Austria: Corona demonstrations: Fascist marches or harmless confusion?

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In recent weeks, Austria has seen an upswing in the mobilization of "Corona-sceptics". At the biggest mobilization so far on January 16, probably more than 10,000 people were on the streets of Vienna. Additionally, at the end of January, despite official prohibition, probably more than 10,000 people were on the street. For almost a year, we have been emphasizing the inability or unwillingness of the black-green federal government under chancellor Kurz to fight the virus adequately and not only to serve the economic interests sufficiently well. The cause of the demonstrations is the pandemic policy of the government, "Kurz must go!" is one of the main slogans of the movement. Is it therefore possible to somehow positively link to this movement?

Right-wing leadership of the movement

Since the beginning of the Corona-sceptic mobilizations in May, right-wingers and fascists have been involved. The Identitarians, a neo-fascist organization, mainly active in Europe, already appeared at demonstrations in May. Soon after, the FPÖ, the Austrian Freedom Party, which is known worldwide for their racist-populist politics, organized its own rallies, which, however, could not really trigger the desired dynamic which would have enabled the FPÖ to appropriate the leadership of the movement. Various figures from the neo-Nazi scene were also prominently present early on at the spring demonstrations, e.g. from the circle of the convicted neo-Nazi Gottfried Küssel. Even though this was no secret, in the beginning, the movement was mainly characterized by the "non-partisan" "Initiative for Evidence-Based Corona Information" (ICI), which said of itself "We are not right-wing. We are not on the left. We are angry!".

The movement really took off with the second wave and the much too late anti-pandemic measures. What the FPÖ had failed to do was now organized much more diffusely by different individuals and networks - especially via the messenger service Telegram. Clear organizations, such as the ICI or even the FPÖ, have now been replaced by less transparent connections. Nevertheless, the leading organizers are still known for their clearly right-wing views. Jennifer Klauninger, for example, who belongs to the completely mask-refusing hardliner faction and got media attention by publicly tearing a rainbow flag, already organized racist mobilizations at the Austrian-Slovenian border against the admission of refugees in 2015/16. In the course of this, she co-founded the fascist "Party of the People." For a short time, she was also a party member of the FPÖ. In the meantime, she rants that the elite - in her anti-Semitic logic, Rothschild and Soros are mentioned by name - would prefer to "exterminate" the "superior white people." After the events of the weekend of January 30/31, however, Martin Rutter, with whom Klauninger has been at odds for some time, may have prevailed within the movement. As a former member of the provincial parliament for Team Stronach, he was expelled from the party because of his appearance at the so-called ?Ulrichsbergtreffen? -a meeting of traditional SS associations and other right-wing to far-right traditional associations. He then joined the BZÖ, a split from the FPÖ, in Carinthia. In addition to open racism against migrants, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about George Soros and the "globalists" are also part of his
agenda. Moreover, he represents a clearly Christian wing in the movement.

Fascist movement?
The leadership of the movement is thus located between the right-wing esoteric scene, the FPÖ and crazy conspiracy theorists. There are also many similarities with the Trump movement on the street, where QAnon supporters, Trump supporters and fascist groups mix. However, in contrast to the movement in the U.S., right-wing ideological penetration is less advanced in Austria. Of the tens of thousands of people who took to the streets, presumably only a minority are clearly right-wing, ideologically. For many people, the social character of the meeting with friends and acquaintances from the movement apparently also plays a significant role. The reasons for the different participants, however, are quite complex, as is their composition. For example, migrants - although clearly underrepresented by Viennese standards - are also a part of the movement. The broad participation from the provinces and even from abroad in the large-scale mobilizations in Vienna is particularly noticeable.

But what all parts of the protesters share is that they obviously have no problem to go on the street with more or less openly appearing fascists. Especially at the mass demonstration on January 31 (which was forbidden by the authorities), a mixture of right-wing soccer hooligans, Identitarians and neo-Nazis formed the top of the demonstration and thus also its leadership. It was their organized appearance that made it possible to push the demonstration through the police in this form in the first place. In the movement, the right-wing to fascist forces currently represent the only organized and organizing part. Therefore, it is quite likely that the dynamics of the movement will shift clearly to the right in the coming weeks and months, unless the government changes its approach to fighting the pandemic or further internal conflicts arise. A certain layer of currently still rather apolitical people runs the risk of becoming clearly politicized to the right, or even joining the fascist structures.

January 31
An important factor in the development of the current Corona-sceptic movement is certainly the weekend of January 30 and 31. On the part of the police, almost all gatherings on this weekend in Vienna were prohibited - and not only gatherings of Corona sceptics, but also clearly left counter-events, which had so far always adhered to the consistent wearing of masks and distances out of their own conviction. Here it becomes visible why one should not rely on the state in the fight against the right, because the state also uses its extended powers on the left and the workers' movement. On January 30, the protests called by Jennifer Klauninger failed miserably, probably only a few dozen Corona deniers followed her call. But on Sunday the situation was different. Almost the entire Austrian right-wing and fascist scene mobilized for the demonstration led by Martin Rutter and Co. Until the ban, Herbert Kickl, a FPÖ politician, had also been scheduled as a prominent speaker. After the ban, the FPÖ tried to register its own rally for the Corona sceptics, but also failed due to a police ban. In the end, despite the official ban, probably more than 10,000 people gathered in the center of Vienna. At the beginning, the police made timid and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to encircle the crowd gathered on the Ring (at the level of Heldenplatz) or to prevent it from forming a demonstration. However, the crowd led by organized fascists and football hooligans managed to break free from the police's grip and started a long-lasting demonstration around the center of Vienna. After the initial attempts to prevent the demonstration, the police behaved as if it were a normal registered demonstration. The demonstrators were largely escorted, and in some cases even left to their own devices. The traffic in the side streets was regulated so that the demonstration could go its way unhindered and minor attempts at anti-fascist blockades were cleared out of the way within seconds by WEGA (the Viennese special forces of the police) and Co. Only after 5 hours of unhindered demonstration through Vienna, the police - presumably to save at least some face - verified the identities of the last remaining demonstrators, and that after the vast majority of the demonstrators had already started their way home unmolested. Towards the end of the demonstration, participants thanked the police for their
friendly approach.

What to do?
January 31st was a clear signal of strength for the movement. For years there was not such an open and unhindered appearance of the fascist and neo-Nazi scene in Austria. It was able to lead the demonstration over large parts. Therefore, the left and the workers' movement need a clear answer to this danger from the right. On the one hand, there needs to be a clear confrontation with the right-wing parts of the movement and this also on the streets. The more or less open appearance of fascists and neo-Nazis must not remain unanswered, even if they are only part of a larger movement. Wherever fascists openly appear, we must stand in their way and ideally drive them out of the street. Part of the tactic towards the movement is simply classical antifascism.

However, this must not lead to the conclusion that the entire movement is made up by fascists, because of this. Rather, it is a petty-bourgeois mass movement with a fascist wing, which tends to become stronger and more important. On the other hand, we also need a clear alternative to the current fatal government policy. If, on one side, winter tourism is kept open and, on the other, the government shifts the fight against the pandemic almost exclusively to the private sphere, it is clear that something is wrong. The decision to close down work spaces, or enable home offices is largely left to the companies themselves and not to the workers. We demand an end to the mendacious fight against the pandemic of the black-green federal government. Instead we need the closure of all non-essential sectors of the economy, under the control and decision of the workers themselves, until the number of cases has reached a level where the virus can be completely eradicated through effective testing and tracing. There is a need for livelihood security and an increase in unemployment benefits. At the same time, we clearly stand up for the Defence of democratic rights, including the right to demonstrate and assemble. Because as the weekend of January 30/31 showed, the state is not only restricting demonstrations of masked rejectionists, but also of leftists. Furthermore, the costs of the crisis must not be passed on to the general public, but must be paid by the rich, who were able to significantly increase their wealth during the crisis. Only if the left manages to develop a clear, perspective-oriented position on the containment of the pandemic, independent of the government, will it be possible not to leave those affected by the pandemic and the economic crisis to the right.

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