



## Did Austria really defeat populism?

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A sigh of relief went through Europe on December 4<sup>th</sup>, when the first results of the repeated runoff for the presidential election in Austria were published. The left-wing and pro-European candidate Alexander Van der Bellen had once again defeated his right-wing populist contender, Norbert Hofer, with 53.3 to 46.7 percent. Austria is therefore the first European country with a directly elected Green president.

But does that mean that Austria resisted the temptation and defeated populism? Does the Austrian example really stand in contrast to the election of Trump in the US and the Brexit vote in the UK?

Admittedly, the populist right-wing candidate did not emerge victorious in this case. Soon, Austria will adorn itself with a progressive left-wing president who stands for solidarity, tolerance, and a strong European community. Yet the facts remain that, albeit his defeat, Norbert Hofer could rally 47 percent of the voters behind him. Nearly half of the electorate considered a right-wing populist to be the best choice to represent the country. For the Freedom party this success is unprecedented and the best result achieved – to date. This casts a cloud over the upcoming legislative elections, which formally should be held in 2018. However, there is mounting evidence that the coalition government between the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the Conservatives (ÖVP) will not last until then.

Early elections could be considered a stroke of luck for the Freedom Party. Many voters who never before cast a ballot for the FPÖ felt impelled to do so in the current presidential election, faced with the alternative of a progressive left-wing Green candidate. This most likely broke the spell for parts of the electorate and thus reduced the hurdles to vote similarly in the next elections. The 'stigma' that might have been associated to the populist party, which is often portrayed as radical-right, lost ground and it became more socially acceptable to vote for the Freedom Party.

Experts further claim that the FPÖ was in some way lucky not to have won the presidential chair, because this success might have taken away some of their potential for the next parliamentary elections. At this point, the Freedom Party leads in most national polls, which in all likelihood would result in a right-wing populist chancellor after the next lower house elections. But also in most of Austria's regions the FPÖ is on the rise – in the states of Upper Austria, Styria, and Vienna current surveys show the party in the lead. Furthermore, the Freedom Party entered two subnational-level coalition governments in 2015 (in Upper Austria and Burgenland). In both cases the FPÖ is still the junior partner, to the conservative ÖVP and the social democratic SPÖ respectively. This points however to two trends: On the one hand, the FPÖ gains experience in governing – even if only at the subnational level. On the other hand, the two major parties explore new coalition options, which hints at potential cooperation also at the national level.

Therefore, the answer to the question whether or not Austria has defeated populism is yes, for now. The FPÖ was once again kept at bay and out of office. But this time it was a tense neck-and-neck race and the result of the presidential runoff shows quite plainly the electoral potential of the Freedom Party.



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