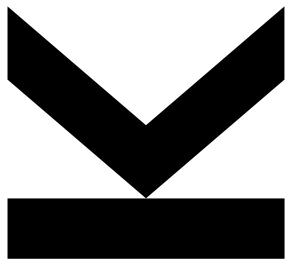


LUMPING ASYLUM SEEKERS, MIGRATION AND THE POOR TOGETHER – MEDIA DISCOURSES AND WELFARE-POLICY DISPOSITIVES IN AUSTRIA AFTER 2015



Roland Atzmüller (Johannes-Kepler-Universität, Linz / Österreich) **Alban Knecht** (University Klagenfurt / Austria),

Presentation on the Conference „Summer of Migration“ – Right-Wing Populism, Media and Affects, 16-17 September 2021, Ljubljana.

INTRODUCTION - CONTOURS OF A CONSERVATIVE/NEO-LIBERAL AND FAR-RIGHT/RIGHT-WING POPULIST REFORM PROJECT

- Discursive operations to articulate the socio-political fundamentals and goals of the respective party-orientations (Heinisch et al, 2019; Mayer et al, 2018; Rheindorf/Wodak 2019, Sauer/Ajanovic, 2016; Schiedel 2014) and their implementation in social policy-reforms.
 - Migration as „universal signifier“(Laclau/Mouffe, 1991): more and more social problems and crises are interpreted as outcome of migration.
 - Social policies as an important instrument of socio-political engineering: identifying „new“ elements emerging from the articulation of the conservative/neo-liberal and far-right/right wing populist reform project

CONTENT

- 1. Context: Evolution of Austrian welfare and migration regime and the reform of the needs-oriented minimum income scheme (Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung)
- 2. Perspectives of the Government Programme 2017-2022
- 3. Narratives of the reform of needs-oriented basic income scheme: the conservative/neoliberal perspective; the far-right/right wing populist perspectives; emerging common grounds
- 4. Conclusions – contours of far-right social policies

1. CONTEXT – ELEMENTS OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AUSTRIAN WELFARE REGIME

■ Far-reaching transformations since the 1990s

- Shift to budget consolidation, **austerity** and internationalisation (export oriented regime of accumulation) bring welfare expansion (more or less) to a halt (Becker/Jäger 2012))
- „**Coordinated liberalisation**“ (Hermann/Flecker, 2009) of the employment regime and internal polarisation of labour markets (growth of unemployment and precarious labour market segments (e.g. through migration))
- **expansion of activities and measures at the „margins“ of the „welfare system“** articulated with emerging migration regime – nascent „new“ dispositif of governing the poor
 - Activating / workfarist labour market policies
 - Creation of differentiated mechanisms governing inclusion / exclusion into the employment and welfare regime
 - Reform of the „Third Net“ below social insurance based welfare transfers – **i.e. 2009 income support** (‘social aid’) is transformed into ‘needs-oriented minimum income scheme’: **poverty alleviation but also entry point into the Austrian social system**

CONTOURS OF THE EMERGING MIGRATION REGIME IN AUSTRIA

- Emergence of **migration- and asylum-regime** (linked to conservative and employment-centred welfare and employment regime)
 - Increasing restrictions of the right of asylum and deepening measures to control asylum seekers
 - Emergence of hierarchized and stratified regime of inclusion/exclusion into/from the labour market, residence, social security etc.)
 - Strongly oriented towards economic demands for so-called human capital and the necessity of self-subsistence
 - Limitation of family reunion (“begrenzter Familiennachzug”)
 - Law of integration (Integrationsgesetz 2017) – integration courses includes language courses and “value and orientation courses”
 - **Needs-oriented minimum income scheme as entry point for persons granted asylum and subsidiary protection status – growth of expenditures after 2015 (concentrated in big cities / Vienna – not more 0.9% of social expenditures)**

DETAILED REGULATIONS OF THE REFORM OF THE NEEDS-ORIENTED MINIMUM INCOME SCHEME (BMS)

■ Key points of the planned reform

- Receipt of full social assistance / income support should require certain language level (German B1 or English C1).
 - In case of lack of knowledge: Reduction of -35% (full benefit level was declared as a 'qualification bonus').
- Capping of benefits per family (175% of a single person's benefit) instead of defining a minimum benefit and degressive benefits for each additional child.
- Shift towards more “benefits in kind” through higher share of support for rent and housing costs at the expense of direct financial support.

In September 2019 the Constitutional Court overturned the upper two issues of the reform.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME 2017–2022

- Remarkable discursive operations to articulate conservative / neo-liberal and far-right / right-wing populist party programmes.
- Focus on **limitation and stop of "migration into the social system"** (S. 117)
 - Migration is presented as main cause for problems in school system, criminality, labour market problems etc.
 - Use of phrase „migration into the social system“ implies other motivation than flight from oppression
 - Social policy is renationalised connected to a discursive strategy of implicit and partly explicit othering
 - **“Austrian social policies”** for **“own citizen”** for different (deserving) categories of „our“ people (children, youth, elderly, who rebuild Austria after the WWII, women)
 - Access to social transfers rigorously tied to „**contributing**“ to „**our social system**“ (thus drawing on social insurance logic to delegitimise means tested and universal benefits (cf. Ennser-Jedenastik 2018) for immigrants.

NARRATIVES OF THE REFORM OF NEEDS-ORIENTED BASIC INCOME SCHEME – CONSERVATIVE FRAMING

- The Government Programme (2017) presented needs-oriented minimum income scheme as a pull-factor for migrants (p.117) – for „migration into the social system“.
- Mainly **conservative politicians** presented need-oriented income scheme **as reason for decreasing work ethic** among certain groups (in particular in big cities / Vienna):
 - growing number of “welfare cheats”, who “do not get up early in the morning” presented as negative social development (Sebastian Kurz), were counterposed to hard working people, who must not be the “stupid ones”.
- Needs-oriented minimum income scheme as reason for **illegitimate expansion of social expenditures who have to be financed by the hard working population**.
- Needs-oriented minimum income scheme should be remodelled to become even more of an **activating social policy measure** to bring people back into work.

NARRATIVES OF THE REFORM OF NEEDS-ORIENTED BASIC INCOME – FAR-RIGHT AND RIGHT-WING POPULIST FRAMING

- Reform of need-oriented basic income as important element of fight against „migration into the social system“ which was explicitly labelled as
 - migration of 2015 was labelled as „**invasion**“ by H.C. Strache (leader of Freedom Party at this time) of „**mass migrants**“ (apa-OTS 2018-11-28) who would “**unrestrainedly loot**” the social system.
- Claim that **centre left parties and welfare bureaucracies would privilege migrant access** at the expense of autochthonous population.
- far-right framing uses **migrant (mainly Muslim) families** with many children as example for mass migrants, who would overburden the welfare system.

EMERGING ARTICULATIONS OF THE CONSERVATIVE AND FAR-RIGHT NARRATIVES

- Expenditures for “**welcome culture**” were presented as **reason for budgetary deficits** and expansion of social expenditures and subsequent austerity measures which burden the hard working autochthonous population.
- The conservative **evocation of urban / Viennese “welfare cheats”** becomes linked to narrative of **migrants looting the social system** to have a good life without work.
- In a joint press statement of the coalition parties it was highlighted that „**Syrian or Afghan families have an average of 3,91 children, as Statistik Austria shows**“ (apa-OTS 2018-11-30)
 - Cuts of social transfers for this group were presented as instrument to limit this situation – it remained unclear what exactly is to be limited (expenditures, birth rates, number of families)
 - The meticulous and pedantic calculation of birth rates also **evokes a demographic threat** (average rate of children for Austrian families is below 1,5)
- Focus on **contributory character of Austrian welfare systems** used to delegitimise access to needs-oriented basic income for migrants without prior employment record in Austria – evokes meritocratic values and work ethic, a specific spirit of community (Gemeinschaft) open to conservative (Christian, rural) as well as national people.

CONCLUSIONS

- Articulation of conservative and neoliberal narratives with far-right and right-wing populist narratives of welfare crises and the need for reform rests on peculiar tensions which serve to neutralise the “negative” dimension of the respective justifications and goals of the outlined reforms
 - The neo-conservative and neo-liberal framing **defuses the racist underpinning** of the narrative of the fight against “migration into the social system”
 - The racist underpinning of the fight against “migration into the social system” **defuses the attack on the poor in general.**

CONCLUSION: GENERAL INSIGHTS ABOUT THE CONTOURS OF FAR-RIGHT SOCIAL POLICIES

- **Renationalisation and (in some countries) re-Christianisation of social policies**
 - Limitation of social transfers for deserving parts of autochthonous population – strengthening of ties of social rights/entitlements to certain social behaviour (hard work, child rearing)
 - Meritocratisation of social rights and social integration serves to defuse racist underpinning of far-right concepts
 - Fight against „migration into social system“ – exemplified in cuts for certain families with many children (
 - Puts i.e. „wrong“ families in contrast to good middle class, maybe Christian families
 - Evokes demographic Shifts social policies to demographic/population policies
- **Strengthening of punitive and educative aspects of welfare measures** which go beyond sanctions through cuts of entitlements
 - Imposes certain activities (work, acquisition of language and cultural skills) as educational/disciplinary (partly as end in itself)
- **(Re-familialisation:** strengthening of and support for ‘right’ families through certain measures to increase birthrates and foster traditional gender arrangements; attack on feminist policies (abortion rights))

EXTRA: DISCOURSES ON ASYLUM SEEKERS AND SCROUNGERS

- July of 2017 – September of 2017: Cancellation of social benefits for immigrants and "restriction of immigration into the social system".
- Chancellor Sebastian suggests in the election campaign that savings on foreigners could finance a tax cut.

Election: October of 2017 – Inauguration of the new Government: December of 2017

- January of 2018: Chancellor Kurz: *„It cannot be the task of the general public to finance those who cheat their way through the Public Employment Service (AMS) with excuses.,, / Vice-Chancellor Heinz*
 - Christian Strache: *"Cheaters" should not believe that they would be carried through"*.
 - July 2018: Parliamentary Group Leader August Wöginger: *„We want to get people out of the social hammock and make the minimum income scheme a stepping stone into work.“*
 - January of 2019: *„I don't think it's a good development when fewer and fewer people get up in the morning to work and in more and more families only the children get up in the morning to go to school“*
- ⇒ **Attacks on the underclass began very soon after the elections.**

EXTRA: DISCOURSES ON ASYLUM SEEKERS AND SCROUNGERS

- July of 2017 – September of 2017: Cancellation of social benefits for immigrants and "restriction of immigration into the social system".
- Chancellor Sebastian suggests in the election campaign that savings on foreigners could finance a tax cut.

Election: October of 2017 – Inauguration of the new Government: December of 2017

- January of 2018: Chancellor Kurz: *„Es kann nicht Aufgabe der Allgemeinheit sein, die zu finanzieren, die sich mit Ausreden beim AMS durchschummeln.“*
- Christian Strache: *“Durchschummler” dürften nicht glauben, dass sie durchgetragen würden.“*
- July 2018: Club-Obmann August Wöginger: *„Wir wollen die Leute aus der sozialen Hängematte holen und die Mindestsicherung zu einem Sprungbrett in die Arbeit machen.“*
- January of 2019: Chancellor Kurz: *“Ich glaube nicht, dass es eine gute Entwicklung ist, wenn immer weniger Menschen in der Früh aufstehen, um zu arbeiten, und in immer mehr Familien nur mehr die Kinder in der Früh aufstehen, um in die Schule zu gehen.“*

⇒ **Attacks on the underclass began very soon after the elections.**