

# Populistyczna narracja Wolnościowej Partii Austrii przed wyborami prezydenckimi w 2016 r.

## Streszczenie

Wybory głowy państwa w Austrii w 2016 r. były pod wieloma względami przełomowe, a ich przebieg zaskakujący. Do II tury wyborów prezydenckich przeszedł Norbert Hofer, kandydat prawicowo-populistycznej Wolnościowej Partii Austrii. Techniczne problemy z przeprowadzeniem wyborów prezydenckich sprawiły, że ich ostateczne rozstrzygnięcie nastąpiło dopiero w grudniu 2016 r. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie głównych elementów populistycznej narracji głoszonej przez FPÖ w okresie kampanii wyborczej. Ugrupowanie sięgnęło po dobrze znany arsenał środków, chcąc przekonać wyborców do swojego kandydata. Pojawiły się zarówno hasła ochrony tożsamości narodowej, obrony interesów Austrii w Unii Europejskiej, deklaracje wzmocnienia pozycji urzędu prezydenta oraz włączenia ludu do rządzenia poprzez formy demokracji bezpośredniej. Wykorzystany został także stały element populistycznej retoryki: krytyka establishmentu oraz teoria spisku austriackich elit, zmierzających do tego, aby uniemożliwić lub też odwlec w czasie zwycięstwo kandydata FPÖ.

*Słowa kluczowe:* populizm prawicowy, Austria, Wolnościowa Partia Austrii, wybory prezydenckie, kampania wyborcza

## Abstract

The election of the head of state in Austria in 2016 was in many ways a breakthrough and its course was surprising. Norbert Hofer, a right-wing populist candidate of the Freedom Party of Austria, made it to the second round of presidential election. Technical problems related to the organisation of the presidential election postponed the final decision until December 2016. The aim of this article is to present the main elements of the populist narrative propagated by the FPÖ during the election campaign. The party reached for a well-known arsenal of means, trying to convince voters to their candidate. It underlined the protection of national identity, the defence of the interests of Austria in the European Union, declarations of strengthening the position of president and the inclusion of the people in the governing through direct democracy. The populist rhetoric recurred as well to its permanent elements: criticism of the establishment and the conspiracy theory of the Austrian elite aiming to prevent or postpone the victory of a FPÖ candidate.

*Keywords:* right-wing populism, Austria, Freedom Party of Austria, presidential election, election campaign

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## **Populist narration of the Freedom Party of Austria before the presidential election in 2016**

The election of the head of state in Austria in 2016 was in many ways a breakthrough and its course was surprising<sup>1</sup>. For the first time in post-war Austria politicians derived from outside the governing party competed for the office of head of state: Alexander Van der Bellen, formally independent candidate, who was supported by the Austrian Greens (Ger. *Die Grünen*) and Norbert Hofer from the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (Ger. *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* – FPÖ). The second round of presidential elections held on 22 May 2016 did not allow for a definite conclusion. Initially, Van der Bellen was recognised winner: he won by a small majority of only 31 thousand votes cast by mail<sup>2</sup>. On 1 July, the Constitutional Court, in response to the complaint of the Freedom Party of Austria, ordered the repetition of the second round of elections. Although the Court did not reveal manipulation and fraud that could affect the final result, numerous formal violations of election rules constituted a sufficient justification for the decision. The designated by the National Council deadline for a second round of elections on 2 October was postponed at the request of the government for another two months. As a reason, it stated the need for the withdrawal of voting envelopes with defective glue. Setting a new date of elections on 4 December

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<sup>1</sup> The winner of the repeated second round of the election for president of Austria on 4 December 2016 was Alexander Van der Bellen, who received 53.8% of votes, while his opponent, Norbert Hofer, received 46.2% of votes. Attendance during the repeated second round of the presidential elections amounted to 74.2%.

<sup>2</sup> The results of voting in the second round of elections for the office of president of the Second Republic of Austria on 22 May 2016: Alexander Van der Bellen 50.3% and Norbert Hofer 49.7%. (*Ergebnis der Bundespräsidentenwahlen WWW*).

2016 required parliamentary approval for an amendment to the electoral law of 1971 authorising the change of the term only in the case of death of one of the candidates (Bundespräsidentenwahlgesetz 31/1971: par. 8).

The equal competition for the office of president was held between politicians coming from antagonistic political camps who presented extremely different visions of domestic and foreign policy. The election campaign, which lasted almost one year, was muted and resumed, fuelling the sense of the chaos. The electoral staff of Van der Bellen and Hofer faced a difficult challenge to maintain high participation of their supporters during the repeated second round of the presidential election. None of the candidates, as opinion polls indicated<sup>3</sup>, could be sure of his victory. It was expected that the final result of the election would be determined by the minimum preponderance of votes.

The aim of this article is to present the main elements of the populist narrative propagated by the Freedom Party of Austria during the presidential campaign in 2016. The study used the interdisciplinary analysis of public discourse, focusing on qualitative analysis of programs and media appearances of the main presidential candidates in Austria in terms of the applied strategy of argumentation.

For FPÖ, right-wing populist anti-state group (Kitschelt 2007: p. 255), the presidential elections are seen as the most important elections of the Second Republic, determining the direction in which Austria will head in the coming years (*Die Leute* WWW). The analysis presented herein is based on an assessment of the electoral programme of Norbert Hofer, commercials, posters, information placed on the website of the candidate ([www.norberthofer.at](http://www.norberthofer.at)) and the group ([www.fpo.at](http://www.fpo.at)), among others through a web television FPÖ-TV, as well as television and print interviews by FPÖ candidate for the office of president. The period from the inauguration of the election campaign by N. Hofer from the end of January 2016 until 21 September 2016, when at the request of the government the parliament despite opposition of FPÖ decided to postpone the repeated second round of elections will be examined.

Firstly, the essential features of populism will be discussed. Then the discussion will focus on defining the specifics of right-wing populism represented by FPÖ. In the subsequent part of this article, the election campaign of Norbert Hofer as well as reactions of the candidate and FPÖ to the decision of the National Council on the postponing of

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<sup>3</sup> A survey carried out on 2 September 2016 by the Hayek Institute pointed out the advantage of Van Bellen over Hofer of 51% to 49%, but a survey carried out on 16 September by the Gallup Institute turned the proportion nominating Hofer for the winner of the election with 51% support to 49% for Van der Bellen (*Sonntagsfrage zur Bundespräsidentenwahl* WWW)

the date of the election will be examined. The article will seek to answer the question what elements of populist rhetoric are included in the program of the FPÖ candidate and how the populist narrative tries to seduce the undecided voters encouraging them to vote for Norbert Hofer. When mobilising voters to participate in the election, the Freedom Party of Austria presents Hofer as a defender of democracy and the rule of law who will curb the lawlessness of the existing mainstream (*Die Briefwahl* WWW). The grouping blames the government for the discredit of the Austrian democracy as a result of “a series of disasters” accompanying the election for president.

### **Immanent features of populism**

A polysemous term populism is used both in terms of political ideology, social movement or demagogy and social engineering. Populism is defined, among others, as a political strategy which effectively plays on widespread social resentments (Betz 2007: p. 274), as an expression of dissatisfaction of the sovereign (people) over the representatives (elite) (Kitchelt: 2007, p. 249), or as a political syndrome referring to the common people (Willes 2010: p. 25).

When highlighting the fluid nature of the fundamental characteristics of populism, Paul Taggart identified six topics appearing in this concept which is difficult to accurately understand: 1) hostility to the representative model of the politics; 2) identification with *indigenous land* understood as an idealised socio-cultural area within the favoured community; 3) lack of basic values called the hollow ideological core; 4) reaction to a sense of deep crisis; 5) self-restraint; 6) chameleonic adaptation to the changing environment (Taggart 2010: p. 79). Margaret Canovan, that recognised pointless any attempt to point to a single ideology or socio-economic situation common to all forms of populism, sees in populism two pervasive features: an appeal to the “common man”, his virtues, resourcefulness and common sense and anti-elitism (Taggart 2010: p. 69). The same aspect was also noted by Peter Wiles who enumerated the following typically populist features: moralistic, not programmatic nature, anti-intellectualism, the existence of the mythical contact between the leader and the masses, resentment and criticism towards the political elite, conspiracy theories and lack of ideological precision (Taggart 2010: p. 26–27). Austrian political scientist Anton Pelinka emphasises that the essence of populism lies in the demand that ordinary people reach over rulers who are perceived as “foreign” (Taggart 2010: p. 18). Political elites, which according to populists are broken and often corrupt, are portrayed as those who exploit the “pe-

ople” guided only by their particular interests. The anti-elite appeal is to mobilise citizens against political parties and the parliament and to call ordinary people to directly express their opinions through referendums and plebiscites.

Radoslaw Markowski draws attention to the intrinsic paradoxes of populism, which include, among others, self-limiting anti-elitism that make populists desiring power preach against elites, aspiring at the same time to become the new political elite (Markowski 2004: p. 25). The problem of compliance between slogans and actions is also revealed by the demand for frequent use of forms of direct democracy, the use of which often exposes the political weakness of the minority populist groups. Political agendas are internally contradictory, appealing to very general values, defining utopian goals and unrealistic plans. Social and economic crises contribute to the rise of populism offering simple solutions for healing the situation. In the period of stability and economic growth the populist groups are pushed to the margins of the political scene (Markowski 2004: p. 26).

A French scientist Pierre Andre Taguieff distinguished two components of the populist discourse: social protest and national identity (Taguieff 2010: p. 170). Protest populism challenges the system of social and political representation, takes the form of hyper-democracy which criticises the elite and at the same time idealises the image of active, responsible citizens distrustful towards the representation systems. Protest populism opposes the idea of representation and the direct democracy, which aims to reduce the gap separating the people from their rulers. Apart from the characteristic of populism demands for democratisation, P.A. Taguieff also points to anti-intellectualism, hyper-personalisation of the movement through the character of the charismatic leader and the defense of economic liberalism (Taguieff 2010: p. 172–173). Identity populism focuses on the national dimension, referring to the homogeneous people defending the national unity against “outsiders”. This dimension of populism has the anti-elite nature, but criticism is less focused on the governing and more turning against foreigners/immigrants. The government is criticised mainly for the fact that it represents the interests of “a group of strangers”. In this case anti-elitism is subordinated to xenophobia.

### **Magnetism of right-wing populism**

To determine the nature of the new parties, which originated in Western Europe during the post-industrial and post-Cold War period on the right side of the political scene, terms of right-wing populism / radical right-wing populism came into use in the mid-90s

(Moroska 2009: p. 136). Herbert Kitchelt recognised the program convergence of the moderate left and the right around the extensive welfare state as a catalyst for the creation of populist anti-statist parties, such as FPÖ, which criticised patronage and clientelistic relations between the voters and the ruling parties (Moroska 2007: p. 258–263). In contrast to the right-wing extremes, which calls for the overthrow of democracy, populists want political reforms aimed at returning power to the people. They do not undermine democracy but criticise its organisational forms (Mesa, Surel 2007: p. 32).

Frank Decker pointed to ideological-programmatic and structural differences between right-wing populist groups (Decker 2006: p. 13–18). In economic terms, parties can appeal both to neo-liberalism and advocate for state protectionism. In the political dimension, right-wing populist parties arising as the aftermath of the crisis of representation criticise the establishment and the exclusive nature of the political process, promoting forms of direct democracy and the eradication of distance of the elites to the people. In the cultural dimension, which is a consequence of the crisis of identity, parties are xenophobic and anti-pluralist. The specificity of groups of right-wing populism consists as well of the organisational structure based on charismatic leaders and authoritarian style.

Referring to the typology introduced by Taguieff, it can be observed that the right-wing populism combines protest against elites and appeal to a monolithic people interpreted in terms of the national community to protect the threatened identity. Lars Rensmann indicates the horizontal and the vertical dimension of right-wing populism, arguing that in its essence the populist narrative calls for a double exclusion of both “those at the top” and “those from outside” (Rensmann 2006: p. 65).

**Table 1. Vertical and horizontal dimension of right-wing populism**

Vertical dimension (against “those at the top”)	Horizontal dimension (against “those from outside”)
against political parties against the political elite opposition to individualism homogeneous representation of the popular will anti-pluralism	against the EU against globalisation anti-Americanism aversion to foreigners

Source: (Rensmann 2006: p. 65).

Hans Georg Benz points out that the key factor responsible for the success of populist radical right party is the ability to identify with specific problematic issues such as immigration and defiance of the idea of a multicultural society (Benz 2007: p. 284). Right-wing populists skilfully play the role of the Ombudsman of the non-articulated opinions and requests, questioning the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, calling for the closure of the borders to immigrants from other countries, and thereby for the protection of their own citizens. Undermining the legitimacy of the existing political elites, they accuse the corrupt rulers of treason and promotion of the interests of the “foreigners” (Benz 2007: p. 275). According to Anton Pelinka, xenophobic elements mixed with nationalism bridge the gap between modern right-wing populism and more traditional national extreme movement (Benz 2010: p. 27).

According to L. Rensmann, the article adopted as the leading feature of right-wing populist parties, which include the FPÖ, the affirmation of “the idea of exclusion” both in the horizontal and vertical dimensions and in the economic, social and cultural terms.

### **“Who loves the Austria chooses Norbert Hofer...”, populist narrative during the campaign of the FPÖ candidate for president of Austria**

At a conference on 28 January 2016 opening the campaign, Norbert Hofer said how important his political origins were: “I am a candidate of the Freedom Party, I represent positions of the Freedom Party of Austria. I will not let that go.” (*Antrittsrede WWW*). However, in his subsequent statements, the FPÖ candidate emphasised his willingness for cross-party action as president, citing the experience in the exercise of the function of the third President of the National Council. He declared that he would be the president of all Austrians across political divides (*ORF-Duell WWW*). Nevertheless, the party leader Heinz Christian Strache suggested that the success of Hofer was the beginning of political change in Austria. On 16 May 2016, during a televised debate of two major candidates, Hofer complained that he was the subject of a massive attack by the establishment: his posters were destroyed, he was scoffed at on-line, he was called Nazi, people were making fun of his disability and offended his family (*ATV-Duell 15.05.2016*).

In the election campaign slogans highlighting the advantages of FPÖ candidate appeared: “Fresh, honest, good”, “Norbert Hofer – the voice of reason”, “Norbert Hofer will lead Austria into a new era”. The politician was portrayed as a young man

(45 years), father of four children, who understands the daily concerns of his compatriots, as well as the difficult personal experiences (serious accident paragliding in 2003, long convalescence, disability). Numerous spots and posters referred directly to the citizens: “Austria needs you now”, clearly emphasising the importance of decisions taken in “difficult times” and the ground-breaking nature of the election. During a televised debate conducted a week before the second round of the election Hofer stressed that he was supported by ordinary people in the country - citizens of Austria and that his rival is assisted only by celebrities and the European elite (ATV-Duell 15.05.2016).

The campaign of the Freedom Party was focused on the role of directly elected by the citizens President of the Republic of Austria having the trust of the people: “The law comes from the people. A new look at the office of president”. In interviews and speeches, Hofer asserted that as head of state he would contribute to the development of forms of direct democracy and active participation of citizens in the exercise of power, not only through referendum but also the civic legislative initiative (*Wie jetzt?* WWW). Speaking at the Oktoberfest at a meeting of supporters of the FPÖ in Vienna, Hofer declared: “If I become president I will return Austria to you” (*Wenn ich Präsident werde* WWW). Norbert Hofer announced that as president of Austria he will actively create internal and foreign policy of the state. As the only federal politician having a direct mandate of trust from citizens, he declared that he would take care of the problems of the people, “ills of everyday life”, ensuring that the head of state can be much more powerful than it resulted from the previous practice of the Second Republic (*ORF Duell* WWW).

According to the electoral slogan: “Power needs control”, the FPÖ candidate stressed that on behalf of the citizens he would be looking at the hands of the ruling, he would be the necessary counterweight to the authority dominated by the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats. As a consequence of his victory in the first round of elections, Hofer pointed to a change in the migration policy of the government of the SPÖ-ÖVP, declaring at the same time that if he would win, “the reasonable course” would continue (*Krone-Interview* 10.09.2016). Hofer announced, moreover, that if the government would pursue a policy which undermined national interests of Austria, he, as the president, would exercise his discretion to solve the National Council contributing therefore to the dismissal of the government. Asked by a journalist Ingrid Thurnher during a television debate about whether the president alone could undertake the evaluation of the actions of the government, Hofer said enigmatically that the decision to dissolve the government would have to be preceded by a series of discussions and

consultations (*ORF-Duell* WWW). While at the beginning of the election campaign the FPÖ candidate pointed to the need to resolve the National Council and to hold the earlier (ie. before 2018) parliamentary elections, underlining the incompetence of the ruling tandem SPÖ-ÖVP and the dramatic loss of voter confidence for the coalition, in September he praised the government for strong tightening of the migration policy (*Krone-Interview* 10.09.2016).

The main slogan of the FPÖ candidate for the office of president referred through the word play and the synonym of “show the flag” (Ger. *Flagge zeigen*) to open and courageous acting in the name of national interests, in conformity with the slogan “Austria First”. The presidential campaign of the FPÖ candidate stressed his commitment to the values of “Truth, Freedom, Patriotism”. Hofer’s rallies were often an occasion to manifest national feelings when singing the anthem of Austria in the sea of flags or the main campaign song full of pathos *Immer wieder Österreich*. An equal sign is put between patriotism and the selection of the right candidate. The website of the candidate listed numerous reasons to choose Hofer: “Whoever loves Austria chooses Norbert Hofer, because he is the only one who...”, among others, will defend Austrians against the consequences of bad immigration policy, will protect the labour market against workers from other EU Member States, will increase the internal security of Austria, will expand the army, will ensure the protection of children, women and the elderly, and will lower taxes. The word that most often appeared on election posters of Hofer was Austria. The honesty of patriotic feelings of the FPÖ candidate, his attachment to their homeland (Ger. *Heimat*) contrasted with Van der Bellen, whose last minute patriotism, as referred to by the head of the FPÖ electoral staff, Herbert Kickl, has as much in common with their homeland, as Turkish President Erdogan with the protection of human rights (*Herbert Kickl*, WWW)<sup>4</sup>.

The migration crisis was an important theme in the campaign of Hofer. The candidate pointed to the inadequacy of the EU, criticised European elite for wrong decisions, called for effective protection of the external borders of Austria and for the implementation of the Schengen and Dublin agreements on the EU’s asylum policy. Incoming refugees are, according to Hofer, mostly economic migrants who have overloaded the Austrian social security system. Uncontrolled influx of immigrants was identified with the threat to internal security due to an increase in crime (Hofer repeatedly referred

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<sup>4</sup> The statement was made after widely commented in Austria Turkish President’s activities associated with the punishment of those responsible for the organisation of anti-presidential coup of 15 July 2016.

to the rapes of Austrian and German women by immigrants). According to the slogan “Austria needs security”, Hofer stressed the right of Austrians to defend the homeland and protect against Islamism and terrorism.

In response to the campaign of his opponents “With Hofer comes Öxit”, the candidate announced that not only did he not want Austria to exit the EU, but he wanted Austria to contribute to the expected positive changes in the Union. Hofer announced a civil referendum on the exit of Austria from the EU structures in two situations: when a united Europe takes centralised action aimed at the construction of “super-state – United States of Europe” and when the prospect of EU enlargement to include Turkey is real (*Wie jetzt?* WWW). N. Hofer declared that he supports a Europe of nation states based on respect for the principle of subsidiarity, a Europe of citizens rather than bureaucrats (*Wir brauchen ein Europa* WWW) and that he strongly opposes to economic policy being controlled by the EU. He announced the introduction of the European policy close to citizens, conscious and responsible representation of the interests of Austria in the world (including his presence on the European Councils), so that the sovereign state would become a partner and not just the contractor of the orders of the European Commission.

When criticising the rescheduling of the repeated second round of elections H.Ch. Strache suggested on his Facebook profile that these were the elites who did not want the candidate of the FPÖ to be elected that were responsible. This conspiracy theory is consistent with the Freedom Party rhetoric claiming that they are the party towards which the entire establishment had a negative approach. Freedom Party of Austria did not support the request of the government to postpone the elections on 4 December during the vote in the National Council. FPÖ MEP and at the same time the chief of electoral staff, Herbert Kickl, in a letter to the Minister of Interior, accused the administration of a mess and neglect. He suggested on the basis of reports of journalists that the problem with the adhesive appeared already during the previous elections and the administration failed to control the printing and did not mend the situation, so as to maintain the election date scheduled for 2 October (Anfrage 10346/J/2016). Hofer at a meeting with his supporters insisted: “I’ll be president of the Republic of Austria. If someone assumes that I lack energy (...) I can assure you the more one fights me, the stronger I get! (*Wenn ich Bundespräsident werde* WWW). Referring to the revised election date due to defective adhesive used in envelopes, Hofer as well as his group undermined the sense of voting by mail, pointing to the formal problems posed by this type of participation in the elections (*Transkript*, WWW). In his opinion vote via letters

should be reserved for exceptional situations such as travelling abroad during the election (*Die Leute* WW). Certainly reluctance of Hofer is also justified by the fact that the victory of Van der Bellen in the second round of the election of 22 May 2016 was decided by votes sent by mail.

## Conclusion

In the election campaign of the FPÖ candidate for president Norbert Hofer we could find an arsenal of proven measures that have been used for years by the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria. The message addressed to the Austrian people contained criticism of national and EU elite, the declaration of fight against the system and the promise to protect the people often associated with the national community against “outsiders”. The issues of migration crisis and internal security of the country at risk of an uncontrolled influx of immigrants from Muslim countries as well as an increase in crime and the fear of terrorist attacks in Austria were heavily exploited. Promises to strengthen the forms of direct democracy on the part of the FPÖ candidate were accompanied by the announcement of the “new look” on the role of the president in the political system of Austria. Hofer was presented as a statesman, who is an effective counterweight to the government created by the parties of the grand coalition. The FPÖ populist narrative focused as well on the conspiracy theory according to which the alliance of elites was to prevent the victory of Hofer or at least postpone it in time, so FPÖ representatives insinuated that the change of the date of the repeated second round of the election was a tactical move dictated by purely political interests.

Despite the final defeat of Norbert Hofer, the FPÖ success was to obtain a high election score on 4 December 2016 (46.2%), proving strong Euro-sceptic mood in the Austrian society that does not exclude Öxit, that is the exit of Austria from the European Union. FPÖ will refer to this EU reluctant electorate during the next elections to the National Council, planned for autumn 2018.

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