

Austria's presidential election: Van der Bellen has won, but there is little reason for complacency

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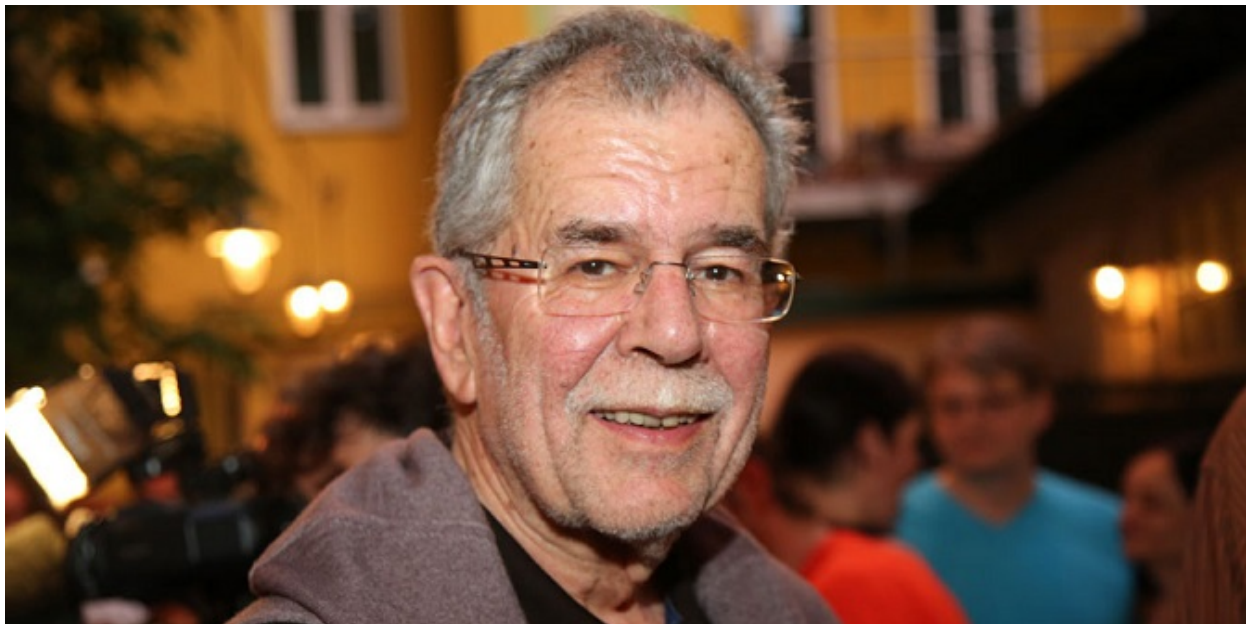
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*On 4 December, Alexander van der Bellen won Austria's presidential election, defeating Norbert Hofer of the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria. **Fabio Wolkenstein** assesses the result, writing that although the populist right may be defeated for now, returning to 'politics as usual' would be a serious mistake for the country's mainstream politicians.*



Alexander van der Bellen won the re-run of the Austrian presidential elections, defeating his opponent from the populist right-wing Freedom party (FPÖ). The victory of the former leader of the Austrian Green party came as a surprise to many national and international observers. With Donald Trump's recent election victory in the United States and populist parties dominating the political agenda across Europe, the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer seemed set to win, becoming the first populist right-wing head of state in Europe.

What made van der Bellen's victory possible is difficult to ascertain. One possible explanation turns upon voter conservatism. Recall that Hofer promised to be a rather "active" president, drawing on the great range of executive powers with which the president is formally equipped in order to influence day-to-day politics. Van der Bellen, on the other hand, committed himself to avoid breaching constitutional convention, serving only as a ceremonial figurehead. In the end, it may well be that many voters preferred Van der Bellen's more conventional understanding of the role of the president.



Exit poll data is indicative of this. The data shows that "having the right understanding of the presidential office" (*Amtsverständnis*) and "being most capable of representing Austria abroad" were the two main reasons for why voters turned out for van der Bellen. The percentage of Hofer voters who believe that the FPÖ candidate interprets the role of the president in the right way is much lower, and has dropped considerably compared with the run-off election in May, namely from 58 to 46 per cent. (The main reason for voters to turn out for Hofer remains the perception that he is "able to understand the concerns of people like me".)

Another possible explanation for why van der Bellen was able to prevail has to do with the FPÖ's style of campaigning. Consider for example that, throughout the campaign, Hofer continually denied that the FPÖ wants Austria to leave the EU – despite the fact that the party has repeatedly called for a referendum on Austria's EU membership and is one of the closest political allies of the fervently anti-EU Front National. Or consider that, in the final TV debate between the candidates, Hofer accused van der Bellen of having been a Soviet spy – an absurd charge that was proven wrong more than a decade ago. It seems plausible that voters were put off by these campaign tactics, which jar with Hofer's self-presentation as being especially truthful. Again, the exit poll data is suggestive: Hofer's own voters perceive him as less credible now than they did prior to the run-off in May.

Yet, however relieved progressives and moderate conservatives might be about Van der Bellen's victory, the fact that Hofer won almost 47 per cent of the vote should give them pause for reflection. The election result is not a sign that Austrian right-wing populism has been decisively defeated, but that the political mainstream is struggling to defeat the FPÖ, and can defeat it only if it mobilises all of its available resources. Indeed, had there not been a broad alliance of politicians from the mainstream left and right backing Van der Bellen, the pendulum may well have swung the other way.

It is also important to note that, according to the exit poll data, 42 per cent of Van der Bellen voters turned out for the Green candidate not so much because they believed he was a good candidate, but because they wanted to prevent a Hofer presidency. (By contrast, only 24 per cent of Hofer voters responded that their main motivation to turn out for the FPÖ candidate was to prevent a Van der Bellen presidency.) So, for many voters, Van der Bellen was simply the lesser of two evils, and not someone who has genuinely won their hearts and minds. To ignore this would be to blind oneself to the fact that it is very hard to love a candidate whose greatest asset is that he secures the persistence of a much-disliked status quo.

In light of all this, the lesson of the Austrian presidential elections is again: there is no reason for complacency. Van der Bellen's victory provides a lifeline to the existing political system, but that does not mean that that system enjoys widespread support. On the contrary, there is an urgent demand for political reforms and the end of debilitating grand coalition politics, and the political mainstream would do better to take this demand seriously. Even more importantly, there is a great need for building coalitions with groups of voters who feel ignored by those in power and are pessimistic about the future of Austria and Europe more generally. Of course, all of this has been said before. But it remains true in ever so many ways. The populist right may be defeated for now, but returning to "politics as usual" would be fatal.

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