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## Opinion // Don't Fixate on the Freedom Party. In Austria Today, the Real anti-Semitic Threat Is From Muslims, Not Nazis

Opinion – Don't Fixate on the Freedom Party. In Austria Today, the Real anti-Semitic Threat Is From Muslims, Not Nazis

As the first active Jewish post-war Austrian MP, I support Sebastian Kurz's coalition with the Freedom Party which, despite its Nazi roots, has long become an anti-immigration, populist movement. These days, the protestors shouting anti-Jewish slogans in Vienna are Muslims, not the far right

Martin Engelberg Dec 19, 2017 12:33 AM

"Everything is very complicated", an often-quoted statement by a former Austrian chancellor, was a sentiment that was, at first, ridiculed. Only later did it become a guiding principle for understanding politics – but not only Austrian politics.

That phrase couldn't be more current. Populism is on the rise, not only in Austria but across Europe and the Western world as a whole. These increasingly successful populist movements cannot be allocated to familiar positions on the traditional scale of right and left.

We see parties like Syriza in Greece, considered to be populist and leftist, but sitting in a coalition with an extreme nationalist and right-wing party. And there are both commonalities and differences between the populist far-right parties of France's Le Pen, German's AfD and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

For now, many commentators describe the new Austrian government as representing a strong shift to the right. But at the same time the program of this very same government includes positive statements regarding Israel, the Holocaust and anti-Semitism that have never been heard from any previous center-left Austrian government. That program includes a clear "commitment to Israel as a Jewish state" and is supporting any peace settlement "with particular attention to Israel's security interests" (my emphasis).

Even more astounding for a so-called right-wing government, that platform includes this acknowledgement: "Austria is committed to recognizing its complicity and responsibility towards one of the greatest tragedies in world history. Above all, we want to commemorate those who underwent as a result, terrible suffering and misery, and set a clear signal against any form of anti-Semitism."

In the meantime, Karin Kneissl, the new Austrian foreign minister, has been awarded some attention from Israel and Jewish groups. She has compared Zionism to the "blood and soil" ideology of German nationalism. Kneissl has an interesting life story: She grew up partly in Jordan, lived in several Arab countries, but also in Israel, and is fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew. She has been always very undiplomatically outspoken in all directions. Criticizing Islam, the developments in the Arab world, but also the pope or German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Nowadays, there are no neo-Nazis in Austria shouting, "Death to the Jews" but rather Muslims protesting against President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in front of the U.S. embassy in Vienna last week. And it's no longer a cogent argument to claim that, if for now the rightists have turned on the Muslims, they will eventually turn on the Jews again, in time.

Anti-Semitism has ceased to be a political weapon in Austria and Sebastian Kurz, the new Austrian chancellor has repeatedly stressed the Judeo-Christian roots and values of Austrian society throughout his election campaign.

Of course, Sebastian Kurz's coalition partner, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) has its history. The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) indeed established itself as a homestead for former Nazis. Dealing with war criminals and former members of the Nazi party (NSDAP) was part of the political reality of post-war Austria.

But it should be remembered that both social democrats and conservatives have openly courted their support. In the 1970s Bruno Kreisky, the famous, notorious social democratic Austrian chancellor, turned the FPÖ into a political partner. In 2000 it was the conservative party which entered a coalition with the black sheep of Austrian politics. By that time the FPÖ had already turned into an anti-immigration and populist movement.

It is time to face the new realities throughout Europe: The growing number of Muslims, living mainly in the Western European cities, often living in effectively parallel societies, putting Muslim Sharia law above the law of the land, and who exhibit a high level of anti-Semitism, are a big challenge.

But the new Austrian government has to solve many more issues: Taxes are far too high in Austria, our bureaucracy, laws and regulations are increasingly blocking economic growth, we need to reform the social security system, education and many other areas. That's a full schedule for the new government under the leadership of the youngest ever Austrian chancellor, Sebastian Kurz.

*Martin Engelberg was born in Vienna and is an active member of Austria's Jewish community. A psychoanalyst and leadership consultant, he is a member of the Austrian parliament for Sebastian Kurz's People's Party (ÖVP), one of the very few openly Jewish candidates for parliament since 1945.*