



‘The Third Man’ Revisited: Security Intelligence and the Far-Right in Austria

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The far-right Freedom Party controls all security ministries in Austria’s new coalition. Should European partners be worried about security leaks to Russia?

On 19 December 2016 the leader of Austria’s far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) Heinz-Christian Strache posted a selfie with senior members of his party in front of the Russian White House in Moscow. With big smiles on all four faces, the men were clearly happy to be there. On this trip to Russia, Strache signed an agreement on cooperation with Sergey Zheleznyak, deputy secretary of the General Council of Yedinaya Rossiya, the Russian political party closest to President Vladimir Putin. Zheleznyak later issued a statement: ‘We need to reinforce the links between our parties and countries, including in the field of international security’.

Just fifteen months later, Strache has risen to the post of vice-chancellor of Austria. The man next to him in the Moscow selfie, Norbert Hofer, has become minister of transport, innovation and technology. The FPÖ, in coalition with the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, also controls the ministries of interior, defence and foreign affairs.

Might the new far-right ministers be tempted to share sensitive information in the field of international security, as Zheleznyak had hoped for less than a year and a half ago? In his book *Russia and the Western Far Right*, Ukrainian political scientist Anton Shekhovtsov writes: ‘It is not clear what forms cooperation between Yedinaya Rossiya and the FPÖ will take, but the signing of the above-mentioned agreement is so far the most important stage of the relations between the FPÖ and Russian actors’.

The takeover of the security ministries in Vienna by the FPÖ has caused irritation in other European capitals. Austria’s partners in the EU have various concerns. German Chancellor Angela Merkel seems worried about the foreign policy implications of the FPÖ now holding the keys to all classified information shared between European security services and their transatlantic partner, the CIA.

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When Merkel received Kurz for a visit in Berlin in January, she is said to have discussed her concerns with the Austrian chancellor. According to a report in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Merkel flagged the possibility that the FPÖ might transmit sensitive information to Moscow. This information could help Russian security services trace intelligence back to sources close to Western security services in Europe, thus endangering informants. She supposedly added that Vienna should be prepared for Western security services to not share information with Austria with as much freedom as before, although Merkel’s spokesman later denied this report.

Kurz felt the need to clarify the matter when he suggested that the danger of leaking sensitive material to Russia was limited. ‘In the long run there will only be peace in Europe with Russia and not against Russia’, he said rather cryptically after the meeting with Merkel: ‘But that does not mean that data will be transmitted illegally’. His office also stated that the security services report to Kurz and Vice-Chancellor Strache. Control was therefore guaranteed.

It is not entirely clear if this statement will calm the nerves of Austria’s European partners. Officially, Strache and his team have toned down their radical positions somewhat in order to be accepted as a coalition partner.

But old habits die slowly. When asked about Kosovo by a Serbian newspaper in February, Strache responded: ‘Kosovo is undoubtedly part of Serbia’. This statement was a direct contradiction to Austria’s official position, having recognised Kosovo as an independent republic in 2008. With this statement, the vice-chancellor of Austria seemed to be more in line with the pro-Serbian position of the Russian Federation.

Not only has the FPÖ entertained a pro-Russian stance, Austria in general has, for historical and economic reasons, been one of those EU countries open to ending the sanctions against Russia sooner rather than later. Strache, after all, has been a strong supporter of ending EU sanctions against Russia. FPÖ member Johann Gudenus visited Crimea in 2014 as an observer during an independence referendum that has been condemned internationally as a cover-up for Russia’s occupation of the region. This is also the view of Thomas



Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a joint press conference in Moscow, 28 February 2018. *Courtesy of the Office of the President of Russia.*

Riegler, an Austrian historian and expert on security services and terrorism, who stated in an interview with the author that: ‘Austria has been viewed for years as friendly towards the Kremlin’.

On matters of security cooperation, Riegler thinks Vienna will retain its importance for spy agencies worldwide, due to its playing host to the headquarters of many international organisations, such as the UN, OPEC and the OSCE.

Riegler also stresses that Russia has already had a rather strong presence in Vienna since the 1980s, described as a kind of ‘city in the city’. According to the 2000 annual report of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism of Austria (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung*, or BVT), Russia’s foreign intelligence service (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki*, or SVR) ‘prefers to place its agents in cover-up posts in the Russian embassy, the general consulate in Salzburg, in trade representation, Russian airlines and with various international organisations’.

What sounds like a scene from *The Third Man*, the famous 1949 post-war film noir, comes close to reality. The film, rated as ‘the best British film of all time’ in 1999 by the British Film

Institute, showed what Vienna was at the end of the Second World War: a playground for Eastern and Western security services. As the capital of politically neutral Austria, Vienna was always interesting for the security services on all sides. Some things never seem to change. ‘When geopolitical tensions between the East and the West rise, it will be felt in Vienna’, says Riegler.

What kind of sensitive information could FPÖ ministers share with Moscow that Russia does not already have? As Austria is not a member of NATO, Turkey might be a better country to turn to if Russia wanted information about NATO developments. Another security expert, who prefers anonymity, states that military surveillance of Austria’s military intelligence service (*Heeresnachrichtendienst*) is directed against the East, mostly Russia, and therefore ‘it would be pointless to share any of this material with Russia’. Another area of Austrian special interest and expertise is the Balkans, where Russia already has a strong presence. Russia therefore might not be so interested in what Austrian security services collect themselves, but might be quite interested in sensitive

information Austrian security services receive from other European security services, like MI6.

Leaks of this kind have become more likely since the Austrian Home Office has recently become embroiled in turmoil. As irony would have it, the new Austrian security ministers are now in control of the services that used to keep a close eye on them. Considering Austria’s history vis-à-vis the Third Reich, the republic has had a law against neo-Nazi activity, called *Verbotsgesetz*, since 1945. Holocaust denial, as well as deliberate belittlement of Nazi atrocities, is prohibited. As some of the leading members of the FPÖ have been close to far-right organisations in the past, domestic security services have had them on their radar for years. The leader of the FPÖ himself took part in a *Wehrsportübung* in the Austrian forest in his student days. These *Wehrsportübungen* were sportive training camps organised by the *Volkstreue außerparlamentarische Opposition* (VAPO), an Austrian neo-Nazi organisation. Today, Strache distances himself from those extremist years between 1985 and 1992, although he is still a member of the far-right fencing fraternity Vandalia.

But Strache is by far not the only fencing brother from one of those colourful fraternities now sitting in government. Hofer, himself an honourable member of a fraternity called Marko-Germania, placed five members of far-right student unions in his cabinet. He started his term by changing the board of directors of the Austrian train company *Österreichische Bundesbahnen* (ÖBB), placing a member of the fencing fraternity Teutonia at its head. The respected Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance classifies Teutonia as being on the extreme right.

Before he became defence minister in January 2018, Mario Kunasek was the head of the Freedom Party in the province of Styria. Kunasek has been in contact with the far-right activist group *Die Identitären* and the small extreme right party *Partei des Volkes*. The German wing of *Die Identitären* are under the surveillance of intelligence services, but will Austrian security services do the same in future? In an interview with the daily newspaper *Der Standard*, Kunasek [stated](#): ‘I don’t think *Die Identitären* are endangering democracy. But some of their actions I find excessive’. At one of these gatherings in 2016 a banner was used that read: ‘Islamisation kills’. The problem might not be what endangers democracy, but what is possible within the democratic framework.

A security service under the defence ministry umbrella, the Office for Defence (*Abwehramt*) has been infiltrating far-right groups in Austria to protect the army from being undermined during state compulsory military service. After a meeting of an extremist group in 2016, two activists pinned a pig’s head to a mosque in Graz. One of those men was an informant for the *Abwehramt*. As with other secret services worldwide, it is sometimes less than clear who exactly is infiltrating whom. It might become even less clear now in Austria, as some far-right activists have risen to high political positions in security ministries.

Merkel is especially concerned as she faces the rise of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany. The political agenda of this protest movement turned political party has shifted towards the extreme right in

past years. While German and Austrian security services have thus far cooperated in surveying the attendance of their respective far-right fringe groups at AfD conferences, this may now become more complicated. In 2017, Strache attended the Ash Wednesday conference of the AfD as an honoured guest speaker. One interest that both the FPÖ and AfD share is providing [scathing criticism of the EU](#), as demonstrated by Strache in his speech: ‘Germany does not deserve to be governed partly by a Brussels dictatorship’.

How the FPÖ will use its new power over the security services remains to be seen. Its first weeks in government were riddled with scandals involving extremist members. The party leadership decided on 13 February to set up a commission of experts to investigate the history of the so-called Third Camp, the reservoir of Nazis who survived the Second World War to later form the FPÖ. This could lead to clearing the FPÖ’s ranks of extremist members and its bookshelves of neo-Nazi material. The feeding organisations of the FPÖ, however, have already been explicitly excluded from the commission’s mandate. Werner Rosenkranz, leader of the parliamentary FPÖ group, stated at a Vienna press conference: ‘They are private clubs’. Forty percent of FPÖ members of parliament are, however, also members of such far-right fraternities.

Ironically, the new security ministers could allow the use of files that their predecessors have collected on them for the work of the historian’s commission. But will the new occupants of the security ministries want this transparency? The new Home Secretary Herbert Kickl has sent mixed signals in selecting Alexander Höferl, who until December 2017 was head of the far-right news network *Unzensuriert.at*, as his communication chief. *Unzensuriert.at*, the Austrian response to Breitbart News in the US, was previously [investigated](#) by the BVT and found to have ‘anti-semitic tendencies ... signs of conspiracy theories [and] pro-Russian ideology’.

Located in the Austrian Home Office, the BVT is precisely the service with which British, French and US security services would like to [reduce their cooperation](#), according to a tweet

by Hungarian journalist Szabolcs Panyi. Although Austria’s Home Office issued a denial, Panyi [stood by his claim](#), stating that his source was not Austrian and that they explicitly said this would only be applied in Russia-related cases.

At the end of February, a special police unit that usually deals with street crime raided the offices of BVT and seized material that included information about extreme right activists. Peter Gridling, head of BVT since 2008, has been suspended from office by Kickl. It is unclear who will succeed him.

Thinking back to Strache’s beaming face in the selfie taken in Moscow from fifteen months ago, Russia analyst Mark Galeotti might have a point when [he writes](#): ‘The more reciprocal intelligence one can provide, the more political leverage one extracts in return – not least, in the form of warm, fuzzy gestures of public esteem of the sort treasured by any politician or service chief’. Galeotti takes the example of Estonia to explain how in the internet age, a small country can still play a big role.

In this delicate landscape of security cooperation and political interests, Austria may therefore be quite interesting for Russia. Austria’s new FPÖ ministers have more to offer to Moscow than sensitive security data. They share common political interests with the Russian leadership, such as the destabilisation of the EU and the Balkans, both of which lie at their doorstep.

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