

# Ending the Schwarzer Tango with Moscow: The Freedom Party of Austria and the Embrace of Neutralism

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## Summary

In the scholarly, expert and journalistic literature, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has long been considered a radical right wing populist party characterised by its friendly stances towards Putin's Russia. Since 2008, the party leadership has organised events that advance the Kremlin's foreign policy interests; travelled regularly to Moscow to discuss political, social and business issues; participated in various efforts aimed at legitimising Russia's aggressive international behaviour; and even signed a coordination and cooperation agreement with the ruling United Russia Party at the end of 2016. Following Austria's 2017 parliamentary elections, the FPÖ became a junior partner in the coalition government formed by the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). There were fears that the party would somehow undermine Austria's commitment to the EU consensus on Russia – a consolidated position on the illegitimate nature of the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine – but those fears turned out to be misplaced. This research paper scrutinises the FPÖ's approaches to the "Russian question" during the party's time in the coalition government, and since the government's collapse in 2019 as a result of the Ibiza affair. The paper argues that the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition provided a number of economic, political and symbolic benefits to the Kremlin, but made few if any attempts to undermine Austria's loyalty to the EU line on Russia. Moreover, the pro-Kremlin stances of the FPÖ were driven by the personal, or at best tactical, considerations of a limited number of leading members of the party, and were never the strategic focus of the FPÖ as a whole. Once those party leaders lost their authority, the party's foreign policy vision shifted towards neutralism. In turn, Moscow is unlikely to have felt abandoned by the FPÖ because – despite the extensive contact and the agreement with United Russia – it was never Russia's most important political partner in Austria. The Kremlin's approach to cooperation with Austrian radical right-wing populists was always much more dependent on Moscow's important relations with the Austrian centre right and centre left.

## Introduction

Scholarly research, as well as expert and journalistic commentary on relations between the European far right and the Kremlin, and Russian individuals and structures loyal to the Kremlin, necessarily enquires into the case of Austria.<sup>1</sup> These investigations are well founded. The Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), which has been described as a radical right wing populist party in the academic literature,<sup>2</sup> has been developing contacts with various Russian actors for more than a decade.

The first identified high-profile meeting between the FPÖ leadership and Russian representatives took place in October 2005, when Heinz-Christian Strache, the then chair of the party, and Johann Gudenus, the then federal chair of the FPÖ's Austrian Freedom Youth Ring (Ring Freiheitlicher Jugend Österreich), met with Russian diplomats at an FPÖ-organised event that also featured representatives from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Iran, Poland and Spain.<sup>3</sup> Gudenus regularly travelled to Russia for educational and personal purposes between 1995 and 2005, and had various business interests in Russia in 2006–2007,<sup>4</sup> but contacts between the party and Russian stakeholders intensified in 2008. Austrian Technologies GmbH, a company founded by the party's economics expert Barbara Kappel, began organising political events involving the FPÖ leadership and Russian journalists, activists, politicians and officials, with the aim of advancing Moscow's foreign policy interests.

At the end of 2008, leading members of the FPÖ started making regular trips to Russia. The party's delegations had different line-ups but usually featured Strache, Gudenus and Kappel, and either the foreign policy spokesperson, Johannes Hübner, or Andreas Karlsböck who discussed political, social and business issues with Russian counterparts. Almost from the start, the FPÖ leadership strove to build closer ties with the ruling United Russia (Yedinaya Rossiya) Party.

In March 2014, Gudenus and Hübner, along with a number of other far-right and pro-Kremlin European activists, acted as “international observers” of the illegitimate referendum in Russia-occupied Crimea, which was followed by Russia's annexation of this Ukrainian region. Hübner, as well as various other FPÖ members such as Detlef Wimmer, Hans-Jörg Jenewein, Axel Kassegger and Barbara Rosenkranz, also participated in the Yalta International Economic Forum held in Crimea. The FPÖ leadership recognised the new status of Crimea, in defiance of the positions of Austria, the European Union (EU) and the West in general. The party also consistently called for the lifting of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Putin's Russia for the occupation and invasion of Ukrainian territories.

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1 See, for example, Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Eva Zelechowski, Michel Reimon, *Putins rechte Freunde. Wie Europas Populisten ihre Nationen verkaufen* (Vienna: Falter Verlag, 2017); Bernhard Weidinger, Fabian Schmid, Péter Krekó, *Russian Connections of the Austrian Far Right* (Budapest: Political Capital Kft., 2017).

2 See, for example, Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Sarah L. de Lange, “New Alliances: Why Mainstream Parties Govern with Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties”, *Political Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (2012), pp. 899-918; Reinhard Heinisch, Kristina Hauser, “The Mainstreaming of the Austrian Freedom Party: The More Things Change...”, in Tjitske Akkerman, Sarah L. de Lange, Matthijs Rooduijn (eds), *Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Into the Mainstream?* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 73-93.

3 “HC Strache knüpft Diplomaten-Kontakte”, *Neue Freie Zeitung*, No. 42, 20 October (2005), p. 13.

4 Sofia Khomenko, “FPÖ: Aus Liebe zu Russland”, *Mokant*, 30 June (2015), <http://mokant.at/1506-fpoe-russland-ukraine-geld/>.

At the end of 2016, the FPÖ's efforts to woo the United Russia Party finally bore fruit: the Presidium of the General Council of United Russia decided to sign an agreement on collaboration and cooperation with Strache's party. According to this document, the signing of the agreement, which took place on 19 December 2016, was driven by "the desire to facilitate the expansion and deepening of multilateral cooperation and collaboration" between the countries.<sup>5</sup> The parties would share information about domestic and world affairs, and compare experiences of party building, organisational work, economic development and drafting legislation. All this would take place in regular exchanges of delegations and at conferences, seminars, roundtables and various bilateral events. The parties also agreed to "support the development of economic, trade and investment cooperation".<sup>6</sup>

At the time, the FPÖ was the largest opposition party in Austria. Following the 2017 Austrian parliamentary elections, however, the party became a junior partner in the coalition government formed by the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP). Strache became Vice Chancellor of Austria, and several senior FPÖ members were given ministerial posts, such as in the Interior and Defence ministries.

Given the pro-Kremlin stance of the FPÖ leadership, there were fears that the party would somehow undermine Austria's commitment to the EU consensus on Russia – a consolidated position on the illegitimate nature of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. These fears turned out to be misplaced. To explain this outcome, this article scrutinises the FPÖ's approach to the "Russian question" during the party's time in the coalition government and following the collapse of the coalition in 2019.

## **"We're Going to Ibiza!"**

In July 2017, Strache and his deputy, Gudenus, accompanied by his wife Tajana Gudenus, went to the Spanish island of Ibiza to meet with a woman who introduced herself as Alyona Makarova. The meeting took place three months prior to the Austrian parliamentary elections, and Makarova, who claimed to be the niece of a Russian oligarch, discussed with the FPÖ leaders how she could help the party in those elections. It was a deliberately informal meeting that was apparently made even more informal by abundant vodka and Red Bull energy drinks.

What neither Strache nor Gudenus knew was that Makarova the oligarch's niece was an invention, the entire complex where they met had been wired with numerous audio and video recording devices, and the meeting was an attempted sting operation to collect kompromat on the FPÖ leadership. The operation was masterminded by the Iran-born Austrian lawyer, Ramin Mirfakhrai, and an Austrian private investigator, Julian Hessenthaler, assisted by two security experts from companies specialising in industrial espionage.<sup>7</sup> The organisers collected several hours of video and audio recordings featuring Strache and Gudenus exchanging ideas with a pretty female decoy in a location that had been used for

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<sup>5</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Austrian and Italian Far-Right Parties Signed Coordination and Cooperation Agreements with Putin's 'United Russia'", *Tango Noir*, 4 June (2018), <https://www.tango-noir.com/2018/06/04/austrian-and-italian-far-right-parties-signed-coordination-and-cooperation-agreements-with-putins-united-russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Christoph Budin, Peter Grotter, "So lief Drehbuch zur Operation Strache in Ibiza", *Kronen Zeitung*, 27 May (2019), <https://www.krone.at/1929662>.

various similar covert operations in the past.<sup>8</sup> Having produced the video, Mirfakhrai and Hessenthaler tried to sell it to political, business and media figures in Austria and elsewhere just before the 2017 elections – and later for up €5 million – but nobody wanted to buy it.<sup>9</sup>

At a meeting in Cologne, Hessenthaler tried to involve the German satirist, Jan Böhmermann, in the distribution of the video but Böhmermann refused. However, the German comedian made an unplanned reference to “hanging out with a few FPÖ business friends in a Russian oligarch’s villa in Ibiza” in one of his shows in April 2019,<sup>10</sup> which prompted the alarmed creators of the video to redouble their efforts to find a buyer.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, an unnamed German association expressed an interest in purchasing the video but was not prepared to pay millions of euros. Its representatives reached an agreement with Mirfakhrai and his associates to buy seven sequences of the video – around six minutes from more than six hours of material – for €600,000.<sup>12</sup> The association would be allowed to select the seven sequences for itself.<sup>13</sup>

A few weeks before the 2019 European elections, the unknown owners of the six minutes of Ibiza video material leaked it to *Süddeutscher Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*, which broke the story using the video they had received.<sup>14</sup> As would become obvious more than a year after publication, the sequences were specifically selected to inflict the maximum amount of damage on Strache and the FPÖ possible. In the video, “Makarova” said she wanted to invest several hundred million euros in Austria, and asked how Strache could help her in return for her help to boost the party’s popularity in the run-up to the elections. For her part, she proposed acquiring a 50% stake in *Kronen Zeitung*, the most popular and highly influential tabloid in Austria, which under her ownership would become a mouthpiece for Strache and the FPÖ in the election campaign. The idea of taking control of *Kronen Zeitung* seemed to excite Strache, not only because the backing of the tabloid would have provided a massive boost for the party in elections, but also because it would have helped him to manipulate the Austrian media environment. In the video, Strache is heard saying: “We want to build a media landscape similar to Orbán’s”,<sup>15</sup> referring to the hegemony that Viktor Orbán’s government has over the Hungarian media. They also discussed the possibility of Makarova donating to the FPÖ through an association. In Austria, donations to political parties are reported to the Court of Audits and, as Strache said, “nobody wants that”. A donation to an FPÖ-controlled not-for-profit association would not have to be disclosed to the authorities.

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8 Ibid.

9 “Ibiza-Drahtzieher berichtet von Treffen mit Böhmermann”, *Welt*, 27 January (2021), <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article225115999/Ibiza-Affaere-Drahtzieher-berichtet-von-Treffen-mit-Jan-Boehmermann.html>.

10 “Böhmermann wusste im April vom Strache-Video”, *OE24*, 17 May (2019), <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/boehmermann-wusste-im-april-vom-strache-video/380491661>.

11 “So erfuhr Jan Böhmermann vom Ibiza-Video”, *OE24*, 27 January (2021), <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/so-erfuhr-jan-boehmermann-vom-ibiza-video/462796422>.

12 While the length of the video offered for purchase was more than six hours, the Austrian police discovered more than 12 hours of video materials related to the Ibiza affair in April 2020, see Fabian Schmid, “Polizei fand Ende April ganzes Ibiza-Video und weitere Clips”, *Der Standard*, 27 May (2020), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000117728092/bundeskriminalamt-veroeffentlicht-fotos-von-ibiza-lockvogel>.

13 Budin, Grotter, “So lief Drehbuch zur Operation Strache in Ibiza”.

14 Leila Al-Serori, Oliver Das Gupta, Peter Münch, Frederik Obermaier, Bastian Obermayer, “Caught in the Trap”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 May (2019), <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/caught-in-the-trap-e675751/>; Martin Knobbe, Frederik Obermaier, “Die Videofalle”, *Spiegel*, 17 May (2019), <https://www.spiegel.de/video/fpoe-chef-heinz-christian-strache-die-videofalle-video-99027174.html>.

15 Al-Serori et al., “Caught in the Trap”.

Gudenus asserted that other Austrian parties took advantage of this donation loophole.<sup>16</sup>

Makarova would financially benefit from having the FPÖ in government. Strache suggested that she should found a construction company similar to STRABAG, an Austrian company which is one of the largest construction companies in Europe. Strache would then take all the public tenders away from STRABAG and give them to the new company.<sup>17</sup>

In additional footage taken from the Ibiza video released in 2020, Hessesenthaler seems to be nudging Strache to say something even more incriminating on tape in relation to his potential deal with Makarova, but Strache refuses the decoy's offer, stressing that he does not want to do anything illegal.<sup>18</sup> Makarova apparently says that under-the-table deals are "completely commonplace" in the East, to which Strache replies: "No, no. But now we're being honest. Any other shit makes you vulnerable, and I don't want to be vulnerable". Gudenus also affirms that they will not "do anything illegal, period".<sup>19</sup>

However, publication of the most damaging sequences from the Ibiza video in May 2019 led to mass protests against the ÖVP-FPÖ government. Protesters gathered in front of the Austrian Federal Chancellery playing a recording of "We're Going to Ibiza!", a 1999 hit by the Dutch Eurodance pop band Vengaboys. Strache resigned as Vice Chancellor of Austria and chair of the FPÖ, Gudenus withdrew from all his political posts and the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government collapsed shortly afterwards.

In an ironic coincidence, Moscow planned to hold a conference on the Valdai Discussion Club in Vienna in May 2019, and the publication of parts of the Ibiza video took place a few days before the planned event. As the scandal unfolded, the conference was deprived of a venue – it was to have taken place at the National Defence Academy of the Austrian Armed Forces – and all the Austrian politicians withdrew from the event. The Valdai meeting was eventually held in the conference room of the Grand Hotel in Vienna, and the Valdai Club's research director, Fyodor Lukyanov, did not conceal his irritation: "Politicians from the Freedom Party of Austria are – to put it mildly – not particularly smart, not very professional, and – in a manner of speaking – very primitive".<sup>20</sup>

## Beyond Ibiza

The Ibiza affair became arguably the largest political scandal in Austria since the Waldheim affair. To investigate the Ibiza case and alleged corruption in the FPÖ, the Austrian Parliament set up the Ibiza Committee of Inquiry. The investigations carried out in the name of the inquiry eventually destroyed – or at least severely damaged – the careers of many Austrian politicians, including Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Austria's youngest ever Head of State and once the most popular Austrian politician of the 21st century.

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 "Neue Sequenzen des Ibiza-Videos aufgetaucht", *Welt*, 21 August (2020), <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article214060112/Ibiza-Video-Neue-Sequenzen-koennten-Strache-entlasten.html>.

19 Ibid.

20 Konstantin Gol'dentsvaig, "Avstriyskaya partiya svobody: ot vykhodtsev iz NDAP do druzey Rossii", *RTVI*, 25 May (2019), <https://rtvi.com/stories/avstriyskaya-partiya-svobody-ot-vykhodtsev-iz-nsdap-do-druzey-rossii/>.

While not all the proceedings of the Committee of Inquiry are relevant to this research, some help to shed light on particular aspects of relations between the FPÖ and Russian actors. According to Julian Hessenthaler, who was detained in Germany at the end of 2020 and extradited to Austria in March 2021 on drug- and document-related charges, the idea of the sting originated following Ramin Mirfakhrai's unsuccessful attempt to do Strache harm in 2015.<sup>21</sup> On 27 March 2015, Mirfakhrai filed an official notice to the Austrian Interior Ministry in which he alleged – presumably on the basis of information provided to him by FPÖ security officer and Strache's former bodyguard Oliver Ribarich<sup>22</sup> – that Strache had been involved in corrupt practices and illegal drug use.<sup>23</sup> One allegation was related to payments made to Strache and the FPÖ for securing a seat in parliament for FPÖ member Thomas Schellenbacher in 2013 at the request of the Ukrainian oligarch, Igor Kolomoisky, and other Ukrainian businessmen.<sup>24</sup> They would go on to use Schellenbacher to advance their business interests in Austria.<sup>25</sup> (In 2020, the US imposed sanctions on Kolomoisky for corruption.<sup>26</sup>)

As the Austrian authorities failed to follow up on Mirfakhrai's report, he teamed up with Hessenthaler essentially in order to punish Strache. They invented the foreign political connection for their sting because they thought that it would be “far more believable” than building a narrative around the use of illegal substances. As Hessenthaler explained, a number of considerations underpinned the choice of a “Russian connection”:

- (1) the Special Counsel investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, and links between associates of Donald Trump and Russian officials;
- (2) publicly known relations between the FPÖ and Russian actors: the agreement between the FPÖ and the United Russia Party and the FPÖ leaderships' visits to Chechnya;
- (3) Hessenthaler's belief that Ukraine, where the payments for Schellenbacher's parliamentary seat came from, was within the Russian sphere of influence;
- (4) Ribarich's allegations that the Russian Judo Federation presided over by Putin confidante Vasily Anisimov was “a possible line of communication” between the FPÖ and the Kremlin;
- (5) third party information conveyed to Hessenthaler that, in the course of 2017, there would

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21 “Veröffentlichung des wörtlichen Protokolls über die öffentliche Befragung der Auskunftsperson Julian Hessenthaler in der 43. Sitzung vom 8. April 2021”, *Parlament*, 26 May (2021), [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/KOMM/KOMM\\_00202/fnameorig\\_981165.html](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/KOMM/KOMM_00202/fnameorig_981165.html)

22 Dominik Schreiber, Kid Möchel, Johanna Hager, “Schwere Vorwürfe: Das ist Straches ehemaliger Bodyguard”, *Kurier*, 24 September (2019), <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/wilde-vorwuerfe-das-ist-straches-ehemaliger-bodyguard/400614638>.

23 “Amtsvermerk”, 27 March (2015), [https://epicenter.works/sites/default/files/beilage\\_4.pdf](https://epicenter.works/sites/default/files/beilage_4.pdf).

24 “Anklage gegen FPÖ-Ukraine-Connection Schellenbacher”, *Zack Zack*, 23 December (2020), <https://zackzack.at/2020/12/23/anklage-gegen-fpoe-ukraine-connection-schellenbacher/>; Fabian Schmid, „Causa Schellenbacher: Hinweise auf blauen Mandatskauf“, *Der Standard*, 15 December (2019), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000112310939/causa-schellenbacher-hinweise-auf-blauen-mandatskauf>.

25 Martin Knobbe, Walter Mayr, Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, “Ex-FPÖ Head Strache Hit by New Corruption Allegations”, *Spiegel*, 23 December (2019), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/ex-fpoe-head-strache-hit-by-new-corruption-allegations-a-1301236.html>.

26 “Justice Department Seeks Forfeiture of Third Commercial Property Purchased with Funds Misappropriated from PrivatBank in Ukraine”, *US Department of Justice*, 30 December (2020), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-seeks-forfeiture-third-commercial-property-purchased-funds-misappropriated>.

be a flow of Russian money into Austrian politics through Cyprus.<sup>27</sup>

The first and second considerations are based on well-established information, but the fourth and fifth cannot be proven at the time of writing. As for the third, while the idea of Ukraine belonging to the Russian sphere of influence is a propaganda narrative pushed by the Kremlin, it is clear that Schellenbacher's engagement in controversial practices was not limited to his connections with Ukrainian businessmen. In 2020, Schellenbacher was involved in the scandal surrounding Jan Marsalek, the former chief operating officer of the now defunct German payment processing firm Wirecard.

In June 2020, an independent auditor discovered a "€1.9 billion hole" in Wirecard's accounts. Marsalek was fired and disappeared, fleeing to Russia via Belarus. Martin Weiss, Marsalek's colleague and a former department head at the Austrian Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung, BVT), coordinated Marsalek's flight from Austria to Belarus. At Weiss's request, Schellenbacher arranged a private for Marsalek.<sup>28</sup> After landing in Minsk, Marsalek was reportedly taken to Russia where he was housed in the Moscow region under the supervision Russian military intelligence.<sup>29</sup> Interpol issued a Red Notice for Marsalek in August 2020.<sup>30</sup>

According to one investigative account,<sup>31</sup> Marsalek had been recruited by the Russian security services in the late 1990s through the Society of Austrian-Russian Friendship (Österreichisch-Russische Freundschaftsgesellschaft, ORFG). In 2011, with the support of the ORFG, members of the ÖVP and Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, SPÖ), Marsalek was awarded "Senator status" in the ORFG, and Wirecard donated €10,000 annually to the association.<sup>32</sup> While Marsalek had links to several Austrian political parties, he evidently had a special relationship with the FPÖ. Using his contacts in the BVT and the Interior Ministry, Marsalek illegally acquired insider information from them and passed it on to Gudenus via the ORFG's General Secretary, Florian Stermann.<sup>33</sup>

## The FPÖ's Kremlin Stances under Test

In October 2017, the ÖVP, which at the time was led by the young and popular Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz, won the most votes in Austria's parliamentary elections for the first

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27 "Veröffentlichung des wörtlichen Protokolls über die öffentliche Befragung der Auskunftsperson Julian Hessenthaler".

28 "Schellenbacher und BVT-Beamter in Haft", *Zack Zack*, 23 January (2021), <https://zackzack.at/2021/01/23/schellenbacher-und-bvt-beamter-in-haft-sollen-marsalek-zur-flucht-verholfen-haben/>.

29 "Marsalek soll sich nahe Moskau aufhalten", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 July (2020), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/sport/ex-wirecard-manager-auf-der-flucht-marsalek-soll-sich-nahe-moskau-aufhalten/26018638.html>.

30 "Marsalek, Jan", *Interpol*, <https://www.interpol.int/en/How-we-work/Notices/View-Red-Notices#2020-45128>.

31 "Zachem Yan Marsalek byl nuzhen GRU?", *Dossier*, 4 January (2021), <https://dossier.center/marsalek/>; See also Christo Grozev, Fidelius Schmid, Roman Lehberger, Roman Dobrokhoto, "Wirecard-Manager Marsalek offenbar nach Weißrussland geflüchtet", *Spiegel*, 18 July (2020), <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/wirecard-manager-jan-marsalek-offenbar-nach-weissrussland-gefluechtet-a-b3be712f-0c90-48a7-9a72-df7162a92613>.

32 "Wirecard: Kollateralschaden für Österreichs Russland-Freunde", *Der Standard*, 15 July (2020), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000118720674/wirecard-kollateralschaden-fuer-oesterreichs-russland-freunde>.

33 <https://orf.at/stories/3172934/>

time since 1966. An SPÖ/ÖVP grand coalition had been governing the country for 10 years but, even before the 2017 snap elections, Kurz and other ÖVP leaders had been considering forming a coalition with the far-right, which was closer ideologically to Kurz's right-wing party than the social democrats.<sup>34</sup> Coalitions with radical right-wing populist parties are generally frowned on in Europe, so Kurz had to convince the Austrian public that an ÖVP coalition with the FPÖ was inevitable, desirable and even unexceptional. To this end, Kurz's aides reportedly manipulated the results of public opinion polls to show that a majority of Austrians preferred an ÖVP coalition with the FPÖ to any other variant of governing coalition.<sup>35</sup>

Sergey Zheleznyak, who signed the agreement with the FPÖ on behalf of the United Russia Party at the end of 2016, welcomed the results of the 2017 elections: "The electoral victory of the conservative People's Party led by young Sebastian Kurz and the significant consolidation of the position of the Freedom Party of Austria, which finished second,<sup>36</sup> attests to a strengthening of the positions of patriotic forces and Eurosceptics in Austria and Europe".<sup>37</sup> Zheleznyak also expressed his hope that the formation of an ÖVP-FPÖ governing coalition would "reflect the specific national interests of the country's citizens, rather than vague and controversial Euro-values (evrotsennosti)".<sup>38</sup> Zheleznyak's thinly veiled excitement about the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition, which he expressed several days before Kurz had invited the FPÖ to formal coalition talks, was naturally based on the perception that Kurz and Strache would be Russia-friendly leaders. As the United Russia Party official put it, Kurz had "repeatedly spoken about the futility of anti-Russian sanctions and suggested to his European colleagues a return to dialogue [with Russia]", while Strache "supported the referendum in Crimea, does not fear cooperation with Russia and has been critical of the EU's policies".<sup>39</sup> Zheleznyak was certain that Austria under Kurz would develop "a more active position towards European institutions", possibly implying that the country would challenge the EU consensus on the sanctions regime and be interested in "a broadening of cooperation between Russia and Austria".<sup>40</sup> The reality turned out to be much more complicated.

To add more bargaining chips to Kurz's hand in the expected coalition talks, the ÖVP researched the FPÖ's links with Russian actors prior to the 2017 elections. This research, as well as other considerations linked to the general concern in Austria and the EU about the pro-Kremlin positions of the FPÖ, probably contributed to a twofold weakening of the FPÖ's control over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which it had secured as part of the coalition agreement. First, the position of Foreign Minister was filled by an independent Middle East expert, Karin Kneissl. Although nominated by the FPÖ, she was not a member of the party. Second, Kurz brought European affairs under his personal control, thereby minimising the

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34 Reinhard Heinisch, Annika Werner, Fabian Habersack, "Reclaiming National Sovereignty: The Case of the Conservatives and the Far Right in Austria", *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2020), pp. 163-181.

35 "Sitzung des Nationalrates am 12. Oktober 2021 [Michael Schnedlitz (FPÖ)]", *Parlament*, 12 October (2021), [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/NRSITZ/NRSITZ\\_00124/A\\_13\\_05\\_41\\_00253115.html](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/NRSITZ/NRSITZ_00124/A_13_05_41_00253115.html). See also Gerald Demmel, "Zusammenfassung: Die ÖVP-Kurz-Affäre schnell erklärt – in 15 Punkten", *Kontrast*, 2 November (2021), <https://kontrast.at/oevp-korruptionsaffaere-zusammenfassung/>.

36 Zheleznyak's assertion that the FPÖ took second place in the elections was incorrect: overtaken by the SPÖ, the far-right party finished third.

37 "Zheleznyak: Pobeda konservatorov na vyborah v Avstrii ukrepit pozitsii evroskeptikov", *Yedinaya Rossiya*, 16 October (2017), <https://er.ru/activity/news/pobeda-v-avstrii-konservativnoj-narodnoj-partii-govorit-ob-ukreplenii-evroskeptikov-v-regione>.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

FPÖ's possible influence on Austria's relations with the EU and Russia.<sup>41</sup> Given the consistent and undisguised attempts by the FPÖ leadership – notably Strache, Gudenus and Johannes Hübner – to build closer ties with the Kremlin since 2008, as well as their direct contributions to public activities aimed at advancing Moscow's foreign policy interests, such precautions with regard to FPÖ involvement in shaping Austrian foreign policy were entirely justified.

Speaking at the joint press conference arranged with future Chancellor Kurz on the eve of taking office, future Vice Chancellor Strache declared that lifting the EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine would be “among other goals his party would like to achieve as part of the newly formed Austrian government”.<sup>42</sup> However, Strache also said that, in order to lift the sanctions, “he would seek allies among other European political forces to secure majority support” for this move, while admitting that “should such a majority fail to coalesce, his party would follow ‘the common European position as required under the principle of democracy’”.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, as the EU's sanctions had to be extended every six months by the unanimous approval of all EU member states, Austria could potentially have vetoed any such extension, but even as he consistently continued to criticise the sanctions and call for a normalisation of political and economic relations with Russia,<sup>44</sup> Strache – now vice chancellor – recognised that use of this veto was out of the question.<sup>45</sup>

There is no evidence that, during his tenure as vice chancellor, Strache was to any serious degree pursuing EU allies with the aim of securing “majority support” for lifting the sanctions on Russia. He would undoubtedly have found support among the parties in the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) political group in the European Parliament,<sup>46</sup> as well as parties such as Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) which openly expressed pro-Kremlin positions, but the significance of that support – had it ever been garnered – would have been politically minuscule. Strache would not even have been able to convince Chancellor Kurz to alter his adherence to the EU consensus on Russia and the sanctions imposed on it. It seems safe to assume that Strache's criticism of the sanctions was nothing more than paying lip-service to the idea of unconditional friendship with Russia, while being predominantly interested in domestic developments and holding on to the power, however limited, provided by the FPÖ's coalition deal with the ÖVP.

Moreover, the FPÖ not only made no ambitious efforts to change Austria's position on the sanctions regime, but also moved away slightly from its blatantly pro-Kremlin stances. One example is the vote by FPÖ Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on a resolution on “Russia, notably the case of Ukrainian political prisoner Oleg Sentsov”, which was held in the European Parliament on 13 June 2018.<sup>47</sup> The resolution was critical of Russia and

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41 Matthew Karnitschnig, “Austria's (Not So) Pro-European Government”, *Politico*, 18 December (2017), <https://www.politico.eu/article/austrias-not-so-pro-european-government/>.

42 “Austria's Freedom Party, Fresh to Government, Vows to Fight Anti-Russian Sanctions”, RT, 17 December (2017), <https://www.rt.com/news/413431-austria-fpo-russia-sanctions/>.

43 Ibid.

44 “Strache: ‘Leidige Sanktionen gegen Russland beenden’”, *OE24*, 2 June (2018), <https://www.oe24.at/oesterreich/politik/strache-leidige-sanktionen-gegen-russland-beenden/335780407>.

45 “Strache: ‘Kein Veto gegen Russland-Sanktionen’”, *OÖ Nachrichten*, 7 June (2018), <https://www.nachrichten.at/politik/innenpolitik/Strache-Kein-Veto-gegen-Russland-Sanktionen;art385,2918130>.

46 The ENF existed from 15 June 2015 until 13 June 2019, and was replaced by the Identity and Democracy group on 12 June 2019.

47 “European Parliament Resolution on Russia, Notably the Case of Ukrainian Political Prisoner Oleg Sentsov”, *European Parliament*, 13 June (2018), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-8->

made explicit references to the illegal nature of its annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol – a development that the FPÖ endorsed. Furthermore, the resolution called on EU member states “to remain firm and united in their commitment to the agreed sanctions against Russia and to prolong them”<sup>48</sup> – an approach that the FPÖ had previously strongly opposed. The ENF decided to vote against the resolution but all four FPÖ MEPs abstained during the vote. The FPÖ’s move was not just a rebellion, albeit mild, against its own EU political group; it was also a departure from its own prior positions. When, on 16 March 2017, the European Parliament had voted on a similar resolution, “Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia and situation in Crimea”,<sup>49</sup> the FPÖ MEPs had opposed it. Thus, in abstaining on the Russia-critical resolution in 2018, once the FPÖ was part of the government coalition with the ÖVP, the far-right Austrian MEPs were trying to narrow the gap between their own foreign policy position and that of their centre-right coalition partners, whose MEPs voted in favour of the resolution.

Despite the obvious discrepancies between the FPÖ’s and the ÖVP’s attitudes to Russia, Kurz’s approach was not dramatically different from that of Strache’s. While still serving as Austria’s foreign minister, had Kurz argued that Russian sanctions should gradually be lifted in return for each step in the implementation of the Minsk Protocol,<sup>50</sup> the agreement signed by the Ukrainian authorities and the aggressors to halt the warfare in eastern Ukraine. On another occasion, as Austria assumed the chair of the OSCE in 2017, Kurz said he wanted to use the country’s OSCE leadership “to ease the EU sanctions imposed on Russia because of the Ukraine crisis”.<sup>51</sup> The major difference between Strache and Kurz in their perspectives on the sanctions regime was that Strache was complying with Kurz’s line, while Kurz, in turn, was following the EU’s general line predominantly defined by Germany and France.

Strache’s balancing act between professions of friendship with Russia and loyalty to his senior coalition partner suggests that whatever benefits – tactical, personal or otherwise – the FPÖ leadership might have gained from its relations with various Russian actors – as can be inferred from the above discussion – they were never decisive in the party’s strategic focus on the pursuit and retention of power.

## Gas, Waltzes and Spies

Although Vienna could not – and hardly wanted to – question the EU member states’ common position with regard to Moscow, the ÖVP/FPÖ government delivered a number of economic, political and symbolic benefits for the Kremlin. Kurz first visited Russia as Austrian Chancellor at the end of February 2018. During his meeting with Putin, they agreed to establish the Russian-Austrian civil society forum “Sochi Dialogue”. During his visit to Austria in June that

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[2018-0288\\_EN.html](#).

48 Ibid.

49 “European Parliament Resolution of 16 March 2017 on the Ukrainian Prisoners in Russia and the Situation in Crimea”, *European Parliament*, 16 March (2017), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0087\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0087_EN.html)

50 “Time to Send ‘Strong Signal’ to Russia and Gradually Lift Sanctions – Austrian FM”, *RT*, 20 June (2016), <https://www.rt.com/news/347469-austria-russia-sanctions-lifting/>.

51 Christoph Schult, Markus Dettmer, “Österreich will Russland-Sanktionen locker”, *Spiegel*, 30 December (2016), <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/oesterreich-will-osze-vorsitz-fuer-lockerung-der-russland-sanktionen-nutzen-a-1127914.html>.

year, Putin and Austria's President, Alexander van der Bellen, reached an agreement on commencing the creation of the forum. The forum was to be co-chaired by Andrey Fursenko, a US-sanctioned assistant to Putin, and Christoph Leitl, president of Eurochambres, the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Its declared mission is "to promote the exchange of views and ideas between citizens and prominent figures in various spheres of public life: culture, education, economy, science, sports and many others".<sup>52</sup>

In March 2018, as Western nations expelled over 100 Russian diplomats in solidarity with the United Kingdom, where Russian agents had tried to murder the former Russian military intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal, using the deadly nerve agent Novichok, Austria declined to expel any diplomats or make any other diplomatic response to a Russian state-sponsored attempted assassination on European soil. As Kurz and FPÖ-nominated Foreign Minister Kneissl explained, the government wanted to "keep the channels of communication with Russia open", as they saw Austria as "a bridge builder between East and West".<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, also during Putin's visit to Austria in June 2018, Gazprom chair Alexey Miller and OMV chair Rainer Seele signed an extension of the agreement to supply natural gas to Austria until 2040. Curiously, there was no urgent need for a new agreement as "the existing gas supply contract would have run until 2028".<sup>54</sup> Apart from the obvious economic benefits to Gazprom, which prefers long-term contracts,<sup>55</sup> signing the new agreement had strong symbolic meaning: June 2018 was the 50th anniversary of the signing of the first agreement on the supply of natural gas to Austria by the Soviet Union.

Another highly symbolic event was Putin's private visit to Austria in August 2018 to attend, as a guest of honour, the wedding of Foreign Minister Kneissl. Kurz and Strache, as well as other Austrian establishment figures, were also present at the wedding. Images of Putin dancing a waltz with Kneissl, and the latter making a deep curtsey – almost kneeling before Putin – at the end of the dance,<sup>56</sup> went viral, making a laughing stock of the Austrian government. Kurz was even forced to reaffirm Austria's commitment to the EU: "Our position in Europe did not change because of a wedding. [...] Our foreign policy towards Russia is clear... We helped shape, and are committed to, all the European Union's decisions".<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, the damage to Austria's reputation had been done and the event contributed to even greater caution among Western allies in their dealings with the Austrian intelligence services. Earlier in the year 2018, after the FPÖ's Interior Minister, Herbert Kickl, suspended the head of the BVT and ordered raids on its offices, most likely to seize sensitive information related to far-right groups close to the FPÖ, a number of unnamed Western intelligence services stopped sharing information with their Austrian counterparts, and the latter reportedly

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52 "About the Dialogue", *Sochi Dialogue*, <https://sochidialogue-en.com/about/>.

53 "Kurz und Kneissl: Österreich weist keine Diplomaten aus", *Die Presse*, 26 March (2018), <https://www.diepresse.com/5395747/kurz-und-kneissl-oesterreich-weist-keine-diplomaten-aus>.

54 "OMV and Gazprom Sign Extension for Natural Gas Supplies to Austria", *OMV Group*, 5 June (2018), <https://www.omv.com/en/news/omv-and-gazprom-sign-extension-for-natural-gas-supplies-to-austria>.

55 "Gazprom Interested in Long-Term Contracts with EU – Putin", *TASS*, 13 October (2021), <https://tass.com/economy/1349207>.

56 Kirsti Knolle, "A Bow or a Curtsey? Austrian Minister's Gesture to Putin Sparks Furore", *Reuters*, 21 August (2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-austria-wedding-idINKCN1L61D4>.

57 "Austria Says Shares EU Stance on Russia Despite Putin Visit", *Reuters*, 22 August (2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-politics/austria-says-shares-eu-stance-on-russia-despite-putin-visit-idUSKCN1L71CQ>.

reciprocated.<sup>58</sup> After Putin's visit to Kneissl's wedding, August Hanning, a former head of the German Federal Intelligence Service, warned against exchanging information with Austria.<sup>59</sup> The BVT's head, Peter Gridling, whose suspension was lifted in May 2018, later confirmed that Austria was no longer participating in the Club de Berne, an informal intelligence sharing forum between the intelligence services of the EU member states, Norway and Switzerland.<sup>60</sup> The FPÖ's links to Moscow and the far-right party's control over the Interior Ministry were reportedly the main reasons for downgrading Austria in Western intelligence circles.<sup>61</sup>

Kurz travelled to Russia again in October 2018 to meet with Putin and take part in the opening of an art exhibition, "Imperial Capitals: St Petersburg–Vienna", organised by the Russian State Hermitage Museum and the Austrian Museum of Art History. Shortly after his return, Kurz was hit by another Russia-related scandal. Perhaps as a riposte to Austria's refusal to show solidarity with Western allies when they expelled Russian diplomats, British intelligence exposed a retired colonel in the Austrian Federal Army as a spy for Russia between 1992 and September 2018.<sup>62</sup> The courts would later establish that the 71-year-old officer was guilty of "betraying state secrets", working for or helping "a foreign intelligence organisation to the detriment of Austria" and "premeditated divulgence of a military secret".<sup>63</sup> At a joint press conference with the FPÖ's Defence Minister, Mario Kunasek, Kurz declared that Russian espionage in Europe was unacceptable and should be condemned, adding that Foreign Minister Kneissl had summoned the Russian representative to the Foreign Ministry and cancelled her trip to Russia.<sup>64</sup> Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said he was "unpleasantly surprised" by the news from Vienna. He reprimanded the Austrian government: "Recently our Western partners have made it a rule not to use traditional diplomacy, but instead use so-called 'megaphone diplomacy' by publicly accusing us and for explanations about matters we know nothing about".<sup>65</sup>

Kneissl's cancelled trip had been planned for December 2018 and she had been supposed to meet with Lavrov to discuss implementation of the Sochi Dialogue forum. The cancellation was only a postponement, however, and Kneissl eventually went to Moscow in March 2019. Perhaps in order to demonstrate that relations between Austria and Russia had not been significantly damaged by the espionage scandal, Kneissl announced that Austria would

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58 Souad Mekhennet, Griff Witte, "Austria's Far-Right Ordered a Raid on Its Own Intelligence Service. Now Allies Are Freezing the Country out", *Washington Post*, 17 August (2018), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/austrias-far-right-government-ordered-a-raid-on-its-own-intelligence-service-now-allies-are-freezing-the-country-out/2018/08/17/d20090fc-9985-11e8-b55e-5002300ef004\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/austrias-far-right-government-ordered-a-raid-on-its-own-intelligence-service-now-allies-are-freezing-the-country-out/2018/08/17/d20090fc-9985-11e8-b55e-5002300ef004_story.html).

59 Peter Tiede, "Ex-BND-Chef warnt vor Info-Austausch mit Österreich!", *Bild*, 21 August (2018), [https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/ex-bnd-chef-warnt-vor-info-austausch-mit-oesterreich-56771264\\_bild.html](https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/ex-bnd-chef-warnt-vor-info-austausch-mit-oesterreich-56771264_bild.html).

60 Fabian Schmid, "Russland-Nähe der FPÖ sorgt für Isolation des BVT", *Der Standard*, 8 April (2019), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000101031061/russland-naehe-der-fpoe-sorgt-fuer-isolation-des-bvt-von->

61 Ibid.

62 Michael Jungwirth, "Britischer Geheimdienst ließ Putins Spion in Österreich auffliegen", *Kleine Zeitung*, 11 November (2018), <https://www.kleinezeitung.at/politik/aussenpolitik/5528189/Der-Tipp-kam-aus-London-Britischer-Geheimdienst-liess-Putins-Spion>.

63 "Austrian Army Officer Found Guilty of Spying for Russia but Set Free", *Reuters*, 9 June (2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-spy-idUSKBN23G314>.

64 "Bundeskanzler Sebastian Kurz: 'Spionage ist inakzeptabel und zu verurteilen'", *Bundeskanzleramt*, 9 November (2018), <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/bundeskanzleramt/nachrichten-der-bundesregierung/2017-2018/bundeskanzler-sebastian-kurz-spionage-ist-inakzeptabel-und-zu-verurteilen.html>.

65 "Austrian Colonel 'Spied for Russia since 1990s'", *BBC*, 9 November (2018), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46155837>.

open two more diplomatic offices in Russia – a consulate general in St Petersburg and an honorary consulate in Novosibirsk.<sup>66</sup> During her visit, Kneissl and Lavrov also signed the joint statement establishing the Sochi Dialogue forum.<sup>67</sup> The founding session of the Dialogue steering committee, attended by Putin and Van der Bellen, took place in Sochi on 15 May 2019. Two days later, *Süddeutscher Zeitung* and *Spiegel* broke the Ibiza affair story.

Following the fall of the ÖVP-FPÖ government, the snap parliamentary elections on 29 September 2019 saw a dramatic decline in the FPÖ's popular support: the far-right party lost almost 10% of its vote compared to the 2017 parliamentary elections. At the end of 2019, the ÖVP reached a coalition agreement with the centre-left Die Grünen (Green party) and President Van der Bellen swore in the new government on 7 January 2020.

## Towards Neutralism

In the period 2008–19, the “Russia faction” of the FPÖ consisted of Johann Gudenus, Heinz-Christian Strache, Johannes Hübner, Andreas Karlsböck and Barbara Kappel. Hübner was publicly marginalised in 2017 following revelations that his 2016 speech at a far-right meeting contained allusions to anti-Semitism.<sup>68</sup> Karlsböck fell seriously ill in 2017 and died in November 2019.<sup>69</sup> Kappel lost the trust of the FPÖ leadership in 2018.<sup>70</sup> After Gudenus and Strache – the main proponents of pro-Kremlin positions – withdrew from FPÖ politics in the wake of the Ibiza affair, the party's Russia faction entirely ceased to exist.

Former Minister for Transport Norbert Hofer and former Interior Minister Herbert Kickl assumed the leadership of the FPÖ. Neither was part of the Russia faction or particularly enthusiastic about developing relations with Putin's regime. Moreover, in answer to questioning from the Ibiza Committee of Inquiry in March 2021, Kickl said that the party's contacts with Russian actors were one of the areas in which he had strongly disagreed with Strache, and they kept clashing:

That was something I never understood – Russia, the Balkans – why the FPÖ had any connections there, or why that was important to Strache. I did not understand. I was also always an opponent of the Ibiza vacations. This regularly led to major disagreements because I said that somehow it was not possible to reconcile having holidays somewhere in Ibiza with being the leader of the party of the little man. [...] And if he [Strache] had told me that he was going to meet some Russian oligarch in Ibiza, I would have said: ‘What the hell are you doing

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66 “Avstriya planiruet otkryt' konsul'stva v Peterburge i Novosibirsk”, *RIA Novosti*, 12 March (2019), <https://ria.ru/20190312/1551722810.html>.

67 “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Austrian Federal Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs Karin Kneissl, Moscow, March 12, 2019”, *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 12 March (2019), [https://archive.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3566453?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://archive.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3566453?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB).

68 Maria Sterkl, “FPÖ-Mandatar Johannes Hübner tritt bei Nationalratswahl nach antisemitischen Anspielungen nicht mehr an”, *Der Standard*, 25 July (2017), <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000061771139/fpoe-mandatar-johannes-huebner-tritt-bei-nationalratswahl-nach-antisemitischen-anspielungen>.

69 “FPÖ-Wien trauert um Nationalratsabgeordneten a.D. Dr. Andreas Karlsböck”, *APA OTS*, 23 November (2019), [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20191123\\_OTS0019/fpoe-wien-trauert-um-nationalratsabgeordneten-ad-dr-andreas-karlsboeck](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20191123_OTS0019/fpoe-wien-trauert-um-nationalratsabgeordneten-ad-dr-andreas-karlsboeck).

70 “Damit können wir sie ruhigstellen”, *Zack Zack*, 21 April (2020), <https://zackzack.at/2020/04/21/damit-koennen-wir-sie-ruhig-stellen-vilimsky-strache-bluemel-beweise-fuer-postenschacher/>.

with a Russian oligarch, damn it?'.<sup>71</sup>

According to Kickl,<sup>72</sup> and as the above observations suggest, they never made these points of friction public. However, their existence helps explain why the relations with Moscow developed by the Russia faction were driven by personal – or at best tactical – considerations of that faction, rather than a strategic focus of the party as a whole.

Another important political characteristic of the FPÖ in this context is the party's historically complicated and often confusing attitude to the US. In the 1990s, under the leadership of Jörg Haider, the FPÖ had been friendly towards the US. After Haider resigned as leader of the party (while remaining an influential member) at the beginning of the 2000s, he started cooperating with the Iraqi regime of President Saddam Hussein and his positions shifted to anti-Americanism. Officially, the FPÖ was critical of Haider's anti-US stances, but some prominent members were supportive of Haider's foreign policy views. One of these was Ewald Stadler, who founded the Austrian-Iraqi Society and together with Haider worked with the Iraqi regime.<sup>73</sup> Haider left the FPÖ in April 2005 and Strache was elected leader of the party in the same month. Stadler, who by then was president of the FPÖ's Freedom Academy responsible for the training of FPÖ members, was apparently able to exert some impact on the development of Strache's foreign policy, impressing anti-Americanism and anti-globalism on him, and it was Stadler who organised the meeting between Strache and Gudenus, and Russian diplomats in 2005.<sup>74</sup>

Stadler and Strache parted ways in 2006–2007, but Gudenus, who had been close to Strache, deepened his scepticism of the US and was instrumental in the creation of the FPÖ Russia faction. At the same time, however, Strache and other high-ranking members of the party, conceivably linked to their critique of Islam, developed positive opinions about Serbia and Israel – countries characterised by strong nationalist sentiments and a history of conflicts with predominantly Muslim societies, most recently Kosovo and Palestine, respectively.<sup>75</sup> In 2010, Strache visited Israel together with a number of other members of European right-wing populist parties.<sup>76</sup> They were received in the Israeli Knesset and issued a "Jerusalem Declaration" that, in particular, "unrestrictedly acknowledge[d] the right of the State of Israel to exist within safe and internationally recognised borders" and accepted "Israel's right to self-defence against all forms of aggression, especially against Islamic terror".<sup>77</sup>

On his return from Israel, Strache declared that he wanted to visit the US to meet with

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71 "Veröffentlichung des wörtlichen Protokolls über die öffentliche Befragung der Auskunftsperson Herbert Kickl in der 41. Sitzung vom 17. März 2021", *Parlament*, 26 May (2021), [https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/KOMM/KOMM\\_00199/fnameorig\\_981145.html](https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/VHG/XXVII/KOMM/KOMM_00199/fnameorig_981145.html).

72 Ibid.

73 "Jörg Haiders geheime Geldgeschäfte mit dem irakischen Diktator Saddam Hussein", *Profil*, 7 August (2010), <https://www.profil.at/home/joerg-haiders-geldgeschaefte-diktator-saddam-hussein-274862>.

74 "HC Strache knüpft Diplomaten-Kontakte".

75 Oliver Pink, "'Outlaws' unter sich: Der serbophile HC Strache", *Die Presse*, 19 February (2008), <https://www.diepresse.com/364103/bdquoutlawsldquo-unter-sich-der-serbophile-hc-strache>; Thomas Seifert, "Besuch aus Israel für HC Strache", *Die Presse*, 21 December (2010), <https://www.diepresse.com/620485/besuch-aus-israel-fuer-hc-strache>.

76 Apart from Strache, the delegation featured Filip Dewinter, a senior member of Belgium's Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), René Stadtkewitz, founder of Germany's Die Freiheit (Freedom), and Kent Ekeröth, the international secretary of the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats).

77 "FPÖ: Strache: Jerusalemer Erklärung", *APA OTS*, 7 December (2010), [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20101207\\_OTS0199/fpoe-strache-jerusalemer-erklaerung](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20101207_OTS0199/fpoe-strache-jerusalemer-erklaerung). In December 2010, upon Strache's invitation, Israel's Vice Minister Ayoob Kara of the right-wing Likud (Consolidation) party visited Austria and conducted talks with the FPÖ, which he called "an ally in the fight against radical Islamism and terrorism", see "FPÖ: Strache begrüßt israelischen Vize-Minister Ayoob Kara in Wien", *APA OTS*, 21 December (2010), [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20101221\\_OTS0229/fpoe-strache-begruesst-israelischen-vize-minister-ayoob-kara-in-wien](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20101221_OTS0229/fpoe-strache-begruesst-israelischen-vize-minister-ayoob-kara-in-wien).

representatives of the Tea Party movement, which he called “a very interesting grassroots movement [that has emerged] directly from the dissatisfied population”.<sup>78</sup> There is no evidence that Strache visited the US at this time but, given later developments, it seems plausible to assert that the interest in the right wing of the US Republican Party – not only from Strache but also from various other members of the FPÖ – evolved alongside the activities of the Russia faction.

In the period 2014–2017, leading members of the FPÖ paid several visits to the US. In March 2014, a group of FPÖ politicians – featuring Karlsböck, the party’s General Secretary, MEP Harald Vilimsky and Viennese FPÖ activist Maximilian Krauss – travelled to the US to take part in the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) hosted by the American Conservative Union.<sup>79</sup> In the autumn of 2016, an FPÖ delegation featuring Strache, Vilimsky, Krauss, Georg Mayer MEP and two regional leaders of the FPÖ, Mario Kunasek and Marlene Svazek, went to the US in the run-up to the US presidential election.<sup>80</sup> During their trip, they met with a number of officials, politicians and activists, but no details about these meetings have been made public. Some members of the FPÖ delegation, excluding Strache, reportedly met with Michael Flynn, then a national security adviser to Donald Trump as part of his 2016 presidential campaign.<sup>81</sup> They later celebrated Trump’s victory in Trump Tower in New York.<sup>82</sup>

Like a number of other European radical right-wing populist parties, the FPÖ seemed excited by the Trump presidency and the rise of the US right symbolised by his 2016 electoral victory. Strache, his adviser Hofer and Kunasek visited the US to meet with representatives of the right wing of the Republican Party – Congressman Steve King and former Congresswoman Michele Bachmann.<sup>83</sup> Vilimsky also travelled to Washington DC in February 2017 to participate in CPAC, later posting a picture of himself on Facebook with Trump giving a speech in the background, and describing the controversial US president as “a great politician challenging corrupt leftist political networks and the international fake news media”.<sup>84</sup>

Ironically, when Strache (or his social media management team) publicised the signing of the agreement with the United Russia party in December 2016, he enthused about the fact that he had led the FPÖ delegation to the US only weeks before. He called his party “a bridge builder and peacemaker”, and stressed the need for “solidarity between the USA and Russia [...] in order to achieve diplomatic pacification” of the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, and to lift

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78 Rainer Nowak, “Strache: Nach Israel nun zur Tea Party”, *Die Presse*, 11 December (2010), <https://www.diepresse.com/617722/strache-nach-israel-nun-zur-tea-party>.

79 Harald Vilimsky, “CPAC. 3 Tage Washington mit @AKarlsboeck neigen sich dem Ende zu”, *Twitter*, 8 March (2014), <https://www.twitter.com/vilimsky/status/442332208452616192>; Maximilian Krauss, “3 spannende Tage mit @vilimsky und @AKarlsboeck in Washington!”, *Twitter*, 8 March (2014), [https://www.twitter.com/Max\\_Krauss/status/442335094737739776](https://www.twitter.com/Max_Krauss/status/442335094737739776).

80 “FPÖ-Delegation war bei Trumps Wahlparty”, *Die Presse*, 14 November (2016), <https://www.diepresse.com/5118079/fpoe-delegation-war-bei-trumps-wahlparty>; “Strache traf Trumps Berater in Washington”, *OÖ Nachrichten*, 15 November (2016), <https://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/ticker/Strache-traf-Trumps-Berater-in-Washington;art449,2403787>.

81 “Treffen mit Trump-Berater: Hat Strache gelogen?”, *Kurier*, 23 December (2016), <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/sprecher-des-designierten-us-praesidenten-donald-trump-dementiert-treffen-zwischen-heinz-christian-strache-und-michael-flynn/237.308.157>.

82 “FPÖ-Delegation war bei Trumps Wahlparty”.

83 “Strache und Hofer in Washington”, *Kurier*, 20 January (2017), <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/strache-und-hofer-in-washington/241.934.722>.

84 Harald Vilimsky, “Großartige Rede von Donald Trump in Washington”, *Facebook*, 24 February (2017), <https://www.facebook.com/Vilimsky.Harald/photos/großartige-rede-von-donald-trump-in-washington-cpac-jetzt-wo-ich-mich-aus-nächst/1220285024757109/>.

the sanctions imposed on Russia.<sup>85</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to talk of a “Trump faction” in the FPÖ comparable to the Russia faction in size, or the time and effort invested in the development of bilateral relations. However, the accidental overlap between the Trump presidency, which was hailed by many radical right wing populists in Europe, including the leadership of the FPÖ, and the participation of Strache’s party in the coalition government helps to explain an important discrepancy between the FPÖ and the ruling Russian elites that obstructed, rather than furthered, their relationship. With Trump as US president, the FPÖ leadership was unwilling to adopt the anti-US positions pushed by their Russian partners alongside their pro-Kremlin positions. Moreover, while Kneissl was not a member of the FPÖ, it is nonetheless telling that when Lavrov lashed out against the US during his meeting with her in March 2019, strongly condemning alleged US pressure on Europe to fight Russian influence, she tactfully evaded siding with the Russian foreign minister.<sup>86</sup>

In the wake of the fallout from the Ibiza affair, the FPÖ became engaged in protracted arguments with Strache and was plagued by internal strife between Hofer and Kickl, all of which left no room for developing new foreign policy ideas. Following the withdrawal of the Russia faction, and later the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FPÖ reverted to what it had often been before when not pursuing relations with foreign actors: a neutralist “party of the little man”, presumably very much to the satisfaction of Kickl who eventually took on the leadership of the party.

The FPÖ could still express its foreign policy positions, particularly in relation to Russia, in the European Parliament, where the party’s three MEPs with Vilimsky at the helm voted on resolutions on international affairs. Table 1 compares the voting behaviour of Vilimsky and the other two FPÖ MEPs – Roman Haider and Georg Mayer – with the voting patterns of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group – on resolutions and reports critical of the domestic and international behaviour of the Russian authorities in the period between November 2019 and April 2022.

Table 1. FPÖ and ID group voting on European Parliament resolutions and reports critical of Russia

<u>Date of vote</u>	<u>Name of document</u>	<u>FPÖ vote</u>	<u>ID group vote</u>
28 Nov. 2019	<u>Recent actions by the Russian Federation against Lithuanian judges, prosecutors and investigators involved in investigating the events in Vilnius on 13 January 1991<sup>87</sup></u>	Abstain	Abstain

85 “Treffen mit Trump-Berater”.

86 “Lawrow: Die diktatorische US-Außenpolitik wird kein gutes Ende nehmen”, *RT*, 13 March (2019), <https://de.rt.com/kurzclips/video/85651-lawrow-diktatorische-us-aussenpolitik-wird/>.

87 “European Parliament Resolution on Recent Actions by the Russian Federation against Lithuanian Judges, Prosecutors and Investigators Involved in Investigating the Tragic Events of 13 January 1991 in Vilnius”, *European Parliament*, 26 November (2019), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0182\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0182_EN.html).

<u>17 Sep. 2020</u>	<u>Situation in Russia, the poisoning of Alexei Navalny<sup>88</sup></u>	<u>Against</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>10 Feb. 2021</u>	<u>EU Association Agreement with Ukraine<sup>89</sup></u>	<u>Against</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>29 Apr. 2021</u>	<u>Russia, the case of Alexei Navalny, military build-up on Ukraine's border and Russian attack in the Czech Republic<sup>90</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>10 June 2021</u>	<u>The listing of German NGOs as "undesirable organisations" by Russia and the detention of Andrei Pivovarov<sup>91</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>15 Sep. 2021</u>	<u>Direction of EU-Russia political relations<sup>92</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>16 Dec. 2021</u>	<u>Continuous crackdown on civil society and human rights defenders in Russia: the case of human rights organisation Memorial<sup>93</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>Against</u>
<u>16 Dec. 2021</u>	<u>Situation at the Ukrainian border and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine<sup>94</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>For</u>
<u>1 Mar. 2022</u>	<u>Russian aggression against Ukraine<sup>95</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>For</u>
<u>7 Apr. 2022</u>	<u>Conclusions of the European Council meeting of 24-25 March 2022, including the latest developments of the war against Ukraine and the EU sanctions against Russia and their implementation<sup>96</sup></u>	<u>Abstain</u>	<u>For</u>

88 "European Parliament Resolution on the Situation in Russia: the Poisoning of Alexei Navalny", *European Parliament*, 15 September (2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2020-0280\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2020-0280_EN.html).

89 "Report on the Implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine", *European Parliament*, 17 November (2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219_EN.html).

90 "European Parliament Resolution on Russia, the Case of Alexei Navalny, the Military Build-up on Ukraine's Border and Russian Attacks in the Czech Republic", *European Parliament*, 28 April (2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0236\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0236_EN.html).

91 "European Parliament Resolution on the Listing of German NGOs as 'Undesirable Organisations by Russia and the Detention of Andrei Pivovarov", *European Parliament*, 9 June (2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0347\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0347_EN.html)

92 "Report on a European Parliament Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Direction of EU-Russia Political Relations", *European Parliament*, 28 July (2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0259\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0259_EN.html).

93 "European Parliament Resolution on the Continuous Crackdown on Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders in Russia: The Case of Human Rights Organisation Memorial", *European Parliament*, 15 December (2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0604\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0604_EN.html)

94 "European Parliament Resolution on the Situation at the Ukrainian Border and in Russian-Occupied Territories of Ukraine", *European Parliament*, 15 December (2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0594\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2021-0594_EN.html).

95 "European Parliament Resolution on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine", *European Parliament*, 28 February (2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0123\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0123_EN.html).

96 "European Parliament Resolution on the Conclusions of the European Council Meeting of 24-25 March 2022, Including the Latest Developments of the War against Ukraine and the EU Sanctions against Russia and Their Implementation", *European Parliament*, 6 April (2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0197\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0197_EN.html).

Table 1 demonstrates that the three FPÖ MEPs initially followed the line of its ID group in the European Parliament, voting against the first two resolutions and a report criticising Russia. However, from the fourth vote, the FPÖ MEPs opted to maintain neutrality on Russia and abstain in the vote on Russia-related documents, thereby rebelling against the ID group which decided to vote either against or for those documents.<sup>97</sup>

Given Kickl's positioning of the FPÖ as the party of the little man that prioritised domestic Austrian affairs, it was hardly surprising that in December 2021 he rejected the possibility of extending the agreement the FPÖ had signed with the United Russia Party in December 2016 for a period of five years. Kickl stated that: "We simply do not need it", and added that the purpose of the agreement had been unclear to him even before he became the chair of the party.<sup>98</sup> He concluded that there were too many problems in Austria and he wanted the FPÖ to focus exclusively on them. Kickl saw "no capacity for anything else".<sup>99</sup> The irony of Kickl's resentment about the party's previous relations with Russia is that he missed the notice period required in order to terminate the agreement, which means that – according to one of the clauses of the agreement – it was technically automatically extended until 2026.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that, under the leadership of Strache, the FPÖ invested a significant amount of time and energy in developing and strengthening contacts with Moscow, the trajectory of the party's relations with Russian stakeholders was largely defined by Russia, and by the accidental intervention of the Ibiza affair. The primacy of the Kremlin's agency over the interests of the FPÖ's Russia faction was anything but surprising: at no point were relations equal. Under Strache, the faction was indeed active in consistently advancing Russian foreign policy narratives in Austria and elsewhere, but it was Moscow that ultimately decided whether to upgrade or downgrade the level of contact with the FPÖ.

The trajectory of relations between the FPÖ and Russian stakeholders in the period 2008–2019 had two strands. One was relatively stable and uniform: leading members of the FPÖ participated in events organised by pro-Kremlin actors, performed the role of "observers" of controversial plebiscites, and pushed pro-Kremlin narratives using media and parliamentary platforms. For Moscow, however, the FPÖ was never the most important political partner in Austria, and the Kremlin's approach to cooperating with the Austrian far-right was always dependent on Moscow's much more favoured relations with the Austrian centre-right ÖVP and centre-left SPÖ, as well as on Moscow's interpretations of the political relevance of the SPÖ and the ÖVP in specific periods of Austrian political history.

FPÖ-Moscow relations reached their pinnacle when the United Russia Party signed the coordination and cooperation agreement with Strache's party in December 2016, but the domestic political context in Austria was instrumental in the Kremlin's decision to upgrade

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97 For more insights into the voting behaviour of FPÖ MEPs see Péter Krekó, Patrik Szicherle, Csaba Molnár, *Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union: Influence of Authoritarian Third Countries on EU Institutions (Budapest: Political Capital Kft., 2020)*.

98 "FPÖ lässt Kooperation mit Putin-Partei auslaufen", *Die Presse*, 9 December (2021), <https://www.diepresse.com/6071894/fpoe-laesst-kooperation-mit-putin-partei-auslaufen>.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

its contacts with the Austrian far-right. In 2016, the country held presidential elections and no representative from either the ÖVP or the SPÖ made it through to the second round. Instead, the second round (and the rerun)<sup>101</sup> saw Hofer competing with van der Bellen, who was backed by the Green party. Although the signing of the agreement took place after van der Bellen's victory over Hofer, United Russia made the decision to sign the agreement before the rerun of the second round, and it is hardly possible to imagine that the Kremlin would have decided to sign such an agreement if Hofer were competing against either an SPÖ or an ÖVP politician. Thus, the second strand of FPÖ-Moscow relations was based on the Kremlin's pragmatic and tactical approach to Austrian political configurations.

Contacts between the FPÖ and the Kremlin actors collapsed when the Russia faction of the FPÖ was eventually destroyed by the Ibiza affair in 2019. Even before the German journalists revealed the story of Gudenus and Strache's meeting with the "Russian oligarch's niece", however, there was no indication that relations between the Austrian far-right and the Kremlin would pass the peak of 2016. Russia was generally satisfied with its relations with Austria under the leadership of the ÖVP's Kurz and simply had no need for the FPÖ beyond the sphere of small- and medium-scale political services.

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101 The 2016 presidential elections took place on 24 April 2016 and 22 May 2016. However, the results of the second round were annulled and a rerun took place on 4 December 2016.



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