



Opinion

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The Viennese paradox: Urban superstar and right-wing whipping boy

Outside the multicultural city, antimigrant forces see Vienna as unfamiliar, uninviting and un-Austrian.

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VIENNA — Vienna, ranked as the world's most livable city in three of the past four years, is an urban marvel — clean, safe, affordable, vibrant and thronged with visitors. So why do so many Austrians elsewhere revile it?

The short answer is immigrants, but the story is more complex. In it lies the key to how Europe's ultranationalist populists are shaking off the stigma of extremism that has locked most of them out of power since World War II.

Vienna, is Austria's only major city; its 2 million people represent nearly a quarter of the country's population. By a long list of metrics — housing, health care, culture, crime safety — it's an enviable success story.

The Viennese paradox is that the city has been seized on by antimigrant forces who paint it as a polyglot pariah: unfamiliar, uninviting, un-Austrian.

"Othering" multicultural cities is a familiar page from the populist playbook — in Europe as well as the United States. President Donald Trump disdains D.C.'s "filth and decay"; his Homeland Security secretary, Kristi L. Noem, skewers Los Angeles as a "city of criminals" and "socialists."

The difference is that those cities, like many major U.S. metropolises, struggle with real dysfunction. Vienna's problems are trivial by comparison. As many Viennese told me, the city's transformation from gray, backward and boring 40 years ago to scrubbed and effervescent today is a source of civic pride.

Immigration has been a key to that evolution, as newcomers from Turkey, the former Yugoslavia and, more recently, the Mideast and Ukraine have turbocharged the city with entrepreneurial striving. They account about a third of the city's residents but nearly 45 percent of its workforce.

"Migrants are no longer a fringe group," Judith Kohlenberger, a scholar at Vienna's University of Economics and Business, told me. "They *are* Vienna."

That's true to a point. The municipal government, run by left-leaning social democrats for more than a century (except for the Nazi era), has managed the city's boom intelligently. A huge stock of city-owned and subsidized housing, along with cheap and affordable public transit, ensure a lively blend of migrants across most of the city's 23 districts. Some are more diverse than others, but none could fairly be called a slum, and virtually all are safe for strolling at night.

Even neighborhoods with the heaviest concentrations of migrants look scrubbed and well tended. In a tour I took of Favoriten, a sprawling southern district, social workers from Volkshilfe, a nonprofit group, dared me to spot even a cigarette butt littering the streets.

But Vienna's integration project has run up against Austria's daunting obstacles to naturalization, which make citizenship unattainable even for many second- and third-generation immigrants. The result is that voting rights are denied to a third of the city's residents, excluding them from real influence.

Overburdened schools funnel children whose mothers don't work into half-day programs, and those children are disproportionately migrants. Among wealthy countries, Austria performs poorly in terms of migrant kids surpassing their parents' educational attainment.

"Kindergarten is where segregation begins in Vienna," I was told by Christine Scholten, co-founder of Nachbarinnen, a civic group that helps migrant women.

Even in a country with relatively low income inequality, those barriers have kept many migrant families from fully assimilating. They've impeded Christian migrants, including from the former Yugoslavia, nearly as much as Muslim ones from Turkey, Syria, Somalia and elsewhere.

That's made Vienna a hybrid where migrants are physically integrated but politically segregated — a convenient target for populists exploiting the discomfort Vienna inspires in rural, largely monochromatic Austria.

No politician has been more successful in harnessing that discomfort than Herbert Kickl, chief of Austria's radical-right Freedom Party. His "Fortress Austria" program vilifies migrants, embraces ethnic "homogeneity" and advocates "remigration," code for expelling asylum seekers, most of whom hope to live in Vienna.

Kickl's bigotry is overt and nods to conspiratorial "great replacement" claptrap. He aims his contempt at Muslim migrants who, by some measures, now outnumber Christians in Vienna's public schools. "Viennese blood — too many foreigners does no one any good" is among his slogans. He vows to become "Volkskanzler," the "people's chancellor," a term long associated with Hitler.

He came within a whisker of achieving that ambition earlier this year, after his party finished first in national elections. Ultimately, his hard-line stances blew up negotiations with mainstream parties, which excluded Kickl from their governing coalition.

Despite that, or because of it, Kickl's prospects look bright. Even out of power, his party's poll numbers have continued climbing as the centrist government pushes tough-on-immigration policies — watered-down versions of his own. They might make more Austrians wonder if Kickl's ethnocentric program would really be so bad — the same bind that other European mainstream politicians face.

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The far right feeds on the rejection of urbanism, Felix Datzian, a scholar at Central European University in Vienna, told me. “And rarely is that rejection as stark as it is in Austria.”

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a complex view of immigration's impact on Vienna. Some highlight the essential role immigrants play in sustaining key sectors of the Austrian economy, such as agriculture and tourism, while others express concerns about cultural integration and xenophobia.... [Show more](#)

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