

Can Populism Be Suppressed in a Democracy? Austria, Germany, and the European Union

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One of the many positive effects of the end of the cold war is that Western Europe and Eastern Europe no longer have to be studied in isolation from one another. Myriad common topics and challenges now involve both regions of Europe. Unfortunately, however, one such common theme is the rise in anti-immigrant populism, where the same disturbing trend has been taking place in both the East and the West.

The rise in populism in Western Europe, particularly in Austria and Germany, is my focus here. After a brief discussion on the concept of populism, both in general and in the specific context of Western Europe, the analysis moves to how and why Austria and Germany, which share a common recent history and similar political systems, have developed significant and consequential differences in terms of how they deal with right-wing extremist parties and movements. Finally, I address the recent crisis between Austria and the other 14 European Union (EU) member states, which arose after the October 1999 elections and the emergence of a coalition government that included Jörg Haider's Freedom party, and which appears to have been settled after the report of Europe's three "wise men" led to the lifting of "sanctions" in September 2000. After careful consideration of the arguments from opponents of the EU response, I argue—based on the extremely successful postwar German model—in favor of the careful suppression of extreme-right populist movements by means of a cross-party elite consensus, while still maintaining a framework of democratic competition. Though it could not have lasted indefinitely, the symbolic diplomatic response to the Austrian situation did serve its purpose, sending the appropriate message, namely that avowed anti-immigrant extremism is unacceptable, for Austria and for the rest of Europe.

Populism Defined

Populism is a concept that is notoriously difficult to define, because its application varies widely across different countries, contexts, and historical time periods. The particular ideologies, strategies, and organizational structures of populist movements do not conform to a single mold or model. Indeed, what characterizes most populist movements is that their appeals are not necessarily programmatic, coherent, or consistent, but rather all-encompassing. In their study of Latin America, Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier provide a useful general definition of populism as “a political movement characterized by mass support from the urban working class and/or peasantry; a strong element of mobilization from above; a central role of leadership from the middle sector or elite, typically of a personalistic and/or charismatic character; and an anti-status quo, nationalist ideology and program.”¹ The defining feature of populism, especially in the context of contemporary Europe, is what Hans-Georg Betz calls “the mobilization of resentment,” which can be directed against established political parties, against the political class in general, and most frequently (and most effectively), against immigrants, refugees, and foreigners.²

One of the confounding features of populism is that it does not fit neatly into conventional conceptions of the left-center-right political spectrum. In Latin America, populist movements have generally been associated with the political left, usually with the strong support of the urban working class. In Europe, populist movements have been considered more of a right-wing phenomenon, fueled especially by peasant or worker support of nationalist myths and ideologies. But the distinctions are certainly not clear-cut, as left-wing populist movements can contain elements of right-wing

1. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
2. See Hans-Georg Betz, “The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe,” *Comparative Politics* 25:4 (1993): 413–27. See also Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); and Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

nationalist ideology, and even European fascist and Nazi movements had distinctly socialist components in their political agendas.

In the post-cold war period, these distinctions have been blurred even further, especially when one includes the countries of post-communist Europe. Vladimir Tismaneanu argues convincingly that “Left, right, center: all these notions have strange and elusive meanings under post-communism,” and he claims that a “new version of radicalism combines themes of the left and right in a baroque, often unpredictable alchemy.”³ Given the contradictory messages and policies that new West European populist parties and leaders advocate, the left-center-right distinctions may not be very helpful for understanding the recent resurgence of populism in Western Europe either.⁴ Overall, however, the central and defining feature of populism, especially in Western Europe, remains hostility to foreigners and immigrants rather than a challenge to the property relations of capitalism. In my view therefore, it still makes conceptual and analytic sense to consider Haider’s Freedom party, and others like it, as movements of the extreme right, while acknowledging that they do not fit neatly into the conventional distinctions of the political spectrum.

Over the past decade, Western Europe has experienced a dramatic rise in anti-immigrant populism. Broadly speaking, there are three distinct indicators of this rise: (1) latent xenophobia and racism; (2) hostile or violent actions against foreigners; and (3) electoral mobilization. In terms of latent xenophobia and racism, many surveys have demonstrated that a surprisingly high number of Europeans openly espouse racist and anti-foreigner views. For example, to the shock and consternation of those who had com-

3. Vladimir Tismaneanu, “The Leninist Debris or Waiting for Perón,” in *East European Politics and Societies*, 10:3 (1996): 504–36. See also Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

4. The policy program of Austrian populist Jörg Haider—whom many think represents the prototype of the new telegenic populist—fits neither the left nor the right, as he advocates, for example, increases in social spending for child care, as well as a flat tax. Haider himself is fond of saying, “People always ask if I am to the left or right of my opponents. I am ahead of them,” although—quite tellingly—he neglects to mention that the quotation was actually coined by the German Greens in the early 1980s. (Roger Cohen, “A Haider in Their Future,” *New York Times Magazine*, 30 April 2000), 56.

missioned the survey, a 1997 Eurobarometer study found that one-third of European Union citizens admitted that they are either “very racist” or “quite racist.”⁵ Second, increases in hostile, and sometimes violent, actions against foreigners, Gypsies, Jews, asylum-seekers, and refugees have been widely reported throughout both Western and Eastern Europe.⁶ Finally, over the past decade, electoral support for anti-immigrant populist parties has increased across Western Europe, especially in Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, and Switzerland.

The Background to the Current Crisis: Austria and Germany Compared

What has caused this increase in populism in Western Europe? Three factors are critical: the first is the increasing economic uncertainty in the new global economy;⁷ the second is the increasing influx of people from other countries and regions, especially after the war in the former Yugoslavia, and the possibility of even more immigrants after EU expansion to the east; and the third is the gradual erosion of the elite consensus between the major parties on the center-left and center-right of the political spectrum to isolate and exclude extremist parties.⁸ Most attention is usually paid to the first two factors, which are the most tangible and visible, but the third may actually be the most important.

Austria and Germany form a logical comparison in several respects—culturally, historically, and politically—and the com-

5. See Eurobarometer, “Racism and Xenophobia in Europe,” Luxembourg, 18–19 December 1997. The full report is available at http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg10/info/epo/eb/racism/racism_en.pdf.

6. For three recent references, see “Far Right Attacks Increase in Germany in 1999,” *Agence France Presse*, 4 April 2000; Steven Erlanger, “No Room for Gypsies: Across a New Europe, a People Deemed Unfit for Tolerance,” *New York Times*, 2 April 2000; and William Drozdiak, “Haider Plays On Fears of Foreigners,” *Washington Post*, 5 February 2000.

7. Economic uncertainty is not at all the same as economic hardship, particularly since West European citizens have extremely high standards of living. Unemployment, however, or at least the fear of unemployment—and particularly the fear of losing one’s job to foreigners—is a crucial element of that economic uncertainty.

8. For a compelling analysis of the causes and consequences of the erosion of this elite consensus, see Richard Rose, “The End of Consensus in Austria and Switzerland,” *Journal of Democracy* 11:2 (2000): 26–40.

parison helps to illuminate the particularities of each.⁹ They obviously have long historical parallels, most disastrously during the Nazi period, after the “willing” annexation of Austria by Hitler’s Third Reich in 1938. In the postwar period, they both embarked on a de-Nazification course, where — even though in both countries many formerly prominent Nazis remained in important political roles as converted democrats — each country’s public, official ideological credentials were explicitly *antifascist*.

The societal internalization of each country’s Nazi past, however, was quite different, as West Germans have had a genuine “working-through” (*Aufarbeitung*) of that past, especially as a result of the student protest movements of 1968 and also the historians’ debate (*Historikerstreit*) of the mid-1980s, whereas Austrians have not confronted their past nearly to the same degree, and certainly not in the same way. Rather, the postwar Austrian national myth is one that views Austria not as the very incarnation of Nazi ideology and aggression, but instead as its victim.¹⁰ A common yet evocative description of this Austrian national historical revisionism is that “Austrians . . . have convinced themselves that Hitler was a German and Beethoven an Austrian.”¹¹

In both countries, the crux of the postwar democratic legitimating principle was an *elite consensus* among the major parties, as well as leading political, economic, cultural, and military figures, not to cooperate with or even to tolerate extreme-right parties and movements. In both Germany and Austria, even though small right-wing parties existed from the early postwar period onwards, they were systematically isolated and excluded (or their electorate was discreetly co-opted by one or both major parties), and they remained marginal in the political party systems. At stake for the leaders from both the center-left and the center-right was the very survival of democracy and the integration of their countries into the western group of nations.¹²

9. When I use the label “Germany,” I am referring to the Federal Republic of Germany, namely West Germany until 1990, and unified Germany thereafter.

10. This myth was propagated by the Allies, who, in the November 1943 Moscow Declaration, called Austria “the first victim of Nazi aggression.”

11. Quoted in Cohen, “A Haider in Their Future,” 56.

12. See, for example, Peter H. Merkl, “The German Response to the Challenge of Extremist Parties, 1949–1994,” in John Brady, Beverly Crawford, and Sarah Elise Wiliarty,

Although both Austria and Germany shared this elite consensus — along with a corporatist political-economic framework that developed close ties between government, business, and labor — it was carried out very differently in the two countries, leading to very different consequences today. In Germany, the elite consensus was not simply carried out voluntarily, but it was also strictly enforced by a constitutional court (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), which has the power to outlaw any groups, organizations, or political parties that espouse extreme right-wing views that are deemed “hostile to the constitution” (*verfassungswidrig*). This punitive power, and the constant threat of invoking it, has been used regularly and consistently throughout the history of the Federal Republic.¹³ The fact that it comes from the independent, highest court in the country, has lifted some of the burden from politicians and elites to counter each and every right-wing movement through elections and the democratic electoral process.¹⁴

In Austria, in contrast, the elite consensus was not implemented by the constitutional court, but rather by means of an elaborate and informal system of “neo-corporate consociationalism,” commonly called *Proporz*, whereby the two leading parties (Social Democrats and People’s Party) cooperated to exclude potential competitors.¹⁵ Under the Proporz system, membership in one of the two major parties was essential for career advancement and privileges in politics and the civil service.¹⁶ As a result, as long as the two parties continued to cooperate, there was little opportu-

eds., *The Postwar Transformation of Germany: Democracy, Prosperity, and Nationhood* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

13. See, for example, Donald P. Kommers, *The Constitutional Jurisprudence of the Federal Republic of Germany*, 2nd ed. (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).
14. Interestingly, the fact that the German system outlaws groups or organizations that are seen as “anti-constitutional” has led some commentators to view Germany as less democratic; for example, the Freedom House scale of political rights and civil liberties has consistently ranked West Germany (and now unified Germany) slightly lower than Austria, which received the best possible score. See Freedom House, “Annual Survey of Freedom House Country Scores, 1972–73 to 1998–99,” available at <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/ratings.pdf>>.
15. See, for example, Kurt Richard Luther and Wolfgang C. Müller, *Politics in Austria: Still a Case of Consociationalism?* (London: Frank Cass, 1992).
16. As Richard Rose writes, “Party patronage was said to reach down as far as the public lavatories, where the attendant on one side was *rot* (Socialist) and the other *schwarz* (a supporter of the People’s Party)” (See “The End of Consensus in Austria and Switzerland,” 32).

nity for any outside parties, especially on the right, to threaten the stability of the Proporz system. In fact, the Freedom Party—which has actually been in existence since 1956, as a continuation of the post-Nazi “Association of Independents,” itself formed in 1945—was vilified and excluded by both leading parties for decades.

But all of this changed in the late 1970s, when Social Democratic chancellor Bruno Kreisky tried to create a Swedish-style hegemonic social democracy and sought to weaken the People’s Party by lifting up the Freedom Party.¹⁷ From 1983 to 1986, the Social Democrats, then led by Franz Vranitzky, went so far as to include the Freedom Party—then in its economic liberal phase under the leadership of Norbert Steger—as a junior partner in the coalition government.¹⁸ Even though the Freedom party was still relatively small in 1986, when Haider became its leader, its participation in government had served to legitimate it and to erode the elite consensus that had characterized postwar Austria until then. From 1986 to 1999, when the Social Democrats and the People’s Party had to govern jointly in a stable but ineffective “grand coalition,” Haider’s Freedom party found a perfect opportunity to enhance its credibility and presence as the major party in the opposition.

The rest of the story is familiar by now, as the electoral support for the Freedom party has grown sharply—from 5 percent when Haider took over the party in 1986, to 16.6 percent in 1990, 22.5 percent in 1994, 21.9 percent in 1995, and 26.9 percent in 1999—with Haider acting as the quintessential populist, proposing vague and often contradictory policies and playing to voters’ fears of increasing immigration, along with workers’ anxieties about adapting to new economic conditions. Finally, the last nail in the coffin of the Austrian elite consensus took place in the months after the October 1999 elections, when the leader of the People’s party, Wolfgang Schüssel, decided that his own personal ambition to

17. For an engaging analysis of this process, see Andrei S. Markovits and Anson Rabinbach, “The Dark Side of Austrian Social Democracy: The Social Democratic Party’s Role in the ‘Haider Phenomenon,’” *Dissent* 47:3 (Summer 2000): 15–18.

18. Kreisky’s tactic resembles that of the late French president François Mitterrand with the National Front in the 1980s, who restructured the French parliamentary system, instituting proportional representation, in an attempt to divide the French right.

become chancellor outweighed his aversion to Haider and the Freedom party, and together they formed a coalition government.¹⁹

The EU-Austrian Controversy

To the surprise of many (probably even the EU members themselves), on 31 January 2000, the other 14 EU member states announced that each country would protest the inclusion of Haider's party in the new Austrian government by suspending bilateral links with Austria, by reducing contact with Austrian ambassadors, and by opposing Austrian candidates for international positions. The argument, according to the Europeans, was that—although the EU itself did not take unilateral action, since no EU laws were broken—the member states decided to send a message that anti-immigrant, right-wing extremism opposes the fundamental identity of the EU. In essence, the EU stand was moral and symbolic, carrying significant, but not vital, political and diplomatic consequences.

Many analysts and scholars immediately condemned the EU response as premature and excessive. Those who opposed the EU sanctions generally made two basic arguments. The first was that no legal basis existed for EU states to isolate another member state for violations that that state has not (or not yet) committed. For example, George Bermann argued that “the EU or its member states” should not “act without a showing of some actual or probable breach.”²⁰ In other words, the crux of this argument is that the EU response constituted interference with the domestic political situation of a country.

19. Technically, the Freedom Party is actually the strongest party in the governing coalition, since it received several hundred more votes than the People's Party (26.91 percent each, and each has 52 seats in the 183 member Parliament). The major posts, however, including chancellor and foreign minister, have been filled by the People's Party in an attempt to assuage the international reaction to the new government. Even though Haider has stepped down as leader of the Freedom Party, and he does not serve in the new government, he is clearly its overarching leader and will remain so in the future. His official withdrawal was merely a strategic and calculated political move to stay somewhat on the “outside.” He still calls for the establishment of what he (eerily) calls the “Third Republic,” of which he still dreams of becoming chancellor.
20. George Bermann, “Austria: Rushing to Judgment in the European Union” (paper presented at the 12th International Conference of Europeanists, Chicago, 30 March–2 April 2000).

This type of argument contains a crucial and timely *moral* element, suggesting that, especially in an age in which western governments are touting the alleged virtues of democracy in societies from Albania to Zimbabwe and as democracy has been expanding rapidly across Europe and around the world, the “will of the people” must be respected and accepted. According to this argument, therefore, the EU had no business interfering with elections that were certainly free and fair, and where the results have not led to the abolition of democracy or to any violation of basic human rights. Since the survival of Austrian or European democracy was not at stake and the new coalition government had not yet had a chance to govern, the EU should have let the popular will run its course within Austria’s existing democratic institutional framework.²¹

The second, and perhaps more ominous, argument was that the EU response might backfire, in that it could actually *strengthen* the extreme right in Austria and across Europe, western and eastern. Tony Judt warned that “if we make a victim of Haider and his country, the man and his rhetoric could well find sympathetic echoes in other countries, as a symbol of widespread resentment by ‘us’ against ‘them.’”²² The thrust of this argument is that the EU was premature in its condemnation of the new Austrian government, and this hostile, non-democratic (if not antidemocratic) reaction would only serve to fuel the fire of Haider and populists like him across Europe.

These positions should be taken very seriously, but in the end, I argue that the response of the EU member states was not only justifiable, but commendable, and that it will prove to be effective in the long run, even if only indirectly. My reason has little to do with the (tempting, but ultimately misleading) analogy to the Nazi rise to power, which Judt rejects convincingly.²³ The

21. For this type of argument, see also Lothar Probst and Winfried Thaa, “Politische Analyse statt moralische Selbstgerechtigkeit: Überlegungen zum Umgang mit Jörg Haider und der FPÖ,” *Kommune*, April 2000.

22. Tony Judt, “The Farce Versions of History,” *Newsweek International*, 14 February 2000.

23. Judt writes, for example, “We are not in 1933; the Freedom Party is not a Nazi movement, and Haider is not Hitler” (See Judt, “Tale from the Vienna Woods,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2000). For an argument in favor of the EU sanctions that stresses the historical importance of the Nazi example, see Dan Diner, “Haider und

appropriate historical reference should not come from the negative lessons from the Weimar/Nazi periods, but rather from the *positive* lessons from the post-Second World War period. The success of postwar Austrian and German democracy was based on a carefully crafted (although occasionally inefficient and often corrupt) *elite consensus* about the importance of excluding potential extreme-right movements or parties. In a sense, this consensus existed because the elites did not fully trust “the people” — and with good reason, given the region’s history in the first half of the twentieth century.

The long-term solution to the current political situation in Austria, therefore, will depend on a restoration of that elite consensus—which includes not only political leaders, but also key economic and cultural figures—to exclude xenophobic and anti-immigrant parties, while at the same time eliminating the cozy corruption and complacency that characterized the previous grand coalition governments. This entails a commitment to a genuinely competitive multiparty system, along with increased governmental and institutional transparency and accountability. But it also means that radical-right policies and actions must be vigorously opposed, by both legal and electoral means.

Democracy and Hyper-Democracy

The end of the cold war has brought about a different age, one that views the expansion of democracy as paramount, both within societies and around the globe. This is why we see an increase in the number, type, and frequency of popular initiatives and referenda—which are deemed to be the ultimate expression of democracy and the popular will—across Europe and the United States. Extremist right-wing populist parties across Europe have managed to adapt the language of democracy and popular sovereignty to their racist and xenophobic purposes in a way that certainly vio-

der Schutzreflex Europas: Österreichs neue Regierung stört den wachsenden europäischen Gemeinsinn,” *Die Welt*, 26 February 2000. For a direct critique of Diner’s argument, see Lothar Probst and Winfried Thaa, “Welche Zivilreligion braucht Europa? Die Erinnerung an den Holocaust sollte es nicht sein. Eine Antwort auf Dan Diner,” *Die Welt*, 13 March 2000.

lates the liberal and tolerant spirit of democracy, even if—unlike the old extremist parties, which were explicitly antidemocratic—it does not seek to overthrow the democratic system. Even Haider himself claims that “What is a populist? Everybody who is a good democrat is a populist.”²⁴ Moreover, one of the most effective slogans of parties of the radical right is “Give the people their voice back!” (“dem Volke die Stimme zurückgeben!”).

In my view, this trend has gone, and is still going, too far. Perhaps its most disturbing manifestation took place recently in the Swiss town of Emmen, on the outskirts of Lucerne, where a referendum was held to decide whether or not to grant citizenship to foreigners who were long-term residents. Voters in Emmen were provided with a brochure containing a full profile on each applicant, including photographs, salaries, tax status, background, and hobbies. The results were that of the 56 people seeking naturalization—all of whom the local authorities had recommended be accepted after thorough investigations and language tests—only eight individuals were accepted, and they were all of Italian origin. The others, mainly from the former Yugoslavia, but also Turks and Hungarians, were refused, even if they had been living in Switzerland for decades and spoke only *Schweizerdeutsch*.²⁵ These results—of a referendum that was held under conditions that were fully free, fair, and democratic—are extremely troubling. Even though a subsequent nationwide referendum in September 2000 on limiting the percentage of foreigners (including EU citizens!) residing in Switzerland to 18 percent was defeated, the support for such restrictive anti-foreigner measures appears to be increasing.²⁶ And as these types of referenda spread across Switzerland, and as the concept of direct democracy expands around the world, extremist outcomes are, unfortunately, probably a bellwether of

24. Quoted in Roger Cohen, “A Haider in Their Future.”

25. See, for example, Fiona Fleck and Julian Coman, “Swiss Under Fire for Ballot on Citizenship: Swiss Voters Are Being Left to Decide the Fate of Individual Immigrants,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 March 2000.

26. Elizabeth Olson, “Swiss Voters Reject Limit on Number of Foreigners,” *New York Times*, 25 September 2000. Incidentally—although the possible reasons for it extend far beyond the scope of this article—it is worth noting that anti-immigrant support is significantly greater in German-speaking areas than in French- or Italian-speaking ones, even though the actual percentage of foreigners is much greater in the French-speaking regions.

what is to come if no measures are taken to attempt to prevent them from coming about in the first place.

Western Europe, like parts of the United States, is moving towards a system that might be called “hyper-democracy,” which panders to dishonesty and manipulation on the part of political and economic elites and to the lowest common denominator for citizens’ individual responses to issues about which they have no fair basis for judgment. This is not to advocate an antidemocratic, Japanese-style system of back-room wheeling and dealing, without popular input, where leaders may come and go, but little changes. But in order to succeed in the twenty-first century, European democracy will have to incorporate the successful elements of post-Second World War West European democracy, namely the establishment and maintenance of a competitive, representative, multiparty democratic system in which extreme-right elements are legally and practically excluded. Of course, this system will also have to adapt to new economic constraints and new demographic realities, but a crucial element of its success, and of the success of the entire European project, will be the legal and fair protection of immigrants.

The challenge for European democracy will be to overcome the type of secrecy and corruption that characterized previous Austrian governments, especially during the many years of the grand coalition. Perhaps the Austrians, as well as the Swiss and other Europeans, could learn from the example of the German constitutional court, which has proven effective in limiting the spread of organized right-wing sentiments in Germany. Such action might not be acceptable for Britain, the United States, or other countries in the Anglo-American tradition, for whom civil liberties and the freedom of association are paramount in their own histories. But it would be neither incongruous nor egregious for continental European countries to use the judicial branch to exclude the kind of anti-immigrant, right-wing extremism that has the potential to thrive electorally if it remains unchecked.

One can envision democratic politics on a continuum, ranging — at the one extreme — from a highly secretive and elitist system with little meaningful popular input, like Japan, to — at the other extreme — a model of direct democracy in which the general pub-

lic actually votes on all sorts of policy issues, as in Switzerland, or in some states (most notably California) in the United States. Most European countries fall somewhere between Japan and Switzerland on this continuum, but the general trend around the world has been towards the increasing influence of the popular will and an increase in the practice of direct democracy. While this expansion or intensification of democratic practices is not necessarily problematic per se, it does open the door to unfortunate popular outcomes that are exclusionary and racist and that are potentially antidemocratic and certainly antiliberal, in the sense of restricting the human and political rights of certain groups of people. And political, economic, and cultural elites of all moderate ideological persuasions have to be prepared to set the boundaries—whether by means of constitutional courts, electoral rules, or popular discourse—on what kinds of democratic outcomes are acceptable or tolerable. It is especially important for leaders of the European Union, as they seek to reach ever greater political and social unity and solidarity, to maintain a cautious resistance to potentially antiliberal outcomes of an increasingly hyper-democratic process.

Conclusion

In sum, the EU's reaction to the new coalition government in Austria, although certainly unprecedented and surprising, was the right decision, and it may well prove crucial for building a just and inclusive Europe. The argument that the sanctions against Austria will only encourage extreme-right sentiment throughout Europe is plausible, and certainly frightening, but why could it not happen the other way around? Might not this stern message to Austria be effective in discouraging, rather than encouraging, support for the radical right across Europe in the future? As Andrei Markovits writes, "Since the EU has now established signals . . . these are valid for other member states as well, not just for Austria."²⁷ Either way, it is purely speculation, but there is certainly no evidence that, had

27. Andrei S. Markovits, "Danke EU, Bravo Kanzler Schröder und Minister Fischer!" *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 8 February 2000. For a more detailed version of his argument, see also Andrei S. Markovits, "Austrian Exceptionalism: Haider, The European Union, the Austrian Past and Present" (paper presented at the Minnesota Forum on German Culture, Minneapolis, 3–6 May 2000).

the EU *not* reacted against the new Austrian government, extremist sympathy elsewhere would have decreased. And the EU leaders made the decision, in my view defensible, that the inclusion of a party whose rhetoric is clearly xenophobic and threatening²⁸ as a major partner in a coalition government should not be accepted without consequences.²⁹

Moreover, opponents of the EU's reaction tended to overstate the severity of the diplomatic sanctions. Even Bermann admitted that "these are not the most severe sanctions imaginable, and do not come close (nor could they legally) to the sanctions authorized by the Treaty for 'serious and persistent' breaches."³⁰ In the end, controversial and unprecedented as it may have been, the EU's symbolic (but not severe) response was appropriate in its tone and message. Even though the report from the EU's three wise men convinced the 14 other EU member states to remove the diplomatic sanctions against Austria in September 2000, the EU response has served its purpose, and the Austrian political situation will remain closely observed. In essence, just as the German constitutional court places an organization under watch before actually taking genuinely punitive action, the EU's reaction sends a warning to Austrians and other Europeans, telling elites and voters alike to be careful with the extreme right.³¹ The precedent has been set, and hopefully the message will get through.

Finally, given that the new postcommunist European democracies are already knocking on the EU's door and considering the widespread nationalist and populist sympathies throughout the

28. Although the purpose of this article is not to examine the rhetoric and policies of Haider or his party, for those who have doubts about the extent of that xenophobia, see Ruth Wodak, "I will Determine Who Is Pure, Respectable and Upstanding! How Jörg Haider and the FPÖ see Austria's Past, Present and Future" (paper presented at the 12th International Conference of Europeanists, Chicago, 30 March–2 April 2000).

29. One could object that the EU is being selective since it did not respond as harshly against the Berlusconi government in Italy that included the extreme-right National Alliance party of Gianfranco Fini, but the situations are quite different. Not only was the Italian fascist history less anti-Semitic and less murderous than German-Austrian fascism, but Fini's party was only one of several minor members of Berlusconi's multiparty coalition—much unlike Haider's party, which plays a major role in Schüssel's new government.

30. Bermann, "Austria: Rushing to Judgment in the European Union."

31. As Markovits puts it, "The signals are there, and the parameters are clear. Austria is under the magnifying glass" (See Markovits, "Danke EU, Bravo Kanzler Schröder und Minister Fischer!").

region, it is particularly important that *East* European political elites receive and digest the message that populist pandering and the inclusion of extreme-right parties as major partners in coalition governments will not be tolerated if these countries are eventually to join the EU. The argument that the EU sanctions will only further alienate East Europeans— who are already prone to anti-immigrant populism and who tend to sympathize with Austrians as “victims” of EU interference — contains a perverse irony: it is precisely the East Europeans whom the extremist Austrians want to exclude. In short, although a difficult and risky course, the EU’s reaction to Austria has set a justifiable precedent that is both morally and politically well-grounded, both for the countries already in the EU and for those that may soon join.

Epilogue

The developments in Austria over the last six months since this article was written have supported the preceding analysis and argument. Contrary to the expectation of its many critics, the EU’s response has *not* led to an increase in support for extremist populism, neither in Austria nor in neighboring countries to the west or east. In fact, support for Haider’s Freedom Party has been dropping steadily over the past year, as it has suffered several electoral setbacks— most recently in the March 2001 municipal elections in Vienna. So far, it appears that the EU’s clear message that anti-immigrant extremism is unacceptable has set an important and influential precedent throughout Europe.