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Punishing the Poor and Fighting “Immigration into the Social System” – Welfare Reforms by the Conservative and Far-right Government in Austria 2017–2019

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Abstract: The paper analyses and assesses social policy reforms of the conservative, far-right and right-wing populist coalition government in Austria between 2017 and 2019 in the light of the debates about welfare chauvinist, authoritarian and populist social policies. The latter had gained in importance over the previous years due to the upsurge of far-right and right-wing populist parties and the (at least partial) accommodation of mainstream parties to this tendency in many countries. The policies of the government were based on the view that the social problems associated with immigration were (at least) one of the main underlying causes for the problems affecting the Austrian society. The paper shows that the government initiated strategies to tackle these developments via a re-nationalisation of social policies. The analysis is focused on implemented and planned activities geared mainly towards the (former) margins of the Austrian welfare regime (social assistance, active labour market policies, unemployment assistance, youth integration policies), as well as on the ideological articulations the government uttered to justify these reforms via the combination of welfare chauvinist orientations with centre-right concerns about market dynamics and public finances. Our analysis concludes that nativist/racialised, nationalist and welfare chauvinist social policies transcend the distinction of deserving and non-deserving social groups, which raises the question about the social imaginaries that lie beneath the attempts of far-right political actors to shape societies through the reform of welfare.

Keywords: far-right social policy, migration Policy, Austria, welfare chauvinism, social welfare cuts, exclusionary social policies, nationalist policies

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1 Introduction

After only about one and a half years, the second attempt at establishing a coalition government between the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right and right-wing populist¹ Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Obinger/Tálos 2006; Tálos 2019) collapsed after a massive political scandal² in early summer 2019, which involved the vice chancellor and the party whip of the Freedom party, led to the end of this government. New elections took place, after which a new coalition government – this time between the Austrian People's Party and the Green Party – was established.

Even though the former government's time in office was very short, the record of its achievements until its downfall appears important for the analysis and assessment of far-right and right-wing populist governmental practices and strategies, as well as to their abilities to find common ground with mainstream (conservative and neoliberal) parties to form stable coalitions. For the viability of such political cooperation, it is in particular social policies that have shown to be of growing significance (Röth et al. 2018; Afonso 2015). This is because social policies constitute a policy field through which the state and political actors try to shape societies, regulate certain social developments (e.g. migration) and structure the social relations and interactions between different social groups (e.g. employers and employees) (Fischer 2020). Social policies determine the extent to which different social groups are included into (or excluded from) society (e.g. labour markets), the behaviours that are expected from them, and the level of benefits and social services they have access to. Thus, they assign them certain positions in the social hierarchies and define their opportunities of participation in everyday life. How this role of social policies impacts concrete national social formations depends on the ideological trajectories of the relevant social forces.

¹ Given the vast array of definitions of right-wing populist parties (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) we decided to use these two terms. Notwithstanding its ideological foundations, we use right-wing populist to depict the ability of certain movements and parties for mass appeal. We also use the term far-right to make clear that many of these parties (such as the FPÖ) have a longer history as a political organisation of the far-right.

² The government collapsed after secretly taped conversations between an alleged niece of a Russian oligarch, the later Austrian Vice Chancellor, and the chief whip of the Freedom party in a finca on Ibiza in summer 2017 had been made public. Snap general elections were announced by the Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz for the end of September 2019.

In other EU-countries (e.g. France, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Austria, Poland etc.) as well, far-right and right-wing populist parties have expanded their programmatic scope over the last at least two decades to include a specific perspective on social policies, which has been labelled welfare chauvinism (see below) (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; Keskinen et al. 2016). Many of these parties claim they want to defend social security for (deserving) hard working people while at the same time aiming at reducing access and entitlements for a number of groups of (allegedly non-deserving) “outsiders” – in particular migrants but also certain other social groups of e.g. the (long-term) unemployed etc.

On the other hand, most mainstream centre-right parties have adopted policies that aim at cutting back welfare expenditures and retrenching the welfare state in order to control costs and to improve competitiveness over the last decades. This is accompanied by a shift towards so-called “workfarist” or activation policies (Scherschel et al. 2012), which are based on the assumption that traditional welfare systems create incentives for the unemployed and poor people to live on social benefits, which undermines their “work ethos” (see also Bochsler in this issue). From this perspective, welfare reforms aim at increasing the incentives for these people to take up employment as quickly as possible through different measures (ranging from benefit cuts, expanding sanction regimes, different forms of job coaching, but also training and upskilling) to improve the functioning of labour markets.

However, given the successes of far-right and right-wing populist parties, a growing number of mainstream parties, in particular (but not exclusively) of the centre-right, have begun to adjust their perspective on social policies to welfare chauvinism at least partially and to integrate it into their predominant goals (Fallend 2019; Akkerman 2012; Schumacher/van Kersbergen 2016). Interestingly, these might not simply imply a differentiation of social rights based on nativist constructions of belonging (e.g. to a nation state). Rather, it can also be complemented by the creation of specific paths for social integration which tie access to welfare benefits and social services to a number of behaviours and attitudes increasingly expected from immigrants and recognised refugees (e.g. language and cultural training, employment etc.) supporting a meritocratic conceptualisation of social integration. Such an accommodation holds true for the programmatic development of the Austrian People’s Party, in particular after 2015, and its rightward move has been highlighted by a range of commentators (Fallend 2019; Ennser-Jedenastik 2020).

Notwithstanding some outlined convergence between these political actors, and given continuing different emphases concerning social policy orientations, it is interesting to ask, which ideological articulations do they develop in certain

national constellations to overcome possible tensions and frictions among them, and how do these feed into concrete social policy reforms? Thus, for the analysis of the government of Austria of the years 2017–2019 and the reforms it implemented concerning social policies and the ‘governance of the poor’, two related lines of questioning emerge. *First*, how did the coalition partners articulate and justify their perspectives on social policies and the reforms they planned in the government programme (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017)? Which social imaginaries³ (Sum/Jessop 2017) were mobilised in the context of the implementation of the government programme – in particular the reform of ‘needs-based minimum income support’ (Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung, BMS)? *Second*, through which measures did the government try to combine the welfare chauvinist goals pushed forward by the far-right Freedom Party (e.g. fighting immigration) with the traditional objectives of the centre-right People’s Party (e.g. cost-cutting and raising market incentives)? What is the significance of the hegemonic discourse on immigration and its alleged consequences that has been established over the last decades in Austria, and in particular after 2015, for the justification and legitimation of these reforms, and how did the former affect the concrete measures?

To answer these questions, we have chosen a specific set of social policies that the government planned or implemented and the ideological articulations it uttered to justify them. First, we chose the reform of the Austrian system of social assistance (i.e. the ‘needs-oriented minimum income scheme’, Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung, BMS), because this was the most important welfare reform it was able to implement. This benefit (see below), which was created in 2010, is the most important provision of the Austrian welfare state that aims at regulating poverty. It provides a certain minimum level of support for those who do not have access to other funds (e.g. through employment) or to social benefits through the employment-based social insurance system (Tálos/Obinger 2019). Thus, it is also the entry point for recognised refugees into the Austrian social system and the services for labour market inclusion. Second, we combine

³ According to Sum and Jessop (2017: 165) imaginaries are meaning systems that frame the experiences of individuals in complex societies and guide their collective considerations and perspectives concerning that society. Collective actors (such as parties or governments) could not “relate to their environments, make decisions, or engage in strategic action” without them. As such they are important not only to persuade people to accept certain e.g. policies but also “for the reproduction or transformation of the prevailing social structures” (Sum/Jessop 2017: 165).

this analysis with an overview of the government's activities and plans concerning Labour Market Policies (activities of the PES, reform of insurance, VET policies for young people etc.), which govern the inclusion into/exclusion from the labour markets.

To answer the outlined questions, our analysis will proceed as follows. In *Section 2* we will discuss the determining orientations of social policies proposed by far-right and right-wing populist parties (nativism, authoritarianism, populism) (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016). These have been highlighted in recent debates about welfare chauvinism and the impact these parties have on social policy development. Our discussion will raise the question of how the racialised and nationalist orientation of far-right social policies are articulated with its welfare chauvinist dimensions and whether this transcends the distinction between deserving/non-deserving groups. *Section 3* will analyse⁴ social policy reforms of the government and its attempt to combine the fight against “immigration into the social system”, as well as neoliberal strategies to make labour markets more flexible and cut welfare expenditures. On the one hand this analysis will highlight the ideological articulations the government mobilised in its programme as well as public debates to justify and legitimate the (planned) reforms. On the other hand, a detailed account of the reform of the ‘needs-oriented minimum income’ will be presented. This analysis will be complemented by an overview of the government's plans for labour market policy reform (scrapping of the insurance-based social assistance (Notstandshilfe) as well as VET-policies (vocational education and training) for young people). The paper will conclude (*Section 4*) with a discussion whether the analysis of the

4 Our analysis is based on an extensive research concerning relevant policy documents (e.g. the government's programme, legal texts) as well as the public and scientific debates on the planned and implemented reforms. For the analysis of the ideological articulations and imaginaries mobilised by the government, we collected all press statements of the coalition parties (ÖVP: N=48; FPÖ: N=49 from a total of N=312) available at APA-OTS (Austrian Press Agency, a website that publishes all press statements) between 01 January 2018 and 30 April 2019 that covered the ‘Needs-oriented minimum income scheme’ (BMS). To analyse the ideological tropes mobilised by the government, we applied a simplified version of the methodological strategies of critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2007). On the basis of the available knowledge concerning the ideological orientations of the Freedom Party as well as the People's Party, we identified and coded the main ideological topoi that were mobilised to justify the reforms. Where possible, we tried to carve out linkages between the different topoi government actors mobilised, to highlight how they tried to create and justify their common political programme by combining the fight against immigration with social policy reform.

activities of the Austrian government – whose focus on means-tested benefits⁵ should come as no surprise, given the propensity of welfare chauvinist reform strategies to target such schemes, as immigrant beneficiaries tend to be over-represented in these programmes due to their social situation (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018) – allows some insights to specify the concept of welfare chauvinism and its articulation with racialised and nationalist imaginaries of the development of society.

2 Social policies and the far right

Far-right and right-wing populist parties experienced a considerable upsurge over the last more than three decades, and in particular after the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis in many (European) countries (Fischer 2020; Hopkin/Blyth 2019). These developments were further accentuated after the so-called “Refugee Crisis” of 2015 (for overviews: Heinisch 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Lazaridis et al. 2016). The growth of these parties was accompanied by attempts of many of them to improve their appeal to working class voters and other less well-off social groups which had predominantly been inclined to (centre) left parties (Lefkofridi/Michel 2017; Ennser-Jedenastik 2016; Flecker et al. 2019; Afonso 2015). Their growing electoral strength have given some of these parties the opportunity to enter into coalition governments – mainly but not exclusively with centre-right parties (Fenger 2018; Röth et al. 2018; Afonso 2015; Stubbs/Lendvai-Bainton 2020) in recent years⁶. To expand their voter base, a growing number of these parties – the Austrian Freedom Party would be a case in point (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016; Flecker et al. 2019) – began to broaden the scope of their party programmes through strategies to present themselves as defenders of welfare systems and social policies (Lefkofridi/Michel 2017; Fenger 2018). This amounted to some remarkable ideological shifts, as at least up to the 1990s far-right and right-wing populist parties were understood to represent socially conservative and (more or less) authoritarian neoliberal political projects aiming at dismantling welfare regimes and existing regulatory frameworks of labour markets (and some, such

⁵ According to Ennser-Jedenastik (2018) this is also the case for universal benefits. But in these cases, what is targeted as being illegitimate is equal access for groups that have moved to a country recently and have not yet contributed to the system.

⁶ The coalition between the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Austrian Freedom Party of the years 2000–2006 was among the first examples in Western Europe (Tálos 2006).

as the Hungarian Fidesz-government under Victor Orban (Stubbs/Lendvai-Bainton 2020), continued in this direction). Furthermore, the outlined social developments, as well as ideological shifts of far-right and right-wing populist parties, caused a number mainstream parties – in particular conservative centre-right parties (Schumacher/van Kersbergen 2016) – to accommodate their social policy programmes, to include welfare chauvinist orientations, and to implement such reforms when in government, such as in the Netherlands (Konig 2019) or the Scandinavian countries (Jørgensen/Thomsen 2016; Keskinen 2016). There is considerable debate whether these strategies prove successful in curbing the upsurge of far-right and right-wing populist parties and how the latter are affected (further radicalisation vs. accommodation to the political centre) by these reactions (Schumacher/van Kersbergen 2016).

The expansion and re-orientation of the programmatic appeal and policy orientations of far-right and right-wing populist parties towards a racialised nationalist defence of (in particular the core of) welfare regimes and social policies, for at least a certain number of allegedly valuable and deserving social groups, raised a range of questions for scientific analyses of the programmatic and ideological orientations of these parties and their strategies in government (Ennser-Jedenastik 2018; van der Waal et al. 2013; Chueri 2020). The first range of questions refers to the contradictory and tense relationships between their defence of national welfare regimes and social policies against globalisation, on the one hand, and on the other hand their (in most cases) continuing inclination (or at least openness) towards policies to deregulate and flexibilise at least some aspects of the economy that would affect some of their constituencies (Afonso 2015; Röth et al. 2018). Such tensions come to the fore (Lefkofridi/Michel 2017) when these parties enter into coalition governments with mainstream centre-right parties, which are more inclined towards policies of welfare retrenchment, austerity and economic liberalisation. Analyses that try to understand how they play out in policy developments reveal that overall welfare spending remained more or less stable in countries where far-right and right-wing populist parties participated in such coalition governments or had some other forms of direct influence on policy making (toleration of minority governments) (Röth et al. 2018; Chueri 2020). These analyses, however, tend to leave open the question whether there were also more qualitative effects concerning e.g. the institutionalisation of social rights; the differentiation and hierarchisation of access of different social groups (e.g. migrants, nationals) to welfare (see for example: Swank/Betz 2019); the development of social policy instruments to govern the behaviour of e.g. the poor, etc.

Thus, the second range of questions that tries to tackle these limitations focuses on the main ideological traits of far-right and right-wing populist social policy programmes and reforms (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2016; Keskinen et al. 2016; Fischer 2020). Laurenz Ennsner-Jedenastik (2016: 412–415), drawing on the scientific debates about right-wing populism in general, differentiates three dimensions concerning the social policy orientations and activities of these parties: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. According to Ennsner-Jedenastik nativism – or racialised nationalism⁷ – separates populations along ethnic, racialised but also religious lines and depicts an understanding of welfare and social policies, which assumes that “non-natives should receive limited support (if any)” (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2016: 412). Authoritarianism refers to an understanding of the social order as hierarchical and the differentiation of deserving and non-deserving groups when it comes to access to social transfers and services (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2016: 412). This differentiation legitimates welfare provision according to the willingness or ability of different social groups to behave according to certain expectations in a hierarchical society (e.g. gainful employment, motherhood etc.) or to be sanctioned accordingly. Finally, populism refers to the critique of (allegedly corrupt) welfare elites and self-serving bureaucrats who have lost contact to the needs of the ‘true people’ and who support a growing number of non-deserving groups at the expense of hard-working everyday people. Thus, far-right and right-wing populist social policy reforms also target e.g. the role of (high-ranking) welfare functionaries and their alleged privileges (high wages and pensions) or their linkages to certain interest groups such as trade unions (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2016).

Given the limitations of quantitative analyses of welfare expenditures for the understanding of qualitative changes of welfare regimes, the differentiation of social policy orientations by far-right and right-wing populist parties as proposed by scholars like Ennsner-Jedenastik (2016) is highly welcome. The multi-

7 We are not completely convinced by the term nativism as it usually refers to all social groups (all kinds of minorities) who not only try to defend their mode of living and cultural characteristics but also struggle for recognition and equal rights (through e.g. affirmative action). Thus, the concept of nativism attempts to cover a wide range of selective (welfare) policies, thereby running into danger of blurring the exclusionary as well as hierarchical dimensions of far-right social policy concepts along nationalist and racialised (or religious) lines, even though these are usually highlighted explicitly when ‘nativism’ is defined. To highlight the specific character of the latter, we prefer ‘racialised nationalism’ (and ‘theocratic’ for countries based on a religious policy). This also seems justified, because neo-racist thinking, which is crucial for the modernisation of the far-right, does not rely exclusively on the differentiation and valuation of different groups of persons based on alleged biological differences (Melter/Mecheril 2011).

dimensional analysis of its nativist/racialised and nationalist, authoritarian and populist dimensions offers some important perspectives on how to analyse and understand different aspects of social policy programmes and reforms pushed forward by these parties. In particular, these conceptualisations allow connecting the ideological orientations of these parties in the field of social policies to the social imaginaries (Sum/Jessop 2017; Jessop 2010) – e.g. concerning immigration and national purity – they mobilise to bring forward their policy proposal and to shape societies accordingly. This is necessary, as social policy is “inherently political as it fundamentally deals with the articulation and actualization of social norms and entitlements, and with social ordering, legibility and discipline, and it has different effects when deployed by groups with different agendas” (Fischer 2020: 378). However, the concept of nativism (this also holds true for our preferred reference to racialised nationalism) raises the question of which concrete ideological articulations (e.g. concerning e.g. assumptions about certain social groups such as the poor, asylum-seekers, Muslims) welfare chauvinist social policies are based on in different national constellations. How do they affect the very construction of certain provisions and regulations and the behaviours they want to induce? Against this background, the distinction between deserving and non-deserving social groups to describe the authoritarian dimensions of far-right social policy concepts appears somewhat limited. While this notion is certainly able to highlight the moral significance ascribed to certain social groups and their activities for society (hard work, motherhood, moralistic lifestyle etc.) – an approach that has already been re-established in neoliberal social policy reforms and their strong focus on the allegedly missing work-ethos of many unemployed (Scherschel et al. 2012) – it tends to underestimate other aspects far-right ideological orientations attributed to social policies and their significance for the reproduction and transformation of social orders that refer to e.g. national identity etc. In a context where social policy reforms are transformed into an instrument to protect a certain social order, which is framed according to racialised and nationalist imaginaries, the exclusion of social groups from the access to welfare (as well as labour market participation) transcends the concept of (non-) deservingness. This certainly varies according to different national contexts and traditions of the far-right. However, to find out which ideological articulations justify and define hierarchised access to welfare and the exclusion of certain social groups, it is necessary to deepen the research on the policy reforms far-right and right-wing populist parties (try to) implement in different countries. This shall be part of our analysis of the Austrian case in the next section.

3 Developments during the conservative and far-right coalition in three social policy areas

Until its downfall, the government and the reforms it proposed and tried to implement enjoyed high approval ratings and were able to dominate public discourses around a range of topics. This shows that the government was able to establish a new hegemony⁸ around its programme and activities and the social imaginaries it articulated to justify and construct its policies (Gramsci 1991–2002; Sum/Jessop 2017). It is certainly not possible to analyse the specific ideological articulations of this hegemony in full detail here (Tálos 2019). However, in large parts it can be found in the ideological and political significance immigration (and in particular the alleged “Refugee Crisis” of 2015) and its alleged effects on society had gained for the coalition government and its programme (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017; Perchinig/Valchars 2019; Heinisch et al. 2019). The social imaginaries (Jessop 2010) the government used to legitimate its policies articulated a nativist/nationalist perspective on social and economic problems and crisis tendencies, with the social and political tensions related to immigration, conflicts around social integration and racism (Mayer et al. 2018; Rheindorf/Wodak 2019; Sauer/Ajanovic 2016). Immigration was presented as (at least one of) the main underlying cause(s) of the problems (social inequalities, unemployment) affecting the Austrian society, allegedly posing an imminent threat to its autochthonous population and national identity (Heinisch et al. 2019). At least from the perspective of the Freedom Party, the latter has been in danger of being replaced by an immigrant “invasion” and foreign, in particular Muslim, cultures and religions (Kurier 2016; Die Presse 2016).

Thus, in 2017 the incoming coalition government did not only embark on restrictive migration and asylum policies to make sure that “no application for asylum can be brought forward legally from Austrian soil” (Perchinig/Valchars 2019, paraphrasing a quote of far-right minister of the interior). Rather, the government programme also set out strategies that aimed at tackling social problems via a re-nationalisation of different policy fields, which was most pronounced in relation to social policies (Ennser-Jedenastik 2020). The nativist or re-nationalised conceptualisation did not simply aim at delegitimising access to

⁸ We use the term ‘hegemony’ here to describe the ability of political forces to establish a more-or-less common worldview (i.e. interpretation of social realities), which enables them to lead morally, intellectually and politically (Jessop 1990), the political agenda and activities being thus justified.

welfare for non-nationals. Rather, the government promised to fight “immigration into the social system”⁹ (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 117) assuming that immigrants, no matter whether they are asylum seekers or not, come to Austria because of its welfare system.

Against this, the government promised to focus on “Austrian social policies”, which have to concentrate on Austria’s “own citizens” (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 117), defined as all kinds of “our” (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017) people (direct reference was made to children; youth; the elderly, who had rebuilt Austria after WWII; women, etc.) and to make sure only those who “contributed” to “our social system” have access to welfare provision (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 108). From this perspective it comes as no surprise that welfare benefits based on means-testing and needs, rather than former contributions, would move centre stage for the government’s plans (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2018, 2020), as immigrants tend to be over-represented in these schemes due to their social situation.

3.1 Reforming the needs-oriented minimum income scheme

The outlined re-nationalisation of (social) policies (ÖVP/FPÖ: 2017) was epitomised in the proposals concerning the so-called ‘needs-oriented minimum income scheme’ (BMS), which had been implemented in 2010 under the preceding coalition government between the Social Democratic Party and the Austrian People’s Party, and which was based on a contractual agreement between the government and the federal provinces (Austrian National Assembly 2010). Even though access to the minimum benefit scheme was closely articulated with the work requirements of the PES (Public Employment Service), its implementation was met with fierce critique from the beginning. The aim of BMS¹⁰ was to remedy (at least some of) the flaws of the overcome, decentralised and means-tested Austrian social assistance system, which was riven by low take-up rates by pos-

⁹ All quotations from political documents or public debates in Austria were translated into English by the authors.

¹⁰ Under BMS single persons who had no access to other resources and without personal assets of more than four times the individual monthly rate of support became entitled to a certain minimum amount of income (in 2018, before the reform of the government, this was set at € 838) and were included into health insurance. For a household of two adults, the amount was calculated at 150% of the individual rate; for the first three dependent children an additional rate was set at least 18% of the individual rate (but this could vary between the provinces) (Austrian National Assembly 2010).

sible beneficiaries and a high level of discretion by local welfare bureaucracies (Fink/Leibetseder 2019).

The number of benefit recipients increased considerably in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (rise of unemployment) and the “Refugee Crisis” of 2015¹¹ – in particular in big cities such as Vienna. This is because the BMS-scheme also constitutes the entry point into the Austrian welfare system for immigrants, and in particular for recognized refugees who have not yet worked in Austria to acquire social entitlements via the social insurance system. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that in 2018 about 35% of recipients of BMS were recognized refugees or persons with subsidiary protection status and just 47% were Austrian citizens (Statistik Austria 2019: 17). Even though expenditures for these benefits amounted to just 0.9% of the total welfare expenditures in Austria (about € 941 million in 2018) (Statistik Austria 2019), the BMS-scheme became one of the most contested welfare provisions over the last years. In the government programme, the announced reform was predominantly justified as a nativist measure to block immigration into the social system, as “it cannot be” that “Austrians who contributed for a long time” receive “less or the same” as immigrants, who started living in Austria only a short time ago (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 117). This hinted towards a remarkable policy shift, as this benefit was developed to constitute a basic level of social provision in the Austrian welfare system, below which nobody having permanent residency in Austria should fall.

In this context two nationalist and welfare-chauvinist tropes in particular were mobilised for the racialised and nationalist legitimisation of the outlined plans. First, benefit entitlements of large families with many children¹² under the needs-oriented minimum income scheme were scandalised by far-right politicians and actors. Meticulously defining the high birth rates of Syrian and Afghan women to two decimal places (3.91 per women) (apa ots 2018d) the party whips of the coalition parties argued in a joint press release that the reform of the needs-oriented minimum income scheme would “counteract these developments” (apa ots 2018d). This scandalisation not only alluded to an alleged lack of work ethic among certain groups of immigrants and cultures (e.g. Mus-

11 Between 2012 and 2017, the number of recipients increased from 212,341 in 2012 to 307,854 in 2017 (+39.1%). Until 2019 the numbers decreased to 267,683. About half of the increase occurred in Vienna (Source: Statistik Austria).

12 The number of couples living in a household (Bedarfgemeinschaft) with three or more children increased from 6,360 (Statistik Austria 2015) to 8,482 (Statistik Austria), most of this increase occurred in Vienna (approximately +1.600)

lims). It also referred to the idea of an “invasion” of migrants and asylum seekers via immigration into the social system, which had been brought forward by high-ranking politicians of the Freedom Party (Kurier 2016; Die Presse 2016). Second, the high share of migrants and people granted asylum was presented as an increasingly problematic burden on the social system, thereby connecting the claim to fight immigration into the social system with the viability of public budgets. In this context, benefit claims by migrants and migrant families were presented as more or less illegitimate, which even amounted to claims that these families “looted” (apa ots 2018c) and “exploited” (apa ots 2018a) the welfare system “good and proper”.

Articulating the nationalist and welfare chauvinist criticism of benefit access of migrants and recognised refugees, with concerns about the “burden” this might constitute for public budgets, allowed combining these perspectives with more neoliberal objections against the needs-oriented minimum income scheme. Thus, during the public debates about the bill, high-ranking politicians, such as the Federal Chancellor (Sebastian Kurz; Austrian People’s Party), the Vice Chancellor (H.-C. Strache, Freedom Party), highlighted the alleged effects of this benefit scheme on the work ethos of welfare recipients (see Bochsler in this issue), and on social budgets getting out of control. The Federal Chancellor made clear that the government viewed the reform of this scheme as a measure to act against those “people who do not get up in the morning to go to work” (orf.at 2019). Furthermore, representatives of the government argued that, without the expenditures for BMS, local councils such as the City of Vienna would not have to run public deficits (apa ots 2018b) that had to be financed by ordinary taxpayers. In the context of the welfare chauvinist justification of these reforms, these attacks on all alleged welfare cheats (“Durchschummler” Sebastian Kurz) and similar arguments are quite interesting. On the one hand, the government tried to defuse the racist, anti-immigration overtones that dominated the public debate about this reform by pointing towards all people who appear as unwilling to work. On the other hand, the welfare chauvinist attack on immigrants accessing welfare benefits became justified on superficially more neutral grounds through its link to quantifiable budgetary problems and their effect on the economy, take-home pay, etc., rather than racialised assumptions about their culture and behaviours.

However, after a heated public debate, the coalition government passed the law (Sozialhilfe-Grundsatzgesetz) (Austrian National Assembly 2019b) concerning the reform of the ‘needs-oriented minimum income scheme’ in March 2019. The law came into effect in June 2019, even though it was immediately met with a constitutional challenge concerning some of its provisions (see below). Rea-

adopting the former name of this benefit – Sozialhilfe (social assistance) – the goals of the new law represent a remarkable departure from the provisions of the agreement between the national level and the federal provinces, which had come into effect in 2010 (Austrian National Assembly 2010) and which was disbanded in 2016.

The agreement of 2010 had stated that it was the goal of the federal government and the federal provinces to “avoid poverty and social exclusion”, to “strengthen the fight” against both, and to support people by sustainably reintegrating them into employment. In stark contrast to this, the new law (Austrian National Assembly 2020) aims at just supporting the general subsistence and accommodation requirements of beneficiaries and their integration into employment without referring to poverty. Furthermore it ties these provisions to safeguarding the functioning of the labour market (see below) – and to (explicitly) supporting migration policy goals as well as the tasks of the immigration authorities, called ‘aliens branch of the police’ (Fremdenpolizei) (Austrian National Assembly 2020). Thus, social provisions for immigrants have become tied to security policies through this legal regulation. In the comments to the law, it is made clear that the new law is clearly aimed at reducing immigration into the social system by minimising the alleged pull factor of the overcome benefit scheme (Austrian National Assembly 2019a). The fight against poverty and social exclusion can still be a goal for legislature in the federal provinces, provided that the specific provisions do not contradict the goals outlined in the law.

The anti-migrant impetus of the law also became obvious in relation to the definition of groups that are entitled to this benefit and those that are excluded from it (at least for a certain time). Excluded groups include beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, asylum seekers, and persons who are obliged to leave the country as, for example, their application for asylum was rejected. The latter groups will only have access to provisions with basic supplies (Grundversorgung, € 365/month). Other foreigners (EU citizens, Third State Members) can only apply for income support after five years of residence in Austria.

To reach its welfare chauvinist goals, the provisions of the new law implemented a range of specifics that aimed at reducing benefit access for migrants in particular. One of the main instruments to do so was the turning around of central elements of the calculation method of benefit entitlements – in particular for families. Before the reform, benefit entitlements were based on a definition of minimum levels for different categories of claimants within a household (including the partner, the number of children) (Austrian National Assembly 2010). This was calculated as a percentage of the benefit for single persons living alone (see fn 11), which had the effect that benefit entitlements for families with many

children could exceed € 2,500. This was scandalised by the tabloids and in particular far-right political actors on a regular basis (see above).

The reform of 2019 tied benefit entitlements to a maximum level per adult and household (175% of the rate for singles) (Austrian National Assembly 2020), and it introduced a degressive calculation mode for the benefit entitlement for each additional dependent child living within a household. This aimed at reducing the support per child for large families (to 25% for the first child, 15% for the second, 5% for all others).¹³ These provisions were scrapped by the Constitutional Court in December 2019, allowing the provinces to pass other regulations.

The second important welfare chauvinist provision could be found in the so-called Skill Bonus (*Arbeitsqualifizierungsbonus*) of 35%. Even though it was labelled as a bonus, it rather served as a reduction of benefits for certain groups according to their employability. The welfare chauvinist dimension of this provision is quite obvious, on the one hand, as employability was defined as proof of German language skills on the B1 level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language) or English language skills on the C1 level (which exceeds the level reached in “Academic Secondary School, Upper Cycle“ in Austria) (Austrian National Assembly 2019b). On the other hand, as access to full benefits was possible once these language levels were reached, and all obligations as laid down in the laws concerning migration and integration (attendance of value courses etc.) (Austrian National Assembly 2019b) were fulfilled, these provisions aimed at legitimising the differential treatments of certain groups of benefit recipients through a meritocratic conception of social rights and integration. This certainly helped to combine the different ideological orientations of the coalition partners, as well as to justify this reform for the wider public, even though it has to be mentioned that the government cut the resources for language trainings provided by e.g. the PES, etc. (see below). Nevertheless, these provisions were scrapped by the Constitutional Court at the end of 2019.

13 In contrast to these provisions geared against large families, the government introduced a tax-deduction of € 1.500 for couples with children called Family Bonus, which is effectively privileging large families of the upper-middle class with many children (Ennser-Jedenastik 2019; Disslbacher/Schultheiss 2018). At the same time, it tied the level of child support paid to families (mainly mothers) whose children do not live in Austria, or of whom one partner is working in Austria, to the level of living costs in the country of origin. This is currently challenged at the Constitutional Court.

3.2 Labour Market Reforms

To fully understand the scope and character of the outlined reforms of income support, as well as the way they attempt to combine welfare chauvinist and nationalist policies against immigration into the social system with market-friendly, neoliberal labour market¹⁴ policy reforms (Fink 2019), a detailed analysis of the measures the coalition government had planned and implemented in this field before it broke down will be necessary. The following areas stuck out in particular.

3.2.1 Labour market policy reforms

Concerning social policies another cornerstone of the government's programme (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 142–145) could be found in its plans to reform the unemployment insurance system and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of labour market policies and the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS). To justify this, the government brought forward two claims concerning labour market problems in Austria. First, it stated that businesses could not fill open positions with the labour force potential made up of domestic residents. In line with neoliberal perspectives, it ascribed this to a range of rigidities concerning employment and labour market regulations that decreased the competitiveness of Austrian companies compared to foreign, mainly Eastern European ones, as well as alleged problems of efficiency of the unemployment insurance system and the Public Employment Service. Second, it stated that unemployment had gone up in the previous period of growth because of an increase of labour supply, as there are still many workers from Eastern Europe pressing to enter Austrian labour markets (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 142). Even though the programme referenced an analysis of WIFO (Austrian Institute of Economic Research) it painted a selective picture of labour market problems in Austria, as recent analyses (Eppel et al. 2018) present a more differentiated picture of labour market devel-

¹⁴ To support the flexibilisation of employment for companies, and to improve the competitiveness of the Austrian economy (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 138–139), the government passed a law (Stelzer-Orthofer/Tamesberger 2018) to raise the upper limit of the working day to 12hrs (instead of 10hrs) and the upper limit of the working week to 60hrs. The new law did not affect the standard working week (40hrs), but it clearly increased the flexibility of companies for branches with weak collective agreements.

opments in Austria since 2008, referring also to sluggish economic growth¹⁵ and an increase of labour supply of Austrian Nationals due to growing employment rates of women and elderly people.

However, its presentation of labour market problems allowed the government, on the one hand, to reiterate the claim of the far-right that high levels of unemployment are caused by immigrants and, on the other hand, to combine it with the problematisation of the overcome employment and social insurance regulations (e.g. working time regulations, non-wage labour costs etc.), as well as the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) and its activities, which could easily be instrumentalised through populist campaigning. Thus, the government proclaimed a comprehensive reorientation of labour market policies in Austria (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 142).

The cornerstone of these plans presented itself as an “advancement”, “harmonisation” and “reorientation” of unemployment benefits, unemployment assistance (Notstandshilfe) and the needs-oriented minimum income scheme/social assistance (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 143). Unemployment assistance is a social insurance-based benefit for the long-term unemployed (it replaces unemployment benefit after a certain duration of unemployment). Entitlements to unemployment assistance are not time-limited.¹⁶ Given the growth of unemployment since 2008, the number of claimants of this benefit had increased considerably over the previous years (by about 78.000 between 2008 and

15 While it cannot be analysed here in more details, its causes and its effect on unemployment differ according to the economic doctrines (e.g. Keynesian demand-side policies vs. neoliberal supply-side policies) followed by political actors (Kromphardt 1987).

16 Emergency assistance (*Notstandshilfe*) replaces unemployment benefits once entitlements for the latter have expired. This can vary according to age groups and length of employment records. Emergency assistance is calculated at 92% of unemployment benefits (55% of the net income of the last calendar year) and 95% for those whose unemployment benefit was below the so-called *Ausgleichszulage* (compensatory supplement paid by the state to top off small pensions), which corresponds more or less to the basic rate for social assistance/needs-oriented minimum income. After six months emergency assistance is capped for certain age bands and depending on length of employment records. People with less than three years of employment fall back to the level of *Ausgleichszulage*, people below 40 years to a benefit level of about 115% of *Ausgleichszulage* (Source: AK-Österreich, <https://www.arbeiterkammer.at/beratung/arbeitsrecht/Arbeitslosigkeit/Notstandshilfe.html>). Furthermore, there is a family top-up for dependent children (€ 0,97/day and child). The average level of emergency assistance was € 27/day in 2019, € 25.20 for women (Data Source: AMS (Austrian PES)).

2017¹⁷). The government brought forward plans to scrap this benefit and to merge it with the income support system. Against this, critics pointed out that many people would lose benefit entitlements altogether, as social assistance is calculated according to household income. As the outlined plans resembled the Hartz-IV system in Germany, they were called “Kurz IV” (Der Standard 2019) in the heated debates that were already unfolding before the government broke down, and critics pointed out that this reform would increase poverty levels (Stelzer-Orthofer/Tamesberger 2018).

Even though the government could not implement these plans, it succeeded in putting forward a range of additional activities concerning the unemployment insurance system and the activities of the PES. A considerable amount of these targeted the practices of the PES, which corresponds with the populist dimensions of far-right and right-wing populist social policies as highlighted by Ennser-Jedenastik (see above, 2016). The government viewed the approach of the PES towards the (long-term) unemployed and the allegedly preposterous behaviour of many, in particular Muslim, immigrants as too cosy. For example, to push forward such a perspective, the government hooked into the debate about an internal audit report of the PES in spring 2018 (Der Standard 2018a) concerning (alleged) behavioural problems with different client groups, which was leaked to the public (Der Standard 2018a). Furthermore, based on its understanding of labour market problems and the outlined problems of the PES, the government pushed forward measures to put more pressure on the (long-term) unemployed and to improve “the effectiveness of sanctions” (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 143). Thus, between 2016 and 2019 the sanctions imposed on unemployed persons increased by about 45% (Kopf 2020).

To change these alleged inefficiencies and to reform the PES and labour market policies in Austria, the government announced a reduction of the former’s budget for labour market policies by 20% between 2017 and 2019. This was interpreted as an attempt to bring the PES (and the social economy actors) into line with the government plans and to set some funds free for a future tax-reform. The budget cuts have led to job losses for more than 1,200 trainers of activation measures (300 of them for German language trainings), and the PES had to reduce its staff by about 200 people until 2020 (Der Standard 2018c). This budget reduction was combined with the scrapping of the employee contributions to unemployment insurance for low-wage earners (less than € 1,733 before

17 Until 2019 the number of claimants for this benefit was reduced by about 28,000 to about 139,472 (Data Source: Statistik Austria).

taxes), which increased take-home pay in these labour market segments by up to € 30 to secure public support for its activities.

The populist attack on the PES, which claimed a lack of efficiency concerning the functioning of its labour market services in a narrow sense, further served to justify a range of cuts concerning allegedly costly active labour market policies supporting the long-term unemployed in general and immigrants in particular. Thus, the government scrapped a range of active labour market policy measures – most notably the symbolically important so-called “Action 20,000“, a policy for the long-term unemployed >50yrs, which had been implemented by the previous government. This measure had been introduced in 2017 and offered employment opportunities – financed by the PES – in local authorities or with non-profit organisations for up to two years. The cuts of the PES-budget also affected funds for the integration of recognized refugees. The budget for the so-called integration year (Integrationsjahr)¹⁸ was halved and the budget for further integration measures was scrapped altogether, which mainly included resources for language courses for recognized refugees.

3.2.2 Youth-related labour market and VET-reforms

Another interesting example of how the government combined welfare chauvinist and business-oriented interests can be found in their plans and activities concerning the programmes for the integration of young people/school leavers into the Austrian VET-system, in which youth with a migrant background are over-represented. The preceding government had implemented the so-called training guarantee as a reaction to the crisis in 2008, which was aimed at offering every school leaver who could not find a regular apprenticeship in a company a place at a ‘supra-company training’ (SCT) site. This approach had become an internationally acclaimed strategy to fight youth unemployment (Atzmüller/Knecht 2017) and the problems of a growing number of young people (many of them with migrant background) to integrate into the Austrian employment regime, for which a completed apprenticeship is increasingly seen as an indis-

¹⁸ The measure called “year of integration” (Integrationsjahr) had been passed by the preceding government in 2017. It was aimed at recognized refugees and people with subsidiary protection who had not been able to find a job and who had only basic knowledge of German. The programme offered German language trainings together with insights into the Austrian labour market. Asylum seekers were allowed to participate if there was a high probability that they were granted asylum and if they had basic knowledge of German. In case of a rejection of their application for asylum, they had to stop this measure immediately.

pensable requirement for future employment prospects. In general, the efficacy of the dual system of VET in Austria is still seen as the main reason for the comparably low youth unemployment rate in Austria.¹⁹ The training guarantee basically complemented the existing dual system, where VET takes place in companies and vocational schools by offering every young person who cannot find a position as a regular apprentice a publicly financed training place in an SCT, provided mostly by third-sector organizations.²⁰ In 2017 the Training Guarantee was transformed into a mandatory provision under the so-called law on *Ausbildungspflicht* (Duty for VET) which was publicly labelled ‘AusBildung bis 18’ (VET until 18). Under the regulations of this law, school leavers could no longer enter employment as unskilled workers, but entry into VET or participation in a measure provided by the PES was made mandatory. To secure adherence to these provisions, parents of adolescents who violate this obligation can be fined up to € 1,000. In the school year 2017/2018, 13,296 young people participated in SCTs, which amounted to about 10% of all apprenticeships. Since then, the number has been reduced to about 10,058. About a third of participants in SCTs do not have an Austrian passport.²¹

The creation of a complementary pillar in the Austrian system of VET via SCTs had raised a range of objections from the beginning. Representatives of the business side, but also conservative and far-right politicians, bemoaned the costs for these places and feared that the SCTs would be a competitor for other businesses, as they might offer attractive VET places with a more youth-friendly – “cosy” – educational approach (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut 2017: 45–46; ÖVP/FPÖ 2017: 145; Atzmüller/Knecht 2017: 124). Thus, they raised doubts about the quality and the efficiency of the apprenticeships offered in SCTs. High-ranking politicians of the far-right combined these arguments with the claim that the ‘Training Guarantee’/‘Duty for Training’ represented a strategy to support recognised refugees and asylum seekers and to finance social economy institutions close to the then social-democrat and conservative government (apa ots 2016).

Well in line with the interests of the business side, the government announced strengthening traditional apprenticeships in companies in its pro-

19 About 40% of a cohort still enters the VET system (BMASGK 2019: 29), and the rate of NEETs aged 15–24 is comparably low, amounting to 7.1% in 2019 (EU-average: 10.1%; Eurostat (2020)).

20 These training sites offer apprenticeships for about 40 to 60 occupations (out of about 210 occupations for which formal apprenticeships are available in Austria; BMWFW/WKO (2019)).

21 In company-based apprenticeships their share is about 13.7% (Dornmayr/Löffler 2020). The statistics on apprenticeship does not provide insights into someone’s migration background in general. An older analysis collecting data up to 2010 puts the share of young people with migrant background in SCTs at 49% (Biffi/Skrivanek 2014).

gramme (ÖVP/FPÖ 2017). Thus, it planned to focus the activities of SCTs on the integration of young people into company-based apprenticeships rather than offering a full qualification. To raise the incentive to move into company-based trainings, the government cut the remuneration for apprentices older than 18yrs in SCTs by half (Der Standard 2018b), and they opened a debate as to whether school leavers at the age of 15 could be forced to move to other parts of Austria to find an apprenticeship place. The cuts affecting the activities of the PES reduced available funds for SCTs considerably (Knecht/Bodenstein 2019).

In September 2018, the government also decided to abolish access to apprenticeship places in so-called “understaffed occupations” (Mangelberufe) for asylum seekers. Since 2012 young asylum seekers had been offered to start an apprenticeship if an employer could prove he was unable to fill the position with a candidate who was Austrian by birth (Knecht/Bodenstein 2019; Knecht/Tamesberger 2019). This decision led to some rifts within the coalition government, as a considerable number of businesses opposed this measure and also because a considerably successful political campaign against it emerged.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we tried to analyse how the now defunct coalition government between the Austrian People’s Party and the Freedom Party tried to transform the existing welfare provisions and labour market policies intended to ‘govern the poor’, as well as the conditions under which they have access to benefit entitlements and gainful employment between 2017 and 2019 by combining nationalist, welfare chauvinist and neoliberal policy orientations. As such this study complements the analysis for other European countries (Koning 2019; Jørgensen/Thomsen 2016; Keskinen 2016; Stubbs/Lendvai-Bainton 2020) of the impact of welfare chauvinism on policy making

To grasp the significance of the re-nationalised social policies, we focused on implemented and planned activities geared mainly against the (former) margins of the Austrian welfare regime (income support, Active Labour Market Policies, Unemployment Assistance, youth integration policies) and tried to highlight their ideological underpinnings, which revealed a specific articulation of welfare chauvinist, authoritarian and populist dimensions, with traditional orientations of the centre right towards cutting and labour market dynamics in a specific way. However, some of the provisions of this reform proved as unconstitutional and were scrapped by the Constitutional Court in December 2019, as they were explicitly aimed at disadvantaging immigrants. To deepen

the understanding of far-right social policy orientations and welfare chauvinism and mainstream parties adjusting to it, we based our analysis of the planned and implemented activities of the government on an analysis of the ideological articulations the government mobilised to justify its social policy. In this context it was most remarkable that the government justified its strategy through a meritocratic conceptualisation of somebody's possibility to get full entitlements to certain benefits tying them to employability. At the same time, however, the government reduced public funds for the acquisition of e.g. language skills, making it harder for immigrants to fulfil these conditions for integration. Thus, the reform of social assistance, but also the other plans and activities we analysed in this paper, reveal that nationalist, welfare chauvinist social policies do not stop at implementing a differentiation between deserving and non-deserving groups but tend to transcend them. This is revealed by its goal to fight immigration into the social system, which raises the question of how far welfare chauvinist measures aim at actively preventing social integration of immigrants by at least narrowing the opportunities to get full access to social benefits, or by shifting the responsibility to overcome economic, social and cultural obstacles and possible discriminations onto the individual. By identifying the main ideological tropes mobilised to justify the anti-immigrant and welfare chauvinist orientations of the outlined reforms, we were able to shed some light on the underlying societal imaginaries that seemingly guide the policy orientations of, in particular, the far-right and right-wing populist Freedom Party, and which, from our perspective, are not captured fully by the existing definitions of welfare chauvinism (e.g. presenting migrant families with many children as a burden and even threat; pointing towards alleged cultural differences concerning the work ethos; equating access to social rights to looting and a burden on ordinary citizens; referring to immigration as an "invasion").

A deeper analysis lies beyond the scope of this paper, but it raises a range of questions for future research. First, our results suggest that more research on the social imaginaries (referring to e.g. national identity and the ideological perspectives on orderly families, attitude towards work, etc.) that guide far-right and right-wing populist social policies is necessary. This is the case, because social policies are crucial for the shaping of society, the structuration of inequalities, the possibilities of participation, etc. Second, the outlined focus of social policy reforms on the "fight against immigration" raises the question of whether far-right and right-wing populist parties such as the FPÖ see social policies as a tool to fight the alleged migrant "invasion" and the alleged population exchange. Thus, it is necessary to ask whether and how far welfare chauvinist social policies could change the functions of the latter by infusing it with goals

of population policy, redefining social cohesion along nationalist orientations, and so on.

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