

'The Elusive Triple Win'

For Rainer Bauböck, Austria is a forerunner of European populism and of the affective polarization of the migration debate. He criticizes radical positions on the right and left and calls for three main strategies: debates in which participants do not regard each other as enemies, a positive framing of immigration, and a balance of interests between destination and origin countries.



Rainer Bauböck is a professor focusing on migration, democratic citizenship, nationalism, and minority rights. He works at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Italy and has taught at Vienna, Budapest, Bristol, Malmö, Berlin, Barcelona, and Princeton. He was president of the Austrian Association of Political Science and, in November 2006, received an award from the European Science Foundation for his work on immigration and social cohesion in modern societies.

Dirk Bornschein: Mr. Bauböck, the topic of migration is viewed from many perspectives. From which one do you see it?

Rainer Bauböck: The topic of migration is mostly viewed from the perspective of the immigration countries. But I have long been trying to look at the issue from a transnational perspective. Transnational means you have to look at both the immigration countries and the countries of origin, and also include the perspectives of the migrants themselves.

From the country's perspective, people come, stay for a while, and maybe leave again. From the migrants' perspective, it is the countries that move. Migrants grow up in one country, migrate to another country, and that country enters their biography and perhaps says goodbye again when they move elsewhere. And I try to connect these two perspectives as well as possible.

The perspective of the home countries, not only of the people, is not something that interests Europe very much.

Rainer Bauböck: That's true. Here the central question is whether this immigration is beneficial to us or a burden. Depending on the answer, the gates are opened more or less, or there is even an attempt to deter. But a policy that only looks at its own interests cannot work, because it is not coordinated with the interests of the home countries. They too ask themselves the same question: does migration benefit them—through remittances sent by emigrants to their families at home, or through the reimport of skills? Does it contribute to development, or is it a hindrance?

Do some of these countries also use migration as an instrument?

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, that happens at times. Home countries recognize very well that the host countries in Europe want to control migration, and they also know that they themselves thus have influence and control. Some say to themselves, we could just send the people on their way. In this way, irregular migration becomes a political weapon to win concessions from the other states. Europeans have already had to learn how that works.

For a long time, people spoke of protecting Europe's external borders, but today that means concluding agreements with countries far beyond the borders, with the home and transit states. Because irregular migrants should ideally not reach the Mediterranean.

What major migration flows to Austria have occurred in recent decades?

Rainer Bauböck: Where to begin?

Let me go back to the 1960s and 1970s, because that is important for understanding Austrian migration policy. This was the so-called guest worker immigration, which started later in Austria than in Germany.

Unlike in Germany or Switzerland, it was organized here through the so-called social partners. This included representatives of employers and employees. Together at the round table, access quotas for workers who could temporarily come to the country were decided. The worker representatives could always participate. Accordingly, it was then difficult for them to understand and represent the interests of these people. At that time there were demands for equal pay, but the newcomers worked in very different sectors of the economy, under miserable living conditions and real exploitation, just as it was in Germany at the time.

Was the government sidelined in this process?

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, indeed, only the social partners were responsible for the pre-negotiations. And it was important that this phase of guest worker policy ran in a non-political way. Not even the relevant minister was heavily involved; the social partners negotiated, presented a consensus to the government, and the government ultimately implemented it.

The idea was not to politicize the topic in public, so negotiations were held behind closed doors. Locals were then told that the newcomers were only temporary and would work in areas where no local workers could be found. At that time many Austrians emigrated from their country, as did some of the guest workers who had just arrived. The wage level in Austria and Switzerland was simply higher.

Politically, this approach was framed by the fact that the two main centrist parties then governed for a long time, either alone or in a grand coalition. Of course, there were fears that immigration could trigger radicalizations, hence this cautious approach.

What happened to the idea of temporary migration, which was meant to reassure voters?

Rainer Bauböck: As in other countries, it became a permanent settlement. That wasn't originally intended, but employers did not want to continually train new people who would then leave again.

With this hardening of the work relationships came new forms of recruitment. Often, entrepreneurs themselves urged their new employees to also bring in relatives and friends to come, saying they would need more workers. The result was a chain migration, along with the accompanying family reunification.

Migration has thus changed from guest worker migration to immigration, even though it was not politically desired or intended.

How long did this phase last?

Rainer Bauböck: In 1975 a new Foreign Worker Employment Act was passed, intended to regulate things better. But the halt didn't work; people still came mainly through family reunification. This phase lasted until the mid-1980s. Austria and Germany tried to persuade some to return, but essentially that attempt failed.

And how did the political process unfold?

Rainer Bauböck: That's really important, because at that time the two formerly duopolistic parties, the ÖVP and SPÖ, began losing their dominance. The Greens appeared on the left, linked to Austria's strong anti-nuclear movement, and the FPÖ appeared on the right. The FPÖ, which had been under 10 percent, became much more successful. It was taken over by Jörg Haider, who is arguably the first prototype of a new European right-wing populist. Others later orientated themselves on Haider's success.

In this context of strong political change, the issue of migration suddenly became politicized from both sides. The Greens declared Austria an immigration country and wanted to grant legal equality to those who came, while on the FPÖ's side it was said no, Austria is not an immigration country; these are guest workers who should now leave. Since then, immigration has been at the top of the political agenda.

And then the so-called “Iron Curtain” fell in the 1990s eastward.

Rainer Bauböck: Exactly. Austria was directly affected, as it shares a very long land border with Eastern Europe and new waves of refugees have passed through it: from Romania, where the upheaval occurred violently, and especially triggered by the Yugoslav wars, where Austria was the first destination country, but also partly a transit country. A relatively large portion of the refugees were granted temporary protection and shortly thereafter permanent residency, because that gave people access to the labour market.

That is, they were integrated into the same system that previously existed for guest workers.

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, they were effectively treated as economic migrants, even though the people had clearly arrived as a consequence of war and flight.

At the same time, the two center parties concluded that they had to reorganize migration policy completely.

And what approaches existed for that?

Rainer Bauböck: They were not actually that different in these two camps initially. The SPÖ also saw that its voters feared open borders that threatened their jobs. They also perceived a security problem and a fear of the foreign. Therefore, policy should be re-founded, and the SPÖ proposed a fair quota system for immigration, for labor migrants, for family reunification, etc.

Additionally, they decided to define an integration policy. Immigrants should demonstrate that they speak German and qualify for the labor market. Integration before new arrivals; that was already the motto of the Social Democrats then. The idea was to integrate those who came to Austria either unintentionally or through a quota first, and make further immigration dependent on that.

And today?

Rainer Bauböck: Well, that has remained the motto to this day, even though it never worked. There have always been new waves of unplanned immigration. And each time the mantra was to reduce access now to digest the inflow.

Under the pressure of ever-new migration there was also a clear shift of the conservatives to the right on this issue. In their view, the conditions for integration should be tightened. The requirements for integration should thus become higher and higher. German language tests were introduced to be admitted for a permanent residence permit, and a whole series of measures made access to citizenship more difficult. I have been dealing with this issue for many years.

How do you see, here on the topic of citizenship, the relation to German politics?

Rainer Bauböck: Clearly, Austrian and German politics diverge in this area, because in Germany access to citizenship has been liberalized since the red-green coalition and, more recently, the traffic light government, whereas Austria tightened the rules almost simultaneously.

Back to the development of domestic politics. You had already noted for the 1980s that the party system was breaking apart and asked what role the migration issue played...

Rainer Bauböck: Around 2000 there was another real political watershed. After the 1999 elections, the conservative ÖVP decided to form a coalition with the right-wing FPÖ. This wasn't strictly necessary; the SPÖ was stronger than the FPÖ at that time. But it secured the chancellorship for the conservatives, because in a coalition with the Social Democrats they would not have been able to hold that position.

The FPÖ thus entered government for the first time, and this maneuver, as is well known, triggered the so-called diplomatic sanctions by EU member states against Austria.

With what success?

Rainer Bauböck: From Austria's point of view, it was counterproductive. The sanctions led to a national rallying cry: "Now we must stand together against Europe." At the same time, the sanctions interestingly also meant that the first government in which the FPÖ participated could not pass a radical anti-immigration program. On the contrary, in some minority-rights issues it even had to send signals to Brussels, in the sense of "look, we're not that bad, we adhere to European values." Since then, Austrian politics has had little stability. In several phases, the FPÖ has participated in government. Each time, these governments collapsed again due to scandals involving the FPÖ.

So, there is no so-called firewall in Austria, which in Germany is still used to curb the influence of the radical right-wing.

Rainer Bauböck: If you look back over the last 25 years, the radical right-wing was included on some occasions and excluded on others, so you cannot speak of an intact firewall here. Sometimes it's invoked, sometimes it's simply torn down. The conservatives are the swing voters, deciding whether to coalition with ultraright forces or with the Social Democrats.

What role does the migration issue play under these circumstances?

Rainer Bauböck: Under these circumstances, migration is omnipresent because it is the FPÖ's most important issue in elections, and because the conservatives are convinced they must challenge the FPÖ by signaling that they too will pursue a restrictive and hard migration policy.

And the Social Democrats?

Rainer Bauböck: The SPÖ is in a bind. On the one hand, it has an urban, liberal wing, and on the other hand, a worker's wing that fears that liberal migration policies will lead to dramatic losses in votes. As a result of this conflict, the far-right FPÖ has developed into Austria's strongest workers' party. The Social Democrats have lost that position.

That reminds me of Germany.

Rainer Bauböck: Yes... The Social democracy thus sees itself as a burnt child in migration issues and tries not to push its own beliefs and programs too loudly. As a rough conclusion, one could say that in the last 25 years Austria has implemented only a few liberal reforms in migration policy, and when they occurred, they were in response to European developments or judgments from the judiciary, including decisions of the European Court of Justice overturning some laws, and of the Austrian Constitutional Court. Time and again it was said that certain policies were not compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

So, the judiciary plays a somewhat liberalizing role?

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, exactly. It constrains the political parties' scope of action. But at present there is no political majority to the center or left of center that could liberalize migration policy again.

You told me about the development of the party landscape. In which direction do you think Austria's political system is moving?

Rainer Bauböck: In this respect, Germany and Austria are very comparable, with two caveats: Austria was a pioneer of right-wing populism and is ahead in this development. Current FPÖ poll results stand around 36 percent. The ÖVP and SPÖ are each around 20 percent, the Greens and the Liberals around 10 percent each. It is increasingly difficult to form coalitions against the right-wing FPÖ. Paradoxically, this has also created a deterrent effect against coalitions with the FPÖ. If the conservatives now formed a government with them, they would lose the chancellorship. They would merely be junior partners. That helps for the moment. The conservatives are not willing to be a stepping stone for an FPÖ-led government.

What role has immigration played in this process of political change?

Rainer Bauböck: On the surface, the answer is very clear: because immigration has been a dominant political issue in these years and because the right-wing parties, especially the FPÖ, have dictated the discourse, the issue has fueled the rise of right-wing populism. That is indeed one way to see it.

But ...

Rainer Bauböck: The question is what would have happened if migration had been framed differently. The American political scientist Alexander Kustov says you can win majorities with a liberal migration policy, but only if the discourse foregrounds the positive benefits for the recipient countries.

In his view, the liberal outlook on migration fails because it mainly foregrounds humanitarian aspects and human rights—just as Greens and leftists generally do. They often argue that conditions at home are unacceptable and that people's rights should be protected here. So, politicians probably need to steer the discourse toward: "Migration is good for us."

I'm reminded of the idea of the "Triple Win," that migration benefits everyone—the migrants, the home countries, and the receiving countries.

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, exactly. The problem is that the majority of migrants arrive without control, because internal EU free movement essentially prohibits mobility restrictions. Added to that, the family reunification, which is numerically crucial, is anchored as a human right and cannot be easily limited. And after all, asylum seekers were not invited either.

Can I add something else?

Yes, of course...

Rainer Bauböck: Europe has hardly participated in the UN's resettlement programs over all these years. People are selected and distributed to states in quotas. That is manageable and often leads to those people making a quicker contribution to their new homes. Of course, this looks much better in public than asylum seekers arriving irregularly, sometimes with the help of smugglers. This form is seen by many here as a negative security threat.

So, you see two narratives?

Rainer Bauböck: I see a framing of security used by the right-wing, and one that could be used by the liberal side to address the population crisis and the economic distress, while saying: “Always under the condition that migration is well and properly designed.”

That second version has unfortunately recently faded away.

You’ve mentioned several times that there are conditions for migration to be a win for all.

Rainer Bauböck: My colleague Martin Ruhs and I wrote an article titled “The Elusive Triple Win,” the hard-to-attain win for all. Of course, it’s a wish and a good goal, but to achieve it, everyone’s interests in this process must be fairly represented.

How could that look in concrete terms?

Rainer Bauböck: We thought about temporary labour migration as an example: if it's designed so that only receiving states decide how many they take in, under what conditions the work takes place, and when people must leave, there is no Triple Win—only a gain for the receiving states. That would be a new “guest worker policy” as seen in the Gulf states today.

One could consider so-called Skills Mobility Partnerships—cooperation with countries of origin. That is what the European Union is currently pursuing. People would be taken in temporarily for work or training, with the expectation that they will return to their home country. This process could be designed on the basis of an agreement in which all stakeholders are represented.

Who would be involved, both states affected?

Rainer Bauböck: No, purely bilateral won't work; it would have to be done at the European level, with a group of African states, for example. In that case, I think a Triple Win could actually be feasible. By the way, economists in the past also assumed a Triple Win for guest worker migration, but only as a side effect, not as a planned outcome. They pointed to remittances or improved earning opportunities. But I think only through a controlled program can something like this work. At the same time, it would create regular pathways for migration to Europe. That, I believe, is the most important lesson in Europe.

The more migration is perceived as irregular and uncontrollable, the more it becomes a security or sovereignty issue, and the worse for European integration and the integration of immigrants, and the better for right-wing populist parties.

We've talked for a long time about changes in the party landscape. What role do the mass media play in migration discourses, especially the big newspapers and radio/TV?

Rainer Bauböck: A very important one. Most people have little direct experience with migration and with migrants. When they do, sociologists find that they often form more positive images. Mass media convey a picture of threat, but also the opportunity that exists for the country as a whole.

Here in Austria, we have large concentrations of tabloid media with a de facto monopoly. They were among the first to focus on migration to boost circulation. They sensationalized and strongly emphasized the link between crime and migration. This kind of public sphere now seems to be unravelling into different media bubbles. The Freedom Party, for example, has its own TV channels and its own social media channels. These are media with very large reach, but they no longer reach the general population as the big tabloid papers did in the past. Yet in those outlets, opinion formation is even more radicalized. Counterarguments are hardly acknowledged.

And public-service broadcasting?

Rainer Bauböck: It still exists, but one of the main goals of the right-wing populists when they come to power is, besides reforming the judiciary, to dismantle the public broadcasters. And it's clear why: if there is no common public sphere anymore, only these separate echo chambers, then you also have a completely different control over the public discourse.

Forgive my provocation: your description of the media landscape sounds as if they are fueling the growing polarization in society and politics. How would you describe it?

Rainer Bauböck: That's not provocation. I see it as a fact. There is growing polarization on certain issues. But I don't think we're in a situation where polarization is constant across the board.

I should perhaps add cautiously that in the 1950s and 60s Austria had a different form of polarization, namely fairly separate life worlds between conservatives and Social Democrats. We did have an elite consensus and government-level cooperation, but the population was aligned with one camp or the other. Today such camps hardly exist; instead, we have polarization of opinions on specific topics. And this polarization is increasingly affective. In a democracy it's not inherently a problem for people to hold different opinions or even ideologies.

It's about a proper culture of debate. Democracy is pluralistic, and if we were all of one mind, we wouldn't need democracy.

Rainer Bauböck: We must fight our conflicts and we do so by expressing our opinions in a civilized manner and within a rule-of-law framework. It becomes problematic when opponents are seen as evil, morally repugnant, with whom one cannot engage in civil discourse. This affective polarization is, I believe, driven by both the right and the left-wing.

But let's stay with the right-wing again...

Rainer Bauböck: The right-wing in Europe has grown up with the supposed fight against morality in politics, against the do-gooders. Yet it moralizes continuously by ascribing to the other side, its political opponents, a lower moral status because they allegedly do not represent the people's interests. This is a form of polarization that is strongly linked to the issue of migration.

The right-wing they say, we represent the authentic people, we speak for the people, and the others, the elites, don't understand who the people are.

Doesn't the term "people" then need to be defined as well?

Rainer Bauböck: Yes, of course, who belongs to the people and who doesn't. In my view, right-wing populism blends the polarization of people versus elite with the polarization of locals versus immigrant outsiders, i.e., refugees and migrants.

How does Austria currently view migration, between the awareness of being a nation-state and being part of the global world?

Rainer Bauböck: Since this topic is highly polarizing, there isn't a single perspective. One side sees Austria as a European state that has dramatically changed through migration over the last 50 years, becoming multicultural and pluralistic, and economically very successful. Austria is one of the few European states still growing demographically, despite declining birth rates among locals, and we're growing exclusively through migration. That's the positive image.

And the negative?

Rainer Bauböck: ... the negative image is Austria as a state that in the glorious 1970s, during the Cold War, was important on the world stage. Austria was then neutral and could play an independent role as a small state. In the European Union, however, Austria is just an appendage that must accept dictates from Brussels and can no longer control its own migration.

Those are the two pictures. One side says Austria is an immigration country, will remain so, and should make the best of it. The other says Austria is not an immigration country, this happened against our will, and we must reverse migration.

That doesn't sound like there's a path to consensus.

Rainer Bauböck: No consensus. ... I'll have to go a bit deeper. There's a problem with Austrian national identity. Austria was for a long time not a national but a dynastic identity. It disappeared with the Habsburgs after World War I, and the new identity as a European republic only became viable after World War II. It wasn't inherently consensus-driven. It was constructed and presented from above by the center-left elites, and not everyone adopted it. But today there is broad agreement that Austria is a nation of its own. If you ask what defines that, paradoxically the German language tops the list.

In Austria, unlike Germany, there was also no possibility to construct a constitutionally patriotic national identity, because there is no republican constitution and the old constitution from the First Republic was revived. Added to this is that we constantly ask how German we are, what we are in comparison to the Germans. In this context the question of identity has been culturally overloaded: the landscape, the music, the food—all of it is packed into an Austrian national identity, thereby implying that external influences are more easily excluded. To me, this sounds as if some people feel the need to prove they have a distinct identity and therefore deny how multicultural Austria has become.

How, in your view, should Austria handle immigration in the current situation, and why in this way and not another?

Rainer Bauböck: First, Austria should constructively engage on the European stage in the Europeanization of migration policy, i.e., as part of the EU's common asylum system. The country should be less obstructionist and actively participate in shaping economic migration, for example toward Africa. I have already mentioned Skills Mobility Partnerships. I would therefore place the European dimension first. There are duties and opportunities to influence well-managed and regulated migration that national states alone can no longer control.

Second: Austria urgently needs to catch up with Germany on integration questions, especially regarding access to citizenship and voting rights. One-fifth of the Austrian population is disenfranchised because citizenship is so hard to obtain. In Vienna it's even 36%.

An enormous figure...

Rainer Bauböck: Our democracy simply isn't representative enough. There is no universal suffrage in Austria anymore, if I may say so cynically. The most important step would be to do what Germany has done since 2000. At least children with one parent who has lived in the country for several years should acquire Austrian citizenship by birth and should not have to undergo naturalization procedures whose hurdles deter most people.

What can other European countries learn from Austria's example, for better or worse?

Rainer Bauböck: It must be prevented that right-wing populists, nativists, or anti-immigration forces become so powerful that they dominate the political stage. Then it will be very difficult to push through constructive policies.

But how can this be achieved?

Rainer Bauböck: Through a positive framing of migration policy. As I mentioned earlier, one must stand up and say how much migration has benefited the country and how it can continue to benefit it. The challenges of the future, including technological revolutions and the like, require large openness to migration. It's not only about the highly skilled, but also about shifts in the labour market and demographics on a large scale, where immigration makes a positive contribution.

Precisely due to immigration, Austria has a stable, growing population, isn't doing so badly economically, and has good starting positions for investments in Central and Eastern Europe. All of this is a consequence of European integration and migration. Yet it is not presented as such. Politics has neglected this out of fear. It's like staring at a snake and pretending nothing is there and avoiding any difficult topic for fear the snake will bite. I think that was wrong.

Mr. Bauböck, thank you very much for your reflections on Austria.