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COUNTERPOINT

# Populist Rhetoric: Austrian Freedom Party

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This series of briefings examines the rhetoric of populist politicians in the European Parliament. We analyse exchanges between populists and their fellow MEPs and give recommendations for how to respond effectively to their rhetoric. The briefings are for politicians and campaigners who are looking to build a response to populist parties both inside and outside the Parliament. Building on our extensive research on populist parties, we hope that they can be a useful advocacy tool for political parties and NGOs to counter populism successfully.

In creating these briefings, our main concern is with the danger that populist parties pose to open societies in Europe. As a result, we focus on rhetoric that seeks to undermine openness and tolerance, whether it emphasises immigration, Roma inclusion or minority rights.

We argue that:

- While populist parties vary significantly according to national context, they share similar tactics and rhetoric;
- The plenary debates in the European Parliament are a valuable resource for understanding this rhetoric; and
- This rhetoric poses a threat to open societies in Europe by paralysing the European Parliament and delegitimising institutions that protect minority rights.

## **Populism: different contexts, similar rhetoric**

On May 22-25, as voters across the EU go to the polls to elect a new European Parliament, populist parties across Europe are expected to perform strongly. These parties range from the moderate, agrarian Finns Party to the anti-immigration Front National in France and the extremist, anti-Semitic Jobbik in Hungary. Their policy prescriptions, voter bases, and hot-button issues differ according to national context.

Despite their policy differences, some populist parties have promised to work together. Geert Wilders, leader of the populist PVV in the Netherlands, and Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National in France, announced in November 2013 that they intend to build a new alliance. Since then, other parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, Vlaams Belang in Belgium and Lega Nord in Italy, have also shown an interest in joining forces.<sup>1</sup> While such alliances have occurred before and have been ill-fated, it is worth wondering whether a significant increase in the number of populist MEPs could impart a new set of dynamics after these coming elections.

Aside from the collaboration between members of the new populist alliance led by Wilders and Le Pen, populist parties more broadly share a range of tactics and rhetoric. Populist politicians of whatever stripe are relentless in their defence of the “ordinary people”, positioning themselves as the representative of the common man and woman in opposition to a fickle, self-interested elite. They depict themselves as rebels and their mainstream counterparts as crooks

complicit in a rotten system. At the same time, they often try to co-opt values like democracy, tolerance, freedom and human rights and use them against mainstream politicians. In these briefings, we illustrate, with a series of examples, how populist politicians from across Europe use these tactics again and again. And how this approach is effective despite its apparent lack of sophistication.

## **The debates in the European Parliament: a valuable resource**

These briefings focus on debates in the European Parliament for two reasons. First, because a good deal more populist politicians are likely to be in the European Parliament after the 2014 elections. We therefore expect that MEPs from the mainstream political groups will spend more time engaging with populists. These briefings provide a guide for how populist rhetoric has been handled in the past and how it can be dealt with in the future.

But these briefings are also intended for those working beyond the walls of the European Parliament. So the second reason for our focus is that it provides a vital resource for understanding how populists interact with other politicians. The European Parliament is a perfect laboratory for exploring which responses to populist rhetoric work – and which do not.

# Introduction (continued)

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## **How populist rhetoric can delegitimise institutions and put minority rights at risk**

In the European Parliament, populist politicians are not just speaking to their supporters. It is therefore much harder for them to make directly discriminatory statements in this setting. Outside of Parliament, politicians from the same parties have crossed the line and made statements that are more clearly xenophobic and racist (such as Geert Wilders encouraging his supporters to chant that they want “fewer” Moroccans in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup> or Lega Nord MEP Mario Borghezio describing the Italian government as “bongo bongo” due to the inclusion of Cecile Kyenge, Italy’s first black minister).<sup>3</sup> But in the European Parliament they tend to tread a much more careful line, weary of their most immediate audience, the Parliament’s other members.

This means that monitoring the rhetoric of populists in the European Parliament becomes a far murkier affair: in true populist fashion the targets of their speeches are often not minorities but the political elite – the other MEPs who they hold responsible for “selling out” the sovereignty and rights of “ordinary” people. But even though populist MEPs generally avoid “frontal” attacks against minorities, their rhetoric towards other parliamentarians still poses a danger. Populists do not follow the standard, informal rules of debate in the European Parliament: their attacks can be aggressive, unrelenting and infuriating. This can be extremely difficult to handle. Populists break expectations and protocol in ways that are fundamentally destabilising—and difficult to counter without resorting to the same

unsavoury tactics. MEPs are damned if they do engage in similar ways—and damned if they don’t. En masse these tactics can create institutional paralysis and weaken the effectiveness of the Parliament, an institution that has done a great deal of work to defend Europe from xenophobia and intolerance.

But can rhetoric really cause that much damage? In the current Parliament, where populists make up a small minority of the total number of MEPs, their rhetoric only has limited effect. In the next Parliament things could change significantly. With more populist MEPs in the Parliament, debates on sensitive issues could be hijacked by these voices. And this really could shift the terms of the debate – a first step to deeper policy changes in the future. Outside the European Parliament, too, populist rhetoric – combined with success at the polls – has influenced mainstream party policy. So far mainstream voices have struggled to find a response that really stops the populists in their tracks.

In sum, populists from a range of different traditions often engage in rhetoric about immigration and minority rights in the European Parliament in ways that can be highly debilitating. We give examples of this rhetoric and discuss how campaigners and politicians can develop an effective response.

In this briefing we focus on the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ).

# Context

The FPÖ originated from movements that believed Austria should be part of a unified German nation.<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Jörg Haider became party chairman, transforming the FPÖ into a radical right-wing protest party that positioned itself against the mainstream.<sup>5</sup> It became known for its anti-establishment, anti-immigration and anti-Islam views. Under his leadership, the party's support rose from 5 percent in 1983 to 26.9 percent in 1999.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, as the second largest party in Austria, the FPÖ formed a coalition with the ÖVP. The FPÖ subsequently faced internal disagreements and falling popular support. In 2005, Haider left the FPÖ, taking other senior figures with him, to set up a new rival party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ).<sup>7</sup>

Under the current leadership of Heinz-Christian "HC" Strache, the FPÖ has largely regained the electoral support it lost during its period in coalition. Like Haider before him, Strache is a charismatic politician, making particular efforts to win over young people with stunts such as rap songs.<sup>8</sup> The ideology of the party under Strache is similar to that in the early years of Haider. It is "committed to protecting our homeland of Austria, our national identity and autonomy as well as our natural livelihood"<sup>9</sup> and advocates restrictive policies on immigration and Islam. In the last European elections, the FPÖ secured 12.71 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

# FPÖ rhetoric

The FPÖ's rhetoric is composed of a number of interlocking frames, each one reflecting a different aspect of their world-view. Each frame contains a number of elements: the actors – individuals, organisations, and institutions – that the frame refers to, and their relationships; the problem that the frame identifies; and the solution that the frame suggests. Drawing on FPÖ's speeches in the European Parliament as well as their language outside the Parliament, we have identified three frames that guide their discourse. For each frame, we discuss the different components and the values they activate, give particular thematic applications, and illustrate with examples of particular rhetoric. When taken together, the frames below show the narrative that the FPÖ aims to present.

## 1. System breakdown

**Actors:** the people who embrace the traditions of "the system" (whether "the system" is the family, the nation or the welfare state) and the architects who are seeking to destroy this system

**Problem:** within the system, people admire and find comfort in its hierarchies and traditions. But others want to undermine this system for their own personal ends.

**Solution:** do what it takes to maintain the system.

The frame activates the following values:  
order, tradition, solidarity

**Applications:** The FPÖ applies this frame to a series of core institutions that they take to be extremely valuable: the family, the nation (or "homeland"), and the welfare state. In each case, the institution is at risk and must be protected: for the family, people who do not follow the traditional family model pose a danger; for the nation, the EU and immigration are the culprits; and for the welfare state, immigrants jeopardise the system by draining resources. In each case, the system is valued by the Austrian people and needs to be defended and maintained.

**Examples:** "The family, as a partnership between a man and a woman with common children, is the natural nucleus that holds a functioning society together, and which, with the solidarity of the generations, underpins our sustainability ... We are committed to the primacy of marriage between a man and a woman as a distinct way of protecting child welfare. Only partnerships between men and women provide our society with a wealth of children. We reject a separate legal institution for same-sex relations." *Party Programme of the Freedom Party of Austria*<sup>11</sup>

"We no longer want our land given away to people, our culture not appreciated, our laws broken!  
For anyone who doesn't want to integrate,  
I have a destination,  
go back home, have a good flight!  
We already have enough of our own unemployed.  
Burglary, robbery and raids,  
everywhere crime is rising fast"  
*Austria First (HC Rap)*<sup>12</sup>

# FPÖ rhetoric (continued)

## 2. Respect our boundaries

**Actors:** those who live freely inside the boundaries (whether literal or metaphorical) and the interfering outsiders.

**Problem:** the interfering outsiders have compelled those living inside the boundaries to follow their rules.

**Solution:** reduce or eliminate the influence of the outsiders.

The frame activates the following values: autonomy, self-direction

**Applications:** The FPÖ applies this frame both to the physical borders of Austria – international institutions like the EU have no right to intrude excessively in Austria's affairs – and to the intangible borders of the family, national identity, the church, and the individual. Each have boundaries that the FPÖ believes cannot be crossed. They should not be controlled by outsiders. This frame upholds the FPÖ's central value of freedom.

**Examples:** “The market is stupid actually. It is the scourge of mankind, if it does not allow borders. Freedom needs borders.” *Heinz-Christian Strache*<sup>13</sup>

“Those who value their own culture and origins can sincerely respect other cultures, or fend them off if necessary, should they become aggressive and threaten to displace our own culture” *Party Programme of the Freedom Party of Austria*<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Reinstating common sense

**Actors:** the bookish, disconnected professional politicians vs the down-to-earth, practical real representatives of the people.

**Problem:** the professional politicians are in charge. Their ideas border on the absurd but are nevertheless being implemented to disastrous effect. They have subverted the natural order of things, because they have no appreciation of nature, “real life” or the heartland.

**Solution:** we need to listen to the non-professional politicians who have other forms of experience – they are in touch with reality and can find the way out of the mess the politicians have gotten us into.

The frame activates the following values: Natural Order, Competency

**Applications:** from the EU to immigration, the FPÖ uses this frame repeatedly, contrasting Austria's political elite – as well as EU politicians and officials – with the ordinary people whom they claim to represent. Particularly fertile ground here is the subject of immigration. According to the FPÖ, elite-driven policy-making on immigration is becoming more and more absurd, far removed from the immediate concerns of “ordinary people”. Only the FPÖ can restore common sense to Austria's immigration policy.

### Examples:

“We're talking about the year 2006. All politicians have resigned themselves to the dominant government

...All politicians?

No, there's one from a non-compliant party, the FPÖ, who keeps on resisting.

I'm HC, a representative of the people...”

*Austria First (HC Rap)*<sup>15</sup>

“Mr President, we all know that the majority of people throughout Europe have long regarded the EU as a kind of Brussels-based bureaucratic behemoth – a behemoth in which decisions are made over people's heads behind closed doors...

Talking of renationalisation in connection with the reform of Schengen is, however, undoubtedly an exaggeration, because ultimately, it falls within the competence of the Member States, which, in the final event, have to answer to their citizens in this regard. We are therefore not talking about an anti-European decision by the Council Presidency; instead, in this case at least, the craze for centralisation emanating from Brussels has been halted for once.”


*Andreas Mölzer, FPÖ MEP*<sup>16</sup>



# Case studies from the European Parliament

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In this section we look at three case studies that illustrate how the above frames work in practice. These case studies are exchanges between FPÖ politicians and other MEPs in the European Parliament. We offer suggestions on how MEPs can respond effectively to this rhetoric.



**...System breakdown -**  
in order to protect the system  
we need outsiders to...

**...Respect our boundaries,** yet  
the professional politicians cannot  
help but interfere in our affairs –  
if only we could...

**...Reinstate common sense -**  
and maintain the natural order of  
things – instead we face complete...

**Figure 1:**  
The relationship  
between the three  
FPÖ frames

## Case study 1: EU citizenship for sale<sup>17</sup>

In January 2014, the European Parliament held a debate about EU citizenship, in light of the Maltese government's recent initiative to sell citizenship of Malta – and therefore of the EU, given free movement laws – to high net-worth foreigners.<sup>18</sup> European Commissioner Viviane Reding condemned the scheme as putting a price on EU citizenship. Andreas Mölzer, an MEP from the FPÖ, had the opportunity to speak.

Andreas Mölzer (non-attached):

Mr. President! The laissez faire way in which naturalisation is being treated has probably been a problem for quite some time. Several EU members are becoming the gateway into the European Union, whether with Spanish mass amnesties for millions of illegal immigrants or to win votes and thereby improve Romania's state finances – one sole novelty is that in Malta there is now a fixed price for the passport.

EU freedom of movement continues to degenerate into a more and more questionable business model, and as long as immigration into our welfare systems is possible and criminals with assets of unknown origin can easily buy the EU passport, nothing is likely to change.

It is in fact interesting that Commissioner Reding, ahead of the plenary discussion, said that only people with a real connection to a country should receive a passport. Such a principle should also apply to asylum seekers, that way we surely wouldn't have parallel societies in which new citizens perceive learning a new language as an imposition. So it is high time to close the doors and end the selling off of citizenship to the rich as well as "poverty- migration".

*From the outset, Mölzer's strategy is clear: draw a line between the Maltese government's plans to sell citizenship and the FPÖ's wider critique of immigration and the principle of*

*freedom of movement. This rhetorical trick aims to associate terms such as "poverty- migration" with the Maltese "citizenship for sale" debacle. The Maltese scheme is, for many MEPs, a striking example of free-market economics impinging on cherished values – during the debate Viviane Reding herself says that "one cannot put a price tag" on citizenship. Mölzer takes this logic and extends it further – just as the Maltese scheme is an example of out-of-control "laissez faire" economics, so is the whole system of EU freedom of movement.*

*In comparing the Maltese "citizenship for sale" scheme with immigration policy in general, Mölzer incorporates this issue into the FPÖ's "**System breakdown**" frame. According to Mölzer, liberal, light-touch policy-making threatens to undermine the system of naturalisation (and the welfare system) and cause chaos. With this latest development in Malta, the system of free movement continues to "degenerate". Mölzer paints a picture of slow collapse, due to selfish, greedy and irresponsible politicians.*

*With his use of the phrases "gateway" and "close the doors", Mölzer also draws on a commonly used metaphor in his discussion of immigration: the metaphor of a country's immigration policy as a set of doors that can be opened and closed. According to this metaphor, people entering from the outside (i.e. migrants) currently have free reign to enter the*

*owners' building (i.e. Austria). An "open-door" policy implies that the owners of the building have no control over who enters – people can come and go as they please. The alternatives to an "open-door" policy are to either leave the door ajar, thereby slowing but not halting the flow of immigration, or to shut it completely. Applying this metaphor therefore removes all subtlety out of the immigration debate – it leaves no room for an immigration policy that prioritises certain types of immigrants (e.g. asylum seekers, students, family members of citizens) or that handles problems with integration at the same time as addressing border controls. Because this metaphor reduces and simplifies crucial questions of immigration policy, we recommend avoiding it.*

### **Suggested Response:**

*Mölzer frames the debate his way – he ties together his views on immigration with the prevailing opinion in the Parliament against the Maltese government's scheme. Any response, we recommend, should do the same – it should tie one's own views on immigration to the Maltese citizenship debate. We suggest something like the following:*

*"Mr President, I along with Mr Mölzer think that no country in the EU should sell its own membership just to make a quick buck in the short-term. That's clearly out of order. But Mr Mölzer, isn't it just as shallow, just as anathema to our values,*

# Case study 1:

## EU citizenship for sale

(continued)

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*to turf out asylum seekers – particularly those people who need our help and are willing to integrate and learn our language – just to save some cash from our welfare bill? Is that what you are suggesting, Mr Mölzer – to turf out any asylum seeker who wants to contribute, wants to fit in, just to make some money in the short-term? Or, if it is feasible, shouldn't we support these asylum seekers and reap the long-term economic and social rewards?"*



## Case study 2: Third-country nationals<sup>19</sup>

In 2011, the European Commission proposed an amendment to the regulation listing the third country nationals that could travel to the Schengen zone without needing a visa. Among other things, this amendment included the introduction of a suspension mechanism to avoid abuses of visa-free travel. The rapporteur assigned to the proposal then made a number of amendments. In September 2013, MEPs discussed the proposal at a plenary session.

Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Madam President! Even if the valued colleague Weidenholzer and Ms Lunacek don't want to admit it, thousands of third-country nationals have abused both the EU asylum system as well as the EU visa system in recent years. Now a safety clause shall permit the suspension of visa waivers when illegal immigration becomes increasingly severe. And this clause is necessary! But it's applicability lies at the discretion of the Member States. When there is an acute and problematic situation, one cannot wait until the Commission completes its lengthy decision-making process. Rather the visa restrictions need to be quickly and flexibly based on the changed immigration conditions and must be tailored accordingly. Once illegal immigrants are in the country – we know this from the past, from good examples and bad examples – a subsequent expulsion is difficult if not impossible.

*In this speech, Obermayr paints a dramatic picture of the threat of illegal immigration – the issue, he suggests, will become “increasingly severe” and “acute and problematic”, involves “thousands”, and will be “difficult if not impossible” to deal with unless the FPÖ’s recommendations are taken. Obermayr effectively gives his audience an ultimatum: listen to me or our immigration systems face collapse. This is a use of the “System breakdown” frame: member states’ systems of immigration are at risk of falling apart as countries become overrun with illegal immigrants.*

*But Obermayr also links this frame to a concern over sovereignty. He contrasts the urgency of the situation with the European Commission’s plodding bureaucracy. The underlying frame here is “Respect our boundaries”: the European Commission (the interfering outsiders) has compelled member states (those living within the boundaries, in this case physical borders) to follow these visa rules to their own detriment. The solution, according to this frame, is to reduce or eliminate the influence of the Commission.*

*The tone of Obermayr’s speech is also worth considering. He creates an impression of being a model of sensible, responsible policy-making, courageous and conscientious enough to tell the truth about illegal immigration when other MEPs have been too cowardly to do so. (This has parallels with the “bearers of truth” frame we discuss in our briefing on UKIP’s rhetoric.) His language is relatively dry compared to other populists we have studied. But that doesn’t mean it is easy to respond to. If anything, this poses a different but equally great challenge for mainstream politicians: how to respond to a figure from a radical right party who sounds like a reasonable and middle-of-the-road political actor?*

Ulrike Lunacek (Greens / European Free Alliance):  
Mr Obermayr! You have just claimed that thousands in Austria have abused their right of asylum. That is incorrect! You know very well that the number of asylum seekers in

Austria has decreased significantly. And when you speak of a European asylum system and a European migration system – I don’t know what you are referring to: unfortunately we don’t have a common asylum system in Europe. Each country creates their own. Unfortunately we do not have a common migration policy. And we need this policy, rather than individuals that argue that a lot of asylum abuse is going on. It is about people having the freedom to travel and not about listening to you argue about those going in the wrong direction!

Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Madam President! It was not actually a question, but an observation: that Ms Lunacek does not want to see the abuse of the asylum system in Europe, which also concerns Austria, is her problem. The fact is that due to the report at hand, it is clear that responsible politics is concerned with citizens, it is concerned with abuse, and that we need to find a solution. That the solution doesn’t suit everyone is understandable from the point of view of Ms Lunacek, who represents a very well-known position. That is her point of view, I have a different point of view. That’s just how democracy is!

*Out of all the exchanges we have analysed in our series of briefings, Ulrike Lunacek’s response is the strongest. She makes a clear effort to reframe the debate, challenging Obermayr’s use of the term “EU asylum system” and shaping*

## Case study 2: Third-country nationals<sup>19</sup>

(continued)

the discussion so that it is on her terms. Obermayr struggles to respond, instead gesturing to differences of opinion – in effect saying that he agrees to disagree. He does, though, make use of the “**Reinstating common sense**” frame, opposing “responsible politics” with the “well-known position” that Lunacek represents. The responsible politicians – the FPÖ, of course – are the representatives of the people in the “**Reinstating commons sense**” frame, who are, according to Obermayr, “concerned with citizens”. The “well-known position”, on the other hand, is code for the absurd, naïve worldview of the professional politicians. According to Obermayr, professional politicians have shielded themselves from the reality of the abuse of the asylum system; it is up to politicians like him to stand up for ordinary people.

### **Suggested Response:**

There is, though, one important weakness in Lunacek’s response – it does not address the concerns that Obermayr raises head-on. Instead, Lunacek rebuts Obermayr’s empirical claim about asylum seekers and focuses on the question of a common asylum system. But pointing out factual errors is not enough here. Lunacek needs to address the concerns that people have about fraudulent asylum seekers. Otherwise she risks being depicted as one of the professional politicians in the FPÖ’s “**Reinstating common sense**” frame, unwilling to address people’s concerns out of ideological rigidity and distance from reality. We would suggest this modified version of her response:

“Mr Obermayr! You have just claimed that thousands in Austria have abused their right of asylum. That is incorrect! You know very well that the number of asylum seekers in Austria has decreased significantly. Of course, it is crucial that we address instances of exploitation when we see them. But there are many asylum seekers who have genuinely fled from terror, want to work hard and contribute to European societies, and desire fitting in rather than leading segregated lives. These people we should welcome.

And when you speak of a European asylum system and a European migration system – I don’t know what you are referring to: unfortunately we don’t have a common asylum system in Europe. Each country creates their own. Unfortunately we do not have a common migration policy. And we need this policy, rather than individuals that argue that a lot of asylum abuse is going on. This is about people having the freedom to travel and making sure that people can’t exploit the system - don’t we have a better chance of achieving this if we work together?”

## Case study 3: Gender equality<sup>20</sup>

To observe International Women's Day on March 8, 2013, the EU held a debate on the impact of the economic crisis on gender equality and women's rights, with a focus on the situation of women in North Africa.

Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Mr President! The topic of equality will soon also concern us in the drafting of the law on boardroom quotas. But how do equality and boardroom quotas fit together from the perspective of an employer? Madam Commissioner, imagine you as the best qualified of a group of applicants don't get the job, because you are a man. This is communicated to you in this way. The reason for your job rejection in this case would be your sex. Such an absurdity would be a possible everyday consequence of introducing boardroom quotas. Equality is not only about increasing numbers and statistics, but about the subjective perception of individuals in everyday life. Therefore, the described job rejection would be the opposite of equality. Men and women would not be equal. From my point of view, it would be more important to fight the very real injustice of unequal pay of women in professional life. That is where politicians would have a lot to do, unfortunately also in my native Austria.

*Obermayr's speech is an example of the “Reinstating common sense” frame in action. In this instance of the frame, professional politicians have devised a plan to introduce boardroom quotas – “an absurdity” – and the disastrous effects of the frame lead to “the opposite of equality”. Boardroom quotas subvert the natural order of the job market, where employers can freely choose who they want to employ. As a result, employers are forced to forgo choosing some of the best-qualified applicants and thereby discriminate against men on the basis of their sex.*

*As we explain in our description of “Reinstating common sense”, this frame draws an opposition between the “natural order of things” and the absurd, artificial solutions imposed by professional politicians. In Obermayr's speech, this is exemplified by his contrasting of the “perception of individuals in everyday life” (signifying the FPÖ's support of ordinary people and the natural order) and the “increasing number and statistics” (signifying the narrow-minded bureaucracy of the political class). Moreover, Obermayr seeks to reclaim the value of “equality” for the FPÖ. The underlying message of the speech is that if only we listened to politicians like Obermayr, who are grounded in the experience of everyday life, we would really be fighting “the very real injustice of unequal pay of women”. So rather than wasting our time with boardroom quotas that create more inequality, the FPÖ and Obermayr truly stand on the side of women.*

*In highlighting what he believes are the disastrous and unequal effects of boardroom quotas from outsiders, Obermayr also makes use of the “Respect our boundaries” frame. The implication of this use of the frame is that interfering outsiders – the drafters of this law – are compelling Austrians to follow their rules. In doing so, they threaten Austria's capacity to decide its own labour policy, as well as the autonomy of Austrian businesses.*

Lena Kolarska-Bobińska (European People's Party):

Where do you see these quotas for management positions in companies? They do not exist; we are fighting for them. We are trying to implement this, but I do not think that there are many quotas in place. Perhaps there are isolated cases, but it is not systematic. I do not think that men are being persecuted in that sense.

Franz Obermayr (non-attached):

Mr President! First I would like to thank you for the question, and perhaps also for the opportunity for a clarification. I clearly said that this is problematic. I cannot imagine that the criteria is solely statistics and numbers, but that qualifications must also be considered. And to notice someone only because he is a man or she is a woman, I find unfair. Besides, in some countries there are, of course, other ways to get into the boardroom, either by appointment or by election. This too would create problems in some countries due to their legal structures.

*Kolarska-Bobińska first responds by correcting Obermayr. She claims that he cannot show that quotas create inequality because these quotas have not yet been implemented. Soon after, however, she contradicts herself by saying that there may be isolated cases where quotas are in place. She then negates one of the frames that he introduces, “Respect our boundaries”, by straightforwardly denying that “men are being*

## Case study 3: Gender equality

(continued)

*persecuted” by interfering politicians. Kolarska-Bobińska does not spend time developing an alternative frame. She simply states her opinion – saying that she does “not think” that men are persecuted.*

*In his response Obermayer ignores Kolarska-Bobinska’s straightforward denial. He uses Kolarska-Bobinska’s concession that quotas may exist at least in isolated cases to clarify that the quotas she refers to are indeed “problematic” and to reinforce the point he made in his earlier speech: quotas are “unfair” and the current system of appointments or elections in boardroom provides enough opportunities for both men and women.*

### **Suggested Response:**

*This exchange shows that it is not enough to simply deny Obermayer’s frames. The danger with straightforward denial is that by negating Obermayer’s language – by saying that men are not being “persecuted” – Kolarska-Bobinska ends up reinforcing it. The frames need to be tackled with new ones – particularly the “**Reinstating common sense**” frame, which Obermayer uses most often in this case study.*

*This is our suggested response:*

*“Mr Obermayer, many of the best and most qualified candidates for boardroom seats are women. The reason they are rejected is indeed their sex. The system in place overwhelm-*

*ingly discriminates against them. All you have to do is look at the composition of the boardrooms of the biggest publicly listed companies in the EU. More than 80 per cent of members are men. This is not acceptable.*

*Is this fair to you, Mr. Obermayer? What are the everyday consequences of this? It’s that the best candidates who happen to be women are not being appointed or elected just because of their sex. Not the other way around.*

*We can’t let the way in which things were done in the past dictate our present-day policy for equality for men and women. We need to take action to increase the participation of woman in boardrooms and combat gender stereotypes. We will all benefit. Qualified women on boards will benefit. Companies will benefit. And our whole economy will benefit. If we take gender equality seriously we need to reduce the negative impact of the economic crisis on women and give Europe as a whole a better chance of recovery.”*

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