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2

Austria: Scandals, Politics, and Identitarians

Fabian Schmid

Far-right movements in Austria have built close relationships with Russia in the last two decades. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), one of the country's three major political parties, has begun to develop ties to Russian politicians and oligarchs since around 2005. This culminated in a so-called friendship agreement with the Russian Kremlin party, United Russia, at the end of 2016. There are also numerous indications that the FPÖ was willing to accept money from Russia-linked oligarchs. Criminal investigations allege that party-leaders received several million euros from an Eastern Ukrainian oligarch, and a secretly filmed meeting between party-leader Heinz-Christian Strache and a woman claiming to be an oligarch's niece led to the downfall of Strache, and the end of the government coalition between the FPÖ and the conservative ÖVP 2019. Currently, there are several investigations into connections between FPÖ-aligned officials and Russia, including former foreign affairs minister Karin Kneissl, who famously moved to Russia in 2023. "We were a pro-Russian government", former chancellor Sebastian Kurz (member of the Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) told a court in October 2023 – he is indicted for perjury. This is not only true for the ÖVP-FPÖ government from 2017 to 2019, but also for previous administrations (2007–2017) consisting of Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the ÖVP. Several former chancellors or high-ranking officials have later worked for Russian companies or lobbied for pro-Russian politicians. While SPÖ and ÖVP seem to be primarily motivated by economic reasons, the FPÖ also has ideological common ground with Kremlin politics.

The FPÖ is generally described as a populist party with mostly far-right policies and rhetoric. The core of its political agenda is a fierce stance against migration

and a scepticism against the European Union (EU). The FPÖ describes itself as neither aligned with Brussels, Washington DC, or Moscow, but as neutral. It is calling for an end to sanctions against Russia and a cease-fire in Ukraine. The party is agitating against LGBTQ+-friendly policies but uses attacks on the LGBTQ+-community by migrants or refugees to call for deportations. Similarly, there have been instances of antisemitism and neo-Nazism within the party, yet the FPÖ has repeatedly criticised “imported antisemitism” by Muslim refugees.

While the FPÖ is a main hub for the political far-right in Austria, there are even more radical organisations like the youth group Identitarian movement. In the past decade, the FPÖ has mostly denied connections to these groups, even though policies and personnel overlap. Under the current party leader Herbert Kickl, the party has fully embraced its ties to extremists, even though there have been instances of violence linked to the Identitarians. The far-right Australian terrorist Brenton Tarrant has donated several thousand euros to the Austrian Identitarian movement and possibly met members of the organisation when travelling to Austria.

One offspring of the Identitarian movement is the Suvorov Institute, a seemingly unimportant pro-Russian organisation. Its current leader Alexander Markovics has been a founding member of the Identitarian movement in Austria. The Suvorov Institute is one of very few entities still actively cooperating with Russian organisations after the attack on Ukraine in 2022. The Suvorov Institute is also working together with other groups with a history of violence, for example the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community from Germany, which was banned in 2023.

In this chapter, the manifold connections between the FPÖ and Russia will be described. After a short overview of how the FPÖ built up ties to the Kremlin, evidence of its pro-Russian actions in government is presented. While the shock of the Ibiza video brought a sudden halt to FPÖ’s relationship with Russia in 2019, the party is still pushing for policies beneficial to Moscow. This is indicated by an analysis of the party’s press releases about the war in Ukraine.

The second case study is the Suvorov Institute, as it shows how Russian influence is still seen on the fringes of politics and even on the fringes of the FPÖ. This is

evidence that Russian entities have no reluctance to cooperate with groups that are linked to violence themselves or other violent groups.

Case Study 1: The Freedom Party

Austria as a Friend of Russia

Alongside the SPÖ and the conservative ÖVP, the FPÖ has established itself as the third major force in Austrian politics. The party has been criticised for its rhetoric and policies regarding migrants and refugees, and its ties to neo-Nazism and far-right extremism. It has also been plagued by corruption. Still, the FPÖ managed to be in government twice in the last twenty years (2000–2006 and 2017–2019); with the conservative ÖVP claiming a coalition with FPÖ was needed to break up the deadlock of forever-coalitions between SPÖ and ÖVP.

The FPÖ's ties to Russia have only been a minor cause for criticism by the other two main parties – probably because they have developed similar connections themselves. This is shown by one scene alone from 2014 when Chamber of Commerce president and ÖVP-politician Christoph Leitl joked with Putin about how long he himself had been at the helm of the organisation – Putin then ironically called him a “dictator.”¹ The Austrian economy is closely intertwined with Russia: the partly state-owned energy group OMV concluded joint ventures with Gazprom.²³ Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI), part of the most powerful banking conglomerate, for example, is still active in Belarus and Russia.⁴ ÖVP politicians worked for Raiffeisen after their political career had ended, and the Raiffeisen Bank gave out multimillion-euro loans to the ÖVP.⁵

A Friendship Agreement Years in the Making

In December 2016, the then-leadership of the FPÖ visited Russia and had a photo of them taken smiling in Moscow's Red Square. The leading⁶ party cadres were in Russia for working meetings, they said at the time. In fact, Secretary General Harald Vilimsky, party leader Heinz-Christian Strache, and his deputies Norbert Hofer and Johann Gudenus had travelled to Moscow to conclude a friendship agreement with the Kremlin party United Russia, whose chairman was Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The agreement was signed by Sergei Zhelesnyak, deputy secretary of the Party General Council.⁷ It was by far the most crucial party in Russia that declared its support for the FPÖ. De facto, it is led by

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, according to the constitution, must not be a party member. Interestingly, hardly anything planned in this agreement ever came to life.

In terms of domestic policy, however, the FPÖ for the first time clearly and officially acknowledged its closeness to Russia and Putin. For some time, no one could have imagined this. When the party was founded after World War II as the Association of Independents, it gathered mainly former Nazis, so-called expelled ethnic Germans, and liberals.⁸ They were all united by a fervent anti-communism. Even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the FPÖ was not interested in Eastern Europe. The party leader at the time, Jörg Haider, wanted to give his party, which was isolated in Europe, foreign policy weight but to do so he travelled primarily to the Middle East to visit dictators like Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein.⁹

All that changed when Heinz-Christian Strache took over as chairman of his party in April 2005. Strache's closest confidant was Johann Gudenus, who was then chairman of the Freedom Party's youth organisation. Strache and Gudenus were connected through their fraternity, the Viennese penal fraternity Vandalia, where Strache was Gudenus's *Leibvater* there, in a sense his mentor.¹⁰ For the FPÖ, fraternities are important as a recruiting ground and as informal networks. Historically, fraternities played a key role in the revolution of 1848, when students and other groups called for freedom of speech and other liberal reforms in Austria.¹¹ The FPÖ sees itself in this tradition – thus the term freedom is part of its official name. Over the next decades, developed rigid antisemitism and moved to the political spectre. After World War II, fraternities in Austria had become breeding grounds for neo-Nazism. Nowadays, most fraternities are seen as far-right and obscure groups,¹² partly because of their rites – some members still fence without protection and proudly wear their scars. As a *Leibvater*, Strache had responsibilities for Gudenus, who in return pledged a lifelong allegiance to him.¹³ Gudenus himself had close ties to Russia. The son of an FPÖ member of parliament and convicted Holocaust denier, he had attended summer courses at Moscow University in the 1990s, spoke Russian, and had conducted business in Russia.¹⁴

Through Gudenus, FPÖ quickly established contacts in the post-Soviet space, for example with pro-Russian actors from Georgia or with the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, a well-known oligarch.¹⁵ This was followed by what can

now be described as the typical programme of Russophile European parties: FPÖ politicians travelled to Moscow and Chechnya, participated in meetings and congresses there.¹⁶ None of this, however, prevented the conservative People's Party from entering a coalition with the FPÖ in December 2017 and making FPÖ politicians, among other things, rise to the level of foreign minister and interior minister.¹⁷

The FPÖ in Power

What happened then is an example of the dangers posed by the participation of the pro-Russian FPÖ in government – ironically, it was then a supposed connection to Russia, of all things, that brought the FPÖ down for the time being. Even before the FPÖ joined the government, a dossier was circulating with accusations against high-ranking police officers and members of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BVT), Austria's civilian counterintelligence agency. When longtime FPÖ Secretary General Herbert Kickl became the interior minister at the end of 2017, his team pushed the anti-corruption prosecutor's office for action to be taken because of the allegations included in the dossier. The dossier sounded like it was written by a disgruntled insider, who alleged that that money had been divested from hostage-saving operations by office officials or that the agency was misused by the ÖVP to collect damaging information on other parties.¹⁸

Consequently, on 28 February 2018, numerous police officers from an anti-drug unit led by an FPÖ-affiliated chief, raided the Office for the Protection of the Constitution whose director Peter Gridling was suspended. The measures were directed against several suspects in the intelligence department, which is responsible for counterintelligence. The accusations were that expenses had been falsely charged and that the rights of certain North Koreans had been violated because they had been surveilled without the consent of the legal protection officer.¹⁹ To date, there has not been a single guilty verdict in the matter.

European and US partner services reportedly reacted with horror to the raid.²⁰ During the raid, countless secret documents were rummaged through and transported to the public prosecutor's office. Among them were documents related to Russia.²¹ Peter Gridling, head of the BVT at the time of the raid, told the *Financial Times* (FT) that “we were very worried about the Freedom party's contacts with Russia”. The BVT investigated how “Russia might finance them,

offer them jobs”. When the FPÖ came into power “they wanted to change the [intelligence service] immediately”, Gridling said to the FT. Interior Minister Kickl unsuccessfully tried to suspend Gridling and halt the renewal of his association as the head of the BVT.²² At the time, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution had already been the target of investigations because of a suspected data leak: an employee named Egisto Ott allegedly sent data from BVT to his private email address. To this day, Ott is suspected of having spied for Russia, which he continues to deny.²³ Only in recent years has it become clear that Ott and a network of acquaintances had been working with the FPÖ and that they were involved in the events surrounding the search in February 2018 by allegedly handing over internal information about their BVT colleagues to the FPÖ and associates. Investigators even allege that the FPÖ paid Ott for secret information and documents.²⁴

A key figure here is the former head of the department at the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Martin Weiss. He left the BVT shortly before the raid to work for Jan Marsalek, then-manager of Wirecard, a German fintech company worth billions of euros that was ensnared in a huge fraud case in 2019. Marsalek allegedly lied about Wirecard’s assets worth three billion dollars. When auditors could not find these assets, Marsalek fled to Belarus to escape prosecution. Intelligence agencies assess that he is now living in a suburb of Moscow.²⁵

Investigators suspect that Ott conducted illegal data queries for Weiss and, thus, for Marsalek. Marsalek is suspected of having cooperated with Russian intelligence services for several years.²⁶ There are several examples of his involvement, which was unknown before Wirecard collapsed: his immediate entourage included Stanislav Petlinsky.²⁷ To protect his business interests in Libya, Marsalek hired Russian mercenary troops managed by Petlinsky. He also allegedly travelled with the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) to Palmyra, Syria.²⁸ Another axis of Marsalek’s contacts with Russia and the FPÖ reaches into the Austrian Foreign Ministry: Marsalek is said to have obtained secret information from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on the Novichok poison attack against Russian ex-agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.²⁹ Skripal was targeted by Russian agents who used the Novichok nerve agent for their assassination attempt. Skripal and his daughter survived, but an uninvolved

British woman died. The OPCW did an analysis of the Novichok samples and distributed them to its member states. According to investigative files from Austria, this document allegedly originated from the Foreign Ministry, with the FPÖ-aligned secretary general there at the time, Johannes Peterlik, requesting the document.³⁰ Shortly afterwards, Peterlik allegedly showed Egisto Ott the document, who filmed the report – and possibly forwarded it to Marsalek.³¹ Those involved deny this. Peterlik's wife, an employee of the Asia department in the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, was in turn one of the prosecution's witnesses whose statements led to the raid there.³² Peterlik and Marsalek were both members of the Austrian-Russian Friendship Society, which also featured Gudenus and other FPÖ politicians. Gudenus met with Marsalek several times. Through an intermediary, a businessman with ties to and interest in Russia, Marsalek relayed information from sources within the intelligence community to Gudenus, who in turn shared it with other FPÖ politicians. This is documented in investigative files from the office prosecuting corruption.³³

Political scientist Karin Kneissl, who was chosen as foreign minister by the FPÖ, was also associated with the Friendship Society. During her time in office, she attracted attention with her pro-Russian positions—for example, no Russian diplomat was expelled from the country after the poison attack in Salisbury. A few weeks later, Kneissl personally invited Putin to her wedding, where he appeared with an entourage of bodyguards and danced with the bride. The lady's traditional curtsy at the end of the dance became one of the most shared and commented on photos in Austria's recent history.³⁴ For her wedding, Putin gave Kneissl expensive jewellery, which she planned to use privately after her term.³⁵ According to chat messages from FPÖ politicians, Russian investors planned to enter business relations with Kneissl's husband.³⁶ After leaving the ministry, Kneissl first became a member of the Russian petroleum company Rosneft's supervisory board, then in June 2023 it became known that she would in the future head a state-related think tank in St. Petersburg.³⁷ Former Committee for State Security (KGB) agent Sergei Shirnov said in an interview that Kneissl would have been an ideal candidate for recruitment by Russian intelligence agencies.³⁸ Kneissl is now living in Russia.³⁹

The Ibiza Video

Kneissl's term ended, just like that of all other FPÖ ministers, in May 2019, when a video recorded two years earlier appeared online. In it, Strache and Gudenus

can be seen negotiating crooked deals with a supposed Russian businesswoman in Ibiza in July 2017. They discussed party donations with her avoiding official reporting offices; urged her to invest in Austria's largest daily newspaper and change its reporting to suit the FPÖ; and offered the prospect of state contracts in return.⁴⁰ However, it was a sting operation: security consultant Julian Hessenthaler had stalked Gudenus on behalf of a lawyer to gather incriminating material on the FPÖ. To do so, he invented the figure of the fake oligarch businesswoman. After the recording in the summer of 2017, there were allegedly attempts to sell the video to various other parties and entrepreneurs, which did not work out. As a result, the parties involved reportedly contacted German journalists Frederik Obermayer and Bastian Obermair. In May 2019, research on the video then appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. They sealed the end of Strache's and Gudenus's political careers and brought down the government.⁴¹ The incident clearly shows that the FPÖ attempted to profit from its relations with Russia during the Strache era, and vice versa. It demonstrated a willingness to receive financial support from the Russian sphere.⁴² Party leader Strache also spoke in the video about having some friends in Moscow who would have a lot of money. Despite intense criminal investigations around the finances of the party and several political special committees, so far, no flow of money from Russia could be officially determined. However, the expensive wedding gift to the then foreign-minister Karin Kneissl, the willingness of Russian investors to do business with her then-husband, Kneissl's involvement with Rosneft, and now the think tank in St. Petersburg are indications of some form of monetary influence.

The many visits to Russian conferences or of Russian politicians have helped to present the FPÖ as an internationally active and recognised party. Logistical support was also provided by the fact that FPÖ politicians were regularly interviewed in Russian propaganda media close to the state, for example RT or Sputnik.⁴³ Conversely, Russia has clearly benefitted from FPÖ's activities. As an opposition party, the FPÖ in Vienna, for example, called for a crackdown on Chechen asylum seekers. This position was also taken during a working visit to Chechen dictator Ramzan Kadyrov.⁴⁴ Although there have always been tensions within the Chechen community in Austria, most of the diaspora consists of people who fled from Kadyrov. By agitating this community, the FPÖ has politically prepared the ground for enabling deportations of Chechens to Russia. Opposition figures in particular are threatened with torture and imprisonment after

deportation. The FPÖ was also useful to the Russian government in terms of foreign policy: the invitation to the wedding of the foreign minister shortly after the attack in Salisbury gave Putin the means to publicly highlight a division within the European Union. While other member countries expelled Russian diplomats, the Austrian foreign minister danced with the Russian president.

The events show clear dangers from Russian influence in Austria:

- Jan Marsalek and indirectly his alleged GRU contacts were offered a way to influence the BVT via the FPÖ and internal documents were possibly forwarded to him. British investigators allege that Marsalek has led Russian spy operations even after he fled Germany.⁴⁵
- The actions of the Freedom Party Interior Minister Kickl severely damaged the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, making it highly unlikely that it could adequately perform its counterintelligence duties. This also led to the investigative journalist Christo Grozev, who has written extensively on Russian corruption for online outlet Bellingcat,⁴⁶ having to flee Vienna because he no longer felt safe from Russian agents there.⁴⁷
- The Chechen community in Austria became the target of political attacks by the FPÖ. Here, too, the lack of operational capability on the part of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution was noticeable.

The FPÖ Today

Due to several factors, the FPÖ's pro-Russian stance has declined in recent years or has not been demonstrated equally openly. After the Ibiza video, party leader Strache and his confidant Gudenus had to leave politics: both are now no longer party members. Contents of the video became the subject of a parliamentary investigative committee – this would have generated increased attention and negative publicity for the FPÖ for any recent contacts in the Russian-speaking world. Meanwhile, the party is led by Herbert Kickl, who served as interior minister under the former government and previously as his party's secretary general for years. Kickl had repeatedly made known his scepticism about Strache's Russian connections and is said to have been unhappy about the conclusion of the association agreement with UR.⁴⁸ After the start of the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, however, a pro-Russian stance has once again shone through. This is shown by an analysis of more than 130 press releases published by the FPÖ's parliamentary club in the first year of the Ukraine war.

For this chapter, an examination of whether these messages expressed criticism of arms deliveries, NATO or the US, Ukraine, Russia, or the sanctions or featured Austrian “neutrality,” was performed. Overall, criticism of the sanctions was voiced in almost 60 percent of all press releases. Russian actions were condemned, but Ukraine or its leaders were criticised almost as often. This is due to the Freedom Party’s interpretation of neutrality, which is considered a kind of national treasure in Austria. In a June 2022 poll, more than 70 percent of respondents favoured maintaining military neutrality.⁴⁹ Yet, it is disputed how neutral Austria actually is and how the country should live out this principle. In principle, neutrality was enshrined in law in 1955 and in a declaration of intent with the Soviet Union before the latter, and the three other occupying powers left Austria. Ever since Austria joined the EU in 1995, it has been unclear how neutral the country has been, given its commitment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the early 2000s, then-conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel spoke of neutrality as being like Mozartkugeln and Lipizzaner horses—in short, a kind of folklore.⁵⁰ However, there have been no serious debates about Austria joining NATO since then.

The FPÖ ties indirectly with this myth of neutrality. It interprets the neutral status not only militarily, but also diplomatically. This is a big difference to the current chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP), who visited Putin after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and declared that Austria is not “morally neutral”, meaning that Austria will not send military aid to Ukraine, but does condemn the Russian attack.⁵¹ Although Russia’s war of aggression is condemned by the FPÖ as well, according to the party, Russia should bear no consequences for its aggressive behaviour, i.e. neither via sanctions nor the expulsion of Russian diplomats. In FPÖ’s vision, Austria positions itself as a place for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine which are repeatedly called for in press releases – regardless of the fact that Ukraine would have to accept massive land losses for peace.

In the first days of the Russian attack on Ukraine, FPÖ’s broadcasts clearly condemned the invasion. But even at this early stage, the party warned against sanctions. Moreover, it immediately blamed the USA for the war.⁵² Thus, already on 22 February 2022, MEP Harald Vilimsky spoke of US President Joe Biden being a “Cold Warrior” who “does not shy away from further escalation in Eastern Europe (...) Both Biden and Putin endanger European security and peace in Europe with their actions.”⁵³ Foreign policy spokesman Axel Kassegger let it be

known that “there is never only one side to blame.” NATO “is arming just as much as the Russian side”.⁵⁴ In the following months, the FPÖ vehemently agitated against a possible EU accession status for Ukraine, as well as for EU funds for reconstruction or military support for the attacked country. The sanctions were linked to inflation and inflationary pressures and were referred to as “knee-jerk sanctions.” Following Hungary’s example, the FPÖ then agitated for a referendum on the continuation of the sanctions.⁵⁵

Case Study 2: The Suvorov Institute

FPÖ, the party clearly leading in the polls for most of 2023 with 32 percent and therefore nearly 10 percent more support than the Social Democrats,⁵⁶ plays a major role in Austrian politics. The second case study is focused on the fringes of the political sphere: the Suvorov Institute. The Suvorov Institute for the Promotion of Austrian-Russian Dialogue was officially registered in September 2014, half a year after the illegal annexation of Crimea.⁵⁷ From the very beginning, the association’s slant was clear: it organised demonstrations for the Donbas and invited predominantly far-right guests to geopolitical discussions in which strong pro-Russian opinions were expressed, as one can see by the manifold postings and summaries of events on its Facebook page.⁵⁸ There are also clear connections to other groups and individuals linked with violence. To the Identitarian movement in Austria, which had at least 32 members with a record of violence; to people involved with the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community, whose members had ties to right-wing terrorism; or to the Russian Night Wolves, who were promoting violence against Maidan activists.⁵⁹ The Suvorov Institute caused a stir above all because of one man: Alexander Markovics. Markovics, born in Vienna in 1991, is said to have been politically active already during his school days. His first points of contact were with fraternities and with the FPÖ, for which he ran as a candidate at the district level in 2010. Markovics achieved a certain notoriety starting in 2012 when he founded the far-right Identitarian movement in Austria. This is an offshoot of the French Generation Identitaire, thus an organisation of the so-called New Right, which packages its extreme content in a modern way.⁶⁰

The ideological core of the Identitarians is the conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement: the autochthonous population is “exchanged” by the ruling elites for immigrants who, out of gratitude, henceforth support their claim to power.⁶¹

Subsequently, the programme of the Identitarians turns against LGBTQ+ and the emancipation of women. Thus, there are strong ideological points of contact with Russia. Markovics, however, seemed to have developed a particular soft spot for Russia even within the Identitarians. Early on, the activist became involved with the propagandist and philosopher Alexander Dugin, reviewing his books and interviewing him for far-right media like *Deutsche Stimme*, a publication of the extreme German political party NPD.⁶² At the Identitarians, Markovics was the leader of the theory group within the movement. In 2017, however, a conflict arose within the far-right grouping which was now publicly represented primarily by Martin Sellner. In an interview with a neo-Nazi German magazine, Markovics later stated that the Identitarians had “itself become part of what it claimed to fight”; there was a “sectarian climate” and “intrigue within the leadership” there. Markovics quickly found a new political home: the Suvorov Institute.⁶³

A Quick Overview: The Identitarian Movement

The Identitarians gained popularity, in particular at the height of the refugee movement in 2015. At its peak, the far-right group, which was monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Austria, had several thousand followers, meaning people who support their ideas and occasionally show up to events, and around 300 members.⁶⁴ There were several criminal proceedings against the Identitarians. Markovics, Sellner, and other leading cadres were charged with forming a criminal organisation and incitement in Graz in 2018 but were acquitted. The indictment alleged that Sellner, Markovics, and others formed a group – the Identitarians – to repeatedly commit crimes (incitement), hence the designation of criminal organisation.⁶⁵ In 2019, the movement came under renewed pressure following the terrorist attack in New Zealand. The right-wing terrorist Brenton Tarrant, before he murdered more than 50 people in two mosques, corresponded with Identitarian leader Sellner and donated €1,500 to him.⁶⁶ In the months before his terrorist attack, Tarrant had made a trip around the world, including a visit to Austria. Authorities suspected a meeting with Sellner, but they could never prove it.⁶⁷ The investigation was eventually dropped. After that, the Identitarians did not regain their former clout; in the end, the movement split into several groups.⁶⁸

In the aftermath of the Identitarians’ dissolution, Markovics began to appear as a Suvorov Institute employee in 2017, first as press spokesman, then as secretary general.⁶⁹ He had already participated in events there before. The chairman of the

association before Markovics was Igor Belov, a Russian journalist who, among other things, worked for the state-affiliated *Sputnik* as a Vienna correspondent. Research by the daily newspaper *Der Standard* and this author led Belov to resign from this position, probably because *Sputnik* did not want to be officially associated with the Suvorov Institute.⁷⁰ The founder of the Suvorov Institute is believed to be Patrick Poppel, a pro-Russian activist who had previously been active in extremist Christian movements.⁷¹ Poppel is currently secretary general of the Austrian-Abkhazian Society, as well as South Ossetia's representative in Austria. He is thus involved with two republics in the territory of Georgia that are under the protection of Russia and are not officially recognised.⁷² In a 2018 interview with the *Wiener Zeitung*, Poppel evoked his great love for Russian culture. He sees the country as the “successor to the Byzantine Empire,” which was “conceived as Christian from the beginning.”⁷³

From the beginning, the Suvorov Institute cooperated closely with official Russian organisations as well as related associations. The Austrian-Russian Friendship Society, for example, promoted Russian language learning at the Suvorov Institute, which in turn was shared by the Russian Cultural Institute in Vienna.⁷⁴ Poppel welcomed to Vienna the motorcycle group Night Wolves, a Russian organisation that is seen as homophobic and ultranationalist, and whose current leader has been sanctioned by the EU. The Night Wolves have existed for more than three decades. Every year they celebrate the Soviet victory in World War II by touring its former frontlines.⁷⁵ Photos show Poppel with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov⁷⁶ or with Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov, the president of the unrecognised Republic of Crimea.⁷⁷ There are also close contacts with Gunnar Lindemann, a member of the Berlin State Parliament for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Together they founded the German initiative Königsberger Freunde, which aims for a “better dialogue with Russia”.⁷⁸ Poppel also announced that he would cooperate with Zoran Stanojevic and his organisation Slavia.⁷⁹ Stanojevic was described by the German newspaper *Die Welt* as a “Russian influence agent”, his organisation Slavia, allegedly posing as a charity, but according to *Die Welt*, it has not left any noticeable track record of charitable work. Stanojevic is said to have conspicuously sought proximity to top Social Democratic politicians.⁸⁰

While Poppel has visibly focused on his role with the Austro-Abkhazian Society, Markovics's influence increased via the Suvorov Institute, which thus networked

even more strongly in far-right circles. In an interview with Gegenstrom, a website of the publishing house *Metapol*, Markovics explained his point of view on the Russo-Ukrainian war. For him, Ukraine has been a “US outpost on the Eurasian World Island” since the Maidan revolution in 2014. The people in Donbas had tried to “break out of Western hegemony,” and the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics had tried for years, together with Russia, “in vain to find a peaceful solution to the conflict (...) here.”⁸¹ After the 2022 Russian invasion, the Suvorov Institute euphorically posted on Facebook in German: “Today Russia’s President Putin recognised the Donbas as independent in its old borders—for the warmongers of NATO and the West this means an end to their evil game! Long live the Donbass [sic]! Long live the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics! Long live Russia! Long live Eurasia! Long live the multipolar world!”⁸²

Markovics connects the identitarian theory of great exchange with Dugin’s so-called Eurasianism.⁸³ Without a multipolar world, that is, with centres of power like Moscow next to Washington, there will be only the American unified man, Markovics argues.⁸⁴ Dugin himself was interviewed by Markovics for the neo-Nazi magazine *Deutsche Stimme*, which is published in the environment of the German political party NPD (now Die Heimat), an extremist right-wing organisation that the German constitutional court described as unconstitutional but too yielding and too insignificant a political influence to constitute a threat to German democracy. Consequently, the German Federal Constitutional Court found no grounds to ban the part.⁸⁵ Markovics also attended the Congress on Fourth Political Theory organised by Dugin in August 2020. The conference “united people from all over the world in the intellectual struggle for their own identity against the liberal system,” as Markovics wrote. One participant, for example, was Maram Susli, known as the Syrian Girl: a Syrian-Australian influencer who allegedly advocated for Bashar al-Assad’s regime and participated in Russian disinformation campaigns. Also in the mix, among others, were far-right Georgian businessman and politician Levan Vasadze, and US radio host Tim Kirby.⁸⁶ Similar lineups of personnel could be observed at the Global Conference on Multipolarity, which Markovics attended in April 2023. More than 100 experts from over 60 countries would participate in the conference online, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced.⁸⁷ Lavrov welcomed the participants, among which was oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who is sanctioned by the US, the EU, and the UK. According to the European Council, Malofeev is “closely linked to

separatists in eastern Ukraine and Crimea” and is a former boss of Alexander Borodai,⁸⁸ so-called prime minister.⁸⁹ Intercepted phone calls and emails showed how closely Malofeev colluded with the Kremlin in his activities related to Gudenus.⁹⁰

Markovics, and thus the Suvorov Institute, continued to be intensively associated with proponents of the New Right in German-speaking countries. For example, with the French right-wing extremist Pierre Krebs;⁹¹ with hard neo-Nazism, for example, in the form of the NPD, although the boundaries between the New Right and neo-Nazism are fluid.⁹² However, the Suvorov Institute also provided direct support for the separatists in the Donbas: the former South Tyrol terrorist Herbert Fritz, for example, was active there as a language teacher “and ambassador of patriotic Europe”.⁹³ Fritz had been arrested in the 1960s for his alleged participation in a terrorist attack in South Tyrol, but was acquitted. He was part of a movement that violently fought to recognise South Tyrol as an Austrian territory, as it was part of Austria until 1918.⁹⁴ In the following years, Fritz founded several right-wing publications and organisations.⁹⁵ Fritz also travelled to Afghanistan after the US troops pulled out. In the right-wing magazine *Info Direkt*, which is close to the Identitarian movement, he wrote that Afghanistan is now “safe again”.⁹⁶ Only a few weeks afterwards, Fritz was arrested by the Taliban on espionage charges. In October 2023, several high-ranking politicians of the FPÖ, like former MEP Andreas Mölze, travelled to Kabul to secure Fritz’s release. They were not successful.⁹⁷ These connections demonstrate more than ideological and likely logistical support from Russia for the Suvorov Institute and its proponents. They are invited to conferences and trips and in return they spread Russian propaganda in Austria. The question of financial support is unresolved. According to several officials at the Directorate General for Public Security (DSN) – the new agency that is a direct successor to the BVT – the Suvorov Institute is monitored and investigated.⁹⁸

There are equally clear links to organisations or individuals in whose environment violence happens. Pierre Krebs, with whom Markovics has made several appearances, is a prominent member of the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community.⁹⁹ In September 2023, German interior minister Nancy Faeser banned the 70-year-old organisation, which promotes a neo-pagan way of living—hence the name. According to German authorities, the Artgemeinschaft’s ideology is a

“continuation of the National Socialist’s ideology”. The organisation had been led by German neo-Nazi Jürgen Rieger from 1989 until his death in 2009. Rieger was also deputy party leader of the NPD and he had been sentenced for violent crimes several times.¹⁰⁰ The neo-Nazi-terrorist Stephan Ernst was also a member of the Artgemeinschaft; he was allegedly removed from its ranks because he did not pay his membership fees. In 2019, Ernst murdered the conservative politician Walter Lübcke, who had argued for the intake of refugees. Ernst was sentenced to life in prison.¹⁰¹ The Artgemeinschaft is also connected to people close to the neo-Nazi-terror organisation NSU (Untergrund), which is responsible for the murder of nine migrants and one policewoman. A former NPD politician, who was a member of the Artgemeinschaft, has been sentenced for helping the NSU. After his release from prison, he lived with the then-head of the Artgemeinschaft.¹⁰²

There have also been repeated violent incidents in the environment of the Identitarians themselves, for example, against anti-fascist counter-demonstrators.¹⁰³ According to investigation files that had been leaked, 32 members of the Identitarian movement had been sentenced because of manifold violent crimes like rape, assault, robbery, or blackmailing.¹⁰⁴ Identitarian groups have also trained in self-defence in public spaces and produced stickers bearing the slogan: Street fight experience since 1529 (referring to the siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire).¹⁰⁵

Threat Analysis

The two case studies show how Russia is influencing Austrian politics in manifold ways. With the FPÖ, the Kremlin has a powerful ally who enacted pro-Russian policies in government and who might come out of the 2024 national elections as the strongest party. The FPÖ’s policy undermines EU solidarity with Ukraine. The party also presents a multitude of complex problems in a populist manner as seemingly easily solvable. A future FPÖ participation in government, possibly even a chancellorship, would significantly complicate the EU sanctions regime. Likewise, financial support for Ukraine would no longer be possible.

It should be noted that some of the same personnel from the era of party leader Strache are still active, such as foreign policy spokesman Axel Kassegger, who attended events in Crimea before the war; or MEP Harald Vilimsky, who was

present at the signing of the so-called “friendship agreement” in Moscow. The FPÖ is also working more closely with extremist groups like the Identitarian movement and its offspring. Current party leader Herbert Kickl called the group a “right-wing NGO” and sees no need for distancing. This could also produce a closer relationship with the Suvorov Institute. The so-called rescue mission of high-ranking FPÖ politicians in Afghanistan for Suvorov-aligned extremist Herbert Fritz is an indication of this. Therefore, the FPÖ could, via proxies, also build contacts to violent groups and the Institute’s activities could influence foreign policy decisions.

Policies: Current Measures

In its fight against Russian influence, Austria is guided primarily by the requirements of the EU. This applies, for example, to the ban on broadcasting Russian state broadcasters such as RT, the code of conduct to combat disinformation, and the list of sanctioned individuals and organisations. The tracing of assets of sanctioned persons is mainly carried out by the Directorate of State Protection and Intelligence (DSN). Counter-intelligence and extremism divisions are also located there. The Directorate is still struggling with the aftermath of the raid at its predecessor, the BVT. According to the interior minister and the DSN director, foreign partners slowly began to trust Austria’s security services again.¹⁰⁶

In the wake of the Ibiza affair, numerous legislative initiatives have been implemented. For example, parties are now only allowed to accept individual donations amounting to a maximum of €7,500. In total, donations may not exceed €750,000 per calendar year. The Court of Audit, the state audit institute for party financing, among other things, was also given more rights of insight into the conduct of political parties.¹⁰⁷

In addition to this, the criminal law on corruption was tightened. In the future, individuals or organisations will not be allowed to buy a seat in parliament by placing the person of their choice on a good list position following a party donation. Also, hypothetical corrupt deals about actions in positions that a person will attain will not be allowed in the future.¹⁰⁸

Policy Proposals

Experts and opposition politicians have repeatedly called for the establishment of a parliamentary investigative committee to investigate the manifold connections between authorities, government parties, and other institutions to Russia. This would indeed make sense since it would be possible to question officials and active or former members of the government in public, and to demand files.¹⁰⁹

Very little is publicly known about the connections between government bodies and former Wirecard manager and alleged Russian spy Jan Marsalek. An in-depth public investigation of his contact's actions in different agencies and ministries – like the foreign ministry's former general secretary Johannes Peterlik or the BVT's Egisto Ott – is needed. However, the chances of such a committee are slim, as its findings could potentially harm all three major parties, i.e. the social democratic SPÖ, the conservative ÖVP, and FPÖ.

It would be beneficial to provide the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (DSN) with significantly more expertise. The latter could no longer share its analyses annually in the Constitutional Protection Report, or in regular publications, in order to make society more resilient against Russian influence. A stronger cooperation with independent think tanks and other entities is needed as well. In *Mythos Gerasimov Doctrine*, the authors Christoph Bilban and Hanna Grininger argue that the famous article of the Russian general Valery Gerasimov – seen as the key document about the Russian hybrid warfare, e.g. through disinformation and espionage – has hardly been analysed in Austria.¹¹⁰

Complicating the situation, the accusations of Russian espionage within the country's own ranks are still causing unrest at the intelligence agency. Stephanie Krisper, a member of parliament for the liberal Neos-party, has repeatedly criticised the intelligence agency, which has led to a lack of expertise and a slow recruitment process.¹¹¹ The current figures are unknown, but personnel files from 2017 and 2018 indicate that only a handful of officials at the BVT were tasked with tracking Russian influence and intelligence operations.

The DSN itself has argued for a new law targeting fake news and disinformation campaigns. An expert from the DSN, who was not named, argued in an interview with the magazine *Profil* that the spreading of fake news should become illegal. The interior minister and DSN director denied such plans but explained that without criminal liability, the intelligence agency's legal capabilities to

AUSTRIA

investigate fake news are limited.¹¹² Therefore, the DSN should be provided with the means to identify actors in the disinformation sphere and investigate links to foreign entities while still upholding freedom of speech. Due to the war in Gaza, the DSN is working with the Department of Education on a new methodology to prevent extremism at schools.¹¹³ Similar initiatives should be introduced in regard to Russian disinformation campaigns.

Due to its widely reported precarious resource situation, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution is only in a limited position to actively search for Russian assets in Austria. The Greens, who currently provide the Minister of Justice, have therefore proposed an anti-money-laundering authority.¹¹⁴ Specialising in this area in a separate, multidisciplinary organisation would certainly make sense and lead to more fruitful results. As long as Russian investments and assets in Austria remain high, there will be political influence from the Kremlin and associated oligarchs.

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