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RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS OF THE AUSTRIAN FAR-RIGHT

Edited by Lóránt Győri

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FOREWORD

At the end of 2016, one picture caused a stir among Austrian journalists and politicians – and later made headlines around the world. It showed the most important figures of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Moscow: Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache, MEP Harald Vilimsky, the former candidate for the Austrian presidency Norbert Hofer and FPÖ's Vice-Header Johann Gudenus “visiting Moscow for work,” as Strache wrote on his Facebook page. Pundits and analysts were wondering what “work” the FPÖ was doing in Russia. But the speculation only lasted for a few hours. Not long after the pictures of Strache surfaced, “Krone” journalist Claus Pandi published a “contract” between the FPÖ and “United Russia,” Russia’s largest party.¹

The contract, signed by FPÖ-leader Strache and United Russia's political secretary Sergey Schelesnjak, will last for five years and then automatically renew for another five-year term. The contract stated both parties will “exchange experiences”, “send delegations to each other”, and inform each other about domestic politics. Both parties are committed to “educating youth to a spirit of patriotism and love of work.” All other relevant parties in Austria criticized this cooperation in harsh words. Conservative party leader Reinhold Mitterlehner asked why Strache “did not travel to Aleppo as well,” the Social Democratic Governor of Carinthia Peter Kaiser claim the contract attested that FPÖ had the “spirit of the 1950s.”

While there is an extensive network of pro-Russian parties in Europe, this cooperation is unprecedented. Furthermore, strong Russian influence is not limited to the political far-right: the Austrian Identitarian movement, one of the most dynamic youth political organizations in Austria, not only regards Russia and its most fervently nationalist forces as ideological models, but they cooperate with each other regularly as well.

This paper is the summary of the results of a one-year-long research project covering five countries and exploring the connections between a wide range of pro-Kremlin stakeholders and Central-Eastern European countries’ political forces in general, and the violent, fringe extreme-right movements in particular.

¹ Katharina Mittelstaedt, “FPÖ Unterzeichnet Absichtserklärung Mit Putins Partei,” *derStandard.at*, Dezember 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000049497726/FPOe-fuehrt-mysterioese-Arbeitsgespraeche-in-Moskau>.

Political Capital has already published Europe-wide researches,^{2,3} and country-specific case studies on the connections between (far-right) political players in Slovakia⁴ and Hungary,⁵ and published a report on the „export” of ultraconservative, illiberal values by pro-Kremlin players to Central-Eastern Europe.⁶ Others have done important research on this topic as well.⁷ However, this is the first research project that focuses mainly on the *violent* ramifications of the strategy of the Russian state and its proxies to support fringe, extremist organizations in order to undermine bilateral ties with Ukraine and the United States, and destabilize the region. The five countries that we are focusing on are Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Most of our findings are indicative of the trends in the broader region.

The war in Eastern Ukraine and the migration crisis have acted as a catalyst for re-legitimizing extremist organizations’ sine qua non for xenophobe activities. Additionally, it has pitted organizations against each other that harbour ancient chauvinistic and revisionist historical sentiments within Central-Eastern Europe. The Kremlin hopes are that by reaching out to and supporting extremist organisations, it will successfully destabilize Ukraine and the surrounding Central Eastern European region.

The authors would like to thank the participants of a workshop held at the DÖW in November 2016 for the helpful insights and suggestions they provided. Also, we would like to thank the National Endowment for Democracy for their support and Joanna Rohozinska for her insightful comments and help throughout the project.

All errors and omissions remain our own.

² Krisztián Szabados and Péter Krekó, “Russia’s Far-Right Friends” (Political Capital, 2009), http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/in-depth-analysis/russia-s-far-right-friends_349.html.

³ Political Capital, “The Russian Connection The Spread of pro-Russian Policies on the European Far Right,” 2014, http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf.

⁴ Péter Krekó et al., “Marching towards Eurasia - The Kremlin Connections of the Slovak Far-Right” (Political Capital, 2015), http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_Study_Russian_Influence_Slovakia_ENG.pdf.

⁵ Attila Juhász et al., “‘I Am Eurasian’ - the Kremlin Connections of the Hungarian Far-Right,” 2015, http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_SDI_Boll_study_IamEurasian.pdf.

⁶ Péter Krekó et al., “The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin’s Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe” (Political Capital, 2016), http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf.

⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Tango Noir: Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)., Alina Polyakova and Atlantic Council, “Putinism and the European Far Right,” *Institute of Modern Russia*, 2016, http://imrussia.org/images/stories/Russia_and_the_World/Putin-Far-Right/alina-polyakova_putinism-european-far-right.pdf, Mitchell A. Orenstein, “Putin’s Western Allies,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-25/putins-western-allies>, Marlene Laruelle (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015)., *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship*, Cas Mudde, “Russia’s Trojan Horse,” *openDemocracy*, 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/cas-mudde/russia%27s-trojan-horse>.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is the result of a collaborative project between Political Capital Institute, DÖW and investigative journalist Fabian Schmid. Political Capital Institute led the research project, contributed to the recommendations and did the editing work on the publications.

During the study, we often refer to the terms “Russian influence” or the “Kremlin’s influence”. These notions are connected to the term “Russian influence through power,” by which we mean explicit and implicit actions by the Russian state and related actors (including intellectuals, businessmen, journalists, etc.) or organizations aiming to create political changes in the behavior and/or political agenda of certain political actors through political means and/or financial instruments. The “soft power” of Kremlin mainly concerns Moscow’s ability to persuade others to do what it wants without direct force or coercion, but with attraction.⁸

The main goals of the research are the following:

- 1.) Describe the basic social, political, and economic frameworks of Russia’s presence in Austria in order to understand the nature and modus operandi of Russian direct or indirect influence on the political fringes.
- 2.) Reveal personal, organizational, media and other links between pro-Russian, fringe political actors and the Kremlin, or Kremlin stakeholders.
- 3.) Collect and analyze the most important pro-Russian declarations and actions of the relevant radical political players in Austria.

We used the following research methods:

- 1.) Desktop research to collect the necessary information, create a timeline of developments and events, and gather statements and quotes done by DÖW.
- 2.) Use DÖW’s Analysis of Polish Pro-Russian media outlets and Facebook pages, following Political Capital Institute’s methodology.
- 3.) Primary research, courtesy of Fabian Schmid, with the aim of gaining confidential information from actors within or close to the political fringes, and used directly or indirectly to exert influence. In order to protect their identity, sources of such information remain anonymous in the study.
- 4.) In-depth interviews with experts from academia, politics and the media to gather background information and provide a broader view of certain actors and events.

⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, New Ed edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

Interviews were conducted with the following experts:⁹

- Patrick Gensing, journalist and author of a book about online hate-speech: “Rechte Hetze im Netz - eine unterschätzte Gefahr”
- Natascha Strobl and Julian Bruns, political analysts and authors of a book about the Identitarian movement: “Die Identitären: Handbuch zur Jugendbewegung der Neuen Rechten in Europa”
- Thomas Riegler, historian who investigates terrorism and right-wing actors
- Peter Hajek, political consultant and pollster
- Alexander Markovics, Identitarian movement
- Patrick Poppel from the pro-Russian “Suworow Institute”

⁹ Quotes were translated from German to English by Fabian Schmid.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Austria, due to its “neutralist” stance, has a special historical relationship with Russia which has also manifested in the post-Crimean period. Austria was the first EU member state to welcome Vladimir Putin for an official visit after the Crimean annexation in June 2014. While Austria has always officially acknowledged the annexation defied international law and has also, in principle, supported the EU sanctions, in reality the country has been at the forefront of those trying to weaken the sanction regime from the beginning¹⁰. Key mainstream political figures have paid visits to Russia repeatedly over the past couple of years, and in turn hosted Russian visits. Russia has some influence on the Austrian mainstream: the business and political world (including the centre-left SPÖ and centre-right ÖVP). But these influences remain rather economically focused, pragmatic and non-ideological in their nature.
- Austria is a special case when it comes to relations between the political far-right and Russia. The most popular opposition party, Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), is the first party to have an official contract and agreement on future cooperation on a vast array of topics with the United Russia Party of Dmitry Medvedev. The presidential candidate of this party, Norbert Hofer, garnered nearly 47% of the votes in the run-off for presidential elections in December. The reason for this agreement on the heels of this success might be due the hopes of the Kremlin that FPÖ can become a leading governmental party in the near future - even after the 2018 elections.¹¹ The presidential election, when candidates of the centre-left and centre-right (where Russia traditionally had very good connections) did not even make it to the second round, could have lead the Kremlin to conclude that the time is here to make new alliances.
- The FPÖ's recent pact with the United Russia Party is the result of a deliberate pro-Russian trend in the party's leadership dating back to 2007. The cooperation between FPÖ and the Kremlin aims to further the Austrian party's ability to get into power, and then to leverage mutual political legitimization: FPÖ can claim Moscow's backing, while FPÖ officials have, and presumably would continue, to legitimize “elections” and “referenda” in the post-Soviet space, as they did in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and in the municipal elections in St. Petersburg in 2014.
- The Russian connections in FPÖ are built-in at the highest levels. Party chairman Heinz-Christian Strache, his deputy Johann Gudenus, and the foreign policy speaker

¹⁰ Heinz Gärtner et al., “Österreichs Umgang Mit Autokratischen Staaten - Working Paper 85 / 2016,” 2016, http://www.oii.ac.at/fileadmin/Unterlagen/Dateien/Publikationen/Arbeitspapiere/Working_Paper__OEsterreichs_Umgang_mit_autokratischen_Staaten.pdf.

¹¹ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russian Model Helps Extreme Right to Become Mainstream,” February 22, 2017, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/europa/476-russian-model-helps-extreme-right-to-become-mainstream>.

Johannes Hübner are regular guests in Moscow. Personal networks, shared values, diplomatic gains and business ties all play a role in this love affair. While the pro-Russian stance of the Austrian far-right could be explained by personal and economic reasons at the very beginning, the relationship has grown into a political alliance, facilitated by the orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev. It has become increasingly marked by shared ultra-conservative values against the decadent, morally corrupt West. Johann Gudenus, for example, studied in Moscow and speaks Russian fluently. He was also a manager of a company with ties to Russia. In addition to his travels to Moscow, he has met with close allies of Putin in Chechnya or Belarus as well. Gudenus also monitored the referendum in Crimea in 2014. The FPÖ not only legitimizes the domestic and foreign policies of the Russian Federation, but propagates the Kremlin's ultra-conservative values and stance of moral superiority versus the West, for example regarding homosexuality.

- Russian influence in Austria is clearly noticeable in far-right youth movements as well. The ideology of Alexander Dugin is gaining influence within the Identitarian Movement, an extremist youth movement founded in 2012 against "US-hegemony" over Europe. It has been gaining followers since the refugee crisis began.
- We have observed a vast network of "NGOs" and think-tanks that have been established all over Austria and Germany agitating for pro-Russian positions. One example is the Suworow Institute in Vienna, which has ties to the FPÖ and the Identitarian Movement. Another is the Center for Continental Cooperation, which seems to receive funding from Russian government entities, and is also growing closer to the Identitarian Movement in Austria.
- Austria is not just a hub for Russian spies, but also a regular meeting place for Russian and European politicians. The regular pro-Russian events in Austria (the alternative "Vienna Ball" in 2014, and a meeting in Linz in October 2016) exhibited a vast network of pro-Russian actors from various backgrounds coming together to network and cooperate openly. The blooming relationship between the Kremlin and far-right actors made Vienna a safe haven for the Kremlin's expanding pro-Russian extremist network throughout Europe. In this way, the FPÖ and the Identitarian Movement have become interlocutors between Eastern and Western pro-Russian far-right actors.
- Russian influence in Austria will most likely increase in the near future, especially since all polls show the FPÖ as the front-runner in national elections, which will take place in 2018, at the latest. Moreover, the widespread anti-American attitude in Austria, together with the country's traditional anti-liberal and authoritarian mentality, arguably provides fertile ground for contemporary pro-Russian agitation by the Freedom Party and other actors. These groups seem to be reaping the first fruits of President Putin's popularity in the country among the electorate.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The widespread Euroscepticism and anti-American attitudes in Austria, together with the country's traditional anti-liberal and authoritarian tendencies provide a fertile ground for current pro-Kremlin agitation by the Freedom Party and other pro-Russian actors. Political forces that want to repulse Russian influence should try to challenge, and not fuel, these general sentiments.
- Challenging the “national” position of FPÖ and destroying its patriotic image via their loyalty to Russian interests might be a successful tool for political parties to reduce the popularity of the party.
- While in many countries (including not only the United Kingdom and Baltic countries, but the Czech Republic as well) the national security services' public reports detail the threat of Russian information warfare, we cannot find similar intelligence in Austria, while at the same time the extensive activity of Russian espionage in Austria is a well-known and well-documented fact. The national security services should pay more attention to Russian influence on the far-right and extreme right, an issue that has essential relevance to national security.
- Civic actors should challenge the far-right (youth) movements inspired by Alexander Dugin through directly engaging vulnerable groups prone to radicalization by starting deradicalization and radicalization prevention programs.
- The networks of pro-Russian government-organized NGO-s and quasi-think tanks need to be mapped and their transparency increased in both Austria and Germany
- Given the low volume of trade between Austria and Russia and the unpopular nature of political Russophilia, it would be logical to assume that money plays an important role in FPÖ's pro-Russian stance. Front National, for example, received money from a bank with close ties to the Kremlin in 2014. However, while there has been speculation about financial ties between the Russian state and FPÖ (mostly focusing on the former business ties of Johann Gudenus and Barbara Kappel), nothing substantial has come to light yet. Investigative journalism, which is generally very weak in Austria, should receive more support in order that it may dig deeper into these connections.

AUSTRIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 2014, Russian, Austrian, and other European far-rightists gathered in Vienna's Palais Liechtenstein (described later) at the invitation of Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev,^{12,13} and conjured up the heritage of the “Holy Alliance”, a coalition of restorative and anti-revolutionary interests formed after the Napoleonic wars by Austria, Russia and Prussia. While the Tsars of Russia and the Emperors of Austria shared common political goals in fighting democratic and secularist tendencies, anti-Russian stereotypes emerged in Austria as early as in the late 19th century, according to Rathkolb¹⁴. They were reinforced by anti-Bolshevism after 1917 and radicalized by the National Socialists, who painted the picture of the Slavic “*Untermensch*”. Crimes committed against civilians, perpetrated by Red Army soldiers following Austria's liberation from Nazi rule, as well as Cold War propaganda, gave anti-Russian stereotypes another boost.

Following the defeat of the axis powers in World War II, Austria, which had been annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, remained an occupied country until 1955, divided into four occupation zones controlled by France, Great Britain, the US, and the USSR. After Stalin's death, under Nikita Krushchev's rule the Western allies and the Soviet Union agreed on Austria regaining its sovereignty under the condition of the adoption of the principle of neutrality. While indeed remaining officially non-aligned with both NATO and Warsaw Pact member countries (both of which it bordered), Austria was by no means equidistant in the Cold War setting, but rather acted as a “secret NATO ally”¹⁵. Austria's pro-Western orientation became obvious as early as the Hungarian revolution of 1956¹⁶, when the country opened its borders for Hungarian refugees escaping from communist terror. Forty years after the State Treaty of Vienna, Austria joined the European Union in 1995. But two decades later, support for EU institutions is one of the lowest among the EU member states.¹⁷

Throughout the Cold War, Austria cultivated an image of itself as a bridge between the East and the West, a neutral stage on which approximation could take place¹⁸, and maintained well-functioning diplomatic and economic relations with the USSR. Still, its “[p]artisan (pro-Western) neutrality”¹⁹ was not without repercussions on popular views of Russia and Russians, respectively. Ostentatious distinction from the socialist systems of its Eastern neighbours was a major factor in the evolution of Austrian national identity after 1945.

¹² Financial Times, “Malofeev: The Russian Billionaire Linking Moscow to the Rebels Already a Subscriber? Sign in Here,” 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/84481538-1103-11e4-94f3-00144feabdc0>.

¹³ A businessman close to the Kremlin who seems to have played a key role in financing the separatists in Ukraine and using the Russian Orthodox Church as a propaganda tool before the Crimean annexation

¹⁴ Oliver Rathkolb, *Die Paradoxe Republik, Österreich 1945 Bis 2005* (Wien: Zsolnay-Verlag, 2005).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ European Commission, “PublicOpinion - European Commission,” 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2137>.

¹⁸ Rathkolb, *Die Paradoxe Republik, Österreich 1945 Bis 2005*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Also, the threat of communism, both from within and from the outside, was deliberately exaggerated by Austrian leaders to ensure maximum political and financial support from Western powers in general, and the US in particular²⁰. Anti-Communism quickly became more central to Austrian self-representation than anti-Nazism, both on the level of political elites and society as a whole²¹.

Anti-Slavic resentment, dating back to the nationality struggles of the Habsburg monarchy, has been kept alive until the present day by right-wing political forces. Most notably among them has been the FPÖ, which is, interestingly, at the same time the most pro-Russian political force on the Austrian political landscape. Its cultivation has always gone hand in hand with a negation of the abundant Slavic roots of the Austrian population, including the autochthonous minorities of Slovenes (Carinthia, Styria), Croats (Burgenland), Slovaks and Czechs. As of late, the notion of a “threat from the East” is presented in association with crime, refugees and economic migration rather than anti-Communism^{22,23}.

Among the refugee population in Austria in 2015, Russians – mostly Chechens – and Syrians accounted for the second and third largest groups, respectively.²⁴ Public discourse, fuelled by Freedom Party propaganda targeting refugees and Muslims in general, portrays them as a security threat with a special focus on Afghans and Chechens. Recurrent violent confrontations between Chechen and Afghan youth gangs, particularly in Vienna, helps those depicting these groups as dangerous.

As a precondition to regain full sovereignty after World War II, Austria adopted the status of a neutral country in 1955. In line with a doctrine of “active neutrality,” established by Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky in the 1970s, Austria has historically favoured a policy of non-isolation of autocratic regimes in order to foster societal change, as well as seeking solutions through multilateral talks. Vienna, a city harbouring the headquarters of international bodies such as the OSCE, OPEC, IAEA and UNIDO, has provided the stage for such talks on numerous occasions.

²⁰ Ibid, 31.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ The FPÖ’s anti-Slavism is connected to historical territorial claim conflicts (Slovenia) and the present-day situation of a welfare gap between Austria and its Eastern neighbors (leading to the notion of Eastern people stealing Austrian jobs, committing crime, etc.). This does not contradict pro-Russian sentiments in so far as there is no comparable labor migration from or border conflict with Russia

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook,” 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/au.html>.

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AFTER THE CRIMEAN ANNEXATION

The attitude Vienna displayed vis-à-vis Russia after the Crimea annexation followed the previously mentioned line²⁵. While Austria has always officially acknowledged the annexation defied international law and has also, in principle, supported the EU sanctions, in reality the country has been at the forefront of those trying to weaken the sanction regime from the beginning. Key mainstream political figures have paid visits to Russia repeatedly over the past couple of years, and in turn hosted Russian visits. Austria was also the first EU member state to welcome Vladimir Putin for an official visit after the Crimean annexation, on 24 June 2014. Aside from meeting with the head of state, then-President Heinz Fischer (a social democrat), and OSCE Chair Didier Burkhalter, Putin also gave a speech at the Federal Economic Chamber (WKO). This latter appearance goes to illustrate that the Austrian appeasement towards Russia is motivated both by diplomatic and economic considerations. Also, the heavy influx of refugees from Syria in 2015 created an increased sense of urgency to end the Syrian crisis, which, according to leading Austrian politicians, cannot be achieved without cooperating with Russia and Bashar al-Assad to a certain extent²⁶.

In a résumé on the year 2015, the Russian Embassy in Vienna noticed a “high intensity of Russian-Austrian political, economic and cultural contacts”, mentioning 28 “larger” Russian delegations from diverse policy fields visiting Vienna during the year. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Vienna six times in 2015 to partake in multilateral negotiations on Iran and Syria, also using the opportunity to engage in bilateral talks with his Austrian counterpart Sebastian Kurz (People's Party/ÖVP, conservative) and President Fischer.²⁷ Kurz, who visited Moscow in May 2015 to meet with Lavrov, has repeatedly spoken out in favour of strengthening ties between the EU and Russia.²⁸ In April 2016, a high-profile Austrian delegation including Fischer, Kurz and two other conservative federal ministers travelled to Moscow at Putin's invitation. Tellingly, the delegation also included WKO President Christoph Leitl. In a pre-visit press release, the Russian Embassy in Vienna noted that relations between Russia and Austria were “evolving positively” and were characterized by “stability and predictability”.²⁹

²⁶ Gärtner et al., “Österreichs Umgang Mit Autokratischen Staaten - Working Paper 85 / 2016.”

²⁷ Ots.at, “Russische Botschaft Wien: Kurze Jahresbilanz 2015,” *Ots.at*, December 29, 2015, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20151229_OTS0015/russische-botschaft-wien-kurze-jahresbilanz-2015.

²⁸ Ots.at, “Kurz: EU Muss Trotz Ukraine-Krise Kontakt Zu Russland Aufrechterhalten,” *Ots.at*, December 10, 2015, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20151210_OTS0344/kurz-eu-muss-trotz-ukraine-krise-kontakt-zu-russland-aufrechterhalten.

²⁹ Ots.at, “Zum Offiziellen Besuch Des Bundespräsidenten Der Republik Österreich, S.E. Dr. Heinz Fischer, in Russland Am 5. Und 6. April 2016,” *Ots.at*, April 5, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160405_OTS0066/zum-offiziellen-besuch-des-bundespraesidenten-der-republik-oesterreich-se-dr-heinz-fischer-in-russland-am-5-und-6-april-2016.

Two months later, the Austrian Parliament unanimously passed a resolution requesting Kurz to use Austria's OSCE presidency in 2017 to propel the implementation of the Minsk accord on the Ukrainian crisis. While the resolution did not explicitly reject the EU sanctions, the Austrian Freedom Party's (FPÖ) Johannes Hübner was pleased to register criticism of the “peace-disrupting” sanction regime “between the lines.” In the debate, former social democratic (SPÖ) party whip Josef Cap argued that the EU had to adjust its stance vis-à-vis Russia, qualifying the policy of sanctions as “a threat to the entire continent,” while speakers of the Green Party (centre-left) and the NEOs (liberal) commented favourably on the sanctions' legitimacy and efficacy, respectively.³⁰ Later that month, the National Council's main committee gave the federal government a mandate to call for a gradual lifting of the sanctions at the EU level. While SPÖ, ÖVP and Greens voted in favour, an alternative, more far-reaching motion tabled by the FPÖ did not find support among the same forces³¹. While scepticism in regards to the sanctions spans the entire parliamentary spectrum in Austria, the right-wing populist Team Stronach, currently the smallest parliamentary faction, is so far the only party aside from the FPÖ to have endorsed an outright and immediate lifting.³²

According to the German Handelsblatt, the Austrian government was “traditionally not a friend of a strict sanctions policy” and has been “tapping the brakes” on EU sanctions against Russia from the beginning, although “as inconspicuously as possible.”³³ Likewise, the FAZ qualified Austria as generally “not exactly a hardliner” on EU-Russian relations³⁴, one day after a delegation of Russian parliamentarians had been welcomed at the Austrian Parliament. On this occasion, the leader of the Russian delegation and the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma, Konstantin Kosatchev, praised Austria's mediating role and expressed hope for Austria's OSCE presidency to promote a process of European integration that would also include Russia.³⁵ At about the same time, Russian ambassador to Vienna Dmitrij Ljubinsky qualified bilateral relations as “absolutely durable” in an interview with the German-language branch of Russia Beyond the Headlines (an offshoot of the state-owned Rossijskaja Gaseta).

³⁰ Ots.at, “Nationalrat: Österreich Soll Die Vereinten Nationen Weiterhin Aktiv Unterstützen,” *Ots.at*, June 15, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160615_OTS0274/nationalrat-oesterreich-soll-die-vereinten-nationen-weiterhin-aktiv-unterstuetzen.

³¹ Kurier, 28 June 2016

³² Ots.at, “Stronach/Lintl: Kurswechsel in Österreichs Ukraine/Russland Politik Gefordert,” *Ots.at*, May 31, 2015, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20150531_OTS0022/stronachlintl-kurswechsel-in-oesterreichs-ukrainerrussland-politik-gefordert.

³³ Handelsblatt.com, “EU-Sanktionen Gegen Russland: Die Furcht Vor Dem Bumerang-Effekt,” July 29, 2014, <http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/eu-sanktionen-gegen-russland-die-furcht-vor-dem-bumerang-effekt/10260078.html>.

³⁴ 21 December 2016, p. 6

³⁵ Ots.at, “Russland Sucht Den Parlamentarischen Dialog,” *Ots.at*, December 20, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20161220_OTS0123/russland-sucht-den-parlamentarischen-dialog.

According to Ljubinsky, there was a common feeling in Russia and Austria to foster these relations despite the sanctions and a shared assessment of the latter as the “wrong track.”^{36,37,38,39} Shortly afterwards, Kurz announced in the German weekly DER SPIEGEL⁴⁰ that Austria aspired to transform the sanctions regime “from a system of punishment into a system of incentives” and expressed his intention to have the sanctions loosened step-by-step over the course of his OSCE tenure.

³⁶ Andrei Jr. Zolotov, “Russlands Botschafter in Österreich: „Für Mich Ist Russland Teil Europas“,” *Russische Nachrichten | RBTH*, November 22, 2016, http://de.rbth.com/politik/2016/11/22/russlands-botschafter-in-osterreich-fur-mich-ist-russland-teil-europas_650025.

³⁷ As one way of intensifying cooperation and exchange during the sanctions, Ljubinsky cited the Russia-Austria Tourism Year 2017 which began on 16 December 2016 with a classical music concert at the Viennese Hofburg Andrei Jr. Zolotov, “Russlands Botschafter in Österreich: „2017 Werden Träume Wahr“,” *Russische Nachrichten | RBTH*, December 16, 2016, http://de.rbth.com/reisen/2016/12/16/russlands-botschafter-in-osterreich-2017-werden-traume-wahr_660038.

³⁸ Also in the field of cultural diplomacy, a three-year “cultural season Russia-Austria” had been concluded in 2015 Ots.at, “Russische Botschaft Wien.”

³⁹ Festival titled “Feel Russia” was held in late May 2016 in Vienna Ots.at, “Zum Offiziellen Besuch Des Bundespräsidenten Der Republik Österreich, S.E. Dr. Heinz Fischer, in Russland Am 5. Und 6. April 2016.”

⁴⁰ No. 1/2017

PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTION OF RUSSIA-EU-US RELATIONS

While Pew Global Attitudes data is not available for Austria, several polls conducted in 2014 for the Austrian weekly PROFIL shed light on prevalent perceptions of Putin's Russia. According to the results, 70 per cent of Austrians held a negative or rather negative view on Russia, with only six per cent favourable, and the rest neutral.⁴¹ However, a majority of Austrians (58 per cent) were in favour of Austrian politicians welcoming Putin on an official visit, while 30 per cent opposed the idea, and twelve per cent were undecided.⁴² As for the crisis between Russia and the Ukraine, 44 per cent of Austrians assigned both countries equal guilt. The fact that only 28 per cent blamed the Russian government (and seven percent the Ukrainian one) was qualified as "surprising" by PROFIL, given the fact that "both international and Austrian media clearly identify Putin and Russia as the main culprits."⁴³ Finally, a majority of Austrians polled (53 per cent) declared themselves opposed to tightening the sanction regime against Russia, while 37 per cent were in favour of doing so even though it might affect Austria adversely.⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ This data leads us to believe that the majority of Austrians oppose the tightening of sanctions for pragmatic and self-interested purposes, and not for ideological reasons.

As for the United States, Political Capital noted in an earlier study that the Austrian population was "quite widely anti-American oriented." Indeed, when Gallup asked people in 132 countries worldwide the question "Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of the United States?" in 2015, Austria was the European country that yielded the third-highest disapproval rate (60 percent), only trailing Russia and Belarus⁴⁶. Remarkably, even in Iran, where the US has been vilified as the "big Satan" by state propaganda for decades, there is a lower disapproval rate, at 51 per cent⁴⁷.

The widespread anti-American attitudes in Austria, together with the country's traditional anti-liberal and authoritarian mentality⁴⁸ arguably provide a fertile ground for current pro-Russian agitation by the Freedom Party and other actors.

⁴¹ Profil.at, "Umfrage: Russland Hat Bei 70% Der Österreicher Schlechten Ruf," *Profil.at*, April 5, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/umfrage-russland-70-oesterreicher-ruf-374069>. - It should be noted that all four polls cited here had a rather small sample size (n=500).

⁴² Profil.at, "Umfrage: Mehrheit Dafür, Dass Heimische Politiker Putin Empfangen," *Profil.at*, June 21, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/wien-oesterreich-umfrage-mehrheit-politiker-putin-376150>.

⁴³ Profil.at, "Umfrage: 44% Geben Russland Und Ukraine Gleich Viel Schuld an Der Krise," *Profil.at*, August 2, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/umfrage-44-russland-ukraine-schuld-krise-377135>.

⁴⁴ Profil.at, "Umfrage: Mehrheit Gegen Schärfere Russland-Sanktionen," *Profil.at*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/umfrage-mehrheit-russland-sanktionen-377957>.

⁴⁵ <http://www.profil.at/oesterreich/umfrage-mehrheit-russland-sanktionen-377957>, 13 September 2014.

⁴⁶ Gallup Inc, "The 2016 U.S.-Global Leadership Report," *Gallup.com*, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/services/191807/us-global-leadership-report-2016.aspx>.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 8

⁴⁸ cf. Rathkolb 2005, 64-74 and 411-413

EFFECTS OF THE SANCTIONS AND ECONOMIC-ENERGY DEPENDENCY

As the Handelsblatt stated in 2014, before the sanctions regime had an impact, the Austrian economy was “closely intertwined with the Russian.”⁴⁹ Its growth potential makes Russia an interesting target location for foreign investment. Some of the largest Austrian companies, such as OMV (oil and gas, with the state of Austria as its biggest shareholder), Strabag (construction), Doppelmayr/Garaventa (world market leader in ropeway systems), or Raiffeisen (finance, close ties with the conservative People's Party), have been thoroughly engaged in Russia for years. In November 2016, the Russian ambassador to Austria emphasized the “excellent contacts with Austrian companies” in an interview and noted that to his knowledge, not one of the roughly 1,200 Austrian enterprises active in Russia wanted to cut ties with his country, while a number of them were actually intensifying their activities and cooperation with Russian partners.⁵⁰ The OMV, for instance, as the biggest Austrian company overall in terms of net turnover,⁵¹ has considerably intensified its cooperation with the Russian Gazprom as of late.^{52,53} Austrian companies like Doppelmayr or Strabag also have ample experience working in Russia having been very active in construction work for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.⁵⁴ Against that background, Political Capital⁵⁵ has deemed mutual interests by Austrian and Russian companies, “[e]specially in the field of finance and energy”, as “the prime reason for pro-Russian lobbying efforts of Austrian business leaders in recent years.”

As a trade partner, Russia is not overly relevant to the Austrian economy, ranking 15th in 2015 (through the first three quarters) after coming in eleventh in 2014⁵⁶. Roughly 50,000 jobs in Austria are, directly or indirectly, tied to trade relations with Russia, according to the Austrian Economic Chamber. Exports to Russia plummeted by 39,1 per cent in 2015, to a level of EUR 1,47 billion, while imports shrunk by 6,9 per cent (to EUR 1,75 billion). Key export articles included machinery and vehicles (41,9 per cent), chemical products (29,9 per cent), and processed goods (14,2 per cent). The counter-sanctions implemented by Russia primarily reduced the food exports of Austria to Russia.

⁴⁹ Handelsblatt.com, “EU-Sanktionen Gegen Russland.”

⁵⁰ Jr. Zolotov, “Russlands Botschafter in Österreich,” November 22, 2016.

⁵¹ Trendtop500.at, “Trend Top 500,” *Trend_shop*, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://www.trendtop500.at/unternehmen/>.

⁵² Political Capital (2016, 26) notes that Gazprom's Austrian subsidiary, Gazprom Neft Trading GmbH, has quietly emerged as a player with “one of the biggest turnovers among Austrian companies”. Remarkably, an accord on the construction of the Austrian segment to the South Stream pipeline by OMV – whose biggest shareholder is the Republic of Austria – was signed during Putin's controversial visit to Vienna in June 2014. In February 2016, Dmitry Medvedev assured Austrian Minister of Economy, Reinhold Mitterlehner, of Russia's readiness to advance the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. Mitterlehner had travelled to Moscow accompanied by Rainer Seele, CEO of OMV, which has been a North Stream 2 project partner since September 2015. In December 2016, OMV and Gazprom reached an agreement on an asset exchange, further strengthening their partnership (FAZ, 21 December 2016, 6).

⁵³ Derstandard.at, “Mitterlehner Kritisiert EU-Sanktionen in Moskau,” *derStandard.at*, February 3, 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000030310755/Mitterlehner-in-Moskau-Aufhebung-der-Sanktionen-im-Interesse-aller>.

⁵⁴ Jr. Zolotov, “Russlands Botschafter in Österreich,” December 16, 2016.

⁵⁵ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture,” August 2016, http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf.

⁵⁶ Aussenwirtschaft Corporate Communication, “Österreichische Exportwirtschaft 2016” (Wien: Aussenwirtschaft Austria der WKÖ, 2016), <https://www.go-international.at/Oesterreichische-Exportwirtschaft-2016.pdf>.

Exports to countries whose economies are deeply interwoven with the Russian economy, such as Belarus and several states in central Asia and the Caucasus region, have been shrinking as well⁵⁷.

Austria being a prominent tourist destination, the tourism industry plays a relevant role in economic relations with Russia, too. In 2015, Austria welcomed 313,406 tourists from Russia, with Vienna alone attracting more than half of this number. This represented a decline by a third as compared to the 2014 level⁵⁸. With a 34 per cent minus in nights spent (1,187,818 in absolute numbers), Russia ranked just outside the top-10 countries of origin in 2015⁵⁹. In Winter tourism, Russia moved down from the 7th to the 11th spot⁶⁰.

Austria's energy dependency is high, with an import ratio of 65,9 per cent in 2014 (EU-28: 53,5 per cent)⁶¹. Dependency on Russian deliveries is particularly marked in the natural gas sector. Even though the Russian share of Austrian imports decreased from 63,2 per cent in 2013 to 51,5 per cent⁶² the following year, it remained distinctly above the EU level of 37,9 per cent^{63,64}. In comparison, the Austrian dependency on Russian crude oil is relatively low. While Russia led crude oil suppliers to the EU by a wide margin in 2014 (30,4 per cent), it ranked third in Austria in 2013 and sixth in 2014^{65,66}. A similar picture emerges with solid fuels, where Russia accounts for the biggest share of EU imports (29 per cent), whereas Austria imports from EU partners – Poland and the Czech Republic – predominantly.

Beyond merely depending on Russia to satisfy its own energy needs, Austria also plays a relevant role in terms of the European gas supply infrastructure, just as the partly state-owned OMV hopes to further participate in the latter's expansion. The Baumgarten gas station in Lower Austria (right at the Slovakian border) is an important hub for Russian gas deliveries to West, South and Southeastern Europe⁶⁷. The station opened in 1959 and started receiving gas from the Soviet Union in 1968. When Vice-Chancellor Mitterlehner met with Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow in February 2016, he stressed the importance of energy security for Austria and let the Russian Prime Minister know that Austria did not want to depend on Ukraine and its conduit system.⁶⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Statistik Austria, "Tourismus in Österreich 2015: Ergebnisse Der Beherbergungsstatistik" (Wien, 2016), http://www.statistik.at/web_de/services/publikationen/13/index.html?includePage=detailedView&ionName=Tourismus&pubId=569.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Eurostat, "Shedding Light on Energy on the EU: What Do We Produce in the EU?," *Shedding Light on Energy on the EU*, 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/energy/bloc-2b.html>.

⁶² Forschung und Wirtschaft BMWFW (Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft, "Energienstatus 2016," 2016, <https://www.bmwfw.gv.at/EnergieUndBergbau/Energiebericht/Documents/Energienstatus%202016.pdf>.

⁶³ Eurostat, "Shedding Light on Energy on the EU."

⁶⁴ No 2014 data available for Austria in the source cited here.

⁶⁵ BMWFW 2016, 29

⁶⁶ It should be noted, however, that an extension of the Družba pipeline from Bratislava to Vienna – which has already been discussed – could considerably increase the Russian share (BMWFW 2016, 32).

⁶⁷ BMWFW 2016, 39f

⁶⁸ Derstandard.at, "Mitterlehner Kritisiert EU-Sanktionen in Moskau."

The effects of the EU sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions on the Austrian economy has been the subject of controversy since their implementation. A study published by the WIFO economic research institute in December 2014 stated that the “trade conflict between the EU and Russia (...) could have noticeable effects on the Austrian economy.” The bilateral bans on products were found “likely to cause only limited economic damages for Austria,” as the share of banned products in Austrian trade with Russia was “rather low.” However, more severe effects were expected due to a projected “general worsening of trade relations between the EU and Russia” and “diplomatic disruptions as well as indirect effects caused by the deep integration of Austrian delivery networks with the EU.”⁶⁹ The study laid out three scenarios and projected a job loss between 9,500 and 46,000 caused by the trade conflict, as well as a loss between 0,6 and 2,9 billion Euros in terms of value added. It was expected that Austria, “on account of its close supply relationships to a number of countries with a high export share to Russia”, would “suffer more strongly under the indirect effects of the sanctions than other EU-countries”⁷⁰.

In contrast to this rather grim outlook, a recent (December 2016) WIFO study by the same authors paints a much brighter picture. It argues that trade relations between Russia and EU member states would have deteriorated massively even if no sanctions had been put in place given the low price of oil and the devaluation of the Russian Ruble. According to the study's findings, Austria experienced “significant export losses amounting to 529 million Euros in 2015,” losses were relatively insignificant in 2014 and cannot safely be attributed to the sanctions. “[R]oughly a third of the observed decrease in exports since 2013 can be traced back to the sanctions and counter-sanctions”, while the effect amounted to slightly over 40 per cent for the EU-28.⁷¹ According to the WIFO's calculations, the sanctions “may have caused a loss of roughly 7,000 jobs” and a loss in value added amounting to EUR 550 million in 2015. Nonetheless, FPÖ chairman Heinz-Christian Strache falsely claimed, as late as mid-November 2016, that the sanctions had killed 40,000 jobs in Austria already.⁷²

In this light, it can be argued that adverse effects from the sanctions on the Austrian economy were rather modest. Still, Austria has remained at the forefront of sanction critics in Europe until today. In addition to the FPÖ, which has been incessantly calling for an end to the sanction regime from the beginning, leaders of the government parties, as well as influential business circles keep on questioning the sanctions' reasonableness, based primarily on economic considerations⁷³.

⁶⁹ Elisabeth Christen et al., “Auswirkungen Der Wirtschaftssanktionen Der EU Und Russlands Auf Wertschöpfung Und Beschäftigung in Österreich Und Der EU” (WIFO, 2016), http://www.wifo.ac.at/jart/prj3/wifo/resources/person_dokument/person_dokument.jart?publikationsid=59227&mime_type=application/pdf.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “HC Strache - Facebook Post,” November 14, 2016,

<https://www.facebook.com/HCStrache/photos/a.226243068590.133860.74865038590/10154366501533591/?type=3&theater>.

⁷³ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

Beyond the examples provided in section 1, Mitterlehner told Russian Economy Minister Alexey Ulyukaev in February 2016 that the sanctions had brought along disadvantages rather than benefits, and announced – both in Moscow and on Austrian public television upon his return – that Austria would work towards lifting the sanctions in Brussels.⁷⁴ In April, President Fischer made a case for rescinding the sanctions step-by-step. In November, Mitterlehner stated that Austria was opposed to both tightening and extending the sanctions (a half-year extension was nevertheless agreed at the EU level in December).⁷⁵ In late 2016, the Russian ambassador to Vienna went on record saying that while Russia felt they had support from Austrian political leaders, “even stronger support” was provided by “Austrian companies, the Austrian Economic Chamber and other associations.”⁷⁶

SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS TOWARDS RUSSIA

Since 2010, Russia has been mentioned in the annual reports of the Austrian Agency for the Protection of the Constitution exclusively connected to Islamist terrorism and the conflicts in the Northern Caucasus region⁷⁷. The only two exceptions include the exposure of a Russian secret agent couple with Austrian identity documents in 2011 and the visit of Vladimir Putin to Vienna during the 2010 European Judo championships⁷⁸. While that latter incident was merely mentioned for the personal protection challenge it entailed, the spy couple had been active in Austria and Germany for more than 20 years, recruiting informants, and even obtaining classified EU and NATO documents⁷⁹. Austria has been considered “a hub of Russian spies” for decades⁸⁰. Vienna, in particular, as the capital of a neutral country at the intersection of East and West, hosting several international organizations (UN, OPEC, OSCE), is traditionally regarded as a hot spot for intelligence activities.

⁷⁴ Derstandard.at, “Mitterlehner Kritisiert EU-Sanktionen in Moskau.”

⁷⁵ Günther Oswald, “Russland-Sanktionen Vernichteten in Europa 400.000 Jobs,” *derStandard.at*, January 5, 2017, <http://derstandard.at/2000050243022/Russland-Sanktionen-vernichteten-400-000-Jobs>.

⁷⁶ Jr. Zolotov, “Russlands Botschafter in Österreich,” November 22, 2016.

⁷⁷ The most recent report (for 2015, published in 2016) states on page 77 that “For the members of the North Caucasian insurgency movement, Austria and Europe serve first and foremost as a safe haven or an area of retreat. Moreover, they are used for fundraising activities and for recruitment. Currently, we do not have any information on a direct threat to Austria by North Caucasian groups of Islam.

⁷⁸ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung Bundesministerium für Inneres, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2011” (Wien, 2011), http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_Verfassungsschutz/BVT_VSB_2011_online.pdf.

⁷⁹ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung Bundesministerium für Inneres, “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2013” (Wien, 2013), http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/BMI_Verfassungsschutz/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2013.pdf.

⁸⁰ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

ANALYSIS OF KEY PRO-KREMLIN PARTIES, ASSOCIATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Mainstream right actors

Pro-Kremlin/anti-sanction voices in the Austrian political debate can be divided up into two groups: actors who operate exclusively, or predominantly, based on economic considerations and those located in considerable ideological proximity to Russian power circles. The first group reaches far into the political centre.

Centrist parties: Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ) and People's Party (ÖVP)

Those with pronounced anti-sanction views are considered a minority within the Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ).⁸¹ The SPÖ endorses an approach of lifting the sanctions step-by-step, dependent on progress made in the implementation of the Minsk accord. But there are also members of the Social Democrats with close ties to Russia and its allies, for example former Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer. He also spoke out against sanctions as well.⁸²

Pragmatic anti-sanction views have been expressed for years (and continues to be) by the ÖVP mainstream. Christoph Leitl, leader of the Austrian Chamber of Economics and member of the conservative ÖVP, has repeatedly called for an end to EU-sanctions against Austria.⁸³ Political Capital⁸⁴ in an earlier study paraphrases an unnamed ÖVP politician stating that “the majority of the party, and especially the employers and businessmen, strongly oppose the sanctions due to the negative impact on growth, jobs and tourism.” Party chairman Reinhold Mitterlehner, who is also the Austrian vice chancellor and minister of economy, is an important figure in this respect. During his visit to Moscow in February 2016, he was awarded the Order of Friendship of the Russian Federation, presumably in recognition of his anti-sanction efforts.

According to a 2016 FAZ article, United Russia MP Konstantin Kosatchev even felt there was a substantial ideological overlap between his party and the Austrian conservatives, with whom he encouraged intensified cooperation. “We share the same values, and I think, we are in the same spectrum of political life,” said Kosatchev⁸⁵.

⁸¹ For instance, MP Christoph Matznetter, who is also vice-president of the Austrian-Russian Friendship Society and serves as the SPÖ's speaker for economic affairs, has been mentioned as a pro-Russian social democratic voice (Political Capital 2016, 28).

⁸² Evelyn Peternel, “Kritik: Ex-Bundeskanzler Gusenbauer Kritisiert EU-Sanktionen Gegen Russland,” accessed April 20, 2017, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/kritik-ex-bundeskanzler-gusenbauer-kritisiert-eu-sanktionen-gegen-russland/88.166.578>.

⁸³ Kleinezeitung.at, “WK-Präsident: Leitl: Sanktionen Gegen Russland Sind ‘unsinnig,’” *Www.kleinezeitung.at*, April 3, 2016, <http://www.kleinezeitung.at/wirtschaft/4958981/>.

⁸⁴ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

⁸⁵ FAZ, 21 December 2016, 6

Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (WKO)

It should be noted that Russia also influences the Austrian business world aside from its FPÖ-connections. The WKO is an official entity that represents employers' interests and is a key player in the Austrian corporatist system. It is traditionally dominated by the ÖVP, which is illustrated by Chamber election results as well as by the fact that so far, all WKO chairmen have been ÖVP politicians, including the incumbent, Christoph Leitl. Leitl, one of the most outspoken critics of the EU sanctions regime, welcomed Putin in Vienna in June 2014, proudly emphasizing that it was his third meeting with the Russian President during his WKO tenure.⁸⁶ Leitl reportedly also holds a vested interest in normalizing EU-Russian relations, as he privately owns €75,7 million worth of shares in two companies in Russia, according to Austrian journalist Martin Thür.⁸⁷

Austrian-Russian Friendship Society (ORFG)

The ORFG was characterized as “the most prominent Austro-Russian organization in Austria” in an earlier Political Capital⁸⁸ report. This report also pointed out that the organization has gone beyond “non-public business lobbying” under the presidency of Ludwig Scharinger (2011 through 2015). Scharinger formerly headed the Upper Austrian branch of Raiffeisen Bank, a bank heavily engaged in Russia. Starting with the Ukraine crisis and the implementation of sanctions, “ORFG got much more visible (...), as one the most vocal organizations in Austria to defend Russia and to call for an end of Western sanctions against the country” based on alleged harm to Austrian companies. While Scharinger's successor as the ORFG's president, Richard Schenz, has been less outspoken and harsh in his criticism of the sanctions, he basically maintained the same stances. Schenz was the CEO of OMV between 1992 and 2001 and currently holds the position of WKO vice-president. At the ORFG, social democratic MP Christoph Matznetter serves as Schenz's deputy. He is, however, not the only politician in the ORFG presidium, which also includes Heinz Hufnagl (SPÖ) and Johannes Hübner (FPÖ). Four of six parties currently holding seats in the Austrian Federal Parliament – ÖVP, SPÖ, FPÖ, and Greens – are represented in the ORFG's board. For the FPÖ, this includes MEP Barbara Kappel, Johann Gudenus (vice-mayor of Vienna), and public Ombudsman Peter Fichtenbauer.

The main goal of the organization is the intensification of Russian-Austrian networks. Such associations, which work closely with the embassy of the partner country, exist in nearly every country in Europe. Most of the time they are apolitical/multipartisan and comprised of politicians as well as businessmen.

⁸⁶ Profil.at, “Putin Versucht Es Bei Wien-Besuch Mit Humor,” *Profil.at*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/leitl-diktatur-putin-wien-besuch-humor-376274>.

⁸⁷ Martin Thür, “Auch Nicht Zur Gänze,” microblog, @MartinThuer, (December 2, 2016), <https://twitter.com/MartinThuer/status/810431535161741312>.

⁸⁸ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

Furthermore, a number of businesspeople have come out in support of Russia's views on the sanctions and more. One name worth mentioning here is Siegfried Wolf, a personal friend of Putin's who presides over the supervisory boards of both Austria's state holding ÖIAG and Russian Sberbank Europe.⁸⁹ Wolf also chairs the board of directors at Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska's Russian Machines Corporation.

Far-right actors

Historically, due to the Slav-phobic and anti-communist tendencies described above, the Austrian far-right has been pronouncedly anti-Russian since the National Socialist era, owing to the Nazi depiction of Russians as sub-humans, the ensuing war of aggression against the Soviet Union and the eventual defeat of the Axis Powers. Other reasons for anti-Russian attitudes often cited by the Austrian far-right include crimes against civilians committed by Red Army soldiers after the war, and the flight and expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia.

While some neo-fascist thinkers propagated an alliance with 'the East' to fight 'Americanization' and liberate Europe from 'Western' control after 1945⁹⁰, the far-right mainstream remained fiercely anti-Russian until recently. Within roughly ten years, the Austrian far-right, from its parliamentary wing (FPÖ) to its neo-Nazi fringes, has performed a collective pro-Russian turn, embedded within a cross-European development. In contrast to earlier 'Eurofascist' tendencies, the goal now is not to emancipate Europe from both Western (American) and Eastern (Soviet) influence, but to team up with Russia against both 'Islamization' and Western liberalism. Key actors for Austria will be presented in the following pages, starting with the most relevant by far, the Austrian Freedom Party.

Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)

As a party founded from the rubble of National Socialism, the FPÖ fought communism and the 'threat from the East' for decades. Since the split-off of Haider's BZÖ and the takeover of Heinz-Christian Strache as the party's chairman in 2005, the FPÖ has returned to its ideological roots in embracing German nationalism. Also, liberal and pragmatic positions were pushed back, giving way to a revival of Haider's recipe for success of the 1990s: the systematic ethnicization of social ills, the scapegoating of minorities (now, first and foremost Muslims), nativism, pronounced anti-immigration and anti-EU stances, and a self-representation as the country's only anti-mainstream force and protector of conservative values.

⁸⁹ Handelsblatt.com, "EU-Sanktionen Gegen Russland."

⁹⁰ Thomas Riegler, "Der Neofaschistische Traum von Einem Autoritären Europa," *Die Presse*, November 24, 2016, <http://diepresse.com/home/zeitgeschichte/5121074/Der-neofaschistische-Traum-von-einem-autoritaeren-Europa>.

Also, under Strache's chairmanship, the FPÖ began vigorously embracing Russia. Bilateral contact picked up considerably beginning in 2007, and were further intensified during the Ukraine crisis in 2014, prompting Political Capital to observe the establishment of "an extending strategic alliance between the FPÖ and representatives of the Russian Federation"⁹¹, paralleling, as Höller⁹² notes, "an increasing international isolation of Russia in the context of its Ukraine policy."

In 2014, the celebration of the so-called "Life Ball," a charity event for those living with HIV took place. Five-thousand people, among them former US-president Bill Clinton, attended the ball, with thousands more watching the event on TV. However, less than 500 metres from the celebration, in the Stadtpalais Liechtenstein in Vienna's first district, high ranking politicians representing Austria's "Freedom Party", FPÖ, secretly met with right-wing extremists from all over Europe and Russia.

All of them were invited by the Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who had made billions with his investment firm Marshall Capital. In 2007, Malofeev founded the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, which hosted the secret extremist meeting in Vienna. Attending, among others, were FPÖ Chairman Heinz-Christian Strache, his deputy Johann Gudenus, the Viennese MP Johann Herzog (FPÖ), French MP Marion Marechal-Le Pen (niece of Front National-chairwoman Marine), and Volen Siderov, who founded the Bulgarian right-wing extremist party Ataka. Also in attendance was Alexander Dugin, a former consultant of leading Russian politicians and the main proponent of the so-called "Eurasian" ideology, which opposes liberalism and Transatlanticism and serves as an ideological justification for Russian expansionism. Dugin had been in Vienna before. In 2009, he was a guest at the so called "Akademikerball", a yearly event formerly held by far-right student fraternities (Burschenschaften), and now continued by FPÖ Vienna. It is known as a meeting place for right-wing extremists from all over Europe.^{93,94}

When Austrian media reported on the secret meeting in Vienna, which was first investigated by the Swiss Newspaper Tagesanzeiger,⁹⁵ FPÖ-leader Strache complained about "unfair media coverage about a private invitation."⁹⁶ It seems unlikely that the secret meeting coincidentally happened on the same date as the Life Ball, which is internationally known as a major LGBTQ event.

⁹¹ Political Capital Institute, "The Weaponization of Culture."

⁹² Herwig G. Höller, "'Info-Direkt': Kremltreu in Linz," *Die Zeit*, January 18, 2016, sec. Gesellschaft, <http://www.zeit.de/2016/03/info-direkt-magazin-russland>.

⁹³ Doew.at, "FPÖ-Akademikerball (Wieder) Mit Gästen von Rechts Außen," February 2016, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/februar-2016/fpoe-akademikerball-wieder-mit-gaesten-von-rechts-auszen>.

⁹⁴ Doew.at, "Rechtsextreme Demonstrieren in Wien (Identitäre Bewegung Österreich)," May 2014, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/mai-2014/rechtsextreme-demonstrieren-in-wien-identitaere-bewegung-oesterreich>.

⁹⁵ Bernhard Odehnal, "Gipfeltreffen mit Putins fünfter Kolonne," *Tages-Anzeiger*, March 6, 2014, sec. International, <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/europa/Gipfeltreffen-mit-Putins-fuenfter-Kolonne/story/30542701>.

⁹⁶ Heute.at, "Strache Zu Rechtentreff: War Private Einladung," *Heute.at*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.heute.at/politik/news/story/21047814>.

In 2016, two years after the secret meeting in Vienna, host Malofeev told Austrian magazine „Profil“ that his Christian religion connects him to the FPÖ.⁹⁷ Regarding Conchita Wurst, the trans-artist who won the Eurovision Song contest 2015 representing Austria, Malofeev said: “They should say: Yes, we are the EU and we are sodomites, who send perverts to the Song contest.” Malofeev denied supporting the FPÖ with other means than his network and moral support.

But he vigorously defended FPÖ-politician Johann Gudenus, who had said before that the European Union is a “lobby for homosexuals,”⁹⁸ echoing Putin’s remark about a “decadent West,” which is “denying its Christian roots.”⁹⁹ Malofeev’s main reason for supporting the FPÖ seems to be its illiberal policies concerning LGBTQ-rights. Although he also agrees with their anti-migrant and anti-EU-positions, his main motive for supporting FPÖ is religious, Malofeev told *Profil*. The FPÖ is against adoption rights for same-sex parents, even if one parent is the biological father or mother of the child. The party also opposes the “civil union” for same-sex couples, which had been introduced in 2010 by a coalition of the Social Democrats and Conservatives.¹⁰⁰

When investigating connections between Russia and the FPÖ, the name of Gudenus is quite significant. Johann Gudenus, born in 1976, has been in politics for decades despite his young age. He began his career in the FPÖ youth organization (“Ring freier Jugend”), which he led from 2000 to 2009. Since 2005 he has also been a member of the Viennese parliament. Gudenus is following in the footsteps of his father John, who was a federal MP and has been sentenced for engagement in National Socialism-related activities.¹⁰¹

In 2005, Johann Gudenus finished his studies at Vienna's Academy of Diplomacy (“Diplomatische Akademie Wien”). He had attended a course dealing with “Russia in world-politics today” at the Diplomatic Academy of Moscow.¹⁰² In 2004 he was awarded a language certificate by the Russian Embassy in Vienna. It is not clear what triggered Gudenus' interest in Russia.

⁹⁷ Simone Brunner, “Oligarch Malofejew: ‘Sagt Doch: Wir Sind Die EU, Wir Sind Sodomiten,’” *Profil.at*, June 2, 2016, <https://www.profil.at/ausland/oligarch-malofejew-sagt-wir-eu-sodomiten-6394808>.

⁹⁸ Derstandard.at, “Gudenus Kritisiert in Moskau EU, NATO und ‘Homosexuellenlobby,’” 12 September 2014, *derStandard.at*, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://derstandard.at/2000005507900/Vortrag-in-Moskau-Gudenus-kritisiert-EU-NATO-und-Homosexuellenlobby>.

⁹⁹ See for example Josef Joffe in „Die Zeit“ about Putin’s remarks- Josef Joffe, “Der Dekadente Westen,” *Die Zeit*, June 11, 2015, sec. Politik, <http://www.zeit.de/2015/24/wladimir-putin-westen-dekadenz-zeitgeist>.

¹⁰⁰ Irene Brickner, “Die Pläne Der FPÖ Für Lesben Und Schwule,” *derStandard.at*, April 28, 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000035915009/Was-die-FPOe-mit-Lesben-und-Schwulen-vorhat>.

¹⁰¹ Christa Zöchling, “FPÖ: Johann Gudenus, Die Unheimliche Nummer Zwei,” *Profil.at*, August 7, 2015, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/fpoe-johann-gudenus-die-unheimliche-nummer-zwei-5790699>.

¹⁰² The Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is a diplomatic institution established in 1934 to teach and train the diplomatic and consular staff of the Soviet foreign service. It was initially set up by the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the USSR. In 1974, it transformed into the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, and after 1991 was renamed to the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

In an interview with the Russian media outlet “Vzglyad,” Gudenus said he had fallen in love with a Russian girl during his summer courses in Moscow “a long time ago.”¹⁰³ His official CV states that he attended summer courses at the Lomonosov Moscow State University between 1995 and 2003.¹⁰⁴

Gudenus has proposed pro-Russia policies for a long time. He suggested building a broad-gauge railway track from Moscow to Vienna¹⁰⁵ and repeatedly demanded an end to the EU sanctions against Russia.¹⁰⁶ He called for the deportation of Chechen asylum seekers from Austria several times.¹⁰⁷ In 2012, Gudenus and fellow FPÖ MP Johannes Hübner, a lawyer and FPÖ’s foreign policy speaker, met with Chechen dictator Ramsan Kadyrov (an appointee of Putin) in Grosny to talk about Chechen asylum seekers in Austria. Gudenus said he was “convinced that there is no political repression from Kadyrov against opposition members”¹⁰⁸ – an absurd statement in the light of the well-known human rights abuses, including killing and torture, of the political opposition in Chechnya.¹⁰⁹ Hübner said he is “looking forward to more cooperation with Chechnya” regarding a platform for the deportation of Chechen asylum seekers.¹¹⁰ More than 30.000 refugees from Chechnya live in Austria, making it one of the biggest ethnicities among migrants in Austria,¹¹¹ which made his proposal more than just a symbolic gesture.

Gudenus, who declined to be interviewed for this study, travelled to Russia and its close allies several times. In 2016, Gudenus visited the Belarusian capital of Minsk for three days,¹¹² where he met with Mayor Andrei Schorez to discuss economic cooperation in the form of a “Business Forum Belarus-

¹⁰³ Sofia Khomenko, “FPÖ: Aus Liebe Zu Russland – Mokant.at,” June 30, 2015, <http://mokant.at/1506-fpoe-russland-ukraine-geld/>.

¹⁰⁴ Wien.gv.at, “Lebenslauf: Mag. M.A.I.S. Johann Gudenus,” 2013, <https://www.wien.gv.at/advuew/internet/AdvPrSrv.asp?Layout=llanzeige&Type=K&PERSONCD=2005110714513115&HIST=>.

¹⁰⁵ Ots.at, “Gudenus: Ausbau Der Russischen Breitspurbahn Bis Wien Wäre Wirtschaftlicher Benefit,” *Ots.at*, April 8, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160408_OTS0137/gudenus-ausbau-der-russischen-breitspurbahn-bis-wien-waere-wirtschaftlicher-benefit.

¹⁰⁶ Ots.at, “Gudenus Fordert: Sofortige Aufhebung Der Russland-Sanktionen,” *Ots.at*, June 24, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160624_OTS0152/gudenus-fordert-sofortige-aufhebung-der-russland-sanktionen.

¹⁰⁷ Ots.at, “FP-Gudenus: Immer Noch 40.000 Tschetschenen in Österreich,” *Ots.at*, January 19, 2015, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20150119_OTS0149/fp-gudenus-immer-noch-40000-tschetschenen-in-oesterreich.

¹⁰⁸ Derstandard.at, “Tschetschenen: Gudenus Sieht Trotz Verfolgung Keinen Asylgrund,” *derStandard.at*, September 20, 2014, <http://derstandard.at/2000005837318/Gudenus-Trotz-Verfolgung-hat-Grossteil-der-Tschetschenen-keinen-Asylgrund>.

¹⁰⁹ Hrw.org, “Human Rights Violations in Russia’s North Caucasus,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/28/human-rights-violations-russias-north-caucasus>.

¹¹⁰ Eduard Steiner, “Gudenus: Geheime FPÖ-Mission Nach Tschetschenien,” *Die Presse*, February 7, 2012, http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/730447/Gudenus_Geheime-FPOeMission-nach-Tschetschenien.

¹¹¹ Medienservicestelle.at, “Rund 30.000 TschetschenInnen in Österreich | Medien Servicestelle Neue ÖsterreicherInnen,” 30, accessed April 20, 2017, http://medienservicestelle.at/migration_bewegt/2015/02/26/rund-30-000-tschetscheninnen-in-oesterreich/.

¹¹² Diepresse.com, “Vizebürgermeister Auf Reisen: Gudenus Besucht Minsk,” *Die Presse*, June 15, 2016, http://diepresse.com/home/panorama/oesterreich/5020528/Vizebuergermeister-auf-Reisen_Gudenus-besucht-Minsk.

Austria.”¹¹³ 2015 he visited the Viennese Ball in Moscow to “set a sign against EU-sanctions.”¹¹⁴ In September 2014, together with MP Monika Mühlwerth (FPÖ) he was an “election observer” at the municipal election in St. Petersburg, which he called “very correct and democratically legitimate.”¹¹⁵

Patrick Gensing, who is a reporter for German newscast “Tagesschau” and author of a book about right-wing radicals and their social media-strategies,¹¹⁶ thinks those visits have a rather symbolic function for Russia:

“These missions have the purpose of legitimizing those elections and referendums and make them appear democratic. It’s quite [a] paradox that at the same time Russia proposes sending monitors to elections in Western countries to undermine their legitimacy.”

In the summer of 2014, Gudenus had also visited Moscow with Johannes Hübner, where he spoke at a „World Congress of Families” (the event is known as the “Forum on the Large Family and the Future of Humanity”) which was partly sponsored by Malofeev’s St. Basil the Great Foundation. Gudenus, toeing the well-known party line on Brussels, called Europe a “puppet of Brussels and the US”, of which he was “ashamed.” He also spoke of the EU as a “lobby for homosexuals” who had “their own TV-channels and newspapers.” Gudenus’ speech, which, according to Austrian newspaper “Kurier,” was delivered in an “imperfect, but very good Russian,” drew heavy criticism from many other politicians in Austria.¹¹⁷ But as Peter Hajek, a political analyst,¹¹⁸ notes: “Most voters don’t care about foreign policy positions.” Visits to other countries and foreign policy ideas become important when they affect domestic politics, Hajek says: “Of course some potential voters could be repelled by Gudenus’ trips, some could support it, but most won’t notice.” As we could see in the polls, while lifting the sanctions is supported by the Austrian electorate for “selfish” purposes, Austrians are not very sympathetic towards Russia in general. Therefore, journalists were also puzzled as to why Norbert Hofer, candidate for the presidential elections in Austria, was repeatedly proposing pro-Russian policies beyond lifting the sanctions, especially towards the end of the campaign this fall. “The victory of Donald Trump in the US-election apparently encouraged Hofer to propose a completely new foreign policy for Austria,” Eric Frey wrote in DerStandard, who further noted that the “the remarks by Strache and Hofer from last weekend (in the middle of November, n.b.) leave no

¹¹³ Stefan Hofer, “Gudenus’ Mission in Minsk - Mit einem ‘Odin’ im Gepäck,” June 16, 2016, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/gudenus-mission-in-minsk-mit-einem-odin-im-gepaeck/204.821.900>.

¹¹⁴ Fpoe-wien.at, “Gudenus: Starke Freiheitliche Delegation Am Wien-Ball in Moskau Setzt Ein Zeichen Gegen Die EU-Sanktionen!,” June 7, 2015, <http://www.fpoe-wien.at/news-datail/artikel/gudenus-starke-freiheitliche-delegation-am-wien-ball-in-moskau-setzt-ein-zeichen-gegen-die-eu-sankt-1>.

¹¹⁵ Tt.com, “Wahlbeobachter Gudenus Lobt Urnengang in St. Petersburg | Tiroler Tageszeitung Online - Nachrichten von Jetzt!,” *Tiroler Tageszeitung Online*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.tt.com/politik/weltpolitik/8982294-91/wahlbeobachter-gudenus-lobt-urnengang-in-st.-petersburg.csp>.

¹¹⁶ Patrick Gensing, *Rechte Hetze Im Netz - Eine Unterschätzte Gefahr*, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Son Kim, “‘Homosexuellenlobby’: Scharfe Kritik an Gudenus,” September 13, 2014, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/homosexuellenlobby-scharfe-kritik-an-gudenus/85.321.616>.

¹¹⁸ After the interview with Mr. Hajek, he conducted a poll for the Austrian-Russian Friendship Society, which claims that a majority of Austrians are against the EU-sanctions. This poll has been used by FPÖ politicians to prove their points, see: Fpoe.at, “HC Strache: Russland-Sanktionen Sofort Aufheben!,” November 17, 2016, <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/hc-strache-russland-sanktionen-sonst-aufheben-1/>.

doubt: (...) Austria, ruled by them, would turn towards the East, economically and mentally.”¹¹⁹ After Donald Trump’s election victory, the FPÖ occasionally presented Hofer as a politician who could maintain healthy relations with the superpowers (US/RU) better than someone like van der Bellen, who disliked both Trump and Putin. But this strategy did not play out well.

The Freedom Party also showed their support after the annexation of Crimea, among other likeminded organizations. In March 2014, Gudenus had been an “election observer” at the referendum in Crimea.¹²⁰ Once again, MP of FPÖ Johannes Hübner accompanied him.

The trip and their mission were organized by a Belgian right wing-extremist named Luc Michel and his “Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections.” Another Austrian politician there was Ewald Stadler, who had been a member of the FPÖ until 2007 but then left the party for the BZÖ, a splinter party founded by former members of the FPÖ which shares its position towards Russia. He had also been a member of Austria's Federal Parliament and the European Parliament. When asked by Austrian newspaper “Kleine Zeitung,” Stadler said he did not know where the money for the Crimea-visit came from (Stadler also declined to be interviewed for this paper). Gudenus said to the newspaper “Heute” that he had not known Luc Michel before the trip, and Michel had told him “he was a leftist.”¹²¹ The Social Democratic Party based part of its campaign for the European Parliament elections on denouncing Gudenus’ visit to Crimea.¹²²

The official meetings between FPÖ and Russian politicians have been going on for over a decade. Political analyst Peter Hajek thinks those efforts could be part of an effort to show voters that a right-wing party like the FPÖ is not isolated in Europe. Before Strache became head of FPÖ in 2005, Jörg Haider had been in charge of the party. While Haider had not been chairman since 2000, as the governor of Carinthia he held a powerful position and was also leading the party behind the scenes.¹²³ Haider was also known for dubious international relationships that shocked fellow Austrian politicians. But not with Russians: he met with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein¹²⁴ and had close ties to Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif.¹²⁵ “Haider was addicted to attention - and he needed money. Gaddafi and Hussein could provide both,” said historian Thomas Riegler, in an interview for this report.

¹¹⁹ Eric Frey, “Hofers Abschied Vom Westen,” *derStandard.at*, November 21, 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000047925415/Hofers-Abschied-vom-Westen>.

¹²⁰ Profil.at, “Krim-Beobachter: FPÖ-Abgeordnete von Moskauer Agenturen Vermittelt,” *Profil.at*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/krim-beobachter-fpoe-abgeordnete-moskauer-agenturen-373711>.

¹²¹ Heute.at, “Wirbel Um Krim-Reise von Gudenus Und Stadler,” *Heute.at*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.heute.at/politik/news/story/14203532>.

¹²² Eu-wahl.info, “Antisemitische Organisation Zahlte Für Gudenus Krim- Besuch,” 2014, http://noe.spoe.at/sites/test.noe.spoe.at/files/news_eu_wahl_19_03_2014.pdf.

¹²³ For a description of the party’s internal dynamics, see: Petra Stuiber, “Volkstribun Jörg Haider Gibt Sich Als Meister Der Spiele: - WELT,” *DIE WELT*, March 13, 2001, <https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article439202/Volkstribun-Joerg-Haider-gibt-sich-als-Meister-der-Spiele.html>.

¹²⁴ Holger Kulick, “Irak-Reise: Entsetzen Über Haiders Besuch Bei Saddam - SPIEGEL ONLINE - Politik,” *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, February 12, 2002, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/irak-reise-entsetzen-ueber-haiders-besuch-bei-saddam-a-182066.html>.

¹²⁵ Diepresse.com, “Gaddafi, Saddam & Jörg Haider,” *Die Presse*, August 3, 2010, <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/585333/Gaddafi-Saddam-Joerg-Haider>.

The Arab dictators were thus also able to symbolically “break up” the Western alliance against them, according to Riegler. Haider left the FPÖ in 2005 to found the new party BZÖ, while still governor of Carinthia. In 2007, he allegedly received EUR 2,9 million to support the citizenship applications of two Russian businessmen.¹²⁶ One year later, Haider died in a car crash, precluding any prosecution for corruption.

The relationships between the new FPÖ-leadership and Russian actors intensified quickly. Strache and Gudenus met with Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov as early as 2008. They were accompanied by a group of FPÖ-politicians: Johannes Hübner, Harald Vilimsky (then party secretary, now MEP) and Barbara Kappel, who held no position in politics or the FPÖ, and is now a member of the European Parliament.¹²⁷

Gudenus is on the executive board of the “Austrian-Russian Friendship Society,” along with former FPÖ MP Peter Fichtenbauer and Barbara Kappel. Hübner is in the presidium of the association.

Cooperation and coordination agreement with United Russia

Measured against their 2014 (Ukraine crisis) peak, the FPÖ's pro-Russian enthusiasm and activities saw a certain reduction in 2015, presumably because of fears of a public backlash.

This restraint, however, vanished almost immediately after the presidential run-off elections of December 4, 2016, which brought the FPÖ closer than ever to the highest public office in Austria. Only two weeks later, a high-profile delegation – featuring, among others, presidential candidate Norbert Hofer, Strache, Hübner, Vilimsky, and Gudenus – visited Moscow to sign a working agreement (erroneously dubbed a “partnership treaty” by Strache at first) with the United Russia (UR) party of Medvedev. It is the first agreement of that kind signed between UR and a European far-right party.

According to *Wochenblick*, an Austrian weekly closely linked to the FPÖ, the accord had been prepared for months, with Detlev Wimmer, the Freedomite vice-mayor of Linz, playing a key role.¹²⁸ The agreement, signed by Strache and UR Secretary-General for International Affairs Sergey Zheleznyak, states that the two parties will, among other things, hold bilateral consultations, exchange information on a wide range of policy issues, organize conferences, and cooperate to develop economic relations between the two countries.

¹²⁶ Haider wanted the two Russians, who were building a hotel in Carinthia, to invest in the career of young Formula one-racer Patrick Friesacher, whom he saw as a brand ambassador for Carinthia. Haider's secretary Franz Koloini was accused of laundering the money, and he and the two Russian businessmen were acquitted in October 2011. In Austria, the federal government routinely hands out citizenship to people who have invested in the country. This fast-track to Citizenship is called „Awarding the citizenship due to special interests of the Republic“.

¹²⁷ Ots.at, “Überaus Herzlicher Gedankenaustausch von HC Strache Und Moskauer Oberbürgermeister Luschkow,” Ots.at, December 16, 2008, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20081216_OT0054/ueberaus-herzlicher-gedankenaustausch-von-hc-strache-und-moskauer-oberbuergmeister-luschkow.

¹²⁸ *Wochenblick*.at, “Linzer Vize-Bürgermeister Hat Putin-Deal Eingefädelt,” *Wochenblick*, December 20, 2016, <https://www.wochenblick.at/linzer-vize-buergermeister-hat-putin-deal-eingefaedelt/>.

Also, they declare a shared goal of “raising younger generations in the spirit of patriotism and work enjoyment.”¹²⁹ Back in Vienna, Strache claimed that the cooperation had been initiated from the Russian side¹³⁰. Almost simultaneously, a delegation of the Federation Council – the Russian Upper House – paid its Austrian counterpart a visit in Vienna. When asked to comment on the FPÖ–UR agreement, delegation head Konstantin Kosachev and Andrej Klimov, another participant, said UR had extended invitations for cooperation to all parties in the Austrian parliament.¹³¹

Shortly after the agreement was signed, Austrian daily Österreich reported that FPÖ Secretary-General Herbert Kickl, commonly viewed as the chief strategist of the party and a key advisor to Strache, was “not exactly happy” with Gudenus's “Russia love” – the first indication of a rift on the issue within the Freedomite leaders' circle.¹³²

The agreement allowed Strache to pose as a statesman and a politician who strikes deals and maintains close relations with world leaders – i.e. someone who is fit for chancellorship. An interesting question, though, is why Russia made its first big Austrian political deal with FPÖ. Russia has stayed away from openly cooperating with the FPÖ in the past as it felt its interest were well-represented by SPÖ and ÖVP. This development indicates that they are now intrigued by the prospect of the FPÖ becoming a governing party soon.¹³³ In an interview with an Austrian daily, Russian political scientist Andrej Kulikov has argued the agreement was an asset for Russia against the background of growing international isolation and that the FPÖ (like other far-right parties) is seen as a force that could contribute to better EU-Russia relations in the near future, thereby fostering Russian interests, and at the same time contributing to the EU's disintegration.¹³⁴

Freedomite economic interests

The services former FPÖ leader Jörg Haider rendered to Russian businessmen followed a primarily financial rationale, and the pre-Strache FPÖ did not entertain any political partnership with Russia¹³⁵.

129 VEREINBARUNG über Zusammenwirken und Kooperation zwischen der Allrussischen politischen Partei “EINIGES RUSSLAND” und der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (copy at the DÖW).

¹³⁰ FAZ, 21 December 2016, 6

¹³¹ Ots.at, “Russland Sucht Den Parlamentarischen Dialog.”

¹³² Oe24.at, “FPÖ-Kritik Am Strache-Vertrauten Gudenus & Blauer Richtungsstreit,” December 30, 2016, <http://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/daniel/FPOe-Kritik-am-Strache-Vertrauten-Gudenus-blauer-Richtungsstreit/263853936>.

¹³³ Diepresse.com, “Putins Flirt Mit Rechts-Außen-Parteien,” *Die Presse*, January 26, 2017, <http://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5160552/Putins-Flirt-mit-RechtsaussenParteien>.

¹³⁴ Simone Brunner, “Ein Moskauer Blick Auf Die FPÖ-Reise - Wiener Zeitung Online,” *Österreich Politik - Nachrichten - Wiener Zeitung Online*, December 21, 2016, http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/oesterreich/politik/863486_Besser-als-nichts.html.

¹³⁵ Tiroler Tageszeitung Online, “Kooperation Besiegelt: Wie Die FPÖ Zur Kreml-Partnerin Wurde | Tiroler Tageszeitung Online - Nachrichten von Jetzt!,” *Tiroler Tageszeitung Online*, December 19, 2016, <http://www.tt.com/politik/weltpolitik/12402602-91/kooperation-besiegelt-wie-die-fpö-zur-kreml-partnerin-wurde.csp>.

In contrast, at least some individual current FPÖ officials have been “involved in dubious deals and processes which are partly ideological and partly financial,” as Shekhovtsov¹³⁶ notes. Johann Gudenus, now vice-mayor of Vienna, established business ties with Russia in 2006. Until 2010, he led a company called “Donowan Invest Trading,” which officially traded cotton,¹³⁷ and had been owned by a Russian man known as Roman Veksler since 2007. The company has been liquidated since then.

There was also a sister Russian company called “Donowan Invest Trading Rus.” The Newspaper “Die Zeit” reported the Austrian company had debts as high as 300.000 Euro, and 400.000 Euro for the Russian sister company. Gudenus did not want to answer questions from “Die Zeit” about his relationship to Russia and his business activities there then and declined to be interviewed for this paper.¹³⁸ According to online magazine *Mokant*, Gudenus left the company due to „internal difficulties”.

Barbara Kappel, who held a mandate to Vienna’s local parliament from 2010 to 2014 and is now an FPÖ MEP, had business engagement in Russia and Ukraine between 2009 and 2011^{139,140} as the vice-president of a scheme called Aquabionica. She traded Russian “bionic water” between 2009 and 2011, selling this “enriched water” in Russia and Ukraine. Critics have called it an „esoteric product” sold through a “pyramid scheme,” which the company denied.¹⁴¹ According to “Die Zeit”, Kappel had ties with the Georgian investor Lewan Pirweli, who visited Strache in 2008 to tell him about the “true backgrounds of the Russian-Georgian war.” After Pirwelis visit, the FPÖ began defending Russia’s actions in Georgia, although the conflict was not relevant for the vast majority of the Austrian population¹⁴². Between 2006 and 2015, Kappel served as the general manager of Austrian Technologies, a federal agency that “promotes Austrian businesses abroad, but specifically in Russia”. Ms. Kappel also declined to be interviewed for this paper.

Accompanying Pirweli at this meeting was the Russian journalist Maksim Shevchenko, who “Die Zeit” called FPÖ’s main liaison in Moscow. Shevchenko is a TV-presenter and host of the shows “Judge for yourself” and “In the context” at the national (and therefore, Kremlin-controlled) Channel One. Shevchenko founded a think tank called “Centre for Strategic Studies of Religion and Politics of the Modern World” and is editor-in-chief of the magazine “Caucasian policy.”¹⁴³ Shevchenko later admitted to organizing Gudenus’ trip to Chechnya, and meeting him there.

¹³⁶ АБТОР: Anton Shekhovtsov, “Freedom Party of Austria: Pro-Russian Far Right Lobbyists and Merchants of Deception,” accessed April 27, 2017, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/06/freedom-party-of-austria-far-right.html>.

¹³⁷ According to mokant.at, the Russian register of commerce said „Donovan Invest Rus” was trading „fur, clothes, shoes, furniture and non-electronic household items”.

¹³⁸ Herwig G. Höller, “FPÖ: Moskaus Blaue Freunde,” *Die Zeit*, September 29, 2014, sec. Politik, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/40/russland-oesterreich-kreml-fpoe>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Shekhovtsov, “Freedom Party of Austria.”

¹⁴¹ Derstandard.at, “FP-Kappel Wirbt in Osteuropa Für Bionisches Wasser,” *derStandard.at*, October 26, 2011, <http://derstandard.at/1319181294958/FP-Kappel-wirbt-in-Osteuropa-fuer-bionisches-Wasser>.

¹⁴² Höller, “FPÖ.”

¹⁴³ Andreas Umland, “New Extremely Right-Wing Intellectual Circles in Russia: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Isborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, August 5, 2013,

In September 2010, FPÖ's Tyrol Chairman Gerald Hauser invited 20 Russian orphans to Austria for a two-week holiday. The welcoming committee also included Gudenus, Kappel, Strache, and MP Andreas Karlsböck. In May 2011, the same four FPÖ officials plus Johannes Hübner met then Governor Boris Gromov in Moscow. Referring to the orphans' visit, Strache stated that "children are goodwill ambassadors, and it is through children that we hope to further develop cultural and economic cooperation with the Moscow Oblast"¹⁴⁴.

Money transfer speculations

Despite the dense business network between politicians of the FPÖ and Russian stakeholders, there is no proof that the FPÖ has ever received money from Russian donors.

So far, there has been a lot of speculation, yet no evidence on Russian money transfers to the FPÖ. In principle, the FPÖ is not in dire need of external financing. As Sickinger points out, generous party financing by the Austrian state and the (illegal) transfer of moneys from the parliamentary faction to the party itself have allowed for a rapid economic recovery after Haider left the FPÖ seven to eight million Euro in debt in 2005.¹⁴⁵ Due to loopholes in the legal requirements for the disclosure of funding and donations, available reports on party financing have not given (and will not give) any indication of Russian financial flows to the FPÖ.¹⁴⁶ Reporting requirements can be circumvented by accepting loans instead of donations, as was the case with the Front National in France. While loans do have to be reported, the recipient is not required to disclose the donor. Also, loans can turn into de facto donations if the donor passes on demanding immediate payment. However, in such cases, the recipient would be subject to the donor's goodwill, creating dependency and in turn pressure to behave in a way that pleases the donor. On an individual level, options for directly or indirectly remunerating politicians abound. While mandataries are generally required by law to report their paid activities, contracts made with MPs acting as freelance professionals are exempt to that rule. To investigate financial connections under this scheme, it is necessary to consider perks such as paid-for visits to Russia, and gifts handed out during those visits.

Identitarian Movement Austria (IBÖ)

A new movement with connections to the Suworow Institute is the "Identitäre Bewegung" (IB), formed after the French "Génération Identitaire," which is itself a rather new group created in 2003 by former members of the far-right party Front National. Its Austrian section was founded in 2012. The movement is perceived to be right-wing extremist, and is monitored by German and Austrian law enforcement agencies. According to the DÖW, some members were formerly engaged in organized neo-Nazism.¹⁴⁷

http://www.academia.edu/4195331/New_Extremely_Right-Wing_Intellectual_Circles_in_Russia_The_Anti-Orange_Committee_the_Isborsk_Club_and_the_Florian_Geyer_Club.

¹⁴⁴ Shekhovtsov, "Freedom Party of Austria."

¹⁴⁵ Hubert Sickinger, first project workshop at the DÖW, 14 November 2016.

¹⁴⁶ In theory, donations over €3,500 must be disclosed vis-à-vis the Austrian Court of Audit, and donations from abroad must not exceed €2,500.

¹⁴⁷ Doew.at, "Rechtsextreme Demonstrieren in Wien (Identitäre Bewegung Österreich)."

The main concept of the “Identitäre Bewegung” is “ethno-pluralism”, a form of “cultural racism.” They argue that different ethnicities should not “mix”. According to their ideology, the “identity” of the West is endangered by “Islamisation”. The movement tries to garner media coverage through various ploys, such as occupying deserted border stations or stopping theatre plays in order to demonstrate. It has received attention with such methods, especially since the asylum crisis began.

The “Identitäre Bewegung” is seen as part of the “New Right”, which utilizes different strategies than previous fascist movements. In the 1950s and 1960s, former Austrian Nazis and international supporters of the Nazi-regime wanted to build a “strong Europe” which could be a “third power besides the US and the USSR”, says historian Riegler.

The modern right-wing extremists are “anti-American, anti-liberal and interested in Russia as a source of financing,” says Riegler, who has done research on far-right movements after 1945, “while Russia can use them as a Trojan Horse to infiltrate the European Union.” He thinks that the connections are rather opportunistic, although there could be “romantic Eurasia-fans” on both sides.

One of them could be Alexander Markovics. Until 2016, he was the spokesperson of the Austrian IB-chapter. He left this position and is now responsible for a “working group theory” within the “Identitäre Bewegung.” Markovics is building up a network with Eastern European and Russian contacts. He has held speeches at the Suworow Institute, done interviews with Suworow Speaker Poppel for GloriaTV, and written a portrait of the pro-Russian activist Algis Klimaitis, a right-wing extremist from Lithuania, for the website of the “Identitäre Bewegung.”¹⁴⁸ There he wrote that Klimaitis has a “warm heart” and is a “friendly man,” who is right for “demanding that Europe ends the US-hegemony.”¹⁴⁹

Markovics has also shown interest in the work of Alexander Dugin, Putin’s “Eurasia”-ideologist. Markovics interviewed Dugin as early as mid-2014; curiously, the interview was published more than a year afterwards at “identitaere-generation.info,” the official website of the movement.¹⁵⁰ Markovics has also written several essays on Dugin’s ideology, which proposes a “multi-polar” world to end US-hegemony – a typical point of Eurasian discussions. He recommends Dugin’s works to everyone who is interested in the future of Europe.¹⁵¹ Right-wing extremists such as the Identitäre Bewegung and Dugin share certain values, explains Gensing: “They are against minority-rights, they are nationalists, they have an authoritarian world-view - there are a lot of similarities.” Markovics himself says that criticism of “racism, antisemitism and totalitarianism” are important teachings of Dugin that influenced the Identitäre Bewegung, which is a clear contradiction to their racist stance, as one of the

¹⁴⁸ Alexander Markovics, “Video-Interview #2 Mit Patrick Poppel,” n.d., <http://www.identitaere-generation.info/tag/suworow-institut/>.

¹⁴⁹ Alexander Markovics, “Porträt: Algis Klimaitis,” n.d., <http://www.identitaere-generation.info/portraet-algis-klimaitis/>.

¹⁵⁰ Alexander Markovics, “Interview – Alexander Dugin,” n.d., <http://www.identitaere-generation.info/interview-alexander-dugin/>.

¹⁵¹ Alexander Markovics, “Buchvorstellung: Konflikte Der Zukunft,” n.d., <http://www.identitaere-generation.info/konflikte-der-zukunft/>.

main talking points of the Identitarian Movement is the theory of a “Great Exchange.” This theory suggests that politicians (“the Elite”) are actively swapping “Austrians” with “foreigners.”¹⁵²

But according to Markovics, not everything is perfect in Russia. When speaking to the author, he praises the “Russian patriotism” and Russia’s “fight against Islamist terror and for a multi-polar world”. But he criticizes corruption that has spread since the Yeltsin-era. “I see it like Alexander Dugin”, Markovics says, “I can only recommend Dugin’s book ‘Putin vs Putin - Vladimir Putin viewed from the right.’”

In September 2015, when the asylum crisis was peaking in Austria, Markovics was interviewed by the German-language Russian channel RT Deutsch for the first time. He was also RT's “expert” regarding presidential elections in Austria the following spring. In September 2016, Markovics was seen helping FPÖ members handing out flyers for their presidential candidate Norbert Hofer.

RT Deutsch repeatedly reported on the “Identitäre Bewegung” and its actions in a way that supported the movement’s PR-strategy; whereas the German-speaking Sputnik relied on Patrick Poppel, who was on the Suworow Institute's executive board with Sputnik’s correspondent Igor Belov. “Right-wing extremists can network through organizations like the Suworow Institute”, said Natascha Strobl, author of a book about the “Identitäre Bewegung,” in an interview for this paper.

There are even more ties between the “Identitäre Bewegung” and Russia. Alexander Dvorak-Stocker, an activist for the movement, is a member of the so-called “Center for Continental Cooperation,”¹⁵³ a think tank based in Munich. While Dvorak-Stocker formally has no organizational position at the “Identitäre Bewegung”, he is quite powerful because of his background. His father Wolfgang is manager of the Stocker publishing house in Austria whose subsidiary “Ares Verlag” is known for the publication of extremist right-wing literature in German. Ares also holds shares (49%) of “1848 Medienvielfalt Verlags GmbH,” which is the company behind “unzensuriert.at,” a far-right media outlet very close to FPÖ.¹⁵⁴

Alexander Dvorak-Stocker has appeared at several demonstrations in support of the “Identitäre Bewegung”. It is not clear what brought him to the “Center for Continental Cooperation,” which is led by a young Russian named Yuri Kofner and is pushing the Eurasian ideology Dugin established. Kofner has studied at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and seems to have vast financial resources. His social media accounts show him traveling to conferences around (Eastern) Europe; his think tank doesn't seem to be short of money either. Kofner has taken selfies with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and the former Austrian chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel. His organization is listed as an official partner of the RIAC, the “Russian International Affairs Council,” which is a think tank financed by the Russian Foreign Ministry.

¹⁵² Deraustausch.ifoesterreich.at, “Der Grosse Austausch,” 2015, <https://deraustausch.ifoesterreich.at/>.

¹⁵³ Center for Continental Cooperation, “Center for Continental Cooperation: Member List,” *Center for Continental Cooperation*, December 19, 2015, <http://greater-europe.org/members>.

¹⁵⁴ Austrian company register, accessed October 10, 2016

Kofner also writes for the pro-Russian, far-right German magazine “Compact,” which in turn featured articles by “Identitäre Generation” members Alexander Markovics, Martin Sellner and Alina Wychera. Kofner also turned up at an event of the Suworow-Institute when Alexander Markovics held a speech there.¹⁵⁵ Suworow spokesperson Patrick Poppel is also a member of the board with Kofner’s Center for Continental Cooperation. “The goal seems to be the creation of a pro-Russian counter-public in the German-speaking public, where different actors can appear as ‘experts’ on certain topics”, says Gensing. He thinks that these magazines and organizations can influence the public discourse in Germany and other German-speaking countries.

The so-called Identitarian Movement has managed to garner a lot of public attention in Austria since 2012 through actions, online campaigning and aggressive communication tactics. Their close ties with (pro-) Russian actors are visible. The group and several of its speakers have repeatedly been featured by Russian media (RT, Sputnik).¹⁵⁶ In 2016, *Der Standard* noted that Vienna was emerging as a “hub for ‘Eurasian’ propagandists.”¹⁵⁷ In October 2015, IBÖ leader Martin Sellner met Yuri Kofner (*1988) at a far-right conference in Berlin and was interviewed by him.¹⁵⁸ Kofner is the chairman of the Eurasian Movement of the Russian Federation (eurasian-movement.ru) and director of its European offshoot, the Munich-based think tank “Center for Continental Cooperation” (CCC). In its mission statement, the CCC calls for “[t]he liberation of Europe from US hegemony in all sectors of society: the military, political, economic, cultural and media sectors,” for “[t]he resurgence of traditional European identity and culture”, and the ending of “mass immigration”, among other things.¹⁵⁹ Its aim is to become “the biggest anti-transatlantic think tank in Europe.”¹⁶⁰ Kofner, a MGIMO graduate, has also appeared as an “expert” from the Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy, an organization in close proximity to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also heads the Eurasian Research Club at MGIMO.¹⁶¹ MGIMO is also listed as a “partner” on the CCC website.

¹⁵⁵ Fabian Schmid and Markus Sulzbacher, “Identitäre Grüße Aus Moskau: Rechtsextreme Allianz Mit Dem Osten,” *derStandard.at*, June 10, 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000038542175/Identitaere-Gruesse-aus-Moskau-Rechtsextreme-Allianz-in-den-Osten>.

¹⁵⁶ RT Play, “Hipster Power: The Anti-Immigration Identitarian Movement, a Group of Self-Described ‘Right-Wing Hipsters’, Is Gaining Strength in Austria - Facebook Post,” May 24, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/RTvids/videos/1221622227848028/>.

¹⁵⁷ Schmid and Sulzbacher, “Identitäre Grüße Aus Moskau.”

¹⁵⁸ The interview, in which Sellner calls Putin “a great statesman ..., a true patriot and a true identitarian”, was included here - Center for Continental Cooperation, “‘Was Ist Putinismus? Die Westliche Postmoderne Und Putins Alternative’ – Ein Vortrag in Wien,” *Center for Continental Cooperation*, November 8, 2016, <http://greater-europe.org/event/was-ist-putinismus-die-westliche-postmoderne-und-putins-alternative-ein-vortrag-in-wien>.

¹⁵⁹ Center for Continental Cooperation, “About Us,” *Center for Continental Cooperation*, December 19, 2015, <http://greater-europe.org/about>.

¹⁶⁰ Center for Continental Cooperation, “‘Grosseuropa von Lissabon Bis Wladiwostok’ – Ein Vortrag in Wien,” *Center for Continental Cooperation*, January 8, 2017, <http://greater-europe.org/event/grosseuropa-von-lissabon-bis-wladiwostok-ein-vortrag-in-wien>.

¹⁶¹ International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), “Labor Market and Migration across the Eurasian Continent - Short Biographies,” 2016, http://www.iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/researchPrograms/AdvancedSystemsAnalysis/Short_biographies_6_workshop_final.pdf.

Contact between Sellner/Kofner and the IBÖ/CCC, respectively, has intensified ever since the previously mentioned encounter. In December 2015, at the Greater Europe Conference in Moscow, Kofner met Maximilian Dvorak-Stocker (IBÖ), who appears as a “member” and “expert” on the CCC's website. Dvorak-Stocker's romantic partner, Bernadette Conrads, is also an Identitarian activist and ran for the 2015 Vienna city elections on a Freedomite ticket. Another key figure in terms of IBÖ ties with Russia is Alexander Markovics, former chairman of the IBÖ. Markovics made his first appearance as an expert for RT Deutsch in September 2015. In spring 2016, he stepped down from his IBÖ chairman position, presumably to be freed up for less public cross-border networking activities. Furthermore, Markovics is a recurring author for katehon.com, a Russian think tank headed by Dugin.¹⁶² He also appeared as an activist for the FPÖ's students' organization (Ring Freiheitlicher Studenten/RFS).

The Suworow Institute and Christian-Fundamentalist Circles

Gudenus' office in Vienna's town hall is now decorated with an “Icon of the holy Tsarist family.” It was given to him by Patrick Poppel, chairman of the “Suworow Institute”. Gudenus stated, when asked by DerStandard, that he had the icon for “no reason” and that he “does not know much about the Suworow Institute.”¹⁶³ But the organization and Gudenus share a common goal: to strengthen the relationship between Austria und Russia. The Suworow Institute was founded in 2014 as a reaction to the civil war in Eastern Ukraine.

It wants to “connect people who are working for an honest dialogue with Russia.”¹⁶⁴ One of the founding members was Igor Belov, who works as a correspondent for Russian media outlet Sputnik. After an article in Der Standard in July 2016, written by the author about Belov's far-right liaisons, Belov resigned from all organizational positions at the Suworow Institute, presumably after being pressured by Sputnik. Moreover, the Muscovite media organization denied being “involved in any projects with the Suworow Institute.”

Patrick Poppel, until then spokesperson of the organization, took over. Previously, Poppel had been the chairman of Rekos Vienna, a party founded by former FPÖ MP Ewald Stadler, known as one of the international monitors of the referendum in Crimea. In May 2015, Poppel also welcomed the “Night Wolves” to Vienna, a motorcycle club with an extremely nationalist agenda and ties to Vladimir Putin¹⁶⁵ and ideologist Alexander Dugin.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶²Interestingly, katehon.com also features articles by several FPÖ politicians: Johannes Hübner, Johann Gudenus, and Hans-Jörg Jenewein.

¹⁶³ Fabian Schmid, “Sputnik, FPÖ, Identitäre: Russisch-Rechtes Rendezvous in Wien,” *derStandard.at*, July 31, 2016, <http://derstandard.at/2000042003825/Sputnik-Gudenus-Identitaere-Russisch-rechtes-Rendezvous-in-Wien>.

¹⁶⁴ Suworow.at, “Wir Über Uns | Suworow Institut,” 2016, <http://www.suworow.at/wir-ueber-uns/>.

¹⁶⁵ Agence France Presse, “Night Wolves, Putin's ‘Biker Brothers,’ To Ride To Ukraine To Support Pro-Russia Cause,” *Huffington Post*, February 28, 2014, sec. WorldPost, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/28/night-wolves-ukraine-putin-biker-brothers_n_4873315.html.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Hoisl, “Putins Bikerbrüder in Wien,” *Vice*, May 4, 2015, https://www.vice.com/de_at/article/putins-bikerbuerder-in-wien-379.

The Suworow Institute's activities are quite heterogeneous. It is organizing language classes for Austrians who would like to learn Russian. It is also engaged in activities covering a wide array of topics, e.g. events teaching "martial arts of the Russian Cossacks" and video production for the "religious YouTube channel" GloriaTV. According to the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW), the institute is "actively engaging with actors from the extremist right."¹⁶⁷ The Suworow institute has held demonstrations supporting the Donbass separatists in the Viennese inner city and has ties to lower-ranking FPÖ members.¹⁶⁸ Until July 2016, Christian Machek was a member of the board at the Suworow Institute. Machek is a teacher in a catholic high school. He has written a text for the FPÖ publication "Europa am Scheideweg" (Europe at crossroads) and helped Anneliese Kitzmüller, FPÖ's speaker for family issues, write her book "Der freiheitliche Weg zur familienfreundlichsten Gesellschaft" (The Freedom Party's way to the most family-friendly society). Machek is known as a Christian hardliner and vehemently opposes women's right to abortion and equality for LGBTQ families.

Poppel himself has a history with two religious associations: he still is the secretary of the "Freunde der Rudolfsheimer Kirche" (friends of the Church of Rudolfsheim) and was chairman of the "Bruderschaft vom heiligen Erzengel Michael" (Brotherhood of the Holy Archangel Michael), which dissolved in July 2016 and was known as a very conservative catholic congregation.¹⁶⁹ Poppel and other members of the Suworow Institute also showed up at the opening of the first Russian-Orthodox monastery in Austria in June 2016.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Poppel is a contributor for katehon.com and is listed as a "member" of Yuri Kofner's CCC (which counts the SI among its "partners"). Both institutions propagate a Eurasian/Euro-Russian alliance, based on the notion that (Western) Europe should become more like Putin's Russia.¹⁷¹ Close ties also exist between the two self-proclaimed think tanks and the IBÖ. For example, the CCC lists the IB as a "partner" organization, Poppel interviewed Markovics in January 2016 for his GloriaTV channel, and both Markovics (February) and Kofner (January and November) have given talks at the SI in Vienna in 2016.¹⁷²

Julian Bruns, author of a book about the "Identitäre Bewegung" says in an interview for this analysis:

*"For Austrian and German right-wing extremists, Christianity serves as an identity marker. Strache's speeches with a cross in his hand, crosses at right-wing movement Pegida-demonstration: Those are examples for religious symbols that foremost serve a political purpose."*¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ Schmid, "Sputnik, FPÖ, Identitäre."

¹⁶⁸ "Suworow Institut - Институт Имени Суворова - Facebook Post," June 19, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Suworow.Institut/posts/1128839900507449>.

¹⁶⁹ St-michael-bal.de, "St. Michael Erzbruderschaft," 2016, <http://www.st-michael-bal.de/bruderschaft.htm>.

¹⁷⁰ Suworow Institut: „Berichte“, accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.suworow.at/berichte/>

¹⁷¹ Patrick Poppel, *Gloria.tv*, 2016, <https://gloria.tv/video/X7g81Y9xN4Ch2c3Raou9mR4W2>.

¹⁷² Kofner's talks were programmatically titled "Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok" and "Western post-Modernism and Putin's Alternative", respectively - Center for Continental Cooperation, "'Grosseuropa von Lissabon Bis Wladiwostok' – Ein Vortrag in Wien."; Center for Continental Cooperation, "'Was Ist Putinismus?'"

¹⁷³ Julian Bruns, Kathrin Glösel, and Natascha Strobl, *Die Identitären: Handbuch zur Jugendbewegung der Neuen Rechten in Europa* (Münster: Unrast, 2014).

Bruns does not think that religion plays an important role for right-wing extremists. Religion is rather used as a symbol for political identity. But there are some connections between the far-right and Christian fundamentalists, such as fighting against abortion or “Gender”-policies. One example is the “March of Families,”¹⁷⁴ which takes place in Vienna each year on the same date as the Rainbow Parade in support of LGBTQ rights. Participants in the “March of Families” are partly from extreme right-wing groups, while others have a Christian background.

It is no secret some pro-Russian activists, such as associates of the Suworow Institute or politicians within FPÖ, are framing their activities as being inspired by a religious motive. They may find allies in Christian conservatives, which are partly organized within the FPÖ. As of now, the connections between local religious extremists and right-wing extremists are rare, but it is possible that cooperation between these groups will increase, especially on issues such as abortion access and LGBTQ rights.

Neo-Nazis and Paramilitary Activities

Efforts to establish working relations with Russian comrades have not been limited to Eurofascist/'new right' counter-intellectuals as of late. Ordinary neo-Nazis and 'White Power' racists have displayed similar intentions, among them former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. Duke, who has been residing in Austria for years, partook in neo-Nazi conferences in Moscow both in 2002 and 2006¹⁷⁵. As early as 2004, he proclaimed that Whiteness included Slavic people, too, and that Russia was the “key to White survival.”¹⁷⁶ In 2006, a German-Russian Peace Movement of European Spirit was founded by Herbert Schweiger (1924 – 2011), a former Waffen-SS officer and icon of post-war Austrian (neo-)Nazism¹⁷⁷. In 2008, Schweiger's organization, with the German neo-Nazi magazine Volk in Bewegung/Der Reichsbote (ViB), hosted a meeting that was attended by Russian neo-Nazis. Shortly afterwards, ViB propagated a “Berlin-Moscow axis” and had Schweiger identify a common nature (“Wesenheit”) of the Russian and German peoples¹⁷⁸. That same year, the Austrian far-right micro-party Arbeitsgemeinschaft für demokratische Politik (AfP) addressed the “German-Russian relationship” at its annual gathering¹⁷⁹. Nonetheless, networking efforts between European and Russian neo-Nazis have been hampered somewhat both by widespread Russophobia in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and the Baltic states¹⁸⁰.

¹⁷⁴ Marschfuerdiefamilie.at, “Marsch Für Die Familie,” March 15, 2016, <http://www.marschfuerdiefamilie.at/>.

¹⁷⁵ Heribert Schiedel, *Extreme Rechte in Europa*, 1st ed. (Wien: Edition Steinbauer, 2011).

¹⁷⁶ David Duke, “Is Russia the Key to White Survival?,” *David Duke.com*, October 23, 2004, <https://davidduke.com/is-russia-the-key-to-white-survival/>.

¹⁷⁷ Schiedel, *Extreme Rechte in Europa*.

¹⁷⁸ “Volk in Bewegung” 2/2008, no. 3 (n.d.).

¹⁷⁹ Schiedel, *Extreme Rechte in Europa*.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

There is also historical baggage in the form of conflicting territorial claims, past war enmity and (post-)war crimes. In 2004, Austrian neo-Nazis declined to address the audience at a commemorative march for Rudolf Heß in Wunsiedel (Bavaria) because Russians were allowed to speak, while other Austrian neo-Nazis cadres spoke out against the exclusion of “people of good will” from former enemy states¹⁸¹.

In recent years, the crackdown on the international 'revisionist' scene prompted neo-Nazis to increasingly transfer their “revisionist” activities to Russia and the Islamic world¹⁸². Also, the Russian social network VK has come into heavy use by Western (including Austrian) neo-Nazis,¹⁸³ while some far-right organizations, including Freies Österreich and the AfP, have turned to Russian web servers and domain providers to host their online presence. Both moves seem to be motivated by the hope for better protection from observation by security agencies and critical researchers/journalists, as well as by the intention to evade what they perceive as censorship on Western platforms. In 2016, the neo-Nazi association *Freundeskreis Ulrich von Hutten*, co-founded and headed by Austria-based Lisbeth Grolitsch, held its annual guest week under the motto “Germany – Russia. A European Task”¹⁸⁴.

In terms of cross-border activities, the relationships between the Austrian and the Hungarian far-right have considerably deepened as of late, including with Hungarian actors with a manifested propensity towards physical violence. István Györkös, a neo-Nazi leader who shot a policeman in October 2016, held paramilitary drills for years near the Austrian border. It is assumed that Austrian far-rightists also took part in these events. Evidently, Austrian members of the Blood and Honour international neo-Nazi network participated in a “Day of Honour” march organized by the Hungarian revisionist The Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM) in Székesfehérvár on February 6, 2016, in which the New Hungarian Guard also partook¹⁸⁵. In March 2016, a Hungarian neo-Nazi rock band paid a visit to their Austrian Blood and Honour comrades¹⁸⁶. In April, the Olympia Vienna student fraternity, which counts several prominent FPÖ figures among its members, hosted representatives of Jobbik's youth organization and of the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM) for a semi-public event on the situation in Hungary. The event was moderated by Alexander Markovics, a member of Olympia and cadre for the Identitarian Movement Austria (IBÖ)¹⁸⁷. Already in January that same year, Olympia had hosted guests from Hungary at the annual ball of the Viennese FPÖ (*Wiener Akademikerball*), including the mayor of the Hungarian border town Ásotthalom, László Toroczkai.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ According to Fabian Schmid, journalist for *Der Standard*, FPÖ leader Strache also acquired a VK account early on.

¹⁸⁴ “Huttenbriefe 2/2016, 14,” n.d.

¹⁸⁵ Doew.at, “‘Olympia’, ‘Blood & Honour’ und Die Österreichisch-Ungarische Achse,” April 2016, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/april-2016/olympia-blood-honour-und-die-oesterreichisch-ungarische-achse>.

¹⁸⁶ Doew.at, “Neonazi-Konzert in Vorarlberg,” March 2016, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/maerz-2016/neonazi-konzert-in-vorarlberg>.

¹⁸⁷ Doew.at, “‘Olympia’, ‘Blood & Honour’ und Die Österreichisch-Ungarische Achse.”

Toroczkai had led the HVIM until 2013, became a star of the European far right in 2015 for his tough border policy and assumed the office of Jobbik vice-president in 2016. Occasional expressions of mutual sympathies notwithstanding, the FPÖ has acted aloof towards Jobbik since 2011, as it searches for a more moderate image¹⁸⁸.

While Austrian neo-Nazis occasionally participate in paramilitary drills held in neighbouring countries such as Hungary,¹⁸⁹ the Austrian far-right has, in recent decades, displayed a comparatively low level of violent, paramilitary or terrorist activism, arguably due to the strength of its parliamentary representation (FPÖ).^{190,191}

However, a few private associations affiliated with and supported by the Austrian Ministry of Defence offer paramilitary training domestically and abroad. Recent reports suggest that far-right activists and sympathizers of groups such as the Identitarians have repeatedly partaken in such events.^{192,193}

Crime related to right-wing extremism has been rising steadily since 2011, as evidenced by the annual Reports on the Protection of the Constitution published by the Ministry of the Interior (most recently: BMI 2016). While only a small fraction of these crimes relates to acts of physical violence against people, the recent increases in both weapons found on an individual's premises and (arson) attacks on homes for asylum seekers are concerning.

When everything comes together

One of the clearest signs of a network of pro-Russia actors in Austria is the conference “Defenders of Europe,” which took place in Linz at the end of October 2016. Nearly all organizations and movements mentioned in this paper attended: the FPÖ sent its general secretary, Herbert Kickl, and the “Identitäre Bewegung” sold merchandise through its outlet “Phalanx”. The German “Compact” magazine and the far-right media outlet “Unzensuriert”, the latter of which had been founded by an FPÖ politician, were also among the participants. The conference had been organized by the Austrian magazine “Info-Direkt,” which is also based in Linz. Its first cover, published in 2015, showed the Russian president. Its headline was “We want one like Putin.”

¹⁸⁸ Doew.at, “FPÖ-Akademikerball (Wieder) Mit Gästen von Rechts Außen.”

¹⁸⁹ Events resembling paramilitary training are still hosted by the Militär Fallschirmspringer Verbund Ostarrichi (MILF-O). Well-connected in Armed Forces and police circles, MILF-O cannot be clearly categorized as far-right, although indications to that effect have been reported.

¹⁹⁰ In the 1990s, a series of pipe and mailbomb attacks targeted public figures of non-mainstream ethnic background and people who had expressed pro-immigrant stances. Four Roma were killed by a pipe bomb in 1995. In 1999, a supposedly unaffiliated individual, Franz Fuchs, was found guilty of the attacks. Paramilitary training was popular among Austrian neo-Nazis around 1990, when groups in several Austrian regions engaged in such activities with a certain regularity until a crackdown on the leadership circle in the early 1990s put an end to it.

¹⁹¹ In 2007, pictures that showed FPÖ chairman Heinz-Christian Strache participating in a paramilitary event held in the mid-1980s with (at that time) fellow neo-Nazis stirred controversy in Austria, but remained inconsequential for Strache. Conversely, a local FPÖ politician in Linz had to step down from his offices in 2013 after footage proving his neo-Nazi past and participation in paramilitary training surfaced.

¹⁹² Fabian Schmid, “Bundesheer-Umfeld: Schießbewerbe Mit Anhängern Der Identitären,” *derStandard.at*, February 10, 2017, <http://derstandard.at/2000052390367/Bundesheer-Umfeld-Schiessbewerbe-mit-Anhaengern-der-Identitaeren>.

¹⁹³ Fabian Schmid, “Verteidigungsministerium: Geheime Privilegien Für 147 Vereine,” *derStandard.at*, January 28, 2017, <http://derstandard.at/2000051568434/Verteidigungsministerium-Geheime-Privilegien-fuer-147-Vereine>.

One of the speakers was Nathalie Holzmüller, a Russian migrant who organizes the “Russian Ball” in Vienna, another platform for connecting pro-Russian activists with Russian oligarchs and politicians. Holzmüller, who speaks German and Russian, is also editor-in-chief and publisher of the magazine “Art & Business.” In an interview with Info-Direkt, Holzmüller talked about collecting donations for people in Crimea and receiving a “Golden Medal of Honour” from the Russian government for her “tireless idealistic activities.” Johann Gudenus has also attended the ball several times. The fifth issue of Info-Direkt was presented at the Ball 2015.¹⁹⁴

When asked if admiration for Putin and pro-Russian policies bode well with FPÖ’s electorate, political analyst Peter Hajek says that “there are trends in the Austrian population towards favouring a ‘strong leader,’ also supported by voters of the Freedom Party.” But Hajek thinks this should not be “exaggerated” and interpreted as a wish for an authoritarian ruler. Natascha Strobl adds that “eight years of Obama being president of the US were a nightmare for European racists.” She thinks Russia’s foreign policies are perceived as a “rebellion against EU-policies” and vitalizing “dreams of national strength.”

¹⁹⁴ Höller, “Info-Direkt.”

General Media Landscape

In general, Austrian mainstream media are known to criticize Putin's policies. In 2007, the Russian President cancelled an interview with the Austrian public broadcaster ORF because of “unfriendly reporting,” and he also cancelled interviews with the printed periodicals PROFIL and Die Presse, while a request from the Kurier was turned down out of dislike for the questions the paper was required to turn in beforehand.¹⁹⁵ In 2014, a Russian embassy representative in Vienna criticized what he perceived as biased depictions of Russia in Austrian “mainstream media” and expressed his hope in “alternative media like Facebook” in terms of painting a more favourable picture.¹⁹⁶ That same year, PROFIL noted that “Austrian media clearly identify Putin and Russia as the main culprits” for the Ukraine crisis.¹⁹⁷ In contrast, news outlets like “alles roger?” (a giveaway magazine owned by Austrian entrepreneur Ronald Seunig) and NEOPresse (a major player in the German-language blogosphere) have become notorious for publishing pieces praising Putin's policies. Neither can be attributed to the far-right without reservation, but they both display a clear tendency to engage in conspiracy speculations. The same is true for the blogger's platform “fisch+fleisch”, which, however, also publishes more balanced assessments alongside firmly pro-Putin standpoints. Similarly to Info-DIREKT and Contra Magazine (both described in the next section), all three are rather new, founded in 2015, 2012 and 2014, respectively, and boast a certain relevance in terms of the audience they reach.

While media targeting the Russian-reading community exists in Austria, those “have no relevance outside their immediate audience”¹⁹⁸. Political Capital explicitly mentions the Novy Vensky Zhurnal (New Viennese Journal)¹⁹⁹ and rugraz.net, qualifying the latter as a “major Russian website in Austria” and “the most explicit demonstration of illiberal Russian values that one can find in Austria”²⁰⁰. Russian state media like RT and Sputnik are frequently featured by far-right actors, who use them to present information picked up from these news outlets as an alternative to the mainstream (or 'Lügenpresse') and as credible sources that reveal what Western media are allegedly hiding.

¹⁹⁵ Derstandard.at, “Putin-Besuch: Zensurversuche in Österreichischen Medien,” *derStandard.at*, May 23, 2007, <http://derstandard.at/2885953/Putin-Besuch-Zensurversuche-in-oesterreichischen-Medien>.

¹⁹⁶ Derstandard.at, “Russische Botschaft Beklagt Österreichs Einseitige Medienberichterstattung,” *derStandard.at*, April 22, 2014, <http://derstandard.at/1397521268304/Russische-Botschaft-beklagt-Oesterreichs-einseitige-Berichterstattung>.

¹⁹⁷ Profil.at, “Umfrage,” August 2, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Far-right Media

The pro-Russian turn of the Austrian far-right has also encompassed the entire media landscape pertaining to this political spectrum, including the Catholic-fundamentalist *Neue Ordnung*, online disinformation outlets like *Contra Magazin*, periodicals close to the FPÖ (*Die Aula*, *Zur Zeit*), and neo-Nazi magazines (*PHOENIX*, *Huttenbriefe*), to mention just a few. The turn is particularly remarkable for the latter group considering the anti-Russian legacy of National Socialism.

One magazine that merits special attention is the abovementioned *Info-DIREKT* (I-D). Its first issue was published in early 2015 and featured a programmatic cover headline: “Wir wollen einen wie Putin” (“We want a guy like Putin”). Issue No. 5 was presented at a soiree prior to the Russian Ball at the Viennese Hofburg. According to the event's organizer, Nathalie Hofmüller, the magazine was handed out to Russian state representatives on this occasion²⁰¹. The personnel behind I-D remained, at first, largely anonymous. By now, ties to the FPÖ and the involvement of former members of the BfJ (a neo-fascist youth organization active between 2003 and 2008) have become evident^{202,203}. However, it remains unclear how the magazine is financed. Its costly makeup and the small number of paid ads (including FPÖ insertions) leave some room for speculation. At a far-right conference in Linz in October 2016²⁰⁴, co-hosted by I-D, Jan Ackermeier rejected allegations of receiving Russian money on the magazine's behalf. Ackermeier is a former staffer for the FPÖ's parliamentary faction in Vienna. The conference's accompanying cultural programme was put together by Nathalie Holzmüller, who also hosts the Russian Balls in Vienna and organized Malofeev's Viennese get-together in 2014²⁰⁵. Stefan Magnet, another I-D collaborator, works for FPÖ-TV and travelled to Moscow with the FPÖ delegation for the signing of the cooperation agreement with United Russia in December 2016, reporting on the journey both for FPÖ-TV and I-D. *Info-DIREKT* has featured interviews with Alexander Dugin and the Russian consul in Salzburg. A separate section on its blog is dedicated to Russia. The website was moved to a Russian server after a questionable scoop in September 2015: according to an I-D report citing an unnamed Austrian intelligence source, the US was behind migration to Europe with the aim of destabilizing the EU.

²⁰¹ Höller, “Info-Direkt.”

²⁰² Doew.at, “Zu Den Neonazistischen Hintergründen von ‘Info Direkt,’” January 2017, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/jaenner-2017/zu-den-neonazistischen-hintergruenden-von-info-direkt>.

²⁰³ Doew.at, “Prorussischer Rechtsextremismus,” August 2015, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/august-2015/prorussischer-rechtsextremismus>.

²⁰⁴ Doew.at, “Pangermanismus Als Abendlandrettung,” November 2016, <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/november-2016/pangermanismus-als-abendlandrettung>.

²⁰⁵ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

This report was widely picked up by Russian media, including West FM²⁰⁶. Likewise, Contra Magazin has been featured repeatedly by major Russian news outlets^{207,208}.

Analysis of Austrian pro-Russian Facebook pages

The three Facebook pages selected²⁰⁹ for the Austrian case study are *unzensuriert.at*²¹⁰, *Info-DIREKT*²¹¹, and *Pegida Österreich* for the period of September – October, 2016.²¹² The first is a blog founded in 2009 by Martin Graf, who, at that time, held the highest public office of any FPÖ politician as the third president of the National Council. It has since emerged as one of the most-read political blogs in Austria. Since 2012, *unzensuriert.at* has been owned and published by the 1848 Medienvielfalt GmbH. The blog, by its own account, publishes roughly 3,000 articles per year, generating over two million page views. A print-spinoff quarterly was started in 2011, but discontinued in 2013. Since 2015, the people behind the blog have produced *Unzensuriert-TV*, and a Youtube channel.²¹³ The Facebook page primarily promotes content published on the blog. It reached the milestone of 25,000 fans in 2015 and doubled that mark in the subsequent year, which represents highly remarkable numbers for an Austrian news outlet.²¹⁴ The blog ranked 58th among German-language media in November 2016 in terms of social media reactions received, and 8th among Austrian media over that same timespan.²¹⁵ The Austrian weekly *PROFIL* analysed the content published on *unzensuriert.at* over two weeks (between November 7th and 20th 2016) and found not a single article among 124 studied that mentioned the FPÖ in an unfavourable way. By contrast, all other Austrian parties were cast in a negative light almost exclusively. Other groups and actors frequently targeted on the blog include refugees, Muslims, (mainstream) media and “the elite”, while Donald Trump and Russia were reported on more affirmatively. Also, *PROFIL* found that 88 per cent of the articles were published without indicating the author.²¹⁶

²⁰⁶ Höller, “Info-Direkt.”

²⁰⁷ Contra Magazin provides google analytics data on its site. According to these data, 384,000 unique users were reached in November 2016 with 1,215,000 page views. 80% of these users were from Germany, only 8,4% from Austria.; for the sake of comparison, *kurier.at* (a mainstream newspaper) had 3,5 million unique users and 43,4 million views, so while not bad for a fringe site, its reach should not be overestimated.

²⁰⁸ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

²⁰⁹ The selection was based on a combined total of several characteristics, such as the number of likes, and the content itself, meaning that the severity of pro-Russian content is decided by the latter if the pages had close “like” counts.

²¹⁰ “About - Unzensuriert.at - Facebook Page,” 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/unzensuriert/about/>.

²¹¹ “Info-DIREKT - Facebook Page,” 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/infodirekt/>.

²¹² “Pegida Österreich - Facebook Page,” accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/pegida.at/>.

²¹³ Unzensuriert.at, “Impressum,” *Unzensuriert.at*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/00390-impressum>.

²¹⁴ “About - Unzensuriert.at - Facebook Page.”

²¹⁵ Jens Schröder, “Die Likemedien-Top-100 Im November 2016: Größte Zuwächse Für sport1 Und Spiegel Online, Dicke Verluste Für Die Huffington Post, Die F.A.Z. Und Die Deutschen Wirtschafts Nachrichten | 10000 Flies Blog,” December 21, 2016, <http://blog.10000flies.de/die-likemedien-top-100-im-november-2016-groesste-zuwaechse-fuer-sport1-und-spiegel-online-dicke-verluste-fuer-die-huffington-post-die-f-a-z-und-die-deutschen-wirtschafts-nachrichten/>.

²¹⁶ Jakob Winter and Ingrid Brodnig, “Unzensuriert.at: Wie Die FPÖ-Nahe Site Systematisch Stimmung Macht,” *Profil.at*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/wie-fpoe-site-unzensuriertat-stimmung-7709776>.

However, two key protagonists behind *unzensuriert.at* are well known: Alexander Höferl, who is the head of the FPÖ's communication bureau, and Walter Asperl, a staffer for the FPÖ parliamentary faction. Another hint at the blog's proximity to the FPÖ is the fact that leading FPÖ politicians such as Chairman Strache frequently share content published there via their social media profiles.

The *Pegida* Facebook site began publishing posts in late 2014. At that time, the PEGIDA movement ("Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident") had started to attract mass support in a limited number of German cities.

Against that background, and with the Austrian *Pegida*'s Facebook site collecting likes quickly, it was assumed that the movement could spread to Austria as well. However, local efforts were discontinued after a small number of gatherings that drew underwhelming crowds. The Austrian *Pegida* basically seemed to be a Facebook phenomenon from its very beginning. Georg Immanuel Nagel, a far-right ideologue, acted as the spokesperson of the group early on. Since his resignation, the Austrian *Pegida* has failed to find a new face. Nagel continues to write articles for far-right magazines and occasionally appears as a speaker at anti-migrant rallies in Austria and Germany. On Facebook, *Pegida* continues to rant against "the elite", "political correctness", refugees, the "system media" or "Lügenpresse", and Muslims.

Info-DIREKT is a print magazine and blog that started in February 2015. It is published by the Verein für Meinungsfreiheit und unabhängige Publizistik (Association for Freedom of Opinion and independent Publishing) in Linz. Karl Winkler, a former far-right activist, and Gertrud Stain, are the association's officials (for more information on the magazine's background, refer to section 7.2 of this report). Just like the print publication, *Info-DIREKT*'s blog and Facebook site are characterized by conspiratorialism, a clear pro-Russian alignment in geopolitical issues, and portrayals of the enemy similar to those found on the other two pages analysed here; the enemy here being the mainstream media, the US, the EU and immigrants, to name a few.

Table 1. Featured pages

| Page | Likes ²¹⁷ | Established |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| <i>unzensuriert.at</i> | 51,876 | February 2009 |
| <i>Pegida Österreich</i> | 20,947 | December 2014 |
| <i>Info-DIREKT</i> | 13,743 | February 2015 |

Summary

Remarkably, Russian policies and actors were only seldom addressed by the three sites studied over this two-month period. Also, Russian sources were hardly ever referenced. This can be regarded as somewhat surprising for *Info-DIREKT* at least, considering that the print magazine makes little effort

²¹⁷ As of February 1, 2017.

to hide its sympathies for Putin's regime. Possible explanations include this study's focus on posts that performed well in terms of interactions generated (which could indicate that geopolitical news is simply not attributed high relevance by the sites' audiences); the possibility that the period of investigation was unrepresentative of the sites' editorial policies; and the fact that none of the three sites has a clear focus on geopolitical issues. In particular, *unzensuriert.at* and *Pegida Österreich* display a heavy concentration on domestic issues like immigration (framed as a threat on many levels), asylum, and Islam/"Islamification".

This arguably mirrors the priority generally awarded to these topics by Western European far-right parties, as opposed to their Eastern ideological counterparts. Also, it should be noted that *unzensuriert.at* and *Info-DIREKT* use Facebook predominantly to feature their own blog content: not only do they not link Russian content – they link hardly any third-party content at all.

All three sites show an unsurprising political party preference, not even trying to hide their ideological proximity to the FPÖ behind a pseudo-objective curtain. Another commonality between the three consists in their ostentatious opposition to the so-called “establishment” and its alleged alliance with the “mainstream media” in suppressing the truth, persecuting those who tell it, and acting against the “will of the people”.

General statistics

An analysis of posts and interactions in the interval of September-October 2016 shows that among the three sites investigated, *unzensuriert.at* was by far the most active one, comfortably accounting for more posts than the other two combined. *Unzensuriert.at* also generated a considerably higher amount of interactions – more than twice as much per post compared to *Info-DIREKT*. While *Pegida* ranks second in terms of posts and interactions numbers (in absolute terms), *Info-DIREKT* was more effective in terms of interactions per post.

Table 2. Page statistics September-October, 2016

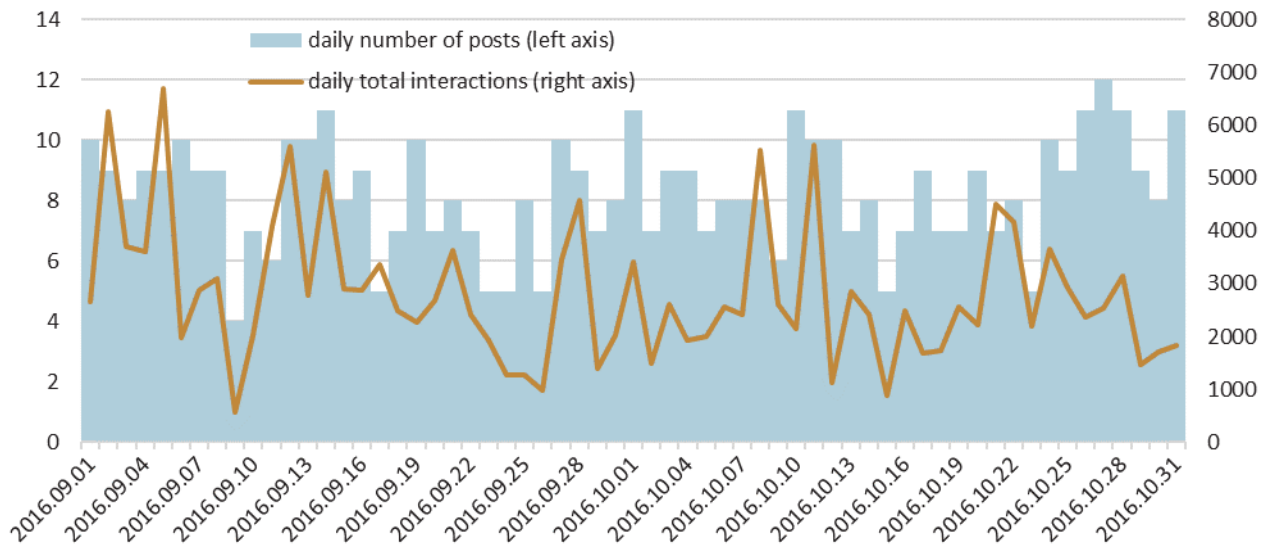
| Pages | Unzensuriert.at | Pegida Österreich | Info-DIREKT |
|--|-----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Posts | | | |
| Total number of posts in the period | 503 | 216 | 116 |
| Average number of posts per day | 8.2 | 3.5 | 1.9 |
| Interactions²¹⁸ | | | |
| Total number of interactions in the period | 171,232 | 31,747 | 18,827 |
| Average number of interactions per post | 340.4 | 147 | 162.3 |

²¹⁸ Comments, shares and emotional reactions (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry)

Page activity

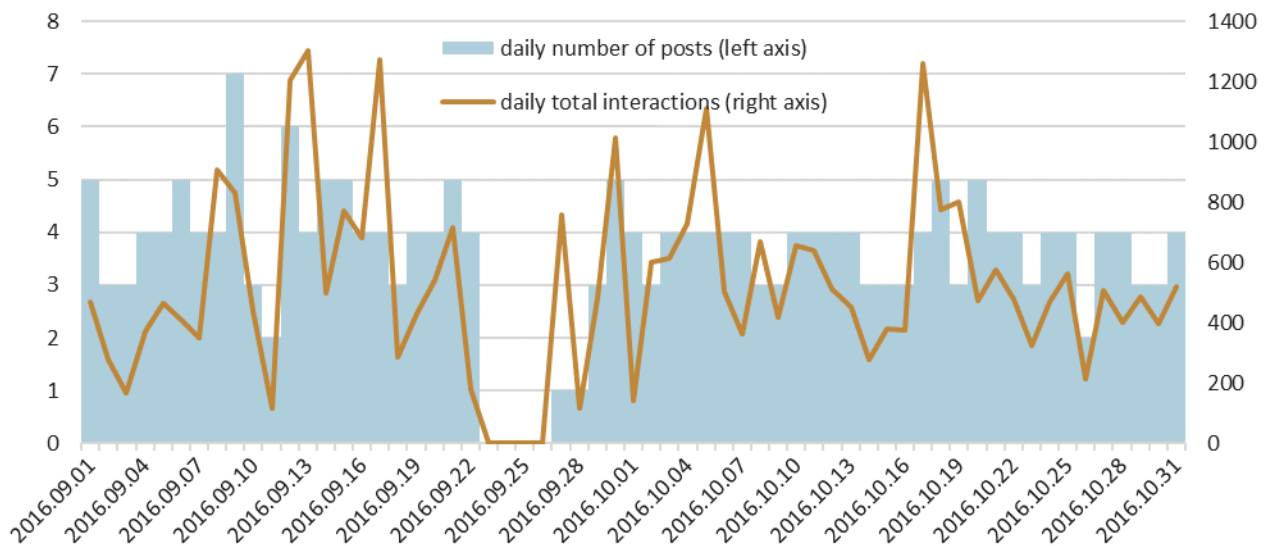
Tables 3, 4 and 5 feature the general distribution of posts and the specific audience's reaction to it per day during the period under review.

Table 3. Distribution of posts and interactions on the *unzensuriert.at* page per day



Unzensuriert.at displays a pretty steady activity pattern with no extraordinary highs or lows. Every day of the timeframe analysed featured four posts or more, indicating a level of professionalism that the other two sites are lacking. The audience shows a higher volatility, with stark day-to-day changes that do not follow the site's activity trend.

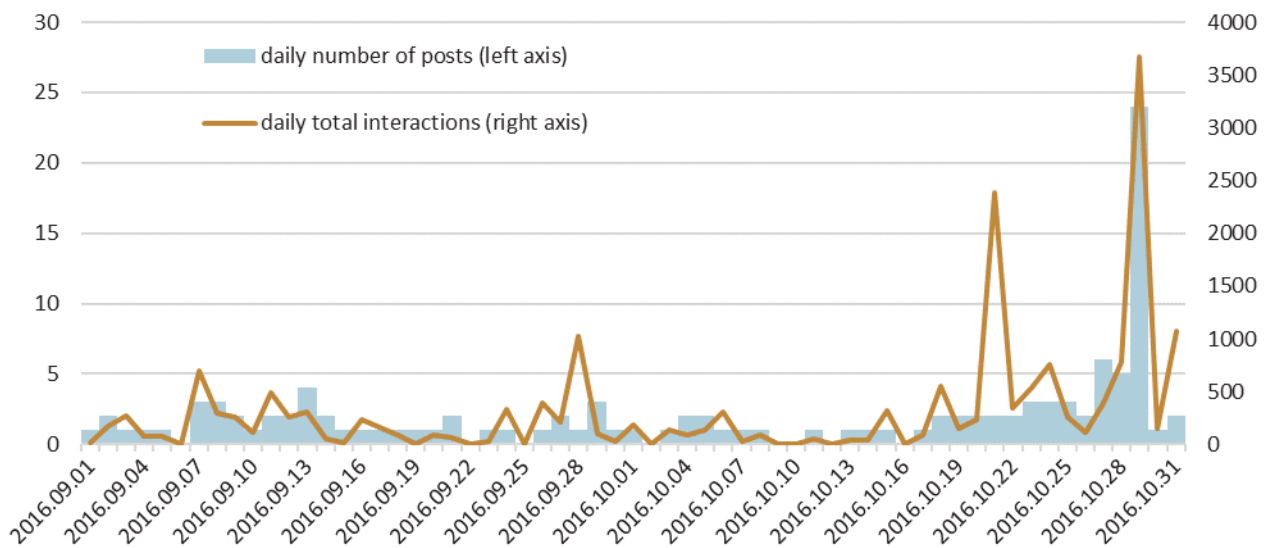
Table 4. Distribution of posts and interactions on the *Pegida Österreich* page per day



Pegida consistently published three or four posts on most days. However, the analysed timeframe also includes a span of four days with no posts at all, hinting at the fact that in contrast to *unzensuriert.at*, this site is not maintained professionally.

Audience interaction is by and large congruent with the site's activity, although there were days with a level of interaction exceeding post activity, and days with interactions trailing it as well.

Table 5. Distribution of posts and interactions on the *Info-DIREKT* page per day



What is most notable about the data for *Info-DIREKT* is the “post island” of October 29th (and the two days leading up to it). This anomaly can easily be explained with reference to the far-right conference *Info-DIREKT* co-hosted in Linz this very day. When comparing all three sites, this site's activity at the end of October most closely resembles the practice of “campaign mode” posting. Reactions tend to follow the site's activity rhythm, with some noticeable exceptions where the level of interaction sharply exceeds editorial activity.

Campaigns

The topics dominating the Austrian political debate in September and October 2016 were the presidential elections in Austria and in the US. The Austrian repeat run-off election between Norbert Hofer (FPÖ) and Alexander van der Bellen (formerly a member of the Green Party) was originally scheduled for October 2. However, due to technical problems with election envelopes, it was postponed until December 4, in a decision announced on September 12. Other major policy issues during the analysed timeframe include a debate on an emergency decree that would have massively restricted the rights of asylum seekers in Austria, and the Euro-Canadian trade agreement CETA.

The highest density of posts during the period observed was recorded between October 27 and 29 by *Info-DIREKT*. In contrast to a generally low frequency of zero to two posts per day over the two-month period, the two days leading up to the far-right conference in Linz saw six and five, respectively, with an absolute high of 24 posts on the day of the event (October 29) itself. The three days rank first, second and third over the investigation period, with not a single other day yielding five posts or more. October 29 marked a record in terms of interactions too, at 3674. Content-wise, the posts focused on the conference almost exclusively by advertising the event, refuting criticism, defending the organizer's restrictive media access policy, and by providing live-coverage of the event.

Unzensuriert.at, which acted as a media partner for the same conference, displayed a similar posting pattern. The end of October aside, the site was most active and attracted the most attention during the first eight days of September, with above-average posting numbers and the two highest interaction numbers occurring at this time out of the entire research period.

However, in terms of the topics covered, no clear campaign orientation could be identified. While a heavy emphasis on alleged criminal acts by (and other problems associated with) asylum seekers, as well as Muslims, became apparent, the posts did not reflect events which were especially relevant at the time of publishing. The article which, by a wide margin, drew the most interactions of the entire two-month period was posted on September 5, and claimed that asylum seekers received preferential treatment at Vienna's General Hospital. Likewise, the article gaining the second-most interactions (September 2) suggested that Austrians were discriminated against, contrasting the income situations of an Austrian man suffering from cancer to those of asylum seekers. The third most successful article in early September, in terms of interactions generated, dealt with a case of sexual abuse by an Afghan man, ranking 14th in total interactions among 503 posts observed over the analysed timeframe. The *Pegida* site gave no indication whatsoever of a campaign-style posting pattern.

Posts

Links were the most common type of posts on all three sites. *Unzensuriert.at* posted links almost exclusively, which is unsurprising given the sites main function of promoting the blog's content. Posts are of a more mixed nature on the other two sites, with a nearly a third consisting of photos on both. Whereas *Pegida*'s links performed better than both photos and videos, in terms of interactions generated per post, *Info-DIREKT*'s videos generated the most attention by far in relative terms (almost twice as many interactions on average compared to links, and more than three times as many as photos, although based on a small sample size of just four videos overall).

Table 6. Statistics by type of posts on the 3 pages under review

| Unzensuriert.at | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| type | number of posts | proportion of posts |
| Link | 493 | 98.0% |
| Photo | 1 | 0.2% |
| Video | 1 | 0.2% |
| Status | 8 | 1.6% |
| Event | 0 | 0.0% |
| Note | 0 | 0.0% |
| Total | 503 | 100% |
| Pegida Österreich | | |
| type | number of posts | proportion of posts |
| Link | 147 | 68.0% |
| Photo | 63 | 29.2% |
| Video | 6 | 2.8% |
| Status | 0 | 0.0% |
| Event | 0 | 0.0% |
| Note | 0 | 0.0% |
| Total | 216 | 100% |

| Info-DIREKT | | |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| type | number of posts | proportion of posts |
| Link | 72 | 62.1% |
| Photo | 37 | 31.9% |
| Video | 4 | 3.4% |
| Status | 3 | 2.6% |
| Event | 0 | 0.0% |
| Note | 0 | 0.0% |
| Total | 116 | 100% |

Table 7 showcases the main domains from which outside material was reposted. It shows that *unzensuriert.at* and *Info-DIREKT* feature the content of their own blogs almost exclusively, while *Pegida* links to other PEGIDA sites about a quarter of the time. The ideological range of actual third-party links is broad and includes mainstream media (most importantly the right-wing tabloid *Kronenzeitung*) as well as far-right news outlets such as *unzensuriert.at* and *Wochenblick*. Interestingly, none of the three sites provided links to official Russian sites or media in the two-month period of investigation.

Table 7. Outgoing domains

| | | |
|--|-----|------|
| Links on <i>unzensuriert.at</i> | | |
| unzensuriert.at | 493 | 100% |
| Links on <i>Pegida Österreich</i> | | |
| krone.at | 24 | 16% |
| epochtimes.de | 16 | 11% |
| unzensuriert.at | 15 | 10% |
| wochenblick.at | 14 | 10% |
| jungefreiheit.de | 8 | 5% |
| anonymousnews.ru | 6 | 4% |
| focus.de | 5 | 3% |
| freiezeiten.net | 5 | 3% |
| kurier.at | 4 | 3% |
| compact-online.de | 3 | 2% |
| diepresse.com | 3 | 2% |
| <i>Others (once or twice)</i> | 44 | 30% |
| Links on <i>Info Direkt</i> | | |
| www.info-direkt.eu | 62 | 86% |
| www.unzensuriert.at | 4 | 6% |
| twitter.com | 3 | 4% |
| europaeisches-forum.at | 1 | 1% |
| media.giphy.com | 1 | 1% |
| www.fpoe-ooe.at | 1 | 1% |

Issues and narratives

Important issues featured on the sites have been identified utilizing a tiered approach. First, we selected a sample of 60 posts based on the 20 most liked, shared or commented posts. Second, we choose the top 4 performing posts among the 60, thus the number one most liked, shared, commented or interacted messages²¹⁹ to identify the 4 most popular issues. Third, we used our sample of 60 to map out top performing narratives based on a pre-defined set of issues or narratives utilized routinely by pro-Russian propaganda, namely: Russia, the EU, NATO, USA, Syria Ukraine, migration.²²⁰

Top issues

The top post of all three sites was recorded by *unzensuriert.at* on September 5:²²¹ it ranked first both in total interactions (3,426) and shares (1,855) by a comfortable margin. The content consists of a claim made to *unzensuriert.at* by an anonymous nurse at Vienna's General Hospital. According to this source, hospital personnel were ordered to give preferred treatment to Muslims (a term that appears to be used interchangeably with “asylum seekers” and “migrants” in the article), and forced to sign a non-disclosure clause with regard to this practice. Also, the nurse complained about disrespectful behaviour on the part of these patients and their relatives.



“Operations at AKH [General Hospital]: asylum seekers first? A nurse speaks out.” Source: *unzensuriert.at*

Unzensuriert.at also accounted for the post that stirred the most comments (402).²²² The post was a link accompanied by the comment “Christmas cancelled because of Muslims”. The linked article reported on a kindergarten in Kassel, Germany, where Christmas celebrations were called off because a majority of the children were not Christian. Muslims are referred to as “Mohammedaner” in the text, a common practice among the German-speaking far-right that is not only perceived as offensive by Muslims, but also intended to offend. Also, the anonymous author purports that similar developments had taken place in Vienna, too.

²¹⁹ The top post which received the highest number of interactions based on the total of number of likes, shares and comments.

²²⁰ We used a pre-set list of issues based on previous propaganda analysis and experiences, however there was no guarantee that our top sample will include any of the aforementioned major topics.

²²¹ “Unzensuriert.at - Facebook Post,” September 5, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/unzensuriert/posts/10154521625528711>.

²²² “Unzensuriert.at - Facebook Post,” October 11, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/unzensuriert/posts/10154627902308711>.

Record interaction numbers for the other two sites were considerably lower, with highs of 2,308 (*Info-DIREKT*) and 1,048 (*Pegida*), respectively. The most successful post by *Info-DIREKT*²²³ was written by Stefan Magnet, a former activist in neo-Nazi circles who now works for the FPÖ and participated in the party leadership's trip to Moscow in December 2016. His text celebrated the invitation of Martin Sellner, leader of the far-right Identitarian Movement in Austria, to a TV debate on *ServusTV*, a private channel owned by Dietrich Mateschitz (the founder of the Red Bull energy drink company). Magnet argues that this invitation “tears ... a hole into the 'cordon sanitaire' of the mainstream media” and claims that the Austrian public service broadcaster ORF would “never have dared” to invite a far-right activist to such a debate. He also claimed that it was the first time any European broadcaster featured an “Identitarian” on prime-time television. Both claims are false: another Identitarian activist, Alexander Markovics, had already participated in an ORF prime-time discussion programme more than a year before. Like many of *Info-DIREKT*'s articles, this one is rife with “anti-establishment,” “anti-political correctness” and “anti-mainstream media” rhetoric. It is worth noting that this post, while not ranking first in interactions overall, generated more emotional reactions than any other post by any of the three sites (1,834, as compared to 1,355 for *unzensuriert.at*'s top post), and garnered the most comments (121) of all *Info-DIREKT* posts during the period of analysis.

The most successful *Pegida* post in terms of emotional reactions²²⁴ (738) shared a poll initiated by a Facebook site titled “Christian Kern [the Austrian social democratic chancellor] resignation – PRO [FPÖ chairman] HC Strache”) on September 27. It included a meme consisting of a picture and quote of Strache's: “Social security benefits for Austrians only!”). As is common on Facebook, the poll question (“Is he right?”) had to be answered via emotional reactions and received not a single “No” vote among the 732 participants (by 19 February 2017).

The most-interacted *Pegida* post,²²⁵ also ranking first in shares (824) for the site, provided a link to an article on the German *blastingnews* site, a fake news outlet that publishes user-generated content. The article reports on a phenomenon that is allegedly spreading across (Western) Europe: people throwing themselves on cars, claiming they had been run over, and demanding financial compensation. The author, operating under a pseudonym, alleges that “oftentimes,” the “car jumpers” are refugees, which was apparently considered a sufficient reason to use a “refugees” tag on the article.



²²³ “Info-DIREKT - Facebook Post,” October 21, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/infodirekt/posts/1624829584483827>.

²²⁴ “Pegida Österreich - Facebook Post,” September 27, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/pegida.at/posts/1809250555987058>.

²²⁵ “Pegida Österreich - Facebook Post,” October 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/pegida.at/posts/1818881001690680>.

Not a single *Pegida* post in September and October 2016 received 100 or more comments. The most-commented-on post²²⁶ (92) on the site linked to an article published by *Wochenblick*, an Upper-Austrian newspaper associated with the FPÖ both ideologically and in terms of personnel. The article recounted a poll of Turks living in Austria conducted by the Union of European-Turkish Democrats (UETD), an organization close to the Turkish AKP of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. By the *Wochenblick*'s account, almost 90 per cent of the respondents stated that they would prefer to live in Turkey, with 80 per cent of those citing fear of rising islamophobia as their motivation to leave. The article qualifies these results as „shocking” and a sign of reluctance to “integrate.”

Info-DIREKT's most shared post²²⁷ (524) referred to the October 2016 far-right conference in Linz and the speech given there by FPÖ secretary general Herbert Kickl. It contained a 50-second video in which Kickl states that rather than discussing how “mass immigration” should be carried out, the crucial question was “do we even want it?”



Source: Info-Direkt

Major narratives

The main thrust of the narratives featured on these websites are reconstructed in depth by locating basic geopolitical issues in our sample of the top 60 posts ranked by the highest number of likes, shares or comments.²²⁸ We pre-defined an initial set of major issues like the USA, the EU, NATO, Syria and migration, but other emerging local or international topics are also mentioned in the analysis.

²²⁶ “Pegida Österreich - Facebook Post,” September 8, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/pegida.at/posts/1800891100156337>.

²²⁷ “Info-DIREKT - Facebook Post,” October 29, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/infodirekt/videos/1628542604112525/>.

²²⁸ The actual number of posts is usually lower due to the comparison of the top 20 liked, 20 shared and 20 commented posts, because many posts on those lists overlapped.

Of the 39 articles included in our analysis of the most-interacted posts on *unzensuriert.at*, a majority (20) dealt primarily with refugees, with crimes (allegedly) perpetrated by asylum-seekers appearing as a topic of particular emphasis (8),²²⁹ often coupled with the allegation that law enforcement agencies tend to turn a blind eye to refugee crime and/or treat them particularly mildly.²³⁰ Another recurring narrative was that of refugees being favoured over native Austrians by state authorities (4).²³¹ Muslims and/or certain notions or practices associated with Islam were targeted in 16 articles,²³² with nine of those arguing that Austria, Germany and/or Europe were undergoing a process of “Islamification.”²³³



“Robert Koch Institute: Asylum Seekers Import Infectious Diseases like Tuberculosis”. Source: *unzensuriert.at*²³⁴

Several articles called out parties and politicians of the centre, as well as private institutions, for promoting this alleged development by appeasing or even bowing down to Muslims.²³⁵ Across the articles, the lines of distinction between Islam as a religious faith, political Islam and the latter's extremist manifestations are vaguely drawn, if drawn at all.

²²⁹ Unzensuriert.at, “Schweden: Frau in Rollstuhl von Sechs Asylananten Stundenlang Vergewaltigt,” *Unzensuriert.at*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021997-Schweden-Frau-Rollstuhl-von-sechs-Asylananten-stundenlang-vergewaltigt>.

²³⁰ Unzensuriert.at, “Keine U-Haft, Keine Haft, Keine Abschiebungen: Arabische Täter Lachen Über Justiz,” *Unzensuriert.at*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021963-Keine-U-Haft-keine-Haft-keine-Abschiebungen-Arabische-Taeter-lachen-ueber-Justiz>.

²³¹ Unzensuriert.at, “AKH-Mitarbeiterin Packt Aus: Asylwerber Sollen Bei Operationen Bevorzugt Werden,” *Unzensuriert.at*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021704-AKH-Mitarbeiterin-packt-aus-Asylwerber-sollen-bei-Operationen-bevorzugt-werden>.

²³² Unzensuriert.at, “Islam-Kennerin Laila Mirzo Bezeichnet Den Koran Als Ein Handbuch Des Terrors Und Der Intoleranz,” *Unzensuriert.at*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021871-Islam-Kennerin-Laila-Mirzo-bezeichnet-den-Koran-als-ein-Handbuch-des-Terrors-und-der>.

²³³ Unzensuriert.at, “Schüler in Deutscher Volksschule Werden Mit Dem Koran Indoktriniert,” *Unzensuriert.at*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0022106-Schueler-deutscher-Volksschule-werden-mit-dem-Koran-indoktriniert>.

²³⁴ Unzensuriert.at, “Robert Koch Institut: Asylwerber Schleppen Ansteckende Krankheiten Wie Tuberkulose Ein,” *Unzensuriert.at*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021960-Robert-Koch-Institut-Asylwerber-schleppen-ansteckende-Krankheiten-wie-Tuberkulose>.

²³⁵ Unzensuriert.at, “Kindergarten Sagt Weihnachtsfest Auf Rücksicht Auf Andersgläubige Kinder Ab,” *Unzensuriert.at*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0022001-Kindergarten-sagt-Weihnachtsfest-auf-Ruecksicht-auf-andersglaeubige-Kinder-ab>.

The list for *Info-DIREKT* comprises 32 articles, heavily focused on covering the far-right October conference in Linz (11),^{236,237} including protests and criticism directed at it. A main narrative, here and in other contexts, was that the establishment was trying to silence critical voices.²³⁸ The second-most popular topic was the alleged bias and manipulation of mainstream media in general, and the Austrian public broadcaster ORF in particular (7).²³⁹ The other key “enemy” portrayals found in the articles were migrants and asylum seekers (5).²⁴⁰ Four articles addressed the Austrian presidential elections, displaying a clear (and unsurprising) preference for the Freedomite candidate.²⁴¹

In general, the FPÖ is treated very favourably on this site, compared to all other Austrian parties. Conspiracy theories on both domestic and geopolitical developments were promoted in four articles, including ones insinuating (again) that George Soros²⁴² and/or the “the Rothschilds”²⁴³ were behind the migration flows to Europe. On the Syrian crisis, *Info-DIREKT* openly sided with President al-Assad.²⁴⁴



“[L]osing people as refugees is like losing human resources. How can you build a country without human resources?”²⁴⁵ - *Info-DIREKT* promotes its print magazine quoting Bashar al-Assad.

²³⁶ “Kongress: Ein Starkes Zeichen Für Meinungsfreiheit,” *Info-Direkt*, October 29, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/10/29/kongress-ein-starkes-zeichen-fuer-meinungsfreiheit/>.

²³⁷ Info-direkt.eu, “SPÖ: Kampf Gegen Rechts Als Einziger Ausweg,” *Info-Direkt*, October 27, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/10/27/spoe-kampf-gegen-rechts-als-einziger-ausweg/>.

²³⁸ Info-direkt.eu, “Wiener Anwalt Will Facebook Zensieren,” *Info-Direkt*, October 25, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/10/25/wiener-anwalt-will-facebook-zensieren/>.

²³⁹ Info-direkt.eu, “Warum Sprach Herbert Kickl Beim Kongress ‘Verteidiger Europas’?,” *Info-Direkt*, October 31, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/10/31/warum-sprach-herbert-kickl-beim-kongress-verteidiger-europas/>.

²⁴⁰ Info-direkt.eu, “Caritas-Boss Will „Gesellschaft Umgestalten“,” *Info-Direkt*, September 10, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/09/10/caritas-boss-will-gesellschaft-umgestalten/>.

²⁴¹ Info-direkt.eu, “Demo Mit Norbert Hofer Gegen CETA von Medien Totgeschwiegen,” October 23, 2016, <http://www.info-direkt.eu/staatsfunk-ruft-zur-wahl-van-der-bellens-auf>.

²⁴² Info-direkt.eu, “George Soros Irrer Plan zur ‘Europa-Rettung,’” September 27, 2016, <http://info-direkt.eu/2016/09/23/neu-george-soros-irrer-plan-zur-europa-rettung/>.

²⁴³ Info-direkt.eu, “Rothschild Und Die Asyl-Industrie,” *Info-Direkt*, August 13, 2015, <http://info-direkt.eu/2015/08/13/rothschild-und-die-asyl-industrie/>.

²⁴⁴ Sana.sy, “President Al-Assad to SBS Australia: Western Nations Attack Syrian Government Openly and Deal with It Secretly – Syrian Arab News Agency,” July 1, 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=81447>.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

Similar to *unzensuriert.at*, the *Pegida Österreich* was strongly focused on associating refugees with crime and other problems and thereby presenting asylum seekers as a threat (11 of 43 articles).^{246,247,248} Six posts applauded restrictive measures taken against refugees in other countries, with Viktor Orbán's Hungary as the point of positive reference in four of those posts.²⁴⁹ "Islamification" and anti-Islamic standpoints emerged as another recurring theme (6).²⁵⁰ Also, the Austrian government (3), the EU (2) and the "welcoming culture" vis-à-vis refugees (3) were criticized on several occasions. Lacking its own website and thus lacking original content, *Pegida* links third party sites much more frequently than the other two Facebook pages analysed here. A linked article on *anonymousnews.ru* claims that according to a Hungarian intelligence source, "thousands of Muslim soldiers" in Europe were planning to take over the continent.²⁵¹ Another post promotes an article on *epochtimes.de* which recounts the Russian perspective on the Syrian conflict and world politics in general, extensively quoting Russian permanent representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin.²⁵²



"Stop intervening in the internal affairs of sovereign states, stop your colonial habits, leave the world in peace and then, maybe, the situation will improve in many areas" – a quote by Russian UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin featured in *Pegida*'s comment on the *epochtimes.de* article.

²⁴⁶ EpochTimes.de, "Bozen: Afghanen Gegen Afrikaner - Bürgerkriegsähnliche Verfolgungsjagden in Südtirol," *Epoch Times* www.epochtimes.de, October 11, 2016, <http://www.epochtimes.de/politik/europa/bozen-afghanen-gegen-afrikaner-buergerkriegsaehnliche-verfolgungsjagden-in-suedtirol-a1947356.html>.

²⁴⁷ Wochenblick.at, "Asylwerber Machen Jagd Auf Frauen Im Dirndl," *Wochenblick*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.wochenblick.at/asylwerber-machen-jagd-auf-frauen-im-dirndl/>.

²⁴⁸ Unzensuriert.at, "Ordensschwester Packt Über Muslimische Zuwanderer Aus: Zerschnittene Gesichter, Brüste Und Schamlippen," *Unzensuriert.at*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0021978-Ordensschwester-packt-ueber-muslimische-Zuwanderer-aus-Zerschnittene-Gesichter>.

²⁴⁹ "Pegida Graz - Facebook Post," September 13, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/grazpegida/photos/a.638163866289053.1073741829.637126439726129/897539617018142/?type=3&theater>.

²⁵⁰ David Berger, "„Basler Zeitung“: Die Islamisierung Europas Ist in Vollem Gange," *Philosophia Perennis*, October 11, 2016, <https://philosophia-perennis.com/2016/10/11/basler-zeitung-islamisierung/>.

²⁵¹ Anonymousnews.com, "Geheimdienst: „Tausende Muslimische Soldaten Bereit Europa Zu Erobern!“,“ *Anonymousnews.ru*, October 9, 2016, <http://www.anonymousnews.ru/2016/10/09/geheimdienst-tausende-muslimische-soldaten-bereit-europa-zu-erobern/>.

²⁵² Kathrin Sumpf, "Hören Sie Auf, Gesindel in Der Ganzen Welt Zu Unterstützen', Sagte Der Russische Botschafter Im UN-Sicherheitsrat," *Epoch Times* www.epochtimes.de, October 10, 2016, <http://www.epochtimes.de/politik/welt/un-sicherheitsrat-bleibt-im-syrien-konflikt-tief-zerstritten-a1946187.html>.

APPENDIX

The list of meetings (reported in the press) between Russian stakeholders and FPÖ politicians, 2007-2016

| 2007 | |
|----------------|---|
| May 23 | Vladimir Putin's visit to Vienna. Strache publishes his "first Putin-friendly press-release" ²⁵³ , qualifying the visit as "an honour and accolade" for Austria. ²⁵⁴ |
| December | Strache congratulates United Russia on its victory in the Duma. ²⁵⁵ |
| 2008 | |
| August 25 | Twelve days after a truce between Russia and Georgia, Strache hosts a meeting with Georgian journalist Malkhaz Gulashvili, Georgian businessman and "opposition politician" Levan Pirveli, and Russian journalist Maksim Shevchenko (Channel One Russia), an "old acquaintance" of Pirveli's ²⁵⁶ . In a press release, Strache blames Georgia for the conflict and champions improving Euro-Russian relations. ²⁵⁷ Shevchenko, who is considered well-connected to both the Kremlin and prominent Russian far-rightists, has been characterized as the „FPÖ contact man in Moscow," who „calls Strache a friend" ²⁵⁸ . Pirveli, in turn, has been dubbed "the main figure behind the first wave of [FPÖ's] contacts with Russia", with Gudenus taking over as "the most important intermediary between the party and Russia" upon Pirveli's return to Georgia ²⁵⁹ . |
| September 10 | Strache meets Oleg Morozov, first deputy speaker of the Duma, in Vienna ²⁶⁰ |
| October 20 | The FPÖ's party academy (Freiheitliches Bildungsinstitut/FBI) hosts a conference titled "Europe – Russia – Georgia: Peace Building" in Vienna, chaired by Shevchenko and Freedomite MP Peter Fichtenbauer, with Pirveli among the speakers. ²⁶¹ |
| December 15-16 | An FPÖ delegation, headed by Strache and including Gudenus, Hübner, Harald Vilimsky (secretary general), Hilmar Kabas (honorary chairman), and Barbara Kappel (then Austrian Technologies general manager), visits Moscow. The delegation meets with mayor Yury Luzhkov, Russian-orthodox church officials, and Duma MPs for United Russia. ²⁶² |

²⁵³ Political Capital Institute, "The Weaponization of Culture."

²⁵⁴ Ots.at, "Strache: Putin Ist in Österreich Herzlich Willkommen," *Ots.at*, May 23, 2007, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20070523_OTS0212/strache-putin-ist-in-oesterreich-herzlich-willkommen.

²⁵⁵ Ots.at, "Strache Verbindet Mit Russland-Wahl Hoffnung Auf Stabilität," *Ots.at*, December 3, 2007, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20071203_OTS0252/strache-verbindet-mit-russland-wahl-hoffnung-auf-stabilitaet.

²⁵⁶ Political Capital Institute, "The Weaponization of Culture."

²⁵⁷ Ots.at, "Strache Will 'neutrale Österreichische Vermittlerrolle' im Georgien-Konflikt," *Ots.at*, August 26, 2008, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20080826_OTS0283/strache-will-neutrale-oesterreichische-vermittlerrolle-im-georgien-konflikt.

²⁵⁸ Höller, "FPÖ."

²⁵⁹ Political Capital Institute, "The Weaponization of Culture."

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ots.at, "FPÖ: Montag: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 'EUROPE - RUSSIA - GEORGIA: PEACE BUILDING,'" *Ots.at*, October 17, 2008, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20081017_OTS0180/fpoe-montag-international-conference-europe-russia-georgia-peace-building.

²⁶² According to this press release, Luzhkov also invited Strache to the Viennese Ball in Vienna and to a reception hosted by his spouse in Kitzbühel (Tyrol). Ots.at, "Überaus Herzlicher Gedankenaustausch von HC Strache Und Moskauer Oberbürgermeister Luschkow."

| 2009 | |
|------------|---|
| January 30 | The FPÖ hosts a networking meeting of European right-wing populist/extremist parties (such as the Vlaams Belang, the Front National and the Danish People's Party) in Vienna. Also participating is, again, Shevchenko, whom the FPÖ presents as an "advisor to Vladimir Putin". ²⁶³ The meeting is capped off with a visit to the annual ball of Vienna's pan-German student fraternities. Among the guests: far-right ideologists Andreas Molau (Germany), Enrique Ravello (Spain), and Alexander Dugin (Russia) ²⁶⁴ . |
| May 25 | "International peace conference" on Ossetia and Abkhazia hosted by the FPÖ in Vienna; among the speakers are Shevchenko and United Russia MPs Grigory Ivliev and Viktor Zvagelsky. ²⁶⁵ |
| 2010 | |
| June 4 | A conference on the 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet region is hosted by the Freedomite party academy and Austrian Technologies. The event is hosted by Strache, Kabas and Kappel, with Pirveli, Shevchenko, and United Russia foreign affairs speaker Sergey Markov participating. ²⁶⁶ |
| September | Strache initiates a visit by twenty Russian orphans to Austria for a two-week holiday. |
| 2011 | |
| May 10-11 | An FPÖ delegation, including Strache, Gudenus, Hübner, Kappel, and MP Andreas Karlsböck, travels to Moscow at governor Boris Gromov's invitation. Aside from Gromov, the delegation meets with Duma Vice-President Andrey Metelsky. ²⁶⁷ In reaction to Strache's claim of „friendly contacts with the United Russia party,” UR clarifies that the FPÖ was „certainly not” one of its official sister parties and that “when it comes to partnerships with parties in EU countries, our natural counterpart is the European People's Party”. ²⁶⁸ |
| July 4 | An FPÖ delegation, accompanied by Shevchenko, visits the Viennese Ball in Moscow ²⁶⁹ . |
| 2012 | |
| | Gudenus and FPÖ foreign affairs speaker Hübner travel to Grosny to meet with the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov. They are accompanied by Shevchenko (who organized the visit ²⁷⁰) and Pirveli ²⁷¹ . |

²⁶³ http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20090201_OTS0032/fpoe-konferenz-europaeischer-rechtsparteien-grosser-erfolg (press release, 1 February 2009).

²⁶⁴ Schiedel, *Extreme Rechte in Europa*.

²⁶⁵ Ots.at, "Strache Lud Zu Friedenskonferenz Zu Ossetien Und Abchasien Nach Wien," *Ots.at*, May 25, 2009, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20090525_OTS0151/strache-lud-zu-friedenskonferenz-zu-ossetien-und-abchasien-nach-wien.

²⁶⁶ Ots.at, "FPÖ: Konferenz 'Farbige Revolutionen in Der GUS Und Ihre Aktuellen Auswirkungen,'" *Ots.at*, June 4, 2010, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20100604_OTS0089/fpoe-konferenz-farbige-revolutionen-in-der-gus-und-ihre-aktuellen-auswirkungen.

²⁶⁷ Ots.at, "FPÖ: Strache Trifft Moskauer Gouverneur Boris Gromow," *Ots.at*, May 11, 2011, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20110511_OTS0144/fpoe-strache-trifft-moskauer-gouverneur-boris-gromow.

²⁶⁸ Stopptdierechten.at, "Strache: Ist Da Jemand? Licht Ins Dunkel!," May 19, 2011, <http://www.stopptdierechten.at/2011/05/19/strache-ist-da-jemand-licht-ins-dunkel/>.

²⁶⁹ Höller, "FPÖ."

²⁷⁰ Political Capital Institute, "The Weaponization of Culture."

²⁷¹ Höller, "FPÖ."

| 2014 | |
|-----------------|--|
| March 16 | Referendum on the Russian annexation of Crimea. To boost the referendum's legitimacy (or perception thereof), Moscow has invited international observers, a majority of whom “turned out to be members of European far-right parties”, including neo-fascists such as the Italian Fiamma Tricolore and Hungarian Jobbik ²⁷² , as well as three Austrians: Hübner, Gudenus – who qualified the ballot as „quiet, disciplined and exemplary“ (ibid., 45) and former FPÖ politician Ewald Stadler. The observation is organized by the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE), which is classified by Political Capital ²⁷³ as “another FSB [the Russian domestic intelligence service] outfit”. |
| April 10 | After the EU begins implementing its sanctions regime, an FPÖ delegation (Strache, Gudenus, Kabas, and then-Vienna city MP David Lasar) meets with Russian UN ambassador Alexey Borodavkin in Geneva – “as a result of an official invitation,” as a Freedomite press release states. Strache calls for an “end to the pointless and harmful sanctions against Russia ... which harm, first and foremost, the Austrian and European economy”, and qualifies Russia as “a geopolitical world power that one has to include and must not ostracize.” ²⁷⁴ |
| May 31 | Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev, who is believed to support separatists in Eastern Ukraine, ²⁷⁵ hosts a conspiratorial meeting at Vienna's Liechtenstein palace. As journalist Bernhard Odehnal reports a few days later, attendants include Strache, Gudenus and Johann Herzog (Vienna city MP) from the FPÖ, Alexander Dugin, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (Front National), and a number of other European far-right politicians and aristocrats. ²⁷⁶ In all probability, the date was chosen deliberately: on the same day, the Life Ball, a benefit for people living with HIV and an annual get-together of the international LGBT scene, was held at the Vienna city hall, only one kilometre away from Malofeev's meeting. |
| June 25-27 | Gudenus, Hübner, and Karlsböck represent the FPÖ at the Third International Parliamentary Forum in Moscow. In his talk, Gudenus emphasizes the FPÖ's special role in strengthening the EU-Russia partnership. ²⁷⁷ That same month, Gudenus states Russia compares favourably to some EU countries in terms of freedom of expression. “Here, you can speak completely free and open without having to anticipate sanctions against mass media or politicians.” ²⁷⁸ |
| September 10-11 | International forum “The Large Family and the Future of Humanity” in Moscow, sponsored by Malofeev's Saint Basil the Great Foundation. Gudenus delivers a speech in which he attacks the US, the EU and “the homosexual lobby” which he portrays as “extremely powerful in Europe” and “a very, very bad thing.” ²⁷⁹ |

²⁷² Antonis Klapsis, *An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin's Russia* (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2015),

http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=va6rCQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=%22policy+documents.+It+or+organises+seminars+and+training+on+EU+policies+and+on+the+process+of%22+%22and+at+the+Open+University+of+Cyprus,+and+the+Head+of%22+&ots=s_30C2ZeKI&sig=nvi9e9cFXnrnKododIbPHvELXK0.

²⁷³ Political Capital Institute, “The Weaponization of Culture.”

²⁷⁴ Ots.at, “HC Strache Trifft Russischen UNO-Botschafter Borodavkin in Genf,” *Ots.at*, April 11, 2014, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20140411_OTS0069/hc-strache-trifft-russischen-uno-botschafter-borodavkin-in-genf.

²⁷⁵ Höller, “FPÖ.”

²⁷⁶ Odehnal, “Gipfeltreffen mit Putins fünfter Kolonne.”

²⁷⁷ Ots.at, “FPÖ-Delegation Beim 3. Internationalen Parlamentarischen Forum in Moskau,” *Ots.at*, June 26, 2014, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20140626_OTS0240/fpoe-delegation-beim-3-internationalen-parlamentarischen-forum-in-moskau-bild.

²⁷⁸ Höller, “FPÖ.”

²⁷⁹ Johann Gudenus, “Johann Gudenus: Children Make the Main Wealth of Human Life,” *Международный Форум Многодетная Семья И Будущее Человечества*, 2014, <http://www.familyforum2014.org/johann-gudenus>.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| September 14 | Gudenus attends the gubernatorial elections in Saint Petersburg as an observer. He praises the transparency and legitimacy of the ballot as superior to European Parliament elections ²⁸⁰ |
| September 16 | In European Parliament, 127 MEPs vote against the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, with „most of the negative votes ... from MEPs belonging to far-right parties”, including the FPÖ, the Greek Golden Dawn, Jobbik and others. “[P]ractically all the far-right parties represented in the EP”, Klapsis ²⁸¹ notes, “aligned with Moscow on this issue of critical importance for the Kremlin.” |
| November 24-25 | Strache, Gudenus, Hübner, and Karlsböck travel to Moscow to attend an international Round Table chaired by then-Duma president Sergey Naryshkin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and meet with Duma MPs. ²⁸² |
| 2015 | |
| March 11 | Gudenus cancels his appearance at the International Russian Conservative Forum in Saint Petersburg after facing public criticism. He claims to have backed out of his commitment upon having learned about the other participants. ²⁸³ According to the Forum's website, these include representatives of neo-fascist parties like Forza Nuova (Italy), NPD (Germany), and Golden Dawn (Greece). ²⁸⁴ |
| 2016 | |
| December 10 | Gudenus, together with Russian ambassador to Austria Dmitrij Ljubinsky, opens the tenth annual Moscow Ball in Vienna, using his welcome speech to call for an immediate end to „these asinine [EU] sanctions”, which, according to him, not only effect the Austrian labour market, but also “harm ... our Russian friends “. ²⁸⁵ |
| December 18-19 | A high-level FPÖ delegation travels to Moscow to sign a five-year cooperation agreement with United Russia |

²⁸⁰ Höller, “FPÖ.”

²⁸¹ Klapsis, *An Unholy Alliance*.

²⁸² Ots.at, “FPÖ: Strache Nimmt an Konferenz in Moskau Teil,” *Ots.at*, November 25, 2014, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20141125_OTS0118/fpoe-strache-nimmt-an-konferenz-in-moskau-teil.

²⁸³ Ots.at, “Gudenus Sagte Teilnahme beim ‘International Russian Conservation Forum’ nach Bekanntwerden Der Teilnehmerliste Ab,” *Ots.at*, March 11, 2015, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20150311_OTS0191/gudenus-sagte-teilnahme-beim-international-russian-conservation-forum-nach-bekanntwerden-der-teilnehmerliste-ab.

²⁸⁴ Realpatriot.ru, “Foreign Participants,” *Международный Русский Консервативный Форум*, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://realpatriot.ru/participants/>.

²⁸⁵ Ots.at, “Gudenus Fordert Bei Moskauer Ball Stopp Der Russland-Sanktionen,” *Ots.at*, December 12, 2016, https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20161212_OTS0101/gudenus-fordert-bei-moskauer-ball-stopp-der-russland-sanktionen-bild.