



## Refugees, Communism and Nationalism

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As Austria prepares for legislative elections on Sunday, observers are debating whether Central and Eastern European political currents are tilting toward the right. Yet experts warn this is not a new trend, but rather a consistent problem in a region troubled by a growing number of populist governments that seem to want to push back against EU values.

On Oct. 15 Austrians will hit the polls again, one year after the victory of Alexander Van der Bellen, a pro-EU independent backed by the Green Party, over Norbert Hofer, the right-wing nationalist. Yet this time, Austrians will need to return to the voting booth in a country witnessing growing Islamophobia that could bring a far-right party into a coalition government.

The battle involves the People's Party (OeVP), a conservative party that leads the opinion polls; the center-left Social Democrats (SPOe), the other party in the current coalition government; and the Freedom Party (FPÖe) of right-wing populists. The most likely outcome is for the People's Party to win and join forces with the far-right Freedom Party to form a coalition government that will lead the country.

The early elections were called in May, due to political battles over reforms inside the current coalition, and have already sparked controversies. The center-left chancellor and leader of the Social Democrats, Christian Kern, has been accused of discrediting his main challenger, Sebastian Kurz of the People's Party, through several social media sites by spreading xenophobic and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, according to The Guardian. Such charges come in an already turbulent political climate – both parties have suggested they are considering a coalition with the FPÖe.

Yet the country's history with far-right extremism is not new, experts say. The Freedom Party has been around for decades, in various forms, including in another coalition government in the late 1990s, despite EU criticism.

"So what Austria is showing us is two things: this is a recurrent problem, and the problem seems to be getting worse, not better," says Erik Jones, professor of European studies at Johns Hopkins University.

But, while its voice might be getting stronger, FPOe is not as bad as others, other analysts say.

"It's really not a fascist party; it's more of a populist anti-immigrant (party) with some folks in it with pretty ugly views," says Doug Bandow, senior fellow specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "No one believes it will take power. It's a question of where it falls within a multi-party election."

The region is no stranger to such ideologies. In Hungary, Viktor Orban, the leader of the national conservative Fidesz, took power seven years ago and adopted a strong rhetoric against EU principles, appealing to religion and the working class resentful of losing national sovereignty over Brussels policies. He has been criticized for nepotism, limiting the freedom of the press, and trying to shut down a university with alleged connections to Brussels.

Poland's government, a country hailed for its democratic views and economic policies during the economic crisis, is now headed by the Law and Justice party (PiS) that wants to reassert itself in a Europe led by Germany.

In the Czech Republic, nationalistic and anti-Islamic rhetoric has flourished among political leaders in a country whose president has played on people's frustrations with the EU while also adopting strong anti-immigration policies stirred by the refugee crisis.

Less conflicting situations with anti-EU messages can be found in Slovakia where the prime-minister, a former Communist, initially fought requests of accepting the EU's quota of immigrants. In Romania, the social democratic government was criticized by Brussels for legislative proposals encouraging corruption that sparked massive protests in Bucharest in January.

In most of these countries, experts say, today's nationalist or populist movements are a response to a history of influence, occupation and even oppression from outside forces.

"Countries like Germany, France, or Britain have not only had the democratic experience since War World II, but they'd also worked together in the Cold War period," says Bandow. "They had the creation of the EU, they had the U.S. as a partner which has helped bring countries together. They had many thing to moderate their politics that the Central and Eastern Europeans haven't."

The smaller countries in Central and Eastern Europe also have reacted strongly to the refugee crisis that peaked in 2015. Public anxiety over migrants helped amplify the political voices in the countries speaking out against EU quotas, contoured a criminal profile of the immigrant, and made countries such as Hungary raise fences at its borders.

"The 2015 experience had a huge impact. There were millions of people, overwhelmingly young men, and it had a lot of consequences, such as crimes against women," Jones says. "That's not a characteristic of most of the immigrants but they had been high-profile enough that it caused an extraordinary reaction."

The recent influx of refugees into Central Europe is something new and threatening, analysts say. Immigrants have previously avoided the region because the countries were comparatively poor and run by Communist governments that closed the borders to the outside world, says Bandow.

"For them (Central Europeans), mass immigration is rather new and threatening especially when it's – from their perspective – from groups that are themselves rather threatening."

With few policy alternatives to deal with refugees, political extremism becomes even more appealing, experts say.

"We've seen a breakdown of the traditional political parties and the weakening of the traditional left," Jones says. "So these populist movements flourish because the other alternatives become less attractive and less effective."

Experts argue that there is a fundamental difference between the expressions of nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe compared to that in the West.

"In the West, you have a rejection of policies and practices rather than institutions per se," says Mabel Berezin, an expert in nationalism in Europe and a professor in the department of sociology at Cornell University. "In Poland and Hungary, you have these people, the far-right, actually running the countries."

Central European governments may be less prone to being run by far-right parties if the EU responded more promptly to some of the main concerns by the region's leaders, such as issues related to security and the financial challenges remaining from the 2008 global financial crisis.

"So far those problems have not been adequately managed," Berezin says. "So you are getting a lot of backlash because a lot of those problems pose disruption in the ordinary living of the ordinary people."

While it's hard to predict what the future holds for both Austria and the region, analysts are skeptical and suggest a more politically unstable continent is possible, whose countries need to work closely together, but pay more attention to their individual needs.

"A stronger Europe is very unlikely to happen," Bandow says.