

Democracy is Not for Wimps

The fight against populism can be won by the conservatives, liberals, social democrats, and greens working together. Austria has shown that it's possible.

By Matthias Nass

Of course the populists can be beaten. Alexander Van der Bellen proved it on December 4, along with the majority of Austrian voters. They did not let themselves be bewitched by the politicians with the simple slogans who in their country, like in all Western democracies, stir up fear of the cold, hostile world out there.

Norbert Hofer, the FPÖ candidate who lost the presidential election, wrote on Facebook after his defeat: "I am infinitely sad that it did not work out. I would have liked to take care of our Austria."

How nice that the Austrians are spared this care from Hofer, that they can look after themselves as adult democrats.

A glimmer of hope at the end of this horrifying year, where the West nearly lost faith in itself. Everywhere, people are looking back and taking account of 2016, reliving the shocks of the past twelve months - from the Brexit referendum to the Trump election.

The Paralysis Slowly Fades

Of the feared double-whammy on December 4th, the second, the constitutional referendum in Italy, fizzled without provoking the fear of panic. Matteo Renzi resigned - and share prices were rising in Europe. The fear of a new bank crash does not seem so great now. The "no" vote of the Italians was a no to Renzi, rather than a no to Europe.

Slowly, but not too late, the defenders of democracy and friends of Europe are loosening from the paralysis that seemed to have befallen them this year. This could be seen last week in the elections for the Richmond Park district of London, where Liberal Democrat Sarah Olney captured a seat in the lower house with a passionate pro-European election campaign.

No question has been asked more frequently by the British after their country's vote to end its membership in the EU, and even more so after the election of Donald Trump, than this: How could this happen? A great introspection began - and continues to this day. A good

thing. Only politicians and pundits must not exhaust themselves with contrition. With full sympathy for the concerns of the citizens, the defenders of liberal democracy cannot agree with the chorus of simplification.

At the presentation of the Marion Dönhoff Prize to Navid Kermani two weeks ago at the Hamburger Schauspielhaus, President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz said: "It is time for us to recognize modern complexity as an irreplaceable reality. For if we do not, we will never be able to overcome the trenches in our societies. We will identify the wrong problems and counter with the wrong solutions."

In the struggle against populism, which is also a struggle for enlightenment and sincerity, the conservatives and the social democrats, the liberals and the greens, must pull together. It should not bother them, if they are labeled "mainstream" politicians as a result. Certain fundamental values must now be defended jointly, regardless of other arguments over tax reductions or pension increases, armaments expenditures or environmental requirements.

One Must Take Up the Fight

In the presidential elections in France, the Republicans will be represented by the reputable and scandal-free François Fillon. If it comes down to a runoff with Marine Le Pen, it should be obvious to the French Left to support the conservative Catholic, economic liberal Fillon. Just as it should have been obvious to Bernie Sanders' supporters in the USA to choose Hillary Clinton to prevent Trump. Unfortunately, some saw that differently.

First things first: at the moment, resistance to right-wing populism takes precedence. And to do so, one must form alliances that run contrary to political purism. Do not worry, the times will change again. Especially in the US, the political pendulum has always swung around: George W. Bush was followed by Barack Obama. Even after Donald Trump we're not likely to see the end of the world, but rather a liberal democrat.

Except that you have to do something for it. This is the signal from the presidential election in Austria: You have to take up the fight. Democracy is not for wimps.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was [originally published](#) in ZEIT Online. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.