

Appeals to “Normality” and “Common Sense” in the Face of Global Uncertainty

An Interdisciplinary Discourse-Historical Approach

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Article abstract

Crises cause fear, panic, uncertainty, and helplessness. Uncertainty and insecurity challenge everyone involved; everyone expects instructions, planning, explanations and security. However, we confront scaremongering, simplifications, a range of legitimization strategies and fallacies. Specifically, the fallacies are often placed before community, national or even local interests. These developments are illustrated with a detailed qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of debates in Austria, in the summer of 2023. I argue that the fallacious appeals to common sense and normality depend on their context, with different content, functions, and effects being observable. Such appeals instrumentalize a ‘politics of emotions’ in different ways. Thus, a novel political logic is normalized, superseding rational discourse, deliberation, and expert-led policy formulation.

Appeals to “Normality” and “Common Sense” in the Face of Global Uncertainty: An Interdisciplinary Discourse-Historical Approach

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Abstract: Crises cause fear, panic, uncertainty, and helplessness. Uncertainty and insecurity challenge everyone involved; everyone expects instructions, planning, explanations and security. However, we confront scaremongering, simplifications, a range of legitimization strategies and fallacies. Specifically, the fallacies are often placed before community, national or even local interests. These developments are illustrated with a detailed qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of debates in Austria, in the summer of 2023. I argue that the fallacious appeals to common sense and normality depend on their context, with different content, functions, and effects being observable. Such appeals instrumentalize a ‘politics of emotions’ in different ways. Thus, a novel political logic is normalized, superseding rational discourse, deliberation, and expert-led policy formulation.

Résumé: Les crises provoquent la peur, la panique, l’incertitude et l’impuissance. L’incertitude et l’insécurité mettent à l’épreuve tous les acteurs concernés ; chacun attend des instructions, une planification, des explications et la sécurité. Cependant, nous affrontons des alarmismes, des simplifications, une série de stratégies de légitimation et d’erreurs. Plus précisément, les erreurs sont souvent placées avant les intérêts communautaires, nationaux ou même locaux. Ces évolutions sont illustrées par une analyse qualitative et quantitative détaillée du discours des débats en Autriche, à l’été 2023. Je soutiens que les appels fallacieux au bon sens et à la normalité dépendent de leur contexte, avec des contenus, des fonctions et des effets différents observables. De tels appels instrumentalisent une « politique des émotions » de différentes manières. Ainsi, une nouvelle logique politique est normalisée, remplaçant le discours rationnel, la délibération et la formulation de politiques dirigées par des experts.

Keywords: common sense, discourse-historical approach, discourse-strand, fallacy, mainstreaming, normalization, normality, populism, topos.

*The revenge is going to be success... We're going to turn our country around. **We're going to bring sense and – common sense.** You know, people say, 'You're conservative.' I'm not conservative. You know what I am? **I'm a man of common sense. And a lot of conservative policies are common sense. We're not going to have open borders. You're going to have to come in legally.** (Donald Trump, *Fox News*, 11/3/2024; <https://www.foxnews.com/media/trump-says-hes-not-conservative-im-man-common-sense>) (emphasis added)*

*[...] Now the bad news is that this nation is divided over gun legislation. That's a simple fact. That's a political reality. But the good news is there is a broad consensus, **perhaps 60, 70 percent of the American people who agree on common sense gun safety legislation.** And here is what that consensus is about, supported by a strong majority of the American people. (Bernie Sanders, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/sanders-calls-for-common-sense-gun-safety-legislation/>) (12/3/2015) (emphasis added)*

1. Introduction

At the time of writing, in the summer of 2024, we are confronted with a 'polycrisis' (e.g., Tooze 2022). This term is used to describe a situation in which multiple crises do not simply add up to a somewhat bigger crisis, but rather create a significantly different, amplified crisis in which the sub-crises influence each other in interdependent ways. As numerous studies have demonstrated (e.g., Heitmeyer 2024; Roberts 2022; Nowotny 2016), crises engender feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and subsequently fear (Bauman 2006).

The aim of this paper is to pose the overarching question: How do governments and citizens cope with such uncertainties? In addition to institutional measures, various other options exist. These include, as Bauman (ibid.) has persuasively argued, seeking solace in religious beliefs, searching for a leader who promises simple solutions, blaming scapegoats for the crisis and related problems, trusting experts, their predictions, and proposals, or believing in one's own abilities. These strategies include trying to return to a previous state of normalcy (a *retrotopia*, as described by Bauman 2017), searching for a new state of normalcy, or a combination of these possibilities (Krzyżanowski et al. 2023; Vieten 2020).

Numerous instances of fallacious *appeals to common sense and normality* can be observed especially among far-right and nationalist-conservative politicians in Europe and beyond. In Austria, Germany (Gruber 2024), France (Chrisafis 2023), Italy, the United Kingdom (Clifton 2023), Canada (Conservative Party of Canada 2024) and the United States, among other places, far-right politicians are emphasising common-sense policies and solutions that entail new “normal” imaginaries of a post-crisis society (Newth 2024; Newth & Scopelliti 2023; Brown 2023; Patten 1996). This is a society that is supposedly better equipped to protect its citizens than is currently the case, frequently by returning to an imagined past (as evinced in the slogan “Make America great again”). There is moreover evidence that some NGOs and left-wing politicians and parties also fallaciously appeal to common sense and provide their imaginaries of a better future (Woodley 2015).

The *ad populum* argument is a fundamental tenet of populist rhetoric, as evidenced by the rhetoric of far-right populists (Wodak 2021, pp. 74-76) and that of left-wing populists and grassroots movements (Katsembekis & Kioupkiolis 2019; Woodley 2015). Scott (2021, p. 328) asserts that the phrase “the people” must be clearly defined. This can be done in two ways: by including all those living in a particular country (i.e., inclusive), or by applying a nativist approach and limiting the term, for example, to “true Austrians, British or Swedes” (i.e., exclusive). Furthermore, appealing to common sense suggests a definition of democracy that is exploited by populism, “by identifying the gap between the promise and the performance of democratic politics, to argue that the promised project of politics has been corrupted by a force external to ‘the people,’ and only this contingent community can act to restore that promise.”¹

Thus, it can be argued that appeals to common sense and normality are dependent on the *context* in which they are employed, with different content, functions, and effects being observable. All

¹ Additionally, Mondon (2015, p. 39) claims that “far-right ideas are seen in the media and within the ranks of mainstream parties as ‘common sense’, or at least acceptable. The growing acceptance of this ‘common sense’ is the result of very carefully crafted strategies put in place by extreme right thinkers since the 1980s”.

such - necessarily fallacious - appeals serve to instrumentalise a “politics of emotions” in different ways. In this manner, a novel political logic is being normalised, superseding rational discourse, deliberation, and expert-led policy formulation (Staerkle et al. 2022).

In view of the above, I pose the following questions:

What are the meanings of the common sense fallacy and in which contexts might it resonate, become accepted /normalised, and by whom?

What function do such fallacies perform in times of uncertainty and insecurity?

What imaginaries of a “(new) normal” might be presupposed and indicated by appealing to the common sense of a people?

The following section will elaborate on the characteristics and consequences of the aforementioned polycrisis, thereby providing the larger socio-political context for the empirical case study that follows. Second, the negative and positive meanings of the terms “common sense” and “normality” will be discussed in their specific historical and contemporary contexts. Prior to illustrating my assumptions with a case study drawing on Austrian political debates from 2023, I will provide a brief summary of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak 2016; Wodak & Rheindorf 2022), which has been applied in this research. During the debate in question, different political parties (left, conservative, and far-right) competed for the hegemony of their imaginaries of “the new normal”, employing appeals to common sense (*Hausverstand*) and normality (*normal*) to provide adequate solutions to the ongoing significant cost-of-living and other existential crises. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of a politics of emotions.

2. The Broader Socio-Political Context: Crises, Uncertainties, and Fear

2.1 Crises and Discursive Shifts

The term “crisis” is consistently associated with negative connotations in everyday life. Crises are often perceived as causing fear, panic, and a sense of powerlessness, which can be exacerbated by media and politics. Consequently, navigating heightened uncertainty and insecurity represents a significant challenge for all stakeholders during a crisis. There is a pervasive expectation of clear directives, predictability, explanations, and ultimately of certainty and security. Bauman places particular emphasis on the role of uncertainty in the context of crises. The presence of uncertainty is conducive to the emergence of fear:

‘Fear’ is the name that we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and what is to be *done* – what can and what can’t be – to stop it in its tracks – or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power.” (Bauman 2006, p. 2 [emphasis in the original])

A “politics of fear” coupled with a rhetoric of exclusion have become the defining components of a discourse about strangers both within and outside of the nativist “body politic” (*Volkskörper*) and/or the nation state (Wodak 2021a, pp. 67–68). Far-right parties present themselves as the defenders of Western civilisation, protecting the *common man* and *woman* from the perceived threats posed by the elites and by those whom they designate as “the others.” Such parties appear to offer straightforward solutions to the fears and problems they address, particularly through the construction of scapegoats, or “the others”, who are ostensibly responsible for ‘our’ current suffering. The construction of scapegoats frequently draws upon, refers to, and instrumentalises traditional anti-semitic, anti-Muslim, racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, and homophobic stereotypes (ibid., p. 13, p. 26).

Accordingly, Heitmeyer (2024, p. 200) maintains that in crises, it is the perception of losing control that plays a salient role:

In crises, loss of control is expressed in different ways. One of these is that the behavioural options for controlling reality, i.e. for solving problems, are massively narrowed. This is especially true

in systemic crises. These crises generate fears through impairments or the loss of security-guaranteeing everyday structures, low possibilities of influencing external circumstances, feelings of being at the mercy of others, feelings of powerlessness, and loneliness.

Heitmeyer further posits that such a loss of control may precipitate a political “tunnel vision”. This is defined as a narrowing of perspective and a lack of consideration of alternative courses of action, which may in turn give rise to extreme behaviours, massive aggression, and radicalisation. This, in turn, may result in a further closure of other perspectives. Subsequently, such emotional states frequently include the search for authoritarian actors who promise to restore control by reducing the complexity of the crisis (*ibid.*)

In addition to the fear of loss of control, Heitmeyer (2024, p. 202) asserts that the capacity to navigate ambivalences and ambiguities – both of which are hallmarks of modernity (e.g., Bauman 2003) – has been eroded. Therefore, in lieu of rational and nuanced governance, a proclivity for decision-making in “either/or” conflicts is devised to circumvent ambivalences and ambiguities, thereby paving the way for authoritarian tendencies. This Manichean worldview may also contribute to the proliferation of conspiracy narratives, which serve as common-sense explanations for many individuals (Richardson & Wodak 2023; Amlinger & Nachtwey 2021, p. 18). These developments became particularly evident during the “refugee crisis” and the COVID-19 pandemic (Wodak 2021b; Wondreys & Mudde 2020; Triandafyllidou et al. 2018).

For example, during the “refugee crisis” in Europe in 2015/16, xenophobia and an associated moral panic were stoked to a massive degree in many countries. This often led to specific practices of exclusion, for example in discussions about social contributions for “new arrivals”, who were constantly described as “illegal (illegitimate) migrants (profiteers)” in the media, a discourse that – from the outset – served and continues to serve to criminalise all migrants and refugees. Aside from the normalisation of the far-right agenda, this also resulted in a political and institutional mainstreaming of the far right. These processes led not only to a change in norms and values, but also to far-right populist actors collaborating with actors from the political centre, as the latter now propagate comparable agendas. This sort of amalgamation has been well demonstrated empirically

through a detailed, in-depth qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis of the Brexit campaign of 2016 (Brown 2023).

Other in-depth quantitative and qualitative studies have succeeded in tracing such normalising and recontextualising, multi-level processes of discursive and political change in even more systematic detail, by examining day-to-day media reporting and manifold other genres (such as speeches, parliamentary debates, posters, and laws) in a specific period that was externally defined by politically salient events. For example, Markus Rheindorf and Ruth Wodak (2018) analysed debates about salient concepts that metonymically condensed significantly different ideological positions towards integration, migration, asylum, and so forth, in vehement and antagonistic political struggles in the Austrian context of 2015/16. In this way, we were able to illustrate, for example, how the term *Integrationsunwilligkeit* (unwillingness to integrate) came to dominate Austrian political and media discourse in 2015 and how the so-called refugee crisis was subject to increasing securitisation and economisation (Rheindorf 2019). The result of this normalisation was that this discursive shift finally became essentialised, and hence hegemonic, normal, common-sense politics.

In order to trace the trajectory of the term *Integrationsunwilligkeit*, a combination of qualitative and quantitative linguistic methods was employed to demonstrate its frequency, collocations, contextualisation, and recontextualisation in the pursuit of legitimising increasingly strict policies. It is evident that this term, which was previously employed solely by the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), has now become a prominent feature in Austrian media generally and, by extension, in public discourse. This represents a significant shift in the political discourse on integration, whereby the concept of integration is now being recontextualised within the discourse on assimilation. Figure 1 illustrates a cross-sectional approach that has the advantage of revealing the intertextual links between party politics and other discursive fields, which may be explicit or coded. The process of normalisation encompasses the incorporation of fringe ideologies into the mainstream, including not only politics but also popular culture and other fields. This occurs through processes of recontextualisation and resemiotisation, which typically move from the backstage to the frontstage, and across

fields and genres (Rheindorf & Wodak 2019, p. 307).

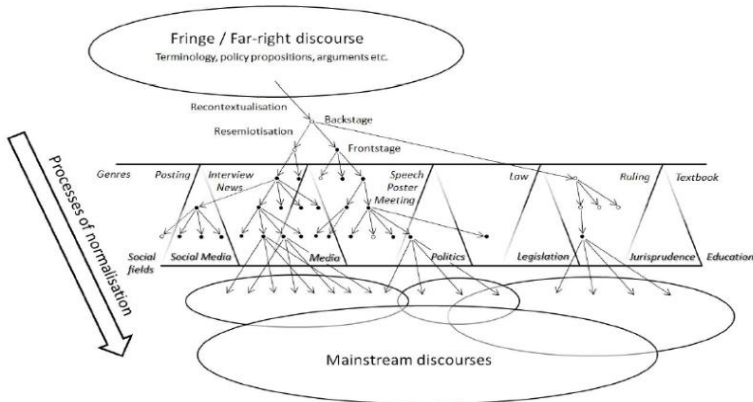


Figure 1. The normalisation of far-right/extreme-right ideologemes (adapted from Rheindorf & Wodak 2019, p. 307)

Other theorists, such as the ethnologist Viktor Turner (2008), posit that positive moments can be observed within crisis situations. Turner describes these moments as occurring in a state of liminality, which he defines as a state of being ‘betwixt and between’. In crises, individuals are compelled to question the status quo and the processes that have become automated. Consequently, potential avenues for transformation emerge, frontiers are crossed, and a transition occurs between existing, already fractured structures and nascent, as yet unformed structures. It is important to note in this context that each crisis is unique, affecting different areas and fuelling different fears and uncertainties.

2.2 Insecurity and Uncertainty

In an essay in *The New York Times*, film director and author Astra Taylor (2024) asked somewhat polemically: “Why does everybody feel so insecure all the time?” Apart from “*existential insecurity*” in the face of natural disasters, war, and climate change, there exists, according to Taylor, “*manufactured insecurity*”, i.e. implying that

in our neoliberal, capitalist societies, insecurity is intentionally created by neoliberal elites for economic and socio-political reasons (e.g., Béland 2007, p. 320).

Taylor argues that insecurity and uncertainty, which are easily transformed into fear, permeate many areas of life. Social structures promote insecurity instead of providing security. Moreover, as numerous studies have shown, insecurity is a subjective feeling that affects people of all ages, social classes, and professions. Unlike inequality, which creates measurable (economic) differences between groups, insecurity, for example the fear of losing status, jobs, and values, is often not verifiable with facts or figures. Taylor also quotes philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s famous book *Theory of Legislation* (1802), which argued that the fear of loss can destroy the joy of achievement (ibid.).

Additionally, Agius, Bergman, and Kinvall (2020) speak of “*ontological insecurities*”:

Ontological security refers to a ‘security of being’ and has to do with a person’s elemental sense of safety in the world, where trust of others is like an emotional inoculation against existential anxieties; whereas ontological insecurity refers to ‘the consequent attempts to deal with anxieties and dangers’, where ‘identity and autonomy are always in question’ (ibid., p. 435).

This concept is based on socio-psychological theories of the search for identity, which is also the search for stability and control. Far-right politicians instrumentalise such individual and subjective fears and insecurities by painting a potential loss of control on the wall, such as a loss of the familiar, traditional space, a ‘home’ that is being completely changed by so-called foreign infiltration (see above, section 2.1.). For example, Agius et al. refer primarily to progressive gender politics, which is used by many far-right parties as an opportunity to demonise non-heterosexual identities. New forms of cohabitation, LGBTQ+ persons, gender research, and laws on permitted abortion therefore threaten toxic masculinity and traditional norms and conventions in many societies.

Overall, we can conclude that the combination of crises, a loss of control, ever more uncertainties and anxieties, and the polarisation of discourse and debates provide the context for the emergence of authoritarian tendencies and developments. As Heitmeyer (2024,

p. 217) emphasises, “the themes of the crisis will change, but the socially and democratically destructive mechanisms will remain.”

3. “Normal Common Sense”

“Common sense” can be defined as “those plain, self-evident truths [...] accorded so well with the basic (commonsense) intellectual capacities and experiences of the whole social body” (Rosenfeld 2011, p. 23.)² As such, it is often considered to represent the basic level of sound practical judgement or the knowledge of basic facts that any adult human being ought to possess in an epistemic community, the *endoxon/endoxa*.³ Thus, referring to common sense implies that a specific community is being addressed that allegedly shares the same norms, values, and judgement. These norms do not have to be explained or spelled out, they are “common”, an integral part of socialisation and cultural practices.

There exists a long philosophical history of the concept: The roots reach back to ancient Greece (Aristotle – “*koinē aísthēsis*”) and ancient Rome (Cicero – “*sensus communis*”) and through to Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, who used the term “*bon sens*”, and Kant, who employed two terms in German (*gemeiner Menschenverstand* and *Gemeinsinn*) and emphasised the subjectivity of individual experience as opposed to scientific knowledge.⁴ Overall, since the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of common sense has been commonly used in rhetoric, with both negative and positive connotations: “It [common sense] has been a standard for good taste, and a source of scientific and logical axioms. [...] It has been

² For a short overview, see Edwards (2024) (<https://easysociology.com/general-sociology/understanding-commonsense-knowledge-in-sociology/>.)

³ Aristotle used the concept of *endoxon* to describe an opinion that can be accepted by most people, because it represents traditional but not necessarily true knowledge (Boukala 2016). Accordingly, van Eemeren (2010, p. 111) also defined *endoxa* as commonly held beliefs (common sense) or generally accepted commitments that are acceptable for the audience and that *topoi* (see below, section 5) refer to.

⁴ “Der gemeine Menschenverstand zeige sich vor allem in der unmittelbaren Anwendung von Urteilen in der Erfahrung, er könne aber nicht als Rechtfertigungsgrund für Begriffe und Dogmen als Sätze a priori gelten” (See Kant, Immanuel ed. 1900ff. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 4, pp. 259-260.)

equated to conventional wisdom, vulgar prejudice, and superstition.” (Hundert 1987).

As Rosenfeld (2011) elaborates throughout her detailed conceptual history, the term ‘common sense’ has become tied to ideas about “democracy”, from Thomas Paine’s manifesto (1776) to Hannah Arendt (1954, 1972) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), thereby “legitimizing the airing of nonexpert opinion in the public sphere” (Rosenfeld 2011, Chapter 6). However, Rosenfeld concludes that in the late twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, the appeal to common sense has been colonised by the populist far right, from Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo Salvini in Italy to Ontario’s Premier Mike Harris’s ‘common sense revolution’ against taxes and big government and the ‘common-sense conservatism’ of the American Tea Party (with protagonists such as Sarah Palin).

The Tea Party and Palin coined the term “kitchen economics”, implying that any housewife who dealt with the household budget would be able to manage the US federal budget as well. There was thus no need, they argued, for any economic experts. In Wodak (2015, p. 2), I labelled this idea/belief as the “arrogance of ignorance”, i.e. intuition and common sense are posited as providing enough skills to solve the huge global problems of the financial and other crises. Similar attitudes manifested themselves during the pandemic: many anti-vaccination movements and far-right politicians accused medical experts of disseminating false information. They claimed that experts and their proposals were not needed to cope with COVID-19 (Staerkle et al. 2022).

Newth and Scopelliti (2023) conducted a large quantitative and qualitative study of 4241 tweets in four countries (the UK, Italy, USA, and France) from 2008 to 2022, searching for the use of specific keywords and hashtags such as “*common sense*”, “*#commonsense*”, “*sensible*”, and “*#sensible*”. They found that populist far-right parties have been dominant in publishing ‘common sense’ narratives, in nationally context-dependent ways, since 2018 (ibid., pp. 13-14):

Common sense framings in all case studies included a strictly racialised and securitised notion of the nation-state as common sense

with a clear exclusionary politics against immigration and a racialised ‘other’. [...] One key area of coherence between the case studies is the depiction of Great Replacement narratives as common sense.

On the other hand, as Woodley (2015) emphasises, after having investigated two progressive grassroots movements in the USA (the movements for a “living wage” and for “marriage equality”), it was ultimately the *discursive reframing* of the contents of these movements that made them politically acceptable, and hence normalised. This reframing entailed delving into common-sense arguments (and not just superficial wordings) that all opponents would have to accept. In the case of the living wage movement, the *endoxa* referred to was that “hard work should be rewarded”, while in the second case, it was that “marriage is about ‘true love’ and creating family ties” (ibid., p. 102). Neither case could, therefore, be rejected, not even by far-right or national-conservative groups. Thus, she concludes that changes via political acceptance of new norms imply changing deeply ingrained beliefs, and thus the *endoxa*.

Returning to and analysing the two quotes cited at the beginning of this paper by the former US President Donald Trump (Republican Party) and the Senator of Vermont Bernie Sanders (Democratic Party), it immediately catches the eye that both appeal to *common sense*. However, their appeals indicate significantly different worldviews, which integrate totally opposed policies: Thus, both emphasise that agreeing to a specific policy is “common sense”, fallaciously implying that most of the American people would endorse the respective proposal: Trump suggests closing borders to “illegal” migrants, while Sanders urges to finally decide on and provide a more restrictive gun safety regulation.

These quotes illustrate the “common sense fallacy”, which according to Douglas Walton et al. (2008, pp. 128-129)⁵ is an example of the Common Folks *ad populum* argument. The two appeals

⁵ Walton (1995, p. 225) defines a fallacy as consisting of five parts (i.e., an argument (or at least something that purports to be an argument) that falls short of some standard of correctness; is used in a context of dialogue; has a semblance of correctness about it; and poses a serious problem to the realization of the goal of the dialogue). For more extensive discussion about the concept of fallacies and “meta-argumentation”, see Tindale (2007), Alkin & John (2023).

cited above were uttered in the context of vehement and polarising public debates, namely, how to cope with the many refugees and migrants trying to escape from Mexico and other Latin American countries to the USA and how to prohibit mass shootings at American schools that cost the lives of innocent children. Both politicians appeal to the “American people” (e.g., Canovan 1999; Wodak 2017; 2021a, pp. 9-10), who are not defined in any detail, however, and both claim that the majority of “the people” would agree with their proposals (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Common Sense Fallacy (Common Folks *Ad Populum* Argument) (Walton et. al 2008, pp. 128-129)

- I (the speaker) am an ordinary person, that is, I share a common background with the members of this audience (group G)
- You (the respondent) are a member of this audience (group G)
- Therefore, you should accept what I say.

In addition, we observe that the *appeal to common sense* implies another fallacy: the *appeal to normality* fallacy, also known as the “moral justification *ad populum* argument” (Walton et al. 2008, p. 129; Figure 3). Thus, not only do most American people ostensibly agree with a proposal viewed as common sense; that proposal necessarily presupposes the value of being “good” and “right”, and thus of being politically acceptable, accepted, and normalised. In this way, the “common sense” policies put forward by Trump and Sanders, respectively, are legitimised by the authority and will of the common people.

Figure 3: Appeal to Normality Fallacy (Moral Justification *Ad Populum* Argument)

- Everybody who is good, or who represents a group G with good qualifications, accepts policy P.
- Your goal is to be a good person, or a member of a group with good qualities.
- Therefore, you should accept P.

An *appeal to normality* fallacy consists of justifying something on the grounds that it is normal within socially accepted standards or that it is simply common, and it might indicate the normalisation and acceptance of a behaviour, movement, proposal, or policy that was hitherto not accepted. The conclusion “therefore, it is good” is often unspoken, but clearly implied.⁶ As both Trump and Sanders obviously position themselves differently on a range of agendas and endorse different ideologies, I assume that the common sense and normality fallacies indicate and condense these totally opposed imaginaries in specific contexts: Trump states that he is conservative, and being conservative equals common sense, hence it is normal and good. Meanwhile, Sanders endorses the agenda of the Democrats, of which restricting gun policies is a salient part and which, following Sanders’s argument, is agreed as being common-sense, good, and thus conceived as normal by most of the American people.

4. Case Study: The Austrian Debates about Common Sense and Normality, May – September 2023

4.1 The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), Methodology, and Data

The DHA engages with the relationship between texts and their wider social, political, and cultural contexts – that is, it views discourse as language in use as being both *shaped by and shaping* social structures. The analysis of texts, talk, and images (*semiosis*) is primarily conducted on two levels, an “*entry-level analysis*”, which focuses on the thematic dimension of texts, and an “*in-depth analysis*” that deconstructs the coherence and cohesion of texts in detail (Wodak 2021a). The entry-level thematic analysis aims to map out the contents of the texts being analysed. The in-depth analysis deals with the research questions themselves and aims to identify the *genre* (e.g., TV interview, policy paper, election poster, political speech, or homepage, Facebook, tweets, and so forth), the *macro-structure* of the respective text, the strategies of agent construction,

⁶ See also <https://www.lifespan.io/topic/a-guide-to-logical-fallacies/#appeal-to-normality>.

the argumentation schemes, and any other means of linguistic realisation used therein.

A further crucial element of the DHA is the examination of *intertextuality*, which encompasses the connections and relationships between a text and other texts, both in the past and the present (Reisigl & Wodak 2016, p. 27). This concept is related to that of *recontextualisation*, which analyses the trajectories and dynamics of discourses. The process of decontextualisation involves the removal of an argument, topic, genre, or discursive practice from its original context and its subsequent restatement or realisation in a new context. This is followed by the process of recontextualisation, whereby the respective element is integrated into a new context, thereby acquiring a new meaning. This is because meanings are shaped by use (Wittgenstein 1967). The analysis of intertextuality and recontextualisation may facilitate a more profound comprehension of the way a specific issue, group, or event is appraised through the lens of discourses situated within and emerging from disparate socio-political and historical contexts. Conceptually, the empirical event under investigation is viewed as a phenomenon that has discursive manifestations across *four heuristic levels of context* (Figure 4; Wodak 2021a), namely:

- the immediate co-text of the communicative event in question;
- the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses;
- the extra linguistic variables and institutional frames of a specific ‘context of situation’; and
- the broader socio-political and historical context that discursive practices are embedded in.

Figure 4: Levels of Context

Context can reach from a particular conversational situation to mediatisation via traditional or new (social) media, over shorter or longer timeframes and lesser or greater distances between socio-political and historical constellations.

The DHA also draws on *argumentation schemes*, frequently realised via the concept of *topoi*. *Topoi* are “search formulas which tell you how and where to look for arguments. At the same time, *topoi* are warrants which guarantee the transition from argument to

conclusion” (Kienpointner 2011, p. 265). *Topoi* can be made explicit as conditional or causal paraphrases such as ‘if x, then y’ or ‘y, because x’ (Reisigl & Wodak 2001, pp. 69–80; Reisigl 2014). Focusing on such conclusion rules, Kienpointner (1996) distinguishes between *formal argumentation schemes* (drawing on Aristotle’s taxonomy such as the *topos of definition*, the *topos of the species* and *the genus*, the *topos of comparison*, and so forth. On the other hand, Kienpointner (ibid.) and Wengeler (2003a, 2003b) emphasise a *content- and context-specific definition* of *topoi*, which allows for the deconstruction of presupposed and frequently fallacious prejudices embedded in everyday common-sense conversations about specific topics.

Content-related topoi are particularly relevant in far-right populist rhetoric (Wodak 2021a).⁷ In view of the above and following Walton et al. (2008), the fallacies of appeals to common sense and normality are both demonstrably subcategories of the *argumentum ad populum*. At this point, it is important to emphasise that *topoi* are not necessarily fallacious. Indeed, *topoi* are a useful shortcut for appealing to existing and widely shared knowledge and conceptions. Nevertheless, the use of *topoi* in specific contexts (which are often very complex), in what they ignore or sidestep, can ultimately be fallacious or manipulative.

In essence, the DHA endeavours to comprehend the way power-dependent semiotic instruments are employed to construct favourable self-representations and unfavourable other-representations. This also allows for the prioritisation of particular events within the context of a narrative, as well as increased opportunities to convey messages through opening space for ambivalence (Engel & Wodak 2013). Furthermore, the power of discourse establishes what is considered ‘normal’, as evidenced by the political messages that circulated during the 2014–2016 refugee crisis and the impassioned debates that ensued (see section 2.1).

⁷ In Wodak (2018, 2020, 2021a, and 2023), a range of formal *topoi* and content-related *topoi* (in respect to specific topical debates, texts, and talk) are presented, with examples illustrating the entire argument. We must neglect further discussions on argumentation schemes and the DHA here due to reasons of space and instead refer readers to Reisigl & Wodak (2001, 2016) for more details.

In the discourse analysis, I used the concept of *discourse strand* to make what might otherwise be called ‘debate’ or ‘discussion’ tangible from a corpus linguistic perspective. I follow the definition provided Rheindorf and Wodak (2018) as thematic threads within higher-level, broader discourses that can be analysed by sub-corpora. The criteria for applying the concept of ‘discourse strand’ are as follows:

- thematic continuity and boundedness;
- strong intertextual (and often explicit) links between the texts contained;
- relative temporal proximity and narrowness;
- a limited group of social actors (focused social field);
- a triggering event or events; and
- high keyness values (of the respective sub-corpus compared to the entire corpus).

Discourse strands in this sense allow a clear temporal delimitation of the research material. This in turn enables a focused contextualisation in the sense of the four-level context model along time axes – a useful tool for tracking discursive shifts in the form of frequency peaks and normalisations (see Figure 5).

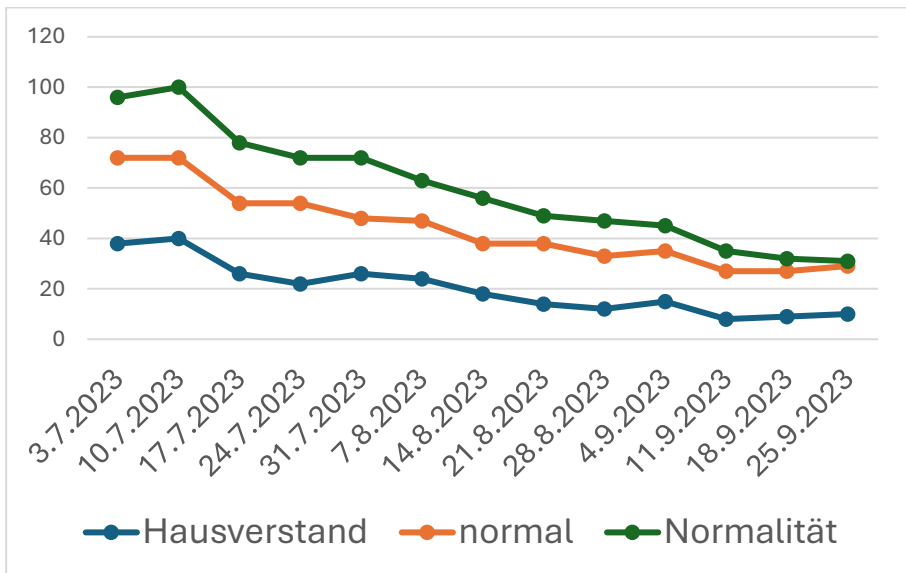


Figure 5: Broadsheets: “Normal” and “Common Sense” (3/7 – 25/9/23)

In this study, I mapped the discourse strand on common sense and normality in the Austrian media from July 3, 2023 to September 27, 2023 through a corpus of texts containing eleven high-circulation Austrian newspapers (*Der Standard, Die Presse, Heute, Kleine Zeitung, Kronen Zeitung, Kurier, Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Österreich, Salzburger Nachrichten, Tiroler Tageszeitung, and Wiener Zeitung*) as well as 15,048 national radio and TV transcripts and 43,088 press releases. Using corpus linguistic methods, I tracked the increase and decrease in the use of the terms **Hausverstand* and **normal* in relation to speakers (politicians) and party affiliation.⁸ These frequencies were then supplemented by qualitative analyses of appeals to common sense and normality and the related argumentation.⁹ This combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses afforded robust, multi-layered insights.

4.2 The Socio-Political Context – Austria, Summer 2023

In 2023, the extreme-right Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ*) under its current leader Herbert Kickl¹⁰ won many more votes in Austrian regional elections, e.g. in Lower Austria and Salzburg, which had previously always endorsed huge conservative majorities, i.e. the Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP*). These victories, which occurred primarily in rural regions, must be attributed among other things to the strong Austrian anti-vaccination movements that were cleverly colonised and instrumentalised by the FPÖ during the pandemic. By

⁸ It is impossible to elaborate the quantitative analysis in detail due to space restrictions. Overall, The ÖVP has the highest frequency of the use of 'normal' (Nehammer 134), with the FPÖ coming second (Kickl 72), followed by the Green Party (Kogler 51), the SPÖ (Babler 32), and the president (VdB 27). The frequency of 'common sense' in the topics of 'climate' and 'budget' were 24 and 38, respectively (whereas during the pandemic, 2020-2022, 'common sense' only occurred eighteen times with the topic #pandemic, #Covid 19, and #Corona).

⁹ See Rheindorf & Wodak (2018) for more details on the multi-level qualitative and quantitative methodology.

¹⁰ Wodak (2023b) summarises the history of Austria's far-right party, FPÖ: <https://www.farrightanalysisnetwork.com/?p=576>

mixing political illiberalism, identity politics, and welfare chauvinism with whatever else seemed and continues to seem popular, the FPÖ has been reaching voters who feel neglected by established political elites and are frustrated by modernisation, cultural change, and globalisation (Norris & Inglehart 2019). Overall, the FPÖ remains an “anti-system party” that nevertheless seeks to enter government when the opportunity presents itself. In terms of its ideological positioning, (Economist 2023) the threat to democracy posed by the FPÖ (through a kind of ‘Orbanisation’) lies precisely in its populist, ideologically extremely flexible and ambivalent nature, while simultaneously preserving its ties to Austria’s Nazi past.

The ÖVP formed a coalition with the Green Party after the last national election in 2019 (e.g., Wodak 2019). Ever since, huge corruption scandals have weakened the ÖVP, along with the challenges posed by the above-mentioned polycrisis (Wodak 2021b, 2022; Kartnitschnig 2024 a, b). The former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who had won 37.4 percent at the election as leader of the ÖVP, eventually had to step aside in favour of a new chancellor (Karl Nehammer), with on-going court proceedings against Kurz following. Subsequently, the ÖVP lost massively at the last regional elections in 2023; many voters either stayed at home or voted primarily for the FPÖ. The ÖVP also lost the trust of many voters because, for example, the regional governor of Lower Austria, Johanna Mikl-Leitner, had promised – before the election – never to form a coalition with the FPÖ. After the election, she nevertheless did so, with the coalition sworn in on March 23, 2023. A similar broken promise led to a coalition with the FPÖ in Salzburg inaugurated on June 14, 2023. Moreover, on June 6, 2023, the largest opposition party, the Social Democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) elected a new leader, Andreas Babler (White 2023), who promised to stop the shift to the right and to implement a ‘transformation’ of Austrian society, specifically by fighting rising inequality and child poverty and providing better education and healthcare.

When studying the manifestos and programs of the FPÖ (e.g., Wodak & Reisingl 2023), it becomes clear that Austria is to be reinvented as ‘Fortress Austria’ (*Festung Österreich*) at the centre of ‘Fortress Europe’, protected from ‘illegal migrants’ by borders and walls. This programme is propagated on all available channels using

traditional propaganda tools (e.g. Loewenthal & Guterman 1947; Walton 1997). The FPÖ began its repeated rise to power by winning regional elections and normalising its politics of nativism, welfare chauvinism, and exclusion as mainstream politics, with significant support from the ÖVP.

In this context and following losses of up to ten percent or more in regional elections, the ÖVP initiated a debate in the summer of 2023 regarding the concepts of ‘common sense’ and ‘normal/ity’, aiming to establish a new agenda in the media and public sphere. Mikl-Leitner was successful in this endeavour, as evidenced by an opinion piece she published on July 3, 2023, in the liberal broadsheet *Der Standard*. The piece, which demonised the ‘wokeness’ allegedly propagated by the left, presented the ÖVP and its ideology by contrast as ‘normal’, ‘common-sense’, ‘mainstream’ (‘the silent voice of the majority’), and as ‘the centre of society’ (*Mitte der Gesellschaft*) (Text 2 below), via fallacies of *hasty generalisation* and the *topos of definition*. This piece was immediately recontextualised in all news channels. It would appear that Mikl-Leitner was responding to and reframing the statements made by Kickl in a speech from May 1, in which he explicitly invoked fallacious appeals to common sense and normality (see Text 1). According to Kickl (though without providing any evidence), FPÖ voters in fact form the centre of society. They are, he argues, already familiar with the concepts of ‘common sense’ and ‘normality’, and, therefore, with the FPÖ’s imaginary of a ‘Fortress Austria’ (see Figure 7).

Text 1

“Dear friends, a different wind will blow in this country, the wind of change, and for you it will be a wind of justice [...]. It is high time for a turn towards normality and common sense, it is high time for a total turn towards one’s own people and for a total turn away from the self-appointed elites [...]. Let no one tell you [...] that you are the fringe of society.”

Mikl-Leitner’s agenda was immediately responded to by the leaders of other political parties and subsequently dominated the media (see Figure 5). The leader of the Green Party, Werner Kogler,

(ORF 2023) labelled the attempt to define “normality” as not only dangerous and fallacious but moreover implicitly accused Mikl-Leitner of being ‘prefascist’ (an *ad hominem* attack) on July 6, 2023 (Text 3). Austria’s President Alexander van Der Bellen, formerly leader of the Green Party, gave a speech at the opening of the Bregenzer Music Festival in which he criticised any appeals to the “people” as populist rhetoric. (*Der Standard* 2023) His criticism was not only directed towards the ÖVP and the FPÖ, however, as he also quoted Babler’s appeals to “our people” (*unsere Leut*) as inappropriate (Text 4).

The leader of the SPÖ, Andreas Babler, responded promptly, attempting to reframe the debate by enumerating a range of issues pertaining to the ramifications of the energy and cost-of-living crises, for which urgent assistance was required (Text 5.) (Babler 2023) He thereby wanted to redirect the discourse, but was unsuccessful. On July 21, 2023, Karl Nehammer, the Austrian chancellor and leader of the ÖVP, offered a response to Van der Bellen’s criticism in a video message (Text 6). (OE24 2023) The ÖVP also advanced numerous other subtopics during the summer, all of which appealed to the fallacies of common sense and normality. These included the continued acceptance of cash payments in place of credit cards, the banning of miniskirts for girls in schools, and the prohibition of sweatpants for boys (September 22, 2023). Additionally, the ÖVP advocated for the preservation of Austrian culinary traditions and driving habits, both of which are seen as incompatible with solving the climate crisis by climate activists, who are derogatorily labelled as ‘climate-gluers’ (*Klimakleber*) and *Klimaterrorists*. On September 2, 2023, Kickl was interviewed in the so-called annual TV summer conversations (*Sommorgespräche*), during which he was asked to elaborate on his concept of ‘normality’ (Text 7). (FPÖ TV 2023)

The discourse strand ultimately reached its conclusion with the dissemination of Nehammer’s remarks at a backstage event (a late evening gathering at a pub with his core supporters) (Text 8, September 27, 2023). There, he made a series of emotional remarks, emphasising that instances of child poverty, which had been a topic frequently highlighted by the SPÖ, could be easily avoided if children were to consume meals at fast food restaurants such as

McDonald's, where they could purchase hamburgers for lunch (costing €1.40), and if women were to take on full-time employment in place of their current part-time roles. This incident, which became known as '*Hamburgergate*', attracted significant attention and criticism. It led to a significant backlash and scandal from various quarters, including religious groups, opposition parties, feminist organisations, medical professionals, and charitable organisations, for what were perceived as Nehammer's cynical and misogynist remarks.

Moreover, the leaked footage appeared just one day after the ÖVP had held a press conference to launch a new campaign titled 'Believe in Austria',¹¹ which promoted national optimism despite the cost-of-living and energy crises. *Hamburgergate* ultimately overshadowed this campaign and, unsurprisingly, led to many conspiracy narratives and a search for the whistle-blower. Overall, the ÖVP's attempt to win back voters from the FPÖ by 'driving on the right', i.e. by normalising and colonising the FPÖ's agenda, failed. Opinion polls showed that the ÖVP, which stood at nineteen percent in June/July 2023, only stood at twenty percent in September 2023, after the 'common sense and normality' campaign, while the governing coalition, which started with a majority of 51.4 percent in autumn 2019 (Henrich 2024) (ÖVP 37.5 percent, Green Party 13.9 percent), stood at 29 percent in September 2023, thus losing almost 32 percent of approval.

Possibly, the ÖVP would have lost even more popularity without this campaign – but this is pure speculation. Nevertheless, the fallacious appeals to common sense and normal-thinking people did not stop. The annual budget presented in Parliament by the finance minister Marcus Brunner (ÖVP) was titled "budget with common sense" (*Budget mit Hausverstand*). Brunner appealed to common sense thirteen times in his ninety-minute speech. (Nachrichten 2023 and Schaffhauser-List 2024)

¹¹ This appeal invokes a famous speech by then Chancellor Leopold Figl from December 1945, when he promised a better future after the end of WWII and the subsequent existential crises (starvation, polio pandemic, and so forth).

23. 3. 2023: ÖVP/FPÖ coalition sworn in in the region of Lower Austria (Regional Governor Johanna Mikl-Leitner, ÖVP/Vice-Governor Udo Landbauer, FPÖ).
1. 5. 2023: Leader of FPÖ, Herbert Kickl, delivers polemical speech, defining what is ‘normal’ and politics with “common sense”.
6. 6. 2023: Andreas Babler is elected as new leader of the SPÖ.
14. 6. 2023: ÖVP/FPÖ coalition sworn in in the region of Salzburg (Regional Governor Wilfried Haslauer, ÖVP/Vice-Governor Marlene Svazek, FPÖ).
3. 7. 2023: Mikl-Leitner publishes opinion piece in *Der Standard* against “wokeness” and progressive gender and climate politics.
6. 7. 2023: Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler (Green Party) labels the debate about “normality” as “prefascist”.
18. 7. 2023: President Alexander van der Bellen (VdB) in his speech opening the Bregenz Festival criticises populist rhetoric.
19. 7. 2023: Babler responds to VdB.
21. 7. 2023 Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) responds to VdB.
3. 8. 2023: Nehammer proposes raising the right to pay with cash to constitutional status.
2. 9. 2023: Kickl explains his notion of “normal” in TV interview.
22. 9. 2023: Schools in Lower Austria launch new dress code.
26. 9. 2023: Nehammer launches new ÖVP campaign at press conference: “Believe in Austria!”
26. 9. 2023: Video with Nehammer’s utterances at a backstage event is leaked (*‘Hamburgergate’*)

Figure 6: Chronology of Events

4.3 The Discourse Strand – Analysing Appeals to Common Sense and Normality

In the following, extracts of the relevant speeches, video clips, interviews, and opinion pieces are analysed to illustrate the trajectory of the attempt to colonise appeals to common sense and normality, thereby to dominate their dissemination in the public sphere and media.¹² It is also important to focus on how respective politicians

¹² Here, I must neglect the impact of social media, which obviously also plays an important role in this debate, as such an analysis would necessitate different data and different methods (e.g., Newth & Scopelitti 2023).

define “the people” they are addressing and the contents and meanings of common sense and normality that frame their imaginaries for the future of Austrian society. **Text 2 (Johanna Mikl-Leitner, ÖVP, Governor of Lower Austria)**

*So much for the facts. For the **normal-thinking** centre of society, such a question is not a priority. The centre says: Find a pragmatic, uniform regulation and deal with the important issues. Yes, **common sense** sometimes seems to have been abolished. [...] And the **normal-thinking** majority in the centre feels less and less heard. The others are louder. And the debates are dominated by loud voices – more and more. The radicals dominate the public discourse. And that’s exactly why it’s important to take a clear stance for the **normal-thinking** centre of our society. For the silent majority.*

In Text 2, an opinion piece written by Johanna Mikl-Leitner, the governor of Lower Austria, Austria’s largest state, first rejects the FPÖ’s and Herbert Kickl’s – fallacious – claim that they represent the mainstream and that they are the party that implements common sense and normal policies. In fact, she claims – again fallaciously – that the ÖVP is the centre and includes all normal-thinking people. Second, she accuses the left of propagating useless ‘woke’ politics, i.e. proposals for gender-specific language behaviour and for dealing with the climate crisis. In contrast, she argues (without any evidence) – using strategies of positive self-representation – that the ÖVP forms the centre of society because, she claims, the ÖVP is the only “normal-thinking” (pragmatic) political party (*topos of definition*). The attribute “normal thinking” is repeated several times. Moreover, a contrast is constructed between “us”, the “normal-thinking centre”, and the “radicals, the others”, who allegedly have “loud voices”. Intertextually, she links her statements to Kickl’s speech of May 1, 2023, and tries to reframe his statements. Thus, she fallaciously also claims that the “silent majority” are not FPÖ voters, but ÖVP supporters who should finally make their voices heard. In doing so, she is aligning herself with and following her coalition partner, the FPÖ, which denies the climate crisis and propagates an outdated gender policy.

Text 3 (Werner Kogler, Vice-Chancellor and leader of the Green Party,)

References to “normal-thinking” people are “extremely dangerous and, moreover, pre-fascist”.

“Such an approach is the gateway to evil in the world, to use the diction of the Catholic ÖVP”.

“Because what is the norm depends on the context. The church once thought it was normal to burn women.”

Werner Kogler’s response to Mikl-Leitner’s op-ed makes it clear that the ÖVP’s coalition partner in the national government explicitly rejects the debate on ‘normality’. He used the *topoi* of *history and threat* (“Because the fascists once defined what was ‘normal’, with terrible consequences, we must avoid any attempt to define normality in the present”). He also provided an *argumentum ad exemplum*, referring to the early modern period and the burning of women accused of being witches. He legitimized his positioning by pointing to the Catholic section of the ÖVP and their distancing from such a debate. However, his attempt to end the debate with such a forceful intervention failed.

Text 4 (Alexander van der Bellen, President of Austria)

“It’s time once again to address what needs to be addressed. It seems that some things in our country are not developing in the right way. We must not get used to language being used to exclude people again. We must not get used to talking about ‘us’ and ‘them’ again. We, these are the ‘normal’, these are ‘our people’, these are ‘the people’.

Who says who belongs and who doesn’t?

Who decides who is ‘normal’ and who isn’t?

It is dangerous to use such terms in such absolute ways, because they are very quickly and thoughtlessly reproduced and thus contribute more and more to divisions in a community.”

President Alexander van der Bellen used his annual speech at the Bregenz Music Festival, a major official event with a very large audience, to clarify and reframe Kogler’s spontaneous and forceful response. First, he highlighted the use of exclusionary language behaviour in the past (without explicitly referring to the fascist era; *topos of history*) and then deconstructed the Manichean discourse through a list of rhetorical questions. His questions clearly imply the answer: Whoever is in power is able to define what

and who is normal. He concluded with a *topos of threat*, stressing the danger of debating “who might be normal and who might not be normal”, because “this would contribute to divisions in a community”. Although the president obviously has a lot of authority, even his counter-discourse could not prevent the ÖVP from continuing this discussion.

Text 5 (Andreas Babler, leader of the SPÖ)

“The divisions in our society do not happen through language. They exist. We need to name them and make things right again. More and more people can hardly afford their apartment – the dream of owning their own home has been destroyed. At the same time, the real estate industry is making record profits.

We can only mend these rifts if politics is once again there for the majority and does not become the recipient of orders from the rich and powerful.”

Andreas Babler, the leader of the SPÖ, also tried to change the subject; he did not even mention the debate about ‘common sense and normality’ because, he claimed, such meta-debates about language cannot change material policies and politics. He rejected Van der Bellen’s accusation that his appeals to “our people” are populist. Instead, he emphasised existential and material threats and pointed to current inequalities, listing some examples. Babler then went on to fallaciously claim that the Social Democrats represent the majority (of the people) because these are currently suffering the most because of the existing inequality. His conclusion: the SPÖ is the only party that supports and helps people in need. Babler’s answer addressed the current social class divisions and the resulting injustices. However, his attempt to focus on the major problems currently affecting many people and to start a substantive discussion was not successful.

Text 6 (Karl Nehammer, ÖVP, Chancellor)

*“I’ll tell you who isn’t normal:
Left-wing extremists and right-wing extremists, climate activists,
Identitarians, Islamist hate preachers, vandals, and other extremists. [...]*

It's fine if someone decides to ride their bike to work, but we should stop making drivers feel guilty, especially because many people rely on cars. And it's okay if someone decides to live a vegan life. But it also has to be okay if others like to eat schnitzel. [...]

We won't let a few people simply ban our words. And what I also don't find normal is that you are criticised for standing up for the normal, for the many, for the majority.”

The chancellor, who was also accused of being a populist in the president's speech, rejected this accusation. Continuing the theme started by Mikl-Leitner, he turned – in a video clip – to “the people” and explicitly defined what is “normal” and what is “not normal” (*topos of definition*). Obviously, he was not impressed by the arguments made by Kogler and van der Belen, nor by Babler's attempt to reframe the topic and discuss real problems. In his statement, he divided society into people who are not normal and those who are. The former are, he claimed, extremists of all kinds; Nehammer's negative view of climate activists is manifest because he placed them on the same level as extremists. He then went on to propose a compromise: you can ride a bike and somebody else can drive a car; you can be vegan and somebody else can eat schnitzel. No one should feel guilty.

This proposal was clearly aimed at the Greens (Nehammer's coalition partner), who are often accused of being overly moralistic. In the same vein, Nehammer rejected “wokeness” and political correctness: “Nobody should forbid words”. And he concluded that no one (including the president) should criticise anyone who supports “ordinary people”. Again, the fallacious claim is made that the ÖVP represents the majority, creating an intertextual link to Mikl-Leitner's op-ed and, hence, to Kickl's statements.

Text 7 (Herbert Kickl, leader of the FPÖ)

“For me, normality is the summary of a state of security, familiarity, of having a clear orientation.

It's common sense, it's like an unvoiced/implicit bond that connects us all [...] where you feel at home. “

In his annual summer conversation, Kickl again linked normality with common sense, as he had already done in his speech on May 1 (see above, Text 1). He basically defined both concepts at the same time, almost as synonyms: normality implies security, the known, without ambiguity or uncertainty. This, he continued, is common sense – feeling at home. Hence, certainty and security, so he claimed and presupposed, can only be offered by the FPÖ.

Text 8 (Karl Nehammer, ÖVP, Chancellor)

“What about the parents? What does it mean that a child doesn’t get a warm meal in Austria? Do you know what the cheapest hot meal is in Austria? It’s not healthy, but it’s cheap: A hamburger at McDonald’s. €1.40, or €3.50 with fries. [...] Why isn’t part-time work increasing? Not even among women who have no care responsibilities. If I don’t have enough money, I work more.”

Karl Nehammer was talking to his core supporters – backstage – in a pub. He was angry, very emotional, and dismissed the many criticisms levelled by the opposition, mainly the SPÖ: that people don’t have enough money to feed their children, that child poverty is on the increase, that single mothers are having a particularly hard time, that rents are too high, and so on. He then angrily pointed out that there are indeed cheap meals – and cited the example of McDonald’s hamburgers. He conceded that such meals may not be healthy, but they are cheap. Thus, he implied that hungry children cannot be choosy. He then turned his ire on women and mothers who often have to work part-time, his solution being: work more! This presupposes a neoliberal ideology: everybody is responsible for their own well-being. Moreover, Nehammer’s misogynist beliefs became apparent: obviously, he does not know how common women and men live or how difficult life might be for single mothers.

Overall, the discourse strand illustrates that in the summer of 2023 all Austrian political parties claimed – fallaciously – to speak for the majority of the people and that they were all able to define what ‘normal’ and ‘common sense’ mean. While ‘the people’ were never explicitly defined, the chancellor (Text 6) offered an example of who might be perceived as normal and not normal (*topoi of contrast and definition*). By subsuming climate activists and centre-left parties in the category of left-wing extremists (as Nehammer has often done on other occasions) and thus of ‘not-normal’ people, he mobilised the divide between left and right, between climate deniers and climate activists, between progressive politics and conservative, even reactionary positions, and between his party, the ÖVP, and its coalition partner, the Greens. In this way, he, on the one hand opened up space for a discursive shift to the right and for a possible coalition with the FPÖ after the next elections scheduled to be held in the autumn of 2024. On the other hand, he colonised the FPÖ’s agenda, hoping that FPÖ voters would now turn to the ÖVP. Finally, Text 8 shows that Nehammer, as leader of the ÖVP, is aware of the cost-of-living crisis. Here, he responded to the attacks made by the SPÖ (see Text 5) – something he had avoided

doing in public, probably hoping that the meta-discussion about the meanings of words would distract citizens from their real problems.

When summarising the contents of what is appealed to as common sense and normal by the ÖVP and FPÖ (by integrating their programmes, speeches, interviews, and coalition agreements in Lower Austria, Upper Austria, and Salzburg), one arrives at the following list of policy proposals, some of which have already been implemented by the ÖVP/FPÖ coalitions mentioned above (Figure 7):

- Teaching in and speaking “German”, even in school breaks
- Subsidising restaurants that serve ‘Austrian’ food (like *Wiener Schnitzel*)
- No more implementation of gender-appropriate language behaviour in official documents
- No support of LGBTQ+ people
- Introducing ‘protective custody’ for migrants deemed criminal by profiling
- Closing borders to ‘illegal migrants’ in alliance with the far-right Hungarian and Serbian Prime Ministers Orbán and Vučić
- Punishing and demonising climate activists (‘*Klimakleber*’; ‘*Klima-Terroristen*’)
- Reducing unemployment benefits
- Supporting mothers staying at home with a bonus (*Herdprämie* or stovetop bonus)
- Making access to citizenship more difficult

Figure 7: Overlap between ‘Common Sense’ and ‘Normal’: ÖVP and FPÖ Policies in Coalition Agreements

5. Conclusions

It is currently impossible to predict whether Kickl’s programmatic shift towards an Orbán-like authoritarianism will convince many voters in the next national elections scheduled to be held on September 29, 2024, and whether the FPÖ could therefore again form a national coalition with the ÖVP. As an explicitly ‘anti-system’ party, the FPÖ positions itself where the political mainstream does not; for example, the FPÖ recently peddled conspiracy narratives about vaccines, and in the case of Russia’s war against Ukraine, it opposes Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia (as do other far-right and extreme-right parties such as Hungary’s Fidesz, Italy’s LEGA, Germany’s AfD, and France’s Rassemblement National). In any case, such coalitions are only made possible through the normalising

and mainstreaming of far-right agendas, usually via the support of conservative parties. As Müller (2018, p. 118) rightly summarises:

To date, in no country in Western Europe or North America has a right-wing populist made it into office without help. It always requires conservative collaborators from the establishment. Whenever conservatives and Christian Democrats decide against supporting right-wing populists, the latter have not been able to succeed.

However, especially in the FPÖ's two national coalitions with the ÖVP from 2000 to 2006 and in 2018/19, it became clear that (some) radical/extreme-right parties like the FPÖ were not successful when they formed part of the government; by contrast, their success in opposition seems to be deeply rooted in their "electoral habitus" (Wodak 2023a, b). The FPÖ has flip-flopped on Europe, secularism, COVID management and calls for compulsory vaccination, climate change, social policy, market liberalism, and many other issues where its positioning followed voters fed up with mainstream politics and dissatisfied with liberal democracy.

The ÖVP, meanwhile, continues its fallacious appeals to common sense, having experienced the failure of its appeals to normality. Apart from a "budget with common sense", they have propagated "migration policies with common sense", "woman's affairs with common sense", and "climate policies with common sense", following the FPÖ's agenda of a politics of emotions and "arrogance of ignorance", disregarding expert opinions and factual evidence. As Aigner (2024) argued in an op-ed from August 5, 2024:

In today's political debates, the term 'common sense' is used in an almost inflationary manner, usually to reject or discredit unpopular proposals from experts or political opponents. The term is often used without evidence as a defence against other views and is therefore more of a 'knockout-argument' than an expression of rational thinking.

Fallacious appeals to common sense and normality have supported the discursive shift to the far right in times of uncertainty and insecurity, i.e. during the polycrisis. They have served to mobilise citizens to believe in simple solutions and anachronistic (*retrotopian*) imaginaries offered by authoritarian leaders, in the repetition of exclusionary rhetoric and scapegoating, via fallacious hasty generalisations and threat scenarios. However, the recent national elections in Poland on October 15, 2023 (BBC 2023) and in France on July 7, 2024 (Urmersbach 2024) have shown that

a *cordon sanitaire* against the far right is possible when there is little or no other support for the far right from other parties, and when the 'new normal' is defined differently, allowing for uncertainty and ambiguity to be endured while working towards reframing the *endoxa*, as suggested by Woodley (2015).

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