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**The Freedom Party of Austria  
under Heinz-Christian Strache (2005–2019)**

**Introduction**

Since its foundation in 1955, the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – FPÖ) has established itself as a firm and influential element of the Austrian political system. Starting as a small party, it managed to form governments with the two major Austrian parties: the SPÖ in 1983–1987 and the ÖVP in 2000–2007 as well as 2017–2019. In 2016, Norbert Hofer, a presidential candidate, lost the election by a small margin, receiving 49.7 % of the vote – the highest vote percentage ever received by an FPÖ politician. This was one of the successes of party leader Heinz-Christian Strache.

During Jörg Haider’s time, the FPÖ became a party heavily focused on its leader.<sup>1</sup> The structure of the party became subservient to strict leadership. The popularity of the leader marked the popularity of the whole party. These developments of the Haider era continued during Strache’s chairmanship.<sup>2</sup> The personal views of the party leader started to shape and mould the ideological profile of the party. During the Haider era,

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<sup>1</sup> P. Andrzejewski, „Paradoks narodowego liberalizmu. Historia i idee Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs“, *Rocznik Polsko-Niemiecki* 2014, No. 22, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> B. Narodoslawsky, *Blausprech. Wie die FPÖ ihre Wähler fängt*, Leykam Verlag, Graz 2010, p. 231. Narodoslawsky goes even further, claiming that Strache became a brand in himself and

that meant a turn towards populism, and during Strache's time, a turn towards right-wing radicalism and a revival of the traditional pan-Germanism of the FPÖ. Therefore, this article investigates the role that leader Heinz-Christian Strache played in shaping the ideological profile of the FPÖ. Strache was the chairman of the Freedom Party from 2005 until the Ibiza scandal in 2019. Firstly, a short biography of Strache will highlight the important influences that shaped his political persona. After establishing the main actor, the paper will investigate the changes in the FPÖ's party programmes. To highlight the ideological changes even further, the paper will focus on the narrative used by Strache and the FPÖ during electoral campaigns. The methods used in this paper are content and political discourse analysis. Additionally, it will also be of importance to mention those people who were politically elevated by Strache in the structures of the FPÖ as well as investigating their ideological position in the party. The paper will conclude with an attempt to summarise Strache's legacy for the FPÖ.

### **Ideological Formation of Heinz-Christian Strache**

Heinz-Christian Strache was born on 12 June 1969 in Vienna. His family origins can be traced to Sudetendeutsche who were expelled from Czechoslovakia and settled in Austria after the end of World War II. He was raised in the Viennese district of Erdberg by his mother Marion Strache, a pharmacist. His father Heinz-Roland Strache left the family when Heinz-Christian was only three years old. For the future politician, growing up without a father figure proved essential in his future ideological development.<sup>3</sup> Erdberg, when Strache was growing up, was becoming a more multicultural district with more and more immigrants from countries like Turkey choosing to settle there. The very fact that Strache was born in Vienna allowed him to present himself as a "true Viennese" man.

When Heinz-Christian Strache went to primary school, his contact with his mother was also limited. Young Strache went to a Catholic boarding school so that his mother could work overtime to provide for the family. He also went to a boarding middle school in Stebersdorf. After that, Strache spent a year at a business school before leaving to become a dental technician. In 1990, the future Austrian politician served in the army where he reached the rank of corporal. He successfully applied to Vienna University to study history. At the same time, in 1993, he started his own business: Dental Labor Strache GmbH where he worked till 1998, before changing his career path to become a dental technician contractor for a bigger company. His successful business caused him drop out of university without obtaining a degree in history. Strache used these facts to show that he is both educated, on the one hand, and from the working class on the other.

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turned the FPÖ into a brand. The party had only one face – the face of the leader, and the artwork for posters had a distinct and coherent style.

<sup>3</sup> N. Horaczek, C. Reiterer, *HC Strache. Seine Aufstieg, Seine Hintermänner, Seine Feinde*, Ueberreuter, Vienna 2009, p. 36.

Heinz-Christian Strache's contact with far-right groups started as early as his teenage years. In 1984, Strache, still in high school and aged 15, became a member of a student corporation called Vandalia. Here he came into contact with right-wing extremists. However, according to Strache's biographers, the most important acquaintance was a certain Gudrun Burger.<sup>4</sup> She and Strache became partners in a relationship that lasted for over seven years. More importantly, Strache got to know his girlfriend's father, Norbert Burger. It is important to break from Strache's biography and take a closer look at the man who he called "Vaterersatz" – a person who finally played the role of a father figure and influenced the formation of the political views of the young Heinz-Christian.

Norbert Burger was born in 1929 in Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria. During World War II, he volunteered to be sent to the front, where, according to his own account, he participated in executions of prisoners. During his studies in Vienna and then Innsbruck, he joined the student corporation Olympia, as well as the student wing of the FPÖ. His dissertation was devoted to the topic of "Italian influences in German South Tirol". Burger became engaged in a terrorist and separatist organisation, the South Tyrolean Liberation Committee – Befreiungsausschuss Südtirol or BAS for short. BAS was responsible for various attacks on Italian infrastructure as well as assassinations of Italian security personnel in the South Tirol region. For his activities in this organisation (especially a series of attacks in the Bolzano region), Burger was arrested in 1961. At the same time, Olympia was banned on the grounds it supported South Tyrolean separatism. Burger was released but arrested again in Munich in 1963. His trial in Austria ended in 1965 with Burger being declared innocent, as the jury treated South Tirol as Austrian territory. At the same time, another trial in Italy continued into 1966 when Burger was sentenced to 28 years in prison. The verdict was passed *in absentia* and Burger never went to Italy from that point. Because of the trials, Burger resigned his membership of the FPÖ. In 1967, Burger established the National Democratic Party (*Nationaldemokratische Partei* – NDP). In 1980, he ran for president of Austria gaining 3.2 % of the votes. The NDP was banned in 1988 by the Austrian constitutional court on the basis it promoted "pan-German" nationalism, racism and neo-Nazism. Burger died in 1992 and Heinz-Christian Strache attended the funeral.

In this circle of contacts, Heinz-Christian Strache became acquainted with several far-right figures. In 1989, he was arrested on the border between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic during a relief action for nationalist activists by Viking, a neo-Nazi group. In 1990, Strache was once more apprehended by the police, this time for carrying a firearm. He attended a meeting of the German People's Union (*Deutsche Volksunion* – DVU) in Passau. In the same year, Strache decided to become a member of the FPÖ. According to Hans-Henning Scharsach, Strache was still active in far-right groups in the first few months after he joined the FPÖ.<sup>5</sup> He later started distancing himself from those groups and focused on developing his political career in Vienna. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his involvement

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> H.-H. Scharsach, *Strache Im braunen Sumpf*, Kremayr & Scheriau, Vienna 2012, p. 50.

in far-right and neo-Nazi activity when he was younger, left a noticeable mark on both his character as well as his political views.

### **Political Career in FPÖ**

One of Strache's first contacts with the FPÖ came through his dental career. Herbert Güntner was a dentist as well as an active politician in Vienna. The start of Strache's political career was very successful as, aged only 21, he became the youngest representative in the district (Bezirk). Slowly building his position, he became elected to the state parliament of Vienna (the city acts as if it is a separate federal province of Austria) in 1996. At the same time, Strache moved up the ranks of the FPÖ where he was responsible for the local youth movement. During his time in the state parliament, he became known as a staunch critic of immigration and against rights for illegal immigrants. In 2004, Strache was elected to succeed Hilmar Kabas as party chairman of the Vienna FPÖ and became a member of the federal party executive. Because of his growing popularity and youthful energy, Strache was considered as a candidate for the FPÖ federal party chairman and to compete against Ursula Haubner – the sister of the then chairman Jörg Haider. This did not come to be as Haider and his followers seceded from the FPÖ and formed a new party, the Alliance Future Austria (BZÖ), in April 2005. Uncontested, Strache was then elected as the party chairman on 23 April 2005. He found himself in a difficult position as the FPÖ was losing its momentum and had to compete with the new populist party, BZÖ. Yet again, Strache managed to succeed. His first test came quickly in the form of subsequent elections in Vienna (state and municipal) where the opinion polls predicted the FPÖ would get less than 10 % of the votes. Strache managed to pull off a surprising 14.8 % result and gained 13 seats in the city council, making the FPÖ the third biggest political party in Vienna. Continuing the electoral marathon in 2006, Strache and his party achieved 11.03 % of the vote in the 2006 National Council election. With 21 seats, the FPÖ became the third largest party in the Austrian parliament and managed to outperform the BZÖ which received only 4.1 % of the vote – slightly above the threshold to get into the parliament. The FPÖ was still the dominant party on the right of the political spectrum in Austria despite Haider being the more seasoned politician. The struggle for the dominance of the right continued and was resolved in 2008 by two events: snap elections and Jörg Haider's death in a car accident. In 2008, the FPÖ received 17.5 % of the vote while the BZÖ had to be satisfied with 10.7 %. Both parties were competing for the same electorate and their combined results showed that there was a huge potential for far-right or populist parties in Austria. Since the BZÖ was a party solely based on its charismatic leader, it was not a surprise that it completely lost momentum after Haider's demise. The BZÖ was strong in Carinthia at first, receiving 44 % in 2009 and then over the years dropping to a mere 6.1 % in 2018. The FPÖ under Strache tried to rebuild the position of the party in Carinthia but was never able to reach Haider's levels of popularity.

The lack of success in the southern federal state of Austria could be explained by the fact that the new leader of FPÖ was a man of the city, a man of Vienna. It was there he

saw most of his success. In 2005, the FPÖ received 14 % of the votes, in 2010 it was 25.8 % and, in 2015, a record high of 30.8 %. In the decade 2010–2020, the FPÖ was the second biggest party in the Viennese state parliament. Considering that the capital of Austria was always a social democratic powerhouse, even called “the red Vienna”, this was a tremendous success.

A similar trend could be observed on the national level. After the BZÖ fell into political oblivion, the FPÖ reconstituted itself as the main right-wing party. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the Freedom Party received 20 % and in 2017, 26 %, tying with the SPÖ. In that regard, Strache managed to replicate the success of Jörg Haider who achieved slightly better results in 1999 gaining 26.9 % – a record to this day.

On 18 December 2017, a coalition government between the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the FPÖ was formed. The young Sebastian Kurz, then 31 years old, became the chancellor while Strache became the vice-chancellor and the minister of civil service and sports. In total, as a junior partner in the coalition, the FPÖ received significant positions in the Ministry of Home Affairs (Herbert Kickl), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Karin Kneissl), the Ministry of Defence (Mario Kunasek), the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Beate Hartinger-Klein) and the Ministry of Transport (Norbert Hofer). The coalition agreement forced the FPÖ to tone down its Euroscepticism. On the other hand, the Freedom Party of Austria was setting the agenda for anti-immigrant measures. The control over the Ministry of Home Affairs also allowed the FPÖ to conduct a policy of non-intervention towards the more radical right-wing movements in Austria (like the Identitarian Movement). The government also enacted compulsory German classes for children with insufficient understanding of the language. Other policies of the FPÖ included a “law and order” act to hire more policemen and limit the number of clerks working in Austrian bureaucracy. One interesting act proceeded by the Freedom Party was lifting the smoking ban in Austria.

It was the height of the FPÖ’s political influence in Austria. The Freedom Party was a coalition partner of the SPÖ in the years 1983–1987 as well as of the ÖVP in 2000–2007. In the first case, the FPÖ was a small force receiving only slightly more than 4 % of the vote – the threshold to be represented in the parliament. In the second case, the FPÖ received more votes than the ÖVP (a difference of 1,000 votes to be exact) but because Haider was such a controversial figure at the time, he stepped down and the ÖVP’s Wolfgang Schüssel became the chancellor. However, because of internal strife in the FPÖ, an early election was called in 2002 which more than halved the FPÖ’s results and, therefore, the FPÖ became the junior partner once again. Nevertheless, the Austrian Freedom party never held as much power as it did in the first Kurz government. This was due to the success of Heinz-Christian Strache but it was also by his own doing that the FPÖ fell from grace.

While the political ascent was long, the downfall was very quick. On 17 May 2019, two German newspapers, *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, published an extensive, hours-long video of negotiations conducted in 2017 at a luxury villa in Ibiza between Austria’s Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, Johann Gudenus (Chairman of the FPÖ) and a woman who claimed to be Alyon Makarov, the self-proclaimed niece of

a Russian oligarch. The publication of the recordings led to the resignations of Strache and Gudenus, the breaking of the coalition agreement between Sebastian Kurz's ÖVP and the FPÖ, and prompted President Alexander Van der Bellen to call new parliamentary elections, which were then held in September 2019. In the aftermath of the election, the ÖVP received 37.5 % of the votes and Sebastian Kurz could form a single party government while the FPÖ, now led by Norbert Hofer, received only 16 %, a 10 % drop since the previous elections.

Although Strache resigned in disgrace, he decided to still be active in Austrian politics. Just as Haider did in times of crisis, Strache backtracked to his safe zone. For Haider it was Carinthia, for Strache it was Vienna. However, in the 2020 state elections, his newly formed party *Team HC Strache – Allianz für Österreich* received only 3.3 % of the vote. The battered FPÖ received a meagre 7.1 % (in total only 10.4 % of votes were cast for the far right, a far cry from when it was the second largest political force in Vienna).

Table 1. The FPÖ results in parliamentary elections during the Haider and Strache eras<sup>6</sup>

1986	472,205	9.7 %
1990	782,648	16.6 %
1994	1,042,332	22.5 %
1995	1,060,175	21.9 %
1999	1,244,087	26.9 %
2002	491,328	10.0 %
2006	519,598	11.0 %
2008	857,028	17.5 %
2013	962,313	20.5 %
2017	1,316,442	26.0 %
2019	772,666	16.2 %

### The People Behind Strache

Every ascension to power brings personal changes. Nina Horaczek and Claudia Reiterer list several figures among the most important people who aided Strache in consolidating the party. Among these are: Herbert Kickl, Harald Vilimsky, Norbert Hofer, Harald Stefan, Johann Gudenus, Andreas Mölzer, Norbert Steger and Otto Scrinzi.<sup>7</sup> The very people on this list shows the departure already from any attempts to follow a liberal course in the FPÖ. The majority of the listed figures have an affiliation with

<sup>6</sup> All official results from Austrian elections are available on the government website: <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/reise-aufenthalt/leben-im-ausland/wahlen/wahlergebnisse> (Accessed 30 January 2021).

<sup>7</sup> N. Horaczek, C. Reiterer, *HC Strache...*, pp. 119–135.

either pan-German organisations, student corporations or the Austrian Identitarian Movement. Otto Scrinzi served as the patriarch of the Freedom Party of Austria. Born in 1918, he joined Hitler Youth, the NSDAP (the Nazi party) and was also an SA Sturmführer. Scrinzi was involved with the FPÖ from the beginning of the movement after World War II. Until his death in 2012, Scrinzi was one of the main sources of ideas about politics and identity for Strache and the rest of party's leadership. Scrinzi was, however, critical about Strache's openness towards Russia and Serbia. The case of Kosovo, he argued, was setting an example for the liberation of South Tirol, a key issue for the senior politician.<sup>8</sup> It was the younger generation of Mölzer and Gudenus that propagated the old Nazi idea of the *Umvolkung* dissolution of the German people so that both the ethnic origins as well as the cultural background are forgotten. Of course, FPÖ politicians applied the old term to new times and used old ideological frames in the context of immigration and Islam. While Mölzer served as the European connection trying to unify far-right and populist right-wing parties in the European parliament, Gudenus was responsible for Russian contacts. Harald Stefan, on the other hand, explicitly embraced pan-German ideas and believed in the broader German cultural nation. Herbert Kickl, a long-time party official and later Minister of Home Affairs and Security, had ties to the Austrian Identitarian Movement.<sup>9</sup> He also spoke against banning the movement altogether.<sup>10</sup> Kickl and Gudenus also served as the Austrian contacts for Putin's "One Russia" party. Harald Vilimsky, the party's lead European Parliament candidate moved from the liberal wing of the party and became a hard-line right-winger. The presence of Norbert Steger is interesting in the sense that this politician is not associated with the far right but rather with social policies. Steger's presence in Strache's inner circle is an example of distancing from the liberal standpoint through social economic policies. Finally, there is Norbert Hofer, the FPÖ's presidential candidate. Hofer was Strache's closest political colleague and his election as chairman of the FPÖ after Heinz-Christian Strache's political demise can only indicate that the circle that led the party till the scandal in 2019 remains firmly in power.

### **Political Profile of the FPÖ During the Leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache**

In the era of Heinz-Christian Strache, the FPÖ adopted only one party programme, in 2011. It is essential to show the development of the ideological profile of the Freedom Party of Austria in the context of previous programmes. The documents themselves are not the best source for forming an in-depth analysis; however, they are a useful tool for looking at the macro-changes in the ideological profile of the party. They allow the drift and shift of ideas to be seen and are good sources for highlighting party priorities at a given time.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> "Kickls Kabinettschef hatte Kontakt zu Identitären-Chef Sellner", *Die Presse*, 2 August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Kickl spricht sich strikt gegen Identitären-Verbot aus", *Der Standard*, 19 September 2019.

In the first documents from 1955 and 1957, the ideological basis of the party is explicitly emphasised. The FPÖ was to be a national party in Austria, striving for a cohesive nation, including the inhabitants of South Tirol. Austrians were considered a part of a broader German cultural nation. The freedom elements of the programmes focused on protecting the individual from the powers of the state.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that even by 1957, the FPÖ had emphasised the problem of the two-party system in Austria and struck anti-establishment overtones. At the time, the dangers of the two-party system were compared to the dangers of communism. The anti-communist rhetoric was later abandoned by the FPÖ. From 1964, under Fredrich Peter, the party took a more liberal turn – *Soviel Freiheit wie möglich, bei soviel Staat wie nötig* (As much freedom as possible with as much state as necessary) became the new motto.<sup>12</sup> In 1973, new ecological elements appeared in the ideological profile of the FPÖ. The care for the environment was an example of the FPÖ's understanding of freedom. "Freedom means responsibility" for the nation, for the state, families and the environment.<sup>13</sup> The year 1985 marked the highest ever influence of the liberal wing of FPÖ, and everything changed with the advent of the era of Jörg Haider. Surprisingly, during his chairmanship the FPÖ adopted only one programme, in 1997. Haider did steer the party into new populist territory and rejuvenated the formula of the old national-liberal (or liberal-national) FPÖ. First of all, the 1997 programme rejected the traditional pan-German idea, proposing Austropatriotism (*Österreichpatriotismus*) instead. Every free individual had a right to his homeland (*Recht auf Heimat*). Haider also emphasised the importance of the Christian roots of Western civilisation. It was a novelty in the traditionally anticlerical party. It was also in 1997 that the anti-immigration stance became part of official party policy.<sup>14</sup>

The latest FPÖ programme from 2011, adopted in Graz, effectively shows the ideological direction of the party's development. This programme describes the FPÖ as *Soziale Heimatpartei*. This is quite a surprising term given the previous liberal nature of this party. It is clear that the FPÖ had to take the existence of the socially populist BZÖ into account. At the outset, the ten-point programme emphasises the value of freedom as the source of human dignity. However, freedom is no longer the main value in terms of the economy. In the fifth point, the programme emphasises that the party accepts the principles of the market economy, but it must take into account the public interest and concern for a fair redistribution of goods in Austrian society. These voices are undoubtedly the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis that hit the world after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. Redistribution should also apply to a simple and efficient healthcare system, but not to foreigners. The education system should also be public and subsidised by the state. The 2011 programme frequently includes anti-immigrant proposals that exclude foreigners from the Austrian welfare state. Again, there is the slogan that Austria is not a country of immigration, and immigrants who

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<sup>11</sup> T. Livonius v., "Die ideologische Entwicklung der FPÖ unter Jörg Haider" unpublished thesis. University of Munich, Munich 2002, pp. 81–83.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, pp. 96–97.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, pp. 113–114.



have committed crimes should be deported. References to the Christian character of Austrian heritage have disappeared from the programme. Instead, the role and responsibility of Austria for German-speaking citizens living in South Tyrol, the Czech Republic and the former Yugoslavia is emphasised. These issues are developed in the last two chapters on diversity, cosmopolitanism and the European Union (EU). In the EU, the FPÖ is in favour of the so-called Europe of homelands and prioritises national legislation over EU legislation.<sup>15</sup>

There are several developments of the Graz programme of 2011 that need to be delved into in greater detail. The first is the fact that the party steers away from its liberal roots. Freedom stops being the basis for party. The social and national undertones are much more pronounced. The case of South Tirol makes a comeback, indicating a return to the national roots of the party and backtracking from the populist turn of the times of Haider. The connection to a broader “German-speaking” civilisational community replaces the positive Austropatriotism proposed by Haider in 1997. However, the return to its roots is only partial – the FPÖ still retains its anti-immigrant stance.

To sum up, the FPÖ started in the 1950s as a national-liberal party slowly evolving into a liberal-national party in the 1970s and 1980s. Haider took a populist turn, abandoning the old party baggage and introduced new ideas – including social welfare programmes. In the 1990s, we could speak of a right-wing populist party. With Strache’s ascension to power, the FPÖ became less liberal, slightly less populist and was steered into more far-right territory. What remains constant is the anti-establishment undertones.

It was, however, not in the party programmes where the true continuities and changes could be observed. For both Haider and Strache programmes were of little importance, even less so for Strache. One has to analyse the public discourse and the rhetoric of the party to truly spot the direction in which Heinz-Christian Strache took the Freedom Party of Austria.

Strache’s first campaigns in Vienna were marked by one topic: immigration. The posters shouted “Vienna must not become Istanbul”.<sup>16</sup> This slogan was reminiscent of the 1993 motto “Vienna must not become Chicago” used by Haider. The difference is that public perception considered Chicago to be a city of mafias and criminal underground. Obviously, the subliminal message was that immigrants were the cause of crime. Strache’s message is much more straightforward – the simple ethnic change of the composition of Vienna’s inhabitants is the danger in itself. An interesting detail lies in the fact that in 2005, Haider, still the leader of Freedom Party of Austria, supported Turkey’s accession to the EU, while Strache strongly opposed it. Other slogans directly painted Islam as a threat; one more creative one, *Pummerin statt muezzin*, was

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<sup>15</sup> The programme is still available on the FPÖ website: <https://www.fpoe.at/test/parteiprogramm/> (Accessed 31 January 2021).

<sup>16</sup> W. Ötsch, *Populismus und Demagogie – mit Beispielen von Jörg Haider, Heinz-Christian Strache und Frank Stronach sowie der Tea Party*, ICAE Working Paper Series, No. 25, Johannes Kepler University Linz, Institute for Comprehensive Analysis of the Economy (ICAE), Linz 2013, pp. 7–8.

a reference to the bell in St Stephens's cathedral, and to Austria's Catholic identity.<sup>17</sup> Strache himself was never a devout Catholic but this did not stop him from utilising Christian images in his campaigns.<sup>18</sup> There were instances of Strache delivering speeches with a cross in his hand – an image often used to depict Strache as a radical. Other slogans used in campaigns adhered to the fact that some immigrants did not speak German as well as issuing a requirement for sermons in mosques to be delivered only in German. Heinz-Christian Strache also employed the old anti-establishment tactics of the FPÖ, targeting the Viennese politicians of the SPÖ as fat cats who did not care about the problems in the streets.

The very same tactics were employed in the 2010 Vienna elections where the threat of immigration was directly connected to the dominant party in the city: the SPÖ. Slogans said: *We believe in our youth. The SPÖ believes in immigration* or *We protect our home city – the SPÖ makes it foreign*. Strache also attacked the ÖVP and the EU with slogans like: *Homeland instead of Schüssel and Brussels (Heimat statt Schüssel und Brüssel)*.<sup>19</sup>

It was indeed anti-Islamic language that dominated the rhetoric of the FPÖ under Heinz-Christian Strache. He made remarks comparing Islam to the fascism of the XXI century.<sup>20</sup> Every aspect of policy was to be reviewed in the light of immigration. The welfare state had to be protected and Strache proposed diversifying access to social programmes as well as healthcare depending on whether one was an immigrant. A proposal compared with the introduction of apartheid.<sup>21</sup> Other proposals included protecting the traditional Austrian landscape from the construction of minarets.

Heinz-Christian Strache, in his autobiography, proclaimed that he is not a Haider clone.<sup>22</sup> While this may be true, there are several similarities in how the two politicians presented themselves. When competing with the BZÖ, Strache posed as the “younger and bigger” Haider.<sup>23</sup> Strache, like his predecessor, tried to show his physical prowess by releasing photos of him skiing or go-kart racing. Both politicians dressed and looked like models from a fashion magazine for men. Similarly to Haider, Strache is a frequent visitor to party clubs and beer tents. Both men released songs. While Haider sang a traditional Alpine song, Strache resorted to rap with the song: *Austria First (Österreich Zuerst)*, also known as HC RAP. Interestingly, *Österreich Zuerst*

<sup>17</sup> For more see: P. Bugl, *Pummerin statt Muezzin – Der Rechtspopulismus der FPÖ*, Süd-deutscher Verlag, Munich 2012.

<sup>18</sup> B. Weidinger, “Equal before God, and God Alone: Cultural Fundamentalism, (Anti-)Egalitarianism, and Christian Rhetoric in Nativist Discourse from Austria and the United States”, *Journal of Austrian-American History*. 2017, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 40–68.

<sup>19</sup> The posters from Austrian political campaigns are available on the webpage: demokratiezentrum.com (Accessed 30 January 2021), They can also be viewed in the attachments of: B. Narodslawsky, *Blausprech. Wie die FPÖ...*

<sup>20</sup> Similar remarks were made by the Dutch populist Geert Wilders, who not only compared Islam to fascism but also compared the Quran with the book *Mein Kampf*.

<sup>21</sup> N. Horaczek, C. Reiterer, *HC Strache...*, p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> A. Mölzer, H.-Ch. Strache, *Neue Männer braucht das Land*, Zur Zeit Edition, Vienna 2006.

<sup>23</sup> E Turner-Graham, “Austria First: H.Ch. Strache, “Austrian Identity and the Current Politics of Austria's Freedom Party”, *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 2008, No. 3–4, p. 184.

was a party slogan already used by Haider in 1992. The song was posted online, which brings up the topic of the first big difference between Strache and Haider. Haider was a man of mass media, most notably the tabloid press. Strache, on the other hand, went online with extensive use of social media. The FPÖ TV YouTube channel is the only political channel in Austria's top 100 most watched YouTube accounts, currently occupying fiftieth place on the list with almost 100,000 subscribers.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of European policy, the FPÖ moved away from the soft scepticism of the Haider era and embraced a more radical approach in line with the anti-establishment ideology of the party, only this time targeting Brussels. Strache opposed the Lisbon Treaty and called for a referendum to reject it. He also was a proponent of the "Europe of nations" instead of a European federation.<sup>25</sup> It was under Strache that the FPÖ took European politics seriously and started to communicate and cooperate with other European parties like: the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Importance), Bulgarian *Ataka* (Attack), Danish *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party), French *Assemblée nationale* (National assembly), German *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany), Italian *Forza Nuova* (New Force) and *Lega* (The League), Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party), Finnish *Perussuomalaiset* (Finns Party) and Estonian *Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* (Conservative People's Party). International cooperation was also expanded by agreements with "One Russia", the party of Vladimir Putin, the Swiss *Volkspartei* (People's Party) and Serbian *Srpska radikalna stranka* (Radical Party).<sup>26</sup> During Strache's time, Vienna became a meeting place for far-right and populist-right parties that cooperated in the European Parliament in the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) Group until 2019 when it was renamed Identity and Democracy (ID). Politicians of these parties tend to meet at a traditional annual Viennese ball during carnival time.

The international cooperation of the FPÖ was a step forward from previous years. Haider only used his contacts with several autocratic leaders like Saddam Hussein to boost his own popularity. The period of Strache's leadership brought stable and institutional cooperation with various parties in Europe.

As Hans-Henning Scharsach notes, the far-right turn of the FPÖ under Strache resulted in a growing number of incidents, minor and major scandals involving the members of the party that were either anti-Semitic, misogynistic or outright neo-Nazi. He even goes as far as detailing a list of law-breaking incidents which promoted Nazism.<sup>27</sup>

## Closing Comments

The FPÖ under Heinz-Christian Strache was a party of continuity which went back to its roots. It also saw it shift from being a populist party towards the far-right

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<sup>24</sup> Top Austria Youtubers sorted by rank, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/country/at> (Accessed 31 January 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> Strache opposed Kosovo's declaration of independence.

<sup>27</sup> H.-H. Scharsach, *Strache Im braunen Sumpf*, p. 297.

of the political spectrum. The continuities from the times of Jörg Haider included the focus on the topic of migration to Austria and all the civilisational perils that it is supposed to bring. In that regard, Strache used his own experiences of his upbringing in an ethnically changing Viennese neighbourhood to channel political emotions.<sup>28</sup> The rhetoric used by the FPÖ under Strache was much more pronounced with stronger xenophobic tones. The Austrian Freedom party abandoned the softer “Austria for Austrians” slogans of the late Haider era and directly attacked Islam and immigrants from Islamic countries.

The return of the FPÖ to its roots was the making of Strache and his associates. Unlike Haider, whose parents were tied to the NSDAP, a pan-German identity was assumed by Strache. As with all newcomers to a certain faith or ideology, the convert usually is more devoted to the cause than the old hands. This was exactly the case with Strache. Through his appointments to the leadership of FPÖ, as well his own devotion, Strache revived the pan-German mythos, which was abandoned by the populist Haider in the 1990s. The discourse of the FPÖ focused on the civilisational challenges that come with mass migration and the pan-German ideology proved a good footing for creating a stronghold that needs to be defended. It was no surprise that Strache adhered to the Ottoman wars with the Austrian Empire in the Early Modern Period.

The far-right turn of the FPÖ under Strache sacrificed what was left of the party’s liberal traditions. Almost the entire liberal economic programme was replaced with social polices filtered through nationalist lenses: welfare state only for Austrians.

The lasting legacy of the Strache era is: moving the FPÖ towards the far right, the deepening cooperation of European right-wing parties in European politics, and strengthening the FPÖ’s position in Austrian social media.

In government, the FPÖ managed to introduce several polices concerning immigration, compulsory German classes, strengthening the police force, etc. Perhaps the prize for the most memorable act will be awarded for the lifting of the smoking ban.

Heinz-Christian Strache wrote that he was not a clone of Jörg Haider. Nevertheless, the party during his chairmanship was still a “leader” party – focused on the political frontman. Strache managed to reach levels of popularity for the FPÖ similar to the best results of Haider in 1999 (above 26 %) and formed a coalition government with the ÖVP with a very generous allocation of positions in various ministries. The problem with a “leader-party” is that when the leader fails, the whole project fails. With Haider’s untimely death, the momentum behind his movement disappeared. The involvement of Strache in the Ibiza scandal resulted in an electoral backlash for the FPÖ. At the same time, those people elevated by Strache to power and prominent positions in the party still remain, so it is unlikely the FPÖ will change its political course in the coming years.

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<sup>28</sup> N. Horaczek, C. Reiterer, *HC Strache...*, p. 22.

## **Abstract**

### ***The Freedom Party of Austria under Heinz-Christian Strache (2005–2019)***

This paper wants to investigate the role that the leader Heinz-Christian Strache played in the broader context of the history and ideological profile of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). Strache was the chairman of the Freedom Party since 2005 till the Ibiza scandal of the year 2019. Firstly a short biography of Strache will highlight important influences that shaped his political persona. Then the changes in the FPÖ party programme as well as political narrative will be analyzed. The paper will conclude with an attempt to summarize Strache's legacy for the FPÖ.

**Keywords:** Heinz-Christian Strache, Austrian Freedom Party, Austria, radical-right wing.