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Exorcising Europe's Demons: A Far-Right Resurgence?

Is Jörg Haider the tip of the iceberg … the first of many yet to come? The charismatic chief led the Freedom Party (FPO) to win 26.9 percent of the vote in the October 1999 Austrian general election, coming second behind the Social Democrats. Even though the FPO beat the mainline conservative People's Party for second place by a mere 415 votes, the result sent shockwaves through the Austrian political system and throughout Europe. It threatened to overturn the cozy power-sharing arrangements between conservatives and social democrats that had governed Austria for most of the post-war era. Other EU countries effectively put Vienna on notice that there would be serious consequences if Haider and his supporters entered government. Threats notwithstanding, in early February, a new coalition containing Freedom Party ministers (but not Haider himself) was sworn in, and all 14 of the other EU governments took immediate steps to downgrade their bilateral ties with Vienna.

Isolating Vienna within the EU was an unprecedented step. At one level it was a gesture of principle: a declaration that certain ideas are beyond the political pale. At another level, it was a defensive response: a harbinger of fears that the far-right contagion might spread to other countries where right-wing extremists, though entrenched in local politics, have hitherto been denied national office.

The United States too expressed its deep concerns about the Freedom Party's involvement in government. Kathryn Hall, the U.S. ambassador to Austria, was recalled to Washington for consultations and, on her return to Vienna, stressed that the Clinton administration would be following the ac-

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tions of the new Austrian coalition closely. Nonetheless the ambassador noted that the United States intended to continue working with the Austrian government on a variety of issues like Holocaust restitution and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, then chaired by Austria.

But if Washington's initial response to events in Vienna was more restrained, is this simply because the Europeans overreacted? Just how concerned should the United States be about a resurgence of the far right on the European continent? The answer of course depends upon a careful assessment of the phenomenon itself. The rise of Austria's Freedom Party mirrors the emergence of similar political formations in a number of other European countries. In France, the xenophobic National Front's candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen won 15 percent of the vote at the last presidential election in 1995. The French far right also has a strong presence in local government, as does the anti-immigrant Northern League in Italy. In 1994, the political heirs of Italian fascism entered into a coalition government. The Flemish nationalist *Vlaams Blok* has done well in northern Belgium, and in Germany the extreme right has shown signs of harnessing discontent in the eastern part of the country. More recently, the Swiss People's Party became the second largest bloc in Switzerland's lower parliamentary chamber. In Eastern Europe, regressive, ultranationalist, and anti-Semitic groups are rearing their heads.

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The diversity of these countries, and (with the exception of Eastern Europe) their relative affluence and political stability, suggests that this is a complex phenomenon. It cannot be easily reduced to a simple resurgence of the fascist or Nazi tendencies of the past. But I believe that many of these parties do have sufficient commonalities to talk about an emerging far right in Europe. This is a new phenomenon, however, arising out of a new context—a reaction to the prevailing uncertainties. Now that global integration rushes forward and a new millennium beckons, their strident nationalism stands in opposition to the prevailing winds driving the world economy and supranational bodies like the EU. It is prompted as much by fear of change and a fear of the future as by relative economic disadvantage. Its populism often finds a traditional scapegoat in immigrants, and in many cases its anti-immigrant message covers an underlying anti-Semitism drawing upon age-old canards of conspiracy and Jewish domination.

Indeed, given the diversity of the formations under discussion, the term

"far right" seems only a partial description of what does appear to be a new and disturbing phenomenon. Although some of these parties or individuals within them may have a certain nostalgia for the past, they are not, by and large, explicitly neo-Nazi in their outlook. Thus, to label them "fascist" doesn't really add much to our understanding of them. Indeed, in my view such terms as "fascist" and "Nazi" are best restricted to the formations that emerged out of the maelstrom of post–World War I Europe. Today's far-right parties have been established in a very different context. Haider is a generation away from Hitler's war. Therefore, a new label is needed. The category "far-right populism" may better describe these groups' different national characteristics and differing points of emphasis. To brand these far-right formations as simply throwbacks to an earlier age would not only be wrong, it would be dangerous. Rather, an understanding of the true nature of this phenomenon can guide policymakers in an effort to constrain such parties' rise.

'Far-right populism' may better describe these groups.

The Fire beneath the Cinders

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the extreme right in Europe inevitably suffered from its association with Nazism. In some countries, it saw a brief electoral surge that disappeared almost as quickly as it had arisen. France provides one of the best examples, with the first *Poujadisme*—an anti-tax, anti-capitalist revolt of small businessmen—and then the cause of *Algerie française*. This "colonial nationalism," aimed at maintaining France's grip on Algeria, enabled the far right to emerge from isolation. But once the colonial issue was removed from the mainstream political debate, the far right lost its best mobilizing issue.

What they needed was a new theme. Old-style anti-Semitism only rallied the extremist fringe. It needed a setting in which it could tap into wider support, rather than just those with a nostalgia for a more authoritarian past. The 1980s provided just such a context for the far right to break out of the political ghetto: the collapse of communism, the end of the Cold War division of Europe, and the competitive strains of the global economy.

During the 1970s, the buzzword in Western Europe among academics and journalists was Euro-communism—to its advocates a new form of communism that took no orders from Moscow and presented an avowedly democratic path towards socialism. There were important similarities between the parties, but there were also important differences depending upon the spe-

cific political and historic contexts from which each had emerged. The rise of the far right in Europe is very similar—a broad trend marked by parties with distinct national accents.

It began in France with the electoral rise of the National Front under Le Pen, its ebullient leader. It goes without saying that this is a party that speaks with a distinctly French accent and arises out of a particular national context. Nonetheless, it epitomizes some of the key features of the new far-right phenomenon and the challenges it poses to the political establishment. The Front was a protest movement, capitalizing on the discontent of groups who felt denied a voice in the traditional parties. It presented simple answers to complex problems—identifying France's immigrant population as the principal source of the country's ills. The wave of optimism that swept the left to power in 1981 quickly gave way to disillusionment. As the bite of austerity policies surfaced, the Communist Party, which had supported the Socialist-dominated government in a union of the left, found it difficult to capitalize upon this discontent. The far right was better able to present itself as an antisystem party, attracting a broad protest vote, taking over the so-called "tribune" role long the preserve of the Communists. Polling data suggests that many people who might have once been considered typical communist supporters—young, male, working-class voters in the red-belt around Paris—were now supporting the National Front.

Factionalism has been a perennial problem for far-right parties.

Immigrants, and especially North African immigrants, would at first glance appear to be the chief demons in the National Front's worldview. Yet beneath the rhetoric lurks a deeper antipathy, often referred to in coded language as "internationalists," "cosmopolitans," or "lobbies." The pages of the far-right press, much of which is close to the National Front, are stridently anti-Jewish. The Front itself blames the Jewish community for its political isolation from mainstream parties, and U.S. Jewish organizations like the B'nai B'rith, dedicated to exposing and analyzing racism and anti-Semitism, have come in for particular criticism. The Front has watched uncomfortably as France has sought to come to terms with the history of collaboration with the Nazis and the debt that it owes citizens who suffered at the hands of the Vichy authorities.

The National Front's ideology also contains a strong anti-American element, though a more cynical American observer might be tempted to comment that this is little different from mainstream political views in France. The far right both echoes and amplifies such attitudes. On one hand, the

National Front wants a simple rebalancing of the Franco-U.S. relationship. On the other, the Front believes that France is threatened by the "New World Order" which is seen as a vehicle for U.S. dominance through organizations such as the United Nations and NATO which compel France to do Washington's bidding.

One of the most significant elements in the National Front's rise has been the extent to which mainstream political parties facilitated its actions or inactions. The initial rise of the Front caught mainstream politicians by surprise. Few recognized the potential strength or longevity of this phenomenon, writing Le Pen off as both a bully and a buffoon. But the mainstream right has suffered from a fundamental dilemma, wanting to attack Le Pen and the Front, while not alienating those who vote for them. The left is just as guilty as the right. When in power, it too has sought to be tough on immigration thus helping to justify Le Pen's message.

A Wider European Phenomenon

The last elections for the European Parliament in June 1999 provided an opportunity to take stock of the far-right phenomenon throughout the EU. At first sight, statistics suggest that these parties are largely on the wane. France furnished the first electoral test for the two warring factions into which the *Front National* had split in December 1998. Le Pen's established formation won only six percent of the vote and five seats in the European Parliament, down from 10.5 percent and eleven seats in 1994. Bruno Mégret's rival *Mouvement National* took a mere three percent of the vote and won no parliamentary seats. Factionalism has been a perennial problem for far-right parties, and the split in the National Front has certainly weakened it for the time being. Much will depend upon what happens when Le Pen leaves the political scene. But it is clear that whatever comfort these internal rivalries may give to the Front's enemies, the combined total of the two formations was only marginally less than the tally the Front itself had scored at the previous contest. Nonetheless, the real news at the election was the success of the strongly nationalist list led by former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua and conservative maverick Philippe de Villiers, who appeared to have taken advantage of the far right's internal difficulties to garner support for their own euro-sceptic message.

In Germany the *Republikaner* party's support collapsed to barely two percent. During the early 1990s, it held seven European parliamentary seats, but in 1999 it secured none. In Austria, Haider's party lost a few percentage points and one parliamentary seat but remained the third largest party (its breakthrough still lay ahead). In Italy, Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance

saw its share of the vote drop, losing two seats. The separatist Northern League of Umberto Bossi also lost votes. Belgium and Denmark were the only success stories for the far right: the Danish Peoples' Party (*Folkesparti*) gained a single seat by taking nearly six percent of the vote. In Belgium, where the far right is split along language lines, the French-speaking National Front lost ground, while the Flemish *Vlaams Blok*'s share of the vote went up to over nine percent, enabling it to retain its two seats. The various formations of the European far right together captured less than 30 seats in the 626-seat assembly in Strasbourg. This can hardly be classified as a fascist tide sweeping over Europe!

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Although the European elections provided a useful barometer for measuring the pressure levied by the far right on mainstream parties throughout the EU, a number of other national election results have illustrated—perhaps more accurately—the resilience of far-right parties and their continuing ability to play upon themes of discontent and unease. Belgium held national elections in 1999 on the same day as the Euro vote. The anti-immigrant, Flemish nationalist *Vlaams Blok* did well, taking 15 seats as opposed to 11 at the previous contest. Its strength in its Flemish-speaking heartland has been significantly enhanced where it took between 15 and 20 percent of the poll and almost one-third of the vote in Belgium's second largest city, Antwerp. It is the pressure from this separatist party that explains the Belgian government's strong response to the FPO's arrival in power in Austria. The *Vlaams Blok* is now seeking to present a more respectable image (what some have termed the "Haiderization" of the party), although it does not by any means regard the FPO as an ideological fellow-traveler. "Haider is a liberal who is to the left of us," said one of its spokesmen recently. But the party has a solid and growing core of support; it already has 18 of the 56 seats on the Antwerp Council and appears poised to do even better in the next municipal elections.

Switzerland has also provided evidence of a far-right advance. The Swiss People's Party won nearly 23 percent of the vote at the general election last October. It emerged as the second largest party with 44 seats in the 200-seat National Council. Traditionally a conservative, junior coalition partner, recently under the influence of Christoph Blocher, it has moved to the right, campaigning on an anti-immigrant and xenophobic platform and opposing further integration with Europe. Blocher himself has tried to harness Swiss resentment at Jewish organizations' efforts to persuade Swiss banks to honor debts to Holocaust victims and their families. A bizarre sense of the mood in

Switzerland was provided by a citizens' vote in the town of Emmen, a suburb of Lucerne, that was strongly backed by the People's Party, in which local people voted on the suitability of some of their neighbors to be granted Swiss citizenship. Only 8 of some 56 individuals were deemed suitable—all of Italian origin—while others, many from the former Yugoslavia, were rejected.

The Far Right in Perspective

Belgium and Switzerland illustrate the difficulties in assimilating these phenomenon into a single far-right label. Such parties may have very different origins and histories. The Swiss are clearly in a very different economic position to the Belgians, and Austria's relative affluence should seemingly make it less hospitable territory for the far right. Nonetheless, each of these formations is in its own way responding to a wider crisis in European governance, with different aspects of this crisis more pronounced in different societies. In France, the National Front has emerged at a time when old certainties about France's place in the world have vanished. French communism has suffered a relative collapse and the political recipes of the left and right have both been tried and found wanting. Belgium's linguistic and cultural divisions, along with the economic disparities between its regions, have given the emergence of the far right a unique aspect. In Switzerland, the old certainties about its place in the world are increasingly called into question as are some of the old stereotypes about its recent past. In Austria, the old political establishment that has effectively shared power since the Second World War is being rejected, and the comfortable assumptions about the war years are less and less tenable, inevitably perhaps prompting a backlash against those who would remind Austria of its questionable past.

Indeed, it is as though politics is starting again in some countries, as is literally so in the eastern part of Germany where, in both Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt, the neo-Nazi German People's Union (DVU) has gained a foothold in recent regional elections. In part, this has been a reflection of disillusionment with the current government and the unfulfilled promise of German unification. Of course, the financial scandal that has rocked the Christian Democratic Union and prompted the resignation of its leader Wolfgang Schauble last February has also contributed to the backdrop of crisis against which the FPO's entry into Austria's government has been viewed. Haider's success had demonstrated the potential attraction of the nationalist right, and the CDU's subsequent chaos appeared to threaten one of the bulwarks of Germany's post-war democracy.

The turbulence in Germany illustrates yet another element in the overall European crisis: corruption undermining established political elites. Le Pen in

France has sought to capitalize on the scandals that have plagued the French Socialist government by using the slogan "Clean hands and head held high" to characterize his own political style, though the Front's brief excursion into municipal government appears to have spawned its own share of minor corruption and machine politics.

The rise of the populist right has often been facilitated by the mainstream parties of both left and right. Mainstream politicians have continued to stoke the very issues, such as immigration, that the populist right has made its own. The current debate in many European countries on asylum seekers and refugees is a case in point.

The far-right parties are responding to a wider European crisis in governance.

Where the populist right has taken a position in national office, like the FPO today, it has done so only by entering into a deal with mainstream politicians seeking short-term political advantage. This strategic debate has been a problematic issue for many populist-right parties. The French National Front has always viewed itself as coming to power if not by an insurrectionary path, then by being called upon to govern in the aftermath of some great crisis of the Republic. Mégret's heresy, which contributed to his expulsion from the National Front, was to insist on the need for an "Italian strategy" mirroring the successful approach taken by the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, which under Fini metamorphosed into a more modern, populist party able to take its place in a wider recomposition of the political right.

Without such deals, national power is likely to prove elusive for the populist right. Given the domestic political circumstances in key EU countries like Belgium and France, however, the strong response to the FPO's role in government becomes more understandable. Just what the isolation of Austria was intended to accomplish, beyond sending a signal of disapproval, is unclear. EU diplomats are going to have to find some way of pulling the EU out of the Austrian cul-de-sac in which its member countries appear stranded. Condemnation of the European stand—at least from many Europe-based commentators—was nearly universal: it was misguided, it would simply confirm Haider's success, and it was motivated by equal measures of hypocrisy and self-interest.

The wider context, however, suggests good reason why such a gesture was seen as essential. True, the earlier participation of the revamped and repackaged fascist party in the Italian government had not brought down sanctions and condemnation from its fellow EU members. But the context in Europe

had changed. Some governments felt growing pressure from the populist right in their own countries, and Europe had just gone through a wave of introspection prompted by the new millennium. Combined with the delayed impact of the collapse of communism, this has meant that the Holocaust and World War II are more in the public eye today than they ever were 20 years ago. Thus, there is a sensitivity to anything that harkens back to Europe's most shameful hours. It was not only that Haider came from Austria (a country that many would see as among Hitler's most willing victims), it was also his own highly ambiguous and ambivalent attitude toward the Nazi past that set alarm bells ringing.

The new populist right may not be fascists, but they are often stridently nationalist, xenophobic, and carry all sorts of unpleasant ideological baggage, whatever the sugar-coating of their sharp suits and liberal economic policies. Other avowedly far-right parties recognize Haider's FPO for what it is; representatives of the far right in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France have all welcomed Haider's assent as an example that they hope to emulate. The fact that Haider tries to keep such fellow travelers at arms length does little to conceal their common mobilizing themes.

A View from the Outside

So should Washington be worried? Caution is called for, but it is important not to exaggerate the threat from the far right: a brown fascist tide is not threatening to engulf Europe. The emergence of this far right, however, should matter to U.S. policymakers for three reasons:

- Fundamentally, the transatlantic links binding an enlarged democratic Europe to the United States remain a key element of U.S. foreign policy. Anything that is detrimental to the internal political life of America's allies should matter to Washington. The far-right parties are responding to a crisis in governance. In many countries, turnout at elections is poor, and democratic politicians are held in low public esteem. The impact of political corruption in France, Germany, and elsewhere is having a corrosive effect, undermining confidence in the traditional political class. The emergence of far-right parties may be a symptom of a wider malaise, but they are also actors within the political system and thus can exacerbate existing trends.
- In a number of countries, the far right may be distanced from government, but it can nonetheless exert significant and disproportionate influence on national politics in several key areas. The clearest example is probably that of France where the *Front National* has not only kept the

perceived problem of immigration on the political agenda but also largely defined the terms in which it is discussed.

- In many cases the far right's strident nationalism leads to a strong antipathy towards the United States. They see the United States as a hegemonic superpower—a threat not just to the independence of European governments but to Europe's cultural integrity. Such themes are not the exclusive preserve of the far right. In many countries, fears of U.S. domination have been voiced to varying degrees of intensity by mainstream politicians. The far right is thus pushing on an open door, and it can complicate Europe-U.S. relations at a time when the constraints of the old Cold War years have been removed and Europeans are likely to be more critical of Washington.

The populist right does not exist in a vacuum and its impact upon policy may be much more significant than its numerical support suggests. The French National Front's ability to define the terms in which immigration is debated is a case in point. They provide a conduit through which regressive and often racist ideas enter mainstream political life. Many of these parties also attract loose followings of skinheads and other exponents of direct action—the xenophobic rhetoric often spilling over into violence.

Such parties are undoubtedly responding to the needs of an electorate that feels that mainstream politicians have let them down, but their supporters may be disappointed. A share in power may demonstrate that the politicians of the populist right are no better than the old guard they condemn. This may well be happening in Austria. Understandable hostility toward the shunning by the EU governments has not necessarily prompted even more support for Haider, with over half the population still uncertain as to whether the FPO is really ready for government. Nonetheless, Austrian democracy's flirtation with the populist right has again highlighted the rise of this worrying phenomenon.

In May, the EU announced that it was planning to spend $150 million over the next few years in an effort to persuade the citizens of EU countries that eastward enlargement is a good thing. The aim is to counter fears that the inclusion of up to 13 more countries in the EU will lead to an inflow of cheap labor and a rise in crime. It is easy to see how the parties of the populist right will seek to prosper from this debate. The issues that they have increasingly made their own look set to remain high on Europe's agenda for many years to come.