterländische Front* under its leader Engelbert Dollfuß, who was assassinated by members of the then illegal National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) in 1934. While still sometimes honoured by ÖVP members for resisting Hitler, the regime of Dollfuß was authoritarian in nature and has been labelled as 'Austrofascism' (Pelinka, 2017).
- <sup>19</sup> <https://spoe.at/story/kurz-papiere-beweisen-oevp-hat-regierungsarbeit-gezielt-sabotiert>; [www.falter.at/archiv/wp/projekt-ballhausplatz](http://www.falter.at/archiv/wp/projekt-ballhausplatz); <https://player.fm/series/falter-radio/episode-3-der-geheime-plan-des-sebastian-kurz>
- <sup>20</sup> Part of the 'Austrian success story' after 1945 is the establishment of the Austrian *Sozialpartnerschaft*. The most important employer and employee organisations work together and with the government, finding acceptable compromises for economic issues, salary negotiations and so forth ([www.polipedia.at/tiki-index.php?page=Sozialpartnerschaft](http://www.polipedia.at/tiki-index.php?page=Sozialpartnerschaft)). In this way, Austria experienced few strikes and social conflicts in the post-war period.
- <sup>21</sup> See <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/293189/umfrage/asylantraege-in-oesterreich/>
- <sup>22</sup> See [www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/wahl2017/Im-Kern-ist-Kurz-ein-Strache/303871667](http://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/wahl2017/Im-Kern-ist-Kurz-ein-Strache/303871667)
- <sup>23</sup> It is not possible to describe the election campaigns here, beset as they were by many (media) scandals, rumours and partly criminal machinations. Rather, the aim here is to trace the change of hegemonic discourse and accepted practices due to a 'successful' adoption of populist extreme-right propositions and rhetoric.



- <sup>24</sup> See [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/oesterreich-alle-ergebnisse-der-nationalratswahl-2017-a-1172061.html](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/oesterreich-alle-ergebnisse-der-nationalratswahl-2017-a-1172061.html)
- <sup>25</sup> See [www.derstandard.at/2000070495198/regierungsprogramm-oevp-fpoe-kurz-strache-ueberblick-analyse](http://www.derstandard.at/2000070495198/regierungsprogramm-oevp-fpoe-kurz-strache-ueberblick-analyse) and <https://derstandard.at/jetzt/livebericht/2000070552695/koalition-liveticker-neue-oevp-fpoe-regierung-angelobt-tausende-bei-protesten-in-wien>
- <sup>26</sup> See <https://www.bundespraesident.at/aktuelles/detail/news/aufgaben-und-rechte/> On Van der Bellen's premature assertions regarding a coalition that might include the FPÖ, see: [www.diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4828916/Van-der-Bellen\\_Wuerde-FPOegefuehrte-Regierung-nicht-angeloben](http://www.diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4828916/Van-der-Bellen_Wuerde-FPOegefuehrte-Regierung-nicht-angeloben)
- <sup>27</sup> [www.ecre.org/editorial-austria-when-good-countries-go-bad/](http://www.ecre.org/editorial-austria-when-good-countries-go-bad/)
- <sup>28</sup> I unfortunately must neglect the manifold, complex reasons for such a global move to the right, such as rising economic inequality, the financial crisis of 2008, austerity politics, identity politics and so forth, which are covered extensively elsewhere (Wodak, 2015a, 2017, 2018b; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Fuchs, 2018).
- <sup>29</sup> See <https://kurier.at/politik/regierungsprogramm-rigorese-massnahmen-gegen-asylmissbrauch/302.354.984>
- <sup>30</sup> [www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-06/wien-sebastian-kurz-giovanni-di-lorenzo-live](http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2018-06/wien-sebastian-kurz-giovanni-di-lorenzo-live)
- <sup>31</sup> In the original German: *Ich will da jetzt nicht mutmaßen, aber ich habe mich sehr viel mit Migration beschäftigt. Ich weiß, dass oft sehr schnell der Fehler gemacht wird, dass etwas anders dargestellt wird, als es ist.*
- <sup>32</sup> See Pfahl-Traughber (2015: 75–81) on the differences between right-wing, left-wing and religious extremism.
- <sup>33</sup> On the history of the FPÖ, see Rheindorf and Wodak (forthcoming) as well as Wodak and Rheindorf (2018).
- <sup>34</sup> See the weekly magazine *Der Falter*: <https://cms.falter.at/falter/der-falter-und-die-burschenschaften/>
- <sup>35</sup> <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/fluechtlinge-konzentrieren-weltweiter-wirbel-um-kickl/306.070.490>
- <sup>36</sup> <https://derstandard.at/2000072943520/einzelfall-ausrutscher-fpoe-oevp-regierung;>
- <sup>37</sup> [www.dw.com/en/hungarys-viktor-orban-targets-critics-with-soros-mercenaries-blacklist/a-43381963](http://www.dw.com/en/hungarys-viktor-orban-targets-critics-with-soros-mercenaries-blacklist/a-43381963)
- <sup>38</sup> These antisemitic slurs seem to contradict the many explicit affirmations of friendship with the Israeli government and Prime Minister Netanyahu. That many populist extreme-right parties seek to befriend and support the Israeli government, however, indicates a coalition based on similar interests and exclusionary politics – of fighting the left-wing opposition, on the one hand, and the alleged Muslim threat, on the other. It does *not* indicate anti-fascist and anti-antisemitic beliefs and activities (Betz, 2013; Wodak, 2018c).
- <sup>39</sup> <https://derstandard.at/2000083825283/Waldhaeusl-besteht-weiter-auf-Registrierung-Schaechten-sei-Tierquaelerei>
- <sup>40</sup> <https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5399881/Kopftuch-im-Kindergarten-Kurz-lehnt-politischen-Abtausch-ab>
- <sup>41</sup> <https://derstandard.at/2000084024629/FPOe-Politiker-trat-nach-rassistischem-Kongoaffen-Posting-aus-Partei-aus>
- <sup>42</sup> [www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-06/orf-oesterreich-rundfunk-fpoe-journalisten-entlassung-pressefreiheit](http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-06/orf-oesterreich-rundfunk-fpoe-journalisten-entlassung-pressefreiheit)
- <sup>43</sup> <https://derstandard.at/2000075143822/Wie-Tuerkis-Blau-Widersprueche-wegredet;>
- <sup>44</sup> [www.falter.at/archiv/FALTER\\_20180711F2EE3D488F/wie-die-bundesregierung-unsere-offene-gesellschaft-schliesst](http://www.falter.at/archiv/FALTER_20180711F2EE3D488F/wie-die-bundesregierung-unsere-offene-gesellschaft-schliesst)

<sup>45</sup> [www.krone.at/603088](http://www.krone.at/603088)

<sup>46</sup> <https://derstandard.at/2000078514603/Sobotka-tadelt-Kurz-wegen-mangelhafter-Anfragebeantwortung>

<sup>47</sup> I am very grateful to Jan Grzymski for pointing me to this case, as it provides more evidence for my overall argument.

<sup>48</sup> <https://orf.at/stories/2328900/2328903/>

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