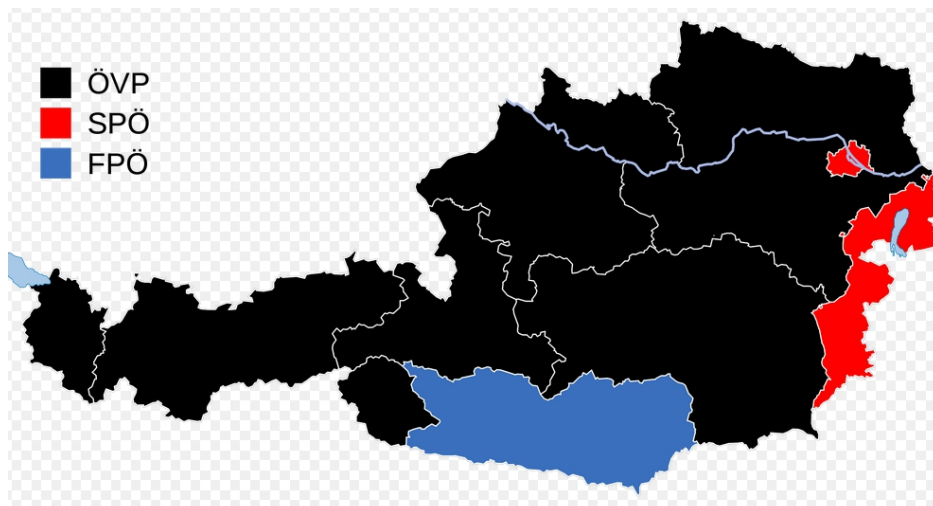


Published: 11 January 2018

Country: Austria



Asel is the first baby to be born in 2018 in the Austrian capital Vienna. Instead of good wishes, Asel and her Muslim parents were subjects to hundreds of Islamophobic comments online. Hate speech appearing in comment sections of some media and in social media posts was so extreme that the Austrian president had to intervene reminding those who left racist messages that “all men are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

The New Year’s Day outpour of hatred was a reminder that Austria has turned right becoming, as [the Guardian](#) described it, “the only western European country with a far-right presence in government.” Many would claim that the Austrian media, mostly tabloids, played an important role in the country’s move to the right. Also, Austrian populists and their supporters take to social media in order to communicate ideology online. For instance, Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of far-right party FPÖ, is followed by almost 750,000 people on Facebook equivalent to 15% of Austrians who voted in the last elections.

“It’s not surprising Strache recently called [social media a ‘blessing for democracy’](#) . It is also reminiscent of Donald Trump’s bypassing of the traditional media: Strache uses Facebook to communicate directly with voters, without the filter of journalism. Several websites publish the highly controversial content the FPÖ frequently shares on social media,” the [European Journalism Observatory](#)

reported.



Although blaming social media and the tabloid press for the triumph of Austrian right-wing populism would be short-sighted, one of the guest speakers at the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) panel at the [International Journalism Festival in Perugia](#) in April 2018, an Austrian journalist Bettina Figl says that the Austrian media did play a key role in bringing about the result at the last elections.

“Austria’s notorious tabloid press – most famously the *Kronen Zeitung*, *Heute* and *Österreich* – are powerful players in the national media landscape and read widely. Famous for their sensationalist framings and for publishing misleading or false information, they have long developed strong ties to Austria’s conservative and right-wing political scene – an alliance which partially helps explain the toxic political climate,” Figl says.

When it comes to the mainstream media, Bettina Figl says that both major media outlets and general public have gone pretty much "back to normal".

“The term ‘fascism’ is usually not used to describe the new government. Only some activists and very left-wing websites and magazines use that expression, but not the Austrian mainstream media. When we first had a right-wing coalition in 2000, shock and protest among the public were much bigger. There were massive rallies and protests. We will need to wait and see what happens at the rally planned for this weekend though,” Figl says.

Historian Andrea Mammone comes to the similar conclusion on how public and media spheres are somehow accepting the FPO's right-wing extremism. Writing about [the revival of far-right in Central Europe](#), Mammone says that “tacit approval of anti-Muslim and anti-immigration sentiments is rooted in the irrational idea that immigration and globalisation represent a challenge to national/European traditions as well as to the identity of European citizens”.

In a series of articles ahead of the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) panel at the [International Journalism Festival in Perugia](#) in April 2018, we will analyse the role of the media in the rise of right and far-right rhetoric in the public sphere in Europe and around the world. By questioning the role of some media in the past events, MDI is hoping to initiate a debate on possible answers to extremism of all kinds. MDI and its European partners have been engaged in countering religious hate incidents against Muslims, Jewish and Christian communities through the [Get the Trolls Out project](#). By initiating a discussion on whether fascism is back and what is the media's response to it, we are aiming to have a conversation on some of the most critical issues of our world today.